



Hobsons Bay Wetlands Centre



The Bay Trail West – Laverton Creek

Self-Guided Walk 4.5 Km return

Park at Apex Park at the south end of the Esplanade, Altona, and walk south. You can also walk the trail from the other end. Park at the 100 Steps car park at Andrew Park Drive in Altona Meadows. Walk up the 100 steps to the top of the hill and start the walk from its other end.

1. The Laverton Creek Spit

Stop near the shoreline after 300 m.

The western shoreline of Port Phillip is still in a relatively unspoiled and natural state. That's good news for our native wildlife, our marine ecosystems, and for those of us seeking to be outdoors in nature.

In western Port Phillip, wind waves and currents are not as strong as in the open ocean, but they are strong enough that the sandy shoreline is constantly being reshaped. As you look south, you are looking across 17 hectares of recently formed sand spit. It wasn't even here twenty years ago.

Although the new land is essentially nothing but sand and silt, it already has well established native vegetation. You will see large grey bushes, (coast saltbush) and the lower bushes nearby (austral seablite). These plants are highly adapted to poor, sandy, coastal soil. They move in on the newly deposited spits within months.

After the coastal plants move in, the spit becomes habitat for shorebirds needing places to feed, roost, and build nests--birds such as pied oystercatchers, red-capped plovers, and pacific gulls.

2. The Bird Sign

Stop near the bird sign after 275 m.

The sandspit created a sheltered lagoon, which in turn has become one of the prime waterbird feeding areas in the entire Port Phillip area.

All the species of birds you see on the sign do make an appearance here in the lagoon at one time or another. That fact by itself would make this one of the top biodiversity hotspots in the metro Melbourne area.

What makes this area special, is the number of wading birds that use this habitat--sandpipers, stilts and avocets. Because the lagoon is very shallow, unpolluted, and full of tiny invertebrates, these birds spend hours wading as the tide goes out. And when the tide is in, they roost on many sandy points opposite, which appears to be just far enough away from the human activity for them to feel safe to rest.

Amazingly, some sandpipers you see here in the summer have flown half-way around the planet, undertaking one of the longest regular migrations of any animal on the planet. Look for them on the bird sign, and then if the time of year is right, look for them across the lagoon--red-necked stints, sharp-tailed sandpipers, bar-tailed godwits, and greenshanks.



3. Coastal Overlook

Stop near the lookout and bench after 130 m.

The Shorebird Lagoon is only one small part of a larger area of international significance. From this rise, look south toward Point Cook. Between the suburbs on the right and the bay lies a wide area of saltmarsh.

The habitat, like most saltmarsh in south-eastern Australia, is largely covered with a type of low bushes called glasswort, or samphire. There are also extensive ponds and lagoons.

These are mostly man-made ponds, created by the Cheetham Saltworks in the mid-20th century.

In 1971, a convention of the nations from around the world was held in the Iranian town of Ramsar, to agree on the monitoring and conservation of the planet's wetlands. In 1982, this area was registered under the Ramsar convention, in a part because it is a key sanctuary for migratory birds.

Further along on this walk, you will be treated to a spectacular view over this saltmarsh landscape.

4. The Explosives Reservation

Stop near the creek bank after 200 m.

Before European settlement, the area where you are standing was saltmarsh. Further inland saltmarsh gave way to extensive, open grasslands. Being located far from any towns at the time, in 1896, 225 hectares of grassland were set aside to be a safe storage site for high explosives. The Truganina Explosives Reserve operated here for 61 years.

Explosives were once moved along rail onto a long pier, right past where you are. Some of that rail remains, (near the gate in the old fence), as well as a few pilings from that pier (offshore, beyond the spit).

5. Laverton Creek

In 180 m, turn left to cross the wooden bridge.

It may be hard to imagine, but Laverton Creek didn't even exist until the 1970s. Dug as a flood control project, it connects Truganina Swamp to the north with Port Phillip.

Even though it's man-made, today it is a productive estuary. Estuaries are habitats where freshwater meets saltwater. They are places where schools of small fish thrive, and where you can expect to find larger waterbird such as spoonbills, herons, swans, and pelicans. If you are here at the right time you may even see flocks of up to a hundred graceful red-necked avocets, the emblem species of the Hobsons Bay Wetland Centre.

6. The Swift Parrot Sign

After crossing the bridge, stop where a path leaves the bike path, near the interpretive sign.

Take time read about swift parrots, and then follow the footpath straight ahead. These mahogany gums trees are not typical of this area. They were planted years when the Explosives Reservation was in operation. However much of the undergrowth is made up of native plants commonly found in coastal woodlands and grasslands. In the spring you will see the bright

pink flowers of karkalla, or pigs face, or tiny blue flax-lilies, and in winter, creamy white clematis.

7. In the Saltmarsh

In 180 m, stop where the path nears a fence.

This cable fence to the right marks the boundary of the Ramsar-listed saltmarsh. You can tell you are in saltmarsh habitat by the plants growing here. The most typical of all saltmarsh plants are the curious-looking glassworts. Glassworts have fleshy, jointed, leafless shoots and branches.

