WINTON WETLANDS AUTUMN-WINTER 2023 NEWS

WE'RE IN THE MOVIES!

ABC TV News coverage of Growling Grass Frog translocation

YouTube

There's so much going on at Winton Wetlands that it can be hard to keep up, even when you're working here.

To make it easier, we're trying to capture more of what goes on in video form and make it available on YouTube and on our website.

We can't capture every last thing that happens but over time we'll do our best to provide at least a good representative sample of good stuff that's happening.

Nothing slick—not much music and definitely no dancing! For the most part, it's unrehearsed, unvarnished video snippets just showing work-in-progress here.

We particularly want to emphasise activities that give opportunities for people to get involved in some way. Go to these links for a sampling of three recent activities here at the wetlands. And do check into our YouTube channel from time to time for more.

Launch of Taskforce Growler—inviting community involvement in important work under way to bring back native Growling Grass Frogs to Winton Wetlands, after many years of absence. This work will in turn help to bring back other species:

Return of the first pygmy perch and purple spotted gudgeon (threatened native fish) to the waters of Winton Wetlands after many years:

Regular surveying of fish and other aquatic life to keep track of the volume, health and diversity of aquatic life in the waters of the wetlands:

SCAN FOR VIDEO LINK

TURNING BACK EXTINCTIONS

Expert groups concerned with water management, fish conservation and ecological renewal came together on World Wetlands Day — February 2 — to return a key species of native fish to Winton Wetlands.

Supplies of the Southern Purple Spotted Gudgeon, critically endangered in Victoria, were released back into the waters of Winton Wetlands in a co-operative activity involving Winton Wetlands Committee of Management, North Central and Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authorities, and groups interested in native fish breeding.

This activity followed similar release activity the previous month involving Southern Pygmy Perch, another native fish once common in and around Winton Wetlands but made locally extinct in recent decades.

The push to bring back native fish previously lost to Winton Wetlands and adjacent areas is part of a three-state effort being funded through the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

The February release of approximately 300 gudgeon, and around 250 more Pygmy Perch following an initial 750 back in January, making 1000 in total, were in line with the theme of this year's World Wetlands Day: 'It's Time for Wetland Restoration'. Organisations around the world marked the annual event in a range of different ways.

"Here in Australia we thought one of the best ways Winton Wetlands could mark World Wetlands Day was to get on with the release of these important native fish," Restoration Scientist Lance Lloyd says.

Successful partnerships

Mr Lloyd says the activity has involved cooperation not just between Winton Wetlands and catchment management authorities, but also with groups including Native Fish Australia, Australia New Guinea Fishes Association, fish breeder Middle Creek Farm, and Aquasave-NGT, part of Nature Glenelg Trust, an environmental group based in South Australia. Captive breeding activity has been supported by the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action DEECA.

"We're seeing an unprecedented level of cooperation and partnership happening across three States, the Federal Government and expert groups of various kinds, all linked by a common interest in achieving a return to healthier waterways and more diverse and balanced ecosystems.

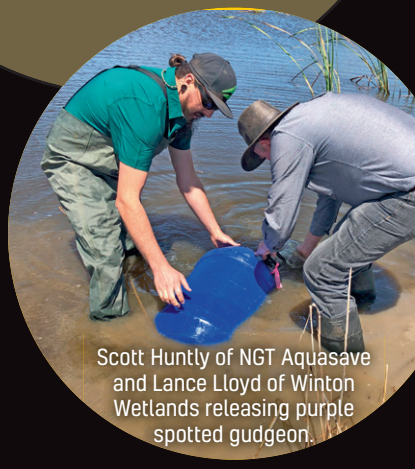
"This re-introduction activity returns vital ecosystem functions back into the system. The native fish prey on smaller creatures in the water and in turn are prey for endangered birds and fish species. Healthy wetland habitats, including submerged aquatic plants, can protect enough of them to allow the broader wildlife population to thrive.

"It's something we can all begin to take some pride in. In effect, we're working to turn back extinctions. We'll all be watching closely and continuing to work together to monitor the progress from here."

