

MEMBERS' PAGE

A HAPPY TADDY TALE!

Meg Wilson



Alison Doley's article 'Should tadpoles be moved when the pond dries up?' (WW9/2 Apr 2005), prompts the telling of a happy tadpole tale.

We moved two years ago to a Mundaring property with a dam alongside a severely degraded creekline reserve. The most 'wildlife' encountered were some resident black ducks, an occasional heron, some furtive quendas holding out in dense tangles of buffalo grass, the occasional sighting of frogs (motor bike, tree and green-and-gold bell varieties) and a few, fat marron. But in a clear position of dominance in the dam was a huge school of restless tiny fish. Over the first two summers I was astounded by the capacity of these fish to populate – the water literally churned and rippled with them whenever I came near. They appeared to occupy every watery niche. The bottom of the dam was visibly bare of vegetation. How were the frogs breeding? With so many fish, even in the shallows, it seemed unlikely many tadpoles would survive.

Armed with valuable information from a water-quality monitoring course I'd attended, some sampling gear and a microscope, I was able to establish that although water quality was fairly good, macroinvertebrate numbers were low. Tadpoles were seldom seen – at most two or three hiding below the grassy margins of the dam. Were the fish our native western minnows (wishful thought!) or the dreaded introduced gambusia? (They are wrongly labeled 'mosquito fish' as they are not an effective control. It is our native fish that do this job admirably.)

With the wonderful help of the Centre for Fish Research at Murdoch University, the fish were confirmed

to be gambusia. Not only were these pest fish disabling our dam and all wildlife that depended on it but, left to rule the pond, they would continue to infest the downstream reaches of the creek all the way to the Swan River every time the dam overflowed. I dreamed of bringing back the native fish and longed to see what would happen when we did. In preparation, our Murdoch team assisted by trawling the dam from end to end. The 'catch' yielded a bucketful of fish, little else. On the advice of our experts we let the dam dry out over the next summer and waited to see what would happen. Rocks were brought in to line the sides and bottom of the dam to provide future habitat and refuge.

The following spring brought a sight to behold, one I will always remember. There were no fish. At first I felt uneasy about our seemingly dead waterbody. Then to my wonder and utter delight I discovered that each day, shortly before noon for a few hours*, a beautiful water dance took place. Numbering in the thousands and spread across the dam, tadpoles of all shapes and sizes seemed to rise from nowhere and with gentle, graceful movements, drifted between sun and shadow. It was mesmerizing and enchanting all at the same time. Visitors were captivated. From where did the tadpoles so mysteriously come and go? A closer look revealed a soft, dense forest of algae across the entire floor of the dam – something new,

possibly the native *Nitella*. Happily too, macroinvertebrate numbers had swelled dramatically, especially among the backswimmers.

As summer set in, like Alison Doley, I anguished over what would happen to the tadpoles if we let the dam dry up again. As the water level dropped lower, the heron appeared more and more often. It was her nesting time. I concluded that the tadpoles she took would soon be transformed into sleek, elegant waterbirds and that was alright by me. Still further into summer, our neighbours began to remark at the surprising numbers of froglets appearing in garden beds, flowerpots and even hanging baskets. Then in March with the early rains a new sound, a delightful nightly serenade, was heard from the direction of the creek. Moaning frogs! Secretly, I was as proud of those babies as if they had been my own!

(* Might this suggest these tadpoles were responding *en masse* to water temperature and light?)

Meg Wilson can be contacted by email: meg.wilsonii4@bigpond.com (Drawing: Emma Bramwell)

Did you know?

... that Captain James Stirling, when he was surveying Western Australia in 1827 looking for a site for settlement, wrote "... it was not the season for whales, but their wrecks strewed the shore of Geographe Bay". Clearly, whale strandings at Busselton are not just a modern phenomenon!