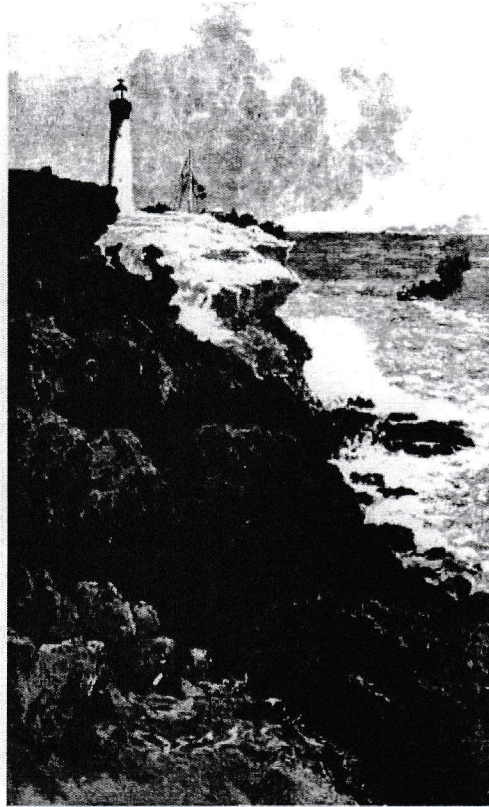


# Cape Nelson

Portland Victoria Australia



(Illustration from *Australia - The First Hundred Years* published in 1888)

**history, heritage and environment**





## Cape Nelson – glimpses of history

### The indigenous people

Lieutenant James Grant noted the presence of an indigenous people near Cape Nelson in 1800. He recorded that 'we plainly saw several fires on shore.' Cape Nelson and its locality were part of the traditional lands of the Dhauwurd Wurrung or Gundjimarra people who made use of the resources of Cape Nelson and its environs as they traversed the region on a seasonal basis.

### How and why Cape Nelson was named

Cape Nelson and most of our region's coastal features were named by Lieutenant James Grant. Grant and the crew of the *Lady Nelson* were the first Europeans to sight this region, sailing from west to east in December 1800 on a mission that ended in Sydney Town. On 5 December 1800, Grant sighted and named Cape Bridgewater 'in honour of the Duke of that title' and Cape Nelson 'after the vessel'. Grant also named Cape Grant, Lawrence Rocks, Julia Percy Island—and Portland Bay, later to become the site of the Portland Bay Settlement, which in turn became Portland.

### French Connection

The French also played a significant although ultimately futile part in naming Victoria's south-west coastline. A French exploration expedition spent time in these waters during April 1802. The leader of the French Expedition, Nicholas Baudin, renamed the features named by Grant! Portland Bay became *Baie Tourville* and Cape Nelson became *Cape D'Auquesne*. The French connection with the South West was fleeting and the names they gave to the region's coastal features did not endure. One of the few exceptions was Descartes Bay on the western side of Cape Bridgewater.

### The Cape moves!

Maritime pioneer Matthew Flinders and the *Investigator* reached the waters of the South West on 19 April 1802. Having copies of Grant's charts, Flinders merely confirmed Grant's names. As the *Investigator* proceeded around the coast, Flinders recorded that 'as we passed Cape Bridgewater, a second cliffy head opened... and a further around the last. These are the Capes Nelson and Sir W. Grant'. Flinders noted that the true location of Cape Nelson differed considerably from where Grant had charted it!

### Major Mitchell at Cape Nelson

Overland explorer Major Mitchell, accompanied by pioneers Edward and Frank Henry, visited Cape Nelson on 31 August 1836. It was the most southern point of his journey of exploration, which had commenced from Sydney several months before. Mitchell surveyed Portland Bay and nearby features. Mitchell recorded that 'I proceeded with the theodolite to a height near Cape Nelson, and from it I intersected that cape and also Cape Bridgewater, Cape Sir William Grant, the islands to the eastward etc'. His visit is commemorated by way of the Picnic Hill Memorial near Cape Nelson.

### How the lighthouse came about

It took some thirty years of deliberation and delay before the Cape Nelson Lighthouse was constructed and put into service.

