

WINTON WETLANDS SUMMER 2023-24 NEWS

WE'RE NOW ON THE 'CITIZEN SCIENCE' MAP

A budding ecologist from St Josephs Chiltern Primary does some sampling.



Students from St Josephs Benalla with teacher and Winton Wetlands staff.

Winton Wetlands has featured for the first time in annual reporting of achievements in 'citizen science' toward the improvement of Victoria's waterways.

Estuary Watch Victoria and Water Watch Victoria has published its 2022-23 report which features two case studies involving Winton Wetlands: one involving water quality monitoring and the other bird monitoring, with particular reference to the wonderful survey work of BirdLife Murray Goulburn.

The report makes prominent mention of one of our most passionate volunteers, Di Cornish, who spoke of the satisfaction she derived from her contribution to water monitoring: "For water quality, we took samples all over the wetlands and tested for PH and clarity. It was interesting to see the difference in clarity as



Field ecologist Sarah Way (right) talks to students from St Josephs Chiltern.

the water levels at various sites changed. I also enjoyed visiting parts of the site that are not readily accessible to the public."

We've been delighted to see the work of people like Di and others receiving well-deserved recognition.

Di is pictured here on the day of the release of the first growling grass frogs into outdoor enclosures at Winton Wetlands.

In other good news, the Winton Wetlands team recently received an Outstanding Service Award in recognition of its outstanding contribution to the Water Watch and Estuary Watch programs. The award was gladly accepted on behalf of the team by Restoration Manager Dr Lisa Farnsworth.

SOME FUN FACTS

DID YOU KNOW...

... that important revegetation work at Winton Wetlands is being paid for by fines against local polluters, in a scheme supported by the Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA)?

... that **North Central Catchment Management Authority** and **Middle Creek Fish Farm**, with others, are working together to help make it possible to bring back native fish once lost to Winton Wetlands?

... that BirdLife Australia (via **BirdLife Murray Goulburn**) has been keeping track of important changes in bird population at Winton Wetlands in regular volunteer-led surveys for the past 10 years, and this continues in 2024?



An EPA Victoria pollution-busting patrol vehicle was on display.

... that **Turtles Australia** is working with university researchers from Latrobe University and Winton Wetlands to find better ways to protect turtles and their eggs from fox attacks?

... that **Taskforce Growler** is an alliance of community groups including **Swamps, Rivers & Ranges**, the **Gecko Clan** Landcare group, and others who are together making possible the return of iconic Growling Grass Frogs to Winton Wetlands and northern Victoria?

... that drone-tech supplier **AirSeed Technologies** is

delivering thousands of plant seed pods by air into hard-to-reach corners of Winton Wetlands, at no charge, with support from groups including **Goulburn Broken Indigenous Seedbank**?

These and other organisations - as well as fantastic individual volunteers - are helping make the restoration of Winton Wetlands possible, extending our capabilities far beyond what could be done by a small staff team on its own.

More info about these and other amazing supporters in future editions!



EPA Victoria's John Dahlenburg - left - and interim CEO Dennis O'Brien discuss fish and water quality issues.

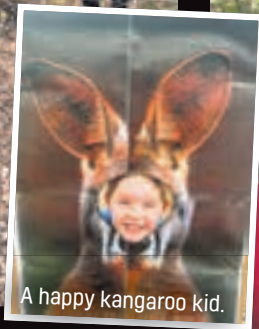


An AirSeed specialist seeding drone being put through its paces in June 2023.

WE HAD A WILD TIME!



Aquatic ecologist Lance Lloyd - right - took attendees for an educational 'ramble in the reeds'.



A happy kangaroo kid.



Intrepid attendees made a trip out to the Duck Pond area to watch native spotted gudgeon fish being prepared for release.

The year 2023 ended with a bang for Winton Wetlands, with a series of events that came together to form our first-ever WILD WEEK.

