

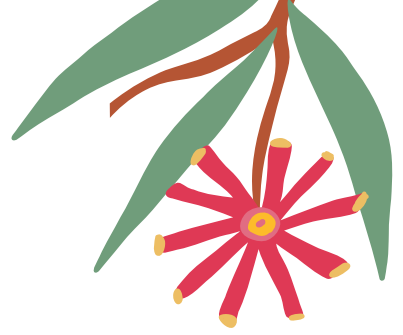
Nature play

in the City of Whittlesea











Your guide to the best local places
for kids to explore, imagine and play in nature.





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What is nature play?

Have you ever:

- climbed a tree
- rolled down hills
- skimmed a stone across water
- made mud pies
- built a cubby house from sticks
- hidden in grass
- jumped in a puddle?



If so, you've experienced nature play. Unstructured play outdoors nurtures children's wellbeing and development as they engage all their senses, build physical strength and coordination, and develop resilience through risk-taking and problem-solving.

Think of the balance required to cross a stream on stepping stones, or the planning and creativity involved in building a shelter from sticks. Time spent outside also helps children connect with the plants, animals and wild places around them, leading to an understanding and care for the environment. And beyond all of that, simply being outdoors lifts mood and decreases stress.

The City of Whittlesea has over 80 conservation reserves. In this booklet, we've highlighted some of the best reserves for nature play, along with activity ideas inspired by the unique features of each site. We hope these places become favourites for your own nature play adventures.



What to bring

Children will make nature play anywhere, whether they are jumping in puddles, watching ants or throwing stones into a pond. The beauty of nature play is that it doesn't need equipment or rules – it's using whatever nature provides mixed with your own imagination. However, some 'exploration extras' can add to the adventure and spark new activity ideas.

Exploration extras

Magnifying glass

This simple tool turns tiny insects or leaves into something fascinating. Not to mention that you'll feel like a nature detective!

String

A length of string is endlessly useful. It allows you to easily build creations like a nature mobile or a tiny raft to float down a stream.

Container

Perfect for collecting treasures, storing interesting finds, or mixing up a "potion" from ingredients you find.

Pencils, crayons and paper

Good for drawing animals you see, making rubbings of leaves or bark, or for children to create their own maps.

Rubbish bag and gloves

Bring a bag and gloves to take your own rubbish home – and to pick up any you spot along the way. Many children love joining in cleanups; it gives them a sense of pride and purpose while reinforcing the important habit of leaving natural places better than you found them.

Preparing for the weather

Nature play can happen year-round. No matter what the weather brings, there's something you can do in nature. Just make sure you're prepared for different weather conditions.

Rain and cold

Children naturally gravitate to rain, puddles, and all the excitement that comes with wet weather. After rainfall, the world comes alive – birds hunt for worms, snails appear, and the soft, damp ground is perfect for making mud pies. Let them get wet and muddy, just pack a raincoat (or a waterproof puddlesuit), warm layers, gumboots, and a spare change of clothes.

Heat

Pack a sun hat, water, and sunscreen, and choose a spot with plenty of shade – trees or areas near water are ideal. Head out early in the morning when it is cooler.

Wind

Seek out a sheltered spot where hills or trees soften the breeze. Alternatively head to an open or elevated place to feel the full force of nature's power and enjoy flying a kite.





How to use this booklet

We've included the best Council-owned reserves for nature play within the City of Whittlesea. Reserves are listed by suburb, with a special section for the newest and largest reserve spanning multiple suburbs, bunjil nganga Parkland Quarry Hills.

Each nature play location comes with star ratings to help you quickly spot the features that matter most to you for your next adventure.

Nature Play Location Ratings

The nature play locations are rated from five stars (highest rating) to zero stars (lowest rating).



Nature Play Location categories

Parking: A higher car parking rating means there is a designated parking lot, while a lower parking rating will have on-street parking.

