



Protecting Victoria's state forests and native wildlife

Regulatory Priorities

2023–2024

**CONSERVATION
REGULATOR VICTORIA**

Regulatory Priorities

2023 – 2024

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices. We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.



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Accessibility

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Foreword from the Chief Conservation Regulator

We are very fortunate in Victoria to have access to beautiful and unique natural environments which are home to important native species and habitats. Our forests are also a great place to explore and experience nature.

The Conservation Regulator plays a critical role in protecting Victoria's forests and native wildlife by educating the public, permitting activities and undertaking compliance functions across biodiversity, public land use, fire prevention, and timber harvesting.

Our ongoing commitment is to ensure safe and equitable access to public land that is consistent with the long-term health of the environmental values we are entrusted with. This includes partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners, co-regulators, community organisations, government partners and regulated individuals and organisations to deliver our goals.

The Conservation Regulator conducts a regular state-wide risk assessment process to determine the greatest threats to Victoria's public land, biodiversity and wildlife and assesses where we, as a regulator, can make the most difference to mitigate these threats. These are our regulatory priorities.

The Victorian Government's decision to cease native timber harvesting in State Forests by 1 January 2024 is critical context for our role. As the regulator of native timber harvesting, the Conservation Regulator will continue to regulate the timber industry and deliver the Forest Protection Survey Program in areas planned to be harvested through this transition process. We will continue to assess our priorities and our role in the regulation of this industry to ensure we are focusing on what matters through the transition.

Our refreshed regulatory priorities include a new focus on threatened species protection. This recognises the continued evidence of long-term biodiversity decline in state, federal and global analysis like the Victorian Government's Biodiversity 2037 and Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Wildlife protection has always been a key area of work for the Conservation Regulator. It continues this year with a sharpened focus on wildlife welfare.



Kate Gavens

Chief Conservation Regulator

This recognises the harm caused by illegal wildlife trafficking, poor management of wildlife (including those held as pets, for commercial gain and in human care) and from illegal disturbance and control of wildlife.

We are delighted to see the continued trend of more Victorians using public land for recreation. It motivates our work and validates our view that Victorians appreciate our shared environment. We continue to work with our regulatory partners and colleagues across the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) so you can be sure your visitation supports our native species and habitats.

We appreciate the public's interest and trust in our work and look forward to delivering on our commitments.



How we set our regulatory priorities

The Conservation Regulator is committed to meeting all our regulatory responsibilities. Our work is state-wide, including protecting ecosystems and managing activities across almost 34,000km² of state forest.

We identify and implement a set of regulatory priorities to ensure this work is focused on the problems that are causing the greatest harms to the environment and the areas the regulator can make the most difference. We publish our regulatory priorities so the Victorian community and stakeholders have transparency about where we will focus our efforts and what they can expect from us.

Understanding risk allows us to identify priority areas and design effective solutions. As we review our regulatory priorities, we work to improve our ability to determine how we can be most effective in protecting Victoria's environment.

We do this by continuing to:

 Collect, collate and analyse data

 Identify emerging environmental and behavioural trends

 Undertake targeted research

 Collaborate with our regulatory partners

 Consult with key stakeholders and the Victorian community

Trends we are seeing



Cost of living

Victorians continue to experience cost of living pressures. Increased energy and home heating costs are driving demand for firewood resources, while housing shortages and regional migration rates are changing land use patterns. We expect these trends to continue as cost of living pressures and population growth remain.

Climate variability

Ecosystems across the state remain vulnerable as they recover from recent extreme weather events. Back-to-back La Niña events brought temporarily cooler and wetter conditions, resulting in increased fuel loads across the state and flooding impacts along the Ovens, Goulburn, Loddon and Murray River systems. These conditions are likely to change as Victoria is expected to experience reduced rainfall and warmer temperatures as atmospheric circulation shifts to an El Niño event in the second half of 2023.

Visitation rates

We continue to see year-on-year increases in visitation rates to public land across the state. Research shows that people who connect with nature are more likely to protect the natural environment, and spending time in nature increases health and wellbeing. This is a great opportunity for the Conservation Regulator to support visitors to enjoy their natural areas while ensuring the long-term health of Victoria's forests, parks, and reserves.

