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Environment Conservation Biodiversity

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# 'Like the fires never happened': Residents alarmed at Gippsland burns



Miki Perkins  
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Threatened species in Gippsland under pressure after vast swaths of their habitat were destroyed in last year's catastrophic bushfires are facing a series of planned burns that conservation groups say will deepen the crisis.

With the onset of cooler autumn weather, Victoria's planned burn season has begun.



Derek Hayes at the site of a recent planned burn at the Mitchell River National Park, in Gippsland. LISA ROBERTS

Over the next three years Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) – an agency within the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning – is planning 133 burns in greater Gippsland, covering 62,808 hectares.

Dr Jenny Lau, who manages the extinction program at national bird conservation organisation BirdLife Australia, became aware at the "11th hour" of two planned burns that would affect the habitat of the critically endangered glossy black cockatoo at Wombat Track and Tostaree, east of Orbost.

One planned burn is just 500 metres from a site where BirdLife Australia has installed nest boxes specifically for the rare cockatoo under a \$50,000 [federally funded bushfire recovery project](#).

The biggest ongoing threat to the birds is starvation through the loss of black sheoak woodlands. Black sheoaks are highly vulnerable to fire.



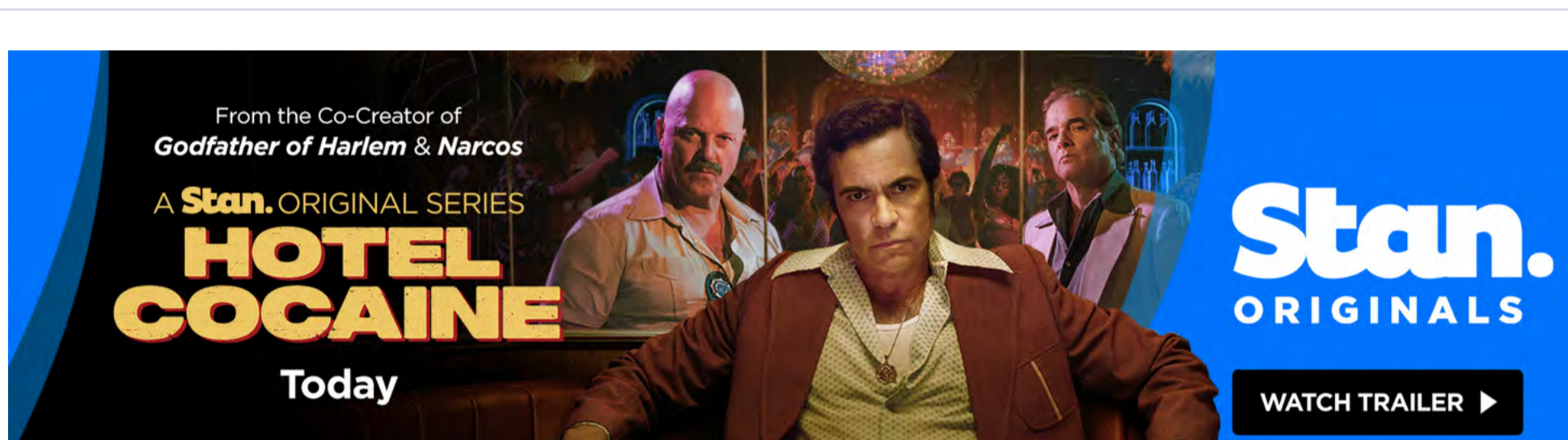
A rare glossy black cockatoo was spotted on the fringes of Melbourne for the first time in 150 years in 2020. It had been driven to different habitat after the bushfires. DES LUCAS

BirdLife staff worked frantically to map areas of black sheoak within the boundary of the Wombat Track burn and managed to get about 50 hectares excluded, Dr Lau said. But there are other areas of black sheoak within the area that will be burnt.

"It's clear that [Forest Fire Management Victoria] is not doing enough to identify and protect important habitat for species most impacted by the 2019-20 fires," Dr Lau said.



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"On the one hand, the Victorian government is providing support to communities to revegetate areas with sheoak ... but on the other, [Forest Fire Management Victoria] has burnt sheoak in areas unlikely to reduce risk to life and property but likely to have real consequences for threatened glossy black cockatoos."

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In a statement, Forest Fire Management Victoria's chief fire officer Chris Hardman said biodiversity specialists assessed planned burn areas, and had recently excluded known feeding areas for the glossy black cockatoo.

Strategic planned burning around areas of significant biodiversity and wildlife refuges could "not only reduce the risk bushfire presents to life and property but also the devastating impacts of unrestrained fire on critical habitat," Mr Hardman said.

About 1.5 million hectares were burnt in eastern Victoria during last year's bushfires.



Murdoch University has teamed up with industry to track endangered Carnaby's cockatoos in southwest WA, using technology that will provide insight into threats to the endangered species.

At a meeting in mid-March, representatives from 16 Gippsland conservation groups, including Gippsland Environment Group, Environment East Gippsland and Lakes Entrance Landcare, met with the Environment Department and FFMV staff and moved a motion requesting that all burns are "paused and reviewed" this year.

Areas that have or will be burnt include Mitchell River National Park, Tostaree and Wombat Track.

The group is also concerned that some of the agency's planned burn maps don't appear to include the department's own data that highlights the area's biodiversity values, meaning staff are unaware of the evidence of endangered creatures.

Gippsland Environment Groups spokesperson Louise Crisp said Forest Fire Management Victoria was burning the habitat of threatened species such as yellow bellied gliders and powerful owls.

"Despite the catastrophic destruction of threatened species habitat and the death of millions of animals they are extinguishing their last refuges. It's like the fires never happened," Ms Crisp said.

Conservationists were not opposed to planned burns, particularly when close to homes to protect assets, Ms Crisp said. But she questioned why it was necessary to burn in national parks.

Gunai Bidwell man Derek "Poogie" Hayes visited Mitchell River National Park after the latest hazard reduction burns: "This is vandalism and it makes me wild. So many old trees burning up. And when the scrub grows back thick after the burn, you won't be able to walk through here."

The burns in the vicinity of the Mitchell River National Park were "cool mosaic" burns and aimed to create a corridor of reduced fuel above communities such as Flaggly Creek and Wuk Wuk, Forest Fire Management Victoria said in a statement.

After the black summer bushfires, the national Threatened Species Recovery Hub said unburnt forest refuges should be protected from burns: "For many years, they will be the only 'mature' patches within extensive landscapes and hence require protection."

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