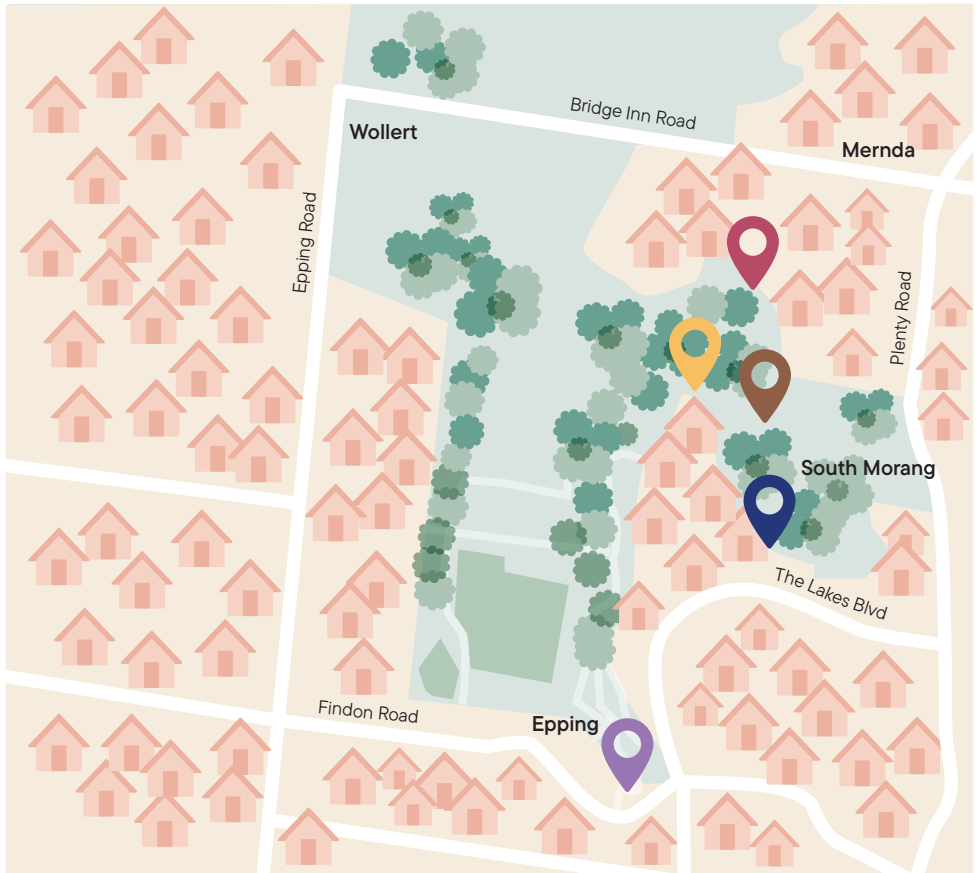
Accessibility: A higher accessibility rating means the place has a sealed pathway and flat terrain. A lower rating is for sites with unsealed or no walking tracks and/or steep slopes.






Wilderness: A higher wilderness rating means the location feels like you are in the bush, far from a built-up human environment. A lower rating means that the location feels closer to a suburban setting.


Facilities: A higher facility rating means the location will have facilities such as public toilets, water taps, benches, seating, BBQ's or recreation facilities such as a playground or oval. A lower facility rating is the absence of these.

bunjil nganga Parkland Quarry Hills

bunjil nganga Parkland Quarry Hills spans the hilltops of Mernda, Wollert, Epping and South Morang and covers 1,100 hectares, making it by far the largest parkland in the municipality. Meaning ‘Eagle view’ and pronounced ‘BUN-jil NANG-ga’, the parkland offers incredible views of the Great Dividing Range, Mount Macedon and Melbourne City and unrivalled opportunities for nature experiences through play, exploration and hiking along the connected trails.



