

# GIPPSLAND HIGH COUNTRY TOURS

Newsletter no. 45

P.O. Box 69, Bruthen Vic. 3885

Australia

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## Farewell

After 32 years of running Gippsland High Country Tours, I have decided it is time to close the business and say farewell to you, my valued clients.

Little did I know back in 1991, that the tours I started then would still be going over 30 years later! Not only would the tours have Advanced Ecotourism Accreditation, but Gippsland High Country Tours would be inducted into Ecotourism Australia's Hall of Fame.

But all good things must come to an end and it is time for a new chapter for me. The tours require me to be away from home regularly and during the two year break from tours due to COVID, I found I rather enjoyed having more time at home. Returning to tours last year after the break, also reminded me how much work is involved and that I'm not getting any younger! So after considering it for some months, it feels like the right time to close the business. Even though I am still working part time for Parks Victoria, I can begin to ease into retirement now.



Jenny at sunset Alpine Discovery Tour (Photo W McCallum)

It has been extremely rewarding sharing my love of East Gippsland and beyond with so many of you. You have observed and experienced the wonders of the natural world for yourselves, listened and learnt from me and from other guides, and we too have learnt lots from many of you. Real knowledge sharing!

We have had enormous fun on the tours in the last three decades and many of you have come back time and time again on different trips, we pick up where we left off last time and conversation flows easily. Some of you have become friends and we've enjoyed keeping in touch and sharing other interests.

I also know that some of you have not quite managed to get on one of the tours yet, despite being on my database for many years and keeping in touch. I'm sorry I did not get to meet you.

"Oh no, what will we do now", I hear you say? I have been working hard to find the best options to present to you to help fill the gap with Gippsland High Country Tours now closed and I am confident that many of you will find some really good alternatives in the recommendations I offer in this newsletter.

I am not selling my database with your details - that was never the deal when you signed up to my emails and newsletters. So I will keep in touch with perhaps one or two more emails in the next 12 months as new nature tour options present themselves that I think are worthy of sharing with you, then all details currently on my database will be deleted.

In this newsletter there are stories from recent tour participants, I have lots of thank-you messages, I will share a bit of history and some snippets of my highlights. Maybe one day I will write "memoirs of a tour guide" - there are so many good stories from over three decades of tours - far too many to share here. I am sure many of you have favourite memories too and it would be lovely to hear them.

The Gippsland High Country Tours website and Facebook page will remain active for a while and serve to share information about other nature experiences and tours plus the blog page on the website will continue to have nature stories added from time to time. This blog may morph into something a little different over time. I will continue to be contactable by email and I'm very happy to help you find other nature tours or to discover East Gippsland for yourself, so don't hesitate to get in touch.

Take Care, *Jenny* (Jenny Lawrence)

Email: [jennyghct@netspace.net.au](mailto:jennyghct@netspace.net.au)

## Top recommendations for nature tours and experiences in East Gippsland and beyond

Two nature tour companies that I can thoroughly recommend are **Inala Nature Tours** and **Echidna Walkabout**.

Both companies share similar ethos to me and have been offering quality nature tours for around 30 years with their passion for nature and knowledge of all things wild shining through.

As well as their own extensive programs of tours, each have offered to pick up one or more of my regular East Gippsland tours to continue to provide you with the opportunity to experience these wonderful destinations, along with the birds, wildlife, flora, rich history and scenic beauty. Itineraries may change a little and they will add their own personal touches of course, but you can still be assured of a similar experience. **See pages 3,5,6**

My other top recommendation is Goldsmiths in the Forest B & B near Lakes Entrance. A destination all of its own or use it as a base for more exploring. **See page 4**

I have a number of other local nature tour operators listed on the Links page of the website which is found <https://www.gippslandhighcountrytours.com.au/specials-news/links>



### What Does the Tick Mean?

Australia's Ecotourism Certification Program is an innovative "world first" program. It is a national scheme with hundreds of products across every state and territory of Australia.

