

Maribyrnong River: Wildlife of the waterways

The areas surrounding the Maribyrnong River are home to a range of animals including birds, frogs, fish and mammals. Many native plants have disappeared and introduced plants such as willows and blackberries now dominate waterways in the catchment.

Drawing water for domestic and agricultural use has altered the pattern of flows in a number of these waterways. In areas that are being urbanised, changes are also expected as increased run-off generates more flows into rivers and creeks. Such changes in flow patterns can impact on the fish, frogs and other species living in our waterways.

Recent studies in the catchment have focused on the importance of ensuring sufficient flow to protect the animals and plants that live there. We have provided you with an overview of some of the animals you are most likely to see in the area but don't be surprised if you see even more!



Fish

In 2005, the Maribyrnong catchment including its major tributaries were surveyed for fish. The surveys captured more than 5000 fish across 38 survey sites. Ten species of native fish and eight species of exotic fish were found.

Native fish made up 65% of all fish sampled. There were good numbers of five native species, each having at least 250 fish sampled. The exotic fish were dominated by a single species, Eastern Gambusia, and this was the most common fish in the Maribyrnong. Exotic fish compete with native fish for available food and habitat, and injure or predate on native fish.

Four of the native fish found are migratory, using the downstream estuaries or ocean as well as freshwater habitats at different life stages. The existence of weirs, fords and dam walls can prevent migratory fish from accessing upstream habitat. Melbourne Water has constructed five fishways in the Maribyrnong system at existing barriers, including three within Brimbank Park. The fishways allow fish to travel past the barriers, and further fishways are being planned.

The most common fish species in the Maribyrnong are:



Fish



EASTERN GAMBUSIA

GAMBUSIA HOLBROOKI

OTHER NAME: MOSQUITO FISH

SIZE: MALES 3.5CM,
FEMALES 6CM

These small pale olive-green/grey fish are native to north and central American rivers, which drain into the Gulf of Mexico. They are believed to have been introduced into Australia in the 1920s. They feed on rotting debris, insect larvae and pupae, fish eggs and fry. This is the most common fish in the Maribyrnong and made up almost one-third of all fish in a 2005 survey, and was found at half of the sites sampled. The species is known to harass and compete with small native fish and the young of larger native fish.

COMMON GALAXIA

GALAXIAS MACULATUS

OTHER NAME:
COMMON JOLLY TAIL

SIZE: UP TO 19CM

This migratory fish made up almost a quarter of fish sampled in the Maribyrnong. Adults move downstream to estuaries to spawn and young spend the first six months at sea. When they return to freshwater streams, they are part of large spring whitebait migrations. Their diet consists primarily of terrestrial insects deposited onto the water surface, with aquatic insects and crustaceans also consumed. They are a long olive-grey fish with variable mottling on their sides.



FLAT-HEADED GUDGEON

PHILYPNODON GRANDICEPS

SIZE: UP TO 12CM
(COMMONLY 8CM)

This native fish made up almost 15% of fish sampled and was most common in the main channel of the Maribyrnong and the lower part of Deep Creek. It is a small dark fish with irregular colouring and markings. It has a distinctive broad head with a wide mouth and eyes near the top of its head. It prefers still or slow-flowing water, areas with aquatic plants and muddy bottoms.

AUSTRALIAN SMELT

RETROPINNA SEMONI

SIZE: UP TO 6CM

These small, slender, silvery fish were the fourth most common fish in 2005 surveys, making up almost 15% of the number caught. They are most common in the Maribyrnong River up to Keilor and in Jacksons Creek around Bulla. They prefer slow-flowing areas and can sometimes be seen shoaling near the surface or around plants or woody debris. They spawn in spring when each female lays up to 200 transparent and highly adhesive eggs on aquatic vegetation. These fish eat insects and algae and are often eaten by larger fish in the Maribyrnong.

Fish



SOUTHERN PYGMY PERCH

NANNOPERCA AUSTRALIS

SIZE: UP TO 8.5CM

These small fish are food for larger animals such as tortoises, birds, other fish and frogs. They are usually pale golden with greenish-brown mottling and a silver belly. Their diet consists of small crustaceans, insects and their larvae. They can live up to five years and inhabit the vegetated edges of streams, billabongs and drains, preferring still or gently flowing water. They made up about 1 in 20 fish sampled in the 2005 survey, and were most common in Deep Creek.

