



Major Bushfires in Yarra Ranges Region.

The Yarra Ranges Shire is recognised as one of the most wildfire prone areas in the world, because of its mountainous topography, highly inflammable vegetation, aspect, prevailing winds and climatic patterns which combine to create a severe fire hazard area.

A further factor which makes the area particularly hazardous is the combination of the Forest- urban environment and the large number of Tourists who visit the Region annually.

Topographically the Dandenong's form a triangular area of steep hills rising abruptly from the surrounding plains. The Northern and Western faces are exposed to strong dry winds during summer. Rainfall varies with altitude. The dry season coincides with the period of hot, dry northerly winds making the summer season a period of grave fire danger.

The northern and western slopes of both the Dandenong's and the Upper Yarra Valley are vegetated by dry to wet sclerophyll forests dominated by messmate. Long leafed box, narrow leaf peppermint and mountain grey gum. This type of forest which is indigenous, and the source of most major wildfire events, becomes particularly flammable during the summer months, being all eucalypts, they produce large volumes of litter, which is highly combustible.

Messmate has one of the highest spot fire potentials amongst the eucalypts. The bark provides an ideal material for the production of burning embers which travel long distances ahead of the main fire.

Gullies in western and northern slopes present the greatest fire hazard, as fires can spread up these steep slopes with amazing speed. The rate of forward progress of a fire in eucalypt fuels will double on a 10 degree slope and increase fourfold on a 20 degree slope. Fires in the Basin have provided evidence of this fact.

The most disturbing aspect of the Fire History of the Dandenong Ranges in particular, has been the fact that most fires have been deliberately lit, or have been the result of residents careless burning off.



1851 February 'Black Thursday'

Fires covered a quarter of what is now Victoria [approx. 5 million hectares.] Approximately 12 lives, one million sheep and thousands of cattle were lost in the fires.

1880

Fires in The Basin and Olinda.

1898 1 February

Serious Fires in Ferntree Gully National Park, Kallista, The Patch and Selby.

Fires burnt 260,000 hectares in South Gippsland. 12 lives were lost and more than 2000 buildings were destroyed.

1907

Fires again in Ferntree Gully National Park and One Tree Hill.

1908

Fires again in Ferntree Gully National Park.

1910

Fires on Mount Dandenong.

1913

Fires in Sherbrooke Forest, Sassafras and Monbulk.

1914

Fires in Ferntree Gully and One Tree Hill. Fires burnt out over 100,000 Hectares over the entire State.

1919

Fires in Sassafras and Olinda. Widespread fires throughout the State, the most serious being in the Otway Ranges.

1920

Fires in Kallista along the Sassafras Creek Gully.

1922

Fires in Upwey.

1923

Fires in Sherbrooke Forest, Belgrave, Sassafras, & Upper Ferny Creek.

1925

Fire in Ferntree Gully National Park.



1926 Black Sunday 14 February 1926.

Serious fires in the Dandenong Ranges. Throughout Victoria fires burnt across large areas of Gippsland throughout February and into early March. 60 lives were lost. The fires culminated in Warburton on February 14, with 31 deaths recorded at Warburton. 12 saw mills were destroyed and around 150 homes. Other areas affected were Yarra Junction, Britannia Creek, Millgrove, Powelltown, Noojee, Neerim, Walhalla Kinglake & Erica. In the Upper Yarra Valley the fire started on Mount Little Joe and burnt to Mallacoota.

1928

Fires in the Basin.

1932 Red Tuesday.

Bad fires in The Basin, Sassafras, Olinda & Belgrave. Major fires occurred in many districts around Victoria throughout the summer. Large areas in Gippsland were burnt and 9 lives were lost. In the Upper Yarra Valley 16 people lost their lives, around 70 homes 10 saw mills were destroyed between Powelltown and Warburton. The fire came from Healesville, through the Dee Valley to Mount Little Joe, to Powelltown and Noojee, and through the Don Valley into Yarra Junction and Hoddles Creek.

1934

Fires in The Basin, Ferntree Gully, Ferny Creek & Sassafras.

