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PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

October 2006



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Web site : www.geocities.com/alicenats

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club 2006

Meetings

7.30 pm on the second Wednesday of the month.
Venue: Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Road

11th October. Robert Gosford from the ANU will speak on the fascinating topic of "Indigenous Knowledge of Birds".

Trips / Activities

Sat 7 October. 7am. Working Bee at Elsa Corbet's property, Palm Circuit. Bring breakfast or morning tea to share. Elsa will provide tea, coffee and juice.

Sat. 14 October . 8.30am. Visit to Ian Archibald's workshop and museum, behind Aviation Museum, Araluen Precinct. *Please note change of date.*

Fri 3 November. BBQ and frog search at Simpsons or Emily Gaps depending on rain.

Sat 18 November. Bird watching at Alice Springs Sewage Ponds.

Sun 10 December. 7.30am. end of year club party at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Starts with walk around garden followed by shared breakfast at 9am.

New Members

Welcome to new members Dawn Morgan, and Bill and Janet Smyth. Geoff and Jenni Kenna have also become members as result of being the successful winners of the ABC Garden Fair competition "Which bird is which?"

Guest Speaker Report

The Sonoran Desert

Presented by Brenda King
from the Sonoran Desert Museum,
Tucson, Arizona

13th Sept 2006

by Helen Morgan

The Sonoran Desert lies in the south east corner of Arizona and is governed by five seasons -the pre-summer, dry summer, wet monsoon, winter rains and spring wild flowers. Monsoons bring spectacular lightning and erratic, unpredictable rainfalls. The temporary pools soon fill with spadefoot toads. The average annual rainfall is 11 inches [28 centimetres] and temperatures range from below freezing, with snow at times during the winter. Summer brings temperatures of 112 degrees F [44 degrees C.] during the dry. The introduced grasses, especially the buffel [yes, it's a pest there too] cause wildfires that can destroy the habitat and change the face of the desert.

The Sonoran Desert is nurtured by three river systems that are under pressure of a rapidly increasing population. The Santa Cruz has dried up but is being restored by treated wastewater. The San Pedro is also threatened by ground water pumping - increasing restrictions on this aims to eliminate ground water pumping completely by 2011. The Colorado's water flow is depleting rapidly due to supplying water to the fastest growing population in the US. This has been compounded by eleven years of drought. Life in the Sonoran Desert depends on these water sources.

The red rocky terrain is reminiscent of Australia's red centre but the predominant trees, the Saguaro cacti, are markedly different. These cacti dominate the landscape in size and numbers. They often begin life under the shelter of a PaloVerde [*Parkinsonia sp.*] or greenstick bush. The Palo Verde, a handsome bush with golden spring flowers is Arizona's state tree. The Saguaro Cactus can grow up to twelve metres tall and may live for over two hundred and fifty years. Its beautiful white flowers open for only eighteen hours and provide sweet nectar for many insects, the lesser long nosed and free tailed bats and birds. The White-winged Doves migrate to the dessert when flowering commences. Many creatures that help to pollinate the flowers, also enjoy the sweet sticky fruits of the Saguaro. The fruits are still harvested by the native O'odham

people in the traditional manner using a harvesting pole made from the ribs of the giant cactus. The fruits produce thick sweet syrup when boiled. Two local Woodpeckers and the Flicker make nest holes in the cactus and when they move on, the three local owls and the cactus wrens move in. The cactus homes are warm in winter and cool in summer.

Other cacti include the Prickly Pear Cactus which is a major food source for many desert dwellers such as the desert tortoise. The tortoise is endangered due being collected as pets and sometimes released carrying diseases to pass on to other tortoises. There is the Hedgehog Cactus with its brilliant flowers and serious prickles and the Barrel Cactus known for its notorious fishhooks. It also leans South. There are many other useful plants growing in the desert. The Mesquite [*Prosopis velutina*] Tree produces nourishing bean pods that are relished by people and animals. While the Jojoba plant produces nuts that are 80% oil and for many years were used as a substitute for sperm whale oil.

These fruiting plants support many of the desert animals including a hopping mouse with pouches on the outside of his cheeks, the tiny ground squirrels, prairie dogs and the wild peccary, which although looking a bit like a pig, is not a pig. The cottontail and jackrabbits maintain controlled populations due to the abundance of predators such as the mountain lions and bobtailed cats. Thanks to the bobtailed cats the feral cats are never a problem.