SHORT-FINNED EEL

ANGUILLA AUSTRALIS

SIZE: MALES UP TO 60CM,
FEMALES UP TO 90CM

These native migratory fish have a long snake-like body and an even golden to olive-green colour. They are active at night and eat crustaceans, insects, yabbies, fish and frogs. All short-finned eels migrate and breed at one site in the Coral Sea near New Caledonia. They spawn at depths of more than 300m before soon dying. The newly hatched young drift back to coastal areas on ocean currents. Short-finned eels should be widespread and abundant, but made up about 5% of fish sampled. It is suspected that a disease that afflicted short-finned eels throughout Victoria in early 2005 was detrimental to the species.



FRESHWATER SHRIMP

ATYIDAE

SIZE: UP TO 4CM

Freshwater shrimp are translucent and can be mottled with blues, greens and darker markings. The front two pairs of legs of the shrimp bear distinct brushes. Freshwater shrimp occur in the slower-flowing (lowland) rivers and in ponds and billabongs. They feed mainly on sediment, fine decomposing vegetation, bacteria and algal particles.

SCUDS

AMPHIPODS

SIZE: UP TO 2.5CM

Scuds are small crustaceans. They have seven pairs of walking legs and three feathery swimming limbs. Amphipods feed on plants and animals, using a wide range of methods including shredding, filter feeding and grazing. They are usually green, but can be other colours, including orange. Ceinidae live among aquatic vegetation in still to slow-moving water. Another amphipod, the Paracalliopiidae, is abundant in the middle reaches of the Maribyrnong River.

Birds

The Maribyrnong River is home to a diverse population of native and migratory bird species. There is a varying range of species, with waterbirds making up large numbers. An extensive revegetation program along the river's length has been successful in retaining and recreating habitat that is essential in providing food and shelter for a vast amount of Victorian birds as well as those making the trek from countries such as Japan, China and Korea.

Some of the waterbirds that are frequent visitors to the Maribyrnong River and its surrounding environment include such species as Pacific Black Duck, Chestnut Teal, Straw-necked Ibis, Purple Swamphen and Masked Lapwing.

Although waterbirds are prominent along the length of the river, many other familiar bird species can be found feeding on the plants and chasing the insects that form part of the Maribyrnong ecology.

At least 100 bird species inhabit this environment during different times of the year.



Birds



PACIFIC BLACK DUCK

ANAS SUPERCILIOSA

SIZE: UP TO 60CM

This duck has a dark body and head with two characteristic cream stripes across each side of its head. In flight, it shows a green speculum (panel) and pale underwing. This sociable duck is found throughout Australia and the Pacific. It feeds on aquatic plants, seeds, worms and snails and nests in hollow trees, long grass or reeds. It can interbreed with the introduced mallard duck and the hybrid offspring have orange-brown legs and feet.



MASKED LAPWING

VANELLUS MILES

OTHER NAME:
SPURWING PLOVER

SIZE: UP TO 35CM

This bird has a brown back, white chest and characteristic yellow facial wattles. It is a bit smaller than the Australian magpie. It prefers grasslands, mudflats and wetlands and feeds on insects, seeds and grubs. It nests in a scrape in the ground from July onwards and is recognisable by its Kerr-kick-ki-ki-ki call.



WHITE-PLUMED HONEYEATER

LICHENOSTOMUS PENICILLATUS

SIZE: UP TO 19CM

The bird is olive-grey with a yellow head and black bill. It features a faint black line before its white neck plume. Its voice is recognisable by the 'chick-owee', 'chick-abiddy' sound. It lives in open forests and woodlands, particularly red gums on watercourses.



PURPLE SWAMPHEN

PORPHYRIO PORPHYRIO

SIZE: UP TO 48CM

The purple swamphen has a bright red bill and frontal shield, purple chest and black head and back. It is a common and widespread bird in swamps and marshy paddocks. It feeds on soft shoots of reeds, frog, snails, eggs and ducklings and builds a hidden nest of reeds. All family members share in the incubation of young. Its voice is a harsh, screaming 'hee-ow' noise.

Birds



NANKEEN NIGHT HERON

NYCTICORAX CALEDONICUS

OTHER NAME:
RUFIOUS NIGHT HERON

SIZE: UP TO 64CM

The nankeen night heron is a stocky bird with a rich cinnamon-coloured upper body and cream underparts. The top of its head is black and it has short, yellow legs and feet. During breeding, the back of its head bears three white, long, trailing feathers. Young birds are heavily spotted and streaked white, brown and orange-brown. Nankeen night herons feed at night in shallow water on insects, crustaceans, fish and frogs and breed throughout the year, depending on food availability. They roost in trees close to the water. Breeding takes place in colonies, often together with egrets and cormorants. The nest is a loose stick platform over water. Both sexes incubate the eggs.