The need for a lighthouse to the west of Portland had long been apparent. The state of navigation, the nature of sailing vessels and the treacherous coastline meant that many vessels were regularly endangered as they made their way back and forth.

In 1854, a government committee recommended that lighthouses be constructed on a number of prominent headlands along the Victorian coastline, with a major open ocean lighthouse to be erected on Cape Bridgewater. Cape Nelson later became the most preferred site but governments of the day always seemed to have more pressing priorities.

There were a number of maritime disasters in the area. In 1863 the *Jane* came to grief on rocks near Cape Bridgewater and in 1871 the steamer *Barwon* was wrecked nearby. There were also a number of near misses.

The eventual construction of the lighthouse appears to have come about as a political favour in repayment of an earlier favour! Local parliamentarian William Tytherleigh is said to have supported Peter Lalor, the hero of Eureka and later a prominent politician, at a critical time. Lalor held several ministries and became speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 1880. He is said to have thrown his considerable influence and prestige behind moves to have a lighthouse constructed on Cape Nelson.

The site was surveyed in 1879 and tenders were let in 1882 for the construction of a lighthouse and two cottages. A memorial stone was laid at Cape Nelson on Thursday, 19 April 1883

Despite various problems, work proceeded at a satisfactory rate and the light was officially lit on 7 July 1884—30 years after the idea of a lighthouse west of Portland had first been advocated.

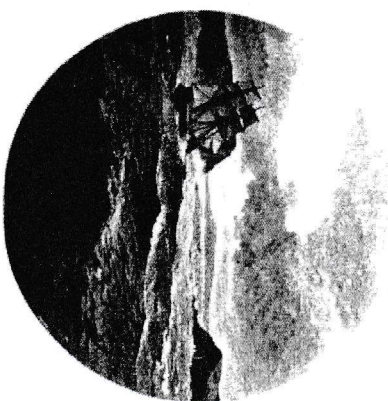
### Cape Nelson at war

When the lighthouse was constructed, the Australian Colonies feared a Russian invasion. In 1885 warships were sighted on two occasions and news of the sightings telephoned to Portland. Some concern resulted, but the warships proved to be the German vessel *Hueria* and the French warship *Magon*. Both made friendly visits to Portland and were inspected by the locals.

The lighthouse also played a part in World War 1 when a radar station and support camp was established at Cape Nelson to provide early warning of Japanese warships and ship-launched aircraft. The installation included lookouts, air raid shelter, quarters, and gun emplacement. The radar station was linked to an Allied airbase at Mount Gambier and was also intended to protect the Port of Portland.

### The Cape today

Cape Nelson is a popular visitor attraction and can be reached by road as part of a 24 kilometre round trip scenic drive. Pass by the feedlots supporting the live sheep trade and visit the Major Mitchell monument at Picnic Hill, taking in views seen by Mitchell in 1836. The lighthouse offers striking photographic opportunities and visitors can do the three-kilometre loop of the Sea Cliff Nature Walk, with its coastal vegetation, cliff top views of the Southern Ocean and farmland panoramas.



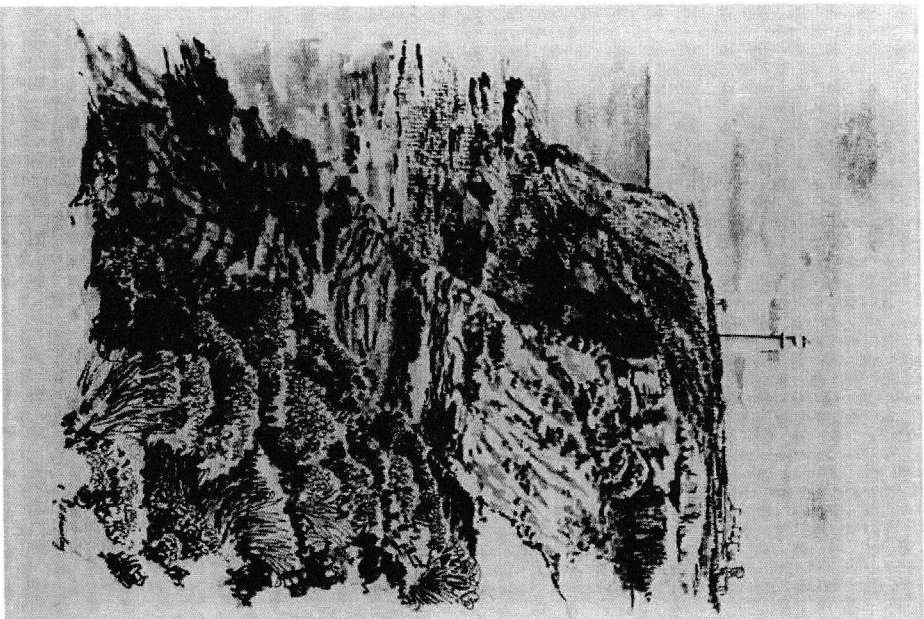
The *Lady Nelson* at sea  
(Illustration from *Australia – The First Hundred Years* published in 1888)



