

# Loud and proud

It's mean and green, but the growling grass frog is under threat due to a lack of water and the impacts of urbanisation on its habitat. Reporter Jamie Doyle finds out more about Cardinia's favourite amphibian.

If you head out south of the Princes Highway in Pakenham, you just might hear a deep growling noise.

No you're not imagining it — the growl belongs to Cardinia's own *Litoria raniformis*, or growling grass frog.

Ecologist and frog expert Aaron Organ says the growling grass frog is a unique species native to Cardinia and other permanent wetlands across most of Victoria.

**Despite the frog's cannibalistic nature, it is not dangerous to humans, and residents should be careful not to destroy the frog, or its habitat.'**

"The species used to be quite widespread in regions of Victoria, but in the past 10 or 20 years they have declined quite markedly."

Recent studies by the team at Ecology Partners have revealed that a number of significant populations of the frog remain in the Pakenham area.

Aaron says the growling grass frog is an "attractive species" of frog, varying in colour from a brown or dull olive to bright emerald green.

He says the growling grass frog, unlike other species, can often be found basking in

the sun or on vegetation around water, including farm dams.

"Like the growling grass frog, most frog species tend to be active at night, but 'growlers' can often be seen and also heard during the day."

And, like other frog species, the male growling grass frog has its own unique catchcry.

"It has a unique deep droning call — 'crawark-crawark-crok-crok'."

The cannibalistic frog eats a variety of swamp life including bugs and even other species of frog.

"The growling grass frog has a fairly ferocious appetite, and it will eat anything, including other frogs."

"It's quite opportunistic. Anything could become its next meal," says Aaron.

Cardinia's growling grass frog came under the spotlight early last year when construction began on the Pakenham bypass.

Cardinia Council's manager environment and heritage Ian Stevenson said the initial planning for the Pakenham bypass first brought the frog to the council's attention.

"There are works in place [for the



Pakenham bypass project] to protect the frog.

"Initial research about [the frog] emerged during the environmental effects statement conducted by VicRoads."

A spokesman for VicRoads says that prior to construction of the bypass, VicRoads undertook surveys to determine frog numbers and the impact of the bypass on the growling grass frog population.

"VicRoads relocated all the frogs that were in danger to nearby environments, and is continuing to monitor the construction to make sure all the frogs are protected."

He says that as part of the project, VicRoads has also installed "frog underpasses" so the growling grass frog can travel safely beneath the motorway.

Ian says the council is also looking at ways it can help protect Cardinia's favourite frog.

"It is definitely a significant species for the area, and has a strong hold here."

"Pakenham has one of the largest populations, although there are growling grass frogs in areas like Craigieburn and Wyndham."

"We are trying to plan for its survival. The

council is developing a plan — a targeted survey and conservation management plan for Pakenham's urban growth corridor."

Ian says that despite the frog's cannibalistic nature, it is not dangerous to humans, and residents should be careful not to destroy the frog, or its habitat.

"The more natural conditions we have for it the better. We need to maintain ponds for breeding, and conserve natural wetlands for the frog to live in."

Aaron says the growling grass frog is a nationally vulnerable species — listed under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act — with drought and urbanisation key factors in its demise.

The frog is also affected by chytrid fungus, an amphibian disease that invades the surface layers of the frog's skin, causing damage to the keratin layer.

"The prolonged drought is a big problem which has certainly knocked the frogs about quite a bit. Ongoing urbanisation around Melbourne has also led to local population declines. However, the destruction of [the frog's] habitat is the No. 1 cause of the species decline," Aaron says.



From top: The growling grass frog is native to Cardinia; the male frog makes a deep growling noise to attract a mate. Above: The frog varies in colour from olive to emerald green. Pictures courtesy of Aaron Organ and Melbourne Water.

