NEWS FROM THE ALPS

THE ALPS PROGRAM: WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS

Being given the chance to fly over vast landscapes - rather than walk - is clearly a more effective way to spot weeds like Broom. Scroll below to see how Rosie McVeigh is training up her high-tech kit to make doing a good job easier.

PEST PREOCCUPIED

This month we've asked the three parks agencies that manage and protect the Australian Alps to give us a quick catch-up on pests – the weeds and the feral animals. For these people – who hail from ACT Parks & Conservation Service, Parks Victoria, and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service – much of what they do dances around one aim: to support the Alps' diverse natural ecosystems. It's their job to knock back the destructive effect and competition that arrives with introduced plants and pest animals. This is how they are doing it…

AUSTRALIAN ALPS NATIONAL PARKS

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AUSTRALIAN ALPS FIRST PEOPLES

Speaking with Adam Henderson, who is Ranger in Charge of Namadgi National Park **in the ACT,** what soon becomes clear is that there's nothing random about pest control at Namadgi. As he describes how they tackle English Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), Orange Hawkweed (*Pilosella aurantiaca*), rabbits, pigs, deer or whatever, what emerges is a metronome-beat of scheduled works, within schedules that often go back a long way. For example…

"For the past twenty or more years we've recorded every site of English Broom in the park and revisit them each year. We gather the whole depot together as a team and have volunteer support from the National Parks Association (ACT)." This is done in spring when the broom is in flower and easiest to spot. Everyone is split up into groups to best treat what last year ended up being 6,000 plants in roughly 200 locations. "Back in the beginning, the plants would have been more mature, growing in thickets and needing chainsaws. Now it's a case of cutting and dabbing seedlings and small plants." The process of revisiting known infestation sites is effective, and given seed has a viability of 80 years, the annual visit is also about spotting new plants. "Some plants blend in and manage to evade detection until they're quite big but usually we're dealing with small seedlings."

Sometimes being attentive is the key: here, the ACT's skilled up Hawkweed spotting team keep an eye out for Orange Hawkweed which is yet to be recorded on their patch, but present nearby in New South Wales.

To deal with Orange Hawkweed, ACT Parks have a prevention approach. "We don't have it recorded in Namadgi but given Kosciuszko National Park (KNP) is only a few kilometres away, there is always a possibility that vectors like wind or bushwalkers on the Australian Alps Walking Track could bring it in. We recognise it's a big problem over the border and given we have similar environments here, we take it seriously." Monitoring that's been ongoing for several years is being taken up a notch with support from Commonwealth funding and development of an action plan should it appear at Namadgi. "We're looking at using set locations using set methods and developing a good plan of what we would do if we found it. Our staff have been building their identification skills thanks to spending time each year with the KNP Hawkweed Taskforce team, and they are being joined by a First Nations Team which is skilling up to come out and carry out surveillance."

Namadgi's rabbits are another good example of what can be done with a consistent and persistent approach. "For the last 20 or more years we've been doing spotlight transect surveys four times a year, counting rabbits. In 2014 in the Gudgenby Valley, we recorded 600 rabbits per kilometre which was described as one of the highest densities of rabbits in South East Australia." What is impressive and very encouraging is the most recent count which revealed a 95% knockdown in numbers with only three per spotlight-kilometre were detected along the transects. How this was achieved is text-book effective

rabbit control – a bit of everything, carried out at the right time, as part of a concerted annual program. Warrens were located and mapped: the latest CSIRO virus deployed: baiting done with 1080: warrens fumigated and ripped: spotlighting at the old warren sites to detect stragglers. “And while lately we are still seeing rabbits in some areas, on the whole it’s effective control.”

Rabbits culled as part of a text-book control program to deal with what was once a high density infestation in the Gudgenby Valley.

Sometimes the focus isn’t the pest but the protection of a landscape. Since the 2020 fires which burnt Namadgi’s sub alpine bogs and fens, major efforts have been made to help them regenerate and restore their water function by slowing the water that moves through them. Coir logs help hold the water long enough for better infiltration. Hessian is overlaid to help the sphagnum moss to grow back under UV protection. “We visit these remote areas by helicopter and are seeing a slow but successful recovery. And while we’re there, walking the bog transects we’re looking for weeds, animal scats or other signs of pests, taking a presence or absence recording. If we find blackberry or willow, we control it on the spot or if it’s a bigger issue, make plans to drop someone off to attack it.” Keeping an eye on things pays off because there have been some surprises: a small population of rabbits and the occasional willow seedling. “Our strategy in this case is to protect an environmental asset and the measure of success is its integrity, that it’s not degraded.”

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service control Sambar deer and feral pigs from the air using thermal assisted aerial control. “This approach came out of a concerted deer program a few years ago and it’s very effective in detecting an animal, and staying on it through tree cover.” Pigs are also targeted through an annual ground baiting program that started in 1989. “What drives us to keep on delivering these control programs is the need to protect and the results we achieve.