# Cape Nelson Lighthouse

## Facts and figures

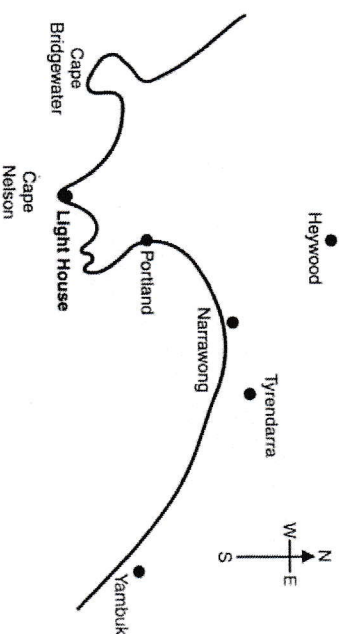
- The lighthouse was officially opened in 1884 and has been in service ever since then
- Lighthouse is located 13 kilometres south-west of Portland
- The height of the lighthouse structure is 32 metres
- Light can be seen from over twenty nautical miles out to sea
- The light is some 75 metres above sea level
- Lighthouse operated by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority
- Cape Nelson was named by maritime explorer Lieutenant James Grant in 1800
- Lighthouse is located at latitude 38° 25.9 south and longitude 141°32.5 east
- Nearest lighthouse to west is Cape Northumberland Lighthouse, just over the South Australian border
- The light signal is a white light, group flashing 4 times every 30 seconds
- Nearest lighthouse to east is Whalers Bluff Lighthouse at Portland
- The Lighthouse keepers quarters are protected from winds by a 435 metre long and 1.75 metres high wall that extends out to the lighthouse
- Cape Nelson light is now fully automated



Cape Nelson Lighthouse  
(from the *Portland Sketchbook* by Hawley & Vaughan)

## Cape Nelson locality flora and fauna

- A substantial part of the coast around Cape Nelson makes up the 210 hectare Cape Nelson State Park. The park and its rugged coastline is home for many seabirds and animal life including Echidnas
- At the same time, the Cape Nelson State Park is home to a wide range of colourful plants, culturally significant plants and a range of uncommon if not rare plants or trees
- The Dhauwurd Wurrung utilised plants from Cape Nelson for food, medicine, shelter and tools
- Unwelcome vegetation on Cape Nelson and its locality include Cape weed, Coast Tea-tree, Shiny Leaf, Polygala and Wild Radish. These weeds threaten native vegetation and biodiversity by competing with native indigenous vegetation species for food, sun and water
- Plants at risk of survival in the Cape Nelson locality include the Drooping Velvet-bush, the Pale Turpentine Bush, Velvet White Correa, Oval-leaf Logania, Silly Guinea-flower, Ixodia and the Coast Gum or Soap Mallee
- An excellent reference on the unique and culturally significant plants of Cape Nelson is the brochure *Unique Plants of Cape Nelson*, available from the Portland Visitor Information Centre





# Cape Nelson State Park

## Sea Cliff Nature Walk

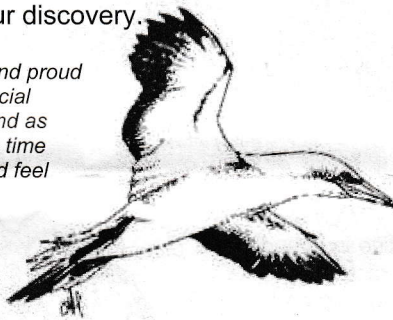


### Visitor Guide

Visit and explore the Capes spectacular coastal cliffs. Observe diverse bird life and unique plants while strolling on picturesque walks. The Great South West Walk (GSWW) and the nearby Cape Nelson Lightstation are spectacular features of this park's bountiful attractions that await your discovery.