[www.ecotourism.org.au](http://www.ecotourism.org.au)

Choosing a product that displays an **Eco Certification** logo means you will enjoy an experience with a quality operator, leaving minimal impact on the environment.

**Advanced Ecotourism Certification** recognises Australia's leading and most innovative ecotourism products, providing an opportunity to learn about the environment with an operator who is committed to achieving best practice when using resources wisely, contributing to the conservation of the environment and helping local communities. Gippsland High Country Tours is proud to have been part of this certification program with Advanced Eco Certification and induction to the Ecotourism Australia Hall of Fame.

### Find other eco-certified tours and accommodation in the Green Travel Guide

<https://greentravelguide.org/>



#### Promoting environmentally-sustainable wildlife tourism

With members across every state in Australia you can find wildlife tours, eco-accommodation, wildlife parks and more on their website -

<https://www.wildlifetourism.org.au/>

At Gippsland High Country Tours we have been proud of our return client base and our recommendation rate. On most tours at least half the participants have been repeat clients. Some have travelled with us more than a dozen times.

**Thank you for your loyalty!**

*Established in 1987, Gippsland High Country Tours is a proud member of Ecotourism Australia and Wildlife Tourism Australia.*

*This Newsletter is typeset and published by Gippsland High Country Tours.*

*Illustrations by Catherine Turnbull. Photographs by J. Lawrence, Wayne McCallum, B Phillips, Inala Nature Tours and Echidna Walkabout. All illustrations and photographs are subject to Copyright and must not be reproduced without permission.*

## Recommendations (continued)

### Echidna Walkabout

Janine Duffy and Roger Smith founded Echidna Walkabout in 1993, and since then have been providing high quality nature and wildlife experiences for small groups of international and domestic travellers. They both have a strong respect for the environment, indigenous cultures and aim to live sustainably. Echidna Walkabout believe that by helping nature while you travel you will make a difference and enjoy yourself while you're doing it! They call it Conservation Travel.

Janine is now focussed entirely on the Koala Clancy Foundation and Roger and his small team, focus on extended wildlife tours right across Australia.

An experienced naturalist, birdwatcher, all-round bushman and dedicated conservationist, Roger Smith is a friendly, outgoing character who loves sharing his passion for Australia's wildlife with his guests.



Roger says "East Gippsland is a magnificent part of the world, an area that I love possibly more than any other. I can assure you that Echidna Walkabout has the same interests and dedication to the region that Jenny has."

The **4 Day Wildlife Journey** to East Gippsland operates regularly from September to May and on the website you can see the itinerary and also links to Blogs (there is a lovely one on East Gippsland's orchids) and notes listing wildlife and bird sightings and photos. <https://echidnawalkabout.com.au/tours/wildlife-journey/>

Roger also knows Errinundra Plateau well and is keen to add an Errinundra tour to the program soon.

[Echidna Walkabout](#) (03) 9646 8249

### Inala Nature Tours (by Cat Davidson)

#### Hello from Tonia and the whole Inala team

Dr Tonia Cochran is the owner and managing director of Inala Nature Tours. Her home and the Inala 1,500 acre Conservation Reserve is based on beautiful Bruny Island, Tasmania, however the nature tour company that she established almost 30 years ago runs birding and ecology tours all over Australia and also in carefully chosen International nature locations.



With our experience as a travel consultant and tour operator we specialize in designing small-group tours and personalised itineraries for nature-based tours throughout Australia. We work directly with clients themselves, as well as with travel companies from all over the world (we are often the company that other international companies use for their Australian birding and nature tours) and our passionate and experienced guides deliver exceptional nature tours, and help find you endemics and regional specialties.

Tonia and the team have loved working with Jenny and Gippsland High Country Tours for many years, and it will be our pleasure to be able to continue to offer some of the excellent tours that Jenny has previously offered. Watch our website or sign up for our quarterly newsletter to keep an eye out for all upcoming tour announcements.