RED-BROWED FINCH

NEOCHMIA TEMPORALIS

OTHER NAME:
RED-BROWED FIRETAILS

SIZE: UP TO 12CM

The red-browed finch is green and grey but most easily recognised by its bright red eyebrow, rump and beak. It is often observed in small flocks, which feed on the grass and fly into dense undergrowth when disturbed. Red-browed finches feed on seeds and insects on the ground, but sometimes perch on seeding grass heads. Their preference for open grassy areas surrounded by dense shrubbery enables them to survive well in weedy areas along railway tracks and creek lines, where seeding grasses escape the lawnmower.



WILLIE WAGTAIL

RHIPIDURA LEUCOPHRYS

SIZE: UP TO 22CM

The willie wagtail is the largest and best known Australian fantail. The plumage is black above with a white belly. Willie wagtails are distinguished from other similar-sized black and white birds by its black throat and white eyebrows and whisker marks. They are found in most open habitats, especially open forests and woodlands, are often associated with watercourses and wetlands and are common around human habitation. Willie wagtails are active feeders and can be seen darting around lawns as they hunt for insects on the ground. As they do so, their tails wag from side to side. Insects are also captured in the air.



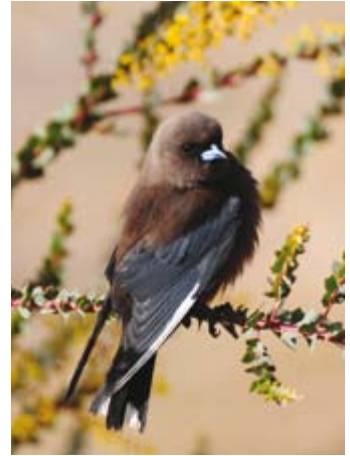
RED WATTLEBIRD

ANTHOCHAERA CARNUNCLATA

SIZE: UP TO 36CM

The red wattlebird is a large, noisy honeyeater. The common name refers to the fleshy reddish wattle on the side of the neck. The plumage is grey-brown on the body, with prominent white streaks and yellow on the belly. The face is pale and the tail is long with a white tip. The red wattlebird feeds on nectar, which it obtains by probing flowers with its thin curved bill. Some insects are also eaten, taken from foliage or caught in mid-air. Berries and the honeydew produced by some insects add to the bird's diet.

Birds



CRIMSON ROSELLA

PLATYCERCUS ELEGANS

SIZE: UP TO 36CM

The crimson rosella has mostly crimson (red) plumage and bright blue cheeks. The feathers of the back and wing coverts are black, broadly edged with red. The flight feathers of the wings have broad blue edges and the tail is blue above and pale blue below and on the outer feathers. Young crimson rosellas have the characteristic blue cheeks, but the rest of the body plumage is green-olive to yellowish olive (occasionally red in some areas). Crimson rosellas are normally encountered in small flocks and are easily attracted to garden seed trays. Once familiar with humans, they will accept hand-held food. Natural foods include seeds of eucalypts, grasses and shrubs, as well as insects and some tree blossoms.

CHESTNUT TEAL

ANAS CASTANEA

SIZE: UP TO 50CM
(COMMONLY 42CM)

The chestnut teal is a small dabbling duck with a high forehead and rounded head. Males are distinctive, having a glossy green head, chestnut brown neck, breast and flanks, dark brown upper body and wings, and a black undertail with contrasting white patch. Females are mottled dark brown and grey, with a pale throat streaked brown and a dark eye stripe. In both sexes the eye is a deep red, the bill is blue-grey and the legs and feet are green-grey. The wings have a dark glossy green to purple speculum (panel) edged white and the underwing is brown, with white wing pits.

RED-RUMPED PARROT

PSEPHOTUS HAEMATONOTUS

SIZE: UP TO 27CM

Red-rumped parrots are medium-sized, slender parrots. The adult male is bright green, with a blue-green head, a red rump, and yellow shoulders and belly. The female is a duller, olive-green, with a green rump and faint yellow or light green scales on the belly. Young birds of both sexes are duller in colour. The red-rumped parrot is found in open grasslands or lightly timbered plains, as well as along watercourses and in mallee farmlands with access to water. It feeds in pairs or small flocks on the ground, preferring seeds and leaves of grasses. It also will feed on seeds, fruits and flowers in trees and is often seen feeding in suburban parks around Melbourne.