Ecologists and field staff from several organisations returned native fish into the waters of Winton Wetlands.

The release of spotted gudgeon brings the total of nationally threatened species at Winton Wetlands to more than 15, with even more at a state level. Winton Wetlands' broader restoration program has three main elements:

- **Restoring the habitat of native species**
- **Eliminating threats to native plants and animals**
- **'Rewilding' species lost from the site that cannot easily re-colonise**



Scott Huntly of NGT Aquasave and Lance Lloyd of Winton Wetlands releasing purple spotted gudgeon.

Eutaxia plant.

"GROWTH SPURT" AFTER HEAVY RAINS

Winton Wetlands has been through what's been called an "ecological growth spurt" following heavy rains that lasted through Spring 2022 and into Summer, bringing consequences still being felt well into 2023.

Counting by staff and volunteers on the wetlands reserve showed wildlife populations, including reptiles and birds, looked very healthy in the face of the highest water levels recorded since 2016.

Inspections showed the Wetlands had also been highly effective in 'cleaning up' and delaying the flow-on of flood waters into the Broken River north of Benalla.

During the greatest flood period, the outflow channel from Winton Wetlands held back and slowed down the eventual release of excess water into the Broken River for several weeks, evening out water flows.

"We were also impressed by the quality of water flowing from the reserve into the Broken River," Restoration Manager Dr Lisa Farnsworth says. "Water coming out of the wetlands was looking very clear, showing the wetlands being quite effective in their natural role of filtering pollution and turbidity in the water as it passes through."

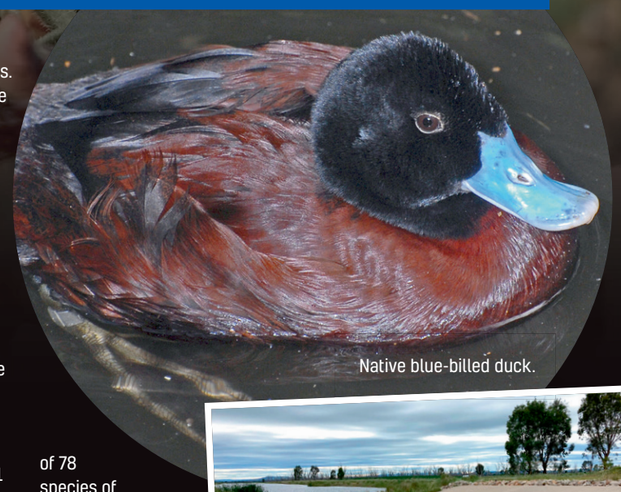
Reptile counting conducted in Spring last year revealed more than 500 creatures at specific search locations, including 372 frogs and 143 reptiles – both lizards and snakes. In total, 15 different species were spotted, the most common being the eastern large striped skink.

"We sighted more snakes than usual last Spring, and that's an indication that some of their natural habitat was disrupted by the higher water levels. Many of them were on the move seeking respite from the rising water. It will be interesting to see what Spring 2023 brings."

Bird counting conducted last Spring by volunteers from Bird Life Murray Goulburn revealed 81 species observed at 14 different observation sites. These included eight different duck species, 10 different raptor species including a Brown Goshawk, an endangered Grey-crowned Babbler, and 25 waterbird species.

Bird counters made only the second ever sighting of a White-bellied Cuckoo Shrike in an area of revegetated land. They were last seen at Winton Wetlands in 2014.

Further counting conducted in February 2023 brought sightings of 78 species of birds at 16 sites across the Reserve. Some of the highlights included Blue-billed Duck, Nankeen Night-Heron, Rainbow Bee-eater, Latham's Snipe and Little Grassbirds.



Native blue-billed duck.