In the Victorian alps, effective pest management relies on strong partnerships. Parks Victoria works closely with other land management agencies, Catchment Management Authorities, Traditional Owners and other stakeholders, establishing networks of collaboration and expertise where partners work towards agreed outcomes via shared objectives. As Darin Lynch says, “ninety-nine per cent of the time it’s what we all want to achieve”.

Darin, Parks Victoria’s North East Victoria Conservation Manager, is responsible for protecting chunks

of the Australian Alps and leads a highly skilled team of technical specialists. A former Ranger, he understands that generalist, yet critical role. For the ranger wearing many hats, his conservation team is

the dream: they offer support behind the scenes to help develop projects that tackle the threats to ecological values – what's at greatest risk and what's contributing to decline. They provide technical expertise, monitoring and access to funding. "We work alongside rangers with the local knowledge, offering them additional capacity and specialist support."

These before and after images of a horse roll pit on the Bogong High Plains illustrates the fact that the landscape is looking better than it has looked in the past 20 to 30 years.

In Victoria's Alpine National Park, deer, pigs, goats, foxes and cats are managed through aerial and ground shooting programs. These programs are routine, ongoing and scheduled around the complex life of the National Park – school holidays, events, planned burns and bushfire to name a few.

Feral horses are also managed to protect alpine peatlands and other significant biodiversity values. In early 2025, the Bogong High Plains was declared horse-free following several years of ground shooting

by professional shooters. “This year we carried out regular surveillance to prevent horses returning to the area to ensure our peatlands, one of the most fragile of the Australian Alps’ ecosystems, are safe.”

And then there are the weeds – the usual list of villains: Hawkweed, Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), willow, blackberry and English Broom. External funding provides the means for Parks Victora to tackle each of these. “Hawkweed control has been a huge success, but we still carry out a massive monitoring program each year, combining our team, contractors and volunteers. And we still find new infestations or areas of re-emergence. This is how we stay on top and stay in control.” As for the Oxeye Daisy, “It’s on our radar as a significant threat. At this stage we are looking at the highest risk areas and with more funding, plan to contain it and prevent spread.”

WHY FERAL HORSE NUMBERS ARE BEING CONTROLLED

Feral horses are causing long-term damage to alpine, subalpine, montane and floodplain environments. This damage includes the destruction of habitat critical to many threatened plant and animal species, damage to waterways, degradation of fragile vegetation, and soil disturbance that results in erosion or compaction. To prevent further impacts, enable impacted areas to recover, and meet obligations under the *National Parks Act 1975* (Vic.), *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (Vic.) (the FFG Act), and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cwlth) (the EPBC Act) horse populations need to be reduced significantly, with some populations removed entirely. Victoria’s Alpine National Park Feral Horse Action Plan 2021 outlines Parks Victoria’s approach to this urgent issue and describes progress over the last three years.

Adam Watt is a Pest Officer with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, working in **New South Wales’** Southern Ranges Branch which includes Kosciuszko National Park. Like everyone who works to push back against the stresses and threats posed by pest animals, he and the team he works with face the usual list of introduced species.

These are just some of the species which are being stressed by sharing landscapes with feral pests. Alps-wide, measures to control pests are helping to support species like (L to R) the critically endangered Alpine Water Skink, the endangered Broad-toothed Rat and critically endangered Alpine Tree Frog.

Resources are carefully and strategically allocated, as part of a plan to manage specific threatened native animals, plants or communities. “We do our best to protect our conservation assets with available resources. For example, in areas like the alpine bogs and fens, we’re keeping pest numbers to a level to reduce impacts.” In this case, Adam is talking about feral pigs, which are being managed via trapping, targeted baiting programs, and aerial shooting. “We build a picture of feral pig distribution through

