

Media Release



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Puggle rescuer named 2024 Northern Rivers Volunteer of the Year

Northern Rivers wildlife carer Leoni Byron-Jackson has been named the Northern Rivers Volunteer of the Year for her incredible dedication to native animals over two decades, including a record 2,500 animal rescues.

Leoni was recognised today at a special ceremony at Twin Towns as part of the 2024 NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards. Recipients in other Northern Rivers regional award categories were also announced, including young, adult, senior and volunteer team of the year.

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards celebrate the work of thousands of individuals and volunteer teams from a diverse range of organisations across the state. The Awards are hosted by The Centre for Volunteering, whose mission it is to promote and support volunteering across NSW.

Northern Rivers Young Volunteer of the Year: Jackson Whitney from Yamba

Jackson volunteers with the NSW SES and VRA Rescue NSW. He also gives his time as a photographer and drone operator across the state to create recruitment and training videos for emergency services. His contributions to training have been an important innovation for emergency services in regional NSW.

Northern Rivers Adult Volunteer of the Year: Simone Clark from Ballina

Simone has shown remarkable commitment to the community through her volunteer roles at Wardell CORE, Orange Sky and Mary's place. She gives her time providing meals, clothes, groceries, showers and laundry services. She was a constant presence during the 2022 floods, providing non-stop help during and after the devastating emergency disasters.

Northern Rivers Senior Volunteer of the Year: Leoni Byron-Jackson from Goonellabah

Leoni helped establish the Northern Rivers branch of the NSW Wildlife Rescue Service more than 20 years ago and she has continued to lead and volunteer there across many different roles. She is also a small mammals expert, having trained hundreds of volunteers in how to care for echidnas, possums and gliders. She has become an essential conduit between animal rescuers and local vets, police, wildlife hospitals, and businesses.

Northern Rivers Volunteer Team of the Year: Agape Outreach

The 250 volunteers at Agape Outreach provide crucial support to people experiencing homelessness, poverty,

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or housing insecurity. Each year they recover more than 100 tonnes of rescued food, distribute 48,000 meals, and provide around 14,000 hampers to support people in need across the Northern Rivers region.

The Centre for Volunteering CEO Gemma Rygate said:

“These awards recognise the exceptional effort of volunteers across the Northern Rivers region.

“Whether it’s in the local sports club, in health care, education and cultural centres, legal support or emergency response, volunteers are essential for the ongoing health and viability of local communities.

“It’s important for volunteers across the region to know that their commitment is recognised and valued.”

The Awards are supported by Principal Partners the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and ClubsNSW.

The NSW Minister with responsibility for Volunteering, Jodie Harrison said:

“Congratulations to the recipients of the Northern Rivers Volunteer of the Year Awards. Thank you for the incredible contributions you make to NSW and your local community.

“Volunteers are the lifeblood of our communities, and the NSW Government is pleased to be partnering with the Centre for Volunteering to recognise volunteers and the valuable role they play in making NSW the best state to live and work in.”

ClubsNSW CEO Rebecca Riant said:

“The awards are a tribute to the vital contributions made by volunteers across the state. Volunteers are the backbone of the NSW club industry, and their efforts are crucial in uplifting local communities.

“We’re delighted to have a special Club Volunteer of the Year Award category, and I can’t wait to see who takes home that honour.”

Northern Rivers award recipients will be invited to represent their region at the Gala State Ceremony in Sydney at the end of the year, where the NSW Volunteer of the Year will be announced across each category.

More information at media@volunteering.com.au

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About the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards

2024 marks the 18th year of these high-profile Awards, which have honoured hundreds of thousands of volunteers for their community service, while highlighting the value and benefits of volunteering.

Anyone who volunteers in NSW can be nominated for an award.

The Award categories are:

- Young Volunteer of the Year
- Adult Volunteer of the Year
- Senior Volunteer of the Year
- Volunteer Team of the Year
- Employee Volunteer of the Year
- Club Volunteer of the Year
- Not-for-Profit Voluntary Governance Award
- Volunteer Leader of the Year

Twenty-five regional ceremonies are held in towns and suburbs throughout NSW from mid-August until November.

The regional finalists will be invited to a Gala State ceremony in December in Sydney where the NSW Volunteer of the Year is announced. Recipients for the NSW Volunteer of the Year are also announced across the eight categories.

The Awards are run by the Centre for Volunteering and proudly supported by our principal partners the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and ClubsNSW.

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