

April 2012



Biddip

Newsletter of the Toodyay Friends of the River

Volume 6, Issue 1



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*Above: A morning on the river. Photo by Dave Isbill
Story on Page 9*

*The Toodyay Friends of the River is indebted
to the Toodyay Op Shop for their support in
producing the April newsletter*

Presidents Report by Greg Warburton



It seems to me as I go back over the TFOR calendar since the last Biddip that we are well on track with an impressive list of achievements already under our belts for 2012. Working bees have been well attended and progress continues with members taking on various projects.

The re-vamping of the River Section reporting method, the Feral Pig workshop, Clean up Australia Day events, a new website and sediment surveying of Millards Pool are just some of the highlights. One of the most encouraging signs is new and enthusiastic members coming on board. As we head into winter we can look forward to such activities as tree planting and the 40th anniversary of the Avon Descent. I'm also hopeful work will continue on the walk track over the next few months and I take this opportunity to give a run down about this project.

The lack of a marked walking track in Toodyay was always surprising to me considering the many areas in the Shire that are ideal for that purpose. As we know there are many nature reserves featuring magnificent woodlands, wildflowers and views over the Avon Valley. The Avon River has majestic Flooded Gums, shady river bank picnic areas and pools that attract a variety of water birds. In the early 70's the Toodyay Naturalists Club, with the Shire and other community groups, established nature walk tracks up on Pelham Reserve with signage and picnic facilities. However, a lack of maintenance over the years has seen these tracks fall into disrepair with signage dated, dilapidated or removed. A walk track of sorts exists between the Caravan Park and Duidgee Park but is little used as it is often overgrown. Visitor Centre staff told me that many tourists made enquiries about walk tracks and every community member I have spoken to is very supportive of the idea of a decent walk track for Toodyay.

TFOR have long recognized the potential for a walk track along the river to connect people to its environmental and cultural history and to impart a sense of value and respect for this precious waterway. With access to Millards Pool through development of the Glen Coe Estate and the establishment of a 1.5 km sealed walk track from Nardie Cemetery to Extracts Weir it seemed logical to extend this track 4 km to reach Duidgee Park. Last year TFOR installed a picnic shelter at Millards Pool which has proven popular with visitors and would serve well as a rest station on the proposed walk track. Recently, FESA and the Shire have created fire breaks along most of the western bank with TFOR members pushing through several sections to create connectivity for walkers along the entire distance. A series of meetings with community groups, the Toodyay Shire and funding bodies proved productive culminating in a very well supported funding application with Lotterywest Tracks n' Trails. We now await the result of that application. If successful, work will commence towards the end of the year on the installation of track makers, picnic tables, seating and interpretive signage. The main feature of the walk track will be Red Banks Pool which has great cultural significance to the Ballardong people. This Pool is a haven for water birds and the Toodyay Naturalists' Club currently are researching the feasibility of installing a bird hide here.

The long term vision of the walk track idea is to connect Toodyay and Northam with a track along the River. The Avon Valley Environment Society has established a network of tracks into which the Toodyay Track would link. There would then be connections with the Kep Track and Bibbulman Track. Perhaps one day we will see a walking track starting at Walyunga National Park and coming up the valley to Toodyay. Walking is by far the most popular physical activity in our society and is actively encouraged and supported by the Department of Sports and Recreation and the Health Department. Walk Tracks also have great economic benefits with the Bibbulman Track, for example, generating millions of dollars a year for communities along the way. I'm confident that in the not too distant future, thanks to TFOR, Toodyay will have a quality walk track that will not only convey value and respect for our River but will also be something the community can be proud of.



Christmas at the Taylor's photos by Beth Frayne



These photographs provide proof that the Toodyay Friends of the River do enjoy the occasional social events between their working weekends.



Reflections on the Avon

by Rebecca Meegan-Lowe

When Desraé invited me to write a piece for *Biddip*, I reflected on how my experience of rivers was shaped in childhood.

