

NEWS FROM THE ALPS

THE ALPS PROGRAM: WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS



The new Mindjagari Track can take you to extraordinary moments like this: here being enjoyed by ACT Parks' Ali Mungoven who managed the project.

HOW GREAT BECAME BRILLIANT

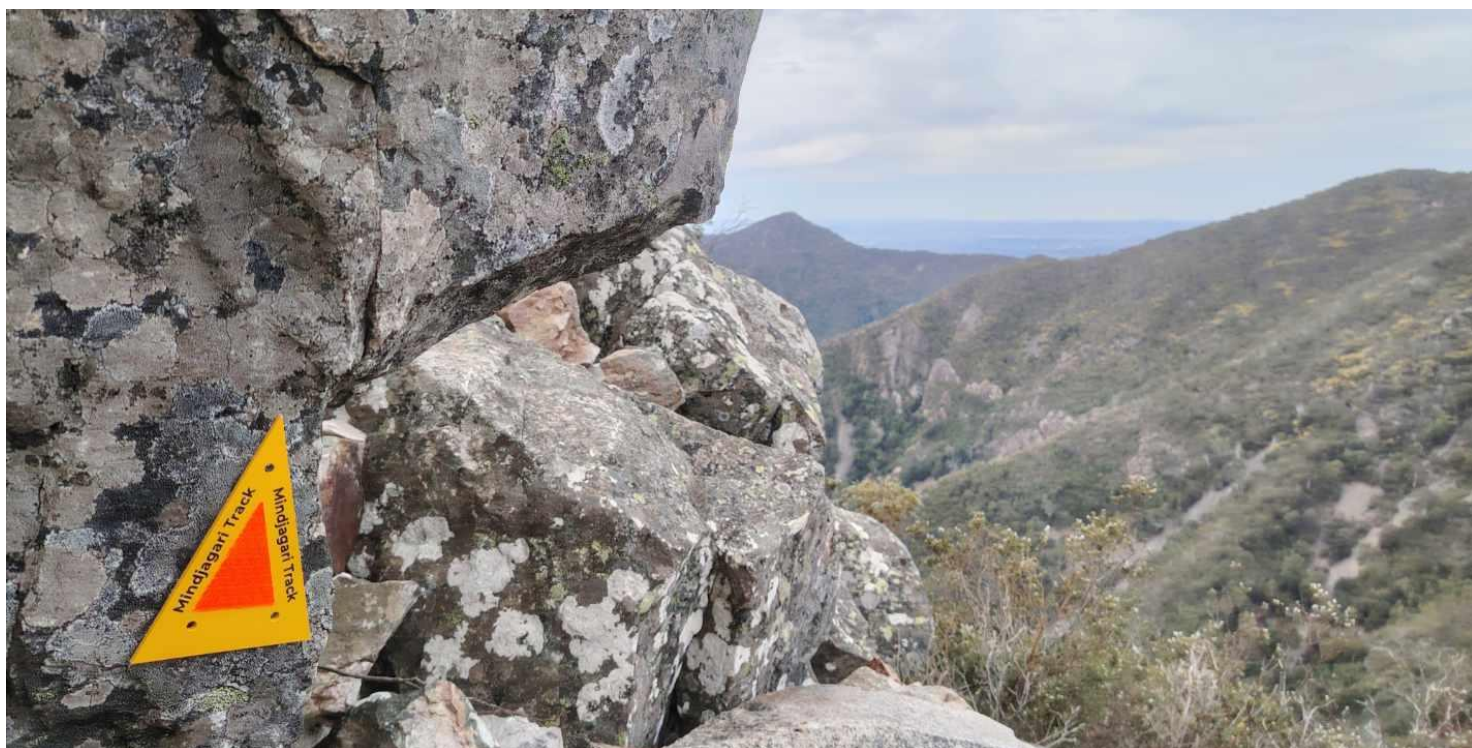
This story is about an opportunity spotted and taken: where a relatively straight-forward project became the moment to achieve so much more than just the primary goal. We're talking about the newly opened Mindjagari Track network. Listening to ACT Parks and Conservation's Ali Mungoven who project managed most of the job, it's obvious that the new track has a lot more going for it than improving access for fire crews.

