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## 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF STATE FAUNAL EMBLEMS OFFERS HOPE FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES

Dedicated volunteers, the Victorian Government, and Zoos Victoria today celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victoria's precious Bird and Mammal Emblems, cutting a specially decorated cake to mark the occasion at Melbourne Zoo.

Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Mental Health, Hon James Merlino MP, Zoos Victoria CEO Dr Jenny Gray and Board Chair Kate Vinot joined with passionate community volunteers to celebrate 50 years of hard work to improve outcomes for the critically endangered Helmeted Honeyeater and Leadbeater's Possum.

"Today's celebration is a message of hope for these treasured native species," said Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater President, Professor Alan Clayton.

Once common in Victoria, Helmeted Honeyeaters are now only found in a single location, 661 hectares of land in Yellingbo, about 50 minutes from Melbourne's CBD.

"A decade ago, it was estimated there were only 50 Helmeted Honeyeaters in the wild," Professor Clayton said. "Today, thanks to the efforts of the Friends of Helmeted Honeyeater volunteers and a multi-agency recovery team there are around 250 birds in three separate colonies.

"Increasing the number of Helmeted Honeyeaters involves ongoing partnerships with the State Government, Zoos Victoria and many philanthropic trusts that believe in conservation and have come on the journey with us. It's also a testament to the hundreds of volunteers who come together with likeminded people to help our State Bird Emblem."

The Friends of Leadbeater's Possum President Steve Meacher said his volunteer group has been tireless in their advocacy and efforts to preserve known habitat of both the lowland and highland populations of the Leadbeater's Possum.

"The species is critically endangered and the small lowland colony at Yellingbo is under especially severe pressure," Mr Meacher said. "Unfortunately, efforts to breed the possum in captivity have so far been unsuccessful and a recent trial translocation has been abandoned due to cat predation. We must continue our efforts as a volunteer community group to do all we can to protect our unique species in the forests where they live."

Zoos Victoria CEO Dr Jenny Gray said the work of the two Friends groups was an important part of these species' survival.

“Zoos Victoria is committed to fighting extinction and we are proud to partner with these two Friends groups to do whatever we can to make a difference to these species found only in Victoria,” Dr Gray said. “Without the support of Friends groups and the passion they bring, many of our critically endangered species face insurmountable challenges from habitat destruction, feral animals, and climate change. I congratulate the Helmeted Honeyeater and Leadbeater’s Possum Friends groups for their sustained efforts to support our native species.”

The species’ fate has inspired two internationally regarded musicians, composer Dr Jane Hammond and pianist Coady Green, with the support of the Australia Council of the Arts, to develop a new project inspired by the Helmeted Honeyeater. This work will be premiered at the Melbourne Recital Centre in May.

Volunteers with the Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater and Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum participate in revegetation works, habitat preservation, an indigenous plant nursery, new merchandise, fundraising and advocacy. Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum has also successfully run a case in the Federal Court against VicForests. An appeal will be heard in April.

**Media inquiries:**

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