



# 2025 Birrarung Riverfest Report



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**Acknowledgment of Country**

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association acknowledges that the lands and waterways of the Yarra, Birrarung catchment, are the unceded territories of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung and Bunurong peoples. We pay respect to Traditional Owners, who have and continue to care for Country. We acknowledge that the river now called Yarra has always been known as the Birrarung by its custodians.

**Thank you**

We acknowledge and thank our major partners the Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo collaboration and Melbourne Water and all stakeholders that have provided their time, expertise and energy to make the Birrarung Riverfest a success. The Yarra Riverkeeper Association values your contributions towards achieving our shared vision for a healthy, protected and loved Yarra, Birrarung.





# Festival Introduction

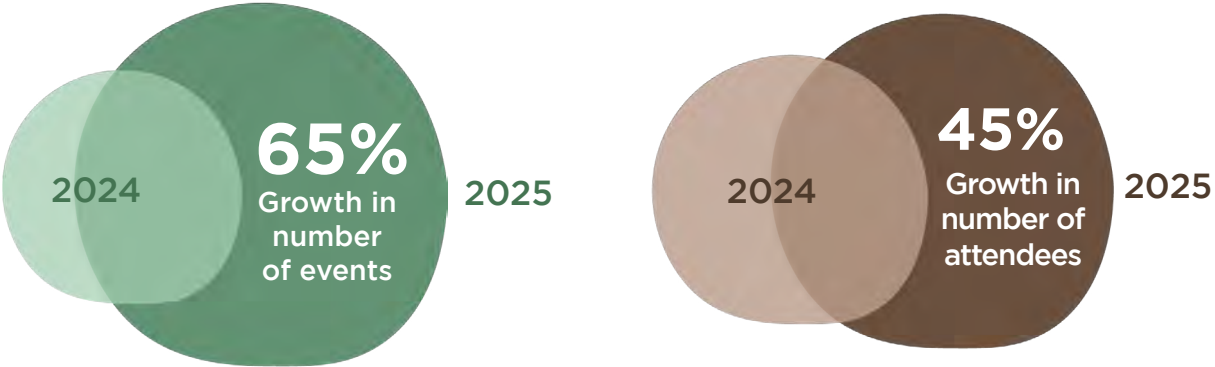
Birrarung Riverfest 2025 was held from 6 to 28 September (World Rivers Day) over 23 days. In its third year, this community celebration of our beloved, iconic river, grew significantly in both number of events held and number of attendees. The highlights of this year's Riverfest were the increase in diversity of audiences and the strong presence of Wurundjeri-led cultural events.

Riverfest aims to raise awareness and appreciation of the river and to provide varied opportunities for people to experience and learn about the river. As a grassroots festival, the program reflects the myriad ways in which Victorians relate to their Yarra, Birrarung. Riverfest offers something for everyone, whether that's paddling, clean-ups, tree-planting, art-making or storytelling.

The Birrarung Riverfest was presented by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association (YRKA) in service of the association's vision of a healthy, protected and loved Yarra, Birrarung. Riverfest is a living example of YRKA'S role as a collaborator and convenor for the river - bringing together the many individuals and organisations that care for the river.

