claimed within 14 days please return to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

**MARCH 2004** 



President Vice-President Scoretary/ Treasurer Property Officer Public Officer Newsletter Editor Bob Read Kevin Boyle Connie Spencer Barbara Gilfedder Rosalie Breen Leoni Read Emily Findlay

rread@octa4.net.au

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

rread@octa4.net.an robbiemily@hotmail.au

Web site http://www.octa4.net.au/alicenats

# ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB MARCH 2004

# MEETINGS

Wednesday 10 March, 7:30 PM in the staff room of OLSH off the Sadadeen Road – Speaker Ajay Narendra on his Racehorse Ant research.

Wednesday 14 April – Speaker Margaret Friedel, an Ecological Journey through Namibia

Wednesday 12 May – Speaker Michael Green, the Henbury Meteorite Crater.

# TRIPS.

March 7<sup>th</sup>, Walk in hills behind Zeil Street. 6:30 am. Meet at track beside Araluen Christian School, Blain Street. Leader Barbara Gilfedder

March 13<sup>th</sup> Walk in Telegraph Station vicinity. Meet Gosse Street playgrouud at 7:00 am. Leader: Rosalie Breen

March 21<sup>st</sup>, Kunoth Bore. Meet 7:30 am at Sargent Street sign on the North Stuart Hwy.

Newhaven Station. Need numbers
in order to book.
Slot gorge southern side of Mt Gillen. Meet 7:30 am at the Information Bay opposite the Old Timers Home. Leader: Connie Spencer
Over night walk in West Macs. Consult with Kaye Percy.
Open for suggestions
Chain of Ponds (Trephina)
Mac Clark Conservation Reserve (Acacia peuce) and Acacia pickardii. This would be a combined FNC & APS trip

# KINDRED ORGANISATIONS

# **EVENTS**

#### ILPARPA VALLEY LANDCARE GROUP INC. Chairman - Michael Hewett (89522372-H)

Secretary - Vacant

Treasurer - Glen Marshall (89524942-H, 89522497-W) Committee - Trish Handley, Rod Cramer, Ann Grattidge.

Here we are still battling on to keep the rubbish and vehicles out of the claypaus area. Clean-up-Australia-Day is on Snnday, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2004 and we are having a clean up and free sausage sizzle, at the claypans. 9 am start at the first claypan - follow the track from the only entrance off Ilparpa Road. Contact Glen for details. Also, we have a draft document planned as a blueprint for a 10 year vision of management in the claypan area. There are some hard copies around - either from Glen, Rod or myself. We also need a secretary - any takers?

Regards Mike

# **GUEST SPEAKER REPORT**

## **Bunyips that Boom and Spiders that Bark**

(101 bits of useless information about wildlife) Talk by Stuart Traynor to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists 11 February 2004.

A Bunyip is a strange creature a bit like a hippo, with a head like a dog, thick fur and backwards feet, that inhabits muddy billabongs. It has a deep booming voice. A whole series of sightings, by reputable people like Hamiltou Hume, go back to 1821. According to Stuart Traynor, Bunyips were Fur Seals, more widespread then than now, that swam up swollen rivers searching for food, then got trapped as water levels dropped and billabongs dried up. And the deep voice can probably be blamed on the Australasian Bittern, a secretive, nocturnal bird that

inhabits wet, reedy places that has a voice like a fog horn.

Another animal that is misrepresented in Australia, is the Barking Spider. Baldwin Spencer was intrigued by this and found in fact that this large, hole-dwelling spider makes a rasping noise, like a finger dragged over a comb. The 'barking' heard in their vicinity was quails who live in the same habitat.

Stuart entertained us with these and similar tales that he called useless trivia.

Did you know the word 'cockatoo' is Malaysian, a 'bandicoot' is named after a giant Indian rat - a pandi kooka, 'emu' is a Portuguese word for heron, and 'bustard' is derived from the Latin 'Avis tarde''?