*'We are happy and proud to share this special place with you and as that you take the time to look, listen and feel the Country.'*

Gunditjmara, the local Aboriginal Traditional Owners, welcome you.



### Discover a rich natural history

A truly fascinating place steeped in a rich human history that spans thousands of years. The park is archaeologically, ecologically and geologically rich and diverse.

### Facilities and accommodation

Two scenic bushwalks (see overleaf). A picnic area, fireplaces, tables, toilets, a self-guided walk and lighthouse are available. No camping except for GSWW registered hikers.

Enquire at Portland's Maritime Discovery Centre for camping and other local information.

### Picnics

Located on the Norman Wade Scenic Drive, the Cape Nelson Picnic Area is a tranquil setting among Soap Mallee close to several walks.

### Norman Wade Scenic Drive and Cycle

The drive/cycle route takes in several sea-cliff lookouts.

A number of sealed and gravel vehicle tracks are open and available to bicycles and vehicles to share. Riders and drivers should all be alert and watchful for each other.

### Cape Nelson Lightstation

Visitors are welcome at this heritage listed Lightstation. Open daily with free access to the grounds. Lighthouse tours are available by arrangement. Enquire about staying in the luxuriously restored Keeper's cottage or just relax in the café. Book ahead on (03) 5523 2188.

### Exploring by foot

1. Cape Nelson Lighthouse Loop Walk (6km)
2. Great South West Walk
3. Sea Cliff Nature Walk (3km) (see over page for walk notes)

### 1. Cape Nelson Lighthouse Loop Walk

Twice the distance of Sea Cliff Nature Walk this is still a relatively easy walk with a little more preparation. Water, shoes, hat and sunscreen are essential. The full loop walk will take you through coastal heathland, Soap Mallee and several coastal outlook platforms.

### 2. Great South West Walk

Experience some of Australia's most beautiful scenery and wildlife on this great 250km loop walk. It also passes Point Danger where Victoria's only land-locked Gannets breeding colony is located.

### 'Step-on' and 'step-off'

Cape Nelson Loop Section of this great walk has locations that intersect the roads and tracks around Cape Nelson. A separate brochure covering the entire 250km walk is available.

### [www.greatsouthwestwalk.com](http://www.greatsouthwestwalk.com)

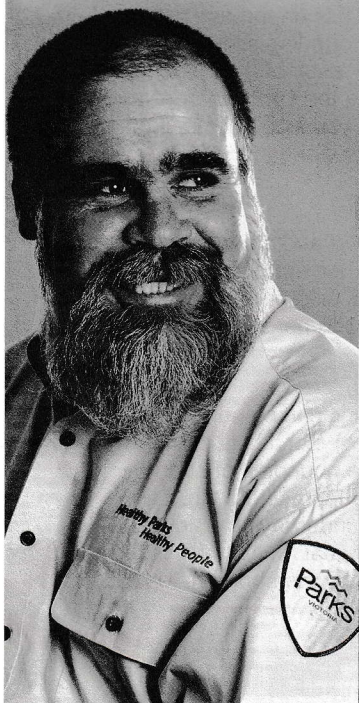
Visit the website to find out more or enquire at Portland's Visitor Information Centre in the Maritime Discover Centre.

### Be fire ready and stay safe

Many parks and forests are located in high fire risk areas. On days of forecast Code Red Fire Danger this park may be closed for public safety. If you are already in the park you should leave the night before or early in the morning for your own safety.

Closure signs will be erected and rangers will patrol when possible, however you may not receive a personal warning that the park is closed so check the latest conditions by calling 13 1963 or visit [www.parks.vic.gov.au](http://www.parks.vic.gov.au)

For up to date information on fires in Victoria or general fire safety advice call the **Victorian Bushfire Information Line** on 1800 240 667.