But the story does start with fire. Specifically, the risk fire poses not only to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and its biodiversity wealth – both wild and captive bred - but to the city of Canberra, the reserve's too-close-for-fire-complacency neighbour. Canberra is a community that knows and has experienced fire, so it's not surprising that a commonwealth grant, through disaster ready funding, should have found its way into the parks agency's hands. As Ali puts it, "Here fire comes predominantly from the west so the track project was aimed to strategically manage fire risk to Tidbinbilla and Canberra. There were existing trails – footpads – that had, over many years, been unofficially cleared and our primary aim was to formalise



these tracks and make them into functioning tracks for remote access to carry out hazard reduction burns or control a bushfire.”

This may sound deceptively simple, but it wasn't. The existing trails had evolved, through use and without the professional land manager's thought for protecting the landscape. The old trails were also confusing and therefore dangerous when they 'braided' out, a defined path dissolving into several cryptic options. But the very fact the trails were there, pointed to an opportunity to produce more than just improved remote fire access. Now complete, the Mindjagari Track network is helping protect Canberra, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and the endangered species breeding programs on site. And it doesn't stop there. Everyone - the cohort of visitors who helped create the original unofficial version, together with those new to the Track – now has a network of formalised trails which have been subtly but clearly marked. What has always been valued – Mindjagari's remote beauty and epic vistas – is still there but better, safer, more mindful of the ecological and heritage values, and with practical fire protection in mind.



Subtle but effective markers were part of the package that has created a safer, multi purpose trail network.

The fact that the project took two and a half years to complete makes sense. “We started with ecological assessments which included working with consultants on locally sensitive and threatened species as well as cultural heritage assessments - working with local registered First Nations representatives. We also walked through ideas and concepts with trail construction experts to make sure we made the most of the features while working sustainably. And then we considered the whole, using our local understanding of how and where visitors to the park would use the tracks.”

In total the network is 22 kilometres long: 14 were significantly reworked, predominantly by contractors, while ACT Parks' own crew worked on sections as part of their in-kind contribution to complement the Commonwealth grant. “Some sections were super steep and difficult: for example, we lifted a hand winch in so they could move rocks to improve the scramble over the boulders to reach the iconic viewpoint known as ‘The Pimple’.” Good use was made of the helicopter lift days: signage boulders positioned at key track junctions were lifted in and lowered into place. Their strong messaging has been designed to help people make safe decisions about when to head back.

The completed network now skirts culturally sensitive areas and actively protects sensitive landscapes. For example, where footpads crossed a Hoary Sunray meadow (the endangered *Leucochrysum albicans subsp. tricolor*) the new track alignment runs protectively alongside to give visitors an experience similar to the original.



Of the highly skilled track building specialist team, Ali says “They were up there for four months, often walking two hours to reach the work site. At one point, when it started to snow, I made a welfare check. And they were fine, saying, this is what they live for. They didn’t want the job to end.”



Given ‘Hoary Sunray’ (*Leucochrysum albicans* var. *tricolor*) is an endangered species, the track was diverted from going through two of these meadows, skirting the edges so you can still see these lovely wildflowers but not impact them.

When determining the new alignments, agency staff decided to retain several existing shortcut footpads down spurs. “The spur tracks are very steep, and push the boundaries of sustainable track gradients. But they lie along strong lines of desire and offer important exit points for walkers who have underestimated the difficulty or length of the walk, so they have been retained and upgraded.”

For Ali, “It was a special treat to be involved in this project, a once in a career opportunity. Funding for something like this doesn’t come often so the pressure was on to do a good job. It was about finding a

balance between overdoing or underdoing it. From the feedback we're getting it looks as though we've hit the right mark."



Look closely to spot the walkers on the Mindjagari: it's a sublime landscape which demands common sense to walk it. Be informed, pick the walk that suits you best, and keep an eye on the time because search and rescue will be called out if you're not out of the gates by closing time.

Perhaps because the Mindjagari Track network is so close to civilisation in the form of Canberra, visitors can misjudge the difficulty of the terrain. Anyone planning a visit should check out [the information page](#) which uses words like *difficult* and *challenging* to flag the fact that the network is not a gentle, level 20 minute loop from the car park. Having said that, if you have the skills, fitness and experience to tackle a Grade 5+ track, it's an extraordinary, epic-vista experience sitting waiting for you. And it's only a half hour drive from the edge of Australia's capital city.

