

## Little Red Bird to get 3-year boost for habitat and feed

Kowanyama people welcomed recent news that the Mitchell River group has been successful in securing nearly \$100,000 for a three year program to help the “little red bird”, also known as the White-bellied Crimson Finch (*Neochmia evangelinae*).

This project will build on the work delivered by Dr Ray Pierce and Dr Pamela Schultz in 2016-17 and will see Mitchell River working in close cooperation with the Kowanyama Rangers.

Head Ranger John Clark commented: “The little red bird is very important to Kowanyama people. These birds tell us when the country is healthy.

When we have too many fires or cattle and horses tearing the place up, the little Red Bird struggles.”



Funded by the Queensland Government’s 2019 Community Sustainability Action Grants program, the project will support recovery of threatened species.

Our project combines several activities that are drawn from the recommendations of the nationally-approved WBCF Threatened Species Recovery Plan, outlined following.



*Magnificent Creek waterhole is one of the 5 habitat areas covered in the project.*



**Survey and monitoring.** The project will add to a growing base of field data to help better understand the bird's life cycle and habitat requirements. This research is being led by respected ornithologist Dr Ray Pierce who helped shape up the funding application and give it the scientific rigour needed.

Dr Pierce will lead a series of field studies during the project. These may involve both local community members as well as enthusiasts keen to assist with the project.

**Fire management.** Proper control of fire is key to maintaining the health of the WBCF habitat and food sources. Hot, late season burns are very destructive. The red bird favours pandanus for nesting, but also needs brush that grows low and near the edges of water sources so that they can access water without having to travel far. Long, open flights expose them to a range of predators.

The key to improved fire management is inviting the local custodians to lead their community on the journey. Fire has a long tradition of being an obligatory part of Indigenous law and governance. There are elders who can speak for these patches of country and delegate authority to the right people to control permissions to burn. As the local community re-adopts these cultural norms there will be a reduction in poor behaviour, indiscriminate burns, and disrespectful management of the environment.

**Controlling cattle and horses.** The destructive impact of these big grazing animals is hard to overestimate. Their pads and camps put continuous pressure on the sensitive areas around permanent waterholes. Their grazing reduces the variety and viability of perennial native grasses.



This is a real challenge because there are only two options for reducing the impacts: fencing off the high-value habitat or destocking and removing horses across the whole property.

Given the very high cost of fencing at Kowanyama (approx \$18K/km for standard stock fencing!) it may be more productive to seek funding and approvals to de-stock the entire area.

We are looking for ways to coordinate our efforts through collaboration with the local Prescribed Body Corporate, Abm Elgoring Ambung Aboriginal Corporation. Mover and shaker Tanya Major is working with various parties involved in the ongoing effort to resolve the mess left behind by the Kowanyama Cattle Company that continues to languish in receivership.



**Weed control.** Rubbervine and Hymenachne are the two of the most threatening weeds which have some hope of being controlled. Unless these invaders are contained they will dominate and destroy much of the complex ecosystem diversity in the area.

Grader grass is prolific and well-established and there is not yet a practical response to deal with it. There is evidence that some native birds are using the grader grass as a food source of last resort.

**Restoration.** As fire is brought under control, grazing pressure reduced, and weeds being managed, the land will begin to heal itself. This project aims to give it a bit of a boost on that journey to recovery.

In cooperation with the local Shire, we will encourage propagation of pandanus trees in the community garden and shadehouse. The project will run for 3 years under this funding round, which should be sufficient to get some young trees up and ready for planting at the waterholes. The boss of RISE Kowanyama, Stephen Dunnell, is excited about the possibilities of collaborating through the participation of elders and youth who are already growing local ornamentals and veggies at the community garden.





The red birds love the seeds of “canegrass” which used to be the dominant species around their habitats. Much of that abundance has been grazed out, burned out, and crowded out.



