

Walker Swamp teeming with life offers chance to learn

MARK RABICH

YEARS of ideas, planning and hard work are beginning to pay off at Walker Swamp, north-east of Dunkeld, as the Nature Glenelg Trust (NGT) gradually sees the environmental restoration it hoped to facilitate in the area come to life.

Since 2014, NGT has progressed significantly in the transformation of the 500-acre stage one property back to its original state decades after it was drained and used for agriculture, then commercial tree plantations.

The success of NGT's efforts has allowed community groups and schools to use the restoration of the land to educate and inspire.

A cooler and wetter spring and summer means the swamp is now holding substantial water, and myriads of birds, fish, and other water animals are populating the area, with NGT senior ecologist, Greg Kerr enthusiastic about the diversity of life being observed.

Dr Kerr listed several animals that were emerging at or in the swamp.

"We're getting a lot of the small native fish starting to appear," he said.

"There's a small native crayfish yabby that never grows more than two and a half centimetres.

"It's very rare - it's limited to a few wetlands around the Grampians and it's in large numbers.

"We're getting a range of less common birds in good numbers, things like blue-billed ducks and hardheads and a range of diving ducks.

"We're also getting large numbers of the more common ducks, the grey teal, the chestnut teal, the mountain duck, or shelduck, depending on where you come from.

"Those larger numbers of the more common ones are good news as well - it's not just about the number of species, but it's the number of birds of each species that you're getting and we're getting 100-fold increase in the numbers of birds, but we're also getting a 10-fold increase in the diversity of birds coming to the area. That's all good news."

As the wide range of animal life appeared, Dr Kerr began to seek ways for Walker Swamp to host on site educational opportunities.

As a former teacher, Dr Kerr got in touch with several schools in the region and was delighted at the response from the teachers to integrate real-world observations of the changes at the swamp into their syllabus.

"We received a grant from The Ross Trust, which is a group that works on the environment-education interface and it was through them that I've been able to get money to work on the bird courses and training people in citizen science projects," he said.

"The other half of it was to work with local schools to assist them to integrate our knowledge gained from Walker Swamp into the various programs and so we've been able to work with four colleges in town - Monivae, Baimbridge, Hamilton (and Alexandra), and Good Shepherd." For Cameron McKelvie, Baimbridge College Year 9-10 environmental geography teacher, the opportunity to meet with Dr Kerr and discuss possibilities about curriculum subjects involving the project was of great interest, especially as he originally grew up in Dunkeld.



WITH the Grampians as a spectacular backdrop, THAC geography teacher, Paul Carroll points out various features of Walker Swamp to his VCE students. Photo: MARK RABICH.

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"We met up and had a bit of chat about the history and everything around the area and it does seem like a valuable learning tool, where the students can engage with ecologists and scientists to find out what they've done to enhance any part of the environment," Mr McKelvie said.

"Our subject's called environmental geography. So (we're) using the curriculum that's looking at the focus between human connectedness to the environment and linking it to the rehabilitation that Greg and his team has done out at Walker Swamp.

"That's a vital thing that (the students) can see ... this is close by and NGT have a lot of local activities where they rejuvenate land."

While Mr McKelvie looked forward to excursions beginning soon with his students, for The Hamilton and Alexandra College (THAC) Year 11 and 12 students, the outings had already begun.

Travelling along the gravel back roads by bus to the car park and observation tower erected in 2018, the group spent several hours at the swamp recently.

THAC geography teacher, Paul Carroll was pleased how Walker Swamp offered his students

the chance to see environmental change with their own eyes.

"They have to do a unit on changing land use and they were looking at a field trip on that topic," he said.

"So when Greg contacted me last year ... I thought, that would work in well with our basic geography requirements and would be a good experience for students to get out and have a look."

Mr Carroll believed it was important to have the students physically gather their own information for it to make an impact.

"We also have to do a lot of primary data collection as part of our course," he said.

"The students collect the data rather than me giving it from a secondary source or a book, so the students get to see and take photographs, sketches and do bird counts - all these sorts of things.

"For the average person rocking out to Walker Swamp, they might not appreciate the changes that have occurred, but if you read up about it, and learn about it, and put the effort in to understand what's going on, you really do appreciate the environment that you travel through and look at."

"(The students) enjoyed walking around and listening to what I had to say and also find information that they learnt back at school - the information that the NGT provided (from) Greg Kerr - they were able to see it in real life.

"It's like everything, you learn about Italy, but until you've actually been there and experienced it - it really comes home.

"Being a geography student is all about learning about the world we live in and an important part of that is actually getting out of the classroom into the world we live in and experiencing these different environments."

As far as the setting goes, Mr Carroll loved being out in a beautiful part of the region.

"It's good to get out amongst nature - it's a stunning part of the world with the Grampians as a backdrop," he said.

