

# Bitterns and rice: still on the conservation menu

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Australian rice crops support the largest known breeding population of the globally endangered Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*), and they're home to other threatened species too. These agricultural wetlands now form part of a network of important habitats for some of our most threatened species.

Thanks to funding from Riverina Local Land Services, we've recently completed the surveys for our third rice-growing season, and it's our best sample yet. We had 80 sites covering 2050 hectares of rice on 41 randomly selected farms.

We have much analysis ahead, but it's already clear that in most years, 500-1000 bitterns descend on the rice crops of the New South Wales Riverina. That's around one quarter or one third of the global total. This year, we found eight nests, all from randomly selected rice farms, indicating widespread breeding. Importantly, we were also able to confirm successful breeding, with fully-fledged young.

Late in April, we were able to get our first bittern away with a satellite transmitter and begin discovering the network of non-breeding wetlands they use after harvest. Affectionately known as 'Robbie', the journey of this young male has been captivating.

He flew 557 kilometres, crossed two state borders and chose the recently restored Pick Swamp in South Australia, which forms part of the Piccaninnie Ponds Karst Wetlands Ramsar site. After a few days, he began

moving along the coast back into Victoria. He used habitat around the mouth of the Glenelg River, and then continued on to Long Swamp. Here, Nature Glenelg Trust has been undertaking some innovative wetland restoration trials. They think he has fine taste in wetlands and is a good endorsement for restoring them.

As a threatened species, the Australasian bittern is not alone in its use of Riverina rice fields. Remarkable numbers (hundreds) of Australian painted snipe (*Rostratula australis*) used rice during the 2012-2013 season. Equally surprising was the discovery of eastern grass owls (*Tyto longimembris*) roosting in rice during the 2013-2014 season, while the southern bell frog (*Litoria raniformis*) populations around Coleambally and in the western Murray Valley are among the largest known for the species.

For more information about the *Bitterns in Rice Project* and to follow the journey of Robbie and other bitterns in the future, check out our new website: [www.bitternsinrice.com.au](http://www.bitternsinrice.com.au)



*This bittern chick was one of nine from three nests in adjacent rice bays, each with a female, but only one booming male, confirming polygamy* (© Copyright, Matt Herring)



*The journey of 'Robbie', a 3-4 month old rice-bred Coleambally male, to the South Australian coast*

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*Australian rice crops support the largest known breeding population of the endangered Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*)* (© Copyright, Matt Herring)

