**Warrambool**

– n. a watercourse that flows only after flooding.

**Forthcoming edition of the Australian National Dictionary**

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**The story behind the Word of the Month**

The following passage in the Melbourne Age newspaper on 19 April 2003:

Historian Tom Griffiths, in his essay The Outside Country, tells of a pastoralist of the 1880s who said waterways like the fabled Paroo and the Warrego in the north-western part of the vast Murray-Darling Basin scarcely deserved the name rivers. What Australia has in their place, says Griffiths, is ‘channels, swamps, dry deltas, waterholes, freshes, shallow ephemeral lakes, warrambools, billabongs, dunefield swales, anabranches and flooded alluvial plains’.

There are some curious terms here. A dunefield swale seems to be ‘a hollow between sand dunes’, and an anabranch is ‘an arm of a river that separates from and later rejoins the main stream’ (the ‘ana’ part taken from the Modern Latin word anastomosis ‘intercommunication between two vessels, channels, or distinct branches of any kind, by a connecting cross branch’, from a Greek word that ultimately meant ‘to furnish with a mouth or outlet’). Most Australians would not have the word **warrambool** as part of their vocabulary, but it is definitely an Australian word.

If you google the word **warrambool**, Google will ask you if you were really searching for the Victorian city of Warrnambool, on the south-western coast. If you insist that you are really after **warrambool**, and do some searching, you will come up with many place names containing **warrambool**, especially in an area between Narrabri in northern New South Wales, and the Queensland-New South Wales border. Newspapers in the late nineteenth century often refer to warrambools:

All along the course of the Darling, at some distance back from the river—sometimes as much as twenty or thirty miles—there are shallow watercourses called **warrambools**, along which the flood waters pass in wet seasons. One of these warrambools, north west of the Darling above Brewarrina, runs parallel with the river for more than 100 miles before returning into the main channel. *South Australian Register*, 10 December 1884.
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Leaving Walgett on Tuesday, at noon, via the Western route to Sydney. ... For the first ten miles the country rather disappointed me—it might have been fairly expected to look better; but the dry crabhole nature of the *warrambools* wants a lot of making up to restore them after droughty spells. *Maitland Mercury*, 7 August 1886.

The punt being underwater, the party had to proceed round by the North Bourke bridge, to gain which they had to cross a flooded *warrambool*. *Western Herald and Darling River Advocate*, 23 November 1892.

From these descriptions, it is clear that a *warrambool* is a watercourse that is seasonally dry, and that after flooding water is often retained in the shallow depressions that make up the landscape feature.

Where does the word *warrambool* come from? William Ridley was a Presbyterian minister who worked as a missionary in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland in the 1850s. He was interested in Aboriginal languages, and published *Kamilaroi and Other Australian Languages* in 1875. Kamilaroi (now usually given as Gamilaraay) is a language spoken over a wide area of northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland. From this language, Ridley listed the word *warumbul* with the sense 'watercourse'. *The Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay & Yuwaalayaay Dictionary* of 2002 lists *warrumbul* as 'watercourse (overflow channel). The name is used to refer to overflow channels which have water only during flood times'.

*Warrambool* is therefore an Australian word that has been adopted from an Aboriginal language. It has always been limited to a particular region, but the 2003 quotation above from the *Age (Melbourne)* newspaper shows that it is more widely used in environmental contexts. For a recent discussion of this word, see the *Endangered Languages and Cultures* site [here](#).