At least koala and kangaroo were originally Aboriginal dialect words but koala simply meant big animal and kangaroo was what the natives were saying to Captain Cook meaning 'go away' in rather impolite terms, and not the name of an animal at all. In fact Cook was probably looking at a wallaby at the time and not a kangaroo.

Stuart told us that the kangaroo is the only animal in the world over 5 Kg that can hop. This is only because it is a marsupial. Only having jellybean-sized babies means it can have a pelvis rigid and strong enough to stand the stress of the bounding. Its legs are like pogo sticks, and the movement actually makes its breathing more efficient by creating a vacuum in the chest with each hop.

We thank Stuart for his enlightening stories and for being a speaker at several Field Naturalists meetings over the years. We are sorry that he is again leaving town (the third time). We wish him well with his transfer to Darwin and work at the Territory Wildlife Park.

# BOOK REVIEW

"Fishes of the Lake Eyre catchment of central Australia", Rob Wager & Peter J Unmack", published by the Queensland Dept of Primary Industries.

As soon as I saw this book I knew that I had to have it. It covers all 33 native and 5 introduced species in the Lake Eyre Basin, including the Finke and Georgina River systems. It has been designed as a field guide and includes a key to families based on features such as fins. The accompanying diagrams should make it straightforward for a layman to use. There is a description of the appearance, biology, habitat and distribution for every species, and colour photos of all except a few quite similar species. The price of \$27.50 may look a bit steep for a slim paperback, but considering the number of colour photos and the small population of the region it covers, is quite reasonable.

It is available in Alice Springs from Big Kangaroo Books.

#### Robert Read

## NEWS

#### Diamond Lucy in the sky

Scientists believe they have discovered the largest diamond known to mankind, with a mass about equal to that of the Sun.

The gem in question is around 50 light years from Earth, in the southern sky in the constellation of Centaurus, just near the Southern Cross.

Astronomers believe it is the super-compressed heart of an old star, which has burnt out and become a 1,500kilometre-wide lump of crystallised carbon.

Its official name is "BPM 37093" but in light of its status as the largest diamond ever discovered, the astronomers who spotted the cosmic gem decided something a tad more evocative was required.

The Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics team settled on "Lucy", as in the Beatles song Lucy in the sky with diamonds.

Vince Ford, from Carberra's Mount Stromlo Observatory said, "Actually, this would probably be the oldest stage of a star's life that we have ever looked at because of course ouce they go past that and are totally cool, not emitting any radiation at all, you can't see them."

Lucy is what is known in astronomers' parlance as a

white dwarf, which is the remains of a burnt-out star once much like our own Sun.

"What's happened is that it's hit the stage where it's run out of heat, it's left there as a big pile of cinders and metal," Mr Ford said.

"Because of that high mass, the pressure in the core of it, just gravity pulling the star tighter and tighter, has compressed the core down to the stage where the carbon in it has actually crystallised and of course what you get when you crystallise carbon under high pressure is diamond."

#### Kangaroos turn np noses at gum leaves

Kangaroos are fussy eaters. They won't eat gum leaves or anything that grows near them because they don't like the smell, Australian research has found.

So conservationists could plant guin trees near rare plants to give them a better chance of surviving, the researchers say.

Other studies have shown red kangaroos avoid plants that contain quinine. But this is the first study to show how kangaroos respond to essential oils in Australian trees.

The researchers looked at western grey kangaroos in Whiteman Park, northeast of Perth, and how they fed on plants from the Myrtaceae family, which includes eucalypts (gum trees), paperbarks and bottlebrushes.

The essential oils this family produces, such as eucalyptus oils from gum trees, are toxic to bacteria in the kangaroos' gut. These are the bacteria that help the animals digest their food, said one of the researchers, Professor Byron Lamont.

"Anything with essential oils in it seems to deter the kangaroos feeding on them," Lamont told *ABC Science Online*.