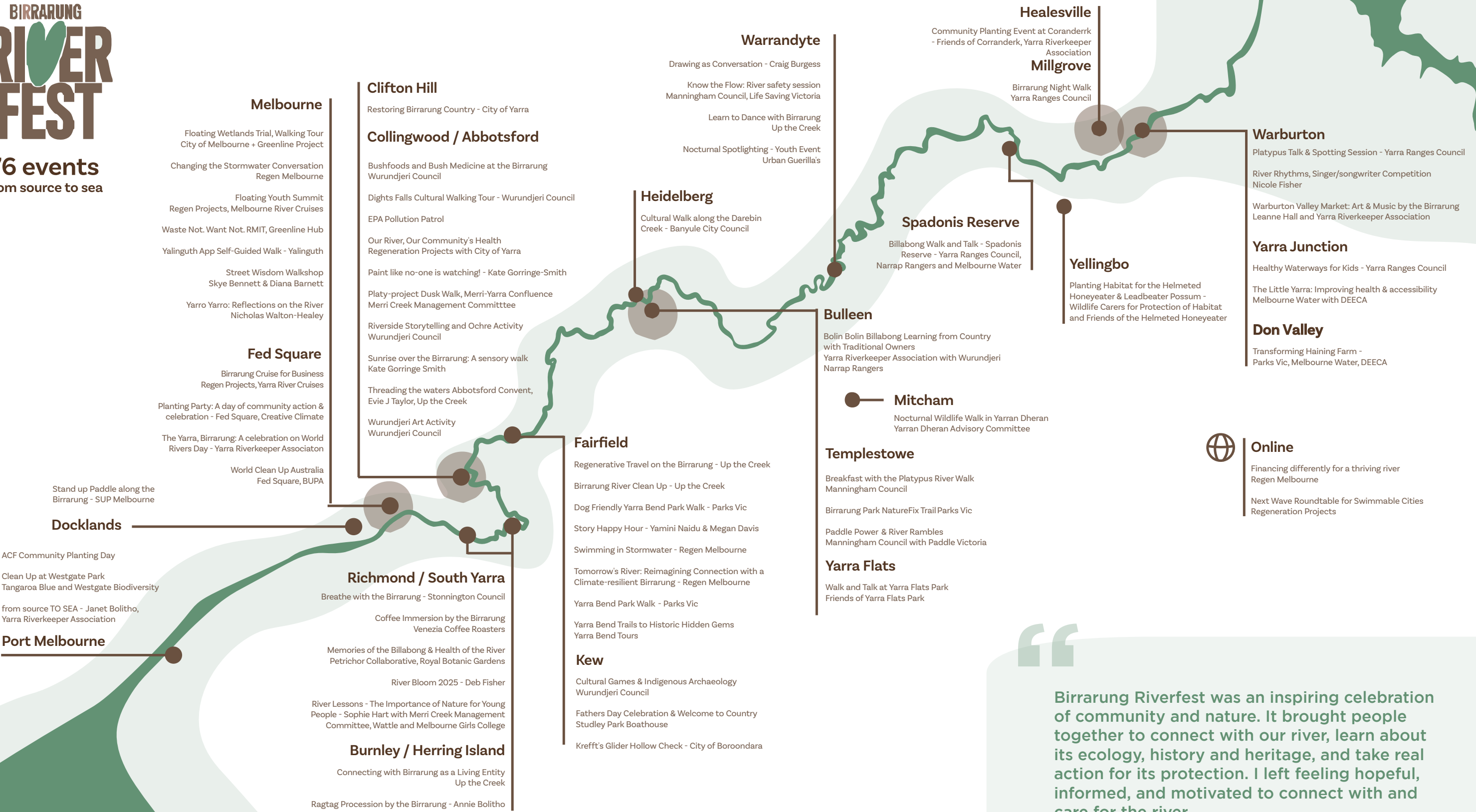


2024	2023
1-22 September (22 days)	24-22 Sept-Oct (28 days)
46 Events from 28 hosts	16 Events from 12 hosts
2000 Attendees	660 Attendees
200 Contributors	50 Contributors



BIRRARUNG  
RIVER  
FEST

76 events  
From source to sea



“Birrarung Riverfest was an inspiring celebration of community and nature. It brought people together to connect with our river, learn about its ecology, history and heritage, and take real action for its protection. I left feeling hopeful, informed, and motivated to connect with and care for the river.”



# Festival Program

The 2025 Birrarung Riverfest ran from Saturday 6 September to Sunday 28 September, culminating in a powerful World Rivers Day celebration. Over 23 days, an extraordinary 76 events were delivered, surpassing our original target of 50. From Warburton in the upper reaches to Westgate Park at the river's mouth, the festival united communities all along the 242-kilometre length of the Birrarung in a shared celebration of connection, creativity and care for our living river.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association (YRKA) co-created the program by inviting expressions of interest from Traditional Owners, community groups, artists, universities, business partners, environmental organisations and government bodies including previous event hosts.

Events included guided walks, a singer/songwriter competition, litter cleanups, tree-planting, storytelling, stormwater workshops, First Nations cultural education, art installations, swimming and deep conversations about river issues. 21 of these events were repeated from 2024. There were also two major online events hosted by Regen Melbourne and Regeneration Projects bringing together people from across Australia and the international swimmable cities movement focusing on how to resource a thriving and swimmable Birrarung.

Please see the addendum at the back of this report for a full list of events hosted during Riverfest.

