

MEDIA RELEASE

Monday, 17 July 2006



Feathered friends lend a hand to cotton farmers

The conservation of birds and their habitats may be thought of as an unconventional way to increase farm productivity.

But this thinking is challenged by one of the authors of the recently launched guide book *'Birds on Cotton Farms: a guide to common species and habitat management'*.

"Birds are an important part of healthy agricultural ecosystems and provide vital services like pest control," said co-author and Queensland Murray-Darling Committee ecologist, Greg Ford.

Goondiwindi cotton farmer, Geoff Jamieson, agrees with Mr Ford, recalling when his feathered friends have helped him grow successful crops in very tough conditions.

"In 2000 we grew our first crop of INGARD cotton and with this came the responsibility of growing a refuge crop. We were resigned to the fact that the refuge would be financially unrewarding because it carried up to 12 large grubs per metre of row," said Mr Jamieson.

"However, because the refuge was located close to [remnant vegetation along] the McIntyre River it was an ideal habitat for birds, particularly Willy wagtails – there were hundreds of them."

"Much to the surprise of our agronomist, the Willy wagtails were eating all the large grubs and at boll count time the count was only 10 less than the INGARD crop. Thanks to the Willy wagtails the refuge actually went on to yield 3.2 bales / acre."

For Mr Jamieson, this wasn't a one off occasion. In 1994 a locust plague nearly destroyed their irrigated and dryland sorghum crops, until thousands of ibis converged on the property.

"When the crop was due to be harvested it turned wet and the locust plague was causing considerable damage, so we called in an agronomist. He recommended that we aerial spray an insecticide, we agreed and ordered the plane," said Mr Jamieson.

"But just after the agronomist left, we noticed an invasion of thousands of ibis. They were lined up on the storage walls, channel banks, head ditches and roads.

We thought, 'bugger it, cancel the plane and let's give them a go.'"

"The ibis stayed a few days and then left when they had the locusts to a stage where they could not get a good feed anymore. In this particular instance we saved thousands of dollars by not using a costly insecticide and letting nature take its course instead."

Mr Ford says examples such as these provide evidence of how Mother Nature can help farmers.

"These are just two of the many excellent examples of how farmers' efforts to look after riparian and remnant vegetation can be rewarded through cost-saving natural pest control and other ecosystem services," said Mr Ford.

Mr Ford and co-author Nicci Thompson, in association with cotton industry and catchment management bodies, will shortly deliver a series of training workshops, aimed at cotton community members interested in identifying, monitoring and conserving birds and their habitats.

“The habitat management principles outlined in the new book will aid farmers to implement Best Management Practices (BMP) for native vegetation and biodiversity, and the identification guide to over 130 bird species will help them monitor the biodiversity outcomes of their BMP efforts,” said Mr Ford.

“Managing and monitoring riparian and remnant vegetation are key components of the Australian Cotton Best Management Practices (BMP) process.

“Research and long-term bird observations in agricultural landscapes have shown that birds are very good indicators of the health of ecosystems from landscape to farm scale.”

The “Birds on Cotton Farms” project was funded by an Australian Government Envirofund grant to the Australian Cotton Growers Research Association.

The project was supported by the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC and Birds Australia Southern Queensland, with significant contributions from QMDC, and the Border Rivers–Gwydir and Namoi Catchment Management Authorities.

Copies of “Birds on Cotton Farms: a guide to common species and habitat management” are available from Border Rivers Catchment Management and Landcare centre (Goondiwindi), Landcare Discovery Centre (Toowoomba) and Cotton Catchment Communities CRC (Narrabri).

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