Key:  Foothills Park  Atrium Reserve  Granite Hills
 Granite Hills Community Park and Aboriginal Gathering Place  Mortar Ridge



There are five main locations within bunjil nganga Parkland Quarry Hills that are particularly good for nature play:

- Foothills Park, Epping
- Atrium Reserve, South Morang
- Granite Hills, South Morang
- Granite Hills Community Park and Aboriginal Gathering Place, Mernda
- Mortar Ridge, Mernda

Foothills Park, Epping



This lovely reserve offers so much variety. The walking track called The Lakes Boulevard running parallel to Hendersons Drain is sealed and flat, taking you through shady stands of native trees and around the lake. Spot the Purple Swamp Hens and Swans, build a tiny boat from the reeds and look for kangaroos resting in the shade of the River Red Gums. Take the steep gravel track near the playground and BBQ facilities up the hill and enjoy a generous view of the city and South Morang. Lie in the grass and watch the clouds roll by, come in spring and be awed by a sea of purple chocolate lilies and other wildflowers.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

On-street parking near 48 McCabe Drive, Epping.

Accessibility ★★★★★

The flat walking track around the lake is suitable for all abilities while the gravel track up the hill is for those with no mobility issues.

Wilderness ★★★★★

Some pockets here feel wild, although in most places there are views of houses and streets.

Facilities ★★★★★

Playground, BBQ and seats.

Atrium Reserve, South Morang

Walk through the open gate and follow the gravel track, taking in the wide skyline and open grasslands as you go. Beside the track, you'll find an almost-horizontal acacia tree, perfect for small children to practise easy climbing and balancing. You can play in the grassy area near the entrance or continue up the hill. If you follow the trail for about 1 km you'll reach the Aboriginal Gathering Place. Although for a shorter adventure on this trail, wander through younger stands of trees and pause beside some of the ancient ones. Turn your walk into a treasure hunt by following animal tracks and collecting nature's small wonders: feathers, colourful leaves, interesting stones, bones, seed pods and cocoons.



Key: ● Parking ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

On-street parking near 29 The Atrium, South Morang.

Accessibility ★☆☆☆☆

Unsealed tracks and some slope.

Wilderness ★★★★★

It feels wild here, with little visuals or noise coming from nearby houses and streets.

Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

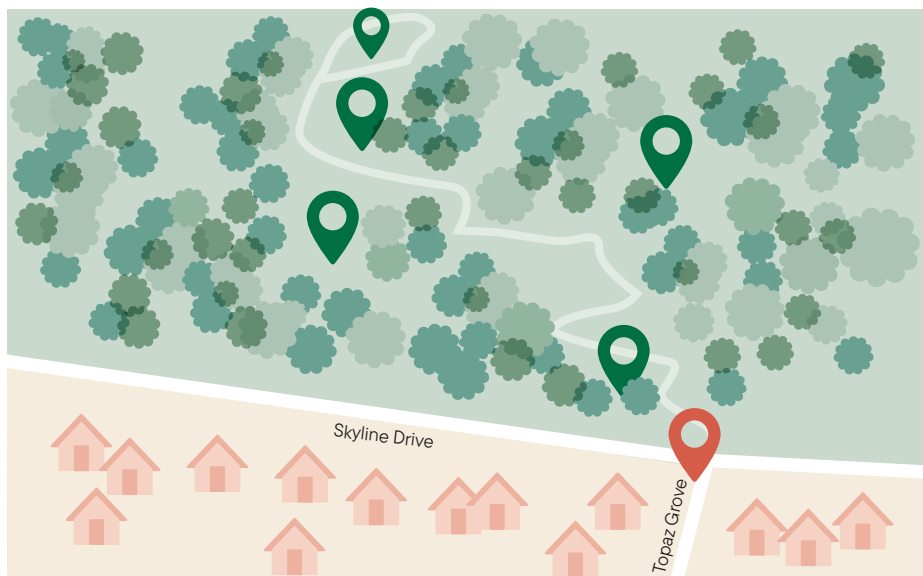
Only a walking trail is provided, no additional facilities.