## The Audience and Attendance

YRKA actively sought events that catered to audiences identified as under-represented in 2024 particularly youth, families and business. *The Floating Youth Summit* attracted university students from all cultures, while the *Wurundjeri Art Activity* attracted young families during the school holidays. The *Birrarung Business Cruise* attracted city businesspeople while *Threading the Waters* attracted young artists and the *Planting at Coranderrk* attracted people from all walks of life with an interest in First Nations Culture and environmentalism.

Many events, with the capacity for only a small number of attendees (20-30 people), booked out very quickly. Wurundjeri-led events, the various billabong walks, tree planting, the platypus walks and paddling events proved very popular. As almost all events were free and outdoors, we experienced a problem with no-shows and people not cancelling, perhaps due to poor weather conditions or other commitments. Because of this, and to mitigate significant drop off in attendance, we are considering a modest booking fee for events in 2026.

Significantly, attendee evaluations showed that Riverfest attracted a large audience who are not regular visitors to the river.

52%  
50+

of attendees were  
50+ years of age

63%

never, rarely or only  
sometimes visit the river

68%  
1<sup>st</sup>

of people had their  
first ever Riverfest  
experience this year

75%

of attendees  
were female





Awareness Raising and Action Taking

YRKA's aim for the festival was to celebrate the river and raise awareness of how to care for the river while encouraging people to take action. The key messages of Riverfest were;

- There's something for everyone at Riverfest.
- Act now for a healthy, protected, loved Yarra, Birrarung.
- Our Yarra, Birrarung: one living entity, cared for by many, caring for all.
- Birrarung is under pressure from city growth, climate change, and stormwater pollution. Now more than ever, our living entity needs our care.
- Simple actions like picking up litter, clearing gutters and drains, and planting greenery help reduce stormwater pollution flowing into Birrarung.
- Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo, what's good for the Yarra is good for all.

These messages were communicated through all our event collateral, marketing, social media, media interviews and speeches by YRKA Ambassadors who attended every event.

Event attendees were invited to complete an evaluation survey, and 356 responses were received.

Feedback from attendees:

“

Absolutely fantastic, an excellent way to engage the community, educate them about the importance of the waterway, to mobilise social capital and political will around furthering the aims and values of the Yarra Riverkeeper legislation.

SUP Melbourne feels like a nice community of folks who love getting out onto the water. I enjoyed my first paddle with them, and I think doing a river clean up on SUPs allowed me to get to the places I can't on my kayak.

I couldn't recommend this event highly enough (Dights Falls Cultural Tour). Every Victorian should do it. Thank you so much for offering it.

I've been nervous entering each event as a solo ticket holder, but each time have been immediately put at ease by how welcoming the hosts and other attendees are.

Beautiful day out with passionate and community minded people. It was good for the soul which is much needed in these times.

”



Results from 356 survey responses





## The Yarra, Birrarung: A Celebration on World Rivers Day

The festival came to a fitting finale with a true community celebration — over 75 contributors came together at Fed Square from performers to volunteers. It began with the Flowtilla for the Future, a flotilla of hope serenaded by the Riverfest Festoons and Climate Choir. On land, the Djirri Djirri Dancers performed before MC Margie Gillespie welcomed all to The Edge Theatre. Highlights included Uncle Ron Murray on didgeridoo, singer/songwriter competition winners Beck Sian and James Hampton, and a lively panel hosted by YRKA President Janet Bolitho. The *Prayer for a River* book launch and interactive Learning & Action Zone inspired all. The day closed with a thanks to our community over afternoon tea - a festival uniting the many people and organisations caring for the Birrarung.

“The River Rhythms singer/songwriter competition opened Riverfest in Warburton, near the Birrarung’s source, and flowed all the way to its finale in the city at Federation Square. Beck Sian and James Hampton carried these songs downstream, their performances beautifully completing 23 days celebrating all 242 kilometres of the Birrarung—from source to sea.

Nicole Fisher,  
River Rhythms Producer and Riverfest Volunteer”



## Event Hosts

It wasn’t just attendees who developed their awareness and commitment to the river. The 44 event hosts who ran 76 different events between them, all reported a deeper commitment to Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo (what is good for the Yarra is good for all). They made important connections with other hosts and there was a growing sense of belonging within the many communities that care for the one living entity, the Birrarung.

