

NEXT STOP, PITT WATER-ORIELTON LAGOON



It's a major stopover for tourists travelling the East Asian-Australasian flyway but unless you're one of them, such as the Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit or Red-necked Stint, you may not have heard of it.

These feathered tourists fly up to 25,000 kilometres every year from the northern hemisphere to Pitt Water-Orielton Lagoon, the most southern feeding grounds for migratory shorebirds in Australia.

It's also the only Ramsar wetland in Tasmania found within an urban landscape. It has inspired a dedicated group of local volunteers to form a new Wildcare group, the Friends of Pitt Water-Orielton Lagoon.

Convenor of the group, Sandy Leighton, has walked most of the Sorell side of the lagoon. She's passionate about clearing the area of weeds which threaten the habitat of these international visitors, and has been instrumental in securing an NRM South Naturally Inspired Grant for the work.

"The Naturally Inspired Grant has helped us create a template for the work we want to achieve and it gives us a timeline to follow for the next 12 months," she says.

Although parts of the lagoon have suffered from close proximity to an urban area – rubbish and backyard weeds often find their way into the Ramsar-listed site – it still holds incredible natural values.

Apart from the migratory shorebirds that travel to the lagoon once a year to feed and forage, it's also an important shark nursery and supports some of the most significant saltmarshes in Tasmania.

Threatened plants include Lemon Beauty Heads, New Holland Daisies and Yellow Sea Lavender. The site is also home to a remnant of the critically endangered vegetation community, Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania.

The new Wildcare group has already put its NRM South grant to good use, tackling weeds on the difficult-to-reach Woody Island.

"Our relationship with the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service has been critical to this work," says Sandy. "They supply two staff and a boat to help us reach and work on the island."

Apart from the difficulty of getting to Woody Island the group's work is also restricted by the local birdlife. Thankfully Eric Woehler from BirdLife Tasmania has guided the group to help work out when to tackle the weed infestations without disturbing the migratory and breeding patterns of the many different bird species that inhabit the lagoon.

Some of the weeds the group has in its sights are African boxthorn and Boneseed as Boneseed is a woody, erect shrub that forms dense infestations that can smother native vegetation and Sandy has found dead Cormorants caught in the thorny branches of the African boxthorn.

The first major assault on Boneseed was carried out a few years ago by contractors, and now the job is to keep the seed bank under control until it exhausts itself.

"When we returned after the primary control had taken place we pulled out more than a thousand Boneseed seedlings from Woody Island. Boneseed takes a bit over 12 months to go from seedling to flowering. We don't want any more of the seed bank developing, so we have to stop them before they get to that point," says Sandy.

Studies show it will take more than a decade to exhaust the seed bank. With friends like the Pitt Water-Orielton Lagoon Wildcare group this long timeline is okay – they have the passion and commitment needed for such a daunting task.