DUSKY WOODSWALLOW

ARTAMUS CYANOPTERUS

SIZE: UP TO 18CM

Up to 100 dusky woodswallows may form a tight swarm on a tree branch as they settled down for the night. They do this by clinging to the shoulders and wings of the bird below. Sometimes you can see them huddling together like this on a chilly day. These summer migrants return each year to breed.

Frogs

About 12 species of frogs and toads have been recorded in the region that includes the Maribyrnong River, each with their own distinctive calls and characteristics and more likely to be heard than seen. If you're quiet when approaching, a variety of species can be encountered while close to the Maribyrnong River and its wetland areas.

Two species – the Growling Grass Frog and Bibron's Toadlet – have been classed as threatened and/or vulnerable because of degraded habitats the prolonged drought and threats of fungal diseases.

Various community groups and schools are involved in restoring frog habitat, however we all need to participate. The easiest way to help frogs survive is to avoid pouring soaps, detergents and chemicals into sinks and drains. Frogs are extremely sensitive to toxins.



Frogs



GROWLING GRASS FROG

LITORIA RANIFORMIS

OTHER NAMES:
SOUTHERN BELL FROG OR
WARTY BELL FROG NATIVE

SIZE: UP TO 9CM

These large frogs with long back legs are easily recognised by their green and gold colour and scattered warts over their skin. Feeding mainly on terrestrial invertebrates such as beetles, termites, cockroaches, moths, butterflies and various insect larvae, growling grass frogs breed from August until April. Their call is a growling 'waaah waaah waaah'. They are found scattered throughout the Maribyrnong River, mainly concentrated in the middle reaches.

BIBRON'S TOADLET

PSEUDOPHRYNE BIBRONII

OTHER NAMES:
SOUTHERN BULLFROG OR
EASTERN BANJO FROG

SIZE: UP TO 3CM

These small frogs have short legs and numerous large warts on their back. In the Melbourne area, bibron's toadlet is limited to the northern and western suburbs and to the west of Port Phillip Bay. It has been found in the middle and upper reaches of the Maribyrnong River and its upper tributaries. Numbers have declined over the past decade, and the frog has now disappeared from or is rare in areas where it was once common.

COMMON FROGLET

CRINIA SIGNIFERA

OTHER NAME:
COMMON EASTERN FROGLET

SIZE: 2CM

The colour and pattern on the common froglet is extremely variable. At one extreme, the back is smooth and uniformly brown; at the other, longitudinal ridges are present with alternating light and dark brown bands, or even shades of green or red. The common froglet breeds from April to December, and its mating call can create a deafening chorus. After rain, breeding occurs in still waterbodies or slow-flowing creeks. It is common throughout the Maribyrnong catchment, especially in central and southern areas.

SOUTHERN TOADLET

*PSEUDOPHRYNE
SEMIMARMORATA*

SIZE: UP TO 3CM

The southern toadlet is very similar in size, ecology and behaviour to bibron's toadlet, yet has a more restricted distribution. The Southern Toadlet is small, with short legs and has numerous large warts on its back. It is bright orange under the limbs and throat. The southern toadlet is a terrestrial species, found in open forest, woodlands, grasslands and heaths, wherever sufficient damp soil and cover is present. Its breeding season extends through late summer to autumn. Listed as vulnerable in Victoria, the southern toadlet has been recorded several times in the upper Maribyrnong catchment.

Frogs



SPOTTED MARSH FROG

LIMNODYNASTES TASMANIENSIS

SIZE: 4CM

This medium-sized frog has a pale back, broken up by numerous clearly defined spots ranging from brown to green, and its underneath is smooth and white. It is highly adaptable and often forms large breeding aggregations, with vocal male choruses. Males call while floating in water, usually among aquatic vegetation, from August until May. It is most common in the central and southern parts of the Maribyrnong catchment.



BROWN TREE FROG

LITORIA WINGIER

OTHER NAMES:
EWING'S TREE FROG OR
SOUTHERN BROWN TREE FROG

SIZE: UP TO 5CM

This medium-sized frog usually has a dark to light brown back, white underside and the back of its thighs range from yellow to a deep red. The brown tree frog calls from and breeds in farm dams, ponds, creeks and waterholes. It tends not to be associated with fast-moving water. It is common throughout the Maribyrnong catchment, although most recent records are from the northern part of the catchment.