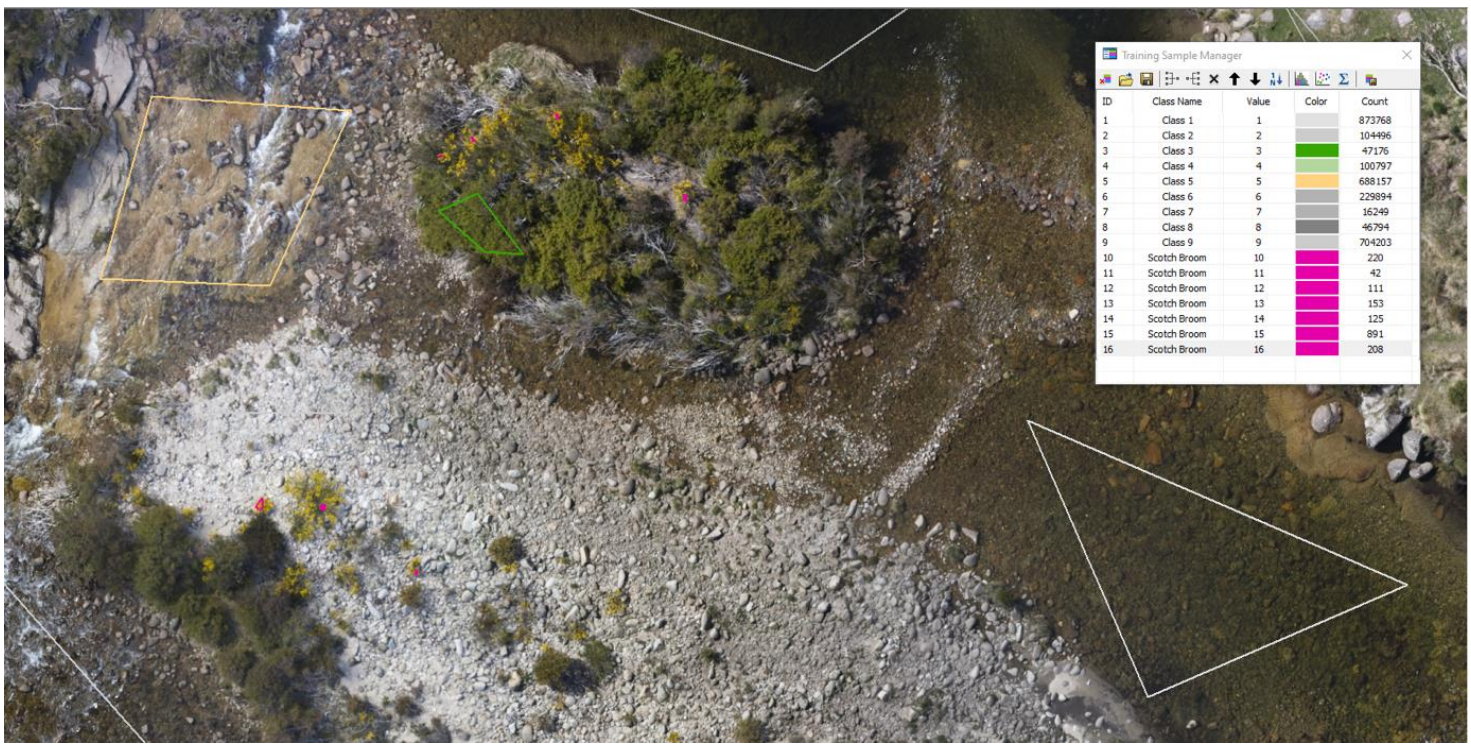
threatened species monitoring and observations in the field. And since the mid-2000s we've noted that Sambar deer have increased their range within Kosciuszko National Park, pushing further north."

Like other agencies, NSW makes effective use of aerial control to target large feral herbivores. "We schedule three aerial controls each year in the alps region, working around weather conditions and park users, targeting the Main Range in KNP in November when visitation is at its quietest, and areas closed to vehicles in winter. When we're dealing with these big landscapes aerial programs are our main control option: if we didn't use this method we'd be struggling to reduce vertebrate pests." That said, staff are always keeping an eye out for new methods, like the relatively recent addition of Pig Brig Trap Systems (circular netted traps). "They're lightweight and easier to transport than traditional panel traps; you can use them in a wider range of landscapes; and the sense is that we're having more success."