My earliest river memories come from summer holidays on the Fleurieu Peninsula, South Australia. We rowed the Inman and Hindmarsh rivers and got to know and love the Coorong and mouth of the Murray River. My parents lived by the ethos *Leave Nothing but your Footprints* and it was a valuable principle to learn as a child.

As kids we were encouraged to explore wild places quietly. The fragile faces of sand dunes were skirted, seals and nesting birds admired from a distance, any lifted stone or piece of bark or driftwood replaced. We were always on the lookout for ‘canoe trees’ which still stand as memorials to the Ngarrindjeri people. For centuries they cut the bark for their canoes from river red gums and expertly navigated the local waterways.

These were great times during which I was largely oblivious to problems facing the Murray even then. However, I do remember stumbling across hundreds of European carp dying on the sand (it was illegal for them to be thrown back). Not even my parents’ gentle explanation could reduce the distress. It was a stark lesson in how human interference in natural systems has consequences.

Winter and spring holidays were often spent in the Flingers Ranges, an ancient landscape which we adored. We hiked the peaks and explored the springs and creeks. From the safety of a large remnant river gum, I gazed down on a farmer herding his cows along the creek bed past the camping ground. This was a regular event and I would reflect upon it a lot in later years.

*Where your valley grows wide in the plains
they have felled the trees, wild river.*

*Your course they have checked, and altered
your sweet Alcaic metre.*

*Not the grey kangaroo, deer-eyed, timorous,
will come to your pools at dawn;*

*but their tamed and humbled herds
will muddy the watering places.*

*Passing their roads and cities
you will not escape unsoiled...*

(from Judith Wright Northern River)

And so to the Avon, the beautiful Avon. Ric found it first, this strip of land that hugs the river in a gentle eastward sweep downstream from Duidgee Park. We soon noticed how therapeutic even the thought of it is during the working week. Driving from the city, conversation flows between the day’s events and lists of ‘must do’s’. Gradually this ebbs as attention turns to passing scenery – the glow of powder bark wandoos, an early flush of hovea or pools beside the road that may or may not mean rain in Toodyay.

Toodyay is a magical place. In the half light of cool, still mornings we make our way down to the river’s edge with mugs of tea, arriving in time to catch the first shaft of orange light. We sit on the rocks in silence, watching as mysterious eddies of mist play above the water and hundreds of spider webs begin to sparkle with tiny beads of dew. Soft shapes in the distance gradually gain focus as dark greys finally yield to colour. Bird calls cut the air with a clarity unmatched later in the day. The moment is sublime. Is it too romantic to say that it nourishes the soul?

Reflections on the Avon ...cont

by Rebecca Meegan-Lowe



Every year brings wonderful discoveries. This year, four dead *Pseudotaenia gigas*, a rare species of jewel beetle known only from WA. We saw a live one several years ago plus another dead one, now in the WA Museum. Staff there eagerly await our recent finds. I was surprised to hear that our total of five (plus the live sighting) will be the most specimens recorded by the museum from anywhere in WA. All other records are of only 1 or 2. In fact, only 4 specimens have been added to the records in the past 50 years (one from Norseman, one from Kalgoorlie and two from Mt Gibson Station). How magnificent these beetles are! But what brought this recent quartet of beetles to our place, gleaming like emeralds as they lay in summer's dry grass?

I pen this on a hot day in Perth; 37° today, nearly 40° yesterday and doubtless hotter in Toodyay. By the time *Biddip* reaches you in April I hope steady rain has arrived to quench parched landscapes, cleanse the river, creeks and pools and reward all living things for having survived the closing weeks of summer. I'm keen to see and hear the Avon in full flow again, reviving trees and plants along its course and concealing for a while the shifting sediment that summer laid bare.

I hope the river rises to the occasion of the 40th Avon Descent, providing the flow and rapids that excite us all and which deceive many, competitors and viewers alike. After all, it is the Avon's year-round companions who know the river best. The most precious insights come from those folks who grew up along the waterway or have spent many years nurturing it. For mere mortals like me, their reflections are the ones that really matter.