If kangaroos eat these essential oils they lose their appetite and get sick. If they eat a lot of the essential oils they eventually starve, Lamont said.

The toxicity doesn't extend to other marsupials, such as koalas and possums, which eat gum leaves. To test the kangaroos' eating habits, the researchers gave them matched pairs of Myrtaceae species.

Each pair had one plant whose leaves contained between two and nine essential oils, and another plant of the same type that was bred in a nursery and didn't have the essential oils.

To the researchers' surprise the kangaroos not only avoided the plants containing essential oils, they left the plants they normally found tasty if these grew near plants containing essential oils.

### After the bushfires

The effect was similar in Whiteman Park, which is recovering from bushfires that wiped out many species in January 2001. After the bushfires, the kangaroos ate a common plant, the kangaroo paw, which is Western Australia's floral emblem and does not contain these essential oils.

Lamont said the lack of this common species in the park was surprising.

"We decided it must be the kangaroos that had completely eaten them out. They were selectively eating the kangaroo paw, which is usually in great abundance after a fire."

Lamont blamed kangaroos' fussiness on their particularly acute sense of smell. He said researchers had always thought their sense of smell was to detect dangerous predators like dingoes, Australia's wild dogs.

"But now it seems they also use it to select their diet," he said.

Lamont added that their findings could help regenerate Whiteman Park and other areas that are being regenerated, like mines.

Lamont said that eucalyptus, bottlebrush or paperbark seedlings planted beside more delicate species would give these species a better chance of surviving by protecting the plants from predators.

"The encalypt type species can act as nurse plants protecting other plants around or underneath them," said Lamont.

Although there have been no similar studies involving red kangaroos or eastern grey kangaroos, Lamont expected he would see similar results.

From the ABC Science Show 21/2/2004-02-26

### **Budding Talents**

The regenerative powers of the Australian bush are the stuff of legend. Just weeks after fire has reduced the landscape to a barren wasteland, the charred and blackened bodies of gum trees sprout clumps of healthy foliage. But how do the trees achieve this miraculous resurrection?

The trunks and branches of most trees have dormant buds on the bark surface. When the tree is damaged, perhaps by a storm or by insects, these buds sprout and the tree begins to grow anew. But because the buds are close to the surface, they are extremely vulnerable to fire.

Most eucalypts have small bumps on their bark that were assumed to house dormant buds similar to those found in other trees. However, when Geoff Burrows (Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga) examined these structures, he didn't find buds, but strands of specialised tissue that ran from the bark surface into the woody part of the tree. Called epicormic strands, they had the remarkable ability to form buds all along their length, which means they cau resprout even when most of the bark is destroyed by fire.

This budding mechanism is unlike that seen in any other trees in the world and gives eucalypts a head start after fire.

By Nature Australia. Monday, 1 March, 2004

# Have a shot at the Wildlife Photographer of the Year

Entries are now open for the 2004 Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition, with amateur and professional photographers from around the world encouraged to give it their best shot.

The 2003 competition's winning and commended images are now on show at Sydney's Australian Museum, giving potential Australian entrants the opportunity to come in and get inspired by last year's poignant, funny and beautiful images.

The competition categories include 'The Underwater World', 'The World in Our Hands', 'Animal Portraits' and 'Composition and Form'. There are three special awards, 'The Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Wildlife', the 'Innovation Award', and the 'Eric Hosking Award' for the best portfolio of six images taken by a photographer aged 18-26. In the junior section there are three age categories, and the 'Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award'.

The Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition is organised by the BBC Wildlife Magazine and the Natural History Museum (London).

Entry forms are available in the February issue of BBC Wildlife Magazine and from the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition Office at the Natural History Museum, London, via the competition website www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto> or by telephone on +44 (0) 20 7942 5015.

By Nicole Thomas

THE CLOSING DATE FOR ENTRIES IS 2 APRIL 2004.