Birds abound in the desert from the Great Horned Owl to the thirteen species of tiny Humming Birds. How about the Turkey Vulture which cools itself by urinating on its legs? Worse still, it will vomit over you if you pick it up. Must not forget New Mexico's state bird the Roadrunner that may be a poor flier but can run at a steady 15 miles an hour [24km/h].

Reptiles and insects with strange habits inhabit the desert. There is the Gila Monster with his powerful lockjaws and venomous bite and the Horned Lizard who breaks his eye capillaries to squirt blood at his predators. Snakes abound, 14 different rattlesnakes and a non-venomous mimic who is really a constrictor. There are many scorpions, large and small – the smallest having the biggest sting. The male tarantulas live life on the prowl seeking out long living females who remain safely in their burrows for twenty years or more.

This account mentions only a fraction of the flora and fauna that inhabit the Sonoran Desert. Like central Australia, it appears to be a hostile environment superficially, but on closer inspection, it abounds with life. Due to the similarities, funding has been made available to create a partnership between the Sonoran Desert Museum and the Alice Springs Desert Park – hence Brenda's visit to Alice Springs.

Trip Reports

Lake Lewis

Saturday 2nd September 2006
By Rhondda Tomlinson.

Eight people with great gusto set off from Bob Read's home just after 7.30am with the knowledge we had about 200km to reach our target on the Tanami Road.

8.10am we passed Morgan Flint at the Kunoth Bore turnoff and he joined our cavalcade, now we were three vehicles.

The green tinge was due to the recent rains also which included the rain that cancelled our last attempt to visit Lake Lewis.

Mt. Hay appeared to the right and on the left the Chewing's Range ran parallel with the road. The yellow flower bushes were scattered through the scrub land and crested pigeons took a death defying leap in front of the vehicle.

At 8.35am we stopped to gather the troops and admire the small purple *Ptilotus* flowers, Billy Buttons and tiny Paper Daisy. Jenny collected some Barley Mitchell grass seeds. On the road again and we passed the Amburla turnoff and Milton Park turnoff where we saw many tall yellow/green *Ptilotus* all through the bush. A Brown Falcon, Black-faced Woodswallows swooping around and a Wedge-tailed Eagle feasting on road kill as well as Crows. Lots of little red termite mounds scattered through the bush and a very majestic "wedgie" strutting on the roadside.



Road side stop

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

Just past the Kintor turnoff we stopped as the following vehicle radioed to say they were checking out a birds nest. Our discoveries were *Solanum quadriculatum* and *Eremophila latrobei* as well as two different *Ptilotus*, a small pink and a thin green with a fluffy top as well as several other plants.

Where was Morgan? We had mislaid him somewhere. Jim went back in his vehicle and a bit later Jenny followed. An electrical fault and we were soon on our way again. A flock of "budgies" flew over head and



Tilmouth Well Roadhouse

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

before long we arrived at Tilmouth Well Roadhouse. This, of course, was an ice cream stop for some but a necessary key stop for the gate across the road. Through the gate we drove and across the flat red soil sand plane with calcite patches. The vegetation is salt tolerant on one side of the track and the other red soil with vegetation to suit. We walked over the crunchy salt area looking at the stunted struggling plants. The water in the distance was it a mirage with reflections?

We didn't make too many stops on the way as we had to drive about 15km but we did stop on the 2nd causeway to look out over the sea of salt. Lunch was on a sandy hill from where Morgan tried out his latest, "boil the Billy toy". Jim had made a cupper in his "billy" just before hand.



The "billy toy"

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

We were puzzled at to if we were looking at another mirage but this time it was the real thing so lunch stowed away we turned our vehicles to the patch of wet salt. We could not walk right out to the small low depression but the water was blue surrounded by the white salt and resembled a frozen pond in the process of melting.

On the way back we did make some more stops to look at plants and the *Tecticornia* was in abundance in a very dry and salty area. The little light coloured spots are the flowers.



Tecticornia

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

All too soon it was time to head home but we could have spent another day at least looking around. Thank you Bob it was a really great trip.