Wild Week ran from 20-25 November, and featured:

- participation by schools in a fabulous creative art and garden-building project
- cooperation amongst local artists to pull together a major wetland-themed art exhibition
- a kids' photo competition
- release of the first-ever Winton Wetlands wall calendar, featuring stunning new photo imagery submitted by visitors to the wetlands
- an artist-in-residence presence at the wetlands, culminating in an exhibition of the artist Mark Dober's work that was launched at Benalla Art Gallery on Friday 24 November

- a big public open day on Saturday 25 November
- Saturday's WILD WEEK open day brought together a range of organisations that help make the work of Winton Wetlands possible by offering their staff and volunteer time, expertise and resources to further the restoration of the wetlands reserve.

This open day was an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge and thank our wonderful volunteers, who routinely make contributions that add significantly to the work done by the staff team to "keep the show on the road".

Importantly, WILD WEEK as a whole provided opportunities for story-telling too: about the work being done at our internationally significant ecological restoration project; about the people and organisations making progress possible; about the issues being faced along the way; and about the big challenges still ahead.

Winton Wetlands management not only has the task of maintaining and restoring a sensitive wetland eco-system on a grand scale - occupying some 8750 hectares - but also making sure that a broad range of people know what's going on.

Government departments and agencies, private and corporate benefactors, wetland scientists and land managers in many locations, volunteers,



Education officer Rowan Barrow - front left - reviewing stands at the Wild Week open day.



People gather for official speeches at Education Centre.

staff, neighbours, and helpers in many different shapes and sizes all need to know about the work going on, how it's being handled and the role they can play to support it.

As well as talking to them all, we need to make sure we're listening too!

WILD WEEK and the events around it provided a meeting place and a focal point for some of that information-sharing and discussion about the past year and beyond - and a chance to get together and do it in a fun way!

We were super-active on our social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram), we enjoyed excellent support from local

print and broadcast media telling stories of the wetlands throughout Wild Week, and our website was never busier as more people than ever dipped in and out for event information - and many have since been coming back for more. So the word about Winton Wetlands is getting out!

It all sounds like fun - and it is - but there's an underlying seriousness too: the survival of this important wetland environment and others like it are crucial for maintaining balanced and healthy eco-systems fit for human habitation too. Education and fun go hand-in-hand to promote wider understanding of the issues at stake.



A frog-hopping race.

FIRST 'GROWLERS' LEAD THE WAY

A landmark in efforts to reverse the extinction of native wildlife was reached in 2023 with the return of the 'long-lost' native Growling Grass Frog to Winton Wetlands.

A small group of Growling Grass Frogs - or 'Growlers' - was relocated overnight on 9-10 March from an area near Bendigo to Winton Wetlands, where these frogs had become locally extinct in recent decades.

The move was able to proceed following final approval as a permitted activity under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) by the Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek.

It followed the formation of a network of interested parties including Winton Wetlands Committee of Management, local water catchment authorities, the University of Melbourne, leading amphibian researchers Dr Matt West and Dr Geoff Heard, and others, together demonstrating the necessary expertise and capabilities.

Funding for the work came from philanthropic bodies, the Wettenhall Environment Trust, and the Ross Trust, along with Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, the Murray Darling Basin Healthy Rivers program funded through the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. In-kind support came from a number of other sources including Coliban Water and, very importantly, the Yorta Yorta community. More funds are being sought to continue the work.

Those involved in the project expect it can become a model for similar efforts at "rewilding" native species into areas where habitats have been damaged or destroyed.

The first group of around 30 frogs - including metamorphs - was transferred from property managed by Coliban Water near Bendigo in a convoy of vehicles arriving at Winton in the early hours of Friday 10 March.

They were subsequently held in a custom-built quarantine and breeding facility at Winton Wetlands for seven months, then moved into captive outdoor breeding enclosures in October 2023.

During their time in captivity, a rigorous process of health checks was maintained, monitoring for potential fungal infection or any other potential problems which could hold up the release of these "growlers" back into the wetland system.