A survey of event hosts revealed the following:



**80%** indicated an intention to participate in Riverfest again in 2026



**1593** hours were spent organising and running events



**\$88.3k** was spent by event hosts in running events



**4.7/5** Given to YRKA for curation of the program, overall communications and general satisfaction in working with us.



**229** people were involved in running events

Both participants and event hosts strongly agreed that a sense of community was created at the events.

Some feedback from our hosts:

“

Our Wurundjeri guide was a generous, thoughtful, knowledgeable and respectful guide and fabulous storyteller. This was a stand-out event.

Seeing people engage with DEECA, Parks Vic and Melbourne Water to get a new perspective on what they have been doing, was a highlight. I felt there were some lightbulb moments.

Seeing the kids embrace paddling in the river despite the cold weather and cold water, was inspiring.

A highlight for me was seeing the pride and joy of the Narrap Team sharing their knowledge at the Bolin Bolin billabong.

Seeing 26 enthusiastic community members working collaboratively to heal Birrarung country by planting 1500 local native plants, was fantastic.

”





## First Nations

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association honours the Traditional Custodians and their enduring connection to Birrarung, a living ancestor whose care and protection have spanned millennia.

In 2025, the festival deepened this connection by embedding First Nations voices, leadership and culture throughout the program. Every event began with an Acknowledgement of Country and recognition that the Yarra has always been known as Birrarung, a river that flows through both land and story.

A cultural consultation process guided the development of our 2025 program and opened pathways for even greater collaboration in 2026. Many events featured Welcome to Country ceremonies, smoking ceremonies, and cultural performances, creating moments of truth-telling, learning and shared responsibility.

We were especially honoured to welcome the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation's Education Department to this year's programming, leading six powerful events that brought cultural knowledge, language and care for Country to the heart of Riverfest.

### 1&2 Dights Falls Cultural Walking Tour

- 3 Bushfoods & Bush Medicine at the Birrarung
- 4 Cultural Games & Indigenous Archaeology
- 5 Wurundjeri Art Activity
- 6 Riverside Storytelling & Ochre Activity

“

**I feel deeply honoured to have been invited onto Coranderrk to help heal Country and to hear firsthand from Uncle Dave about the significance of the Birrarung in Wurundjeri culture**

”

In addition to these events the following events were held:

Bolin Bolin Billabong, Learning from Country with Narrap rangers

Community Planting at Coranderrk with Uncle Dave (3 planting days)

Cultural Walk along the Darebin Creek

Memories of the Billabong and health of the river

Billabong Walk and Talk at Spadonis Reserve

River Lessons with Traditional Owner storytelling

World Rivers Day with many Traditional Owner elements to the program.

## Planting at Coranderrk

Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Dave Wandin welcomed volunteers to Country by the Birrarung at Coranderrk Station. He reminded us that Birrarung is alive and we could listen, observe and learn from the river. YRKA is proud to be partnering with Uncle Dave in the next stage of vegetation restoration by the Birrarung at Coranderrk. During Riverfest, Uncle Dave and the Friends of Coranderrk hosted 3 planting days to install 8000 new plants within a large enclosure, fenced to keep deer at bay. The events were hugely popular with 50+ people attending each day. Attendees came from all over Melbourne and some were planting trees for the first time.





## Stormwater Education & Pollution Prevention

With the support of the Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo collaboration and Melbourne Water, Riverfest became a catalyst for community action on stormwater and pollution. Together, we shared a clear message: Birrarung is under pressure — from urban growth, climate change, and stormwater pollution — and every small act of care matters. Across 13 events, including education sessions, litter clean-ups, creative activations and the Flowtilla for the Future, communities learned simple, practical ways to protect the river. Our trained Riverfest Ambassadors helped turn awareness into action — inspiring thousands to care for Birrarung and reminding everyone that what's good for the Yarra is good for all.

Key stormwater messages were delivered by event hosts, guest speakers and YRKA Ambassadors at these events:

Four stormwater focused events were held in partnership with Regen Melbourne.

The EPA Pollution Patrol activation teaching people about pollution monitoring and reporting.

Six litter clean-up and educational events, on & by the river and nearby streets.

River Bloom, an art installation highlighting the thousands of tennis balls that enter the river.

And the 'Flowtilla for the Future' at Federation Wharf, which gave the river a voice on stormwater and closed the festival with a powerful community call to action.

### Stormwater Story

In partnership with Regen Melbourne and the Swimmable Birrarung initiative, four stormwater education events helped shift the conversation from problems to possibilities. Together, we explored how Melbourne can finance and design a climate-resilient, swimmable Birrarung — one where people and nature can thrive side by side.

