

The frog that can't jump bounces back

Natasha Robinson

THEY are slimy and unsociable, and only the French think they're tasty. But frogs inspire such affection in humans that a record number of volunteers have taken part in a frog census that has recorded the existence in Melbourne of a tiny and rare species that cannot jump.

The southern toadlet, which is only the size of a human fingernail, was thought to be extinct but has been spotted in this year's frog census by Melbourne Water.

The census also showed that an interstate interloper, the eastern dwarf tree frog, is threatening Victorian native frogs. Researchers have appealed for residents to report any sightings of the unwelcome intruder.

The census was compiled by 900 volunteers who scoured bushland recording frog sounds on hand-held tape recorders.

Biologist Gerry Marantelli from Victoria's Amphibian Research Centre — aka "Frog Man" — sat through hours of the tapes, identifying each frog from its call.

"I listen to them driving along the road in the car and every chance I get," he said.

Mr Marantelli said the southern toadlet was abundant in far-southern South Australia, northern Tasmania and coastal areas of Victoria until about 10 years ago,

when the species began its slide towards extinction.

"It certainly has declined quite considerably, and given that it's a frog that really doesn't occur in a lot of places, the populations that we find are of pretty significant importance," he said.

Rather than being threatened by polluted waterways like many other frogs, it is the drought that is a major cause of the southern toadlet's diminishing numbers.

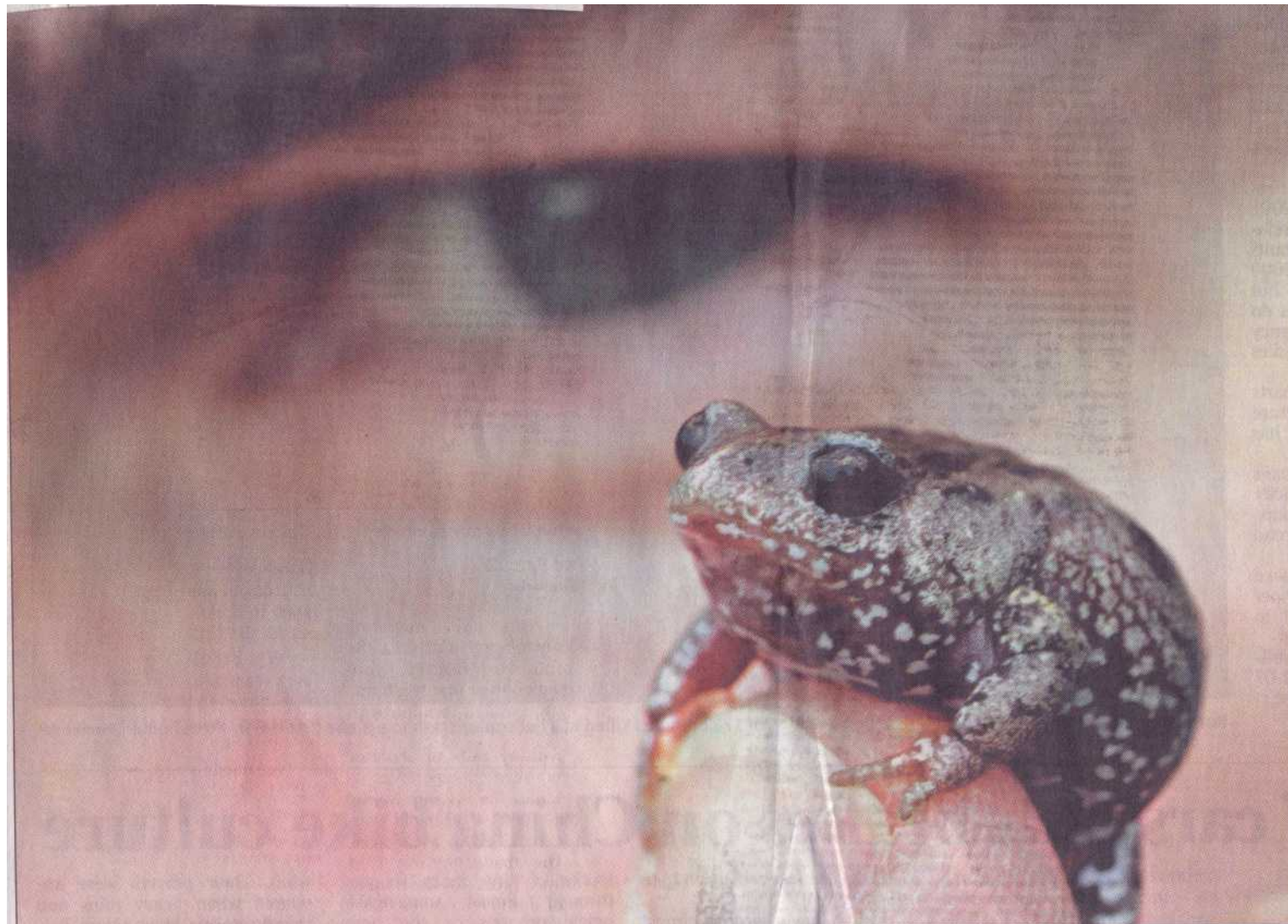
"It doesn't rely on rivers and creeks, it relies on still water. It lays its eggs on land and relies on a flooding of the eggs or a pool building up in the winter with the rain," Mr Marantelli said.

"The frog only lives for a certain length of time, so if the drought continues beyond the life of the frog and it hasn't been able to breed for that whole period, then the population declines."

Mr Marantelli said a large number of people took an active interest in frog conservation, because frogs have a special place in the Australian psyche.

"A lot of the people I speak to relate their memory as children, how it was beautiful to go to sleep listening to the frogs, and other people recount stories of collecting tadpoles," he said.

"I think the idea of catching a tadpole and watching it turn into a frog in your childhood is a rite of passage."



Holding on: One of the southern toadlets found by the frog census in the Melbourne area clings to Gerry Marantelli's finger