Thankfully, a patch of canegrass is being lovingly tended by long-term community man Viv Sinammon. His legendary status is well-earned and we’re looking forward to discussing the best way to leverage this seedy treasure-trove. It is only through the far-sighted actions of Viv that

there is a seedbank preserved. Viv put the grass in to feed local populations of the red bird. Now it looks like that reserve of native tucker can be multiplied to feed many more hungry finches. Perhaps canegrass meadows will once again be commonplace across Kowanyama’s magnificent delta country. The little red birds would be looking forward to it!

### Summary of the project’s outputs

Over the course of the three years, the project is committed to delivering:

Survey camps held	3
Fire management workshops delivered	3
Area to be surveyed and spot treated for weeds (ha)	3,500
Area to be intensively controlled for weeds (ha)	250
Number of trees to be planted	100
Number of grass seedlings planted	400
Fencing to be installed or upgraded (kms)	2
Habitat restoration camps held	2

Work on the project will be coordinated by the Mitchell River Watershed Management group. A schedule of activities starting after the Wet, early 2020, will be published on the website.



*View across Red Lily Lagoon. This is a special place for the blue-tongue lizard.*



Comment  
from the  
Chair

**Allan Holmes**



After a relatively quiet year we are hoping to be somewhat more active during 2020.

The Mitchell Giver group has received some funds as a result of the payout from the Dianne mine rehabilitation settlement. We expect to convene a meeting in April or May of next year to plan work to ensure long term natural resource management throughout the catchment.

We will be inviting interested parties to put forward ideas and projects which we can practically and realistically sponsor to ensure the water, soil, vegetation, flora etc are well managed right across the Mitchell catchment.

We are pleased to have been granted funding to continue the survey and habitat management work for the White-bellied Crimson Finch down at Kowanyama. This work will include activities that will reduce threats and restore habitat.

The control of feral animals and weeds continues to be an important concern for long term health of the river system.

We also hope to finalise our project work in the Arriga area. Although there are many complex factors involved, the data we have gathered help build an understanding of this important area. Working with project officer Brian Prove, we look forward to delivering a good report.

As we approach Xmas and new year the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group wish you and family all the best for a great festive season and productive new year.

Best wishes. Safe travelling.

**Allan Holmes, Chairman**  
[chair@mitchell-river.com.au](mailto:chair@mitchell-river.com.au)

## Farewell to a faithful friend of the regions

At the recent Queensland Water and Land Carers (QWaLC) meeting in Cairns our long-serving regional Director, Mark van Rygt, stood down.

Many would know Mark as an absolute stalwart of the landcare ethic. He is always ready to get out bush with a purpose. Getting stuff done is the core of this fellow's approach, and his history tells a remarkable story of success.

Mark has set up both the Mt Isa Landcare and Gregory River Landcare Groups, started the Mt Isa Fish Stocking Group, introduced hundreds of people to the joys of remote land care and camp oven cooking, and been responsible for both cultivating and catching thousands of fish in the very special part of the world he calls home.

Mark is always ready with a story and an insight he's learned over the years through deep experience. He served on the QWaLC Board at various points, most recently for 2x 3 year terms as Director for the Northern and Southern Gulf regions.

Mark says he's sad to leave the QWaLC Board, but he's also pretty chuffed about getting more free time to devote to his beloved local groups.



He was gifted a special Japanese gardening tool as a going-away present, and somehow made it look very much like a Crocodile Dundee moment...

Go well Mark!

# A brief overview and view of the future for the Mitchell River Group

Provided by **Ian Adcock**, Director.

In this issue of CATCH UP I would like to refresh our stakeholders and new members some history of the Group over the past 29 years.

The Mitchell River Watershed Management Group was formed out of a meeting at Kowanyama in 1990. The strength of the Group in the intervening years has been its achievements and stakeholder commitment of 106 fully paid up members to March 2007.

The MRWVG spans 72,000 sq. kilometres across the base of Cape York Peninsula it incorporates seven major river systems Mitchell, Alice, King, Palmer, Walsh, Lynd and the Tate.

Five Local Governments are involved, Mareeba, Cook, Ethridge, Carpentaria, and Kowanyama Communities Local Government Area. The Mitchell River has a common boundary with the Wet Tropics in the closely settled area of Julatten. We are a little larger than Tasmania, 40% or more of our Northern boundary extends up into the Cape York NRM Region.