We would be delighted to help with your future nature travel plans, please don't hesitate to get in touch. Email us on: [inala@inalanaturetours.com.au](mailto:inala@inalanaturetours.com.au)  
Website: [www.inalanaturetours.com.au](http://www.inalanaturetours.com.au)

**Inala plan to include three of our popular departures in their program. More on page 5 & 6**



## Goldsmiths in the Forest B & B

Did you ever stay with us at Waterholes Guest House before it closed, and just love the experience? If so I think you will love Goldsmiths in the Forest - ideal for couples, singles and small groups.

Not a tour, but a fantastic experience in its own right – just relax, switch off and let the beautiful forest setting work its magic on you. The birds and wildlife will entertain you – lyrebirds are regular visitors and you will feel thoroughly spoilt. Darilyn will ensure you are well fed and Les will take you on walks and share his bush knowledge.

If you want to explore East Gippsland by car or bicycle, this makes a superb place to base yourself. But don't just take the recommendation from me - read the comments below and see what others like you have thought of the experience.



### Comments from tour participants who have stayed at Goldsmiths in the Forest before or after their tour with me

*"We really enjoyed our stay at Goldsmiths(4 days and nights). The accommodation was very comfortable and there were balconies from which to view the interesting bush surrounds - we even saw a lyrebird taking a day spa. The meals provided were excellent - Darilyn is an amazing cook. She and Les couldn't have been more hospitable. I'd thoroughly recommend the Goldsmith experience."* (Barbara) **Photo at left taken from the deck, by Barbara**

*"We had a lovely time at Goldsmiths in The Forest, I cannot recommend it highly enough. Darilyn and Les are great hosts and the whole setup could not be better."* (Ruth)

*"Goldsmiths is a unique place to stay a short distance north of Lakes Entrance, set within a forest with a rainforest gully. Our welcoming host provided lots of botanical information as we walked. One can observe numerous birds either on a walk or from the deck, including numerous normally shy lyrebirds plus an occasional wombat. There are several walks within the property and a refreshing spa or sauna afterwards. Breakfast is included (a cooked one if preferred) and amazing dinners are provided by the hostess, who is a qualified chef. Many different bush, lake, and coastal walks are within a short drive from the property, including the Bairnsdale to Orbost Rail Trail for walking or bike riding. Goldsmiths is a total pampering experience with a roaring fire on cooler nights."* (Nancy)

*"We added to our tour by staying at " Goldsmiths in the forest" which was also magnificent, including the meals. One of the highlights was to open my blinds early Sunday morning and watch a male lyre bird perform "just for me!!" and right outside the window, scratching about, tail display and all!!"* (Dorothy)

*"Our time with Darilyn and Les at Goldsmith's was quite wonderful. Magnificently positioned in the middle of unspoiled native forest. Les happily took us for walks and talks about the stunning variety of vegetation, stopping occasionally to watch a lyrebird scratching for food. Even watching from the deck of their beautiful house while lyrebirds bathed in the pond below. Not to mention the magnificent meals provided by Darilyn!"* (Eva)

### Goldsmiths in the Forest (03) 5155 2518

Website: <https://www.goldsmithsintheforest.com.au/> (Great lyrebird video to watch!!)

Follow Goldsmiths on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/GoldsmithsInTheForest>

## Alpine Discovery Tour

“Imagine walking in a beautiful snowgum forest, their colourful trunks with patches of greens, greys, gold, orange, and white. Lush clumps of Alpine flowers of yellow, pink, mauve, violet, blue, orange, red, and the multiple varieties of white Alpine daisies all putting on their best faces. Many varieties of colourful beetles rest on their petals. Butterflies of various colours and dragon flies hovering among them. Newly hatched cicadas hang on stalks of native grass, drying their wings. Multiple pobblebonk tadpoles scamper among the lush green plants in a large waterhole. Beautiful ro-sellas flash overhead. Other birds challenge us to identify their melodious calls.

All this and more was what five plucky women discovered as we wandered Mt. Hotham and surrounding plains at a very relaxed, meandering pace with Jenny and Wayne.