Biodiversity decline

Consecutive state and federal 'State of the Environment' reports show our biodiversity is declining, and the number of threatened species is increasing. Climate change, habitat loss and degradation, and invasive species are the key threats to Victoria's biodiversity. Australia's commitment to the 'COP15: Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework' includes taking urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2023 and reducing extinction risk by 2050.

Wildlife welfare

The number of reports of illegal destruction or injuring of wild native animals is increasing, and the Conservation Regulator is concerned with the number of breaches of wildlife licences and authorities. Instances constituting cruelty, neglect or mistreatment are particularly concerning. Long-term declines in the populations of threatened species underpin the need for proactive action to protect Victoria's most vulnerable native species.



Regulatory priorities

The Conservation Regulator's state-wide regulatory priorities for 2023 – 2024 are:



Illegal campfires



Illegal take of firewood



Cruelty to wildlife



Protection of threatened species



Illegal commercial timber harvesting



Illegal vehicle use



Illegal campfires

Bushfires caused by illegal campfires can devastate Victorian communities and the environment.

Victorians continue to camp on public land in record numbers. While it has been fantastic to see so many people out enjoying the State's parks and forests, it is important we recognise that long-term trends in warmer and drier conditions persist. Recent natural climate variability has resulted in increased fuel loads across the state and is expected to bring reduced rainfall and warmer temperatures from the second half of 2023.

The Conservation Regulator recognises that environmental and behavioural campfire risks remain high through the hottest months of December, January, and February.

These present an increased risk of the destruction of native plants and animals and of heritage values, loss of access to public land, loss of personal property and impact to community infrastructure, and in the worst cases, loss of life. The reduction of unattended and unsafe campfires remains a key focus.

The Conservation Regulator takes steps to inform and educate Victorians, conduct patrols, work in partnership with relevant land managers and undertake enforcement actions to reduce the risk of bushfires and protect Victoria's communities and the environment.

Our Authorised Officers conduct regular campfire patrols across Victoria's state forests. We are working to continuously improve the information available about campfires so that everyone knows what a safe campfire is.

It is important that Victorians understand the campfire and barbeque rules before visiting our forests and parks. Review the **Can I? Can't I?** brochure and don't forget to take a bucket and water on your next camping trip, for putting out your campfire.