As the stage one area continued to invite wildlife, NGT looked forward to the further development of the additional stage two area to the south more than doubling the total wetlands project to over 1000 acres.

In the meantime, Dr Kerr was keen to see not just schools but the whole community take interest with the project and see what's happening, so long as they contacted NGT first.

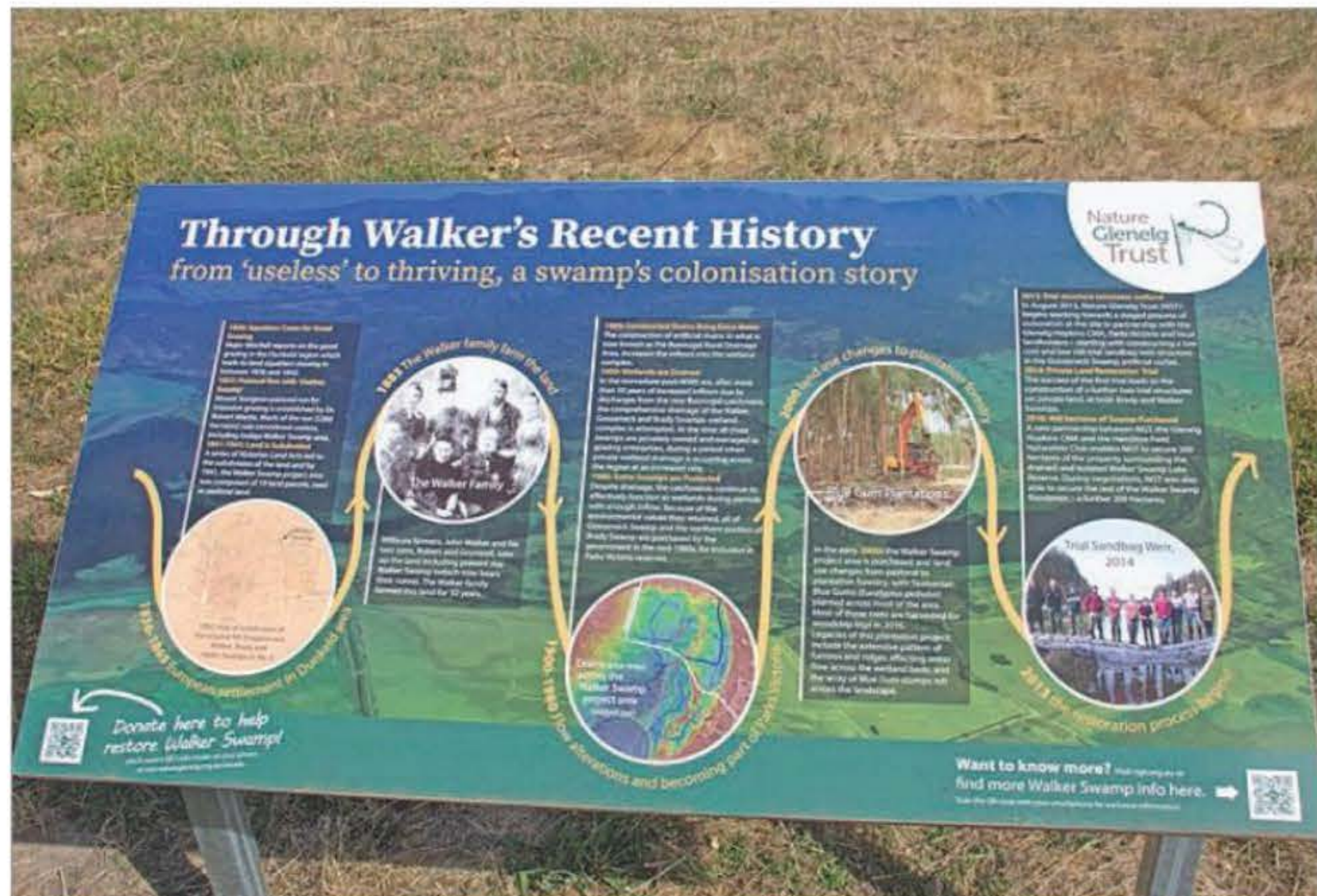
"With individuals, if they contact an organiser to

just walk around themselves, we're quite happy to facilitate that," he said.

"We get community groups (coming), we had one last weekend ... we run public events now and then.

"One of the aims of the project I'm looking at with the bird courses, they're 10 week courses, four hours a week, and we're doing a number of them - one with Parks Victoria, where we're setting up citizen science projects through the park."

More information is available at bit.ly/3rhdJUv or by email info@natureglenelg.org.au.



THERE'S plenty to learn about at Walker Swamp, north-east of Dunkeld. Photo: MARK RABICH.

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