The climax was viewing a stunning sunset from Mt. Hotham. The daytime blue-on-blue hues of the multiple mountain ranges of Victoria and NSW turned to soft coppery tones. Overhead, a brilliant afterglow lingered in the clouds, with ever changing shapes and tones of gold, grey, charcoal and pink. As darkness fell, swarms of Bogong Moths flew across low dips in the road.

The devastation of recent bushfires was evident with ridge after ridge down the valleys edged with the white skeletal remains of snowgums - a stark reminder of how fragile our environment is. There is much regeneration, except in areas where trunks of mountain ash rise like rows of bare poles. Wayne shared his first-hand experience of fighting these fires and took us to Mt. Hotham fire-watch tower to explain the system in Victoria.



An overnight stop in Omeo provided an insight into the early settlement of that area and with several walk around numerous gold mining sites.

Once again Jenny's knowledge of the high country enriched our experience and was further enhanced by Wayne, including his recitation of bush ballads. Thank you for another special tour.”

Nancy O'Toole (January 2023)

**Inala Nature Tours are planning to add this tour to their program in 2024. Details are still being finalised, but contact them to ensure you are on the email list to be sent full details once they are finalised.**

Email: [inala@inalanaturetours.com.au](mailto:inala@inalanaturetours.com.au)

### Hattah Kulkyne & Murray Sunset - Victoria's arid Mallee country

Inala will also be offering a Mallee environment tour along similar lines to our Birds of Hattah Kulkyne & Murray Sunset tour but it will be all nature experiences not just birds.

Email: [inala@inalanaturetours.com.au](mailto:inala@inalanaturetours.com.au) to add your name to the list and be notified when details are finalised, or give them a call on (03) 6293 1217



**ERRINUNDRA** by Dorothy Gordon

High on the plateau the tall timbers reign,  
 deep in the gullies the violets hide  
 and all up the slopes the ferns patrol  
 This is Errinundra.

The rippling streams are the life-streams  
 Where the little green frog is at home  
 And among the brilliant waratahs  
 The wallaby raises her young

In all this Australian Paradise  
 the birdcalls fill the air  
 And the perfume of the bushland  
 pervades everywhere

What a privilege to be  
 In this ancient wonderland  
 Where all the senses are indulged.  
 So wondrous and so grand!

Thankyou Errinundra.



Above: Gippsland Waratah



Above: Walking Errinundra National Park

**The next Errinundra Nature Tour**

[Echidna Walkabout](#) are planning to add an Errinundra Tour to their program soon and Roger is very excited about returning to Errinundra, one of his favourite places, to share these extraordinary forests with you.

Contact Roger on (03) 9646 8249 or email [enquiries@echidnawalkabout.com.au](mailto:enquiries@echidnawalkabout.com.au) to hear more about plans for an Errinundra Nature Tour.

**Croajingolong coast and Mallacoota**

Last November a small group had a fantastic time exploring and discovering the wildlife and abundant spring wildflowers in the Croajingolong National Park around Mallacoota, Gipsy Point.

*"A dream fulfilled to get to Croajingolong. Great accommodation and meals at Gipsy Point Lodge, great bird, plant and animal spotting and I learnt a lot."* (Louise)

**Inala Nature Tours are planning to offer a nature tour to Croajingolong which will include Gipsy Point and Mallacoota. Join the waiting list-**



Contact Inala Nature Tours on (03) 6293 1217 or Email: [inala@inalanaturetours.com.au](mailto:inala@inalanaturetours.com.au)

## Acknowledgements and Thank you

I want to say how appreciative I am for the support I've received throughout the years, especially from my family.

During the life of Gippsland High Country Tours, my children Christine and Alan have grown from pre-schoolers to independent adults and put up with their mother balancing parenting with running a business. They have both played a big part in the business over the years and I know it was not always easy for them but I appreciated their support and involvement. I could not have got the business off the ground in the early years without the assistance from my parents who stepped in time and time again to help in various ways. Other family and friends played a part too helping me with everything from juggling kids, to accounting, secretarial services, mechanical expertise, natural history knowledge and words of encouragement. And a special thank you to my husband Peter, who has been so supportive even with me running around madly preparing and packing for tours, being away a lot and grumbling over my accounting program. Your deep understanding of the natural world has helped me refine some of my on-tour interpretation and it has been great when you've been able to join me on tours.



