U3A Port Fairy
Science…naturally!

Rail Trail – Self-guided nature walk

John Miller April 2020

This is the third in a series of self-guided walks around Port Fairy to help relieve the tedium of COVID-19. The aim of the walks is to provide enjoyable outdoor activities that can be undertaken either by yourself or your family (with appropriate COVID-19 separation and other precautions). I hope you enjoy them.

This walk introduces you to a few of the natural features of the Port Fairy-Warrnambool Rail Trail between Regent Street and the Princes Highway. It is a bit like a treasure hunt – locations are not marked on the ground so you will need to keep your eyes peeled for the plants and other features illustrated.

Start the walk at the start of the Rail Train on Regent Street and walk north to the Princes Highway. The return trip is either to retrace your steps or walk back into town via the Princes Highway.

The start on Regent Street is easily recognised by the copse of tall eucalypts – there are not many other gum trees in Port Fairy.

The Swamp Gums *Eucalyptus ovata,* like most of the native species along the walk, were planted by the very active Friends of the Port Fairy-Warrnambool Rail Trail Group and have grown well. Have a look at Google Maps *street view* to see what the start of the trail looked like a few years ago.

Swamp Gums are very common along the wetter coastal areas around and west of Port Fairy and can be recognised by their wide wavy-edged leaves and their top-shaped gum nuts which have a small pointy cap (operculum) before they flower.Little insect eating birds like Thornbills, Silvereyes and Grey Fantails can be heard, and sometimes seen, fossicking for insects in the tree canopy.

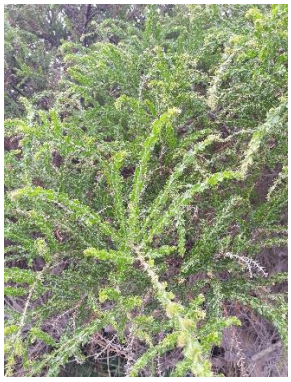
The autumn and winter flowering Silver Banksia *Banksia marginata* provides nectar for insects and honeyeaters at a time when food is scarce. It is much shorter than the Coast Banksia seen on the Russell Clarke Reserve walk and has thinner leaves although they are still silvery underneath. It is more of a woodland and heathland species than a coastal species and is widespread throughout southern Victoria.

Blackwood *Acacia melanoxylon* can be recognised by the broad “leaves” which are not really leaves but actually flattened stems, called phyllodes, and the twisted seed pods are like a contorted brown papery bean. Blackwoods occur right across the wetter areas on and south of the Great Dividing Range in Victoria and also in South Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland.

A couple of spikey wattles in the understorey include Prickly Moses *Acacia verticillata* with narrow spikey phyllodes in a whorl around the stem and Hedge Wattle *Acacia paradoxa* which has small flattened oval phyllodes with two small very sharp spines where the phyllode joins the stem. Being spikey, both are great habitat for little birds.


Blackwood


Prickly Moses


Hedge Wattle

As you emerge from the densely planted vegetation you enter an open area along the floodplain of the Moyne River. The Moyne is still tidal this close to the ocean and the plants on the flats are well adapted to this saline environment.

If the tide is out, take a short stroll down the mowed track towards the river opposite the last (white) house. The ground underneath your feet is very black and spongy due to the high organic content of the soil. The vegetation in this area is called Samphire – a collective term for a group of low-growing more or less succulent plants that are adapted to an intermittent salty and freshwater environment. Samphire plants often have a red tinge as they become stressed as salt concentrations increase in times of low fresh water river flow.

The most common samphire plants here are the leafless Glasswort *Salicornia quinqueflora* and the more fuzzy and leafy Austral Sea-blight *Suaeda australis.*


Samphire with sedges behind


Glasswort


Austral Sea-blight

As you move along the trail you will notice that the vegetation becomes more open and weedy. Two of the common introduced grasses along the edge of the track are Toowoomba Canary-grass *Phalaris aquatica* with its tall cylindrical heads and Cocksfoot *Dactylis glomerata* which can be identified by the one-sided seed heads making it look a bit like a chicken's foot.

After rain, particularly in autumn, you may also find some fungi on the edges of the trail and around the gum trees at the start of the walk. One of the larger fungi, looking a bit like bits of horse dung, is the Leathery Puffball *Scleroderma* species. It usually grows in groups but may be a bit difficult to spot as it blends in well with its background. As the puffball matures the leathery skin splits to release millions of rusty brown coloured spores to be carried on the wind to new growing sites.

Phalaris

Cocksfoot (RBG photo)

Leathery Puffball

There are many more plants and other good stuff to discover along the trail so take your time…and your hand lens.

If you find a plant, shell, bird, whatever, and want to know what it is, email me a picture and a short description and I will endeavour to work it out for you. **jmiller3350@gmail.com**

Please feel free to share this with anyone else who might enjoy the walk.