

Creating natural resource management partnerships and programs that deliver lasting change



## Why the trees, birds, aquatic understorey need more water

As an internationally important wetland, Gunbower Forest is a special place and valued for its recreational, social, cultural, and environmental benefits.

Before regulation, water flowed onto Gunbower Forest in 70 per cent of years. Over the past 20 years it has only been half that, which means there is still a major deficit so we're doing what we can to make up ground.

The North Central CMA in partnership with local community members, Traditional Owners and the Victorian Environmental

Water Holder are proposing to deliver water for the environment to less than 23 per cent of the floodplain from mid-June.

But why are we proposing it after such a big flood? We asked ourselves the same question when writing this year's Seasonal Watering Proposal for the forest.

We've spoken extensively to vegetation, bird, and fish ecologists, and considered monitoring reports about waterbird breeding in the region and the likely scenarios for the forest and the birds if we do or don't water.

## Why water this year?

Locking in the ecological gains from last year's floods makes sense.

Waterbird numbers across the Murray Darling Basin have been at very low levels for the past three decades, despite a number of wet years with significant breeding events. Waterbird chicks are simply not surviving to build the population numbers back up.

We have an opportunity for the first time in Gunbower Forest to ensure the significant waterbird breeding that occurred in our region makes a difference by providing a follow-up flow to sections of the floodplain. The floodplain and wetlands of Gunbower Forest will provide a place for juvenile birds to roost and feed, a place for adult birds to build condition after breeding and therefore survive to adulthood.

Climate change and river regulation has removed the small



and medium flood events. This results in long dry periods between major floods. The understorey is mostly perennial, so we should see sedges and rushes between the big floods which protect the soil and provide food and habitat for all the critters. However, the long dry periods mean the perennial species are acting more like annual species and drying right back leaving just leaf litter, the soil exposed and nowhere for the critters.



The Bureau of Meteorology is predicting a drier than average outlook. Without environmental water the understorey will dry back, the young waterbirds won't survive to add to the population and the red gums won't hold onto their new canopy.

The benefits of the natural flood will vanish within a season. That's why the right amount of water at the right time of the year, when we can, is important.

## Wetlands and lakes across the region have enough water for waterbirds, so why water Gunbower Forest?

Thankfully there is plenty of water in our region's lakes and wetlands to help thousands of waterbirds survive the coming months, but different species need different habitat. There are some waterbirds, such as the great egret, that prefer Gunbower Forest's floodplain habitat.

Monitoring during spring 2022 to autumn this year, recorded more than 1,000 juvenile waterbirds at Gunbower Forest alone, including little pied cormorants, nankeen night herons, Australasian darters, ducks, swans, herons, grebes, and sea eagles.



Overall, 15,000 birds were recorded during 69 surveys, including 41 species of waterbirds, 17 of which are rare or endangered. 21 of the wetland bird species were observed breeding.

Waterbirds need foraging sites and food sources nearby to increase their chances of survival and water for the environment can provide the right conditions for them to stay and thrive. Gunbower Forest can also provide better habitat for some species than open-water lakes.

## Come say hi

We'll be at the Cohuna Farmers' Market on Sunday 28 May from 9am to 11am to talk to the local community about the proposed watering. Look for the North Central CMA marquee. See you there!