### 3. Sea Cliff Nature Walk

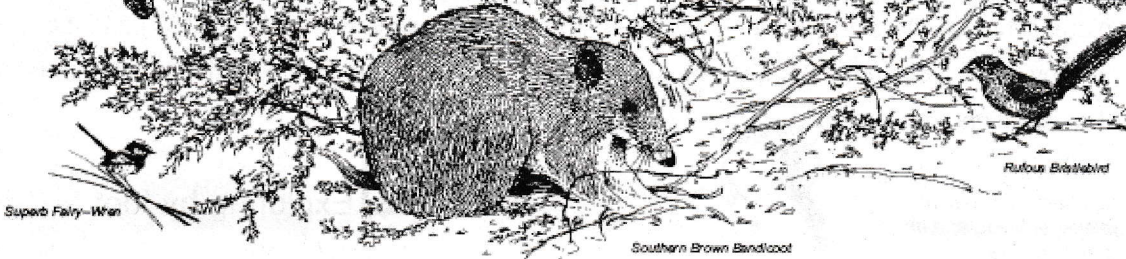
Easy: 1.5 – 2hrs, 3km loop

A good introduction to the nature of Cape Nelson. Walkers should watch carefully for small spring flowering native orchids.

- Sturdy footwear is advisable
- Please stay on the track
- Sections of the track are stony and often uneven
- Keep away from cliff edges as some may be unstable



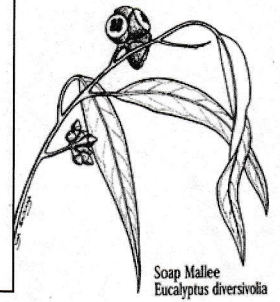
Swamp Wallaby



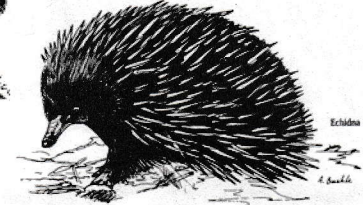
Southern Brown Bandicoot

Superb Fairy-Wren

Rufous Whistlerbird



Soap Mallee  
Eucalyptus diversivolia



Echidna

## 1. Scratching about looking for food

Echidnas live on the Cape and are often active in spring and summer as they search for food. Along the track you will notice diggings and scratching in the soil. They dig and scratch with powerful claws and their holes often have 'finger-like' pointy-holes, a tell-tale sign that their snout has poked about looking for succulent ant-larvae.

Echidnas and platypus are monotremes - both unique to Australia/New Guinea. They have bird, reptile and mammal features, single opening rear end for all functions, they lay bird/reptile type eggs, are covered in fur and feed their young on milk. And they have beaks!

The spikes on the echidna are actually a type of hair (fur). They have two types of hair on their body; short for warmth and long 'spine-like' hair for tough protection.

## 2. Australia's floral emblem

Look about you, can you see the gum-leaf-like leaves? They Australia's floral emblem, the Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*). Common to Australia and Africa, acacia or wattle seed is amazing as it can lie dormant in the soil for many years, waiting to germinate under the right conditions.

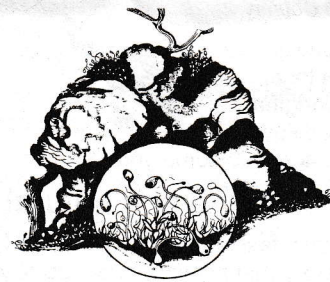
Fire greatly assists by providing the heat needed to break the hard outer layer of the seed. Ants harvest vast quantities of seed for food, carting it back into their underground chambers and Bronzewing pigeons enjoy them also.

## 3. Hiding under skirts

Of special interest in this area is the presence of grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea australis*) These amazing slow-growing plants are not actually grass. They can live for more than 100 years and send up a single large flower-spike, usually following fire, disturbance or drought. It can reach up to three metres. Small mammals such as the endangered Southern Brown Bandicoot will use the unburnt skirts (dead fronds) for protection from predators and weather.