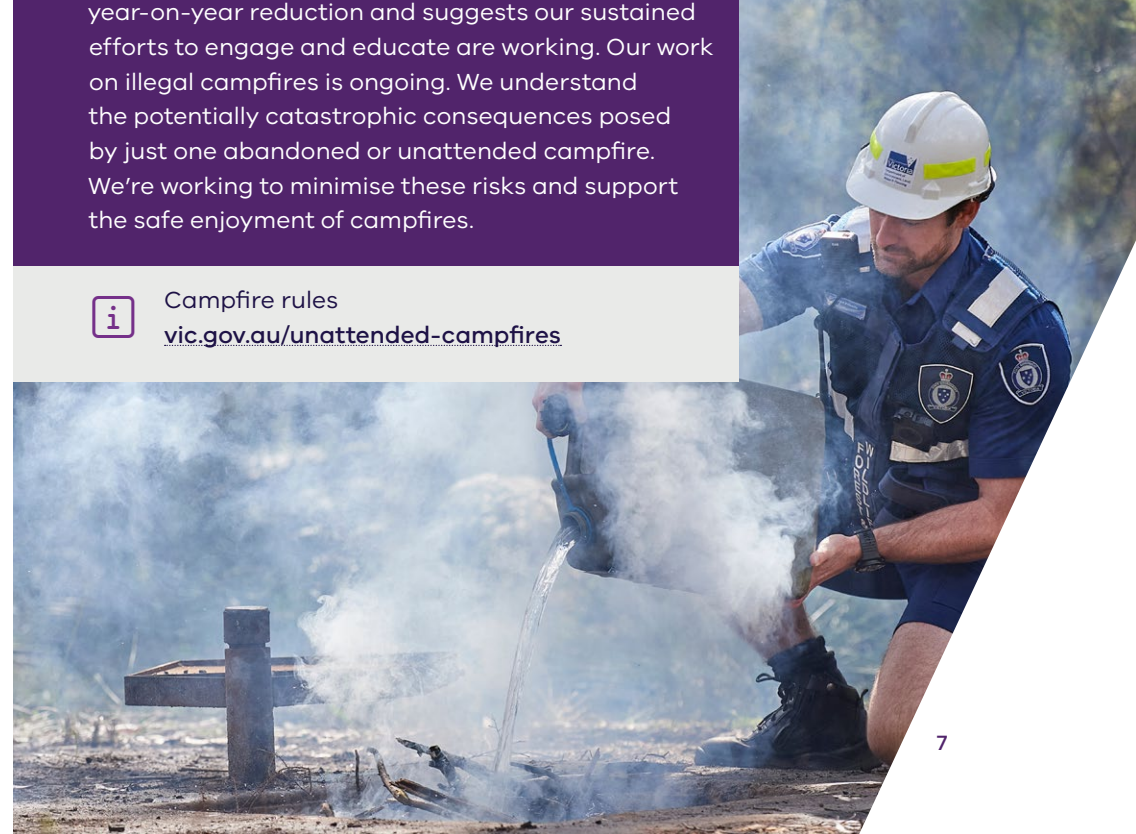


CASE STUDY

From July 2021 to June 2022, our Authorised Officers conducted over 800 patrols on public land, in partnership with Forest Fire and Management Victoria. These patrols recorded a total of 532 unattended or abandoned campfires, a reduction of 39% from the year prior. Since June 2022 we have seen a further 78% decrease in the total number of observed illegal campfires. This is a significant year-on-year reduction and suggests our sustained efforts to engage and educate are working. Our work on illegal campfires is ongoing. We understand the potentially catastrophic consequences posed by just one abandoned or unattended campfire. We're working to minimise these risks and support the safe enjoyment of campfires.



Campfire rules
vic.gov.au/unattended-campfires





Illegal take of firewood

Demand for illegal firewood continues to destroy vital habitat across Victoria's public land.

Responsibly sourced firewood protects critical wildlife habitat and Aboriginal scar trees. Illegal firewood removal remains a key driver of critical habitat destruction, and the unacceptable loss of Aboriginal cultural heritage across the state.

The removal of woody debris and tree hollows destroys sites for threatened bird, mammal, and reptile species to nest, shelter and forage. The destruction of these sites has potentially catastrophic consequences for the welfare of native fauna, such as the greater glider, powerful owl and helmeted honeyeater, and flora, like our river red gums.

Cost of living pressures have increased demand for firewood, while wildlife populations and ecosystems are particularly vulnerable after recent extreme weather events.

The Conservation Regulator informs the community about legal sources of firewood, provides education on the impacts of vital habitat destruction, and uses surveillance techniques to assist with enforcement action targeting illegal firewood collection.

Victoria has two firewood collection seasons per year. From 1 March to 30 June (autumn season), and 1 September to 30 November (spring season), community members can source firewood for private use from designated areas. Firewood collection maps are available on the [Forest Fire Management Victoria website](#).

Illegal firewood can be hard to spot. When buying firewood, ask where it came from, ask for an ABN, and get a receipt.



CASE STUDY

Operation Rivergum was a joint operation between the Conservation Regulator and Parks Victoria from 2020-2022 to address illegal firewood removal from vulnerable ecosystems along the Murray, Ovens, Goulburn and Loddon River corridors. It targeted people removing firewood in large quantities for commercial gain and in doing so, destroying areas of wildlife habitat and native vegetation. This year the Conservation Regulator is targeting firewood theft across the state with Forest Fire Management Victoria and Parks Victoria through Operation Hollows. Authorised Officers are patrolling forests, parks and reserves, and use concealed cameras and other methods to detect offences.



Firewood regulation
vic.gov.au/collecting-firewood



Firewood collection maps
ffm.vic.gov.au/firewood/firewood-collection-in-your-region



The Conservation Regulator encourages anyone with information about illegal take of firewood or the sale of suspected illegal firewood to report it to Crime Stoppers Victoria on **1800 333 000**. Callers can remain anonymous.





Cruelty to wildlife

Cruelty to wildlife is unacceptable and warrants a proactive and preventative approach.