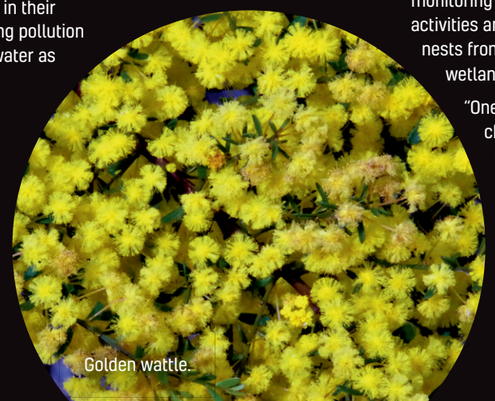
Water outlet overflow after heavy rains.

There is optimism about prospects for successful breeding of long-neck turtles on-site currently as well. Researchers from La Trobe University have been on-site monitoring turtle breeding activities and protection of turtle nests from fox predation in the wetlands.

"One of our greatest challenges in boosting the local turtle population is protecting the eggs and young hatchlings from introduced predators, especially foxes. We're working with researchers to test some new approaches to that during 2023."

Dr Farnsworth said there were critical connections between the different phases of life on the wetlands: each phase formed an important part of the overall cycle of life.

"The natural rise and fall of water levels allows the cycle of breeding and rebirth to continue in a healthy way, with each stage in that cycle being important. We've learned that every stage has a critical role to play. If the wetlands were aways full, or always empty, both would be equally unhealthy in ecological terms."



Golden wattle.

GROWLERS ARE GO!

The first Growling Grass Frogs have arrived back at Winton Wetlands after an absence of many years.

This iconic native species of frog has been missing from the wetlands since the time of the former Lake Mokoan, but with the recent granting of a Ministerial approval from the Federal Environment Minister the Hon Tanya Plibersek, the first 'new' batch of these frogs has been moved from an approved location near Bendigo managed by Coliban Water across to Winton Wetlands.

This first group was transferred overnight on Thursday, March 9, 2023, arriving bright and early to take up residence in a new storage and quarantine facility at Winton Wetlands on the morning of Friday, March 10.

It isn't common for organisations other than zoos to be permitted to undertake activity of this kind involving amphibians. The move has been subject to stringent procedures to ensure health and safety.

This controlled movement of frogs is known as 'translocation' rather than relocation, as the activity happens in a way that ensures plenty of the frogs remain in the original location too.

One of the greatest needs for the first new frog arrivals at Winton Wetlands – in the early stages at least – is to ensure they have a plentiful supply of food, including crickets, wood roaches and other bugs.

Community participation is being enlisted through an enthusiastic team known as 'Taskforce Growler'.

A growling grass frog located at Coliban Water in Bendigo, on the move to Winton Wetlands. Photo: Matt West

TASKFORCE GROWLER

Taskforce Growler is an alliance formed between interested members of the public, wetland scientists and land and water managers across the region, cooperating to achieve successful re-establishment of growlers in the region. Volunteers are already providing "grub for growlers" to help feed the frogs during their re-establishment phase.

According to restoration manager Dr Lisa Farnsworth, bringing back the growling grass frog – or 'growler' as it is affectionately known – will strike a major blow for promoting increased biodiversity in the region.

"Growlers are vulnerable in Victoria and have not been seen around Winton Wetlands since the time the wetlands were flooded to form Lake Mokoan many years ago," Dr Farnsworth says.

"The water quality and conditions provided by the lake were not conducive to the breeding cycle of growlers so they were lost to the area. Although the lake was decommissioned more than 10 years ago, the frogs haven't been able to return."

The loss of growlers is believed to have contributed to the loss of other native species in the area, particularly birds which once fed on these frogs.

"Growlers occupied a place in the local ecology which does not appear to be filled by any other frog species. Fortunately, growlers still survive in some other parts of Victoria, so we have been able to source some for relocation, under strict regulations.

LEADING THE WAY

"With backing from Taskforce Growler, we're hoping to be able to help lead the way for other amphibian 're-wilding' projects around Australia and beyond."

Taskforce Growler is offering various ways members of the public can make direct practical contributions to the success of the growler translocation and breeding activities, through volunteering and fundraising activities happening throughout 2023.

