

# Tim the Yowie Man: The Mouat Tree Project is a great cause for Canberra

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**Tim the Yowie Man**

The Mouat Tree Project is an ambitious plan to raise money to build a shelter to house the rescued tree and it's worth supporting.

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Harry Mouat, left, with fellow surveyor Freddie Johnston, second left, at the end of the job surveying the ACT border; Mouat's wife Iris is in front. *Photo: Althea De Salis*

It rivals winning the under-5 egg-and-spoon race in kindergarten and my hook shot over the library off the school's fastest bowler as one of my most cherished childhood memories.

It was 1985 and a school excursion to Katoomba to visit The Three Sisters rock formation at Echo Point. However, the highlight for me was getting up close to the tree which explorers Wentworth, Blaxland and Lawson supposedly carved their initials in while crossing the Blue Mountains in 1813. Although the ageing eucalypt had died long before my visit, the stump was still standing and touching it was a defining moment in my childhood. It provided me with tangible link to our pioneering past, which hitherto had been little more than a few black and white photos in a textbook and monotonous monologues from Mr Dorian, my history teacher.

In fact, from that moment, I became somewhat obsessed with marked trees. Subsequent family holidays were planned around paying homage to other famous trees such as the Burke and Wills dig tree (and the 1898 "Burke face tree" about 30 metres downstream) on Cooper Creek in outback Queensland, and closer to home, the tree on the banks of the Clyde River at Nelligen which the notorious bushrangers, the Clarke Brothers, were chained to prior to their transport by boat to Sydney to be hanged.



Brett McNamara, of ACT Parks, helps lower the Mouat Tree from a helicopter. *Photo: Matthew Higgins*

Leaving school, my interest in marked trees waned until it was reinvigorated a few years ago by renowned Canberra historian and good friend of this column, Matthew Higgins, who on a bushwalk showed me a tree marked by surveyors charged with surveying the ACT border in the early 1900s.

In 1996, as part of a heritage project, an enthusiastic (and obviously fit!) Higgins walked around much of the ACT border to document reference trees, lockspits and other associated markers left by the three men who surveyed our border 1914-1915, namely Percy Sheaffe, Freddie Johnston, and Harry Mouat. Higgins' field work provided him with "an immediate connection in time with the surveyors, especially given the careful, hand-inscribed nature of the tree blazes".

Following return visits to some of these sites in 2013, Higgins became concerned that decay and the 2003 bushfires had destroyed all but about 4 per cent of the 1500 marked trees he had recorded.

Not wanting them to be lost to the ravages of time, Higgins hatched a plot to try to save at least one of the hundreds carved by Mouat in 1915 on our far southern border, for future generations to marvel at. Sure, a tree marking the ACT border doesn't conjure up the same emotions as Burke and Wills' fateful expedition or of Blaxland and co. finding a way through the impenetrable maze of cliffs to the west of Sydney, but Mouat's marking of our border wasn't without hardship, often working under atrocious conditions.

According to Higgins, "Mouat twice had to contend with blizzards", the acting Commonwealth geologist of the time, Griffith Taylor, recognising the remote country through which Mouat and his team toiled. "The upper reaches of the Cotter are still practically unknown. Only one or two surveyors and an occasional settler have ever been along the valley, which is completely uncharted," Taylor wrote.

Romantic notions of braving the elements aside, Higgins explains the border survey marks and reference trees left by all three surveyors "are among the earliest sites relating to the very birth of Australia's national capital and its territory's water catchment-inspired border".

Despite overwhelming support from like-minded folk like ACT bushwalking guru John Evans and the odd prod from this column, it took almost a year for Higgins' plan to gain traction with authorities and as a first step, earlier this year a tree was carefully chosen and airlifted from our far southern border by helicopter.

According to Higgins, the chosen tree (now affectionately known as The Mouat Tree) was among the last marked by Mouat before he joined "the line" with fellow surveyor Freddie Johnston and the two teams celebrated with dessert made by Johnston's cook – half orange skins filled with jelly.

Earlier this week, this column was buoyed by the news that the next step in Higgins' dream was realised when ACT Planning Minister Mick Gentleman launched The Mouat Tree Project – an ambitious plan to raise \$100,000 for an architecturally designed interpretative shelter to house the rescued tree (and other border-marking memorabilia), at the Namadgi Visitor Centre hopefully for at least another 100 years.

Apart from enticing Canberrans to donate to the shelter fund, the project partners (Canberra Museum and Gallery, the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, the Surveying and Spatial Sciences Institute and the office of the ACT Surveyor-General) are also peddling all manner of merchandise from standard mugs and mouse mats to, of all things, a Mouat Tree pillow. Yes, a pillow! What would Mouat think? First a tree he chiselled 100 years ago with the letters CT (for Commonwealth Territory) is plucked from obscurity by a helicopter and then his name is emblazoned all over a pillow. He must be smirking in his grave.

Canberra is often unfairly criticised for not having as strong a sense of place as other great cities of the world. Lending support behind The Mouat Tree Project is one way we can prove them wrong.

One thing is for sure, as soon as the last nail is hammered into the interpretative shelter, I'll be suggesting to teachers of my primary school-aged kids that they take their classes on an excursion to The Mouat Tree. Hopefully, the preservation of this historic tree will help instil an appreciation of the ACT's origins into a new generation. Heck, if their teachers agree to the excursion, I'll even offer to make jelly-filled oranges for all the class to feast on. I'm sure that will keep Mouat (and Higgins for that matter!) smiling.