Granite Hills, South Morang



The walking trail begins at the corner of Topaz Grove and Skyline Drive, climbing steeply along a gravel track to a summit where sweeping views make the effort well worthwhile. Step off the main track to climb over granite boulders, build cubby houses, or search for the old pine trees. Let your creativity run wild by making nature art from any interesting sticks, stones or leaves that you discover, using sticky wattle sap as your glue. Bring binoculars if you have them. This reserve is one of the best birdwatching spots in the municipality, and it's also common to spot echidnas, wombats, and kangaroos as you wander.



Key: ● Parking ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

On-street parking near the corner of Topaz Grove and Skyline Drive, South Morang.

Accessibility ★☆☆☆☆

A steep slope on a gravel track makes this suitable only for those with no mobility issues.

Wilderness ★★★★★

It feels wild here, with little visuals or noise coming from nearby houses and streets.

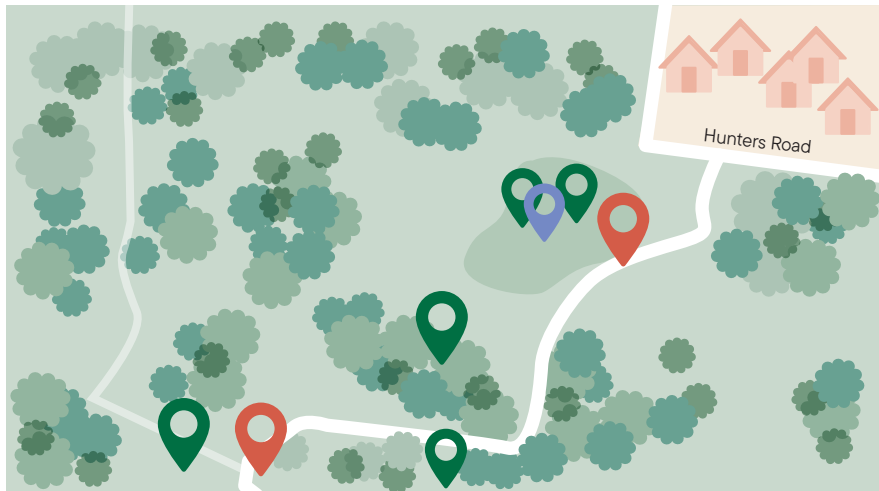
Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

Only a walking trail is provided, no additional facilities.



Granite Hills Community Park

Granite Hills Community Park is a standout destination with a nature-inspired playground featuring water play, sand, climbing structures, and natural elements throughout. Two ponds amongst the playground attract waterbirds, frogs, and dragonflies and the boardwalk over the lower pond allows you to get close to the water. In the stand of trees between the playground and the Aboriginal Gathering Place, follow animal tracks, balance on logs and rocks, and look for kangaroos and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. Climb the rocks around the Gathering Place and enjoy the views from the hilltop lookout.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

Dedicated car parking spaces at the playground and the Aboriginal Gathering place.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Around the playground and Aboriginal Gathering Place building is suitable for people of all abilities, while the bushland in between is for those with no mobility issues.

Wilderness ★★★★★☆

Some pockets here feel wild, in other parts there are roads and large infrastructure.

Facilities ★★★★★★

Dedicated car parking, public toilets, BBQ, seating, water taps and a large playground.

Mortar Ridge, Mernda



Walk through the gate and follow the gravel vehicle track, with the new playground and facilities on your left. About 200 metres along you'll spot an open grassy hill on your left. This hill alone can keep you busy for hours. Take in the stunning views of Mount Disappointment and the Kinglake Ranges to the north. Spread out a picnic, fly a kite, race to the hilltop, or see who can roll down the hill the fastest. It's also a beautiful place to watch the sunrise or sunset, and on a clear night ideal for stargazing. When you're ready to move on, continue along the gravel track. There are lots of rocks here, some of them make a great natural paint if you grind them. Keep an eye out for kangaroos and red-rumped parrots feeding in the grass. If you feel like more of a hike this trail stretches on for quite a distance.



