Getting There

In North-Central Victoria lies a flood plain located between the banks of the Murray River and Gunbower Creek. This 26,400ha flood plain is Gunbower Island, internationally recognised as a wetland of significance for its importance to birdlife, native mammals and amphibians. Located within its confines is the 17,622 ha Gunbower State Forest. The Department of Sustainability and Environment through its Public Land Division, manages State Forests to conserve plant and animal life, and also provide the community with timber, water and recreational opportunities.

History

The first human inhabitants of Gunbower were the Barabarabaraba tribe, which included eight clans. They called this area Kanbowro, twisting and tortuous, like the necks of the black swans, which glided on its waters. Evidence of aboriginal occupation can be found in the various scar trees, mounds and middens (often made up of collections of discarded shells, stone tools and bones) encountered on the island.

The Aborigines lived in harmony with the land adapting their diet to whatever foods were available and moving in the winter months when the water levels became too high. Their diet included yabbies, grubs and plants such as Nardoo, which they mixed with water to make flour.

The first European settlement occurred at Gunnawarra station. These settlers were squatters who grazed sheep and cattle. It wasn’t until the early 1870’s that the value of the stands of River Red Gum and other eucalypt species was realised and the timber industry on the island started in earnest with many timber cutters setting up camps.

Fauna

These wetlands are a haven for rare species such as the Broad-Shelled Tortoise and the Barking Marsh Frog. The White-Bellied Sea-Eagle, a large bird of prey, can also be found in these wetlands. The sea eagle mates for life and will only take another partner upon the death of its mate. They will often use the same nest for several years, usually near water. The sanctuary of the Gunbower State Forest offers a secure habitat for some of the 100 breeding pairs remaining in Victoria. When a nest is found, the department’s foresters record its location and ensure it is protected.

Wildlife conservation is an integral part of forest planning and management. Whilst State forest provides timber, water and a place to recreate, it is also home to a great variety of plant and animal life. Many of the forest creatures rely upon forest trees and their hollows for nesting and shelter. These habitats and others (such as streamside reserves) are protected.

Flora

Gunbower Island has an incredible diversity of native flora and fauna with over 170 species of birds, 24 reptile species, a variety of fish and around 200 plant species.

There are two main forest types on the island. River Red Gum (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) Forest, which is located in the wetter north-west section and Box Forest consisting...
of Black Box (Eucalyptus largiflorens) and Grey Box (Eucalyptus microcarpa) which is located in the higher south-west sections of the island. Gunbower Island contains the second largest River Red Gum forest in Victoria, with the largest being Barmah State Forest.

Our need for water to irrigate agricultural lands has affected the natural flow of water along the Murray. As a result, most areas are now flooded for longer periods. When the waters abate, rapid growth of herbs, grasses and sedges transforms the forest floor into a luxurious green meadow dotted with wildflowers such as the native Paper Daisy (Helichrysum bracteatum). Reeds and rushes can be found in the shallow waters. Warrego Grass (Paspalidium jubiflorum) and Wallaby Grass (Danthonia ssp.) grow on higher ground. Rare plants such as Umbrella Wattle (Acacia luehmannii) and Hooked Needlewood (Hakea tephroserps) colour the forest. Red Azola (Azolla filiculoides) floats on the waters.

Things to do and see
Gunbower Island is an ideal destination for nature lovers and campers. Popular activities include bird watching, camping, canoeing, fishing and pleasure driving. Visitors should note that the island is subjected to annual flooding, typically during the months of August to November contact the Department of Sustainability and Environment Cohuna office or download it from DSE’s website.

Canoeing
Bring your own canoe and drift along the Murray or through the waters of Safe’s Lagoon and Gunbower Creek. A 5km canoe trail (an easy 2 hour paddle) has been established through the wetlands of Safe’s Lagoon. Here you can see birds making their homes or nesting their young in the hollows of standing dead trees. You can hear their calls and see the myriad of creatures living among the reeds and waters. The route to the Canoe trail is well sign posted off the highway as you head to Koondrook.

Pick up the brochure on the canoe trail from the Department of Sustainability and Environment’s Cohuna Office or download it from DSE’s website.

There are no formal walking tracks on the island; however the open nature of the forest makes for some very pleasant bushwalking.

Gunbower Forest Drive
For those who prefer a leisurely drive, the Gunbower Forest Drive is ideal. Enjoy the tranquillity and beauty of the forest and stop along the way for a picnic lunch in picturesque surrounds. Starting from Cohuna (61km North West of Echuca) the Gunbower Forest Drive is a leisurely half-day drive linking a number of historical, cultural and ecological sites of interest. A detailed map is located on this brochure.

STOP 1: Ramsar Convention
Start of Halfway Stump Track.

The separation of Gunbower Island was the result of earth movements caused by the Cadell Fault and uplifting of the Cadell Tilt Block approximately 13,000-20,000 years ago. This event changed the course of the river, creating Gunbower Creek. The sign here explains the Ramsar Convention and the reasons why Gunbower Island has been recognised as a significant wetland area.

STOP 2: Timber Cutters Steps
Junction of Five Sleeper Track and Thompson’s Track.

At the intersection of Thompson Track and Five Sleeper Track, you can see large old stumps with slits cut into the sides. The woodcutters placed planks in these slits so that they could fell the tree at a height where the tree’s girth was not so great.

STOP 3: Shillinglaw’s Regulator
Junction of Five Sleeper track and River track.

