



Objectives:



Help maintain waterbird breeding conditions at Narran Lakes (Dharriwaa)



Reconnect rivers in the Lower Balonne



Help native fish to move and thrive



Narran Lakes, South Arm – March 2023. Photo: Joanne Ocock, NSW NPWS.

In response to rapidly drying conditions across the northern Basin, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) arranged for the release of 6.5 gigalitres of water into the Narran River from the on-farm storages of Eastern Australia Agriculture during February 2023.

This water has provided refreshing flows in the lower Balonne, reconnecting waterholes and improving habitat and food sources for fish and birds along the Narran River, with around 2.4 gigalitres reaching Narran Lakes. These flows have successfully ensured that key wetlands areas remained wet at a critical time for waterbird breeding.



Narran Lakes at South Arm, March 2023. Photo: Joanne Ocock, NSW NPWS.

Waterbird breeding finishing up

When conditions are right, tens of thousands of waterbirds of many different species can be found at Narran Lakes. Over the past three years, research teams have spotted at least 55 different waterbird species at the wetlands, with regular sightings of four threatened species (Black-necked stork, Brolga, Freckled duck and Blue-billed duck).



Waterbird monitoring at Narran Lakes in action. Photo: Shot by Harro for CES, UNSW.

For only the second time since 2013, this spring and summer saw thousands of colonial waterbirds breed within the Narran Lakes Ramsar site. Some of the species that were recorded included Straw-necked ibis, Royal spoonbills, Glossy ibis, egrets and cormorants.

Pelicans have also been breeding with many colonies observed. Drone surveys of just one of these colonies identified around 14,000 nests and 28,000 adult pelicans!



Black Box pelican colony, Narran Lakes. Photo: Shot by Harro for CES, UNSW.

While most birds have now finished breeding, there are still many sitting on nests and thousands of adults and young chicks in the area. With all these extra mouths to feed, the additional water is playing an important role maintaining plants and fish as well as ensuring there is enough food around for a while longer.



CEWO Local Engagement Officer, Jason Wilson pointing out good food location sites in the Narran Lakes Nature Reserve where birds are enjoying the additional water.

Tracking pelican movements

In addition to ground and aerial surveys, researchers from UNSW have been banding pelicans as part of a long-term Basin wide project. Black bands have been placed on the ankles of 400 pelican chicks at Narran Lakes, which will help to track their movements over the course of their life.

Earlier this year, two pelicans with orange bands were spotted at Narran Lakes during ground surveys. The colour of the bands indicated the pelicans had been banded at Lake Brewster near Hillston, over 400 km away. Be sure to keep your eyes peeled for any pelicans sporting black bands and email pele.bands@environment.nsw.gov.au if you spot one!



Pelican at Narran Lake with orange Lake Brewster band. Photo: Pat Johnston and Joanne Ocock, NSW NPWS.

A tapestry of Cultural material

Narran Lakes (Dharriwaa) is not only a special place for its Ramsar listing and environmental importance but is also blessed with an amazing tapestry of Cultural material. Some of this material, such as the large collection of mussel shells, has formed over thousands of years of continuous occupation by the Yuwaalaraay and neighbouring Nations. The shells and evidence of feasts shine and sparkle as they align with the lunettes (bow-shaped edge of the water) of the Lake shoreline.



Jason Wilson showing the CEWH, Simon Banks, a mussel shell, part of a large collection at Narran Lakes.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, with representatives from the Yuwaalaraay Nation and the Joint Management Committee for the Narran Lake Nature Reserve, have made a centre piece stone arrangement of a Crocodile on Park, so visitors can understand the creation story of Dharriwaa and climate change issues endured by Traditional people.



Crocodile stone arrangement at Narran Lake Nature Reserve.

Contact the CEWO Local Engagement Officer if you would like to know more:

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The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the Murray-Darling Basin. We acknowledge their enduring cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to the rivers, wetlands and floodplains of the Basin.



Pelican colony at Narran Lake, March 2023. Photo: Shot by Harro for CES, UNSW.