Key:  Parking  Facilities  Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

On-street parking on Mortar Ridge (between Plugges Street and Command Road).

Accessibility ★★☆☆☆

Gravel track with some incline.

Wilderness ★★★★★

Some pockets here feel wild, although in most places there are views of houses and streets.

Facilities ★★★★★

Under construction as at March 2026, will include public toilets, parking and a playground.





Laurimar Creek Conservation Reserve

Park at Doreen United Soccer Club. Facilities include ovals, BBQ's, drinking water and a dirt bike track with jumps. Head to the Laurimar drain lake – you'll see an ancient River Red Gum, many water birds and you may hear frogs calling. Closer to Braford Drive there's a designated nature play area very close to the Laurimar Creek Reserve Playground. It has many old logs for climbing and balancing on and tanbark to keep the ground comfortable. Dig up the tanbark and see what insects you can find – even better to do this with a magnifying glass in hand.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

At Doreen United Soccer Club, Painted Hills Road, Doreen.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Paths near the soccer club are sealed and flat, however paths closer to the dedicated nature play area are unsealed and not very wide.

Wilderness ★★★★★☆

Some pockets here feel wild, although in most places there are views of houses and streets.

Facilities ★★★★★☆

Walking trail, ovals, BBQ, drinking water, dirt bike tracks and jumps.



Composites Conservation Reserve

Located beside Plenty Gorge Park, this reserve offers a range of nature-play adventures. Wander among towering River Red Gums, explore the winding creek, and keep an eye out for a mob of kangaroos. Park at Terrazzo Crescent and head to the creek or ponds to make mud pies or enjoy the open grasslands - perfect for flying a kite or making daisy chains. Climb over fallen trees and follow the bush tracks that lead into Plenty Gorge Park, where you can follow the river as it meanders through the valley.



Key: ● Parking ● Nature Play

Parking ★★☆☆☆

Street parking in Terrazzo Crescent, Doreen or Elation Boulevard, Doreen.

Accessibility ★★☆☆☆

Unsealed path with slope in sections.

Wilderness ★★★☆☆

Some pockets here feel wild, in other parts there are views of houses and streets.

Facilities ★★☆☆☆

Playground, water taps and picnic table near Elation Boulevard.

Mernda Villages Conservation Reserve

With plenty of parking at the Mernda Adventure Playground, you'll also find public toilets, picnic and BBQ facilities, and occasionally a visiting coffee van. Step into the reserve and follow the creek — especially magical after rain. Wander beneath towering River Red Gums, watch for birds and mammals sheltering in the hollows, and enjoy the burst of native wildflowers and grasses in spring. Continue down to the lake and explore around the boardwalk. Sail leaf boats, throw sticks into the water and watch the ripples, and try making a seed shooter from plantain grass heads — whose will fly the furthest?



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

At Mernda Adventure Playground, off Mernda Village Drive.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Unsealed tracks in the conservation reserve, but sealed, flat walking tracks around the lake.

Wilderness ★★★★★☆

Some pockets here feel wild, other parts are close to busy roads and playground infrastructure.

Facilities ★★★★★☆

Designated parking, playground, BBQ, seating, public toilet.

Woodland Waters Conservation Reserve

Park at the Waterview Recreation Reserve carpark and cross Waterview Drive to enter the reserve. Follow the main track or wander off into the open woodland. In the wetter months, a small pond appears just off the main track; pause here and you might spot tadpoles. Along the main path, look for the raised platform — perfect for an impromptu stage play or to stretch out with a ball of string and create a nature mobile from any treasures you've collected. The wide stretches of woodland and towering River Red Gums make this a brilliant place for imaginative exploration.