There are many poems that capture the spirit and beauty of flowing rivers. However, this summer poem is more appropriate for today. It is a poignant poem, capturing both the beauty but also the challenges faced by our cherished river.

Reflections on the Avon ...cont

by Rebecca Meegan-Lowe

Skirting the Avon, the pyro-gleam
of salt crystals and phosphate-heavy
clarity of low water, mosquito
larvae tumbling, gambuzi
darting in hectic shoals,
fumes of partially-formed
insects wafting in topical thermals
with mid-morning heat;
songs sung in reels
change time, shift
on the extra beat,

and Monger's Bridge
worn down to bare bones,
and even further
dropped into sediment, ossified
salt-white and calcified
grey flesh, the 'we'll cross here'
because it feels sacred,
only to watch it drift, traffic
thinning on its burnt trail,
the heron alone stalking
small animals along the banks ...

(from John Kinsella *The Heronry*)

Notes: Judith Wright (1915-2000) is one of Australia's best known poets and also a campaigner for the conservation of Fraser Island and the Great Barrier Reef (World Heritage Site 1981). John Kinsella (1963-) is one of WA's most accomplished poets and novelists and has spent much of his life in the vicinity of Western Australian rivers. Monger's Bridge is near Bland's Pool in York. See the following source for references to phosphorous concentrations:

http://www.wheatbeltm.org.au/resources/69917_env_flows_Final.pdf

The same source has information about *Gambusia holbrooki* (also known as mosquitofish, endemic to USA) but a more comprehensive survey can be found at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/publications/pubs/introduce-fish.pdf>



Pseudotaenia gigas, a rare species of jewel beetle known only from WA.

Rebecca and Ric are valued members of the Toodyay Friends of the River. Who could ever forget the image of Rebecca sitting on the banks of her beloved Avon River playing her cello, with the Avon Descent boat race as a backdrop. Rebecca's sensitivity to the environment is displayed in this

Feral Pig Control Community Workshop

Toodyay, 10 March 2012

by Desraé Clarke

Feral pigs have been residing in the Avon Valley Gorge and surrounding farmland for many years with the numbers difficult to control. A sow can have from 6 to 10 young, depending on seasonal conditions and the availability of food and, especially, water.

What damage is done to the environment?

As the animals are generally found around water holes, creeks, streams and rivers, damage to the environment is by digging for roots, which ultimately results in severe erosion, fouling of the water, loss of native vegetation and the spread of weeds. Feral pigs will also prey on small native animals and can have a significant impact degrading their habitat in search of food.

What damage is done to farming?

Feral pigs feed on, and extensively damage, grain crops, orchard fruit, young livestock (especially lambs) and they will feed on dead farm animals and carrion resulting in the potential to spread disease..

Control of feral pigs has been extensively pursued through 'environmentally focussed' research and development.

A workshop was held on Saturday March 10th 2012 to build public awareness of the problem with feral pigs in our district. It gave an environmental understanding of feral pig activity, an insight to some of the more recent research that has been conducted on and awareness of the various control techniques.

Speakers on the day were:

Dr Peter Adams - Murdoch University Research

Paul Manera - Department of Agriculture and Food (WA)

Bob Huston - Avon Gorge Invasive Species Group (AGISG)

Ken Whellington - Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) (cage trapping)



Above: Feral pigs caught in a specially constructed cage trap. These traps were on display during the workshop.



Above: Some of the destruction caused by feral pigs in the Avon Valley.

Water Weeds to look out for!

By Wayne Clarke and Sandy Lloyd*

*Sandy Lloyd is a Research Officer on Declared Plants with the Department of Agriculture and Food

Two weeds have recently been highlighted by the Department of Agriculture and Food as being offered for sale by some of Perth's nurseries. Both are environmental weeds that can cause millions of dollars in damage to our waterways.