Bush Tucker Garden

September 17th

Report by Rosalie Breen

Tim Collins, Nursery Manager at the Desert Park led Barb Gilfedder, Bev Grey, Margaret and Jim Lawrence, Kaye Percy, Rhondda Tomlinson and Rosalie Breen on a tour. The Bush Tucker Garden has been developed at the Desert Park, to provide the guides with material for the visitor presentations and as a means to investigate the best ways to cultivate these native plants. Mostly the common ones and more tasty varieties are grown, in plots much like a standard vegetable garden, the whole garden enclosed by a fence. Each plant is subject to detailed recording on a database of its place and date of origin and other details, including a specimen kept in the Herbarium. This gives a good research basis on which to select for the best tasting and most responsive varieties to cultivation. In the garden the plants are irrigated and fertilized with ordinary Osmocote because most plants in this region are not really phosphate sensitive. In fact the annuals such as the daisies really thrive on high nutrients. The Desert Park cultivates plants from the whole of the Southern Bioregion, from Elliot to the SA border, so some are frost-sensitive. Here is what we saw and learned about.

Ipomoea costata Bush Potato. This is frost-sensitive, so often dies off in winter. The aboriginal people are experts at reading cracks in the ground around the plant where the lateral roots produce the tubers, which are harvested without damaging the main plant.

Solanum centrale Desert Raisin. Quite a pretty plant with a ginger tinge to its green leaves. It has a gland at the base of the leaf which attracts the mulga ants. The leaf itself is spine-free; most other *Solanum* varieties have lots of spines and are not edible. Therefore don't eat unless advised by someone who knows what they are talking about.

Solanum cleistogamum Shy Nightshade or Banana flavoured *Solanum*. A sprawling plant, the fruits are pale

yellow when ripe, grow on the underside of the bush but often are hard to find. Spinifex hopping mice like them. It tasted like a very ripe banana.

Cyperus bulbosus Yalka. The garden looked like a bed of dried grass and some wild flowers. They die down in winter and this is the time of harvest. Scratch around the ground for tiny onion type bulbs which after rubbing off the outer husk can be eaten raw or cooked. They generally grow along watercourses and can be found in the floodout areas behind Zeil St.

Solanum ellipticum Native Tomato. Another frost sensitive plant, which grows mostly in rocky areas. Fruit also hard to find. Makes a good garden plant because is quite showy in winter and is easily propagated from cuttings

Cucumis melo Native Cucumber. Actually not a cucumber but a rock-melon. This was growing on a wire trellis and a bit dried off. It is a summer annual and readily reseeds needing higher than 35 degrees to germinate. It grows quickly, fruits, then dies. It is now less common in the bush because cattle like it. To eat it, rub the hairs off and squeeze the contents into your mouth. A bit bitter.

Marsdenia australis Bush Banana. Growing on a trellis too. Most of the fruits had split and seeded into dandelion like parachutes. The fruits are best eaten whole when young, about half full size. The flowers with nectar were tasty, like broccoli.

Next door was the Browse Garden planted with a mixture of trees and bushes for the zookeepers to take branches for the display animals to eat in their enclosures. There was a family of babblers scolding us.

Eremophilas are an important medicine plant for Aboriginal people.

E. dalyana. Gidgee Fuchsia Bush. The leaves have a strong smell like menthol from the oil glands

E. alternifolia. The leaves are dried and ground with emu fat and used socially as a body massage.

E. latrobei.

E. duttonii Always looks glossy green and probably grows from suckers as it is generally found in groups. In some places is considered a woody weed because of its growth. Cattle grazing has altered the balance of nature leading to fewer fires to control its growth

E. sturtii. Also considered a pest in pastoral NSW because it seeds well

Sarcostemma australe Caustic Vine. The milky sap seeps out from the broken stem and is applied to a cut destroying bacteria and creates a latex like seal on the wound when dry. This a very fire sensitive plant, so if growing well, indicates no fires for many years. Generally grows on rocky slopes and tops away from frosts. Grows well in pots with good drainage.

Panicum decompositum Native Millet. Looks a never-ending job to harvest enough seeds to grind and make into a paste which is eaten raw or roasted, but reported easy to gather. A pretty grass.