Key: ● Parking ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

Waterview Recreation Reserve carpark, cnr Waterview Drive and Parisel Circuit, Mernda.

Accessibility ★★☆☆☆

Unsealed path with slope in sections.

Wilderness ★★★★★

Some pockets here feel wild, others are in close proximity to the roads and houses.

Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

Only a walking trail is provided, no additional facilities.



Allendale Park Conservation Area

Nature play opportunities abound - explore the local rabbit dens, attempt to scale the retaining wall or perform a play on the platform on the top of the hill. Scattered throughout the reserve are ancient River Red Gums. These giants take more than a century to form the deep hollows that birds and mammals need for their nests. Look for hollows close to the ground and create a tiny fairy home, or craft a leaf bracelet using leaves and sticks. Wander the entire reserve and then draw your own map, marking favourite spots, special landmarks and secret discoveries.



Key:  Parking  Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

Street parking near 24 Suffolk Place, in the carpark behind Bluestone Restaurant, or on Steadman Way and Pine Park Drive.

Accessibility ★★☆☆☆

Unsealed path with slope in sections.

Wilderness ★★☆☆☆

While ancient River Red Gums abound in this reserve, there is nearly always a visual or sound contact with neighbouring houses and roads.

Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

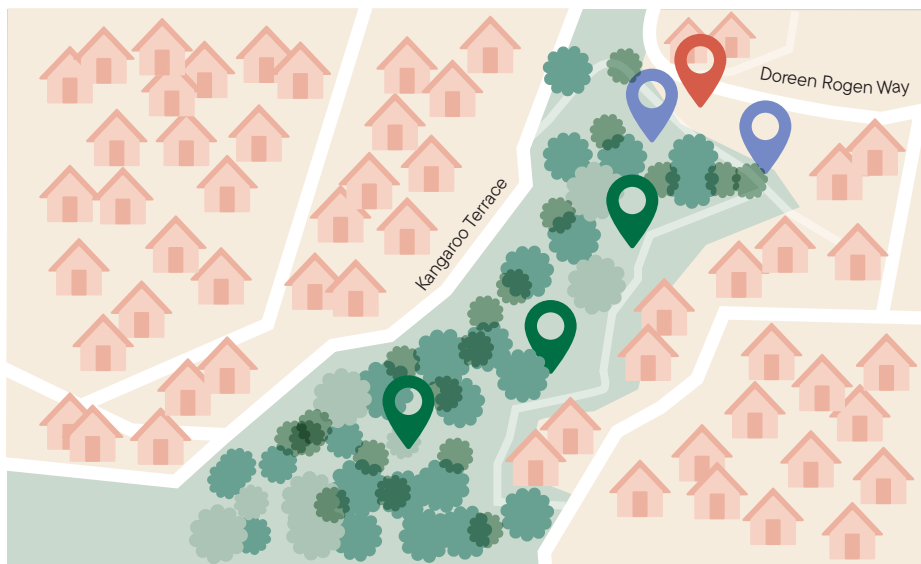
Only a walking trail is provided, no additional facilities.





Riverside Reserve

Riverside Reserve is a peaceful bush gully that joins Plenty Gorge Parklands. Start at the Riverside Community Activity Centre carpark where you'll find many facilities including a playground, toilets, BBQ and sheltered seating areas. Sealed tracks make it perfect for riding your bike or scooter. Head south down the track and try your luck in spotting the local Tawny Frogmouths. Go off the track and you'll find plenty of places to explore and build a cubby house from fallen branches, look for animal tracks and scats, play hide and seek and climb trees. For a longer adventure, continue south along the track for about 1km until you reach the Plenty River and the expansive Plenty Gorge Parklands.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

Riverside Community Activity Centre, 8 Doreen Rogen Way, South Morang.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Sealed flat areas around the Riverside Community Activity Centre. Becomes steep as you enter the bushland.

Wilderness ★★★★★☆

Some pockets here feel wild, others are in close proximity to houses.

