

# Gunbower Island State Forest

## Forest Walks and Drives

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Opportunities for a leisurely half day drive of approximately 61km, as well a number of self-guided half day nature walks through the forests of this 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.

### About Gunbower Island

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 9,434 ha Gunbower State Forest. The Department of Environment and Land, Water and Planning manages State Forests to conserve plant and animal life, and also provide the community with timber, water and recreational opportunities.



Photo: Gunbower Island State Forest (DELWP)

### Getting here

Gunbower Island is situated near Cohuna 240km North of Melbourne, on the Murray River. It is surrounded by River Red Gum forest and is home to many diverse species of flora and fauna.

### History

The first human inhabitants of Gunbower were the Barababaraba 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 Gannawarra 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.

The first major use of River Red Gum was as railway sleepers for the expanding rail network. As log transport was expensive and time consuming, timber cutters selected trees closest to the riverbank. Timber was hauled to the river by bullock or horse teams, and then loaded onto barges for transport to Echuca or Swan Hill. As a result, older trees are more common at a distance of one or two kilometres away from the banks of the Murray River. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were no effective restrictions on timber cutting in the forest. It was not until the Forests Act was passed in 1918, which created the Forests Commission to oversee the forests that long-term management of the forest estate began.

### 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 tephrosperma*) colour the forest. Red Azolla (*Azolla filiculoides*) floats on the waters.



Photo: Grey Kangaroo in Gunbower State Forest (DELWP)

## 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. Further information on how our forests are managed can be obtained from the Department's web site on the Internet at: [www.delwp.vic.gov.au](http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au)

## Caring for the wetlands

Over half of Australia's wetlands have been permanently destroyed or lost. We need your help to protect this unique area. In recent years Gunbower Island has received environmental flows as part of a seasonal watering program to try to help restore regular flooding through the forest. This will help improve the health of the important wetland forest and its flood dependent plants and animals.

For more information on the seasonal watering program visit the North Central Catchment Management Authority's web site: [http://www.nccma.vic.gov.au/Water/Environmental\\_Water/The\\_Living\\_Murray/the\\_North\\_Central\\_Catchment\\_Management\\_Authority](http://www.nccma.vic.gov.au/Water/Environmental_Water/The_Living_Murray/the_North_Central_Catchment_Management_Authority)

## Things to do

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 Environment, Land, Water and Planning Cohuna office during business hours for further information (Tel: 5456 6000)

## Self-Guided Nature Walk

For those who enjoy a leisurely walk, the Koondrook Red Gum Forest Walk is ideal. Enjoy the tranquility and beauty of the forest and stop along the way for a picnic lunch in picturesque surrounds. (refer Forest Note FS00086 - Koondrook Red Gum Forest Walk).

Starting from Koondrook (87km North-West of Echuca, 82 km South-East of Swan Hill), both the Turtle loop or Eagle loop are a leisurely half-day walk, and link a number of historical, cultural and ecological sites of interest. The walks meander through Red Gum forests and wetlands.

### Koondrook Red Gum Forest Walk (Turtle Loop)



Return 13.2 km	3.5 hours
Flat	Formed track
Signposted	No steps

Some bushwalking experience recommended

### Koondrook Red Gum Forest Walk (Eagle Loop)



Return 9.1 km	2.5 hours
Flat	Formed track
Signposted	No steps

Some bushwalking experience recommended

**NOTE: In wet weather or during flood times, access to the start of the trail may be limited.**

## Canoeing

### Gunbower Island Canoe Trail

Bring your own canoe and drift along the Murray or through the waters of Safe's Lagoon and Gunbower Creek (separate Forest Note available). 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 Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Cohuna Office or download the Forest Note FS00085 – Gunbower Island Canoe Trail from DELWP's website.



Photo: Gunbower Creek (DELWP)

## Gunbower Island Forest Drive

For those who prefer a leisurely drive, the Gunbower Forest Drive is the perfect alternative. 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 available.

### Drive Points of Interest

#### 1. Creation of Gunbower Island and 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.

#### 2. Timber Cutter 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.

#### 3. Shillinglaw's Regulator and Boat Ramp

##### Junction of Five Sleeper Track and Thompson's 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 is a popular launching spot for people accessing this part of the Murray River by boat.

#### 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.

#### 5. Graham's Hut

##### Left hand turn off River Track.

Graham's Hut, near Gray's Mill site, is one of the two last remaining Huts on the Victorian frontage of the Murray River from Torrumbarry to Swan Hill. The timber came from the original Strachan farm house built in the late 1800's and was variously transported, by horse drawn dray.

This hut once belonged to a Dr. Graham who donated it to the Historical Society.

#### 6. Wattle Creek

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

Wattle Creek is a damper area of the Gunbower National Park, compared to other dryer River Red Gum areas in the Forests. This damper and wetter area of the island is covered in fallen timber and is a refuge for small animals and the tall trees provide nesting sites for many birds.