Salvinia (*Salvinia molesta*) is one of the 20 *Weeds of National Significance (WONS)* for no reason. It can form huge mats that could devastate waterways, if allowed to become established. And make no mistake – all over the world this weed is causing untold damage to natural environments and waterways.

Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), although not a WONS, is another water weed that invades waterways, and is a hindrance to fish breeding, harbours mosquitoes, and is causing problems all over the world.

The following information is from Sandy Lloyd:

Be wary of weeds spruiked as gardens plants

*“People are reminded to be vigilant when buying aquatic plants, after two of Australia’s worst water weeds were **recently found for sale**.”*

*“Salvinia had been found for sale online, incorrectly named giant duckweed. Salvinia is **prohibited from being grown in Western Australia** and the weeds for sale on this particular website and also at commercial premises in O’Connor have been confiscated,” Sandy said.*

“It is one of Australia’s most damaging aquatic weeds, which can block waterways, pollute drinking water, and displace native plants and animals.

“Salvinia is a free-floating aquatic fern that has fronds in pairs along the stem, which are bright green and covered with short hairs. The plants can be up to 20cm long”.

Sandy said water hyacinth was another serious weed which had been offered for sale recently at a weekend market in Melville. A woman who bought water hyacinth at the market later reported it to the Department when a friend told her it was banned.

*“Water hyacinth is **one of the world’s worst weeds**, choking up rivers, lakes and other waterways,” she said. One of the issues with these weeds is that it often becomes unsightly after a few years. Consequently it is dumped, where it soon finds its way into a waterway.*

Both weeds are declared plants in WA, prohibited from sale and must be destroyed when found.

Anyone with suspect aquatic weeds should not dump them in creeks or drains where they could proliferate and spread. They should be reported to the Department’s Pest and Disease Information Service on 1800 084 881

For further information on these weeds, and for positive identification of suspected plants, contact:

Sandy Lloyd, Research Officer, Department of Agriculture and Food , on 9368 3760



Left: Salvinia,
(photo courtesy APB) and

Right: Water hyacinth
(photo courtesy Penny Hussey,
Western Weeds, Weed Society
of Western Australia 1997



A morning on the river by Jenny Isbill

It was late December 2011 and water levels were dropping in the Avon River so we decided it was time for a little exploration, before too many areas became inaccessible by canoe. We made an early start, meeting up with Vicki and Greg at Millard's Pool at 6am. Greg headed off in his kayak whilst Vicki, Dave and I launched our larger scanoe (large canoe with a blunt stern). Your perspective of the river changes completely when you are actually on the water. Once you are afloat, it is almost as though you transform from being an onlooker to becoming part of the river. For anyone who has not had this experience, you must try it.

The panorama of life on the river is truly revealed as the sun rises and you cruise between the river banks, being assaulted by light, colour and noise. The reflections on the water from trees and clouds are forever surprising you. The movement of water birds as they take off, cruise in to land, or simply thread their way up or down the river, create mini tabloids that capture your attention. We found ourselves continually asking if the others had seen this or that. We spotted some unwanted interlopers in this environment; a couple of rabbits hopping along the riverbank. The discovery of a small tortoise swimming just below the canoe paddle had us ever vigilant for more surprises.



We began to notice what seemed to be floating nests, constructed mainly of twigs and appearing to be anchored to fallen tree limbs that stretched outwards into the river. A treasure trove was revealed as we quietly moved closer and found speckled eggs snuggled into a nest. Then we saw the three coot chicks; brilliant red, yellow and black in colour, and clamouring for attention. No matter how quickly I moved to capture those hungry faces through the camera lens, it was not fast enough for a good shot and we slid past them. Fortunately we were able to quietly manoeuvre back around near the nest and this time I was ready with the camera.

We wound our way further along the river, recognising that soon we would need to turn around as the depths grew rapidly shallower and the arms of the river grew steadily narrower. Retracing our path we ventured in the opposite direction as far as Extracts Weir. Returning to Millard's Pool, we came ashore and enjoyed our breakfast in the fabulous picnic shelter there.