The Conservation Regulator recognises the importance of the welfare of native wildlife and takes a proactive and preventative regulatory approach.

This regulatory priority addresses significant and intentional cruelty to wild native fauna and captive wildlife. It addresses breaches of the law including the unauthorised destruction, injuring or disturbing of wildlife, breaches of the conditions of Wildlife Licences and Authorities to Control Wildlife issued under the *Wildlife Act 1975*, significant and intentional cruelty to wildlife kept in captivity (focusing on commercial licence holders and large holdings of wildlife), and transport of illegally acquired fauna.

We prioritise investigations into significant and intentional cruelty to native animals and captive wildlife. We apply strict conditions to wildlife licences and permits and undertake audits to monitor compliance. We also educate and inform Victorians who interact with wildlife on how to do so in a way that protects animal welfare.

We will focus on the biggest risks and where we can be most influential with our effort. We are also working with Animal Welfare Victoria to ensure we will be ready to implement the proposed Animal Care and Protection Bill, that will (subject to Parliamentary approval) replace the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*.

There are ways you can lawfully enjoy wildlife while protecting their wellbeing. You can install a bird bath rather than feeding wildlife. You should always keep a safe distance to let wild animals display their natural behaviours. You can report any wildlife cruelty to Crime Stoppers, including failing to provide adequate food, water and shelter for captive wildlife, and harassment or disturbance of wildlife in the wild. In Victoria, it is illegal to disturb or destroy wildlife without an authorisation.

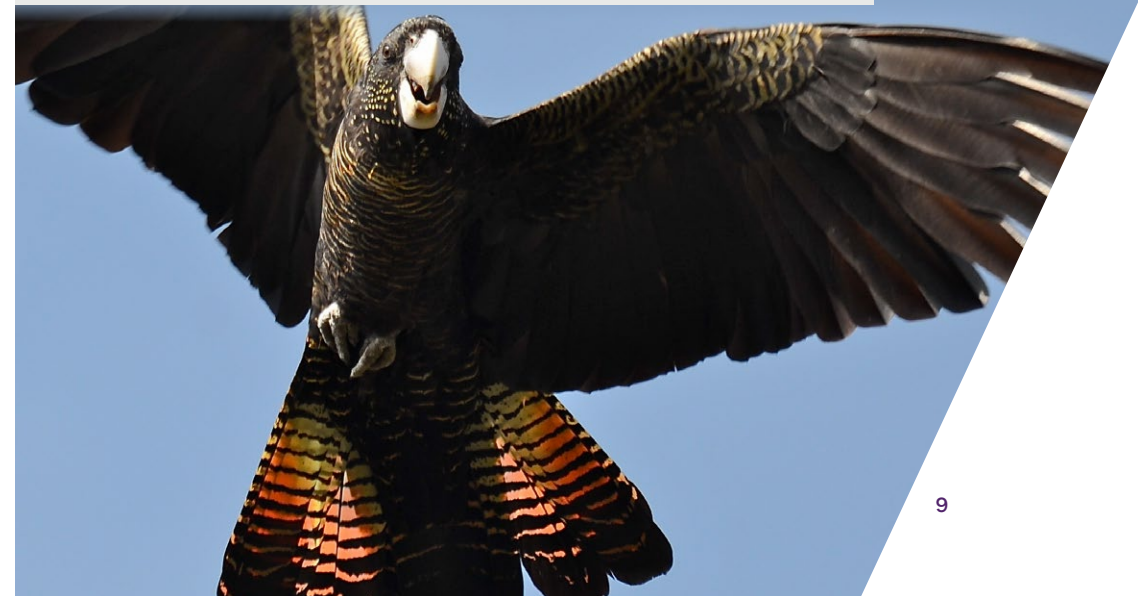


CASE STUDY

Conservation Regulator Authorised Officers initiated an investigation following reports of native birds being shot in north-western Victoria. Officers found four dead magpies, and two seriously injured magpies, which had to be later euthanised by a qualified veterinarian. The offender was charged with 10 offences of wounding and inflicting aggravated cruelty on an animal under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*, and was sentenced to a two-year good behaviour bond, a \$2,000 fine and ordered to pay costs.



