

MEDIA RELEASE

Friday 10 March 2023

Wildlife landmark reached in northern Victoria

A landmark in efforts to reverse the extinction of native wildlife has been reached this week with the return of a 'long-lost' native frog to the waters of Winton Wetlands in north-east Victoria (Australia).

A small group of Growling Grass Frogs is being relocated from an area near Bendigo to Winton Wetlands, where these frogs have become locally extinct in recent decades.

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

It follows 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.

Funding has come from philanthropic bodies, the Wettenhall Environment Trust, and the Ross Trust, along with Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, the Murray Darling Basin Authority and the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. In-kind support has come 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 overnight on Thursday 9 March, in a convoy of vehicles arriving at Winton in the early hours of Friday 10 March. They are now being held in a custom-built quarantine and breeding facility at Winton Wetlands for the next four weeks, after which they will move into captive breeding enclosures.

During their time in captivity, a rigorous process of health checks is being 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.

Growling Grass Frogs were once common in wetland ecosystems but are now regarded as a threatened species in Victoria and elsewhere. .../2

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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), introduced fish and fungal infection.

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 crucial 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 - the largest wetland restoration project in the southern hemisphere, occupying a site of 8750 hectares.

“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 said today.

“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.

“The translocation activity under way this week is important not just in its own right but has strategic significance for broader ‘rewilding’ efforts in future. It looks small in an immediate sense, but it represents a very big step after many years of careful planning and preparation.”

A laboratory and breeding facility has been created at Winton Wetlands for the ongoing work, with the first growlers expected to begin breeding in captivity in Spring this year and the first release of frogs onto the open reserve due in late Spring.

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