

THE MORWELL NATIONAL PARK: by Dr. L.H. Smith, M.Sc., D.Ph.(Oxon), F.R.A.C.I.
Director of the National Parks Authority of Victoria. Article from the "Victoria's
Resources Magazine Vol. 9 No. 2. June-Aug. 1967.

The circumstances surrounding the creation of Victoria's twentieth national park are as interesting as they are unusual. In fact, at the moment of writing, the area in question has not been declared, although on 29th. November 1966, H.E. the Governor of Victoria signed a Bill which had recently been passed by both Houses of Parliament, providing that the land should become the Morwell National Park after certain preliminary action had been taken.

Normally national parks are derived from Crown lands and it is necessary before an area can be dedicated that it become Crown land. The "preliminary action" referred to therefore consists of the transfer of this land to the crown. The events leading to this action are as follows:

Early in July, 1964, the Morwell Shire Council brought to the attention of the Authority an area of land owned by Messrs. Quigley Bros., and suggested that it be acquired to ensure that it would be preserved for posterity as a national park. The adjoining land in the rapidly developing district of Churchill was being subdivided, but one of the owners, Mr. Ray Quigley, no doubt because of boyhood memories, sought to have this particular tract of land preserved. This was our second experience of a landowner striving to resist the pressure of development in order to preserve a favourite beauty spot; the other case was concerned with the Tarra Valley National Park, the Ranger of which, as the owner of an adjoining block of land, was anxious that her land should become part of the park. Eventually, through the generosity of the Bird Observers Club, Mrs Healy's wish was fulfilled.

Officers of the National Parks Authority and Lands Department inspected the area, and, despite the fact that it was snow-covered, reached a favourable conclusion. Unfortunately, the land was privately owned and the Authority had neither the money nor the power to purchase it.

My first visit to the area took place on 30th. September 1965. It was a fine sunny day and the omens were good. Looking back through notes prepared on this visit, I find that I wrote as follows: "The scenery is truly beautiful. In addition to scrub consisting of low acacias and dogwood there are numerous blanket-leaf and pittosporums, great masses of varnish wattle, and towering above them many magnificent eucalypts, Blue Gums (*E. bicostata*) and Grey Gums (*E. cypellocarpa*) being the dominant species. We saw a number of Nodding Greenhood Orchids and Butterfly Orchids (in bud). There were also some magnificent tree-ferns".

And on bird-life:- "It is an excellent bird area. Within a few minutes we had heard the Bronze Cuckoo, the Golden-bronze Cuckoo, the Grey Thrush, the Grey Fantail, the White-throated Tree-creeper, Thornbills, Pardalotes (2 species), the Crested Honeyeater, other species of Honeyeaters, Silvereyes, Golden Whistlers, Spinebills, Blue Wrens, the Fantail Cuckoo, and the Whipbird; and we were greeted by the songs of these birds as we proceeded up the gully. A lyrebird had called a greeting before we were out of the car".

On this excursion I was accompanied by Mr. John Connan, Morwell Shire Engineer, and Mr. R.G.M. Yorston, one of the Authority's technical Officers. I recall that we made slow progress as we paused to admire the many attractive features. I had taken the precaution to bring my tape recorder, just in case the birds sang!

Later on that same day, I attended by invitation a meeting of the Morwell Shire Council and informed the Council that in my opinion the area was suitable for dedication. This was probably the first time on which a visitor to a meeting of the Council had played a tape recording of bird calls to the members of the Council. Certainly, the songs of the Whipbird,

Grey Thrush, Golden Whistler and other birds created a favourable impression on the Council Room.

Acquisition. The key to the solution of this problem was still finance. However, following negotiation in which the Shire Council, the Authority and the Minister of Lands all played a part, on 9th December 1965, the Treasurer approved a grant of \$10,500 to the Shire to meet half the cost of purchase, provided that the Council agreed to surrender the land to the Crown for dedication as a national park, and to provide the public access. As only Parliament may declare an area of land to be a national park, obviously these arrangements were subject to the approval of that body; hence the need for the legislation to ensure that the land having been purchased by the Government and Shire Council in collaboration would in fact become a national park. At the date of writing, the land transfer is proceeding, and is expected to be registered during the next few weeks.

Description of Area.

The land in question consists of Allotments 22 and 23, Section A, Parish of Yinnar, and contains 341 acres and 3 roods. The area consists of a number of steep sloping ridges with a creek running in a small channel 30 to 40 feet deep. The slopes are well timbered, although they show the scars of the early years of settlement and of the 1939 fire.

The main gully, which is in fact a tributary of Middle Creek which in turn is a tributary of the Morwell River, is the principal feature for national parks purposes. This is a truly beautiful area with magnificent Blue Gums and Grey Gums. The gully has developed a plant community of Pittosporum, Blackwood, Blanket-leaf, Austral Mulberry, Musk and Christmas Bush. To walk through such an area, on a fine spring day, whilst listening to the calls of the many birds which live in the gully and on the slopes, is a very pleasant experience.

One of the principal reasons for having this reservation made was to preserve the Butterfly Orchid (*Sarcophilus australis*), sometimes known as Gunn's Orchid, which occurs on the trunks of trees. Although Victoria has many species of native orchids, which are so varied and beautiful that whole monographs have been written about them, none is finer than the Butterfly Orchid. A relic of the ages when jungles covered Southern Australia, it survives now only in a few dense gullies. The flowers are usually yellow-green with a coloured labellum, several on a drooping stem. The Butterfly Orchid is an epiphyte; that is, it lives on trees. It is not a parasite, but merely uses the tree for support. Only a few of our orchids are epiphytes, nearly all being terrestrial. The name 'Gunn's Orchid' derives from that of its discoverer, Ronald Campbell Gunn, said to be the most famous amateur botanist Tasmania has produced. Gunn collected his first specimen near Burnie in Tasmania, and the species was known for many years by the scientific name of *Gunnia australis*. Unfortunately, this beautiful orchid is now quite rare in the two Australian States where it was once common.

On the other hand, the area contains a considerable number of other plants and birds. Members of the Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists Club have identified 97 vascular species of plants, not including grasses, sedges, rushes, lilies and small ephemeral herbs. There is also a wide variety of mosses, liver-worts, lichens and fungi. A preliminary bird list includes 41 species with sightings of particular interest including nests of Wedge-tailed Eagle and the Peregrine Falcon. Lyrebirds are reported to be numerous.

Because of its small size and the delicate nature of some of its precious contents, Morwell National Park will require very careful management. It will be essentially a day visitor park, and as such will provide an opportunity in a rapidly-developing area for local residents and visitors from further afield to enjoy a day in the beautiful Australian bush. It will, however be necessary to exercise control to ensure that the area is not overrun by human visitors, so that those who follow after us may share our heritage. Morwell National Park will also furnish botanists, plant physiologists and ecologists with some very useful reference data.

The Name. The name "Morwell National Park" was not chosen without careful consideration by the Place Names Committee and by the Authority, and ultimately by Parliament. "Morwell" is a very old name in the history of the district, although the early spelling appears to have

been variable. Seemingly, Count Paul Strzelecki in April 1840, was the first white man to see Morwell River and his route took him only a few miles from the park. The first known record of the name "Morwell" is by C. J. Tyers, Crown Lands Commissioner for Gippsland, in his journal for 7th. February 1844. Under the circumstances, the name "Morwell National Park" seems very appropriate and there is no doubt that in the years to come this park will play iits part in providing for the healthy out-door recreation of present and future generations and preserving a little more of our vanishing bushland.

---- L.H. Smith ----