These sessions brought together policy-makers, government leaders, local councils, water experts, and advocates including representatives from businesses and the Birrarung Council to spark real change in how we manage and value stormwater. The result: a growing movement committed to reimagining the future of a cleaner, healthier river.

“

It was an absolute privilege to work with this team of passionate individuals to bring this session together for Riverfest. The vision for a Swimmable Birrarung is giving us the opportunity to change the stormwater conversation to value rainwater and reignite the vision for a Water Sensitive City.

**City of Melbourne**

Occasionally you have a conversation that truly connects. That lifts you above the noise, the well-trodden rhetoric, the humdrum. A conversation that inspires hope and reminds you of the 'why'.

Last Thursday was one of those that I won't forget. A meeting of city-shapers putting their minds to how we can re-imagine, re-engage and re-energise the stormwater conversation to create a swimmable Birrarung. It's one that really excites me and that I think has the potential to bring so many more people on the journey.

**Arup**

”





# Festival Operations

## Resourcing and Operations

YRKA appointed the Festival Producer, Carolyn Tate for the second year. Carolyn developed the program, led the marketing and oversaw the delivery. She was supported by the YRKA Operations Manager, Carina Watson, YRKA Community Education and Engagement Officer Emma Barnett and the President of the Board, Janet Bolitho. Marketing, social media and admin support was provided by Kate Unsworth and Hershei Romero from Ripple Media. In addition, Board members took on a significant role as ambassadors representing YRKA at each event.

The growth in the program from 46 to 76 events against a target of 50, challenged

YRKA resources. Extra administrative support was required which we covered with additional sponsorship.

Most of the funding was provided by our Major Partners, the Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo collaboration and Melbourne Water with Fed Square funding the closing event on World Rivers Day. A financial contribution was also made by Strategic Partner Australian Ecosystems and valuable in-kind contributions came from Regen Melbourne and Regeneration Projects.

We have estimated that 1593 hours of time was contributed by hosts, speakers, facilitators, performers and volunteers (not including YRKA paid or volunteer time). 90% of all the events were free to attend.

## Partnerships

YRKA was generously supported by valued partners.

Event partners were delighted with the success of the festival. All were satisfied with their brand exposure and return on investment with BBBU already indicating a renewal of their partnership in 2026.

Individual events had their own partners and sponsors who supported hosts to stage their events.

## Major Partners

Second year



What is good for the Yarra is good for all

First year



## Strategic Partners

Second year



**REGEN**  
MELBOURNE



**Regeneration**  
Projects

First year



**AUSTRALIAN**  
ECOSYSTEMS

## Major Event Partner

Second year

**FED**  
**SQ.**





Marketing and Communications

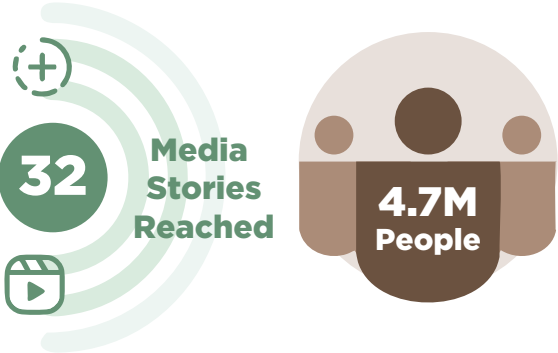
The Riverfest brand, designed by international agency Cummins Partners, in 2024 was the foundation of our marketing and communications and is growing in recognition. This striking brand was used effectively across all digital platforms (website, social media, Humantix ticketing and newsletters) promotional items (posters, postcards, t/shirts and flags) creating strong brand recognition and a strong base for future festivals.

Marketing and communications achieved outstanding results including strong media interest and event bookings.

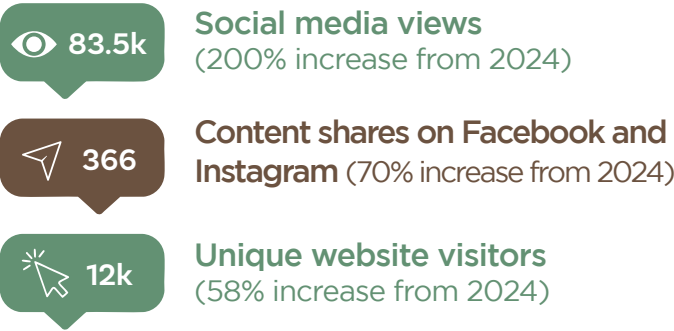
In 2025, we built on the great foundations laid by our media agency, Good & Proper from the previous year. Our media strategy achieved outstanding results again with a much broader media reach.