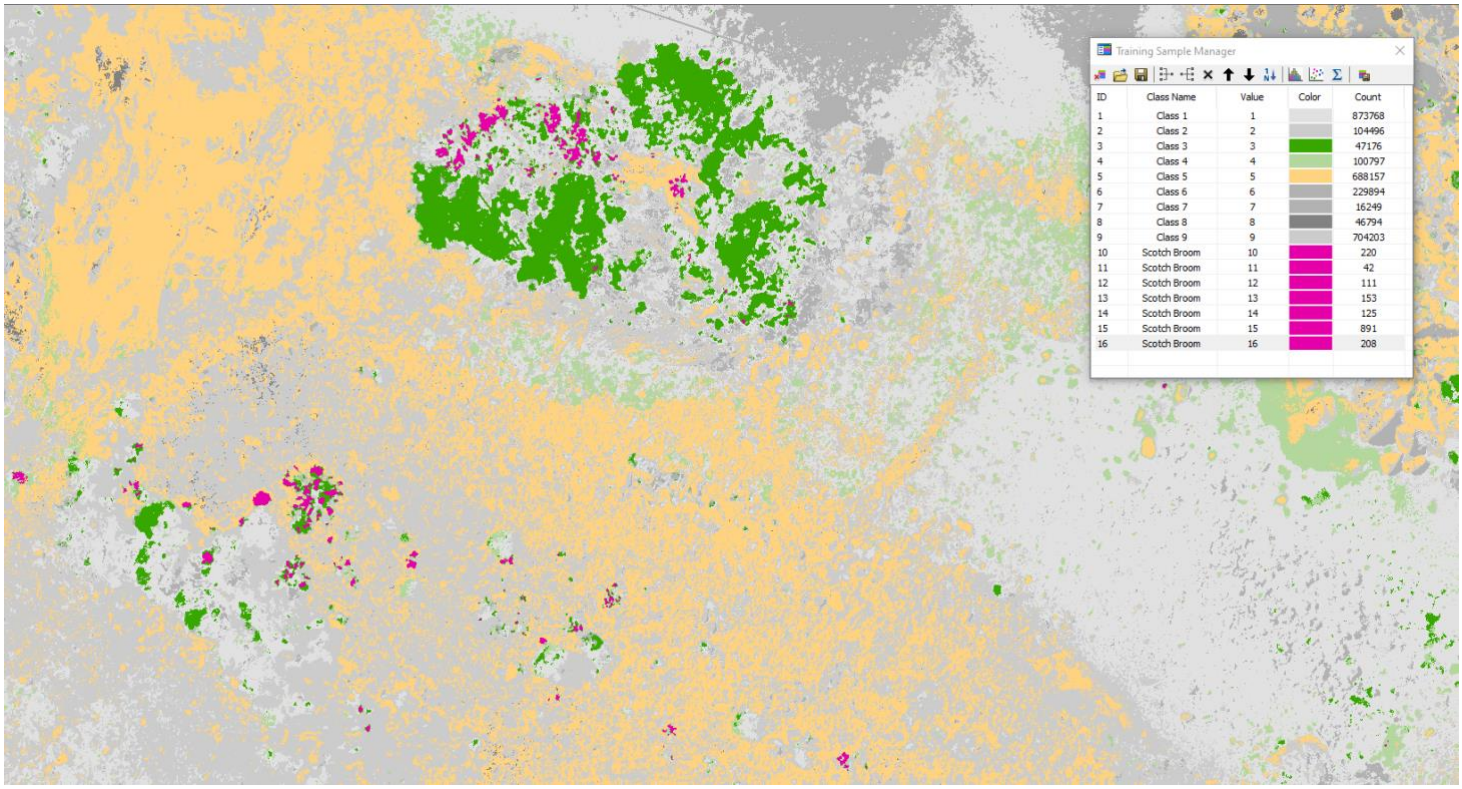
Looking at the overview, says Adam, "It all comes down to the resources available and program priorities. The staff undertaking this work are passionate about what they do and they want to see the best environmental outcomes for the park that they look after. That's why they work in these roles, and they do an amazing job with the resources available."

GOING SUPER TECH

Over the last two years, Rosie McVeigh, (who's also a Pest Officer with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service) has enjoyed a post fire make-over in terms of how she's managing weeds. "With fire burning two thirds of the Scotch Broom* sites in Kosciuszko National Park, and fire itself being a germination trigger for Scotch Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), we had an opportunity to make the most of the moment." In other words, while fire killed the mature plants, the pressure was on and resources were allocated to deal with fire-germinated seedlings. The kit and skills Rosie now has at her finger-tips is remarkably efficient, effective and impressively cool (if you're not already running a similar system yourself).



A colour swatch sample is used to train a GIS program to recognise certain colours and then classify them as rock, water, tree canopy or a specific weed species. In this case, the software was told that whenever it came across the yellow Scotch Broom, it should make those pixels pink.



Once the training data is processed by the software, it's overlayed on the original map to make focussing attention on the weed of interest easier. The data is used to create GPS points and georeferenced maps for the field teams so they know exactly where to go to treat the Scotch Broom.

She starts by using existing information about the location of Broom – gleaned the usual way, spotted by park agency staff and data from historical control programs. She then programs her drone – height, speed, image resolution – and flies over these areas to take a series of images which are later 'stitched' together using an online tool. Rosie has then been teaching the app to recognise Broom in these stiched-together images known as orthomosaics. "In the GIS program I had to teach it to differentiate between landscape features – rock, water, bare ground, tree canopy, Scotch Broom - which is done by making a training sample of colours. I was working on the principle that if I could teach the GIS program what was and wasn't the Scotch Broom, it would more accurately identify the target weed."

Using the colour coded training samples, she's then able to map out areas needing control, and then send out field staff out to deal with it. "A lot of our Scotch Broom is in inaccessible places, so we have a helicopter fly in a quick spray unit, up to a 400 litre tank, and then return with a ground crew of up to six depending on the extent of the infestation in that area. It's a big park and this is an efficient way to get to where we need to be."

And as new weed pressures raise their heads – like Oxeye Daisy – this drone system is looking like an efficient way to deliver targeted control.

*Scotch Broom and English Broom are one and the same species.

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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