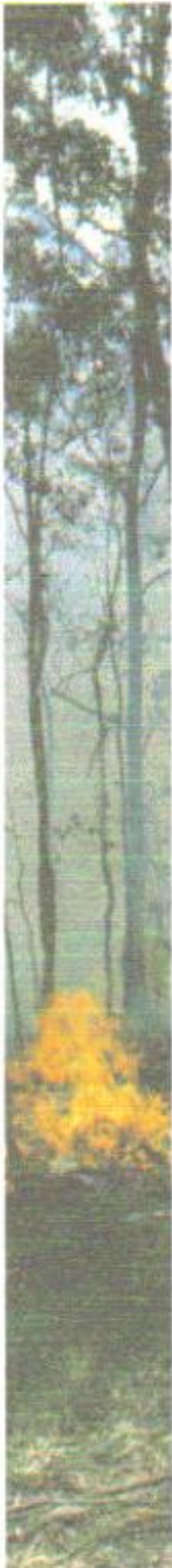
1936

Fires in Ferntree Gully, Belgrave, Selby & One Tree Hill.

1939 Black Friday 13 January 1939.

From December 1938 to January 1939, fires burnt 1.5 to 2 million hectares, including 800,000 hectares of protected forest, 600,000 hectares of reserved forest and 4000 hectares of plantations. The fire severity peaked on Friday 13. The fires caused 71 fatalities, 16 of which were at Matlock and destroyed more than 650 buildings and the township of Narbethong.

The main fires in the Dandenong's were at Olinda, with smaller fires at Ferntree Gully, Belgrave & The Basin. The Upper Yarra Valley was devastated by the fires which burnt with ferocity along the forested ridges either side of the Valley, especially around the township of Warburton, over 100 homes were destroyed, including several saw mills. The fire started in Healesville and burnt through the Don and Dee Valley's, over Mount Little Joe and Mount Victoria, through the O'Shannassy catchment, out to Powelltown, Noojee, Marysville, Matlock, and then to the NSW border.



1944 Wednesday 16 February 1944

Fires in the Ferntree Gully National Park, One tree Hill, Sassafras, Ferntree Gully, Monbulk & The Basin.

Major fires occurred in the Western District destroying over 500 homes. Approximately 440,000 hectares were burnt in 8 hours.

1954

Fires in Ferntree Gully National Park, Upper Ferntree Gully & One Tree Hill.

1959

Fires in Ferntree Gully National Park & Sassafras.

1960

Fires at The Basin, Sassafras and Olinda. Later at Belgrave and Selby.

1962 Sunday 14 January 1962 Black Sunday.

Thousands of acres of forests, Farm Lands and holiday beauty spots in the area between Healesville, Chum Creek, St Andrews, Yarra Glen, Ferntree Gully, Sassafras, Woori Yallock and Warrandyte were burnt out. The fire raged for 3 days and was extinguished by unforecasted heavy rain. Six people perished during the fire, four of whom were from the Ockwell Family at Woori Yallock, who died fleeing the fire. Sadly their home was not burnt. A house fire at Chum Creek sparked off the disastrous fire which within minutes swept the country to the north, west and south of Healesville fanned by strong gusty north winds, forming a four mile front. The townships of Launching Place, Don Valley and Yarra Junction were threatened by the fire. 81 houses in Healesville Shire were destroyed.

1968-69

Serious Fires in the Dandenong Ranges. Fires at The Basin, Sassafras, Upper Ferntree Gully, Upwey & Ferny Creek.

On 8th of January 1969, 280 fires broke out over the State. Of these 12 grass fires reached major proportions and burnt 250,000 hectares. 23 people died, including 17 trapped at Lara on the Geelong Freeway to Melbourne. The fires destroyed 230 houses, 21 sheds and over 12,000 stock.

1971

Fires broke out in The Basin & Sassafras.

1972

Fires in the Ferntree Gully National Park at Lysterfield, also at The Basin, Sassafras, Upper Ferntree Gully, Upwey & Ferny Creek.

Fires at Mount Buffalo burnt for 12 days, covering 12,140 hectares. This included 7,400 hectares of State forest and, 4,520 hectares of National Park.

1973

Fires in Fern Tree Gully National Park & Ferny Creek.

1974

Fires in fern Tree Gully National Park.

1980

Fires in fern Tree Gully National Park, Upwey & Mount Dandenong.

Fires also in the sunset Country & Biog Desert burning 119,000 hectares.