Our Community Engagement Program covers Irvinebank Landcare Group, Julatten & Mt Molloy Community Association, and Cattle Creek Landcare whom we have been supporting since 1992. We have supported the Kowanyama Land Office since our inception. We are also actively engaged with the Rosendale family at Bonny Glen, and often collaborate with Cape York Weeds & Feral Animals via Trevor Meldrum and his team.

Grazing remains the most extensive landuse in the catchment. Mining activities have made a resurgence - owing to high base metal prices. The

Mareeba Dimbulah Irrigation Scheme established in the 1950's has made the upper catchment of the Mitchell River and the Walsh viable for agriculture, horticulture and small scale cattle fattening projects. Tourism and fishing have risen in prominence in recent years.

All Mitchell River Watershed stakeholders were invited to set the goals and objectives of the Mitchell River Watershed Management Plan (2013-2016). Similarly the priorities and actions are products of consultation. Our Plan is linked to NRM Planning at catchment and local level. Reviews of this document are held periodically. We are observed by Government as an Integrated Catchment Management Group. The Group also has Deductible Gift Recipient Status with the ATO.

In 1998, under the guidelines of the Natural Heritage Trust, a working group was established to put in place a Regional Body for the Northern Gulf. By the year 2000 this had become fact and the MRWVG came under the umbrella of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group. At this point in time the catchment group had



funding for several projects, finance was not really a problem. But by 2004 NHT funds had been expended and finance for projects became scarce. We also had to move from our Mareeba office in the DPI building to Cairns. This helped to alleviate travelling time for the office staff.

Field work developed extensively as the demands of stakeholders for assistance increased. Many

people in local areas need to focus on local issues to see value in environmental work.

In 2005 the MRWMG Executive made application to the Northern Gulf for funds to help with administration costs over two years. The argy-bargy that went on about this simple application was unbelievable. It took six months for Northern Gulf to write up a contract and have it agreed upon by both parties. The contract gave us access to RIS Money under ACT 125, paid quarterly for Community Engagement.

At a joint meeting in December 2005 of MRWMG, NGRMG, Peninsula Land Care (PLC), plus personnel from State Agencies, a statement was read out by the chairperson of the PLC: “The stakeholders in the overlapping Regions of Cape York and NGRMG prefer to be looked after by the MRWMG, as they consider their issues are more aligned to the Mitchell River than to an office in Georgetown, or the Gulf area.”

All went well until 2008 when Federal Government money was cut to Regional bodies and catchment groups. This left the MRWMG in a very precarious position: were we to look elsewhere for support (Cape York) or do we become swallowed up by the bureaucracy of the Northern Gulf?

This relationship with Mitchell River stakeholders has been cemented by projects along that part of the Mitchell River Catchment known as the Joint Management Area (JMA).

The MRWMG can provide strategic direction for NRM, along with development and research.

- We do represent the community.
- We are experienced and committed.
- We do have the linkages to successfully implement NRM activities.
- We intend to have a well informed community that is active in NRM issues.
- We recognise the need for industry to sustain our present communities and the need for carefully planned management.

Going forward, the MRWMG needs financial and administration support. Recognition from funding bodies that prevention is strategically more important and less costly than reparation

should mean that groups such as ours would be funded to undertake this vital work.

Our catchment is in a relatively intact state. A significant investment now will have a higher chance of successfully implementing change than in a few years time when problems have begun to escalate.

The MRWMG are here to facilitate the community’s management of natural resources. Our Group has the fortitude, endurance, self reliance and faith: all we ask is for further support.



## Tilapia story continues

Tilapia of both species have been located downstream on the Walsh this year, confirming fears that the pest fish will continue to propagate downstream. There is little practical hope for eradication from the catchment.

The Mitchell River group is working with State agencies to secure funding for landcare works in some of the key weirs and waterholes. Bonnie Holmes, Senior Policy Officer – Aquatic Invasives Invasive Plants & Animals for Biosecurity Queensland, is assisting with ideas and funding opportunities.