This regulator is used to control the flow of water through the forest. It allows the flow of water from the Murray River along the Yarran Creek. The water slowly disperses throughout the forest along runners which you may have noticed crossing Five Sleeper Track. The water is important to the fauna of the swamp as well as the vegetation of the forest.

The boat ramp here is a popular launching spot for people accessing this part of the Murray River by boat.

STOP 4: Grey’s Mill.
Left hand turn from River Track.

This site was originally referred to as Block 24 from which a mill operated in the 1870s. Many different owners operated the mill including Frederick Charles Grey in 1905. He ran the mill until his death in 1912, with his nephew running it until 1913, after which it was abandoned.

Unfortunately there was a fire in 1919 and everything on ‘Block 24’ was destroyed. The area is now referred to as Grey’s Mill. When the mill was in operation, this area was a thriving community where the timber cutters settled with their families. As a result of the increased population, a state school was established. State school 2675 Gunbower Island opened on the 15th of August 1885 and closed on the 3rd of August 1892. It had an average attendance of 19 students. Over the road you can see a water levy bank. This was thought to have been created by the residents to prevent their homes from being flooded.

STOP 5: Graham’s Hut
You can see the stumps where the nursery wharf once stood. 
This nursery was difficult. If you visit the nursery when the river is low, you will see the forest was in flood for months, making access to the trees planted here, as evidenced by the variety of trees such as Monterey Pine (Pinus Radiata) and Monterey Pine (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) that can be seen. At the turn of the century, the headquarters were moved to Daltons Bridge because the forest was in flood for months, making access to the nursery difficult. If you visit the nursery when the river is low, you can see the stumps where the nursery wharf once stood.

**STOP 6: Wattle Creek**

*Surrounded by Wee Wee Rup, Wattle Track and River Track.*

Wattle Creek is a damper area of the Gunbower State Forest compared to the drier River Red Gum Forests. This damper and wetter area of the island is covered in fallen wattle and is a refuge for small animals and the tall trees provide nesting sites for many birds. In recognition of this area’s special values, it has been placed in a Special Protection Zone from which no timber can be harvested.

**STOP 7: Cemetery Bend**

*Left hand turn off from River Track.*

The picket-fenced graves are a reminder of the harshness and isolation of life in the forest. They tell a story of disease, accidents and floods. Two of these graves are reputedly of the Mathers’ children who died during the floods of the 1800s (The Mathers family were associated with the Island’s forest mills for many years).

**STOP 8: Robson’s Mill-Lunch Stop**

*Left hand turn off River Track.*

This bend was the location of Robson’s Mill. The mill was founded about 1875 by the Robson family from Ballarat and was the first licensed mill on the island. The mill produced timber for the suburban market in Melbourne and for the steam boilers on riverboats. It also produced railway sleepers for Australia’s railway network. A whole tree was transported to the river and used the hut as a fishing shed during the 1960’s.

**STOP 9: Nursery Bend.**

*Left hand turn off River Track.*

This area was once a nursery of the Forest Commission (now part of the Department of Sustainability and Environment). An extensive experimental nursery was established here, as evidenced by the variety of trees such as Moutain Ash (Eucalyptus regnans) and Monterey Pine (Pinus Radiata) that can be seen. At the turn of the century, the headquarters were moved to Daltons Bridge because the forest was in flood for months, making access to the nursery difficult. If you visit the nursery when the river is low, you can see the stumps where the nursery wharf once stood.

**STOP 10: Nursery Track.**

As you drive along this track you may notice that at the slightly higher elevations where the soil has higher clay content, there is increased occurrence of Black Box (Eucalyptus largiflorens). This tree prefers drier, clay like soils whereas River Red Gums (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) prefer to be near water, at a lower elevation and on sandier soils, which drain more readily. The main visual difference between these two species of trees is their bark. River Red Gums have smooth bark on their trunks whilst Black Box has rough tessellated bark which carries all the way through the branches. Continue down Island Road and turn left to exit Gunbower State Forest.

**Other attractions**

- Leaghur State Park
- Terrick Terrick National Park
- Guttrum State Forest
- Benwell State Forest

**Caring for our forests**

Over half of Australia’s wetlands have been permanently destroyed or lost. We need your help to protect this unique area.

**Please observe the following:**

- Don’t disturb the wildlife or vegetation
- Camp only in existing campsite rather than creating a new one
- Take care not to camp or park under trees as River Red Gums can sometimes drop their branches.
- Where there are no toilet facilities, bury your faecal waste 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse.
- Take your rubbish with you, don’t bury or leave it behind.
- Fires are permitted, except on days of ‘total fire ban’. Please use existing fireplaces rather than creating new ones and ensure that fires are completely extinguished before you leave. Use only dead fallen wood (or better yet bring your own firewood), as dead standing trees provide homes for wildlife. Comply with fire regulations. DSE encourages all campers and picnickers to use fuel stoves where possible to reduce the risk of fire escapes and minimise pressure on nearby habitat.
- Pets are permitted, but must be kept under control and must not disturb wildlife or other visitors.
- Please drive only on vehicle tracks (no off-road driving)
- Shooting without a licence is not permitted.

**For more information**

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is responsible for managing Victoria’s State Forest. For further information contact DSE’s Customer Service Centre on 136 186 (TTY: 1800 122 969) or visit DSE’s website at http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/forests

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