The Conservation Regulator encourages anyone with information about wildlife crime to report it to Crime Stoppers Victoria on 1800 333 000. Callers can remain anonymous.





Protection of threatened species

Victoria's native plants and animals are protected by law and are fundamental to a healthy natural environment.

Victorians have a role in protecting our threatened species and communities. Healthy biodiversity is essential for health and wellbeing, is fundamental to the cultural practices of Aboriginal Victorians, reduces the impacts of climate change, and is vital to Victoria's tourism sector and the many Victorians who enjoy our natural environments.

Threatened native plants and animal species and communities are listed under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. Current trends across monitored species show a general long-term trend of continued population decline.

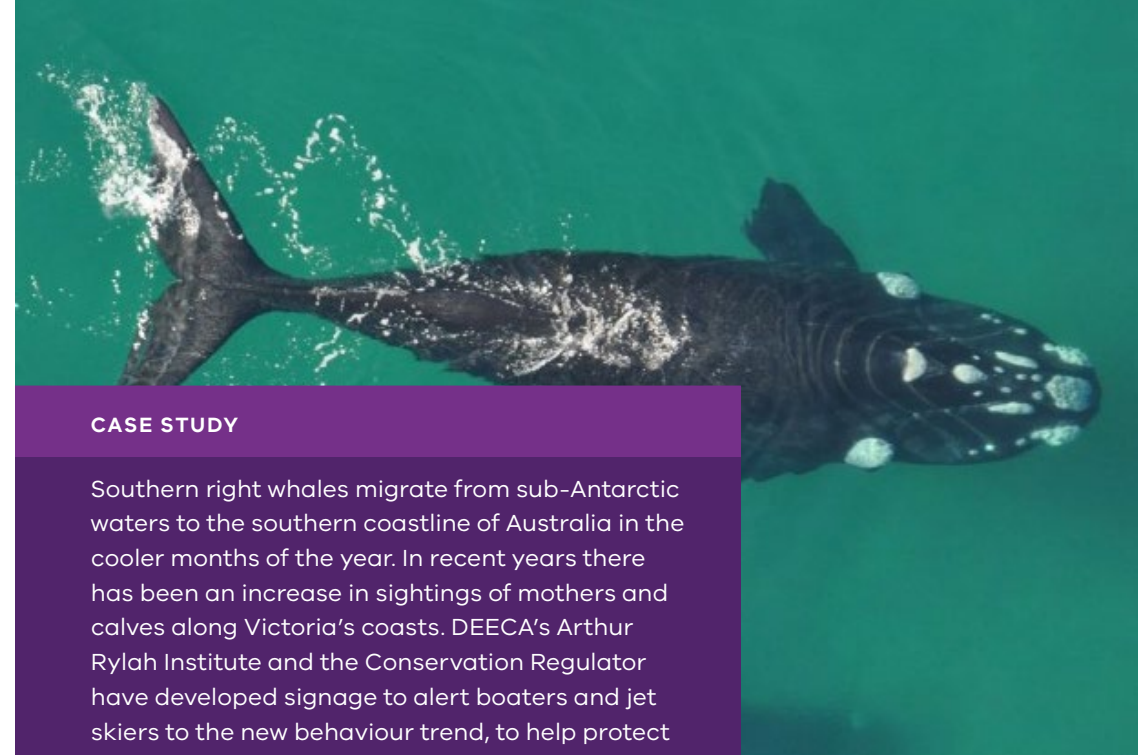
Victoria's threatened species and communities are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss and fragmentation, changes to fire frequency and intensity, invasive plants and animals, and illegal removal or destruction of the plants, animals or habitat that they rely on to survive.

Climate change and population growth are expected to exacerbate existing threats and bring new challenges for Victoria's biodiversity.

The Conservation Regulator prioritises regulatory activities that address threats to the survival of threatened species. This includes proactive education and enforcement in key habitat areas for threatened species, investigation and prosecution of those responsible for illegal take of threatened wildlife from the wild, and proactive patrols on public land. We also conduct various activities to monitor compliance with timber harvesting regulations.

Our actions are incorporated into Action Statements for threatened species and communities.

The best thing you can do is give wildlife space and enjoy native flora by taking photos, not flowers.



