

# Stories

OF NRM PARTNERS

## Rice growers cultivate rare bird



“ In the past when we've thought about wildlife conservation on farms we might fence off the bits that are out of production, whereas the Bitterns in the rice are explicitly using parts of the farm where the agricultural production is. The potential here is enormous. ”

**Matt Herring, wildlife ecologist,  
Boosting the Bunyip Bird  
Project**

On a warm summer evening just over ten years ago, a rice grower in the NSW Riverina spotted a bird he'd never seen before, and quickly snapped a photo.

He sent it to Birdlife Australia, whose excited staff recognised the rarely seen Australasian Bittern, an elusive and endangered bird whose low booming call is thought to be the source of legends around the mythical bunyip that once haunted billabongs.

The discovery set in motion 'Bitterns in Rice' and 'Boosting the Bunyip Bird Yield', ground-breaking NRM projects that are proving that rice growing and conservation can co-exist.

There are only 2500 Australasian Bitterns left in the world, in Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia, and it's estimated that around 40% of these are attracted to rice crops in the Murray, Coleambally and Murrumbidgee Irrigation Areas of NSW to breed.

**Partners in Boosting the Bunyip Bird Yield gather in the rice fields of the Riverina for an update on the project.**



The notion of a threatened species thriving in a highly modified farming environment has captured people's imagination and given the project political momentum. Thousands around the world followed the journey of Robbie the Australasian Bittern, whose satellite tracker showed that he made a round trip of 1270km from the Riverina to coastal wetlands at Nelson in southwest Victoria.

### **BUNYIP BIRD 'YIELD' QUADRUPLES IN FIRST SEASON**

It's not an easy bird to study. If you were to walk through a Bittern's rice crop, the bird's initial reaction is to submerge itself and hide in the crop.

In 2012 Bitterns in Rice brought together ecologists, rice growers and processors and NSW State Government agencies to monitor the bird and its habits. In 2019, the Boosting the Bunyip Bird Yield Project was developed, building on this knowledge of the bird-crop relationship, breeding and feeding ecology and its use of nearby wetlands.

Enthusiastic rice growers are paid incentives per hectare to provide early permanent water and a minimum of 20 hectares of rice to provide food and shelter for the birds. They water natural wetlands on their farms and control feral animals to lower predation of young birds. Some growers trialed putting on extra urea fertiliser to grow small patches

of taller, thicker rice that could encourage earlier nesting.

In the first season of Boosting the Bunyip Bird Yield Project, four times as many Bitterns were found in Bittern-friendly rice when compared with control crops, and one successful breeding event was recorded. In 2021 there are 11 growers taking part, covering nearly 1000 hectares of rice.

State government departments and agencies are working together to provide improved habitat for the Bitterns in natural wetlands along the Murrumbidgee River, with modifications or new structures resulting in an additional 250ha being established.

**Riverina LLS is proud to contribute to the long term survival of the Australasian Bittern by teaming up with rice growers, processors, wildlife ecologists and government agencies.**

**Funded by the Australian Government National Landcare Program with support from Riverina Local Land Services.**

### **LEARN MORE**

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