



Objectives: Reconnect rivers in the Lower Balonne and further downstream.



Inundate Narran Lakes (Dharriwaa) Ramsar site to support water bird breeding.



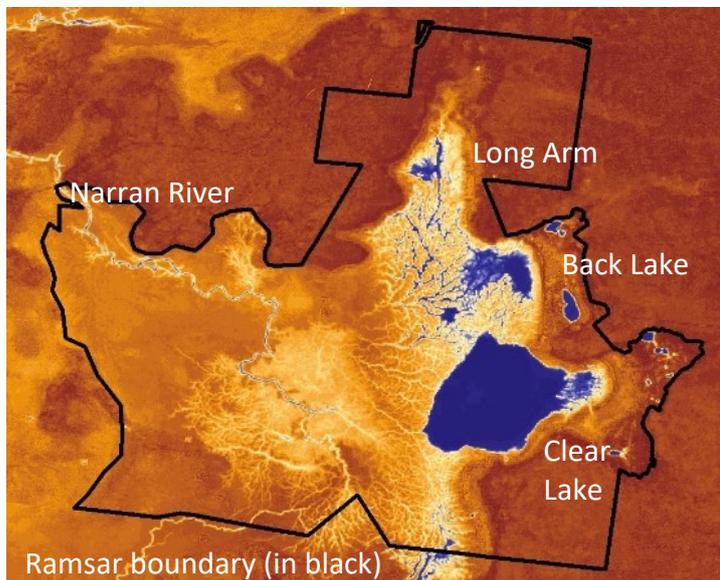
Help native fish to move, breed and disperse.



Target areas: Lower Balonne rivers, Dharriwaa, and the Darling (Baaka) River.

Good flows in the Lower Balonne with more to come!

With all the rain and flows about, Lower Balonne rivers and floodplains are primed. Landscapes are rebounding from the drought. Since November 2021, more than 1,646 gegalitres (GL) of water has flowed past St George, including 131 GL of Commonwealth water for the environment. This is higher than the flows that reached Dharriwaa in 2020 (when 1,442 GL passed St George). Flows reached the internationally significant Narran Lakes (Dharriwaa) in late 2021 inundating core waterbird breeding habitat. Around 65 GL has reached the Darling (Baaka) River so far benefiting local communities and other nationally significant wetlands downstream.



Sentinel image of Dharriwaa - December 2021. Source: MDBA

Hopes for waterbird breeding at Dharriwaa

The current flow is on track to meet the volume needed to trigger large-scale colonial waterbird breeding. Typically more than 154 GL needs to pass the Wilby Wilby gauge on the Narran River over three months. As at 22 December, almost 58 GL has passed the Wilby Wilby gauge and current forecasts indicate that more than 150 GL could reach the lakes by the end of January.

Local reactions to the flows

Over the coming months we will share people’s reactions to the flows. First up, Jason Wilson a Yuwaalaraay / Euahlayi man and CEWO Local Engagement Officer explains the importance of waterbird breeding for the Yuwaalaraay/ Euahlayi people “*We would conduct ceremony around these larger bird breeding events such as harvesting eggs, birds, fish, and shellfish. We would trade songs, dance and tools intertwined with reaffirming family relationships to country, our neighbours and facilitating mob from far distances*”.



Ibis circling before roosting in Back Lake Red Gums. December 2021. Source: B. Vincent, UNE

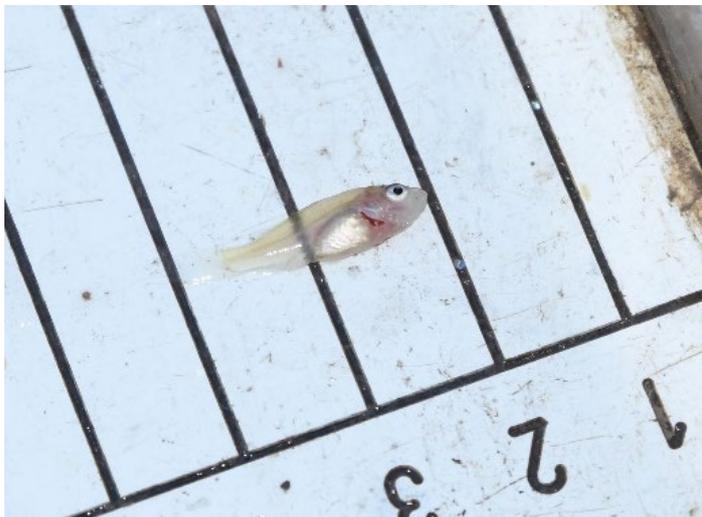
Dharriwaa has attracted high numbers of waterbirds with 54 species observed since 2020, including threatened and migratory birds such as the Black-necked stork, Sharp-tailed sandpiper, Bar-tailed godwit and Little curlew. Some of these species have never before been seen at Dharriwaa while others haven’t been spotted for over 30 years.



Large numbers of Sharp-tailed sandpipers over Clear Lake in November 2021. Source: Pat Johnston, NSW NPWS volunteer.

Flows provide a helping hand to native fish

Monitoring has found large-scale yellowbelly (or 'dhagaay' in Yuwaalaraay/ Euahlayi language) breeding and survival in the Lower Balonne over the past two years. The current flows will help yellowbelly continue to breed, feed and move between rivers, including downstream into Menindee Lakes, a key fish nursery. Some of these fish will travel with the flows down the lower Darling/Baaka and the Great Darling Anabran into the Murray River: [2021 Lower Darling-Baaka and Great Darling Anabran spring fish flows - DAWE](#)



Yellowbelly found in the Lower Balonne in May 2021. Source: M. Hutchinson, Qld DAFF

What's next?

At the present time, unregulated flows are meeting the environment's needs across the Lower Balonne. As a precaution, the CEWO is developing arrangements for local water licence holders to release water from on-farm storages to protect waterbirds breeding at Dharriwaa. If water levels start to drop too quickly, the birds may abandon their nest or chicks. If required, this arrangement will be delivered through a grant program. The water licence holder(s) would be reimbursed for the water released from their storage to maintain water levels in core breeding areas within the Narran Lake Nature Reserve.

We are beginning to see substantial recovery from the drought. We are hopeful to see a lot more waterbirds over the coming months. We are already seeing native plants responding positively to recent rainfall and subsequent flows.



Flowering lignum at Clear Lake in December 2021. Source: B. Vincent, UNE

Monitoring of waterbirds, native plants and fish response to the current flows will continue. Further updates will be available on the CEWO website in early 2022.



Interim Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, Hilton Taylor, and Local Engagement Officer Jason Wilson viewing waterbirds at Clear Lake in November 2021

Local Engagement Officers

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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.