POBBLEBONK

LIMNODYNASTES DUMERILII

OTHER NAME:
SOUTHERN BULLFROG OR
EASTERN BANJO FROG

SIZE: UP TO 8CM

The pobblebonk is a medium to large frog. Two sub-species occur around Melbourne: one to the north and west of Melbourne (*L. dumerilii dumerilii*) has a relatively uniform dark brown back. The other, to the east and south of Melbourne (*L. dumerilii insularis*), has a pale stripe running down its back and more variable colour. Males call from August to April and may migrate up to one kilometre to reach breeding sites. Large numbers of pobblebonk may be apparent following rain.



STRIPED MARSH FROG

LIMNODYNASTES PERONI

SIZE: UP TO 7CM

A large wetland-dwelling frog and voracious hunter, this frog eats almost any animal smaller than itself, including small frogs. Its distribution extends along the east coast from Queensland to South Australia. It is most commonly associated with wetlands and permanent water and shelters among reeds and other debris.

Mammals

A great variety of mammal species are common to Maribyrnong River and its local environment. The mammals known to inhabit the area include 10 species of bat, platypus, koalas, sugar gliders and even the Short-beaked Echidna.

One of the more interesting mammals in the area is the Black Wallaby. With an ample water supply and the restoration/revegetation of its natural habitat, the shy Black Wallaby grazes on coarse shrubs, bushes and grasses. Kangaroos and wombats can also be found along the Maribyrnong River, feeding on grasses. The Common Wombat also enjoys munching on bark and fungi whereas kangaroos like to chew on leaves as part of their narrow diet.

Other native mammals recorded in the area include Brushtail and Ringtail Possums, Water Rats and a variety of pest species. Animals such as foxes, rabbits and domestic cats are widespread across much of Victoria and wreak havoc on our indigenous wildlife.



Mammals



WOMBAT

VOMBATUS URSINUS HIRSUTUS

SIZE: UP TO 1.2M,
WEIGHT UP TO 35 KG

The common wombat is the largest burrowing herbivorous mammal. Indeed, it is such an accomplished burrower that early settlers called it a 'badger', a term that is still heard today. However, the closest relative of the wombat is the koala. With its short tail and legs, characteristic waddle and 'cuddly' appearance, the wombat is one of the most endearing of Australia's native animals. It is a fairly large, solidly built animal with a squat, round, bear like body, small ears and eyes, and a large naked nose. Its thick, coarse fur varies from sandy brown to grey and black, and is sometimes flecked with fawn. Wombats usually come out at night to graze when temperatures are lower.



SHORT-BEAKED ECHIDNA

TACHYGLOSSUS ACULEATUS

SIZE: UP TO 45CM

These curious egg-laying mammals live a solitary life with no fixed address and very few requirements other than ants or termites to eat, and a log or bush in which to shelter. When in danger they dig down, barring an uninviting wall of quills to the enemy. Echidnas are 'true-blue' Australians and should not be confused with porcupines or hedgehogs, neither of which occurs naturally in this country. Once the young echidnas grow spines, their mums eject them from the pouch (who would blame them!).



PLATYPUS

ORNITHORHYNCHUS ANATINUS

SIZE: UP TO 60CM

This top predator is found in rivers and streams across much of eastern Australia, including the Maribyrnong River. It feeds on a wide range of benthic (or bottom-dwelling) macroinvertebrates, along with yabbies, worms, shrimp and small shellfish. Platypus surveys have only been carried out in the middle reaches of the Maribyrnong River, where they were found to be present in low densities. This unique monotreme is a valuable indicator of the health of aquatic ecosystems.



RAKALI OR WATER RAT

HYDROMYS CHRYSOGASTER

SIZE: UP TO 30CM

This native mammal is highly adapted to aquatic life. Its upper parts vary from grey-brown to rich golden brown to blackish. Underneath it is cream to golden-orange. Water rats have a distinguishing broad white tip on the end of their tail. Widespread and common in much of coastal Australia, they have been recorded in the Upper Maribyrnong catchment. Most active at night, they hunt prey such as fish and frogs in the water before bringing them onto land to eat.

Mammals



EASTERN GREY KANGAROO

MACROPUS GIGANTEUS

OTHER NAMES: GREAT GREY KANGAROO OR FORESTER

SIZE: ABOUT 1.4M TALL WHEN STANDING

These kangaroos have grey-brown upper parts with pale grey or white underneath. The males (weighing up to 66kg) are twice the weight of females (weighing up to 37kg) and are more heavily developed in the chest and forearms. They are widespread and common throughout eastern Australia, including along sections of the Maribyrnong River. The eastern greys are most active at dusk and dawn and gather in large mobs where food is abundant. Breeding is continuous when water is available, although most young are born from March to May.