Many of the casual guides who have worked alongside me at Gippsland High Country Tours are friends too and special thanks goes to **"Tom" (David)** who introduced me to serious bushwalking/hiking very early on and competently led

many bushwalks and tours over three decades. **Hans**, your supporting role on many bushwalks and tours has been invaluable as has your role in vehicle maintenance. **Maria**, how lucky was I to have you join me on some tours and it was easy to hand over guiding roles to you, knowing how competently you would run the tours.

**Wayne**, what a pleasure it's been working with you, we make a good team and ensure lots of laughs. **Jim**, I learnt so much from you when you joined early tours as a natural history guide or led wildlife research activities with so much enthusiasm. Likewise I learnt lots from **Raz** and **April** and appreciated your guiding skills too. **Alan M.** you opened our eyes to seashore life and **Andrew** taught us how to listen to the sounds of the bush. **Steve** shared his great enthusiasm and knowledge of early goldmining history of the Tambo Valley, all with a dry sense of humour. **Trevor**, outback driver extraordinaire, birdwatcher and guide – thank you. **Christine** you were a great supporting guide with me on wildlife research tours and **Alan's** help on tours was appreciated by me and by other participants. You both worked hard behind the scenes too. Thank you **Katherine** for sharing Gunaikurnai culture which added great value to the tour experience. **Trudy**, we had some great fun and you too were a very capable guide. The late **Peter Lind** was an excellent and capable guide with a personality that made everyone feel so welcome and involved. There were also some great tours with **Kim, Shannon, James, Sharna, Megan, Christianne, Shane** and **Kirsty** helping out. I have probably forgotten someone, but I have appreciated all those I have worked with.

I have partnered with so many other great local businesses over the years, it's very rewarding being able to help each other, provide local benefits and ensure visitors enjoy their visit to East Gippsland. Land managers from Parks Victoria, DELWP and their predecessors have always been helpful with information on management issues, track conditions and local information and in return they've appreciated hearing of our observations on tours.

I am very grateful for support from two travel agents who were leading the way in the early days of ecotourism in Australia – Barb Murphy from Australian Tracks and Trails and Janet Southern from Ecotour Travel Agency. It was a pleasure working with you both and you sent me some really lovely international clients over the years. Bron from Bronze Discovery Tours sent clients my way, as did Max from Austour & Travel Company. Peter Kellett from Ecotrek worked with me so we could run some joint tour interstate between 2002-2005 and more recently I have thoroughly enjoyed working with Dr Tonia Cochrane from [Inala Nature Tours](#).

Last but not least, thank you to all of you who have found Gippsland High Country Tours, joined a tour, then came back again, told your friends and spread the word. Almost 70% of my clients in any year have been either repeat clients or ones who came to me via word of mouth and I'm very proud of that and grateful to you all. It's been a great 32 years and I could not have done it or enjoyed it as much without all of you. **Thank you!!!!**

## A bit of history and a few highlights (sorry it's a bit lengthy!)

### In the beginning and some day trips

When Gippsland High Country Tours started as a partnership in 1987, it was mainly doing outback charter tours, but when the partnership was dissolved and I took on sole ownership in 1991, I changed the focus to showcasing the East Gippsland area. As the local tours were getting established, I offered day trips for visitors holidaying at Lakes Entrance, but also educational day trips included in the program for Bairnsdale Adult Community Education (B.A.C.E.) for locals. These showed me how much participants wanted to learn about the places they were visiting and led me to develop more educational content in the tours. Although educational day trips for local residents formed a key part of my offering for over 20 years, overnight tours quickly became the backbone of the program.

