



Above
Looking west over Booka Dam (Toorale NP)
during golden hour. Photo – Shjarn Winkle

Wading through the Warrego

Some reflections from a rookie

By Shjarn Winkle

Rugged, pastel and vast are the first words that come to mind when I think about my first trip to Toorale National Park (NP). I began working for 2rog Consulting in early March this year and since then a large portion of my work has involved helping to enhance and drive the communications and engagement aspect of this Project. After months of reading, writing and discussing the Warrego's unique characteristics and biodiversity, I was eager to get out there and experience this landscape for myself.

In mid-June, Sam Lewis (University of New England) and I were given the green light to head out to Toorale NP to conduct water quality and food web sampling. We hit the road at sunrise on June 9th with a good 9 hours of driving ahead of us. As we drove further west the gradient of increasing soil redness impressed me as much as the increasing distance between towns. One such town was Walgett, nestled into the Barwon-Namoi River junction, at the western edge of Gamilaraay Country.

It was there that Sam and I were invited to have lunch with Jason Wilson, Gamilaraay Traditional Owner and Local Engagement Officer (LEO) for the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO).

Jason had prepared an awesome feed of freshly caught local Yellowbelly, cooked on an open fire, alongside a sprawl of salad and veggies. It was a pleasure to meet Jason in person after months of collaboration over the phone and online. Also, to share a traditional Aboriginal meal of Yellowbelly with him on-Country was such a treat and, upon reflection, felt a bit like a special occasion.



Figure 1. Jason Wilson preparing a local Yellowbelly for lunch in Walgett, NSW. Photo – Shjarn Winkle



Figure 2. A Black swan *Cygnus atratus* preparing for take-off

Fed and recharged, Sam and I buckled in and continued west to Bourke, then through the red dirt out the back 'o Bourke until we landed at the old Irrigators Quarters in Toorale NP on sundown.

The next morning we had breakfast amongst the Eucalyptus trees around Homestead Dam, packed the ute and headed off to spend the day traversing Toorale to sample the various wetlands it hosts. Sam and I spent the entirety of that day, and the one after, jumping in and out of all types of things including the ute, our waders, rivers, dams, conversations and the surprisingly warm outback winter sun. We caught plenty of aquatic invertebrates in the silty waters and benthos of Dicks, Booka and Boera dams and in the mighty Darling, too. The diversity of fauna was impressive to see. I think I'll remember the silhouette of six emus slowly wading through the western floodplain, against the backdrop of the golden setting sun, for some time.

At the close of our second day of sampling we packed up camp ready to leave for Armidale the next morning. While packing I felt I wanted to stay at Toorale a little longer to properly soak in the landscape. I must admit I spent a good portion of the easterly drive home planning my next trip west. I feel grateful for the opportunity to work on the Flow-MER Program, two of my ambitions are being facilitated simultaneously: experiencing the diverse ecosystems of Australia & working to understand and conserve them.



Figure 3. Here I am sampling for water quality in the lower western floodplain (Toorale NP). Photo – Sam Lewis

Managing water for the environment is a collective and collaborative effort, working in partnership with communities, scientists and government agencies - these contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land which we discuss here. We also pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.