1983 Ash Wednesday 16 February 1983.

Over 100 fires throughout the State burnt 300,000 hectares, and 71 People died. More than 27,000 stock, and 2,000 houses were lost. The most severely affected areas included Monivae, Branxholme, east

Trentham, Mount Macedon, the Ottway ranges, Warburton, Belgrave Heights, Cockatoo, Upper Beaconsfield & Framingham. The largest of the Ash Wednesday Fires occurred in the Warburton - Reefton areas of Upper Yarra with 30 homes destroyed. 60,000 hectares of catchment and state forest were destroyed. The fire started on Mount Little Joe and burnt to Powelltown, Reefton and towards Marysville. Fire-fighters from the Army, Navy and RAAF were deployed together with NRE, MFB and CFA.

1991 Mt Little Joe. 7 March 1991

Three fires, thought to be deliberately lit broke out within minutes of each other on the side of Mount Little Joe between Wesburn and Millgrove. One home and several outbuildings were burnt in Prices road, Millgrove. Mount Little Joe was burnt out, with the fire threatening homes in Warburton, Wesburn, Millgrove and Gladysdale. Helicopters and aircraft were used extensively during the fire and were largely responsible for saving many homes in the Millgrove - Warburton area. Over 1200 hectares were burnt. Over 80 CFA brigades fought the fire which started on thursday and burnt till saturday.

1997 21 January 1997

Fires broke out in the Dandenong Ranges, resulting in 3 deaths. Fires Also occurred at Arthurs Seat, Eildon State Park, Creswick & Gippsland. Over 400 hectares were burnt, and 41 houses were destroyed.

2001 16 August 2001.

A burning off operation in Yarra Junction beside the Council depot burnt out 10 hectares when it was fanned out of control by strong northerly winds.

2002 Wesburn Forest 9 September 2002.

Following a week of record temperatures reaching 28.5 degrees, which were the warmest early spring days since records began in 1856, sixty hectares of forest was burnt between Old Warburton Road and Edwardstown Road, Wesburn. One hundred and fifty firefighters and 21 firetrucks attended the fire before rain doused the flames mid morning. Over 100 fires were reported across the State.



2009 Black Saturday Fires 7 February 2009.

Drought conditions combined with record temperatures resulted in the worst fires ever seen in Victoria. 173 people died in the fires. Two fires were located in the Dandenong's .On Black Saturday a fire burnt along Burwood Highway in Upper Ferntree Gully, starting in Quarry Road resulting in the closure of the Highway. The second fire, a week later started on a walking track near Terry's Avenue and Sandells Road, Belgrave. Fortunately due to the quick response by fire authorities, with air support, the fires were quickly brought under control averting a major disaster for the Dandenong's.

In the Yarra Ranges, 48,293 ha of land was burnt with the impact and severity of the fires varying across the Shire. The areas of greatest devastation were the Steels Creek, Dixons Creek and Chum Creek areas of the Yarra Valley, where 12 people died in the fires and 309 private properties sustained damage. The Towns of Yarra Glen, Healesville, Tarrawarra, Coldstream, Gruyere and Yering were also affected by the fire. Due to a wind change most of the Upper Yarra Valley was saved from the devastation, despite coming under severe ember attack.

Conclusion.

The communities of both the Dandenongs and the Upper Yarra Valley live with knowledge that they live in one of the worst areas of the World for wildfire, second to California in the United States of America. Bad fires in California usually serve as a warning of the risk of a bad fire season in the Yarra Ranges Region of Victoria.

One comforting factor in living in the Upper Yarra Valley is the fact that the major water catchments for the supply of water in Melbourne are located in the area. In the event of any large fire in the area the Government will commit unlimited resources to fighting the fire as any serious fire in the catchment would have enormous ramifications for Melbourne. From the initial problem of ash and unfiltered run off into the major dams, is the long term reduction in water reaching the dams due to the regeneration of forest where most of the rainfall is absorbed by young trees for many years.

Rick Houlihan.
October 2016.

Source; Department of Sustainability and Environment- Major Bushfires in Victoria 2008.
Upper Yarra Valley & Dandenong Ranges Authority Investigations Report October 1982.
Submission by Betty Marsden to UYVDRA Fire Buffer Zone Inquiry October 1992.
Email from Alan Marks to Jo Hirst 30 August 2009.
Major fires in the Upper Yarra Area compiled by Brian Halit 2009.
Paul Hill's notes from 1991 Fire on Mt Little Joe.

Rick Houlihan, Don Valley. Winton Pastoral Data Base September 2009. Up dated October 2016.