



Ricegrowers'
Association
of Australia INC



Local Land
Services
Riverina



Bitterns in Rice PROJECT

Rice crops connecting wetlands and people

May 26th, 2015

On farms across the New South Wales Riverina, something special is happening. It involves a peculiar bird, hundreds of rice growers and the will to unite farming and wildlife conservation.

Australia's mysterious Bunyip Bird – the globally endangered Australasian Bittern – has been at the centre of an innovative collaboration between the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, Birdlife Australia, Riverina Local Land Services and several other organisations.

Neil Bull from the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, said that support for the project had been fantastic and now a satellite tracking program had begun.

“The awareness we built during the first two years culminated in a successful crowdfunding campaign last year. We raised over \$65 000 as part of the collaboration with Landcare New South Wales and Pozible, a crowdfunding platform.”

The funds will eventually be used to track ten bitterns from the rice, uncovering the network of wetlands that the population depends on after harvest during the colder months. On April 21st, tracking of the first bird began.

The movements of this young male bittern have captivated thousands of people. He is affectionately known as 'Robbie', after the contribution to the *Bitterns in Rice Project* of Coleambally Irrigation's Mark Robb.

Initially, Robbie moved locally around his Coleambally rice crop but by early May he had dispersed 557 kilometres to Pick Swamp on the South Australian coast. He has since moved about 20 kilometres east along the coast into Victoria. He was an egg in a rice crop only 3-4 months earlier.

Andrew Silcocks from Birdlife Australia said that Robbie's journey was already providing valuable insights.

"His selection of restored coastal wetlands is endorsing the efforts of the South Australian Government and Nature Glenelg Trust, highlighting the value of the region to bittern conservation and its connection with rice-growing."

With the crowdfunding and additional support from Murray and Riverina Local Land Services, the *Bitterns in Rice Project* has launched its website (www.bitternsinrice.com.au). It's a one-stop shop for information about the project, such as bittern-friendly rice-growing tips, and enables people to follow Robbie's journey.

Anna Wilson from Riverina Local Land Services, said the project could become a model for integrating agriculture and conservation through a combination of research, grassroots engagement and collaboration.

"Irrigation communities and conservationists have seized this novel opportunity and are demonstrating the benefits of working together."

Wildlife ecologist, Matt Herring, said that after three seasons and a random sampling approach, it was now clear that rice crops support the world's largest known breeding population of the Australasian Bittern.

"There are many opportunities to build on the existing habitat values and increase the number of bitterns that the rice yields, without hindering production. These are exciting times."

~ ENDS ~

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