Nicotiana gossei Rock Pituri. It was re-shooting from woody stocks. The "gardeners" cut it back after it flowers. And it readily reseeds. The dry leaves are

crushed, rubbed to a fine powder, mixed with fine ash to make a chewable narcotic. Used regularly even now and Desert Park supplies the renal unit at the hospital with leaves.

Ipomea sp. Stirling. A prostrate plant with a morning glory type flower covering a large area. This species is found only around Ti Tree and Stirling station. It is dormant when dry but re-shoots for next season. Trials to find out how it responds to cultivation.

Solanum centrale A trial by Desert Knowledge growing varieties from various places, so they can select the best for horticultural use. They are testing the chemicals to discover the bitter principal and so find the most palatable. Also comparing wild harvesting to cultivated harvest. Some from Kkyumba, Tanami, Napperby, John Holland North, Utopia and Anmatyere.

Santalum lanceolatum Native Plum. Obviously thrives on irrigation. One specimen in particular was quite big and beautiful and only four years old. The fruits are hard to get because the birds acquire them first. The deep purple fruit is olive-like. The plant suckers and may be parasitic.

Capparis mitchellii Wild Orange. The juvenile plant is just like an ironwood juvenile, thick, bushy, small leaves and prickly. Is temperamental and grows very slowly, at four years was still very small. Aboriginal folk used it as a method to catch bats, waving it around in the cave hooking them on the prickles.

Carissa lanceolata Conkerberry. A much branched spiny bush with black berries when ripe

Santalum acuminatum Quandong. Young ones growing successfully with *Wedelia* (a daisy) as their host plant. There was also another variety with finer leaves.

Then we went for a walk in the grounds around the nursery noting interesting or rare plants.

Thank you

ABC Garden Fair

Thank you to all members who helped with the Field Nats stall at the ABC Garden Fair.

They had a busy time being constantly surrounded by a crowd of eager competitors in the "Which Bird is Which?" competition. It was great to see so many people with interest in and knowledge of our local garden birds. Particularly good to see so many children helping their parents.

Special thanks also to Eric Tan, Mathew and Cathy Gilfedder and Don Haddon whose photos were used for the competition.

Anne Bowden won "The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds" book and Geoff and Jenni Kenna won the year subscription to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists club. Well done!

Olive Pink Botanic Garden Library

The library at Olive Pink Botanic Garden is jointly owned by the Australian Plant Society and Olive Pink Botanic Garden. There will also be a few Field Naturalists Club books and resources stored in it. As a member of the ASFN you now have full access to all the books in this library. At the last general meeting it was suggested that we purchase more books that might be of particular interest to club members, to place in the library. If you can suggest any special books that we could purchase, please let a member of the committee know? Thank you.

Creature Feature

Report from Newhaven.

6-9 September 2006.

By Liz Carpenter

Our bird count over 4 days was a bit disappointing. Eric Tan had to resort to becoming a world expert in Zebra Finch photography for lack of other moving subjects that were willing to come his way. Photos of fence posts with trailing barb wire, aluminium cans, dry salt lakes, mirages of what may have been, desert flowers, Desert Oaks and purple mountains in the distance became the main subjects for Eric's ongoing web stories on Central Australia.

The weather was changeable with wind, no wind, clouds, no clouds and 6 drops of rain at midnight. We still needed our winter woollies for the early morning, otherwise just our regular anti-cancer protection.

We "did" all of the routes that we could with the petrol that we had. ..., the Dune Route, the Lakes Route, the bores, and the Hill Drive. We climbed the hill, the mesa and the gorge. We spied on beautiful camels that were drinking at sundown and the skeletons of what would have been beautiful in earlier moments.

But the birds? Well, they weren't there. Not many anyway. The lakes were dry. Some bores were dry. The variety of grevillias were in full bloom but even they didn't seem to be attracting more than a handful of Rainbow Bee-eaters, Singing Honeyeaters and Black-faced Woodswallows. We chased raptors, the elusive Masked Woodswallows and White-winged Fairy-wrens through the spinifex. How mad can one be?

And the Tanami Road? Well, it nearly destroyed the shock absorbers and the carburettor.

And the other birders? Two were from Cairns, two from Brisbane, and two caretakers from Bendigo.

And the locals? We rescued one in the midday sun. No water, no shoes, broken car.

So, the highlights?

The country was magnificent. There were numerous glades of Desert Oak trees whispering in the wind. The campground was comfortable and shady. The daily hot shower was irresistible.

