

# GUNSMOKE

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**THE WILD SIDE  
OF GUNGAHLIN**

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# THE WILD SIDE



**A**s we rumble along the golf course track heading toward the Gungahlin Lake, which is surrounded by a golf course and a ribbon of modern houses, is one of the smaller ponds in Bruno Ferronato's study and is part of the the waterway system which starts further north with Ginninderra Creek.

I hop out of the Institute of Applied Ecology's four wheel drive, quite excited about seeing the first trap in the lake.

Bruno wades into the dark brown water and pulls up the trap but there are no turtles in this trap. He has already had some success with the traps he pulled up earlier this morning before I joined him. He has two adult female turtles in the back of the car awaiting their visit to his lab.

Bruno, a long term visitor from Brazil, is in Australia for a few years to complete his PhD on the Eastern Long-neck Turtles (also known as the Eastern Snake-necked Turtle or 'Stinker' <http://australianmuseum.net.au/Eastern-Snake-necked-Turtle>).

It gains the nickname of Stinker for good reason; it lets of a stinky smell if upset. This is Australia's turtle version of the American skunk.

His research, under the supervision of Professor Arthur Georges and Professor John Roe, will compare and measure the impacts of urbanisation on the habitats of the long-necked turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*).

Various sites within the location of Gungahlin are used for his research. Bruno says, "I started out studying veterinary science and this eventually evolved into an interest in turtles. I worked in the Amazon for a while studying turtles (*Phrynops Geoffroanus et al*) of the same family (*Chelidae*) as the Eastern Long-necked Turtle. I lived with the Central Peruvian native people, the Ashaninka, whilst I studied this turtle and observed its' place in their lives and in the jungle wilderness. Being part of their diet didn't seem to affect the ability of the population of this turtle to survive. I loved this time living in such a remote location in the jungle, it will always be a much treasured experience in my life. This research in Canberra is quite a different experience being surrounded with all the modern day trappings and having the drier climate to work in. Through my

# OF GUNGAHLIN

By Sam Brown

research work in South America, I came across one of the leading experts in turtles, Professor Arthur George, and from this connection the opportunity to move to Australia to do my PhD came about.”

We move on to the next location, Yerrabi Pond. Being a larger pond, Bruno has 6 traps set here. The grasses and reeds bordering this lake give the turtles some great habitat areas.

As we pull in the first trap a passer-by stops and asks how the turtle study is going. It seems that a few locals are in the know about Bruno’s work. The passer-by asks if Bruno knows how many are in the pond and how long they live for. Bruno explains, “I won’t know how many until my statistical analysis has been completed but at a rough guess it could be around the two hundred mark. It is believed that they live for about 40 to 50 years although the length of their lifespan has not been confirmed by any research. The population here is healthy and robust.” He also adds, “The main threat to the turtles seems to be from being run over by a car as they move from pond to pond. They tend to move more when the ponds’ water levels drop or after rain. They are completely carnivorous and will eat water insects, insect larvae, tadpoles as well as small fish. Their strong webbed feet are useful tools for digging and ripping their prey apart. They are basically scavengers and will be attracted to any rotting meat.”

Not long after this encounter we are questioned by another passer-by who has been fishing. He questions Bruno about what he is doing with the net. Bruno points out that he is completing an authorised study with the University of Canberra’s Institute of Applied Ecology. The fisherman explains that he is worried that the net might have been illegal as he recently caught a fisherman using a net to haul in a catch of the native fish that was well over the legal limits. Bruno stated, “It is good that you ask and check. I have had many enquiries for the same reason.”

Two dams in Mulligan’s Flat are the next study locations, these being the most remote and least urbanised ponds in Gungahlin.

Mulligan’s Flat is now a nature reserve although at one time it was grazing land. It is now a haven/mecca

for many re-introduced animals such as the Eastern Bettong and the New Holland Mouse as well as for many bird species. The grasses are straw coloured and crisp from a lack of moisture. The twisted and gnarled weather-beaten trees are bewitching with their different colours and shapes. Set amongst this stark but intriguing landscape are several man-made ponds which are veritable oases for the local birds and animals. The first pond has a dead tree in the middle with a large and obvious nest of jagged twigs resting in a fork; this could well be an eagle’s nest. It seems that the bird is making a rather audacious and bold statement that the land is now theirs. The turtles are well escensed in these ponds and have actually been tracked moving in and out of the reserve area. Bruno states, “The turtles here have less reliability in the water supply and therefore seem to suffer more from a lack of food. In the urbanised ponds the turtles are doing better in terms of numbers and growth sizes. It is like booking into Pond Hilton when you have a constant water supply. They have to aestivate here in the bush in drought times. They find a bushy area or hide under logs and wait out the tough times.” No more turtles are found today but we do find an interloper in one of the nets... a humungous yabby which snaps frustratedly at Bruno. It gets put back in the pond and we pack up the nets.

Bruno adds, “I will take the two female turtles back to measure them and check them for eggs. They will then get released back where they were found. The reproduction rates are a vital statistic in my study so we examine all the adult females for eggs.”

This research project will finish at the end of this year for Bruno. “I have been working on this project since 2011 so I should now have enough data to finalise my thesis. All of this research will supply some of the knowledge which will enable the future survival of this species of turtles in this region. Unfortunately there isn’t as much research done on turtles as on other reptiles. They are just not as popular as the snakes and lizards although they are the more loveable creatures in my opinion!”