### Discovering ecotourism

Sometime in the early 1990s I read a lovely article in a Melbourne daily newspaper featuring Dr Tony Lee of Australis Nature Tours. Tony talked about the concept of ecotourism and how he provided experiential and interpretive day trips to (I think) the Brisbane Ranges National Park near Melbourne. He talked about how he interpreted the natural environment and wildlife to the participants and filled their day with information for them to quietly absorb during the drive home. Wow! This thing called “ecotourism” was just what I had envisaged doing, but without knowing whether such tourism experiences existed. I still remember my feeling of excitement and inspiration as I read this article and discovered this sort of educational and sustainable tourism had a name! It gave me the confidence to alter my focus and develop my tours into true ecotourism products.

I discovered the Ecotourism Association of Australia, joined up and when an accreditation program was launched, I was very proud to be amongst the first batch of 13 tour operators in Australia to receive Ecotourism Accreditation in April 1997 under the NEAP program. The association is now Ecotourism Australia and all the tour products in my program have held Advanced Ecotourism Accreditation as well as ROC (Respecting our culture) accreditation. Gippsland High Country Tours has been recognised as Green Travel Leaders and in 2018 was one of the first 14 operators to be entered in the Ecotourism Australia Hall of Fame.

### Wild remote walking with some Wilderness Bushwalks

Thanks to Tom introducing me to serious bushwalks back in 1992, a range of Wilderness bushwalks (backpacking hiking tours) were added to the program between 1995 and 2006 with adventurous souls enjoying the challenges and rewards of really remote walking in Victoria's Alps. We were hiking through Wilderness Areas where there was no vehicle access and very few tracks to follow. Carrying everything for 5-7 days in backpacks and often navigating with map and compass they were very special experiences but not everyone's idea of a holiday!

Destinations included re-tracing part of the “straight line” of the Victorian / NSW border on the Historic Border Trek following in the footsteps of surveyors Black & Allen and discovering the stone cairns, blazed trees and rock markers along the way. Other popular walks were the Cobberas and Cowombat Flat Adventure, Reedy Creek Chasm bushwalk and Tali Karng bushwalk.

We walked for days in the rain, we basked in the sun on remote rock outcrops with eagles soaring overhead, we lost a watch (but none of our participants) and found lots of laughter. Tom made “constellation custard” on the Trangia and in the silence of the mountains, we celebrated a birthday with a balloon, lolly bag and candle while the sun set, and crawled into tents under starry skies. We hunted for water in dry creeks, crossed swollen streams, skirted around steep rocky cliffs and huddled in tents in a snowstorm with trees crashing nearby. We found endangered skinks in sub-alpine wetlands, rare ferns under a waterfall and saw Mountain Plum Pine re-sprouting after fire. There was almost impenetrable undergrowth, then magnificent old twisted snowgums and wonderful open plains or grassy “glens” amongst the trees, where you could sit forever absorbing the peace of the mountains. They were great times but after a while, these walks were no longer popular, so with a feeling of sadness, they came off the tour program – everyone seems to want easier tours.

### Nature tours and walking ecotours that were the core of the business

The most popular tours have always been the easier vehicle based tours with walks ranging from short and easy to challenging full day walks. Some had accommodation, but early on camping overnight was very popular. As the years passed interest in camping tours waned and more and more people wanted accommodation so in the end only fully accommodated tours were offered in the program.



I'm sure you will agree that on a tour it's not just about where you sleep, its often about the homely welcome from our hosts and the way many have generously shared stories of their lifestyles. Sadly these are no longer in business but did you ever come on a tour that stayed in refurbished Melbourne trams at the "High Country Horseless Carriage", a stone cottage overlooking the Snowy River valley and cosy B & B in the homestead at "Springs", or a house beside the Snowy River at "Snowy River WilderNest"? Or maybe you stayed in guesthouse accommodation at "Waterholes Guesthouse".