One of the possibilities is working with new farmers around Leafgold Weir to improve water quality. Tilapia thrive in disturbed, weedy environments. Cleaning up the weir and the runoff would work against the tilapia and would improve public amenity to boot!



# Mitchell River

## Secretary elected to QWaLC

John Brisbin has taken on the role of Director for Northern and Southern Gulf Regions with QWaLC.

Following in the footsteps of Mark van Rygt, John is keen to support local groups having a positive effect on-ground. “People are passionate about their creeks, wetlands, reserves, and parks. I’m looking forward to connecting and supporting all of the groups in our regions.”

Given the low population densities and huge distances, John is realistic about what can be expected.

“We have a very different environment to what you might call the ‘classic Landcare landscape.’ It’s not like a near-urban neighbourhood with a hundred families ready to help clean up a few hundred meters of their beloved local parkland. And it’s not like we have a couple dozen farmers working to coordinate a wildlife corridor across a few hundred hectares of their cropping land.”

“Our regions are dominated by extensive grazing operations. In the Northern Gulf it’s pretty typical that a couple in their sixties will be sitting on 150,000 hectares by themselves. I know several graziers who have voluntary conservation covenants on parcels of land over 20,000 hectares in size, but there is no community to be involved with that country. This is a very sparse landscape. We need to think about what the landcare model means in this context. Others have given thought to this in the past: I’m eager to pick that thread up and see where we can go.”

John is also committed to pushing the “cultural narrative” as he put it, with an eye toward a more healthy relationship with the land we all depend on. He comments: “I think we have a big transition ahead of us. The amazing colonial and industrial story that has gotten us to this point is really just a stepping stone. We need to be

focused on what’s next. What is our relationship with this land going to look like in another 50, 100, and 250 years? The long-term view is hard for us now because our whole world is wired to the short-term demand of capital returns. The speed of the economy destroys the life-giving rhythms of the land. Talking to our Indigenous neighbours puts the matter clearly: we have to slow down. When we take care of the land, the land will take care of us. In the long run, there’s more security in that wisdom than the illusion of capital gains. In our hearts, we know things have to change. We’re going to need a new set of glasses to see properly, and new set of conversations to talk properly. I’m looking forward to that!”



L-R: QWaLC Chair **Geoff Elliot**, incoming QWaLC Director **John Brisbin**, and North Queensland NRM Alliance Chair **Dr Keith Noble**.

At a practical level, John is also keen to bring his recent experience as Chair of Northern Gulf Resource Management Group to benefit the QWaLC Board.

“I know we have much to gain from collaboration and cooperation with the NRM groups. We share huge challenges. The whole regional NRM story has wandered off into the wilderness over the past decade. Public funding is poorly targeted and largely managed as a political asset for attention-starved Ministers. We need to re-vitalise the whole proposition and connect good land management with the awakening concerns of urban populations for clean food, healthy country, and a liveable future.”

Feel free to contact John and discuss your ideas for landcare in the Northern and Southern Gulf: [john.brisbin@qwalc.org.au](mailto:john.brisbin@qwalc.org.au)



*The intensity of the fires was such that significant portions of the scrub was reduced to ash. There is very little living material left, and regrowth will take a long time to establish. (photo courtesy of Northern Gulf)*

## Questions raised over fire in Forty Mile Scrub and St Ronans

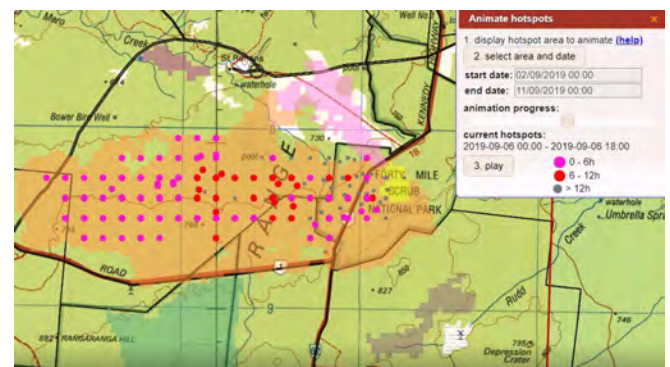
Over the course of 4-8 Sept this year an intense series of fires swept across portions of the Forty Mile Scrub and St Ronans (located between Mt Garnet and Mt Surprise, headwaters of the Lynd).

