

Bringing back the bittern

It's a bird that is a key part of Australia's culture and mythology, but most people don't even know what it looks like. The Australasian bittern is also known as the Bunyip Bird, its mating call mistaken for the mythical creature the Wemba Wemba Traditional Owners and European settlers feared lived on the banks of creeks, rivers and wetlands.



A rare close-up of a bittern (Photo: Matt Herring, Murray Wildlife)

Unfortunately, the Australasian bittern numbers aren't as great as they once were, something the North Central CMA is looking to change.

"Under the Federal Government's National Landcare Program, we have attracted funding for five years to try to Bring Back the Bittern," North Central CMA Project Manager Amy Russell said.

"And we want the communities' help to do it."

There are now only about 2,000 Australasian bitterns left in the world, and at the last count about 40 of them were in the North Central CMA area.

"Landscape change since European occupation, introduced predators and climate change have decimated the bittern population," Ms Russell said.

"We have managed water for the environment at some of the internationally-recognised Kerang Wetlands, and in 2017 we counted at least 16 at one time at Lake Cullen.

"The aim of this project is to find suitable wetlands to create the environment they need to survive and thrive."

However, the CMA is not just looking at public places to create the right habitat for the birds. There are over 1,500 wetlands on the Loddon Plains and more than half of these on private property. This is the perfect opportunity to work with the local community.

"Those who have a wetland on their property, no matter how small, are usually aware of it. It could be a small depression, or a place that stays too wet for too long.



A bittern in flight (Photo: NCCMA)

"This project could be a great chance to turn a small piece of private land into bittern-friendly habitat, and it's an opportunity for the local community to be involved in a project that is bringing back one of our most cherished birds."

If you are interested in finding out more, please contact Ms Russell on 03 5448 7124 or amy.russell@nccma.vic.gov.au

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NORTH CENTRAL
Catchment Management Authority
Connecting Rivers, Landscapes, People

COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

Edition 23: Autumn 2019

Welcome to the 23rd edition of the Flooding for Life community newsletter. This edition features the latest fish monitoring results, water for the environment top-up at Reedy Lagoon, the *Bringing back the Bittern* project.

How are our native fish tracking?

"Fish surveys have been undertaken annually in the Gunbower system since 2009, and our fish ecologists are currently surveying the system again this year," North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) Project Officer Will Honybun said.

"The aim is to monitor the condition of fish populations over time to see how the fish are tracking. We want to see healthy fish populations in the area and to measure the benefits of all the work that's been done over the years to support native fish populations, such as introducing minimum low flows in the creek and installing fish screens.



Juvenile Murray cod found at Gunbower Island during the recent fish monitoring (Photo: Chris Bloink)

"Early results from this survey are looking good and some records from previous monitoring have even been broken," Will said. "At one site in Gunbower Creek we have recorded the highest number of young-of-year Murray cod out of any year since 2009. At another site we found the most Murray cod recorded at any site in a given year. That's great news for our fish as well as for anglers.

"Genetic analysis is also being undertaken to understand the proportion of fish that have been stocked by fisheries compared to those that have bred in the stream system. While the long-term aim is for a healthy, self-sustaining native fish population, providing habitat and food for the fish that are present is a good thing.

Stay tuned for more monitoring results and to see if any more records are broken this year!

CONTACT

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The North Central Catchment Management Authority acknowledges Aboriginal Traditional Owners within the region, their rich culture and spiritual connection to Country. We also recognise and acknowledge the contribution and interest of Aboriginal people and organisations in land and natural resource management.



Protecting the gem in the crown: Reedy Lagoon

Reedy Lagoon is an oasis for more than just the endangered plants and animals that rely on it to survive. It's a place loved by the local community and popular with tourists. It's important to Traditional Owners and, on any given day, really is spectacular.

"Reedy is one of our magic little spots in the forest that's valued by locals and visitors," local dairy farmer and Gunbower Island Community Reference Group member Jodie Hay said.

And in dry times, it becomes even more important.

"It is one of the very few permanent wetlands in the mid Murray region that is still in good condition", Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) Chairperson Denis Flett said.

"It was one of the only wetlands to receive water during the Millennium Drought and it has been managed with water for the environment for the past 15 years.



Watering Reedy Lagoon provides critical drought refuge in dry times (Photo: NCCMA)

This year, the wetland has drawn down quickly on the back of one of the hottest summers on record, and it is time for a drink.

It will be topped-up from late May to June, outside of the irrigation season. At least 600 megalitres will be needed to ensure it stays healthy. This top-up will provide important refuge for waterbirds, turtles, emus, kangaroos and all sorts of critters that inhabit the forest.

The regulator is fitted with a carp screen, which stops adult carp entering the wetland in an effort to reduce impacts from carp on the aquatic plants.

The VEWB is currently reviewing plans for 2019-20 to give a much-needed drink to two other semi-permanent wetlands in Gunbower Forest to ensure that, if dry conditions continue, enough high-quality habitat is available to support waterbirds and other wetland-dependent animals.

Helping chicks leave the nest for success

The chicks have hatched and left the nest...but will they make it to adulthood?

According to one of Australia's most renowned waterbird researchers Professor Richard Kingsford, waterbird numbers in the Murray-Darling Basin have plummeted more than 70% since the 1980s.

New research from the CSIRO suggests that overwintering habitat plays a crucial role in supporting juvenile waterbirds to reach adulthood, as Senior Research Scientist Dr Heather McGinness explains.



A juvenile little pied cormorant spotted in Long Lagoon where it hatched after watering in 2018 (Photo: NCCMA).

"After juvenile waterbirds leave the nesting area, they are still learning to take care of themselves, including how to forage for food, what to eat, what to avoid and where and when to take shelter. They go from receiving regular feeds from their parents, to having to find their own food and shelter. They are also growing, putting on weight, and using lots of energy doing much more flying than they had before.

"So, they need a lot of food from the time they leave the nesting site until they become breeding adults at about three years old. This is especially in the first few stressful months of their independent life, which is generally the late summer, autumn and winter following their spring hatching," Dr McGinness said.

"For example, we estimate that a single royal spoonbill juvenile that is 50 days old needs to eat 1,800 KJ per day. That's between four to six 20-gram yabbies.

"In addition, the adults who were breeding over summer need to regain condition and put the weight back on that they lost when raising their chicks."

While waterbird numbers in the Basin improved following the 'natural' (unregulated) floods in recent years, providing high-quality habitat with adequate food is now critical during these dry conditions. This will help our juvenile birds to reach adulthood and breeding age, so we can avoid a rapid decline in our waterbird community in the future.



Colonial waterbird nests used for breeding in 2018 (Photo: NCCMA).

A fungus identification challenge!

How well do you know your fungi?

Kate Bennetts (vegetation ecologist) along with Barapa Barapa Traditional Owners recently came across a large patch of these dinner-plate sized fungi in Guttrum Forest.

If you can identify the fungus species, please email the name and any other information to sophia.piscitelli@nccma.vic.gov.au