#### 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).

#### 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 community lived here including woodcutters and their families. A school serviced the children and supplies were brought in by riverboat. In about 1885 the mill was sold to David Munro Co who supplied red gum sleepers for the Kerang to Swan Hill and Kerang to Koondrook railway lines. On completion of the contract Munro became insolvent and the mill site was abandoned.

#### 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 Environment, Land, Water and Planning). An extensive experimental nursery was planted here as is evidence by the variety of trees such as Mountain 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.

#### 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 camuldulensis*) 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.

### For your safety

River Red Gums drop their branches without warning so be careful when camping, and remember to leave your car parked in a safe spot.

## Forest use guidelines

### Let's look after our living museum!

- Get active! Walk along one of the many tracks, ride your horse or bike along the bush roads and appreciate the beauty of the forest. Be sure to stay on formed roads when riding
- All native plants, animals, historic sites and geographical features are protected by law.
- Explore and search the forest for clues that give us evidence from the past. Remember to leave everything as you find it.
- There is no rubbish collection service so please take your rubbish home.
- Dogs are allowed in State forest but must be under direct control at all times and are expected to be on a leash in picnic and camping areas or when near other visitors.
- Motor vehicles including motorcycles must not be driven off formed roads or on walking tracks. All vehicles must be registered and drivers licensed.
- Use toilets where provided. At some sites hand washing facilities and toilet paper may not be supplied. Come prepared.

## Safety information

- **On Code Red Fire Danger Rating days, parks and State Forest are closed to the public.** Do not enter parks or forests on Code Red Days. If you are already there when a Code Red day is announced, you should leave the night before or early in the morning. For more information contact DELWP (see below).
- Be responsible for your own safety. Be aware of extreme weather events, carry your own first aid kit and let someone know before you go.
- This area is dotted with many mine shafts. Exercise care while walking through the bush and keep dogs on a leash.
- Visitors are advised to avoid the forest in very wet or windy weather when hazards may be increased.

## Campfire guidelines

Campfires are permitted, provided the following guidelines are observed:

- **Campfire safety** – Use fireplaces where provided. The fire must be attended at all times by a person with the capacity and means to extinguish it. For solid fuel fires, the ground and airspace within 3m of the outer perimeter of the fire must be clear of flammable material. Ensure the fire is extinguished with water before leaving. **If it's cool to touch it is safe to leave.**
- **Campfires are prohibited on days of Total Fire Ban.** This ban does not apply to a person preparing meals on a gas or electric appliance that has been designed and commercially manufactured exclusively for cooking provided:
  - the ground and airspace within 3m of the appliance is clear of flammable material
  - when in use and alight, the appliance is in a stable position and attended by an adult who has the capacity and means (minimum of 10 litres of water on hand) to extinguish the fire.

**It is your responsibility to know if a Total Fire Ban is declared. If in doubt, do not light a campfire.**

## Firearms

Normal firearm laws apply in State forests.

- A licence is required and firearms must be registered.
- It is prohibited to shoot on, from or across roads.
- Use of firearms in camping areas is prohibited.

All native birds and animals are protected by law. State forests are popular recreation areas. Take special care with firearms.

## Camping - Minimal impact

To protect the delicate environments of the forest, we need to 'tread lightly' in the bush to minimise our impact on the natural environment.

- Be careful of camping under trees. Trees can drop their limbs at any time (particularly during high winds).
- Do not dig trenches around tents. With modern tents, this is unnecessary, particularly if you choose a well-drained or raised site.
- Protect water quality – wash up at least 50 metres away from the river and avoid using soap (use gritty sand and a scourer instead).
- Leave campsites tidy – Take your rubbish home.

## Prospecting

- Try your luck fossicking or prospecting with a current Miner's Right. You can purchase a Miner's Right online from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning website at [www.delwp.vic.gov.au](http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au). Remember to re-fill any holes you dig

## Seasonal road closures

Some roads within the forest are seasonally closed each year during environmental flooding. Throughout the watering the forest will remain open to visitors to use the forest, however some access tracks to recreational areas may be closed.

For the latest information regarding the delivery of environmental water visit North Central CMA's website; for tourist information, including recreational opportunities, visit Gannawarra Shire's Gateway to Gannawarra Visitor Information Centre in Cohuna or call (03) 5456 2047; for information regarding forest access and track closures, see the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's Public Access Map.

## More To Explore App



Download the More To Explore App for comprehensive information and interactive maps on what to see and do in Victoria's three million hectares of State forest. <http://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/more-to-explore>

## For more information

**The Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) is responsible for managing Victoria's State Forest. For further information contact DELWP's Customer Service Centre ☎ 136 186 (TTY: 1800 555 667) or visit DELWP's website at <http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au>**



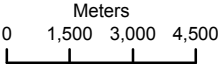
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Forest Notes Map  
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