BLACK WALLABY

WALLABIA BICOLOR

OTHER NAME: SWAMP WALLABY OR BLACK-TAILED WALLABY

SIZE: UP TO 76CM

This wallaby is dark and stocky with coarse fur. Across its back it is dark grey or blackish, with flecks of grey, yellow and orange. Its underparts are pale yellow or orange. They are common along the entire east coast and are found in a wide range of habitats including in the Maribyrnong catchment. They are more active during the days than most other kangaroos and wallabies and are solitary and shy. They feed on foliage of shrubs, ferns, sedges and some grasses. Their breeding is continuous when water is available, although most births in Victoria are during winter.

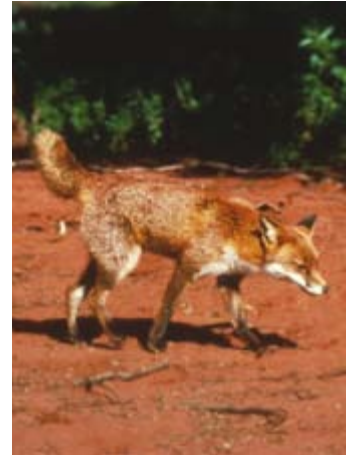


GREY-HEADED FLYING FOX

PTEROPUS POLIOCEPHALUS

SIZE: BODY UP TO 29CM

The grey-headed flying fox is the largest Australian bat, with a wingspan to 1m. They are nocturnal, seeking out sources of fruit, pollen and nectar at night. During the day they roost, hanging upside down in the canopy of trees, often in quite large numbers. They have long grey body fur, with a collar of golden-orange fur. They are found throughout eastern coastal Australia, including in the Maribyrnong catchment. A largely migratory species, they shift in response to changing food resources, although a permanent breeding colony has been present in Melbourne since the 1980s.



EUROPEAN RED FOX

VULPES VULPES

SIZE: HEAD AND BODY 46-86CM, TAIL 30-55CM

The European red fox was introduced to Australia for recreational hunting in 1855 and fox populations became established in the wild in the early 1870s. During the day, the fox sleeps in dens, logs and other shelter – it is mainly active at night. The fox eats almost anything, scavenging and preying on whatever is available. Its main food source is small animals, but it also eats insects and fruit, particularly in summer when preferred prey is less abundant. Both males and females are sexually mature at the age of one year. Litters, averaging four cubs, are born during August and September, and emerge from the den in late spring.

Reptiles

About 20 reptile species are known to inhabit the Maribyrnong River and surrounding areas, with skinks making up a large proportion of that number. Other reptiles are dragons, snakes, geckos, blue-tongue and legless lizards, and the Common Long-necked Turtle.

About four species of snakes are known to inhabit the area including the Eastern Brown Snake, Lowland Copperhead, Red-bellied Black Snake and the Tiger Snake.

Although these snakes are highly venomous, they are protected species in Victoria and must not be caught or killed. Generally speaking, snakes need not be feared and are more likely to flee should they sense danger or human approach.



Reptiles



EASTERN LONG-NECKED TURTLE

CELODINA LONGICOLLIS

OTHER NAMES: COMMON LONG-NECKED TORTOISE AND SNAKE-NECKED TURTLE

SIZE: UPPER SHELL LENGTH OF UP TO 25CM

The eastern long-necked turtle belongs to a group of turtles that fold their head sideways under the edge of their shell rather than pulling their head directly backwards into their shell. It is thought that they can live for more than 35 years. This turtle is the most common and widespread in Australia. However, it did not naturally occur in the Melbourne region. In the 1950s and 1960s this turtle was very popular as a pet and large numbers were imported from the Gippsland Lakes. Melbourne populations are thought to have started from released pets.

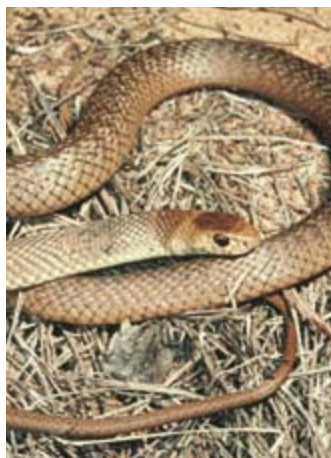


TIGER SNAKE

NOTECHIS SCRUTATORS

SIZE: UP TO 1.7M
COMMONLY 1.2M

These snakes are highly venomous and have a reputation for being aggressive. If threatened they are often forced to defend themselves because they are slow moving and can't escape quickly. Usually found on the ground near water, they can hunt up in trees as well. Mating sometimes takes place in two bursts – first in spring and again in autumn when the females store the sperm ready for use the following spring. Tiger snakes are active during the day with a diet that includes frogs, lizards, birds and mammals. They are widespread in southern Australia, favouring cool moist areas such as swamp edges and creek banks including the Maribyrnong catchment.



