

# A new wetlands effort for the last Southern Brolgas

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Numbers of the majestic Southern Brolga have declined dramatically since European settlement, but restoration of a wetland in northern Victoria, a combined effort by the Loddonvale Landcare Group, the Norman Wettenhall Foundation and the North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA), is improving its local prospects.

Southern and Northern brolgas,

although regarded as discrete populations, are actually one crane species (*Grus rubicunda*) and they share spectacular and endearing characteristics. Standing five-foot tall with a wingspan of six feet, brolgas sport light bluish-grey body plumage with contrasting red to orange face, cheeks and throat, and are renowned for their dancing ability, featuring bowing, running, jumping, stick-tossing and wing flapping.

However, while the Northern Brolga numbers somewhere between 100 000 and 200 000, the Southern Brolga population has been reduced to about 600 or maybe 1000 individuals. Loss and degradation of its wetland habitats has hit Southern Brolgas hard, and they are also threatened by subdivision, fox predation, incidental poisoning and collisions with utility lines. The bird is now declared vulnerable in Victoria.



Landholder Simon Starr, of the Loddonvale Landcare Group, says that the shallow wetlands that brolgas prefer are also the easiest to drain for agriculture so most have been lost or degraded by salinity.

'At Calivil Creek, there is a wetland that forms after heavy rain, but it has long been grazed right down to the waterline and, being a "community service drain," its main purpose has been to drain water away to counter salinity,' Starr says. 'We have about 25 brolgas in the area, which is probably about a quarter of the entire population of brolgas remaining in northern Victoria, and the Landcare Group and the North Central CMA decided to improve the habitat along a portion of the creek to help conserve the brolgas.

'With funding from the Norman

Wettenhall Foundation and the Natural Heritage Trust, we fenced off an area to keep stock out, carried out earthworks to deepen one part, and planted the enclosure with local species, including groundcovers, native grasses, and aquatic plants like sedges and Eleocharis, a spike sedge which has a tuber that brolgas like to feed on,' explains Starr. 'We were careful not to plant too many trees because brolgas like to have a clear view of their surrounds and, like all cranes, they also need plenty of air space to take off.'

Aaron Gay, Biodiversity Officer with the NCCMA, applied for the funding to get the project up and has worked closely with the Landcare Group, the Norman Wettenhall Foundation and the community on the wetland restoration.

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of much-maligned service drains as habitat,' Gay says. 'Right from the start, the work went well, with an endangered Australian Painted Snipe turning up as a good omen within a week of the earthworks commencing!'

Starr, a keen ornithologist, says that, 12 months on, the plantings of native vegetation are looking good and, at the time of writing (spring 2005), a pair of brolgas is incubating eggs in the wetland. Other pairs are also nesting in the district. The pairs are territorial, but by autumn Starr expects there will be a flock of about 25 birds in the vicinity and the dancing displays will begin.

Other water birds also use the wetland, including Latham's Snipe, Dotterels, Black-winged Stilts, Spoonbills, Crakes, Native Hens and migratory shore birds.

'Our main concern now is foxes,' Starr said, 'because the brolga chicks can't fly for 100 days after hatching and they are vulnerable to predation. We will soon begin fox control measures and with luck we'll see brolga numbers gradually building up in future years.'

'The next step is to set up an interpretive display board telling the brolga-wetland story,' says Gay. 'Given the success at Calivil Creek, we at the NCCMA are keen to see many more such projects, especially ones making good use of community service drains as habitat for wildlife. Farmers of the Loddonvale Landcare Group have shown that it's possible to turn community attitudes around and to transform an open drain into a biodiversity asset.'

● Steve Davidson



**With modest effort, service drainage areas have been made more hospitable breeding areas for Southern Brolgas at Calivil Creek, in northern Victoria.** David Kleinert, North Central CMA

'The idea was to replicate as best we could the habitat that would have been there 200 years ago,' he said. 'Members of the Landcare Group and other locals have really got behind the project and it is heartening to see this enthusiasm given that community service drains are usually seen as good for only one thing – carrying away salty water to lower the water table.

'The Calivil Creek restoration demonstrates what can be achieved and the value

**More information:**  
[www.npwr.usgs.gov/resource/distr/birds/cranes/grusrubi.htm](http://www.npwr.usgs.gov/resource/distr/birds/cranes/grusrubi.htm)  
[www.nccma.vic.gov.au/newsDetail.asp?ID=93](http://www.nccma.vic.gov.au/newsDetail.asp?ID=93)

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