It was a great trip apart from the lack of birds. I reckon we should have waited for more rain.

Our bird list of 32 species:-

Wedge-tailed Eagle
Peregrine Falcon
Nankeen Kestrel
Brown Falcon
Brown Goshawk
Diamond Dove
Crested Pigeon
Budgerigar
Australian Ringneck Parrot
Mulga Parrot
Rainbow Bee-eater
Australian Pipit
Hooded Robin
Crested Bellbird
Rufous Whistler
Willy Wagtail
Grey-crowned Babbler
Variegated Fairywren
White-winged Fairywren
Yellow-throated Miner
Singing Honeyeater
Grey-headed Honey eater
Banded Whiteface
Crimson Chat
Zebra Finch
Painted Finch
Masked Woodswallow
Black-faced Woodswallow
Grey Butcherbird
Pied Butcherbird
Australian Magpie
Torresian Crow



"Waiting for the Zebra Finches"

Photo: Eric Tan

Eric Tan's "webstory" of the Newhaven Adventure can be found on www.mountainsbeyond.net

**Photocopying
Courtesy
L J HOOKER**

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INC
Minutes of General Meeting 13 Sept. 2006, held at Olive Pink Botanic Garden

Meeting opened at 9.00pm.

Apologies: Jane Danne, Leoni Read, Connie Spencer, Jim Lawrence, Jim Gilfedder

Minutes of the previous meeting accepted.

Correspondence in: WANC - The Naturalist News – September 2006
 Threatened Species Network – The Web – Winter 2006
 Larapinta Trail Package – Feedback invited
 City Organisation Insurance package offer from Unicorn Risk services
 NTFNC – Nature Territory

Correspondence out: None

Treasurer’s Report: Opening balance (end July) \$1775.15 - Plus annual subscriptions \$275.00 -
 Less postage stamps \$50 - Closing balance (end August) \$2000.15

General Business:

Motion: That several solar lights be purchased up to value of \$100 to light the path from car park to visitors’ centre at OPBG. Moved B.Gilfedder, seconded M.Lawrence. Carried.
 Jenny Purdie to check if this would be acceptable to OPBG.

Suggestion that books relevant to Field Nats be purchased and placed in shared library at OPBG. Members have access to this library. Call for book suggestions to be called for in next newsletter.

Field Trips

Sat 16 Sept.	ABC Garden Fair at OPBG 0830 - 1200
Sun 17 Sept	Bush foods garden at Desert Park. Meet at 0830 just inside the park gate. Leader B Gilfedder 89555452
Sat 30 Sept and Sun 1 Oct.	Palm Valley. Leader Bob Read 89521935
Sat 7 Oct	Working Bee at Elsa Corbet’s property on Palm Circuit. Start 0700. Bring breakfast or morning tea to share. Elsa will provide tea, coffee and juice.
Sat 14 Oct	<u>CHANGE</u> Visit to Ian Archibald’s workshop behind aviation museum. 0830
Fri 3 Nov	BBQ and Frog search at Simpsons Gap or Emily Gap – to be decided closer to time depending on water conditions.
Sat 18 Nov	Bird watching at Alice Springs sewage ponds.
Sun 10 Dec	End of year club party at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Walk around the garden at 0730 followed by shared breakfast at 0900.

Speaker for October: Robert Gosford on Warlpiri Ornithology.

Supper for October: Marg Lawrence.

Note taker for October: Rosalie Breen

Sightings:

Bob Read – Collared Sparrowhawks nesting at Hamilton Downs

Ian Archibald – Bush Stone Curlew in Precinct area.

Helen Morgan – Flock Red-tailed Black Cockatoos near airport.

Margaret Lawrence – Wild Western Bowerbird at ASDP trying to get into aviary

Rosalie Breen – Barn Owl being mobbed by Crows in Chewings Street

Meeting Closed at 9.19 pm.

2006-7 SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions were due in August. Thank you to members who have already paid.

If you have not paid but wish to continue your membership, please fill in this form and return it with appropriate money to the address on the cover of the newsletter.

This will be the last newsletter we send out to those who have not renewed.

We hope you decide to stay with us.

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Inc.

PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

Subscriptions for the year August 2006 to July 2007

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