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PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

FEBRUARY 2004

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President
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Secretary/
Treasurer
Property Officer
Public Officer
Newsletter Editor

Bob Read
Kevin Boyle
Connie Spencer
Barbara Gilfedder
Rosalie Breen
Leoni Read
Emily Findlay

8952 1935
0422006140
89524694
8955 5452
8952 3409
8952 1935
8955 0313

rread@octa4.net.au

constans@austarnet.com.au
fedders@octa4.net.au

rread@octa4.net.au
emily.findlay@nt.gov.au

Web site <http://www.octa4.net.au/alicensats>

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club February 2004

Meetings

Wednesday 11 Feb 7:30 PM in the staff room of OLSH off the Sadadeen Road – Speaker Stuart Traynor (topic to be announced).

Trips

February 14th Bird watching at the Sewage Ponds – 7 am meet at the gate

February 21st Night walk – Simpsons Gap Bike Track -

February 22nd, WaterWatch – Wigley's Waterhole.
Leader: Rosalie

Sun 07 Mar	Walk in hills behind Zeil Street. 6:30 am. Meet at track beside Araluen Christian School, Blain Street.
Early March 2004	One of walks in Telegraph Station vicinity. Leader: Rosalie
March 2004	Kunoth Bore
April 2004	Slot gorge southern side of Mt Gillen. Leader: Connie
April 2004 (school holidays)	Newhaven
May 2004	Chain of Ponds (Trophina)
Sat, Sun & Mon 5, 6 & 7 June 2004	Mac Clark Conservation Reserve (Acacia peuce) and Acacia pickardii. This would be a combined FNC & APS trip.
After rain	Proposed activity: setting up a light trap.
Possible overnight camp	At Old Hamilton Downs one weekend next year if there is sufficient interest.
Unknown	Walk from Wigley's to the Telegraph Station. Organiser: Rosalie

Subscriptions

Please note that subscriptions are now due. If you have not paid already please do so as soon as possible.

Reptiles

Reptiles Crossing

If you are interested in the cold blooded members of our Alice Springs community then you may be interested in taking a trip out to Glen Helen on a hot summers' night. A small group of intrepid wildlife enthusiasts (including Emily and myself), recently decided to test our luck at 'reptile watching' in this prime reptile location.

All you need is a car (it's a long way to walk), reasonable eyesight, headlights (highly recommended), and a couple of torches. If you don't get too enthusiastic then you shouldn't need any bandages. Equipped with these items and a substantial quantity of food, we set out and arrived at the Mt Sonder lookout just on dusk, as all the action starts after dark.

Looking for reptiles in the car is then dead easy – you just drive along at about 25 km / hr, or slow enough to stop before you run something over. The more eyes that you have then the better chance that you will see reptiles on the road before they slink away.

Our car set out from the lookout back toward Alice Springs on Namatjira Drive with no less than 10 eyes scanning the bitumen – and it wasn't long before we were rewarded! Our first find was a Spencers Burrowing Frog in the Finke River Crossing – in fact several of them were observed hopping across the road – a good sign for the rest of the trip.

Only a short time later we came across a lovely Desert Death Adder – in great condition and very keen to be photographed. Although this snake is highly venomous this snake was very inoffensive – only moving off the road when we gently coaxed it with a lengthy stick. It was fantastic to see its 'side winding' movement.



Next to pull our car to a halt was a stunning little 'fat tailed' gecko (*Diplodactylus conspicillatus*), the first of many that we were to find. This gecko uses its fat tail to plug the holes of spider burrows that it uses for sheltering in. It was hard to observe the gecko for too long as a cloud of flying termites had descended on our torch light – a bit of a nuisance, but another good sign of animal activity (the gecko was quite grateful). Ten minutes later and we came across our second Death Adder! – Prompting me to pose the question *what do you call a gathering of Death Adders?* Maybe a flock, or a pod? At any rate I'd call it very exiting and excellent luck!

