



EELING GOOD

Linda Carr previews the 15th Lake Bolac Eel Festival

Photographs by Don Butcher, Emmanuel Hall, Trevor Hunt, Una Allender



Every year in late summer, the quiet creeks and tributaries of the Hopkins River in the Western District come alive for a startling migration, as thousands of eels prepare for their 3000km journey to the Coral Sea up near New Caledonia. Over millennia, the abundance of nutritious food along with valuable oil and skins, led to Lake Bolac becoming an annual meeting place for countless generations of Djab Wurrung and Gunditjmara people.

For many contemporary Australians, eel is not the delicacy enjoyed in other countries but the cultural significance of the traditional eel gathering at Lake Bolac has become the heart of a festival that focuses on community sharing, learning and enjoyment.

While large, commercial events have folded under the pressures of a post-Covid world, the Lake Bolac Eel Festival remains

a testament to meaningful experiences that bring community together. One of the volunteer committee members, Lisa, explains.

“People say that our festival is authentic, that it’s not some invented or concocted thing and I guess everyone who’s involved is doing it with a strong sense of altruism. We, the volunteer Committee, are really united in the principles behind the festival and that gives us a common story, so that it’s not a cynical money-making enterprise.”

The volunteers are the driving force behind the festival’s continued success, linked by the overall principle of ‘healing’. The event’s origins themselves are authentic and simple.

In 2005 Neil Murray, local musician and well-known founding member of the Warumpi Band, brought a small group together to walk the old indigenous

pathways inland from the sea at Warrnambool to Lake Bolac. That first walk – taking several days to cross paddocks with approval from land owners – ended with a small campfire on the shores of the lake and would become the first step towards a festival of shared healing through stories and song.

From these small beginnings the festival has grown, gradually expanding in format but maintaining a focus on indigenous and environmental stories. At the 2026 festival, the local Beyond Bolac Catchment Action Group will host a 3km walk around the lake on Sunday morning. The Committee strives to create learning opportunities in a friendly environment. Particular hands-on favourites have been weaving using natural fibres and eel skin tanning, with city visitors happily taking home their own handiwork.

Anne, one of the longest serving



volunteers, offers a snapshot of the whole festival. "I think the music program certainly appeals to our festival audience and there is plenty for all ages to see and do with the speakers forum, the twilight ceremony, workshops, information stalls and much more."

The township is small and festival space on the lake foreshore is limited but these constraints actually add to the intimate atmosphere whether visitors are camping on the foreshore, staying in the caravan park or trekking up for the day.

Volunteer Sally picks up the thread. "The festival size is attractive. We only have one stage so everyone gets to see everything at the same time. People feel comfortable – it's a friendly festival because it's small. They come from all over the country. We get people from Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania coming in. I think South Australia as well."

During the day people may wander in and out of festival activities as their mood takes them but no one misses the Twilight Celebration. There is something captivating



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about the woven brolga, emu and black cockatoo sculptures casting shadows in the gathering dusk as strangers stand around the fire together waiting for the indigenous performers to dance their stories of Country. The serenity of this unpretentious ceremony is followed by an evening of original music by celebrated artists.

Anne sums the atmosphere well. "The committee works really hard to ensure that the festival retains its cultural, environmental and music focus and I think because we don't change it dramatically, people do come again as they appreciate its uniqueness and know that it is going to be a positive experience."

The charm of this festival does bring people back and now that it has become biennial that feeling of preciousness will only increase. Camping on the lake foreshore is permitted and the caravan park is a stone's throw away from the festival hub. If you've never eaten eel, you can try a piece from the BBQ for a gold coin or if that's not your thing there are food trucks to keep you on the go. Arrive on Friday for the dinner-art auction where the works of invited artists are available, many of whom are already exhibited in galleries, others emerging and new.

The 15th Lake Bolac Eel Festival – Kuyang Lapakira will be held on March 27-29, 2026