But there are still many great places to stay and these are some of our favourites. We have always felt very spoilt and very much at home at Gipsy Point Lodge near Mallacoota, enjoying amazing service and meals in such a beautiful setting. We've stayed at Lighthouse keepers cottages at Pt Hicks and Gabo Island Lighthouses – both pretty special. Karoonda Park at Gelantipy where we always get a warm country welcome has been part of many tours. "Kurrajong" near the Snowy River NP, "Murnong Cottage" near Mitchell River National Park and just over the border into NSW "Delegate Nurses Cottage" near Errinundra NP, have all been delightful self-contained bases for nature tours. There are also many motels and country pubs with great local character and ski lodges at Dinner Plain have given us an excellent alpine base. If you want to explore East Gippsland for yourself rest assured there are some great places to stay!

Special group tours over the years have included a U3A geology group, an art tour with an artist, two adventure tours for teachers from Singapore's National Police Cadet Corps, walkers from Fitness on the Park, Mueller's Victorian Alps for Friends of Melbourne Botanic Gardens and many tours with the wonderful Orbost Women's Awareness Group (OWAG) who were an inspiring group of women with enquiring minds and lots of laughter.

In the beginning, the focus of the nature tour itineraries was the mountain country of East Gippsland. The Alpine National Park, Snowy River National Park and Errinundra National Park were staples for the program until the 2003 Alpine Fires burnt over 70% of the destinations for my tours. Although I was keen to get back to visiting as soon as possible to learn about and share the experience of regeneration of the environment after fire – it was clear I needed somewhere new, so I started to investigate the far East Gippsland coast. Knowing the lessees at Point Hicks Lighthouse at the time was a great starting point and very soon, tours to Croajingolong National Park were "born" and added to the program. They proved extremely popular and Croajingolong has such a rich biodiversity and human history, it was perfect for the educational content that was so important to me.

Together we have explored the many wonderful landscapes of East Gippsland, crouched down with magnifiers discovering the detail in tiny wildflowers, gazed up at massive eucalypts and across vast mountain ranges. We have been awe-struck imagining the rich lives of East Gippsland's first peoples as we discover shell middens on the coast or stone artefacts and scar trees in the mountains. We have wondered at the brilliance in colour and patterns of many small creatures on land and in the water and been thrilled by chance wildlife encounters. Andrew Skeoch from [Listening Earth](#) taught us how to listen better in the bush and understand the language of birdsong. We've discussed our mixed feelings as we celebrate the achievements and hardships of early European settlers but think too about the impacts of changes made since their arrival, both to Australia's first peoples and to the environment.

### **Wildlife Research and giving something back**

Very early on in the life of Gippsland High Country Tours, I was keen to find ways to contribute to environmental conservation during the tours. I started submitting records of wildlife observations to the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife in Jan 1996 when I sent a predator scat (poo) collected on a bushwalk to the Cobberas Range for analysis and the results were that it was a Spot-tailed Quoll scat containing the hair of a Broad-toothed Rat – Wow, one threatened species had eaten another threatened species! I was encouraged to enter the record to the Atlas to help with knowledge of distribution and I realised how valuable the observations we make on our tours could be, especially when in remote areas. Since then and well over 500 observation records later (most containing multiple wildlife species), there are a significant number of "dots on the map" thanks to Gippsland High Country Tours. Likewise bird records are added to Birddata (previously Bird Atlas) where over a thousand surveys can be attributed to the tours and many of you have helped out. More recently some plant and invertebrate observations have also been added to iNaturalist – a fantastic citizen science platform that anyone can easily use.

I was also keen to do some more formal wildlife research so in conjunction with Jim Reside from [Wildlife Unlimited](#), we ran our first Wonders of Wildlife research tour in the Haunted Stream valley in October 1995. Who could forget 5 year old Gil in his yellow raincoat helping to weigh a tiny microbat. This became a New Year fixture on

the program – “Exchange fireworks for the peace of the bush” and was particularly popular to escape the hype of the millennium celebrations at the end of 1999. So the year 2000 dawned for us quietly in the bush checking and releasing wildlife captured overnight in our traps. January 1st did end with a “bang” though as we were walking back to camp after a late night check of traps, we experienced what sounded like long rumbles of thunder or an explosion. Learning later it was a 3.2 magnitude earthquake with the epicentre only about 30km from us.