DECISION TIME

Feeling tired, cold, dehydrated?

Is the weather getting worse?

Are you worried you won't exit the reserve before closing time?

If yes – take the fastest route back to safety

EMERGENCY CALL: 000

Your location:
Pimple Intersection
Latitude/Longitude:
35.442056°S, 148.8723399°E
Phone reception is variable
Non-emergency assistance –
Access Canberra: 13 22 81

Reserve closes:
6pm (AEST/Winter)
8pm (Daylight Saving Time/
Summer)

To avoid triggering a search and rescue you must exit the front gate of Tidbinbilla by these times.

Fastest route back to safety:
Down Banggu Track and back along Camelback Fire Trail to Mountain Creek car park
4.6 km / 2 hrs
*The route over Tidbinbilla Mountain is shorter in distance but more difficult

Legend

- Public road
- Management trail - no public vehicle access
- Walking track
- Mindjagari Track
- Distance marker
- Warning: Very steep track
- Car park
- Lockout

Mt Domain

The Pimple

Johns Peak

ACT Government

CHECK YOUR ANSWERS

If you missed the moment to enter the 2025 end of year quiz, too bad because the lucky winner is being awarded the prize as we speak. The good news is, you can now enjoy the quiz again, this time performance-stress-free, complete with instantly gratifying answers (in panel below). Grab a coffee and have a scroll through for a bit of Alps-related fun...

Question 1. Let's start with an easy question. What is the name of the talented and gifted current Australian Alps Program Manager?

Question 2. What chubby-cheeked mammal stays warm and active during an Australian Alps winter by scampering along tunnels lying under the snow blanket?

Question 3. As fire threatened Buchan just outside Victoria's Snowy River National Park in late December 2019, why did fire crews focus on protecting the school?

A. The fire team were former students. B. The school was the only building in town not to have been coated in fire retardant. C. It's known that communities recover more easily post-fire if infrastructure like the school is saved.



Ariana Henderson a task force leader debriefing her fire crew after saving the school.

Question 4. Name the plant vascular structures sitting under a tree's bark that is eaten by the larvae of the nefarious wood boring beetle (*Phoracantha mastersi*) which is causing widespread damage to the snow gums? Is it: A. Xylem. B. Phloem, C. Artery, D. Vein, E. C and D, F. A and B

Question 5. What is the VR being used to document in 3D priceless cultural heritage sites like Australian Alps huts?

A. Video Referee. B. Virtual Reality. C. Very Reliable. D. Vice Regal.

Question 6. Back in 2013, a new bit of fire kit was being trialled called the Green Dragon. Was it...

A. A vehicle-based incendiary launcher developed in Canada. B. A coating sprayed on tree trunks to deter fire reaching the canopy. C. An electrolyte drink used to keep crews hydrated when out on the fire ground.

Question 7. Deciding where to build a new section of walking track involves...

A. Drawing a line taking the shortest distance from A to B then imposing it onto the landscape. B. Working out what needs to be skirted around because it's vulnerable or culturally sensitive. C. Thinking about the walker's journey and giving them reveals and vistas. D. Consider the slope in terms of walker's fatigue and water runoff. E. All of the above bar A.

Question 8. At alpine hut restoration and rebuild workshops, skills are shared like how to use traditional tools like the maul and froe. Which is hit with which?



A 3D, VR rendering of Cope Hut near Victoria's Falls Creek.

Question 9. When fire threatened Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve's Threatened Species Research and Recovery Program for Brush Tailed Rock Wallabies and Bettongs, how did the animals find themselves on a military airlift to Melbourne and Sydney?

A. Wildlife managers spent the week prior sedating animals with a dart gun. B. They'd spent months conditioning the animals to feed in open traps so they could be caught overnight and moved swiftly out of harm's way. C. It was brilliant timing: the animals had won a trip in a competition.

Question 10. What should you pack in case you're out in the Australian Alps, get into trouble and reach for your phone to discover it's flat?

A. A spare charged phone. B. A pack with 'what if' food and gear. C. Both of these.

Question 11. For what once-presumed extinct 'small rock mouse' were boulder-filled-trench-crossings constructed across ski runs at Mount Blue Cow?

