

Newsletter of the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise

Passing of Robert Boyd, who rediscovered the 'extinct' tortoise

Robert Boyd was a multi-talented man: an artist, musician and composer. But it was Robert's deep interest in and love of nature brought an 'extinct' species back to the world. Sixty-six years ago the Western Swamp Tortoise was presumed extinct. On one of his regular visits to Perth in recent years, Robert Boyd recalled the winter day in 1953 when, as a 15-year-old schoolboy, he saw his first 'extinct' tortoise.

'I've always been very involved with natural history and wildlife and a member of the (WA) Naturalist's Club. My cousin, Archie Gates—who was in the (Royal Australian) Air Force, at Pearce—lived in a little cottage on Warbrook Road. He would often find an odd thing that would interest me and on this occasion he rocked up with this tortoise. That was fine—it was another addition to my menagerie at the back of the house. He'd found it travelling north across Warbrook Rd at Bullsbrook and he stopped and picked it up and thought: "well, there's another thing I can collect for Robert."'

Robert remembers the tortoise was around 15 cm long, with a smooth, well-worn carapace. Even to his relatively untrained eye, it looked old. He had no idea at that stage what it was.

'I took it to the WA Naturalists' Club show-and-tell that month and no one there knew what it was either. It didn't raise any eyebrows, actually. There were a number of naturalists there but they really brushed it off as an introduced species—from another state or something like that,' he says.

Not long after this Robert's cousin picked up another, slightly smaller specimen, in roughly the same place. It seems likely that the tortoises were moving between wetlands in search of food.

Robert took the tortoises along to the next scheduled naturalists' meeting, the wildlife show that used to run at Perth Town Hall.

'That started a kind of investigative rumpus amongst all the naturalists that were there,' he says. 'They thought it was a new species, even to the point that they came up with a name for it. We at home thought it should have been *Emydura boydii* or *gatesii*. But it didn't get a name because in fact it had already been identified and documented in Europe, in Vienna.'

Robert was very impressed by the work done by scientists since then to help the species recover.

'I think it's incredible. It's a wonderful facility at the zoo: amazing. But what fascinates me is that this is the result of what's obviously an incredible amount of research that's gone into every detail of the animal's life. 'And not only that but the organisation, the Friends (of the Western Swamp Tortoise) group: I think it's tremendous.' And we think you were tremendous too, Robert! (*Robert died on April 3, aged 80.*)



Above: Robert with zoo & museum staff inspecting the 1950s specimen and a live tortoise from the zoo; Perth Town Hall, Sept 2016. Photo: J. Wyld

Rachael Wu and her tortoise story

Rachael is currently a Year 5 student at Santa Maria College. She enjoys writing stories, doodling, swimming and reading. Her aspiration when she grows up is to be an engineer who designs robot to help animals and humans, and to be an accomplished writer and illustrator of books. Last year (2018) when she was in Year 4 at St Benedict's School, her teacher (Mrs Genelle Allingame) encouraged her to enter the 'Make Your Own Story Book' competition.

Rachael wrote a story and worked together with Rose Menchetti as the illustrator. They submitted the story book and won first prize in the 'Year 3 & 4' category.

Now Rachael's story, *All because I crossed the road*, is being published on the Friends' website. The first instalment was on World Turtle Day (May 23) and the next two parts will be on June 6 and June 20.

Introduction to the story:

"My life, and my home, was perfect, until one day, my whole life changed, and I was whisked on an adventure of an unknown fate, arriving to many strange places, meeting lots of strange people, going through tough situations, all because I crossed the road.."

Cathy Levett, the member of the Friends who wrote *Westy*, worked intensively with Rachel to serialise her story. Cathy's recent experience in publishing meant she was an ideal mentor to this budding young author.



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.

Out and about: spreading the word

As an important part of our work to bring the Western Swamp Tortoise into the spotlight and to showcase its story to the general public, we have been pleased to attend the **Home Schooler's Expo, Envirofest at Whiteman Park** and the **Aveley Community Festival** with displays over the past few months. Our message has been well received, with over 100 new members joining up! We also thank Evan and the City of Swan for helping us arrange to speak at a **People@Place** network meeting at Ellenbrook, attended by 40 representatives of local groups.

'Westy' goes to York!

Driving through the streets of York, you could be forgiven for thinking that a giant Western Swamp Tortoise had taken over the town! But no, this amazing creature is one of the sculptures created as part of the 2018 York Festival's Hay Bale Challenge.

The sculptures of the tortoise, Bilby and other creatures were created by teams of artists and volunteers under the watchful eye of Japanese artist and veteran of Wara (rice straw) art, Akira Moriya. These ones were made from wheat straw (in the absence of sufficient rice straw) and stand several metres tall.



If you haven't had a chance to see this amazing tortoise and its straw art friends, head to York before they disappear.

A new sculpture project

The Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise is proud to be collaborating with the **Margaret River Chocolate Company** on a sculpture project of its own. Working closely with MRCC's management and a local Swan Valley artist, we have designed a two metre high sculpture to be installed in the grounds of the West Swan chocolate factory later this year, to help celebrate the 20th anniversary of MRCC in the Swan Valley. They have been sponsoring the Friends for about six years, by producing and selling boxes of chocolate tortoises (*right*) and donating part of the proceeds to us. We heartily appreciate their support.



Where are they now?

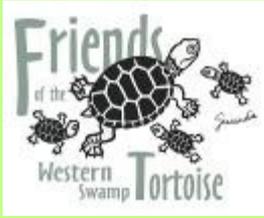
Eggs hatch from May to June, and the hatchlings are only about as big as a ten cent coin (*below*). All the tortoises enter swamps once there is a couple of centimetres of water in them (late June-early July) (*below*). They only live in non-perennial (temporary) shallow swamps with a clay base, where the surrounding land is predominantly sand.



Once the weather changes, they sense the time has come to leave their aestivation places and begin to feed in the water and build up their body mass as much as possible.

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

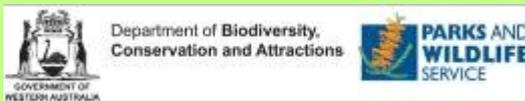
check out the website www.westernswamptortoise.com

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; Jo Gibb, Secretary; Mike Stokes, Pippa McLeery, Cathy Levett (general); education sub-committee—Jan Bant & Cathy Levett.



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