

If not claimed within 14 days please return to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club
Inc. PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

November 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

8th November Speaker Chris Palmer, Entomologist, on "Introducing the Insect".

Trips / Activities

Fri 3rd Nov. 6pm, Simpson Gap. Meet at BBQ area 6pm for BBQ followed by Frog Watch. BYO food and torches / lanterns. Contact Bob Read 8952 1935

Sat 18th Nov. 7am. Bird watching at Alice Springs Sewage Ponds, off Commonage Road. Meet at entrance gate. Contact Bob Read 8952 1935

Sun 10 December. 7.30 am. End of year party at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Start with walk around garden followed by shared breakfast at 9am. BYO drinks plus food to share.

New Members

A big welcome to new member Amanda Markam,

Guest Speaker Report

WARLPURI ORNITHOLOGY

Birds, country and culture in a central Australian desert.
Presented by Robert Gosford

Wed. October 11th
By Rosalie Breen.

Most of Robert's work was done at ANU using secondary data of stories, paintings, language data, dictionaries and land claim evidence, information from the press, radio and the internet.

The land area covered is sand plains, hump grasslands with plenty of water mostly underground. A large part of the Tanami desert is Warlpiri country, created by ancestral beings who made the landscape features, and peopled it. All animals were ancestral beings and are accorded respect, the people identifying with places or the animals. Birds are part of the culture, and are important sources of food, materials, medicine and spiritual practices. The species that features most prominently is designated as a Cultural Keystone species. For the Warlpiri, Ngatijirri, the budgerigar is that: they provide food, eggs, fat, and are easy to catch. They turn up in many dreamtime stories and traditionally have a messenger role.

This type of study of birds using anthropological methods has had little systematic work. And now that Aboriginal peoples want more say in management and with changing relationships with government and land owners, and the fact that in NT Aboriginals own 50 percent of land, we all need to acknowledge their knowledge, learning from it, and agree to changes in land management or joint ownership. There has recently been a conference discussing just these issues

Most of the bird names are general terms for groups of birds, or names based on calls (but often birds have dialect differences e.g. the pied butcher bird has the same call but is a bit different in different areas). It was suggested that collection of specific species names was difficult because of the problem of proper identification. Linguists are not often avid bird watchers. Fairy wrens all have the same name; ducks a general name, but honey eaters all have individual names probably because they are noisy and obvious. Zebra finches are prolific and have a name. Migratory birds fly over this area, but few have a Warlpiri name.

Much biological data can be gleaned from stories, art and ceremonies about behavior and living areas etc. of the different birds. There is a Kurikuriya culture, the storm bird (channel billed cuckoo), a migratory bird associated with rain, indicating a dreaming track with its similar ceremonies and many different sites extending over much of northern Australia. (This has implications in land claims)

Afterwards there was much discussion among the very large audience which as well as the "Field Nats" included those working in Aboriginal fields especially linguists. Robert said he really enjoyed his evening. His talk was so packed with information that a comprehensive summary was not possible.

Trip Reports

WEEKEND AT PALM VALLEY 30th September & 1st October 2006

By Rhondra Tomlinson

The preamble before the Palm Valley trip was quite interesting with the e-mail one liners going back and forth between 4 people and then Rosalie Breen joined us and then there were five.

Departing time 8.30am from Bob Read's with trailer vehicle and all loaded.



Loaded

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

Arriving at the Palm Valley camping ground we dropped off the trailer and did the necessary registration and headed back to do the Mpaara Walk. This was recommended as a two hour family walk. We took three hours to go along the track at the base of the hills, past the old Ranger's residence and along the river and up into the gorge past a small stand of Red Cabbage Palms (*Livistona mariae*).



Cliffs

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

On the way back to camp we stopped for Beth to take a photo of the fiery red cliffs at sunset. Meanwhile back at camp we cooked tea and were organized in time to attend the rangers talk. Two questions that were of interest was Helen Morgan's question about why some of the cabbage palms have pronounced wiggly trunks.