Question 12. Name five Traditional Owner groups that have a connection to the Australian Alps.

Question 13. Actively controlling pest fox populations in the Australian Alps helps reduce pressure on populations of which Australian native duo?

A. The Mountain Pygmy-possum and the Broad-toothed Rat. B. The Fairy Penguin and Humpback Whale. C. Japanese Koi and Maine Lobster.



NSW Parks ranger John White laying fox baits up on Mt Kosciuszko (above) and a cage of airborne excrement is lifted out by helicopter.



Question 14. What weed, probably brought in on ski-field snow-grooming equipment from New Zealand, has a yellow flower and can be detected off-season by specially trained sniffer dogs?

Question 15. Helicopters are a valuable resource when managing landscapes in the Australian Alps. They are used for...

A. Lifting tonnes of solid human waste from remote toilets. B. Lighting fires from above using a large tank and a drip torch. C. Aerial surveys to count deer. D. Rescuing walkers unaware of nearby bushfires. E. All of these and more.

Question 16. In 2023, parks staff helped fight fires in Canada, adapting skills in a foreign landscape and using different methods. While there they saw...

A. Yogi Bear. B. Hoses rolled like watermelons. C. Meerkats. D. A Sasquatch.



Spot the Canadian differences: the melons of rolled sections of hose; the Swedish Hagland personnel transporter; and the forest of spruce and aspen.

Question 17. Why was the wooden boardwalk and viewing platform to the only accessible rock art paintings in the ACT replaced with metal?

Question 18. What is 650 kilometres long, snakes through the Australian Alps from Walhalla in Victoria through to Namadgi in the ACT, is used by car-based visitors and seasoned wilderness walkers alike, and is managed co-operatively by three state parks agencies?

Question 19. Many people volunteer in the Australian Alps. What is something they don't do?

A. 4WD club members work with parks staff to build fireplaces, picnic tables and repair toilets. B. Walk in a search-line to spot weeds. C. Load chainsaws onto their horses and ride into remote areas to clear tracks. D. Paint fresh lines on the roads where needed.



When volunteering in remote settings, why carry your chainsaw when you can strap it to your pack animal?

Question 20. It's a well-known fact that people who live, work and play in and around the Australian Alps are well above average in knowledge, skill, expertise, appearance and karaoke skills. These same people are also aware of the collective power and support offered by the Australian Alps Program. Given you are likely to be one of these people, what do you think the Australian Alps Program does best?



Much thought and effort goes into great tracks: these beautifully crafted steps are on the Mt Tennent summit track in the ACT.

THE ANSWERS: 1. Elaine Thomas; 2. The Broad-toothed Rat (*Mastacomys fuscus mordicus*); 3. C; 4. F; 5. B; 6. A; 7. E; 8. A. the maul hits the froe; 9. B; 10. C; 11. *Burrhamys parvus* or Mountain Pygmy-possum; 12. Dhudhuroa, Gunaikurnai, Jaithmathang, Ngarigo, and Taungurung ; 13. A; 14. Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*); 15. E; 16. B; 17. to protect the art should fire come through and the wood ignite like kindling; 18. The Australian Alps Walking Track; 19. D; 20. open response.

TELL US YOUR STORY: We are always looking for stories to include in this newsletter. What's happening in your part of the Alps? If you've built a new bridge, cleared a track, managed pests, done vegetation restoration works or worked on threatened species recovery, why not send Elaine Thomas a photo and a quick line and she'll take care of the rest. Maybe you just went for a particularly fabulous walk and would like to share your experience. We're always happy to hear from agency staff members, volunteers and members of the general community.

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News from the Alps issue number 111 was published in February 2026 by the Australian Alps National Parks. Program Manager and Editor is Elaine Thomas, Parks Victoria, alps@parks.vic.gov.au. For more information about the Alps, including information about the Parks, other publications and news, visit the Australian Alps National Parks website, <https://theaustralianalpsnationalparks.org>. You can also catch up and stay connected on current Alps related happenings and issues on the Australian Alps National Parks Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/australianalpsnationalparks/>. And many thanks to those people who've been interviewed, and to the photographers for their images. Without this support, *News from the Alps* wouldn't be possible.

