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Cape Chatter

Whales' Song ... as time goes by

There is a special thing happening at the moment in the sea to our south—the annual *Humpback Whale* migration, when tens of thousands of magnificent sea mammals move north from their summer feeding grounds in Antarctica to the warm tropical waters of northern Australia. The lookouts on the coastline near **The Cape** provide wonderful vantage points to see these amazing creatures breaching and ‘blowing’ offshore, and occasionally, some venture in quite close. But you must be patient! I recently came across a lovely story and colouring book, *Whales' Song*, by local Mandy Leggett, which brings the story of this amazing journey along the Bass Coast to life. Mandy has kindly given me permission to share some of the story with you. Also, five years ago, as a way of ‘looking after country’ and rejuvenating the ecology of **The Cape**, the first sods were turned to begin the construction of a number of water features which have become an important part of the biodiverse landscape and vital habitat for many creatures. *Cape Chatter* has been photo-recording the progress of these habitats and we’ll take a look at how they have progressed and what animals have moved in ... as time goes by.



Above: The sight, sound and raw power of a giant *Humpback Whale* breaching in wild seas is never forgotten! I took this photo off the south west Gippsland coast in October 2020 on a whale watching tour—an adventure well worth the effort.

Whales' Song ...

*"... Along the coast and past Kilcunda
the whale's song claps like thunder.*

*From the cliffs, you can see them dance
it is worth a look if you get the chance.*

*The Whales swim around the Cape Paterson "Bommie"
in search of a place to scratch their tummy.*

*Scratching their bellies on the rocks
trying to get the barnacles off.*

*The Hooded Plovers hear their song
from their homes on the beach they sing along.*

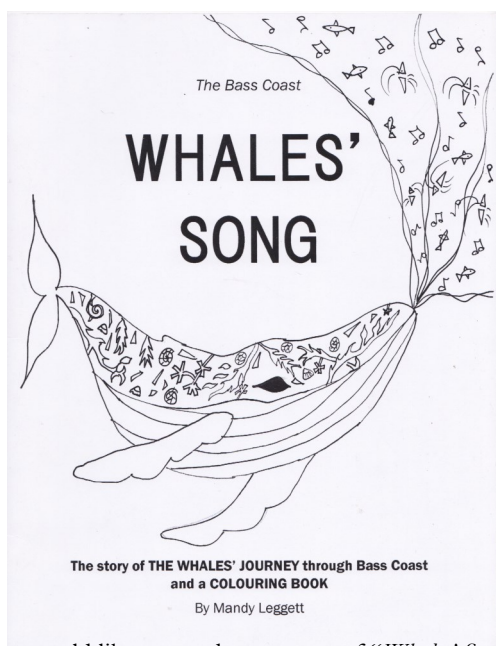
*The walkers see them from the cliffs
Watching them go by as they drift.*

*They may call at Cape for a rest
or to catch some fish on a break from their quest.*

From Eagles Nest, they head out to sea

Leaving Bass Coast behind, they are wild and free ..."

.....
An extract of the *Whales' Song* and their journey past Cape Paterson by Mandy Leggett



If you would like to purchase a copy of "*Whales' Song*" it is available for \$10. Mandy has kindly offered to donate \$2.50 of that to local *Hooded Plover* conservation work. Contact me by email (dwhartney@bigpond.com) to purchase and local pick-up.



From the Top: Pictures I have taken of the whales' journey from Antarctica (2017) to Bass Coast (2020), watched on by a local Hooded Plover **White AW** looking for **Another Whale**!

As time goes by ... following the water

A key feature of the landscape design of **The Cape** are the wetlands, creek line and ponds. These areas are important for the management, storage and treatment of run-off water within the estate. Run-off from hard surfaces such as driveways, roads and foot-paths is channelled into streetscape swales which flow into a series of pits/underground pipes to enter these water bodies. Wetland plant species help purify this water as it flows through the system, and by the time it reaches natural wetlands in the adjoining coastal park, it is much cleaner when entering the ocean. Along the way, it is providing important habitat for a range of fauna, from small freshwater invertebrates through to large furry mammals. A win-win for all!

I have given names to each of the elements in the the central creek line and wetlands system—see below. Each of these water bodies have been planted with a range of sedge/rush wetland plant species including ephemeral batter plants and shallow/deep marsh plants. Large rocks, old timber logs, tree stumps and installed tall dead tree stags have been placed around and within the water bodies to provide habitat and resting structures for animals. Under each stag, a small ‘mini-forest’ of indigenous shrubs and trees are growing and will eventually replace the stags when they rot and fall, providing more, ongoing habitat and humus.