There are four species of glasswort just on this trail. The low, creeping *beaded glasswort* is the dominant ground cover in places where the soil is too salty for most types of grass to grow. On the far side of the fence you may see bare patches of ground where the salt content of the soil is so high almost nothing can grow, except for a few tiny bushes of super-hardy *blackseed glasswort*.

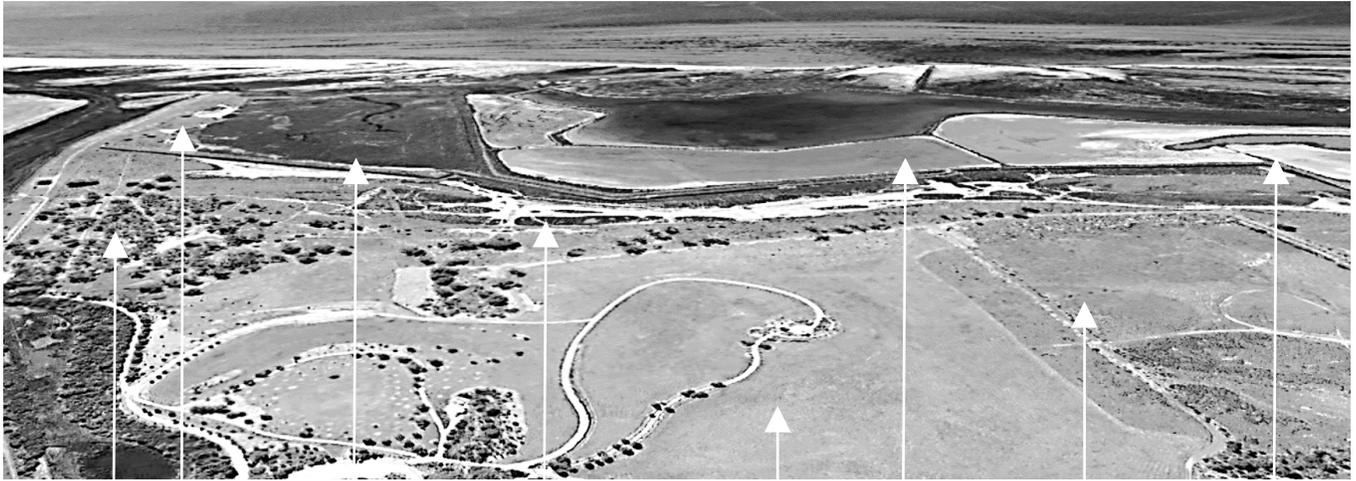
In places where mangroves cannot grow successfully, glassworts are the plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife, protect the coast, and build the soil. If it were not for glassworts, the coastline of south-eastern Australia would be a much more barren place, and the nearby marine ecosystems like waters of Port Phillip would be poorer as well.

8. The Orange Bellied Parrot Sign

In 220 m, stop where near the interpretive sign.

Take time to read about our other rare Tasmanian migrant, the orange-bellied parrot. Also, look in the direction of Port Phillip and notice scattered river red gums and drooping she-oak trees. These are among the few types of trees that would have grown here in the past.

But looking away from Port Phillip you can see one enormous change, from late last century. After the western half of the Explosives Reservation closed, it became a rubbish landfill, which in turn has closed and is now a public park. Over several decades the landfill grew up to become the only hill in this flat coastal plain, between here and the You Yangs.



woodland
grassland

saltmarsh shrubland
hypersaline saltmarsh

100 Steps
saltwork ponds

Gahnia tussockland
old sand spit

9. Cheetham Wetlands

In 200 m, stop where you have a view of the coast.

When this footpath meets the main track, turn right and begin to climb the hill. When that track comes to a T intersection, turn left, and get ready for one of the best views in Melbourne.

In addition to a view of the city to the north, see if you can recognise some of the many types of habitat in the Ramsar wetlands before you.

Firstly, there's woodlands. You walked through that after stop #6.

In the far distance, light coloured terrain is native grassland. Before European settlement, the entire landscape to the west, behind you, was grassland. Now only tiny patches of our original varieties of grassland remain.

The dark area is a special kind of saltmarsh, called "shrubland". This dense thicket, 50 cm to 2 m in height, is made up of *shrubby glasswort* which grows from. This mini forest is growing in very salty soil and probably was exposed to tidal flooding in the distant past. It is a haven for wildlife.

The bare white ground is hypersaline saltmarsh. Hypersaline means "excessively salty".

Years of tidal flooding and poor drainage centuries ago have left behind an almost lifeless habitat.

Areas to the south look like brownish grassland, but the dominant plant is actually not a grass but a coastal sedge, named Gahnia. This is the habitat of Altona's only known endemic species, the Altona skipper butterfly. (Being endemic means it lives only here and nowhere else.)

And lastly there are the ponds and lagoons created by the saltworks. They were once used to evaporate seawater, but now Parks Victoria protects this area as habitat for shorebirds.

10. The Time Beacon

After another 200 m, stop at the top of the hill.

The sculpture behind you is called the Time Beacon. Was the artist who created it thinking this newly built hill deserved some sort of beacon? Many other coastal hills do have them. Williamstown has its own historic beacon and time ball.

Or is this sculpture—which was erected on the centenary of Australian federation—saying something about history? About how much Australia has changed, and how much will change in the future? You can decide what the sculpture symbolises for you.