## 4. An old survivor - Moonah

The old, gnarled tree behind the post at this stop is a Moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*). Due to this sheltered position it is much taller than the wind-blasted specimens that you will see later along the exposed ocean cliff tops. Moonah shows a remarkable ability to adapt to Cape Nelson's variety of conditions. Moonah stands were once widespread along the coasts of South West Victoria. Their wood was highly prized for lime burning kilns and stands of old trees remain as natural treasures.



## 5. A mini-(or micro) forest

Look closely for patches of emerald-green moss. Moss is a miniature plant that grows in clumps or mini-forests. They can change colour and texture rapidly from a gold-colour to a soft lush-green, depending on the availability of water. They are adapted to store water in their mat of

spongy leaves/stems. They often become the seed beds for germinating seeds and are one of the plants that assist an area's transition from rock to soil.

## 6. Adapting to survive - droopy but healthy

You may not have noticed a new plant appearing along this track. The Drooping Velvet Bush (*Lasiopetalum schulzenii*) is extremely rare and Cape Nelson is one of the few areas where it still occurs locally.

Although it may appear to be drooping from lack of water this is in fact a trick. This plant is able to droop its leaves in order to prevent excessive water-loss through evaporation, this is a survival mechanism for living in this area.

## 7. Powerful unforgiving coastal winds

On the seaward side of the track is a small wedge of private open farmland. The bare and rocky areas on the rise are called dune limestone. This is the surrounding soils under-laying rock. It has been exposed as a result of the plant cover being removed and the wind sweeping the sand cover away. Also take note of the old windrows as you follow the trail. These are all that remains after land clearing in 1968.

## 8. Less soil, smaller plants

Spreading Flax Lilies (*Dianella revoluta*) and other native grasses cover this open rocky area. Their springtime displays of delicate blue flowers mature to form blue/purple berries; a favourite food for birds and animals living here.

## 9. Stunted runts – 'Bonsai' on the coast

There would be few places that humans can stand and be taller than gum trees (eucalypt species), but this is one of them! This entire area is subject to the pounding of strong salt-laden winds which cut back and suppress growth. The canopy itself is still thick – protecting under-laying plants and animals. Some plants appear to be bonsai (miniature) as they are unable to grow tall due to pruning by the strong harsh salty- winds.



## 10. Looking towards Bridgewater Bay and Cape Bridgewater

You are looking out at the enormous Southern Ocean - stretching south to the shores of Antarctica almost 3000km away. The ocean is home to some well known locals; tuna fish, whales, dolphins, sea eagles and the Australasian Gannet. On most days you can see Gannets skimming above the ocean waters and then diving suddenly to plunge in search of fish. They roost and breed in great numbers at nearby Lawrence Rocks.

## 11. What's under your feet?

In the headland further along two distinct layers of rock can be seen. Also noticeable at Cape Nelson Lightstation, the cliff-base is dark coloured basalt (bluestone), a result of lava flow from an ancient volcanic eruption. On top is the lighter coloured limestone, deposited more recently.

## 12. A haven for small birds

Stop, look and listen quietly. Scrub wrens, Rufous bristlebirds, wrens, finches and King quail are just some of the birds you may see or hear in this ideal habitat.



Supers Fairy Wren © MTT

## 13. Soap Mallee

This area is dominated by a canopy of thick Soap Mallee (*Eucalyptus diversifolia*) which is restricted to Cape Nelson in Victoria (it is more common in South Australia). Like other mallee eucalypts, Soap Mallee has no single trunk but a large woody rootstock from which several stems grow. After a fire, new growth sprouts from the rootstock protected beneath the soil.

## 14. When the soil changes, the plants often do too

You will see the plants have changed to mostly tea-tree species providing home and shelter for many small birds and masses of insects (which in turn are food for birds and animals). Heath tea-tree (*Leptospermum myrsinoides*) and Prickly tea-tree (*Leptospermum continentale*) both produce masses of white spring and summer wildflowers.

Covered in yellow and orange spring wildflowers, the Bush Pea (*Pultenaea mollis*) is also found here. It is often called 'egg and bacon' due to its flower colours.

**There are a host of other walking tracks to enjoy in the parks and reserves surrounding Portland. Take a walk with a friend. It's great for your mind, body and soul.**



Beautiful Firetail

