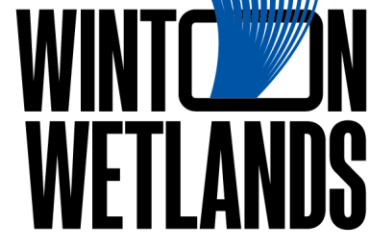


# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **“Growth spurt” at Winton Wetlands delivering major benefits**

Winton Wetlands is undergoing what has been described as an “ecological growth spurt” following recent heavy rains.

Latest counting by staff and volunteers on the wetlands reserve shows wildlife populations, including reptiles and birds, are looking healthy in the face of the highest water levels recorded since 2016.

In addition, inspections are showing the Wetlands have been highly effective in ‘cleaning up’ and delaying the flow-on of flood waters into the Broken River north of Benalla.

While Benalla was faced with flooding three weeks ago, it is only in the past week that the outflow channel from Winton Wetlands has finally spilled water outside the reserve. Floodwaters upstream of Winton Wetlands were effectively held back long enough for natural drainage to occur more broadly across the region.

“We’ve been impressed by the quality of water that’s now flowing from the reserve into the Broken River,” Restoration Manager Dr Lisa Farnsworth said today. “The water coming out of the wetlands is looking very clear, which shows the wetlands are being effective in their natural role of filtering pollution and turbidity in the water as it passes through.”

Reptile counting conducted over the past month has revealed more than 500 reptiles at specific search locations, including 372 amphibians – mainly 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’ve sighted more snakes than usual this Spring, and that’s an indication that some of their natural habitat has been disrupted by the higher water levels. Many of them have been on the move seeking respite from the rising water.”

Latest bird counting conducted 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.

The high rainfall followed by recent warmer days is producing good conditions for breeding of longneck turtles too. Activity is under way across the Wetlands throughout November and December to monitor seasonal turtle nesting activity.

“These are great conditions for turtle breeding, and we’re optimistic that it’s going to be a very good season for us to improve and protect turtle populations in various locations around the wetlands.”

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Researchers from La Trobe University are regularly on-site at present monitoring turtle breeding activities and undertaking preliminary work testing how to best protect turtle nests from fox predation at 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’ll be working on some new approaches to that in coming months.”

Dr Farnsworth said current conditions showed the critical connections between the different elements of life on the wetlands.

“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 always full, or always empty, both would be equally unhealthy in ecological terms.

“At present, with high water levels, there is a rebirth of many species, birds are being attracted back to feast on the abundant food available to them, and there is a replenishment of water with fresh and clean supplies being passed through the wetland filtration process.

“This time will pass, and the wetlands can then be expected to return to more dormant conditions for a time. That will be when other important parts of the wetland lifecycle will occur, preparing for the next ‘growth spurt’.

“It’s exciting to see the completion of the full cycle, helping us to better understand and appreciate the wonders of nature and the way in which the entire complex process ultimately delivers a healthy and abundant ecosystem that’s fit for everyone to thrive in.

“There’s so much more work still to be done to return the wetlands to a balanced state - it’s a work in progress - but times like this give us great encouragement to feel that we’re on the right track.”

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