

Brought Back from the Brink of Extinction

The Working for Water Programme has benefited biodiversity enormously. Its positive effects have gone beyond job creation and rehabilitating hydrology, and have rescued species that were on the brink of extinction.

It was not realized just how damaging invasive alien riparian trees were until they were removed. The problem rests with the fact that invasive alien plants have a pernicious effect that over the years has crept up to blot out indigenous biodiversity.

Some dragonfly species were thought to be extinct as they had not been seen for years, with one being rediscovered having last been recorded in 1920. The point is that by removing invasive alien plants in wetland systems, there can be an enormous and immediate benefit. In particular, it is the very rare and localized endemics that have benefited most, with almost instant recovery of the endemic species where the invasive alien trees have been removed. The removal allows adequate sunlight to penetrate the system once more, and for streamside bushes to recover.

One of the most striking findings is that river braids are under such threat. Alarm bells have been ringing in Europe that pressure on river braids is having a major effect on local biodiversity. This seems now to be also the case for South African river systems. It seems that river braids are highly susceptible to invasion, simply because they are wet, warm and aerated. Yet they are also of great conservation value. The message from this is that pools in river braids ("kuile"), particularly in the Western Cape, need special attention.

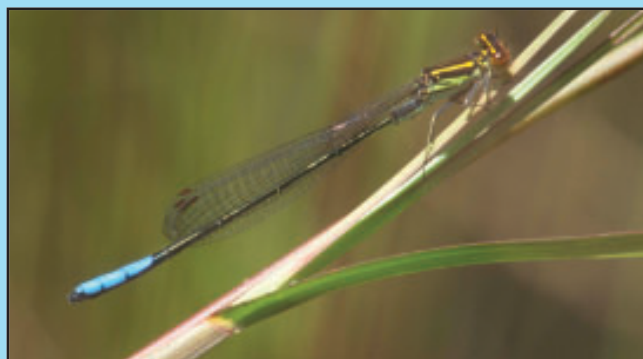
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Basking malachite damselfly Chlorolestes apricans was on the verge of extinction, but raising its profile is now leading to conservation action.



The Ceres Stream damsel Metacnemis angusta, formerly only known from two females, and not seen since 1920, was feared extinct. It has made a dramatic comeback as a result of removal of invasive alien trees under the Working for Water Programme.



Harlequin sprite damselfly Pseudagrion newtoni; disappeared from its type locality but has appeared at one site where cattle grazing of river banks and alien trees have been curbed.