CASE STUDY

Southern right whales migrate from sub-Antarctic waters to the southern coastline of Australia in the cooler months of the year. In recent years there has been an increase in sightings of mothers and calves along Victoria's coasts. DEECA's Arthur Rylah Institute and the Conservation Regulator have developed signage to alert boaters and jet skiers to the new behaviour trend, to help protect vulnerable mother calf pairs from being disturbed by vessels. Information cards and stickers will also be distributed by Conservation Regulator, local council and Parks Victoria teams.



The Conservation Regulator encourages anyone with information about wildlife crime to report it to Crime Stoppers Victoria on **1800 333 000**. For illegal take or damage of threatened flora, please report to DEECA on **136 186**. Callers can remain anonymous.





Illegal commercial timber harvesting

The Conservation Regulator is committed to the proactive regulation of timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests.

Commercial native timber harvesting in state forests is permitted in Victoria until 1 January 2024 and must be compliant with the law. Commercial timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests is regulated in accordance with the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* and the Code of Practice for Timber Production (the Code).

The regulatory framework for timber harvesting exists to ensure timber harvesting activities are done in a way that is compatible with the conservation of environmental, social, and cultural values, so they are protected for future generations.

The Code was amended in 2022, with changes taking effect from 6 June 2022. These amendments include clarifications of the Code's requirements which assist the industry to comply and assist the Conservation Regulator in ensuring the law is properly applied and enforced.

The Conservation Regulator will continue to actively regulate the commercial native timber harvesting until it ceases on 1 January 2024. We will monitor timber harvesting operations and taking appropriate action to remedy and respond to breaches of the law, with a focus on areas of high environmental risk.

The Conservation Regulator's Forest Protection Survey Program will also continue, protecting animals, plants and other values that are threatened or of high conservation value in areas planned to be harvested this year.

As industry activity changes, we will be agile and shift our focus to take account of environmental risk in the lead up to and after 1 January 2024.



The Victorian Government has announced that commercial native timber harvesting in Victorian state forests will cease on 1 January 2024.



Illegal vehicle use

Illegal off-road vehicle use can cause erosion, damage native vegetation, and destroy wildlife habitat.

Victoria has a well-established network of formed roads and tracks available for public use in state forests, parks and reserves.

Despite this infrastructure, the Conservation Regulator continues to detect increasing illegal vehicle use across natural terrain, walking trails, cycling trails, closed roads, restricted access areas, in streams and on informal single tracks.

Illegal vehicle use in these environments causes significant damage, including destruction of wildlife habitat, fragmentation of native forests, degradation of water quality, introduction of weeds, and soil erosion. Cultural sites can be damaged or destroyed, and illegal vehicle use creates unacceptable safety risks for other users of our forests.

The Conservation Regulator supports lawful recreational vehicle use by partnering with community groups and educating the public on the importance of staying on formed roads. We conduct frequent patrols and use surveillance technology to identify illegal off-road vehicle use.

Victoria's state forests, parks and reserves contain over 30,000km of roads and formed vehicle tracks. Before you head off, understand which roads are available for use and stay on formed tracks – for the safety of yourself, other park users and the environment.



CASE STUDY

The Conservation Regulator has 40 trail-bike accredited staff who conduct patrols across the state. Trail-bike patrols target riding on closed roads and unformed tracks, and destruction of gates and other infrastructure. We monitor the use of trail bikes in state forests, park and reserves to limit environmental impacts and ensure safe use and equitable access to public land. Importantly, our trail-bike initiative continues to provide opportunities for our Authorised Officers to engage with the community at events and on the trail.



Vehicle use on public land
vic.gov.au/vehicle-use-public-land





Talk to the Conservation Regulator

If you see something, let us know.



DEECA Customer Contact Centre 136 186



Email us at conservationregulator@delwp.vic.gov.au



Report wildlife crime to Crime Stoppers Victoria 1800 333 000 or [crimestoppersvic.com.au/report-a-crime](https://www.crimestoppersvic.com.au/report-a-crime)



Visit us online at [conservationregulator.vic.gov.au](https://www.conservationregulator.vic.gov.au)



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If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment, contact us through the National Relay Service on 133 677 or visit www.relayservice.com.au



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