

Newsletter of the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise

Revegetating Ellen Brook NR extension

Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise, ably assisted by members of Track Care WA, revegetated an extension to the existing Ellen Brook Nature Reserve on the morning of Saturday 27 June 2020. Fifty adults and 15 children planted over 4500 of the 5000 plants provided by Chittering Landcare, ranging from Prickly Moses (*Acacia Pulchella*), through various *Melaleuca* species to the very tall Swishbush (*Viminaria juncea*). The remaining 500 plants had to go into muddy water on the edges of the swamps and the experts at the Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions planted them the following week. An extremely heavy shower of rain just after 1pm settled our plants into their new home. Revegetating habitat with low, spreading shrubs ensures a safe haven for the Critically Endangered tortoise and is one of the important aspects of the work of the Friends group. We appreciate the opportunity to work with experts at DBCA on these land management projects.

The revegetated area was part of a horse stud just a few years ago, but dedicated Western Swamp Tortoise Recovery Team members arranged the purchase of the land, which adjoins Ellen Brook NR..../p2

Below, left: Getting muddy for a good cause; right: even the youngest Friends can help the tortoise



Planting the bare paddocks and realigning the feral proof fence have been a priority for the Friends group, Chittering Landcare and DBCA. Ellen Brook NR is the only self-sustaining wild population of the Western Swamp Tortoise, which was believed extinct for over 100 years. Since its rediscovery in 1953, the population has fluctuated markedly due to habitat destruction, feral predation and slow breeding rates. Although none of the cryptic reptiles were spotted on the day, they would have been swimming in the newly filled swampy areas and hiding amongst the plants.

An MOU between Track Care WA and the Friends will see further collaboration on a project near the Moore River National Park, to enhance suitable habitat for releasing captive-bred tortoises from the very successful Perth Zoo program.



Above: Chief Scientist for the Recovery Team, Gerald Kuchling, takes a break around midday as the rainclouds roll in.

Education report

School art for conservation

On Wednesday 15 October 2020, Friends Chairperson Jan attended a launch party at Ellen Stirling Primary School for the newly created 'Block Name' artwork pieces. The artwork was created by talented artist, Tony Pankiw, in consultation with a series of school community individuals and agencies over the previous 18 months.

Animals native to the Ellenbrook area were identified and a list sent out to the community and the students to vote on their six favourites. These were (Noongar names in bold):

Western Swamp Tortoise: **Yarkiny**

Echidna: **Nyingarn**

Carnabys Black Cockatoo: **Ngoollyanak**

Kangaroo: **Yongka**

Western Green Tree Frog: **Kwooyar**

Tiger Snake: **Noorn**



FWOST Chair Jan Bant and staff member with the mural

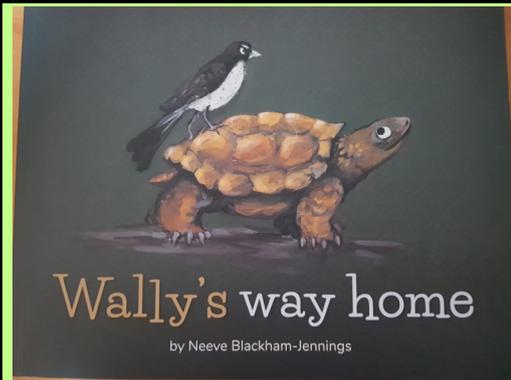
Year One students at Carnaby Rise Primary School test the experts!

The children sent a list of questions for us to answer, and a few were very curly indeed! See how many you can answer (*answers next page*)

1. How many tortoises are left all over Perth?
2. How long do they stay in their egg?
3. How can they sense when the rains (winter) are coming?
4. How many grams does the tortoise egg weigh?
5. Why can't they move habitat?
6. What do the tortoises do all day?
7. How many insects does Westy eat every day?
8. How deep are their aestivation tunnels?

