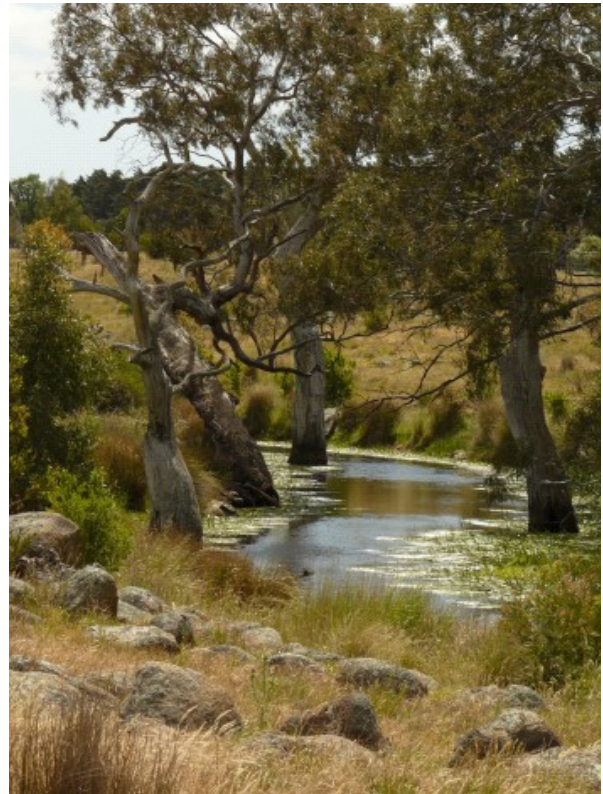


The Merri Valley: Nature on Melbourne's northern doorstep

The State Government announced in December 2008 several urban growth investigation areas, including one that covers most of the Merri Creek catchment from north of Craigieburn to Wallan.

In response, the Friends of Merri Creek present a proposal for a conservation network that would link the Yarra River at Abbotsford via a bushland corridor along the Merri Creek through the northern suburbs of Melbourne, across wildflower grasslands, ancient Red Gum woodlands, rocky gorges, wetlands and rural landscapes to the forests of the Dividing Range and Kinglake National Park.

The Friends seek protection for critically endangered native vegetation, wildlife, volcanic cones, Aboriginal and historic heritage. We envisage a network of habitat links through urban and rural areas, to connect larger conservation reserves within and beyond the Merri catchment. Permanent Green Wedges would be retained between growth corridors, and rural communities and landscapes sustained, both for their own sake and as breathing spaces for the metropolis, complementing the habitat in conservation areas. These measures will help to maintain Melbourne's liveability for people, and conserve the diversity of life on our northern doorstep. Without urgent protective action, these assets will be lost forever.