Facilities ★★★★★☆

Playground, public toilets, netball and basketball courts, gym equipment, BBQ, sheltered seating, drinking water.





Epping North Conservation Reserve

Take a wander among the ancient River Red Gums — some 300 to 400 years old — where birds and mammals make their homes. Imagine everything that these giants have witnessed over the centuries. Follow the flat walking track around the reserve or step off-trail to explore the open woodland. You might spot the resident mob of kangaroos resting in the shade. There's plenty for creative play too: decorate a pet rock, balance along fallen logs, use string to make a nature mobile, or build a fort on the hilltop.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★☆☆☆

At Epping Stadium off Harvest Home Road, or near 18 Vilcins Views, Epping.

Accessibility ★★☆☆☆

Walking trail is mainly flat and sealed in most sections.

Wilderness ★★☆☆☆

Some pockets here feel wild, others are in close proximity to houses and streets.

Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

Walking trail, public toilet facilities available when Epping Stadium open.

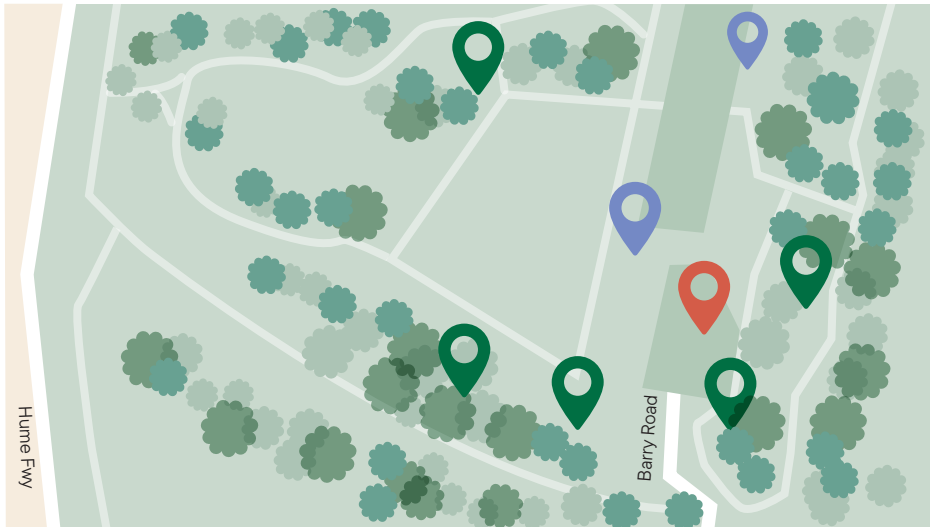




Whittlesea Public Gardens



This park offers impressive amenities, and you could easily spend hours between the playground, the 'learn-to-ride' cycling area (Children learn to ride program | City of Whittlesea) and the various sports facilities. Beyond the built features, the reserve spans 14.7 hectares of open grassland, conservation zones, and wetlands. Keep an eye out for wetland birds, frogs, and the resident kangaroos. Dense pockets of native plantings make perfect spots for creative nature play — bring a magnifying glass and see what tiny worlds you can uncover. Build stick creatures, collect nature treasures, and create your own mini museum display. On the grassy areas, lie on your belly and pretend you're a lizard — what does the world look like from down in the grass?



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

Parking facility at 158 Barry Road, Lalor.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Walking trail is flat and sealed in some sections, unsealed in most.

Wilderness ★★☆☆☆☆

While there are pockets of trees and wetlands in this reserve, there is nearly always a visual or sound contact with neighbouring houses and roads.

Facilities ★★★★★★

Playground, public toilets with accessible toilets, BBQ, basketball ring, off-leash dog park, children's 'learn to ride' cycling park, walking and bike tracks and a skate park.