Answers:

1. There are over 500 tortoises in the wild now, but because they are a threatened species, only the adults can be counted. We still officially have less than 50 adults in the wild. The hatchlings we release from the Perth Zoo's Captive Breeding Program don't reach maturity until between 8 and 15 years old (similar to human beings).
2. 4 to 6 months
3. The scientists do not know exactly how they sense when to come out of aestivation, but suspect it is a combination of lower temperatures and increasing humidity or moisture in the air. In the Zoo, some have been tricked by very heavy summer storms into coming out early.
4. 3.2g to 6.6g.
5. Western Swamp Tortoises are quite slow moving, and although their home range is often a couple of kilometres, they can't easily move habitat. As well, they are very picky about where they'll live...they have to have water in the swamps for at least 7 months of the year, otherwise they can't eat enough food, and then, when they aestivate, they may not be in the best of health.
6. In the winter months, the tortoises swim, eat and bask in the sun (they are cold-blooded like snakes and bobtails, so they have to absorb the energy from the sun to get them moving). In the hot summer months, they aestivate under the ground to escape the heat and bushfires.
7. As many as he can catch while swimming in the water.
8. They dig a hole for aestivation, but, like humans, some are lazier than others, and just scratch a shallow hole under some leaf litter. This means they could be burnt in a fire. The Friends group now installs artificial aestivation tunnels for them to use. They are made from a one metre pipe, 40 cm diameter, cut in half long ways and dug into the ground at a 45-degree angle. They walk down the sand ramp and end up about 700 cm underground.



A new children's book about our tortoise

This charming children's book was written and illustrated by 15-year-old **Neeve Blackham-Jennings**. She was inspired to write it as part of a class project at Perth Waldorf School, which aimed to challenge students to make the world a better place. The WA Naturalists' Club helped Neeve with some funds for publishing the book and she is selling *Wally's way home* to raise funds for the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise group. Email us for details about how to buy your copy: westernswamptortoise@yahoo.com.au

Where are they now?

As we move into full summer, the tortoises are also on the move: out of the drying swamps and into their natural aestivation places within crevices in the clayey ground, in deep leaf litter or in the artificial tunnels (right) installed by nature reserve managers. Aestivation is a type of hibernation or torpor that protects the tortoises from the hot summer and (if they're fortunate) any bushfires that may occur. The tortoises occasionally emerge for a drink if there's a significant rain event. Summer is a dangerous time for the tortoises: apart from the threat of fires, if they don't have enough fat reserves to last until the rains return, they may starve. The trends in climate change mean the dry period is getting longer and longer.



During the summer, adult breeding females (at least 8 years old) lay 3 or 4 eggs underground in their aestivation places near the edges of the swamp, and take no further care of them.



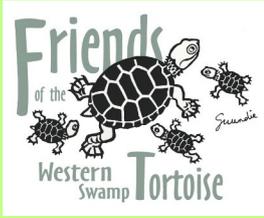
Like a presentation for your school or group?

If you know of a **school or community group** that would like us to come and talk please contact Jan on 0408 024 800 or Cathy via westernswamptortoise@yahoo.com.au.

At schools we include an exciting free games session for the younger children.

You can help save an endangered species, right on your doorstep!

Membership of the Friends is **FREE** and we have lots of great activities, including behind-the-scenes zoo visits and tortoise release days.



Join us to help save the tortoise... because EXTINCTION SUCKS!



For further information on any of the group's activities, contact Jan on

9344 2872 or 0408024800

Email: westernswamptortoise@yahoo.com.au

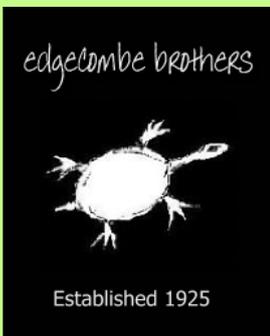
check out the website www.westernswamptortoise.com

or find us on **Facebook** www.facebook.com/FriendsOfTheWesternSwampTortoise/ where we usually post the latest news.

Committee: Jan Bant, Chair; Tanya Marwood, Vice-chair; Bob Height, Treasurer; Pippa McLeery, Secretary; Cathy Levett (general); education sub-committee—Jan Bant & Cathy Levett.



Our current sponsors and recovery partners include:



3 Baron-Hay Court
South Perth WA 6151

Phone: +61 8 9368 3168

Email: snrmo@agric.wa.gov.au
Web: nrm.wa.gov.au



...as well as **Boral**, the **University of Western Australia**, **Curtin University**, **Adelaide Zoo**, **Long Road Website Development**