

# Holding on in a modern world

Michael and Sharon Williams



Green-eyed tree frog (*Litoria serrata*)

## A personal insight into wildlife photography and the decline of frogs in today's challenging world

Images by Michael and Sharon Williams,  
IT'S A WILDLIFE - Nature and Wildlife  
Photography

The fight for survival within the fragments of the modern world will be the ultimate test in 300 million years ...

Wading waist-deep through a fast-flowing stream in the middle of the night, lying down in thick mud in sub-zero temperatures, or maybe climbing twenty metres into a tree is probably not your idea of a fun escape from your day-to-day life ....

Finding and photographing animals in all different kinds of habitat throughout Australia is subject to demands that more often than not take you way out of your comfort zone.

### Committing to the task

Driving trucks across Australia since I was twenty years old, I kept thinking,

“There must be more to life than this.” Now aged thirty-eight, I look back on the last six years and cannot believe I have definitely found it - better late than never!

Something that started as a seemingly simple mission to identify an orange blob of jelly growing on a felled tree in Tasmania has culminated in a commitment to producing high-quality photographic images of Australia's unique flora and fauna. This commitment is to be the catalyst for raising awareness of the need for protection of all habitats and the native species which rely on them for their future survival.

Purchasing a low-end range film camera, my wife Sharon and I would

venture out in all conditions to photograph random things we found within the natural world. Not really knowing what subject matter I wanted to photograph, Sharon introduced me to her love of animals through bird-watching and I tried, rather unsuccessfully, to capture images of birds with a cheap 75-300 mm lens. Documenting all camera settings and lighting conditions associated with each shot taken, I referred to this data in order to determine what worked and what did not. All I had to do now was learn about animal behaviour, composition, and where and how to find all these animals, let alone photograph them in a way that I envisioned.



Australian lace-lid (*Nyctimystes dayi*)



Common mist frog (*Litoria rheocola*)



Green-eyed tree frog (*Litoria serrata*)

The next six years of my photographic life would be some of the most demanding of my entire life. Sharon and I would spend hundreds of hours walking around Melbourne zoos and trekking through Victoria's forests. Observing animal body language, I would attempt to learn about individual species traits, ultimately leading to the poses that would make the most attractive shot and allow me to capture the subject's individual personality. I would find out later that this attention to an animal's behaviour would be the key factor in achieving my aim.

Through volunteering with organisations that conduct fauna surveys, a chance meeting with environmental researcher Clive Crouch was to change our lives forever.

Clive has been conducting fauna surveys throughout Victoria for over thirty years and his invaluable experience has pushed our knowledge forward. This has enabled me as a photographer to create the images I thought I would only ever see in my head.

### Falling in love

Strong, interweaving currents whip around my lower body trying to destabilise my determination in making my way closer to the squelching, duck-like call coming from a clump of vegetation overhanging the fast-flowing river in which Sharon and I have found ourselves. The call of the male Australian lace-lid (*Nyctimystes dayi*) is advertising the current mating season which will secure the next generation of this endangered species of tropical North Queensland. As well as trying to entice a mate, he is generously exposing his location to a very excited photographer, whose dream it has been for over five years to see this species in the wild. Photographing animals in their natural environment is always to be addressed with a high level of respect for not only the species, but also the habitat you are working in. Such respect will be rewarded by amazing outcomes. My obsession with photographing the more threatened and rare species of Australia can sometimes hamper my ability to capture the shot. When confronted with these species I often forget that I need to take a photo of them, often opting to enjoy the

moment instead. When adrenaline is high, it is too easy to miss the shot and miss the experience, so it is extremely important to try and achieve both, if possible.

With the decline of frog species in Australia happening so swiftly it has left many heads spinning, as researchers try to understand the cause of this trend in order to structure a viable recovery plan. As a photographer and a non-scientist, I find myself quite hopeless and unable to be pro-active in the fight to save an animal I have fallen in love with and that brings me to tears being in its very presence. The bond I have with these unique animals is one that I could never have imagined; I will be grateful for this for the rest of my life. I have now dedicated my life to creating images that capture the beauty and uniqueness of one of the most adaptable life-forms on Earth.

#### **Every action has a reaction**

Australia has one of the highest rates of flora and fauna extinction on the planet, but many programs are underway to protect the remaining populations. Achieving this extremely ambitious goal requires the concerted efforts of all humans. Amphibian populations have survived on Earth for more than 300 million years, and of the 6,317 species of amphibians listed worldwide, 5,576 are frogs and toads (<http://www.savethefrogs.com/cool-frog-facts/index.html>).

In the past two decades, there has been a dramatic decline in frog populations: of the more than 200 frog species in Australia, eighteen are currently listed as endangered and fourteen as critically endangered, whilst many others are in decline due to a number of factors (<http://www.frogsaustralia.net.au/conservation/frog-declines.cfm>).

After spending their early lives entirely in water, these amazing amphibians make the transition to a more terrestrial life as they possess lungs and breathe oxygen as we do. Frogs also absorb oxygen through their skin, which leaves them vulnerable to pretty much of everything that makes its way into their environment. Human encroachment on amphibian habitats is the key factor in species decline: water and air pollution, deforestation for mining, agriculture, forest industries and housing; spread of diseases including fungal infections



Growling grass frog (*Litoria raniformis*)



Common mist frog (*Litoria rheocola*)



Waterfall frog (*Litoria nannotis*)



Growling grass frog (*Litoria raniformis*)



Waterfall frog (*Litoria nannotis*)



Sharon and Michael Williams

and micro toxins; introduced pests, such as feral cats and trout; and harvesting for the pet trade as well as restaurant menus. All these have taken a massive toll.

Many organisations dedicated to conservation have been forced to undertake breeding programs for species that are on the brink of extinction or for those whose numbers are in great decline. These programs are unfortunately a necessary stand for the longevity of these species. However, the most important aspect of amphibian conservation worldwide, or any wildlife conservation for that matter, is the protection of habitat. An animal without a home is like a house without foundations.

Thanks to the ongoing work of organisations like the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia and their support of habitat protection programs, the battle to save our flora and fauna species from extinction can be fought more evenly. Without your direct support to organisations such as the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia, they too will become extinct - just like the very ecosystems they are trying to protect.

### **Making a difference**

The way to help save frog species from extinction is quite easy, and all it takes is the belief that "one person can make a difference", irrespective of your education or standing within our society. The way we each choose to live our day-to-day lives on this planet has an impact on the environment and the other species with which we share it - making yours positive.