Bird Identification *by Desraé Clarke*

The question is often asked, "How do you know so many birds?" The answer is always the same – "Learning is from years of patient observation".

Although there are many guides to Australian Birds by a variety of excellent authors, clever photographers and talented artists, identification still amounts to personal observation.

To begin with, think of the birds you may be familiar with. These could be cage birds like the finch, canary or budgerigar, or wild birds like the swallow, honeyeater, magpie, robin redbreast, green parrot (twenty-eight), willie wagtail, kookaburra or mudlark. All the above birds are of different body build, bill type, body size, tail type, stance, colouring and calls.

All birds have different calls from each other but each bird has a variety of its own calls. The call may be a group call, it may be a high-pitched chatter or screech of alarm, it may be a gentle sound when preening or a comforting soft chatter when feeding young or it may be a specific call when courting. Some birds call as they fly while others rest in the overstorey of trees to sing. Many birds enjoy sitting on a fence post or at the top of a tall, dead tree to sing to the world while still others hover in flight, giving a periodic call, as they search for movement on the ground that could be a meal waiting to be taken.

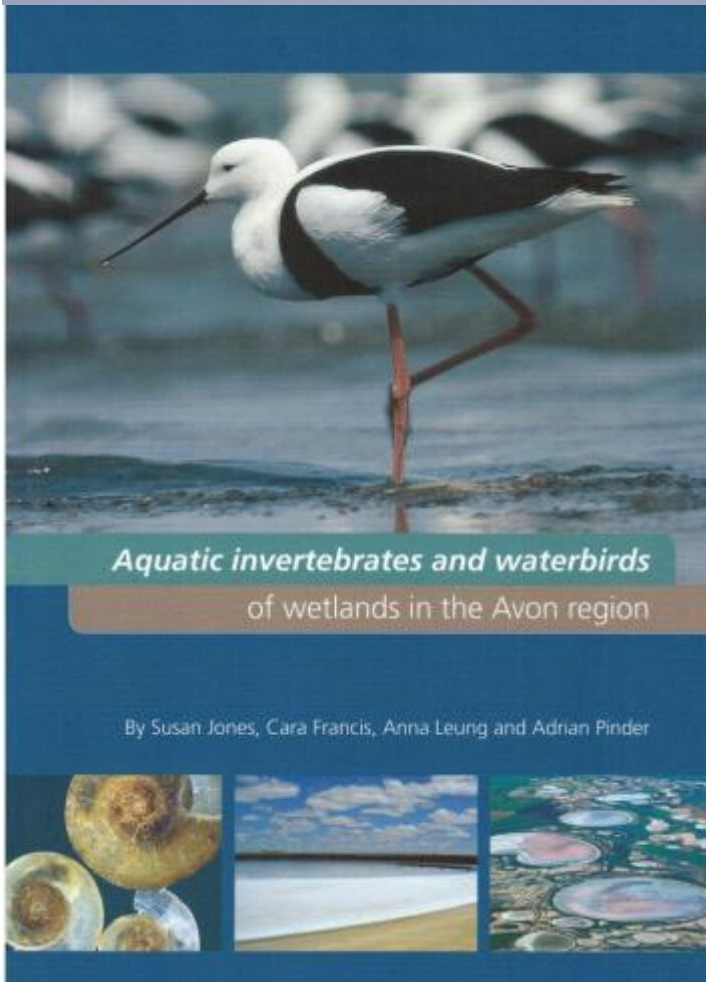
With all the above information, that you no doubt already know, a bird is heard that you are not quite sure as to what it is. If it is stationary try to take in as much as you can on first sighting. Does its size resemble any of the birds with which you may be familiar? What type of bill does it have? Is the tail long and slender or is it a short, squared tail? Is it possible to see the chest and body colouring or markings? What colour is the eye, what colour are the legs? Did the bird call and what type of call was it? *So much data to observe!!!!* Unfortunately, the bird does not always sit long enough for us to get all that data. However, write down the information that you are able to get including the date, time of day and weather pattern. Concentrate on this bird and listen for the same sound again to hopefully enlarge information on your observation. A well-known member of our Club made the excellent suggestion of drawing a bird, not in minute detail but as an 'egg' shape for the head, an 'oval' shape for the body and a 'small oval' shape for the tail. With this drawing one could mark in the shape of the bill, markings around the eye, patterning on the chest, colouring and markings on the wings and, perhaps, the shape of the tail.