EASTERN BROWN SNAKE

PSEUDONAJA TEXTILIS

OTHER NAME:
COMMON BROWN SNAKE

SIZE: UP TO 1.5M

The eastern brown snake's colour is variable, ranging from shades of brown to almost black. It is widespread throughout dry parts of eastern Australia, including the Maribyrnong catchment. Land clearing has apparently been beneficial to this species as numbers appear to have increased. It is extremely swift, alert, nervous and quick to retaliate if provoked. Their diet is a variety of vertebrates, particularly reptiles and mammals. The species is regarded as dangerously venomous.



COPPERHEAD SNAKE

AUSTRELAPS SUPERBUS

SIZE: UP TO 1.6M
COMMONLY 1.2M

Copperheads vary in colour, but can be distinguished by pale areas on the side of the face. Copperheads can be active in cool weather and will commonly hunt at night as well. Although venomous they are not aggressive snakes and will strike only if cornered. Preferring damp areas, these reptiles are usually seen in grass tussocks, rotting logs and tree roots.

Reptiles



EASTERN BLUE TONGUE

*TILIQUA SCINCOIDES
SCINCOIDESI*

OTHER NAME:
COMMON BLUE TONGUE

SIZE: UP TO 56CM

This lizard's colour is highly variable, but usually includes pale bands between its nape (back of neck) and hips and bands on its tail. In spite of their slow movement and large size, it continues to thrive in urban areas. It is active during the day, sheltering under logs, in thick low vegetation and burrows. It feeds on fruits, flowers, foliage, arthropods, snails, eggs and small vertebrates. It is found in virtually all habitats throughout eastern Australia, including the Maribyrnong catchment.

MARbled GECKO

CHRISTINUS MARMORATUS

SIZE: UP TO 10CM

This gecko is coloured pale to dark grey or pinkish brown with dark lines forming irregular marbling, it sometimes has irregular pale grey blotches. It shelters beneath loose bark and rock but has also been known to enter houses. Geckos feed mainly on arthropods such as insects, spiders and scorpions.



Bugs and Insects

More than 60 species of aquatic insects are found in the Maribyrnong River. Some of the most common types are described below. There is a large variety of aquatic insects. Different types are suited to different environments, such as fast-flowing water or still pools, a mud stream bottom or stones, different water temperatures and different water chemistry.

The nature of the Maribyrnong gradually changes along its length from a small headwater stream through a lowland river to an estuary where it meets the sea. As it changes, the types of aquatic insects also change to those best suited to the environment. For example, shredders are mainly found upstream where most leaf litter falls. These are patterns that are common to many river systems.

The aquatic insects that can be found in the Maribyrnong River are also influenced by the geology of the region which affects water chemistry and stream bed material, irregular flows and by changes to land use along its length.

The greatest threats to aquatic insect diversity are the irregular flow regime and stormwater pollution. Flow can almost cease in some parts of the Maribyrnong over summer due to low rainfall and irrigators pumping from the river, while great scouring flows can be delivered to the river from urban areas during storms.



Bugs and Insects



DIVING BEETLE

DYTISCIDAE

SIZE: UP TO 3.5CM

Adult diving beetles can be recognised by their streamlined shape and thin antennae. Their hind legs have paddle-like appendages called tarsi, which have a dense fringe of hairs. Diving beetles are one of the most diverse groups of aquatic beetles, with 226 species recorded in Australia. They are most likely to be found in ponds, lakes, billabongs, dams and slow-flowing rivers. Adults often fly from one habitat to another. Both adult and larvae eat a variety of other invertebrates and will sometimes attack small fish and tadpoles.



ELMID BEETLE

ELMIDAE

SIZE: UP TO 6MM

Elmid or riffle beetles are small and dark and have long legs in relation to their body. Elmid beetles are usually found in well-oxygenated streams on submerged wood or on rocks in riffles. Their diet is decaying vegetation and algae. Both larvae and adult beetles cannot swim and so crawl along submerged objects. Adults breathe oxygen dissolved in the water around them.