Fortunately our trip just went from better to better, as only a slithering distance down the road we spotted another snake, however this one didn't have the robust form of a Death Adder, but was long, thin and

shiny. A closer inspection revealed a very pretty Orange Naped Snake (*Furina ornata*).

As the night wore on, the temperature dropped significantly, but apparently not enough to put the reptiles to bed. Our next discovery was a very slow Stimpson's Python, seeking the last of the warmth radiating from the road surface. These snakes don't usually mind being handled, and with care most of us gently held the snake to take a closer look. We released the animal a safe distance from the road. To cap off an amazing night we left our biggest and best discovery to last. Going on advice, we were keeping a careful eye out on the roadside around creek crossings and flood-ways, as Centralian Carpet Pythons are known to frequent these places. Although we had decided to call it a night and were driving quickly – a foot python lying just off the road didn't escape our notice. This was the highlight a big Centralian Carpet Python with dazzling orange colour so distinctive to the Centralian variety. We all had a close look at this magnificent creature, taking due care to avoid the sharp end, before also releasing it a safe distance from the road. There we watched it meander through the vegetation with its tongue flicking in and out, and no doubt its heat sensory pits searching for some unwary mammal or bird.



Hopefully this may have wet your appetite for some reptile watching on the road. A few things to keep in mind are your safety and how to pick a good night for the trip. Use common sense with your vehicle, move the car off the road and engage hazard lights before inspecting wildlife. Avoid handling reptiles unnecessarily – especially the venomous species that should be viewed from a respectable distance. The best nights are hot, humid and moonless. But don't be too disappointed if you don't see much – this trip was out of the ordinary, however if you persevere one day you'll hit reptile gold!

Sewage Ponds

As some of you will already know after 40 years of unrestricted access, entry to the Alice Springs Sewage Ponds is now restricted. This is one more victim of the wretched public liability problem that makes our lives difficult in so many areas. The arrangement at present is that one can get access by signing off the public indemnity form. I have already done this as a group leader. From the 6th of February the gate will be locked. Keys will be available for a \$50 deposit.

We will have to decide whether there should be a club key and who should be the custodian (not me, I will get my own). See Power Water Notice below.

Attention Birdwatchers

Due to the number of requests for access by visitors and residents who are interested in observing the unique bird-life at the Waste Stabilisation Ponds and Ilparpa Swamp area at the Commonage, Power and Water has released some simple guidelines and requirements for access to this area.

As from 6 February 2004, members of the public wishing to access the Stabilisation Ponds must adhere to the following requirements:

1. Access to the Waste Stabilisation Ponds will only be granted to members of the public who have completed both an 'Indemnity and an 'Induction' form;
2. Pedestrian access only will be granted, (vehicle access can be arranged in special circumstances);
3. Birdwatcher Organisations/Associations must notify Power and Water of their interest, & sign 'blanket' indemnity forms covering all members who visit the ponds;
4. Upon completion of all paperwork, a \$50 key deposit (fully refundable), shall be paid to Power and Water for a key to be issued to the applicant;
5. All persons accessing the Waste Stabilisation Ponds area are required to carry and show photo identification should they be approached by pond security;
6. An emergency Power and Water contact number will be listed on signage at the point of entry. In the case of urgent, unforeseen or immediate access requirements from individuals or organisations;
7. Tour group operators are to provide indemnity for groups and/or individuals, provide proof of insurance and pay key deposit as per above.

An unexpected visitor to Alice Springs

The Parks & Wildlife Service regional office had a welcome visitor in the first two weeks of January, a Flock Bronzewing. The regional office is situated within the Arid Zone Research Institute on the South Stuart Highway. The gardens around the Tom Hare building are landscaped with native plants and as a result, attract a lot of native birds. It is not uncommon when outside in one of the shade shelters to share your smoko or lunch break with an industrious Western Bowerbird or a bunch of noisy Babbler and splendid fairy-wrens regularly hop along our window

ceils. Recently the resident Crested Pigeon flock arrived with a new friend, a male Flock Bronzewing.