The intense nature of the fire and its repeated attacks has raised questions about the cause and the competency of response by QWPS staff who were on the scene.

Traditional owners, led by the Ewamian people, have requested that a public meeting be held to review the facts and put together a more detailed explanation of what has happened.

Chair of the Ewamian Aboriginal Corporation, David Hudson, has written:

*The area as we know it has the majestic bottle trees standing proud and tall on the Savannah Way. How many bottle trees and other significant scar trees have been burnt to the ground including wildlife from this burn out?*



*Our traditional people would have utilised this place as a significant food source for countless generations and within a spark it went up in flames. The devastation will take years to recover or it may not recover at all.*

*As much as everyone is angry as to what has occurred here we have to ensure that this never happens again. We have a duty of care to protect lives and property first, then wildlife and ecosystems next. No one benefited from this, and every sector of the community lost something of great natural value because of (apparently) poor management and an uncoordinated burning programme.*

The regional manager for QWPS, Nick Smith, has agreed to meet with concerned parties early in the new year, with date and venue to be confirmed through the good efforts of Northern Gulf Indigenous Program Leader, Vickie Mylrea.



# Mitchell River AGM sets the stage for 2020

17 October saw the 29th AGM of the Mitchell River Group. Attended by a supportive quorum of long-time members, the meeting was a positive reflection on the ongoing efforts to keep the group viable and relevant in this very special patch of Far North Queensland.

Treasurer Cheryl Emmerson gave a very crisp account of the year's finances which featured only a small movement overall. Her highly skilled bookkeeping earned special praise from our auditor, Graeme Turner, who gave the accounts an unreserved tick of approval.

Chairman Allan Holmes offered his thoughts on the way forward for the group, which was received with nods from around the table.

Trevor Meldrum, of Cape York Weeds and Feral Animals, took the role of returning officer. After nominations were called, the new committee was officially instated with a round of appreciation

# Mareeba Tribe update

At the recent AGM, Duncan McInnes gave a wide-ranging update on changes to the representation of traditional owners in the Mareeba area.

According to his report, the Koko Muluridji combination of groups has been re-formed under a new organisation, Mareeba Tribe.

Through some difficult legal processes and negotiations, this organisation has been formed and has now broken away from the North Queensland Land Council and Western Yalanji PBC.

Mareeba Tribe is now recognised as the authority contact for any Native Title matters in their region (Mareeba and surrounds).

Duncan also covered possible developments at the Kurworld/subdivision proposal. Through Mareeba Tribe there have been ongoing efforts to develop more business and traineeship positions. Duncan emphasised that, for many young Indigenous people, pursuing an economic opportunity is their number one priority.



*Incoming Executive Committee for 2020.*

*(L-R) John Brisbin, Secretary; Bill Bray, Vice-Chair; Allan Holmes, Chair; Cheryl Emmerson, Treasurer; and Ian Adcock, Director.*

# Cape York Weeds Feral Animals Inc bags coveted Indigenous Land Management Award

Trevor Meldrum scooped the Indigenous Land Management Award for Queensland at the State Landcare Awards ceremony held on 08 November at the Cairns Aquarium.

Trevor noted that the work of landcare groups is essential, but it's not easy to get money out on the ground where it's needed. His group is doing excellent weeds and ferals work, providing training and employment to young rangers who would otherwise not have any opportunities.

He accepted the award on behalf of the organisation and gave special acknowledgement to Eric Rosendale, elder and Traditional Owner.

The gala event was hosted by ABC's Phil Staley, and included the QWalc board of directors, led

by Chair Geoff Elliot, along with Member for Leichhardt, Hon Warren Entsch, and the Chair of NRM Regions Australia, Emma Jackson.

A range of awards were given to organisations and individuals across the State, making a great show of community spirit and ongoing support for the Landcare model.