As well as the more serious side of wildlife conservation and restoration, Dr Farnsworth says Taskforce Growler was setting out to offer an element of fun as well – as can be seen from the campaign logo.

To register interest in joining Taskforce Growler, go to the Winton Wetlands website –

wintonwetlands.org.au/taskforce-growler/

AWARD FOR OUR TOP WINTON WETLANDS WATCHER!

On behalf of the restoration team at Winton Wetlands, our very own Dr Lisa Farnsworth has been given an Outstanding Service Award for dedication and contribution to the Estuary Watch and Water Watch program, which this year celebrates 30 years of citizen science activity involving waterways.

Waterwatch is an Australia-wide citizen science program that monitors water quality in rivers and streams. For more information about the Waterwatch program visit **www.vic.waterwatch.org.au**.

Its sister program, Estuary Watch, is a citizen science program that supports community members to actively participate in the monitoring of estuary health. (An estuary is where a river or stream reaches the sea and the waters mix.) You can find more about them at: **www.estuarywatch.org.au**

Estuary Watch and Waterwatch volunteers are passionate about their local environment and meet monthly to collect valuable data on the condition of their local waterways.

The twin programs were established in response to a need for better long-term data on the condition of Victoria's waterways and estuaries and growing community interest in the issues involved.

Catchment management authorities across Victoria help to coordinate the work of Waterwatch and Estuary Watch volunteers.

Here at Winton Wetlands, water quality is monitored once a month at 12 different sites, with the help of dedicated volunteers. (And we're always looking for more of them! See separate article on volunteering in this edition.)

Dr Lisa Farnsworth shown here in presentation-mode at a community gathering.

Our award-winning Dr Lisa Farnsworth was proud to fly the Winton Wetlands flag at an award ceremony held in Bendigo in March.

ONE FISH, TWO FISH, RED FISH, BLUE FISH ...

Our field officers and ecologists do regular fish surveys to check on the number, variety and health of aquatic species in the many different ponds of Winton Wetlands.

There are 33 different wetland areas within the 8750 hectare Winton Wetlands reserve, and conditions can vary across these different areas. So, it's worth keeping regular tabs on how different species are doing in different locations.

One of the ongoing challenges is keeping out invasive species such as carp and other introduced species which put pressure on the survival of native species.

Shown here are (top photo, L to R) Restoration Manager Dr Lisa Farnsworth, field officer Claire Birch, and leading restoration scientist and aquatic ecologist Lance Lloyd conducting fish survey work in the Duck Pond area of Winton Wetlands in February 2023.

It's hands-on manual work, involving big buckets and water trays and lots of sloshing around through shallow ponds!

CALLING ALL CALENDAR GIRLS — AND BOYS

Who doesn't love a good picture of Winton Wetlands? There are so many great ones that have been taken.

And who doesn't love an attractive wall calendar to hang up at the start of each year?

It's time to bring these two together!

Next year we intend to offer a calendar showcasing some of the stunning landscape and wildlife of Winton Wetlands captured in our own photographs and perhaps also by some of the talented professionals and amateurs who regularly visit the wetlands to get snapping.

We never cease to be impressed by some of the beautiful imagery that visitors offer up to our Google profile page and other locations.

We think it would be a great idea to showcase some of these best pics of the wetlands in a fundraising calendar that will be sold—at a reasonable price of course—in our Hub & Café and made available for online sale too.

If you are interested in submitting one or more photos for consideration, please let us know here: ***info@wintonwetlands.org.au***

There are only 12 months in a year, of course, and there might be a great many photos showing similar scenes, so it's not going to be possible to use every photo that comes our way. But if you think you've got a truly outstanding image showing an aspect of Winton Wetlands that people would want to see, we'd love to hear from you.

Humorous calendar by Found Image Press - calendars.com

We can do much better than this!

If one of your photos is used, you'll get a free calendar and a café gift voucher. More importantly, your work will become part of the permanent record of the Winton Wetlands project!

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