Birds bring people together

A MEETING of cultures was celebrated on Saturday at the annual Shearwater Festival. The cultural and artistic event brought together indigenous, non-indigenous and new Australians together to celebrate their connection to place, and specifically Phillip Island.

The Shearwater Festival celebrated the return of the short-tailed shearwaters from their 15,000km migration. They travel from Alaska to Phillip Island each year to breed.

They are a global bird, and during the Shearwater Festival, are used as a symbol of local and global interconnectedness. Their global and local connections start with recognition of the ancient landscapes and people of the land, the Boon Wurrung people.

During the event, children from local schools are taught about the Boon Wurrung and local indigenous culture. During the street parade up Thompson Avenue, the children sings in English and language.

"We know the country that we are on. Sing up country and sing it up strong. We are all connected as one."

This song and its themes were mirrored throughout the weekend of activities with local indigenous dances, and dancing and songs from local culture, where the Shearwater’s return up before flying to Australia, to share stories and knowledge through theatre, drumming and musical collaborations.

The large crowd who participated in the street parade were given just a glimpse of the passion of cultural knowledge during the Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony. Boon Wurrung elder Aunty Carolyn Briggs, and her grandson Marbee Williams led the ceremony.

"She said the ceremony was a way to ‘space back and listen to country to celebrate the heartland of these lands’.

A taste of culture

WHEN Nathan Maynard tells of the taste of mutton-bird (short-tailed Shearwater), his eyes alight.

"It’s delicious, it’s oily, slightly fishy - there’s no other flavour like it!"

As a special guest of the Shearwater Festival, an annual cultural, artistic and environmental event that celebrates the return of Shearwaters to Phillip Island, one could think there was a reverse census somewhere along the line.

Mr Maynard, a Barkindji man from Tasmania, with his family west around 20,000 birds a year, but as Mr Maynard explained, it’s been a part of his clan’s culture “forever”.

"We’re muttonbirders (Shearwater’s a fancy name, or we call it ‘filo’ in our language), and we run up to the Big Pies Island."

"Since the start of time there’s always been one family from the family that does it thinly."

"When the shearwaters come, they took women to the island to hunt the seals, then when the seals ran out all along the further group of islands in Bass motorists harvested muttonbird.

In those days we worried for the white boxes, now we do it for ourselves, now we run the wheels.”

Mr Maynard said the harvest is sustainable, with the majority of the population returning each year.

"It’s true there’s a commercial aspect to it, but it’s much more than that to us.

"All the cousin come and it’s the only time we’ll see them all year.

"For me it’s connecting us to our history, our family and ancestors."

A taste of culture