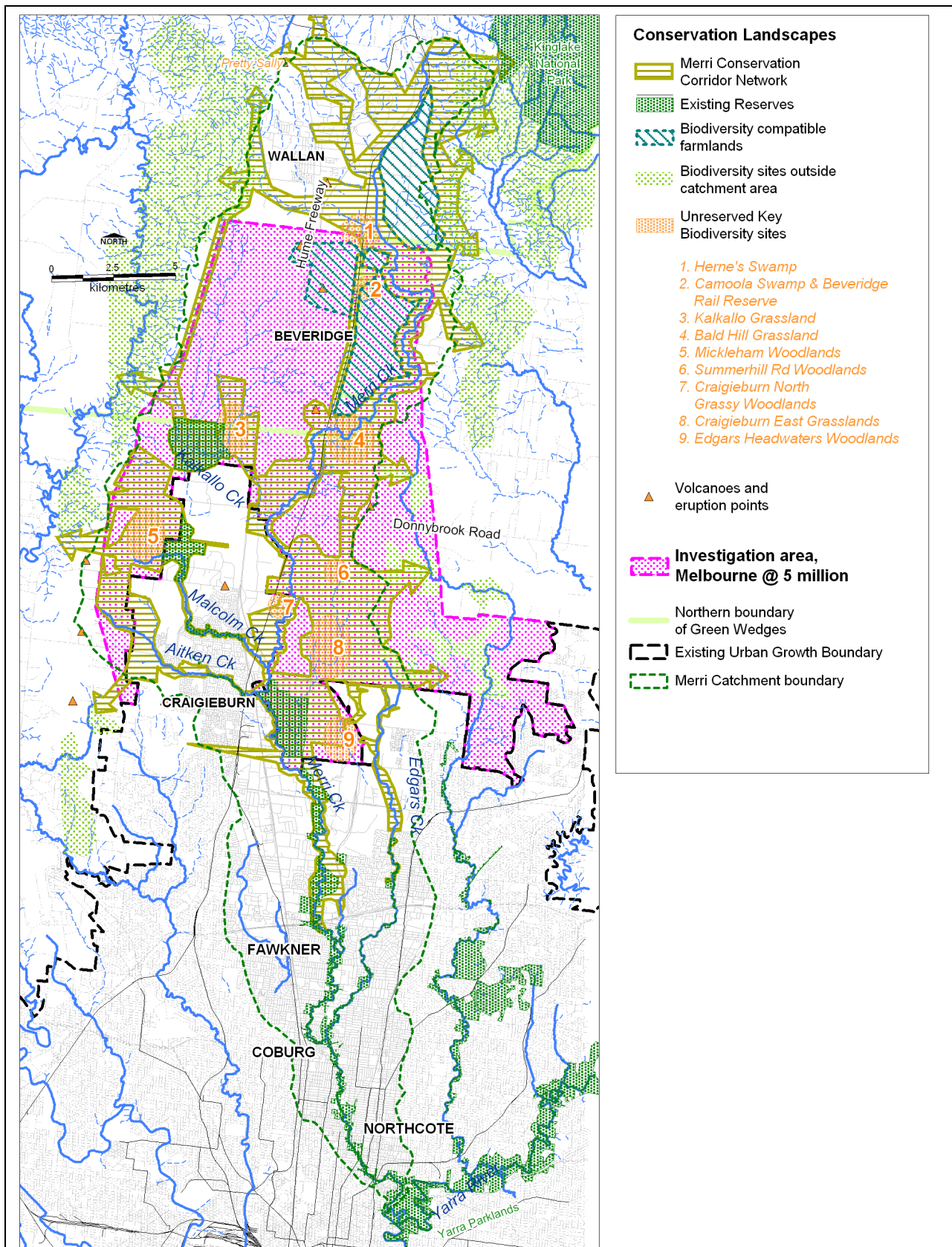


A Merri conservation network

The Merri Creek catchment is on the eastern edge of the Victorian Volcanic Plains, and has some of the largest remnants of the plains grassland, listed as critically endangered under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. Less than 1% remains of the former extent of these plains ecosystems. Of this, only a fraction is protected in conservation reserves. Almost all the remnant vegetation in the Merri catchment consists of plant communities listed as highest priority for protection in the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority's *Native Vegetation Plan* (2006).

The Friends of Merri Creek conservation network proposal would protect many heritage values including:

- some of the largest and most diverse remnants of the natural vegetation of the Victorian Volcanic Plains
- many Aboriginal archaeological sites, and places important to the Wurundjeri people
- endangered plant and animal species
- volcanic cones and other areas of State significance for geology and geomorphology
- River Red Gums that could be 500 years old, pre-dating European settlement
- scenic rocky gorges and broad landscape vistas.



Maintaining the Green Wedges

A fundamental component of planning for Melbourne's growth since the early 1970s has been the concept of urban growth corridors radiating outwards, separated by wedges of non-urban land. The Green Wedge area to the east of Craigieburn has been greatly eroded by urban development in recent years, and is further threatened by being included in the investigation area for urban expansion. It is time to halt the outward push of urban sprawl here, and retain Green Wedges as permanent wedges between growth corridors, not as potential urban land supply that is converted as soon as development pressures build up sufficiently.

Parklands for perpetuity

A major new park has been planned by Parks Victoria along the Merri Creek south of Craigieburn East Road. This parkland needs to be extended northwards.

Important grasslands and woodlands at Mt Ridley are already reserved for conservation. Other sites are owned by public agencies, and, with sympathetic management, can retain their conservation values: Kalkallo grasslands (partly within a Melbourne Water retarding basin property), Kalkallo Commons, and parts of the Edgars Creek headwaters woodlands.

The other key biodiversity sites that are of very high conservation value should be acquired and permanently reserved as public parkland. These parks will be valuable for protecting endangered ecosystems as well as environmental education and low-impact recreation.

Sites that should be given the highest priority for protection in the context of urban expansion include:

- a continuous corridor along the Merri Creek, northwards from Craigieburn East Road
- Craigieburn East grasslands
- Craigieburn North grassland/grassy woodland
- Bald Hill grasslands
- Highest quality parts of Mickleham grassy woodland
- Camoola Swamp.



The proposed new parklands will provide for low-impact recreation and environmental education, as well as ecological research.

