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Friends of Morwell National Park Inc.

Newsletter – March 2007

Website: <http://morwellnp.pangaeon.net>

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G'day everyone, welcome to the latest edition of our newsletter. Thanks to Ken for providing a lovely, long article with terrific pictures for this issue, it has saved me from having to write one myself, and saved you from putting up with more of my ramblings. Consequently, I'll hold over the February activity report and a few other snippets of information until next month.

March Activity

On the calendar for Sunday, March 18 is some track maintenance along the Coprosma Track, along the upper reaches of Billy Creek, above the weir. We will meet at the Junction Road entrance to the Billy Creek section of the Park at 10am. As always you will need clothing and footwear suitable for warding off the pricklies and bites and the conditions on the day and your own lunch and refreshments.

Stinging Nettles are Not All Bad by Ken Harris

I have for a long time known that the Scrub Nettle *Urtica incisa* is the food plant for the caterpillars of the Australian Admiral butterfly *Vanessa itea*. This means that almost every time I pass any nettles, I give them a quick once over for caterpillars. I have done this for some years without success, but on 31st August 2006, I did find a lot of caterpillars feeding on the nettles. I knew at once that they were not Australian Admirals, but I had no idea what they were (or would become). Here is the very hairy caterpillar that I found.



I decided to see if I could rear the caterpillars and thus find out which moth they would become, so I took two caterpillars home and put them in a jar with several stems of stinging nettles. The caterpillars fed avidly on the nettles, but the nettles of course wilted fairly quickly in the jar and I had to collect more nettles after 3 days. I kept collecting stinging nettles every 3 days for most of a month. Not a simple matter and very few changes of nettle occurred without my getting a few stings along the way. The caterpillars grew and changed in appearance, so that on 18th September, after 18 days, they looked like this.

As they grew nearer to pupating, I had to make a guess as to where they would like to pupate. I had a suspicion that they were a Tiger Moth of the genus *Spilosoma* and that led me to suspect that they would pupate among leaf and bark litter on the ground. I therefore provided a layer of dead leaves, bark and twigs in the bottom of the jar. At about the end of September they completed their caterpillar phase and both weaved a cocoon, incorporating the hairs from their final caterpillar stage and in this cocoon became a chrysalis or pupa. Here is one of the cocoons with all the bark and leaves incorporated into it.





At this stage I removed the remnants of the nettles and placed three or four twigs in the jar, so that if a moth emerged it would have something to perch on. I then kept the jar in a spot where I would look at it every day so that I would not miss the emergence of the moth. It was not until 15th February, that I was delighted to find that one of the moths had emerged, 5½ months after I first found the caterpillar, and what a beautiful moth it proved to be.

I was right in guessing it to be a Tiger Moth in the genus *Spilosoma*. It proves to be the Black and White Tiger Moth *Spilosoma glatignyi*, but all the references I

could find, listed a lot of food plants for this moth, but none mentioned stinging nettles. In Morwell National Park, the scrub nettle is an important food plant for this moth, as once I had seen the caterpillars once, I found them on almost every patch of nettles in the park and there are plenty of them as the Friends well know (some from bitter experience).

While I was rearing these caterpillars, I continued to look at every patch of nettles, seeing a lot more of the same caterpillars, but on 19th September, I finally found the caterpillar I had been searching for, an Australian Admiral butterfly's caterpillar.

It looked a pretty well developed caterpillar and it was on the stem of a nettle, very near the top. I thought I would put it in the jar with the other caterpillars (to share their nettles), but I kept it in a plastic bag over night, so that I could take some more pictures, before adding it to the jar. When I went to get it the next morning, I found the caterpillar curled back on itself and firmly attached to the plastic bag. I thought it had started to pupate, so I left it in the plastic bag and by the evening when I next



looked it had formed itself into this lovely chrysalis, which was firmly attached to the plastic bag. In order to support the chrysalis, I had to cut a piece out of the plastic bag and wrap it round a piece of garden stake, using sticky tape to fix it in place.

I kept the stick with the chrysalis on it free standing in our family room and I did not have to wait 5½ months for this one to emerge. After only 2 weeks Fay told me there was a butterfly flying around the room and sure enough, the chrysalis was empty and I found a beautiful Australian Admiral Butterfly perched on the curtain. I didn't try and photograph the butterfly, I simply let it

free in the garden, but here is a picture of an Australian Admiral that I took in 1995.

So next time you collect a few stings from the nettles, remember that there is a beautiful moth and a beautiful butterfly depending on them for food and so they make a very positive contribution to our park.