Ten photo points were established in 2020 in the wetlands and creek line to photo-record the progress of plant growth. A sample of the photo points are shown above as red dots. Since 2020, yearly comparison photos have been taken at all photo points. The **central creek line** and **wetlands** are pictured in the aerial photo above, looking south toward Bass Strait. This photo, courtesy of **The Cape**, was taken by drone in January 2022.

The central wetlands fill in no time!

On 10th May 2019, an unusual storm event occurred over Cape Paterson with heavy hail and rain falling intensely for just over two hours. The central wetland complex had just finished being constructed and during this significant weather event, the four ponds filled within hours ... nature working at it's best. The wetlands were planted out soon after and have now become thickly vegetated—in fact it is difficult to discern the four ponds from the nearby walking paths!

Then—10 May 2019



Now—8 June 2024



The animals move in!

In August 2019, observation records of fauna were started at **The Cape**. What was once degraded pasture land now offered new habitat options for animals and the species numbers and diversity have continued to grow.

Of the **136** species of birds recorded to date, some **75** have been observed in this ecosystem, including **43** land species, **5** coastal species, **21** freshwater species and **6** introduced.



Proof that this ecosystem is working has been the uptake by the 'wetland specialist birds', with species such as the secretive and elusive vulnerable *Levin's Rail*, the migratory *Latham's Snipe*, *Spotless Crake*, *Australian Spotted Crake* and *Buff-banded Rail* all observed. In addition, the small 'reed' specialists such as the *Little Grassbird* and *Australian Reed Warbler* have been regular summer visitors since 2020.

The central creek line ...

In mid 2020, the central creek line was constructed centered on a natural grassy drainage line that ran between an existing farm dam (the north pond) linking it with the central wetlands in the south.

Then—October 2020



Now—June 2024



Above: Looking north up the creek line over the south pond. **Below:** Looking north over the convergence pond.

Then—October 2020



Now—June 2024



Central creek line progress ...

Then—October 2020



Now—June 2024



Above: Looking south from the middle pond.



Given the dearth of mature trees within the estate, the creek line tree stags are fantastic perch points for our most skillful bird hunters, such as *Grey Butcherbird*, *Black-shouldered Kite* and *Peregrine Falcon*, and there is a variety of prey to keep an eye out for, including *rodents* and *reptiles*, which in turn are on the lookout for *frogs*, *skinks* and *invertebrates*.



Then—October 2020



Now—June 2024



Above: Looking south from the north pond.

Creek line and wetland fauna ...

The list of fauna other than birds observed in the creek line and wetlands includes: *Eastern Grey Kangaroo*, *Echidna*, *Wombat*, *Bush*, *Swamp* and *Water Rat (Rakali)*, 8 species of *frogs*, *Water Skink*, *Lowland Copperhead*, and the *Eastern Snake-necked Turtle*.

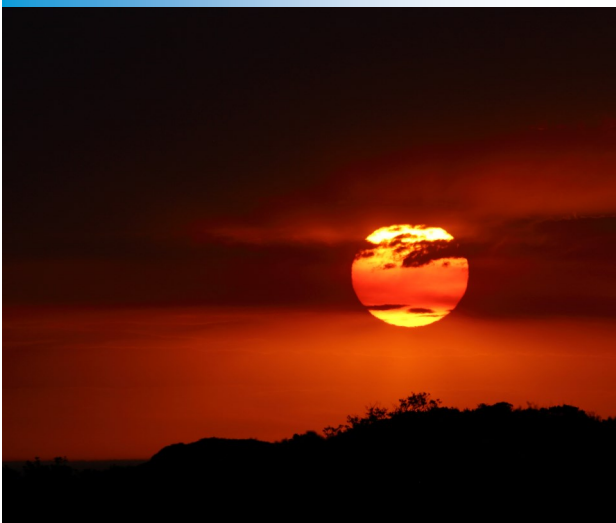


The water bodies are great habitat for the countless freshwater and terrestrial invertebrates. Getting a closer look at these beautiful creatures is an area we hope to explore into the future to help determine the health of the system, which to date, appears very healthy indeed.



In the next issue of *Cape Chatter*, we will look at the progress of another of the landscape features, the east-west chain of ponds, which are now into the third year of development, and see what has been showing interest in this habitat.

Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Contact David by email or through the website to report interesting nature observations at **The Cape**.

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