

REMEMBERING BENJAMIN – NATIONAL THREATENED SPECIES DAY EARTH FIRST By Nick King

The Death of Benjamin

On a cold night on September 7 1936 Benjamin died. He was the last Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine, in existence. His death in Hobart Zoo marked the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger.

National Threatened Species Day is held every year throughout Australia on September 7 – the date of Benjamin’s death to remember Benjamin and to try to prevent the same thing happening to other species.

Australia’s landscapes and species have been severely affected by over 200 years of habitat loss and fragmentation. The impacts of land development, introduced plants and animals, grazing, salinity, changed fire regimes, pollution and a changing climate all place additional pressure on our plants and animals and their shrinking habitats.

Because of these pervasive influences on Australia’s biodiversity it is important for us as a community to consider our impact when making changes to our environment. The Tasmanian tiger is not the only species to have succumbed – Australia has one of the worst species extinction rates of anywhere in the world, and many species are still under serious threat.

In our own backyard

A case in point is that of Latham’s snipe, a little known but regular migratory resident to Orange. Latham’s Snipe (*Galligo hardwickii*), also known as the Japanese Snipe is an annual migrant to the east coast of Australia, arriving in Spring and leaving for the Japanese summer to breed at the end of our Autumn. Latham’s Snipe is a medium sized wading bird which frequents open freshwater wetlands that have cover in the form of low lying dense vegetation.

Numbers reduced through hunting

Latham’s Snipe was once common around Orange. Older residents can remember shooting them for sport. It is estimated that prior to making the shooting of snipe illegal in New South Wales in 1976, up to 10 000 were killed annually. Today Latham’s Snipe is afforded protection under the Japanese-Australian Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA), an agreement which was established due to concern about its status.

Although no longer hunted, Latham’s Snipe is under threat due to the destruction of its habitat due to drainage of wetlands, diversion of water for storage or agriculture, and development of land for urban and other purposes. Orange and district as a growing community has developed and modified much of its wetland habitat which once supported snipe populations.

A sanctuary in Orange

A few pockets of suitable wetland habitat remain in the local area. One important wetland area which exists in the Orange district is the southern end of Ploughman's Valley, which is home to a typical small flock of Latham's snipe. Members of this flock were observed to be in residence on September 1, the first official day of Spring.

We are privileged as a community to be hosts to Latham's Snipe, and we should be proud to have preserved an environment which is becoming increasingly rare and precious. It is up to us as a community to ensure that we do our bit to help retain our wetland environment in remembrance of Benjamin, who wasn't so lucky.

Further information

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species.html>

<http://www.wwf.org.au/ourwork/species/ntsd/>

Next environment event

Rotary Orange Environmental Expo (Sept 18-20) Orange Function Centre. More in next weeks article.