The final step - in due course - will be to release some of the first generation of



Growling grass frog on its first day in an outdoor enclosure at Winton Wetlands - 9 October 2023.

frog offspring into the open waters of the wetlands under close watch, while some remain in their outdoor enclosures for breeding purposes.

The hope is that it will be possible to breed more frogs in due course by combining some of the first-arrivals with other 'growlers' brought in from different locations, thus helping to broaden the gene pool for species survival.

Growling Grass Frogs were once common in wetland ecosystems but are now regarded as a threatened species in Victoria and elsewhere.

They became locally extinct at Winton Wetlands due to loss of habitat caused by permanent flooding of the wetlands for an artificial lake in the late 1960s (which has since been de-commissioned), introduction of invasive non-native fish, and fungal infections.

They were an important species in the original ecosystem as predators of other frogs and insects. They are also large and known to be a good food source for many wetland birds.

Bringing back the species will help secure its survival locally and regionally, increase biodiversity on site and will restore critical ecological functions and processes to Winton Wetlands.

"If a healthy population of these frogs can be re-established on the reserve, it will be a big step toward restoring ecological function and biodiversity to the wetlands, encouraging the return of more migratory birds," wetlands ecologist Lance Lloyd says.

"It will also provide proof of the success of the process we're using, and create a new local source population for further rewilding efforts in other wetlands across the region in due course."



A weird and wonderful rain machine went into action to 'launch' the Village Garden.



Land Care Networks were well represented with Gecko Clan and Ovens Landcare Network on show.



North Central Catchment Management Authority was kept busy talking about fish and water quality.



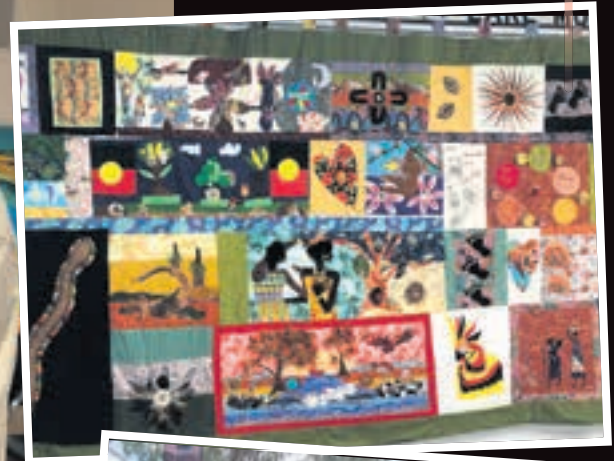
Winton Wetlands expert face-painter Hayley McDonald was kept busy.

SPECIAL THANKS TO SOME SPECIAL PEOPLE

A vibrant Yorta Yorta tapestry quilt took pride of place in the education centre, watched over by Aunty Cheryl Cooper.



Dynamic duo Doug Spowers and Victoria Cooper worked to create an immersive art experience to display the work of the Winton Wetlands Creatives..



The ever-popular stand operated by Turtles Australia offered a hands-on experience.

Our recent WILD WEEK would not have been possible without valuable contributions from many individuals and organisations. It's worth noting that most of them work closely with Winton Wetlands at all times - and not just for this one special event.

So it's worth putting their names up in lights!

- The Village Festival
- Turtles Australia (and the One Million Turtles program)
- Environment Protection Authority Victoria
- BirdLife Australia (and in particular BirdLife Murray Goulburn)
- Swamps Rivers and Ranges
- Gecko Clan Landcare group
- Goulburn Broken Indigenous Seedbank
- North Central Catchment Management Authority
- Middle Creek Fish Farm
- Friends of Warby Ranges
- Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation
- The Winton Wetlands Creatives

We're also grateful for the individual contributions made by volunteers Norm Cook, Di Cornish and Geoff Barrow.

Local fishing and photography celebrity Robbie Alexander did

the honours in helping to release 150 more spotted gudgeon fish into the waters of the wetlands, for which we're also grateful.

Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart from the Winton Wetlands Creatives put in a particularly big effort in helping to facilitate the display of creative wetlands-inspired art not just from themselves but a sizeable group of fellow artists.

An important cultural dimension to our WILD WEEK celebration was the honour of being able to display a large tapestry quilt created by Yorta Yorta women telling their stories, with lead artist Aunty Cheryl Cooper in attendance.

Last but not least, we appreciate the fantastic creative contributions made to the Village Garden project by many students from Glenrowan Primary School and EdSpace Education and Training Centre in

Benalla, with additional touches from residents of Cooina Aged Care Benalla, all of whom came along and contributed during the week that built up to our big open day. Artistic Director Suzanne Kalk and her energetic team provided inspirational guidance to all involved in the Village Festival component of WILD WEEK.

Unfortunately, due to factors including poor weather conditions, two airborne attractions scheduled for our public open day did not happen: a hot-air balloon flight by Goldrush Ballooning, and a demonstration of aerial seeding using a drone by

AirSeed Technologies.

But we're pleased to say that AirSeed continues to be a big supporter of our revegetation efforts, having donated the use of valuable equipment and skills to undertake aerial seeding in hard-to-reach corners of the wetlands over the past year, at no charge - and with more still to come. They've been a big help. [See revegetation article elsewhere in this edition.]

For its part, Goldrush Ballooning is in continuing discussion with us about ways in which balloon flights might in time become a regular attraction to enable low-impact viewing of the wetlands from above. Watch this space.

Needless to say, there are other people and organisations that give important support from time to time too. Space doesn't allow a full A-Z here, but rest assured we'll go on telling more stories about our helpers and supporters in future editions!



Fishing and photo celebrity Robbie Alexander released spotted gudgeon into the waters.

SCHOOLS PROGRAM REVITALISED

One of the most exciting developments at Winton Wetlands in recent times has been the major progress made in strengthening our educational offerings for schools - both in ecological science and cultural awareness.

This has been made possible by the employment of a part-time education officer, and the continuing work of Winton Wetlands' Koorie cultural officer Nikki James.

Our education officer role was filled initially by Karissa Wilson, a qualified teacher who worked closely with Nikki to develop curriculum-specific content for children at different year levels.

Karissa has since departed to become a full-time Mum (for the time being at least) with her role taken over by Rowan Barrow, also a qualified teacher. Rowan and Nikki have continued developing the education offerings of the wetlands at an impressive rate.

So impressive in fact that it's a

challenge to keep up with the rate of visitors! In the six-month period from July to December 2023 more than 1,000 students came through the wetlands as participants in organised educational programs.

Visitors in 2023 have come from many schools, including (to name just a few): Our Ladies Primary School Wangaratta; Glenrowan Primary School; St Joseph's Primary School Chiltern, St Joseph's Primary School Benalla; and Wangaratta West Primary School.

In addition to schools, other groups have got involved too: notably Tomorrow Today, an independent community support foundation based in Benalla, and Boys to the Bush, a not-for-profit group which provides preventative and early intervention activities to help support 'disengaged' young males. Boys to the Bush have been, for example, a big help with our revegetation efforts in recent months while giving the young participants the

satisfaction of getting out on the land and enjoying some positive shared experience.

There's no doubt that teachers and young people alike are more interested than ever in knowing about issues relating to the environment and the ways in which improved wildlife habitat can connect to a healthier habitat for humans too.

Equally, it seems there's a growing thirst for more knowledge about Australia's First Nations people and the things that are important to them.

At a local level, the Yorta Yorta people are the recognised traditional custodians of the land on which Winton Wetlands is located. As a proud Yorta Yorta woman, Nikki James is making a powerful contribution not just toward strengthening our educational offerings but toward developing richer and more meaningful connections to the land.



Koorie cultural officer
Nikki James.

Nikki is to be congratulated for this and also for the further honour of having just been appointed to the Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner Land Management Board.