Habitat links and connectivity

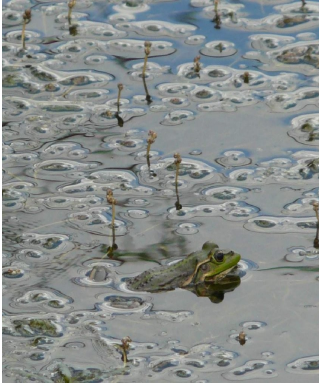


Over 300 species of wildflowers and grasses are found in the native grasslands of the Merri catchment.

Parks and reserves that are connected to other habitat are far more effective in conserving ecological communities than isolated sites.

The Merri conservation network proposal includes habitat links throughout the catchment and beyond. The Merri Creek itself is the 'spine' of this network, providing a continuous habitat corridor from the headwaters along the Dividing Range southwards to the Yarra River at Clifton Hill.

Habitat links must be in both urban and rural landscapes. They need to be wide enough and with suitable habitat to sustain the survival and movement of the species for which they are intended. Where they will function as multi-purpose open spaces, extra width is needed for management vehicle access, recreational trails, firebreaks, utilities and screen planting. In places, habitat needs to be re-established for connectivity. Barriers to wildlife movement such as roads and dam walls will need passage structures.



The endangered Growling Grass Frog routinely travels over 200 metres from permanent water as it hunts for food.

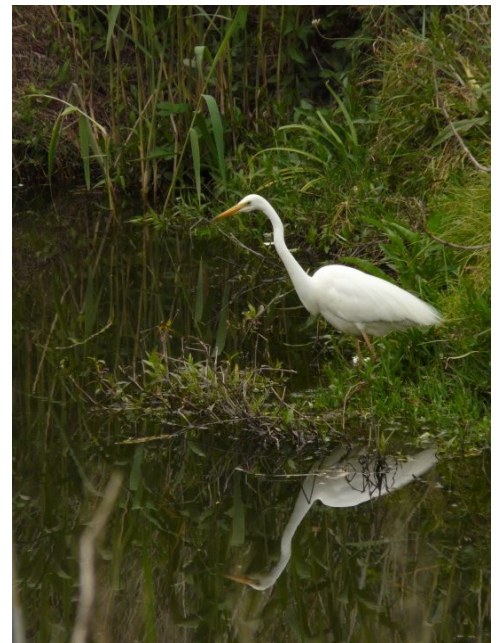
Conservation landscapes

Rural land, and to a lesser extent urban areas, can be managed to retain many species of native plants and animals. Some native pastures and vegetation on properties in the north of the catchment are already being maintained in ways compatible with biodiversity goals, and farm dams, shelter belts, golf courses, retarding basins, and urban parks can also be made to provide valuable habitat for frogs, invertebrates, birds and other wildlife. They can also buffer core protected areas from more intensive land uses.

Species such as Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Swamp Wallabies, Echidnas, Wedge-tailed Eagles and Growling Grass Frogs will only survive in the Merri catchment if they can utilise land beyond designated conservation reserves. The Friends of Merri Creek proposal includes conservation landscapes and retention of farmland where uses and land management are supportive to wildlife and heritage values. Assistance should be provided to private landholders to achieve this 'public good'.

Making it happen: action needed by the State Government

- Suspend the current investigations for extension of the Urban Growth Boundary pending an inquiry into the need for, and timing of further urban expansion.
- Conduct thorough field surveys of flora and fauna, and compile of existing ecological data as part of any investigations for extension of the Urban Growth Boundary.¹
- Protect all sites of State or National conservation significance² through public acquisition or conservation covenants.
- In any re-drawing of the UGB, retain permanent Green Wedges between growth corridors and ensure that land with significant natural and cultural heritage values (partly identified on map, above) remains in Green Wedges.
- In strategic and precinct planning for rural and urban areas, designate habitat links that are wide enough to sustain wildlife movement and ecological connections between conservation reserves.
- Offer a coordinated package to private landowners of measures to support conservation-compatible management of rural landscapes in the Green Wedges, including ecosystem services and stewardship payments, rate rebates, local biodiversity action plans, technical advice and conservation covenants.
- Undertake strategic planning for a conservation reserve network around and across the metropolitan region.



Eastern Great Egret on Merri Creek.

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¹ The current timetable is too short for surveys to be completed before the UGB is revised, but the work is still required to inform growth area planning and land management in the Green Wedges.

² For a list of sites, refer to the Biosites database maintained by the Department of Sustainability and Environment.