## Fact file

**The Mouat Tree:** Information on how to support the Mouat Tree shelter at the Namadgi Visitor Centre is at [themouattree.org.au](http://themouattree.org.au)

**Did You Know?** Mouat Street in Lyneham is named after Harry Mouat.



The "face tree" near the Burke and Wills dig tree in outback Queensland. Photo: Blue Mountains City Council



The Mouat Tree in situ on the ACT border prior to it being airlifted to the Namadgi Visitor Centre. Photo: Matthew Higgins



The Explorers Tree near Katoomba. Photo: Blue Mountains City Council





A dragon fly checks out a long-tongue summer greenhood orchid (*Diplodium aestivum*) in Namadgi National Park. Photo: Tobias Hayashi



The Mouat Tree logo. Photo: Supplied

**Tim's tip:** If you look closely at the Mouat Tree logo, on either side of its base are stylised maps of the ACT and NSW which subtly highlights the border that the tree defines.

**Don't miss:** *Ainslie to Kossie: window on a wonder wander*, Matthew Higgins' illustrated presentation mainly on the natural values of the straight-line route between Canberra and Mt Kosciuszko on Tuesday, July 14 (12.30pm) at the National Museum of Australia. It's free, but you need to book by going to [nma.gov.au](http://nma.gov.au) and clicking on "What's on". See you there.

## Canberra nature map

Last week's expose on Black Mountain [which featured Stuart Harris, a Canberra man who discovered a new species of peacock spider on our iconic hill \(Summit Stroll\)](#), highlighted the role citizen science can play in increasing our knowledge of what lurks in the parks and reserves of our bush capital. However, with the launch this week of Canberra Nature Map (CNM), a new whizz-bang Canberra-centric nature-reporting website and iPhone app, it may not be long before other amateur naturalists join Harris in making their own notable discoveries.

"If you are walking around Canberra and you see a plant, mushroom, lichen or slime that looks interesting and you would like it identified, all you have to do is take a photo of it and load it up to the website," says Michael Mulvaney, a spokesman for CNM.

Once uploaded on the website, "a team of experts in their fields will send the reporter an email confirming the species or asking for more information", Mulvaney says.

In the year-long trial of the website, which preceded this week's official launch, almost 200 Canberrans added about 8000 plant records, that's almost half of all the rare plant records made in the ACT since the late 1800s. Some examples are:

1. The near simultaneous recording of the small trigger plant (*Stylidium despectum*) at two sites 25 kilometres apart (Black Mountain and Williamsdale). Previously it had not been recorded in the ACT for more than 35 years.
2. A native sedge (*Schoenoplectus pungens*) previously only known from four sites in the ACT and not seen since 1966, was found to be quite common around the shores of the constructed Tuggeranong Urban Ponds, such as Lake Isabella and the Point Hut Pond.
3. Three new populations of the Canberra spider orchid (*Arachnorchis actensis*).

CNM isn't useful only in identifying rare species, by harnessing thousands of eyes, it also greatly increases the chances of early and successful intervention of the spread of new weeds. "It's already led to the identification and control of several high-risk weeds including Spanish heath, cobblers pegs and Madeira vine," Mulvaney says.

While CNM is focused on plants, Mulvaney says "it is hoped that it will soon be extended to reptiles, birds and even butterflies".

Even if you don't wander around our parks with magnifying glass and camera at the ready, the website is worth checking out just for the stunning photos, my favourite photo of which is of a dragon fly resting on a long-tongue summer greenhood orchid (*Diplodium aestivum*) taken by Tobias Hayashi in Namadgi National Park.

Now that [anyone in Canberra \(and beyond\) can sign up to canberranaturemap.org](#), who knows what other treasures are out there in our parks and reserves just waiting to be discovered.



Where in Canberra this week. Photo: Chris Blunt



Where in the Snowies last week: Steve Hill, of Kambah, was first to correctly identify last week's photo as the Kosciuszko Chalet Hotel at Charlotte Pass. Photo: Supplied

## Where in Canberra?

**Cryptic Clue:** Neigh!

**Degree of difficulty:** Easy

**Last week:** Congratulations to Steve Hill, of Kambah, who was first to correctly identify last week's photo as the Kosciuszko Chalet Hotel at Charlotte Pass. Steve just beat a barrage of correct entries, including those from first-time entrant Veronica O'Brien, of Gowrie, and Denis Wylks, of Holder, who recalls "a comfort stop there after a three-day bushwalk in January 1965, when there were no walking tracks in the area and the public road continued to Mount Kosciuszko".

Meanwhile, Jenny McLeod, of Weston, reports that the chalet, which turns 85 this year, is "always a welcome sight at the end of the Kosciuszko Alpine Classic, an annual cross-country ski race held in August that starts at Perisher and finishes at Charlotte Pass, with the chalet providing restorative nibbles and gluhwein for the racers".

The pass and village are named after Charlotte Adams who, in 1881, was the first European woman to climb Mount Kosciuszko.

**How to enter:** Email your guess along with your name and address to [timtheyowieman@bigpond.com](mailto:timtheyowieman@bigpond.com). The first email sent after 10am, Saturday, June 27, with the correct answer wins a double pass to Dendy cinemas.

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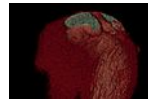
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