Alongside Nikki, Rowan Barrow has been bringing valuable strengths of her own to her role as education officer. As a qualified AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) Lead Teacher, Rowan has taught in a variety of education settings including urban, remote, international and special needs. Returning to her grassroots in the region, she brings with her more than 20 years of diverse educational experience - and Winton Wetlands is all the better for it.

CALLING ALL BITTERNS – ARE YOU OUT THERE?

In late 2023 keen volunteers helped Winton Wetland ecology staff to survey for the elusive and threatened Australasian Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).

The Bittern is a large and stocky heron-like bird that lives in permanent or ephemeral (temporary) freshwater wetlands with tall aquatic vegetation like sedges, rushes and reeds.

The main threat to this enigmatic bird is loss and alteration of its wetland habitats and predation by introduced predators like foxes and cats.

During the breeding season, males make a low, resonant booming call to attract females and claim their territories.

Some 15 volunteers conducted dusk listening surveys at nine sites across Winton Wetlands hoping to hear the male Bitterns calling. Sadly no Australasian Bittern calls were detected - but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, especially at this early stage of field investigations!

The dusk listening surveys were only the first stage of monitoring this species at Winton Wetlands.

A second stage involved the deployment of 10 acoustic data loggers in December. The data loggers were left out in the field for two weeks and set to record audio intervals during dawn and dusk (peak 'booming' times) and throughout the night. The search



The elusive Australasian Bittern.
Photo - Museums Victoria, John Barkla.

continues.

There has been one historic sighting of Australasian Bittern in 1990 at Lake Mokoan. The latest surveys hope to clarify the

presence and distribution of this endangered species at Winton Wetlands following ongoing restoration efforts and the return of the wetlands to a more natural 'ephemeral' wetland system.

FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW

Plans for continued re-planting of trees and shrubs at Winton Wetlands are shaping up well for 2024 following good progress made in the second half of 2023.

SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS:

AIRSEED TECHNOLOGIES

In partnership with this aerial seeding enterprise, important achievements were made in June and December 2023.

June

- 50ha of aerial seeding for native grasses and sedges adjacent to Mokoan Ponds, near to proposed Growling Grass Frog release site
- Seeds funded through the Murray Darling Basin Authority Healthy Rivers program
- Seed pods and delivery of seeds donated in-kind by AirSeed Technologies

December

- 230 hectares of River Red Gum aerial seeding across five sites in December 2023, dropping 150,000 pre-made seed pods.
- All donated in-kind courtesy of AirSeed Technologies

REGENT HONEYEATER PROJECT

- Collection and removal of 50 wool bags full of old corflute tree guards
- Pruning of eucalyptus seedlings
- Valuable assistance from the Boys to the Bush program

ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AUTHORITY VICTORIA

- Planting and guarding of 2,150 mid-storey plants, propagated by Park Lane Nursery, Wangaratta, in the Joan Kirner Plantation, with assistance of volunteers, Winton Wetlands staff and Merriwa Industries staff during September

FOUR MILE CREEK

- Approximately 500 Carex and Lomandra plants along Four Mile Creek line (an inflow to the Mokoan Ponds and proposed Growler release site), with assistance of Winton Wetlands staff and volunteers from department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action during August and September
- This work funded through the Murray Darling Basin Healthy Rivers program of the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water.



Committed volunteer Di Cornish helped with the release of the first growling grass frogs into outdoor enclosures.



Outgoing CEO Sue Lebish - 'a big contribution'.

CEO CHANGE

Sue Lebish is moving on from the role of CEO, having occupied it since August 2020. Prior to that Sue was a member of the Committee of Management for five years.

The Chair of the Committee of Management, Dr Dennis O'Brien, has been appointed interim CEO.

While Dr O'Brien is in the position, the Chair of the Committee of Management will be Lindy Allen, who has been a committee member since 2018.

Dr O'Brien has expressed his appreciation of the big contribution made by Sue Lebish, particularly in regard to

the attention given to financial dimensions of the project that have required particularly close attention at times.

Further announcements about ongoing staff arrangements are being made in early 2024.

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