Mainstream Media

This included interviews on Triple R and ABC radio with coverage on Channel 7 and 9 News, a Herald Sun story and feature stories in online publications such as the Star Mail, What's On Melbourne, Secret Melbourne and City of Melbourne.



The YRKA Riverfest social media campaign achieved deep engagement. 215 pieces of content were shared on facebook and Instagram achieving a total of 27,966 impressions.



LinkedIn was also used more effectively this year with weekly posts creating engagement with the corporate and business world.

Riverfest was also promoted through the distribution of 200 posters and 3000 postcards to cafes, libraries and retailers along the river. This was supported by a strong email marketing campaign, many council and community newsletters and local listings of Riverfest events.

Governance

YRKA reconvened and expanded the Birrarung Riverfest Steering Committee to oversee the direction and operation of the festival. The expanded committee helped facilitate broader engagement with TOs, youth and government bodies. Our thanks go to the Steering Committee included representation from YRKA, BBU, Melbourne Water, DEECA, Fed Square, Wildlife Victoria, Regen Melbourne, Regeneration Projects, Parks Vic and the Birrarung Council.





## 2026 Recommendations

The growth of Riverfest and the enthusiasm of all involved inspires us to continue to develop the festival as an annual event. The following recommendations are informed by our evaluation and will guide our funding bids and planning for Birrarung Riverfest 2026.

- **Secure Long-Term Funding:**  
Seek and confirm funding for a three-year Riverfest program by the end of 2025 to ensure continuity, stability and sustained community impact.
- **Lock in 2026 Dates:**  
Host Birrarung Riverfest 2026 from Sunday 27 September (World Rivers Day) to Sunday 18 October.
- **Strengthen First Nations Partnerships:**  
Begin early in 2026 to deepen collaboration with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Traditional Owners, ensuring their leadership and cultural knowledge guide programming, storytelling and governance.
- **Diversify and Expand the Program:**  
Continue to design an inclusive festival that appeals to all audiences, from families to policymakers, while introducing dedicated streams such as Arts and Stormwater to build depth and focus.
- **Increase Accessibility and Engagement:**  
Improve access for all people by offering diverse venues, formats and mobility options. Introduce a small attendance fee for most events to ensure commitment while maintaining affordability.
- **Create a Signature River Event:**  
Develop a mass-participation event that symbolically and physically connects river supporters along the full length of the Birrarung, from source to sea, uniting communities in one powerful act of care.
- **Foster Collaboration and Innovation:**  
Curate a series of community and government think tanks with partners such as Regen Melbourne and Regeneration Projects focused on creative solutions for stormwater, biodiversity, and cultural connection.
- **Launch a Community Water Summit:**  
Mark World Rivers Day 2026 with a new flagship event, a Community Water Summit, bringing together the people, groups, and organisations already working in service to the river to share knowledge, build alliances and inspire action.

“The success of Riverfest has been due to Yarra Riverkeeper Association’s unique ability to convene and connect the many communities and diverse audiences along the Birrarung. After three years, the festival has proven its popularity and tapped into a desire for nature connection and action for the environment. It is our intention to build on this foundation to make Riverfest the premier, nature-based festival in the state, one that invites care and action from Birrarung’s source to the bay.”

