



The Victoria Naturally Alliance – a shared vision

## Media release

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# Fungal disease could wipe out Growling Grass Frog

A Ballarat man has entered the final stages of work that could save one of Australia's largest native frogs from being wiped out by a deadly fungal disease that is threatening frog populations worldwide.

Ray Draper has spent the past two years mapping the spread of Chytrid Fungus among southwest Victoria's Growling Grass Frog populations in an attempt to save the threatened species from extinction.

Co-ordinating the Growling Grass Frog Project from his home in Ballarat, Ray is in the final stages of completing a map that will show Chytrid Fungus infections of "Growlers" and other frog species across Victoria's southwest.

Once finished the map will help scientists stop the killer disease from jumping to uninfected frog populations.

Although Ray expected to finish the last of his survey work in June this year he has been hampered by a longer than expected summer (Chytrid Fungus is dormant during the warmer months of the year).

The delay has led to a loss of funding and Ray has been forced to use his own money to finish the map.

He now hopes to finish by October but is struggling to find frogs, despite heavy rains that should have created the perfect conditions for frog spotting.

In a recent survey of 25 sites between Warnambool and Ballarat he found only eight frogs, none of them Growlers.

Ray fears it's a sign Chytrid Fungus has a greater hold on frog species in Victoria's southwest than first thought and is desperate to finish his map so that authorities can better tackle the disease.

Identified in 1993 by James Cook University as the mystery disease behind dramatic declines in Queensland's frog populations, the fungus has since infected frog species, including Growling Grass Frogs, across Australia.

"Frog numbers crashed in just three years," Ray says, looking back at the period 1989 to 1992 when populations of Victoria's Growling Grass Frog first took a nose dive.

"That doesn't happen unless something pretty dramatic is going on."

At the time Ray was already worried about dwindling numbers of "growlers".

"Ordinary farmers were saying they hadn't heard them for years and so that's when I decided to set up the Growling Grass Frog Project and look for growlers," he says.

Since then Chytrid Fungus has been blamed for the extinction of the Sharp Snouted Dayfrog in Queensland and has pushed the Southern Corroboree Frog to the brink of extinction.

The disease is behind the disappearance of 70 frog species in Central and South America and scientists believe it's the culprit behind the loss of up to eight frog species in Australia.

Victoria's Growling Grass Frog could be next on its hit list unless the work Ray Draper is struggling to finish pays off.



## The Victoria Naturally Alliance – a shared vision

As recently as the early 1980s Growling Grass Frogs were considered common across much of south-eastern Australia and Tasmania. But since then numbers have plummeted.

Growlers can no longer be found in the ACT and are listed as threatened in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

### Lack of investment

Despite Ray's great work he despairs at the lack of investment going in to combating the spread of Chytrid Fungus. He's also very concerned by how little we still know about the disease.

"We know the fungus has been out in the wild now for at least 20 years but we still don't really understand why in such a short space of time there was such a heavy decline in growler numbers.

"They live to about 18 and have 3000 babies a year. They are a highly mobile species and can easily move from one wetland to another. For them to just drop off the scale the way they did there needs to be an answer to why this happened.

"Every time we answer a question we get ten more questions. We need people and funding to answer those questions."

Professor Rick Speare from James Cook University has been instrumental in convincing Australian and global authorities Chytrid Fungus has the potential to devastate frog populations worldwide and has helped developed a national plan for the deadly disease.

"We found that in Queensland, as the fungus swept through frog populations, the mortality could be very high, with some species disappearing completely," Prof Speare says.

"Other species were severely knocked about by the disease but eventually bounced back, despite the fungus still being evident in the population."

He says Ray's work will fill a large knowledge gap about how far the disease has spread in southwest Victoria and how many frog species it has infected.

## Available for interview

### Ray Draper

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### Professor Rick Speare, James Cook University

Through the work of Prof Rick Speare and Lee Burger, James Cook University revealed in 1993 that Chytrid Fungus was the highly virulent pathogen behind dramatic declines in Queensland frog populations. Since then Prof Speare has succeeded in getting the fungus listed as a key threatening process under the Australian Government's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act.

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### Carrie Deutsch, Victoria Naturally Alliance

Carrie Deutsch is Project Leader with the Victoria Naturally Alliance, a coalition of eight peak environment groups that want to see the State Government turn around Victoria's biodiversity crisis.

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The Victoria Naturally Alliance wants to see Victoria's native plants and animals protected from threats including climate change and habitat loss. For more information go to [www.victorianaturally.org.au](http://www.victorianaturally.org.au).