VR Michael Reserve

This well-loved reserve offers a playground, easy parking, and public toilets—and if you cross Deveny Road, you'll find a spot to grab a coffee and snacks. Scattered pockets of trees and shrubs make perfect spaces for nature play. Find a Y-shaped stick and weave grasses, leaves, or bark to create natural art. Climb a tree, watch ants busily at work, or lie back in the grass for a dash of cloud spotting – what shapes do you see? Bring crayons and paper to make leaf and bark rubbings from the interesting textures you discover along the way.



Key: ● Parking ● Facilities ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★☆

Parking facility at 479 High Street, Lalor.

Accessibility ★★★★★☆

Walking trail is flat in most sections, but unsealed.

Wilderness ★☆☆☆☆☆

There is nearly always a visual or sound contact with neighbouring houses and roads.

Facilities ★★★★★☆

Public toilets, playground, BBQ.

Janefield Wetland

Enjoy a wander through the Janefield Wetland, tucked just behind Uni Hill in Bundoora. Head along the boardwalk and look down into the reeds and water below. Toss a stick or stone and listen for the plop, then lean quietly over the edge to spot tadpoles, fish, or waterbugs going about their day. Channel your inner engineer by crafting a tiny boat from reeds, bark, or leaves and seeing if it floats. Bring a bike or scooter to explore further south, and if you're feeling adventurous, follow a kangaroo track into the Plenty Gorge Parklands for even more of a bush experience.



Key: ● Parking ● Nature Play

Parking ★★★★★

Street parking near 43W Janefield Drive, Bundoora.

Accessibility ★★★★★

Paths here are wide and mostly sealed.

Wilderness ★★☆☆☆

Although a visit to this reserve includes a walk amongst wetlands, there is nearly always a visual or sound contact with neighbouring houses and roads.

Facilities ★☆☆☆☆

Only a walking trail is provided, no additional facilities.





Activities to try

Here are some tried and tested activity ideas that you can do in any nature place that you visit.

Make a nature mandala

This is a creative and calming project that the whole family can do together.

1. Take a walk in nature and collect items that catch your eye, such as twigs, leaves, seedpods, stones, rocks, flowers, grasses. Look for a variety of shapes, sizes, textures and colours.
2. Find a flat surface to work on – it could be a grassy or dirt patch, or concrete.
3. Choose one item to be at the centre of your mandala – it could be a large rock or a small leaf.
4. Now make a pattern around the centre piece with the items you've collected. You may make a spiral shape, or lines coming out of the centre. It might follow a pattern (such as stone, green leaf, stone, yellow leaf) or be quite random. The options are endless.
5. A finished mandala shape is typically circular, but feel free to experiment with making other shapes.



Make a nature mobile

Hang your favourite nature objects from a mobile and take it home. These make a lovely gift.

What you'll need: string, scissors, nature objects and sticks.

1. Go on a nature walk and collect interesting items you find along the way. These may include gumnuts, seedpods, feathers and leaves.
2. Find 1 long stick that you can hang your items from, or 2 sticks that you can tie together with string in a cross shape.
3. Tie a longer piece of string to each end of the branch and join them at the top to form a loop. This is how you'll hang your mobile.
4. Cut your hanging strings and attach them to the stick. Varying lengths can look nice.
5. Tie your nature objects onto the string. Mix heavier and lighter items so the mobile hangs evenly.



How to care for these places

Conservation reserves provide precious habitat for plants and animals who live amongst us in the suburbs. Leave plants, logs, and rocks where they are as they're often essential homes or hiding places for wildlife. As you explore, aim to leave the area even better than you found it by taking your rubbish home and picking up any litter you spot along the way.

Stay in touch

We hope to see you out and about at these reserves within our municipality and enjoying all that nature play has to offer.

City of Whittlesea puts on lots of events and programs throughout the year. Scan the QR code below to sign up to the Living Green Newsletter and stay informed of free, family-friendly environment-focused events or contact us via email at [✉ sustainability.planning@whittlesea.vic.gov.au](mailto:sustainability.planning@whittlesea.vic.gov.au)



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