Flock Bronzewings are mainly found in open Mitchell grass grasslands on black soil plains and have a stronghold on the Barkly Tablelands. Although its conservation status is *near threatened* due to a significant contraction in range, this species is regularly seen on the Barkly Tableland, and as far south as Annitowa, and also sometimes on Andado and Mount Dare it is occasionally seen in large numbers in Connells Lagoon Conservation Reserve, at drinking places. Seeing it at the Tom Hare was great and unexpected, as they are very rarely seen around Alice Springs.

Emily Findlay

Notes on the Flock Bronzewing

Medium sized pigeon mostly found in large flocks. Shortly after the arrival of Europeans, there were reports of huge numbers of these birds on the inland plains, but these days Flock Bronzewings are less common and occur in much smaller flocks which may still numbering from hundreds to thousands.

Males have a black head and throat with white forehead and white stripes behind the eye. The upper parts are buff brown and the flight feathers grey with white tips. The upper breast is white, with the breast and bellies a light grey. The eye and bill are black and the legs and feet purple-grey. Females are distinct from males in that they lack the black and white head and have a buff brown breast. Immature birds strongly resemble females.

The Flock Bronzewing's core distribution is centred in the Barkly Tableland in north western Queensland. However it may be found across the arid interior from Shark Bay (WA) to western Queensland, northern South Australia and north western New South Wales.

Flock Bronzewings have declined in numbers since the introduction of sheep, cattle and rabbits into their range. Their grazing essentially altered the landscape and rendered it unsuitable for Flock Bronzewings. Today this continues to be a threat and in those grasslands which have not been grossly altered, competition with grazing stock and feral animals is such that the productivity of these areas cannot support the large flocks that were once common.

This information was sourced from:

www.birdworld.com.au/records/pigeons/flock.html



Declining Tas devil population leaves door open for foxes

Scientists say efforts to eradicate foxes from Tasmania need to be stepped up as Tasmanian devil populations decline. A mystery illness killing devils is threatening the state's chances of reclaiming its fox-free status.

The Tasmanian devil tumour disease has killed up to 85 per cent of adult devils in some areas. It causes cancer-like lesions on the animal's face. Scientists are yet to find a cause or cure.

As devil numbers decline, so too does the chance of Tasmania eradicating foxes. Wildlife biologist Nick Mooney says there needs to be a bigger effort to eradicate the pests.

"We're entering a very risky period for foxes becoming established, probably the most risky period in our history," Mr Mooney said.

The feral cat problem is also expected to grow as a result of the decline in devil populations but this will benefit native quolls.

Kimberley communities prepare for toad invasion

Northern Territory frog experts will be used to help educate people in the Kimberley about the impact of the cane toad on frogs. The toad is expected to hop over the border from the Territory in two years and communities in the Kimberley are starting to prepare.

Jane Rapkin from the Save Endangered East Kimberley group says education brochures are being prepared for Aboriginal communities and the group is setting up monitoring sites and holding information sessions for the community. She says the region is concerned about the effect of the toad.

"Just concerned community people ... [from] Aboriginal people with the bush tucker foods to particularly in the tourism industry, the tourism operators are quite concerned at the impact it might have on the Kimberley, which at the moment they sell as being pristine," Ms Rapkin said.

Environmental Events Calender

The annual Parks & Wildlife Community Education Environmental Events Calender is now ready for distributions. The aim of the calendar is to assist members of the community to get involved in local environmental events, by providing a comprehensive list of dates and contacts for events in 2004.

This year's calendar is a joint production of the Parks and Wildlife Service and the Australian Association for Environmental Education NT Chapter.

If you would like to receive a copy of the events Calendar (or know anyone that would) please contact Parks & Wildlife on 8951 8247.