MAYFLY

BAETIDAE

SIZE: 10MM

These mayflies are small to medium-sized with mottled colouring and rounded bodies and heads, which feature a pair of long antennae. They are strong swimmers and move with rapid wiggles of their abdomen. The Baetidae is a diverse family with worldwide distribution, including the Maribyrnong River system. Baetids are more diverse in cooler, flowing waters, but species do occur in warmer lowland systems and occasionally in wetlands. They feed mainly on algae grazed from a variety of substrates such as rocks, wood and aquatic plants.



INTRODUCED FRESHWATER SNAIL

PHYSAACUTA

SIZE: UP TO 3CM

This snail is found throughout the Maribyrnong River. It has a mottled mantle that is usually visible through its shell and a fleshy digitate margin (a fleshy finger-like process under the edge of its shell). It lives in a diverse range of aquatic habitats, mostly in slow-moving waters, and grazes on algae. These snails are capable of self-fertilisation and reproduce at least once a year.

Plants

More than 290 species of flora can be found within 50 metres of the Maribyrnong River. Plants play an important part in maintaining the vast ecology of the river and its surrounds. Trees provide homes and nesting places for birds and some mammals while also providing an important food source.

Some of the parks such as Footscray Park, Maribyrnong Park and nearby reserves have been planted out with exotic trees, while at Brimbank Park the native grasses can be seen along the river. Upstream, the rich river flats on the east bank were used for market gardening until 1983.

Here are some of the plants you may be able to see in the area:



Plants



RIVER RED GUM

EUCALYPTUS CAMALDULENSIS

SIZE: UP TO 45M

River red gums are the monarchs of our changing landscape. Silent witnesses to many comings and goings, these giants are home to many living things, both resident and nomad alike. Even when dead, as logs on the ground, they continue to provide shelter and homes for many plants and animals. Old age for a red gum starts somewhere around 300-400 years. Their thick trunks, spreading crowns and gnarled branches create a grand and graceful character... as well as nesting hollows for wildlife.

MANNA GUM

EUCALYPTUS VIMINALIS

SIZE: UP TO 30M

This tall and spreading forest or woodland tree has long, narrow, fragrant leaves and sheds its bark in long ribbons, revealing cream or white bark. Its cream flowers are mostly seen in summer and it provides many hollows for nesting birds and marsupials. It grows along watercourses and on moist well drained soils.

BLACKWOOD

ACACIA MELANOXYLON

SIZE: UP TO 3M

The furrows and cracks in blackwood trunks provide homes for insects and spiders, which hide under the bark and burrow into the wood. This long-lived wattle has dense foliage, creamy lemon winter/spring flowers and dark, heavy wood. A lot of fine Australian furniture has been made from its timber. Blackwoods are excellent habitat for wildlife and beautiful to look at!

SWEET BURSARIA

BURSARIA SPINOSA

SIZE: UP TO 8M

Flowering time transforms this scraggly plant into a splendid highlight of the dry summer landscape. The sweetly scented, cream flowers develop into small brown seed vessels that rattle in the wind. Being thorny, bursarias offer safe refuge for small birds. This humble plant rose to instant fame in 1987 when it was found to provide the exclusive home of the extremely rare Eltham copper butterfly.

Plants



SILVER WATTLE

ACACIA DEALBATA

SIZE: UP TO 20M

In August and September the yellow blossoms of this tree light up the environment surrounding the river. It has grey-green leaves and was given its name because of silver patches on the bark of mature trees. It is easily identified by its feathery foliage and abundant early flowers.

BLACK WATTLE

ACACIA MEARNSII

SIZE: UP TO 15M

People appreciate these wattles for their bright yellow flowers and delicate, feathery foliage. But to birds and other creatures, they are well-stocked bush pantries. Some 350 kinds of insects were found in one old tree. Sugar gliders feed on gum exuded from the bark and black cockatoos rip open the trunks in search of insects. They flower in spring and early summer. These wattles grow very fast and are often used to control soil erosion.

TREE VIOLET

MELICYTUS DENTACUS

SIZE: UP TO 4M

This shrub is a favourite haunt for little birds who like to eat the pretty bluish berries. It grows along the river and creek banks. The tree violet's sweet perfume may beckon you to sniff at its many tiny bell-shaped flowers. But beware, the branches are armed with sharp thorns!

RIVER BOTTLEBRUSH

CALLISTEMON SIEBERI

SIZE: UP TO 7CM

Now far less common than before European settlement, river bottlebrush have fairly stiff sharp-pointed leaves. By contrast, new leaves are reddish, soft, silky and lovely to touch. Look for them along the riverbanks where some very old, spreading examples can be found.