

## **Ann McGregor – A visionary for the Merri Creek**

Hacking their way through weeds over their heads, avoiding an accumulation of man-made rubbish, Ann McGregor, along with her husband Bruce and a handful of other volunteers, knew the Merri Creek was somewhere close by. The year was 1976, and the Creek banks and surrounds were a far cry from what they are today. The Creek was edged by quarries, landfill sites, factories, and other industrial buildings, with a few sportsgrounds dotted along its boundaries. It was in a dire situation; the community had turned its back on the waterway, treating it like a drain and dumping ground. Additionally, the F2 Freeway was planned to run along the Creek valley, and proposed designs had the Creek lined with concrete! (think of the Moonee Ponds Creek under Citylink around Flemington).

Ann, Bruce, and others who joined the walk along the Merri Creek that day had other ideas and formed the *Brunswick Merri Creek Action Group*. They saw the Merri's true potential as a linear park through suburbs short on public open space and started formulating a greener vision. *"The walk demonstrated to us that the Creek was still there under all the weeds and rubbish. Things took off from there"*, explains Ann.

Along with the Group and a coalition of inner northern community resistance, Ann and Bruce worked hard to save the Merri Creek, with the anti-freeway battle even going as far as the Federal Court. To the great fortune of future users, the campaign was successful and the plans for the freeway south of the Ring Road were eventually dumped.

Ann's work in helping regenerate the surrounding landscape, establish a continuous Merri Path and create parklands for the whole community has spanned over 45 years. *"I have had breaks, but it has been rewarding because we could see things happening, so I kept going"*, Ann says. Working with many like-minded people over the years, Ann is at pains to stress that Merri Creek, as we experience it today, is due to the work of many.

In regenerating the Creek's surrounds, they knew that planting local indigenous species was key to establishing a healthy environment. The report they put together in 1980 is one of the earliest indigenous planting guides in Australia. What may seem obvious now, wasn't so obvious then. *"Local plants grow really well when you put them back in their proper environment"*, says Ann.

Wildlife is returning, with wallabies living in some secluded spots along the Creek. Occasionally an echidna may be seen, waddling along its banks. For Ann it is the return of the birdlife along the Merri that holds the greatest satisfaction. In 2008, Ann established quarterly bird surveys by Friends of Merri Creek that continue today. She still sees new species appearing in the revegetated landscape which shows the Creek's regenerated environment can serve a dual purpose: attracting wildlife while still coping with humans and recreational use.

*"The birds appreciate the restored habitat"*, she says.



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A highlight for Ann, and demonstrating the success of her work, is the return of the Pink Robin (pictured) to the Merri. *“Pink Robins breed up in the Victorian highlands but they don’t like the winter”*, she explains. When they migrate to the lowlands, they look for dense forests. So for Ann, it is extremely rewarding to see that Pink and Rose Robins have been living for months at a time in the Creek’s restored habitat.

The restoration work has been a massive collaboration. Public attitudes have changed. The Councils and Melbourne Water have come on board. Funding has been made available. Ann particularly appreciates the richness of working with like-minded people, and the social engagement it brings.

As for the future, Ann has her eyes on work that needs to be done upstream. She would like to see the bushland and native grassland corridor of the Merri Creek expanded and continued north to Wallan, as these suburbs are developed. Ann, an environmental planner by profession, believes that our focus should be on better forms of urban development, to counter the ‘urban stream syndrome’ where rapid runoff from paved surfaces after rain events scours out creek channels and removes the habitat and food resources for animals like the platypus and the rakali (water rat).

*“I would like to see the local communities all along the Merri actively engaged with the Creek and enjoying it, looking after it and learning about nature and exploring, and benefiting from a healthy waterway corridor and parkland. And extending the parkland too, not just along the main stem of the Merri but also up along its tributaries and across the catchment and meeting up with other waterways across Melbourne. There needs to be a biodiversity habitat network across Melbourne.”*

Truly a visionary.

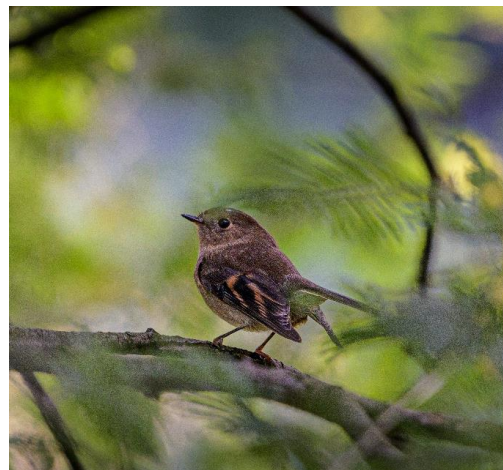
Ann McGregor is President of the Merri Creek Management Committee ([MCMC](#)) and Vice-President of Friends of Merri Creek ([FOMC](#)).

## Acknowledgements

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