Janet Bolitho, YRKA President





Addendum  
Events by River Reach

Inner city

EVENT	HOST
ACF Community Planting Day	Australian Conservation Foundation
Birrarung Cruise for Business	Regeneration Projects, Yarra River Cruises
Birrarung Floating Wetlands Trial, Walking Tour	City of Melbourne, Greenline Project
Breathe with the Birrarung	Stonnington Council
Bushfoods and Bush Medicine	Wurundjeri Council
Changing the Stormwater Conversation	Regen Melbourne
Clean Up at Westgate Park	Tangaroa Blue and Westgate Biodiversity
Coffee Immersion by the Birrarung	Venezia Coffee Roasters
Connecting with Birrarung as a Living Entity	Up the Creek
Cultural Games & Indigenous Archaeology	Wurundjeri Council
Dights Falls Cultural Walking Tour	Wurundjeri Council
EPA Pollution Patrol	Environmental Protection Agency
Floating Youth Summit	Regeneration Projects, Melbourne River Cruises
from source TO SEA	Janet Bolitho, YRKA
Memories of the Billabong & Health of the River	Petrichor Collaboration, Royal Botanic Gardens
Our River, Our Community's Health	Regeneration Projects with City of Yarra
Paint like no-one is watching!	Kate Gorringer-Smith
Planting Party: A day of community action & celebration	Fed Square, Creative Climate
Platy-project Dusk Walk, Merri-Yarra Confluence	Merri Creek Management Committtee
Ragtag Procession by the Birrarung	Annie Bolitho
Regenerative Travel on the Birrarung	Up the Creek
River Bloom 2025	Deb Fisher
River Lessons - The Importance of Nature for Young People	Sophie Hart with Merri Creek Management Committee, Wattle and Melbourne Girls College
Riverside Storytelling and Ochre Activity	Wurundjeri Council
Stand up Paddle along the Birrarung	SUP Melbourne
Sunrise over the Birrarung: A sensory walk	Kate Gorringer-Smith
The Yarra, Birrarung: A celebration on World Rivers Day	Yarra Riverkeeper Associaton
Threading the waters	Abbotsford Convent, Evie J Taylor, Up the Creek
Waste Not. Want Not.	RMIT, Greenline Hub
World Clean Up Australia	Fed Square, BUPA
Wurundjeri Art Activity	Wurundjeri Council
Yalinguth App Self-Guided Walk	Yalinguth

Lower Rural

Online

Suburban

Upper Rural

Billabong Walk and Talk - Spadonis Reserve	Yarra Ranges Council, Narrap Rangers and Melbourne Water
Breakfast with the Platypus River Walk	Manningham Council
Drawing as Conversation	Craig Burgess
Know the Flow: River safety session	Manningham Council, Life Saving Victoria
Learn to Dance with Birrarung	Up the Creek
Nocturnal Spotlighting - Youth Event	Urban Guerilla's
Nocturnal Wildlife Walk in Yarran Dheran	Yarran Dheran Advisory Committee
Planting Habitat for the Helmeted Honeyeater & Leadbeater Possum	Wildlife Carers for Protection of Habitat and Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater
Financing differently for a thriving river	Regen Melbourne
Next Wave Roundtable for Swimmable Cities	Regeneration Projects
Birrarung Park NatureFix Trail	Parks Vic
Birrarung River Clean Up	Up the Creek, Fairfield Boathouse
Bolin Bolin Billabong Learning from Country with Traditional Owners	Yarra Riverkeeper Association with Wurundjeri Narrap Rangers
Cultural Walk along the Darebin Creek	Banyule City Council
Dog Friendly Yarra Bend Park Walk	Parks Vic
Fathers Day Celebration & Welcome to Country	Studley Park Boathouse
Krefft's Glider Hollow Check	City of Boroondara
Paddle Power	Manningham Council, Paddle Victoria
Restoring Birrarung Country	City of Yarra Council
River Rambles	Manningham Council, Paddle Victoria
Story Happy Hour by the Birrarung	Yamini Naidu & Megan Davis, Fairfield Boathouse
Street Wisdom Walkshop	Skye Bennett & Diana Barnett
Swimming in Stormwater	Regen Melbourne
Tomorrow's River: Reimagining Connection with a Climate-resilient Birrarung	Regen Melbourne, Fairfield Boathouse
Walk and Talk at Yarra Flats Park	Friends of Yarra Flats Park
Yarra Bend Park Walk	Parks Vic
Yarra Bend Trails to Historic Hidden Gems	Yarra Bend Tours
Yarro Yarro: Reflections on the River	Nicholas Walton-Healey
Birrarung Night Walk	Yarra Ranges Council
Community Planting Event at Coranderrk	Coranderrk with Yarra Riverkeeper Association
Healthy Waterways for Kids	Yarra Ranges Council
Platypus Talk & Spotting Session	Yarra Ranges Council
River Rhythms, Singer/songwriter Competition	Nicole Fisher
The Little Yarra: Improving health & accessibility	Melbourne Water with DEECA
Transforming Haining Farm	Parks Vic, Melbourne Water, DEECA
Warburton Valley Market: Art & Music by the Birrarung	Leanne Hall