Bill type is extremely important in categorizing birds as it gives a very good idea of their food and feeding habits. The wide bill type of the finch is usually a seed and insect feeder, the honeyeater has the long, slender, curved bill to probe flowers for nectar, the parrot type bill is for cracking or peeling large nuts and fruit and the thick, hooked bill of the magpie and kookaburra is used to hunt for small creatures as their food source.

Investing in a small pair of binoculars is a must for observing birds. There are a number of very good 'Field Guides of Australian Birds' available to assist with the identification of our beautiful feathered friends. Although Field Guides are a must the information is brief because a comprehensive book on Australian birds is not possible to carry when in the field. With this in mind, the enjoyment of bird watching is not how many birds you can identify but how much you learn from each bird you observe. Watching Babblers (Happy Family Birds, as many people call them) helping each other build nests is absolutely wonderful. Observing Silvereyes preen, while softly singing to themselves, after a plunge in the birdbath, is so restful. Robin Red Breasts and Red Capped Robins love to sit on a fence post or a dead tree, looking this way and that, watching for an unsuspecting insect; they are ideal little birds to observe as they tend to sit for quite long periods.



Book Review *by Desraé Clarke*



Above: Front cover of the handbook

‘Aquatic invertebrates and waterbirds of wetlands of the Avon Region’.

This handsome small publication of 2009 was funded by Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management, the Australian Government, the Department of Water and the Department of Environment and Conservation.

The introduction to the handbook describes the history before European settlement, the climate of low and variable rainfall and the subregions of the Avon Region which is located in the south west of our state and encompasses an area twice the size of Tasmania!

Wetlands of the Region are largely natural salt lakes with freshwater lakes restricted to the western side of the Avon Region. The types of wetlands in the region are well-described with the combination of plants and animals, including invertebrates, supported at each wetland.

The large section on waterbirds, and those that utilise the fringing vegetation, is extremely well-described. The photography captures the distinctive features of each bird which greatly assists with their identification.

The comprehensive glossary and bibliography complete this excellent handbook making it a worthwhile addition to ones natural history library

Bird Identification *by Desraé Clarke (cont from Page 10)*

Investing in several birdbaths, to place around the garden or in the bushland, is money well spent. This allows all the birds, both large and small, to drink and plunge in separate bird baths instead of the more aggressive species dominating all. Another important thing to remember is to place some of the baths in the vicinity of thick shrubs; this allows the tiny birds to enjoy the birdbaths without the fear of predators finding an easy meal.

Spreading seed, crumbs, cheese or feeding native birds minced beef is not a good idea. Although not a good idea, including that of the birds soiling verandas, windowsills, vehicle side mirrors, it is a great joy watching birds search for their food whether it be seeds or nectar or an unsuspecting moth, earthworm or grasshopper.

While enjoying the sight of birds drinking, washing, preening, searching for food, nest building, courting one learns more and more about the individual and can add more and more to the original drawing of a head, body and tail.

Newsletter of the
Toodyay Friends of the River

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*"Make Friends with
our Avon River"*



The objects of the *Toodyay* Friends of the River are to *work towards the conservation and rehabilitation of the Avon River and its environs. In the bigger picture of natural resource management, we are committed to implementing the Avon River Management Program and its associated River Recovery Plans for each of the four sections of river that pass through Toodyay.*

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Above: The sun slowly sinking over the town of Toodyay, the distant hills no longer blackened. Janet (Masters) has the floor with the men.

Photo Beth Frayne