With leadership from Alan Monger, we recorded marine and rockpool creatures on a couple of Seashore Life tours and data was submitted to the Marine Research Group. Other wildlife research tours surveyed sites in Snowy River and Alpine National Parks. At one site we increased the wildlife records over a decade from just 5 species to 94. These included a number of threatened species, some feral animals and many common native species. Some of our data collected before and then after bushfires provided opportunities to learn about how wildlife (and the plant communities they live in) recover from fire. A highlight for me though, was confirming the presence of threatened Smoky Mice at a site in the Alpine National Park for the first time in 10 years and I was able to get this discovery published in the Victorian Naturalist.

Contributing to environmental conservation on the tours was not just about wildlife, we have always taken opportunities to pick up rubbish we encounter, but this was a much higher priority on coastal tours to Croajingolong when we made some dedicated “pick-up” time on a beach, where often there was a lot of rubbish washed ashore. Plastics were the main focus along with ropes, twine and my pet hate – nylon balloon strings – that seem to last forever. It never took long to fill up some bags to take out. On a few Croajingolong tours we also undertook some hand weeding of invasive Sea Spurge. Thank you to those to enthusiastically undertook this as part of your holiday!

### **Interstate Natural History Tours**

A phone call from Jim Reside early in the year 2000, encouraged me to consider planning a tour to Lake Eyre which was at the time starting to fill to a level not seen since the 1970s. “People will love it” said Jim, “The birds and Wildlife will be breeding and the explosion of life in the arid country will be amazing”. I was not convinced – having had some experience with long interstate camping tours prior to starting GHCT, I knew how much work these would be to plan and then maybe no one would book. But Jim was persistent and after another couple of phone calls I agreed to send out an “expression of interest” request to past clients. He was right – the interest was there. We planned out a tour and it was booked out (2 vehicles) almost straight away. I added a second departure and it too booked out. So in May 2000 and again in June we had amazing Natural History Tours to Lake Eyre with Jim as the naturalist guide and Trevor and I driving the vehicles. Some of the highlights for me were not so much the shores of Lake Eyre (although the laughter in the back during the “tooth rattling and bra shifting” drive on the corrugated sandy track was memorable) but seeing the explosion of life in the arid country from local rains. Creek bed where the calls of budgerigars breeding in trees was deafening, arid country birds like Inland Dotterels and Pratincoles scattering off the road ahead of us, wildflowers, mound springs and finding Geckos and a Blind Snake under rotting sleepers left from the old Ghan Railway are all etched in my mind.

These tours started something... where else would participants like to go? “Innamincka” they said... but I put that one in the too hard basket initially as it was not an area I had any knowledge of. It was another 12 months before I contacted Peter Kellett from Ecotrek in SA who knew that area well and we decided to do a joint tour. He did a superb job with the logistics and historical interpretation around aboriginal culture and Burke and Wills stories. Jim came along too and under his research permit we did some trapping for small mammals to provide data to SA museum. We never did get a proper look at the fluffy native Long-haired Rats – Jim let the first one escape from the trap and I let the second one escape! Capturing microbats along the banks of Cooper Creek to weigh and measure were pretty special though. This tour was repeated on a number of occasions with a few changes - the last time in 2012.

Other Natural History Tours included Flinders Ranges on four occasions, Coast, Coorong and Kangaroo Island which was away from the desert environment as were the three Tasmanian tours. See my list of acknowledgements on page 7 for thank you messages to the drivers and other tour operators that helped make these so successful. Interstate was great, but my heart is in East Gippsland, so the focus of tour has remained here in recent years.

**Well, if you have read this to the end, thank you for being interested and humouring me as I reminisce over the last 32 years of sharing my love of the natural world with so many curious and adventurous nature lovers. As I mentioned, if you have memories you would like to share, I'd love to hear from you. Jenny**