Local leader Anthony Rossi gave several impassioned accounts of the need for more landcare activities, more connection to country, and a new attitude toward stewardship.

For more information about the awards, please see:

<http://qwalc.org.au/qld-landcare-awards-claim-the-date-8th-november-2019-cairns/>



(L-R) Hon Warren Entsch. Geoff Elliot, Trevor Meldrum



# Water quality in the headwaters: Concerns raised over Rifle Creek and Hunter's Creek

At a recent meeting of the Julatten and Molloy Association of Ratepayers and Residents (JAMARR), locals raised questions about the security and quality of waters in the Rifle Creek catchment.

Rifle Creek is the main tributary to the headwaters of the Mitchell, forming up in the drainage of Mt Lewis (to the north) and the Dividing Range behind Mowbray Falls (to the east). Hunter's Creek, flowing out of Mt Lewis National Park, supplies reticulation to the town of Mount Molloy before joining Rifle Creek.

Rifle Creek flows through patches of scrub and broad expanses of cane fields and cattle properties, borders a number of barramundi farms, and receives runoff from two municipal tips before joining the Mitchell near Lighthouse Rock. It is the living spine of the region, treasured for its cool swimming holes and generous fishing, yet it is not being monitored for water quality or aquatic health.

Many long-term residents recalled the Waterwatch Program, a hugely popular citizen-science effort that empowered locals to make regular observations of waters in their areas. Simple kits were prepared to allow readings of turbidity, pH, dissolved oxygen, nitrates, and temperature. We have data published by the program over the 1994-2002 period before the program fizzled to a halt due to lack of ongoing funding commitments.

JAMARR hosts a landcare group (JAMARR Envirocare) which is keen to get a similar program started again. It was requested that JAMARR contact Council and ask for details on the current processes that Council follow to assess water quality and sustainability.

# Arriga Plains wrap-up on the way

Through funding provided by the Northern Gulf NRM group, Mitchell River has been able to make two water sample runs across the Arriga Plains area, west of Mareeba.

This area, covering approx 8000ha, is a critical production asset for the region, accounting for a significant percentage of cane supplied to the Arriga Mill. It has been the subject of numerous studies and theories, given the debatable nature of risks such as waterlogging and salinity.

A grid of nearly 200 test wells was established to monitor the situation, but then fell into disuse in 2010. The readings taken by Project Officer Brian Prove in 2017 were the first data to be collected since that time. A second run was made in 2018 and the data was combined with some departmental records and information supplied by private contractors to help build a current picture. The data and the conclusions are commercially sensitive, so there are limits to what can be shared publicly.

Behind the data itself, there remain a number of questions about the geology and hydrology of the area. Until further research is undertaken, growers will be using a fair degree of guesswork to explain the readings that are taken from the bores. This year saw a number of fields sown to cotton instead of cane, perhaps indicating a desire to expand the options available to Arriga growers.

A public presentation of the project is planned for early 2020 at the Mutchilba Community Hall.



## 2020 Executive Committee

- **Chair:** Allan Holmes
- **Vice Chair:** Bill Bray
- **Secretary:** John Brisbin
- **Treasurer:** Cheryl Emmerson
- **Director:** Ian Adcock

Contact: [secretary@mitchell-river.com.au](mailto:secretary@mitchell-river.com.au)

## WANTED: Social Media Talent

We create fantastic content about this amazing catchment. Can you help get the headlines and links out onto Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram?

Perhaps you, or someone you know, could spare an hour a week to help the group gain visibility in the social media channels?

Get in touch: [secretary@mitchell-river.com.au](mailto:secretary@mitchell-river.com.au)

## Kuranda Envirocare powering along

Just to our east is a fantastic group of folk who have been making Kuranda green again for the last 20 years. They are devoted to an extensive nursery operation that sees an average of over 5,000 plants infused into the community every year. What an inspiring crew!



*Executive group: (L-R) Leah Leeds, Marg Zehntner, Andrew Horn, John Brisbin (visitor), Cathy Retter, Denise Donald)*