Red Cabbage Palms

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

We climbed up to the top of the ridge with a super view across the valley. On the way down we stopped for lunch and had the company of a dragon which was very tolerant with the photographers. There was an extensive list of birds collected such as Rainbow Bee-eater, Zebra Finches, Red-backed Kingfisher, Grey-headed Honey-eater, Hooded Robin and the Major Mitchell's at the camp ground.

After the setting up of tents and a rest at 4.00pm we headed down the track to a stop at the MacDonnell Ranges Cycads (*Macrozamia macdonnelli*). We did the Arankaia Walk along the river bed where stopped to look at some fascinating rock formations and then up the stairs and back along the ridge where we saw another dragon catching the last of the afternoon sun.



Wiggly ones

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

The palm has 4 growth buds and if one is damaged the crown veers to one side to compensate for the damage and sometimes this can cause it to zig-zag and thus produces an irregular growth pattern.

The other question was why is there only mature and young plants and do not seem to be any intermediate palms. The ranger explained that for several years there were wild horses in the park and they ate the fruit of the palms and also damaged the young plants and for a period of time there was very little survival to maturity of the palms. Now the re-growth is quite vigorous.

Daylight, tents and breakfast dealt with we examined the aerial photos of our targeted morning walk. Our aim was the Finke River and to examine the area where at sometime in its early years changed course. We stopped at a diminishing water hole that had several types of fish, some quite large.



Water Hole in the Finke

Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

Many sand tracks which ranged from Kangaroos to a small hopping mouse and one mystery of two parallel lines which turned out to be a gum leaf that had been blown across the sand. The big, big, find for Helen Morgan was a Wolf Spider which tolerated being photographed from all angles.

We crossed over one neck of the abandoned meander and over the now river bed and into the next section of abandonment. Beth took advantage of a cool shady spot while Helen and I climbed to a shelter cave and Bob and Rosalie ventured a little further along the old course. Heat and time decided our return and a late lunch break in the bed of the dry Finke.

A great weekend was had by Rosalie Breen, Helen Morgan, Beth Hansen, Bob Read and Rhondda Tomlinson. Thank you Bob for all the work you put into the weekend.

Visit to Ian Archibald's Workshop
Sat. 14th October

By Rosalie Breen

Last month Ian Archibald let us into his treasure cave, (albeit an aviation hangar). This is where he does most of his work, preparing specimens and displays for the Central Australian Museum housed in the Strehlow Building. Self taught he is so skillful he is one of the treasures himself.

Those who went to the Alcoota fossil dig recognized the many bones set out on tables, brought back for preservation by painstaking gluing the pieces together and impregnating the bone to prevent it from disintegrating. Then scraping away the coverings of calcrete with a small probe. "Yeh, it takes a while," he replied wryly to a question. This will keep the bones available for research and reference in future years. A lot of reference material is kept in the now unused kitchens at Araluen.

Another job for Ian is to make plaster casts for making death masks (the camel was so real with its hairy chin

and eyelashes), or for making "bodies" of polyurethane for filling up the sample skins in taxidermy. Up high was a fiberglass model of Sweetheart a notorious (and large) crocodile from Darwin. Bodies used in the stuffed animals are also made of wood.

Down the back were some big glass display cabinets housing some of Ian's work, stuffed and mounted animals and birds and skeletons not required for display in the museum. Also quite an extensive collection of insects all pinned and labeled. Each specimen brought to the museum is micro-chipped and fully documented with its personal and physical details, collection place, collector etc. Such information is imperative if the museum is to fulfill its role as a reputable research and reference organization. (Each bone of those mentioned earlier is numbered too)

A big barrel looking machine was the freeze dryer. This works at low temperatures and vacuum to remove water from the specimen, without distortion and is great way to preserve the animal in its natural state. (Also good for making dehydrated potatoes or resurrecting old papers and diaries for reading again.) It takes up to weeks to dry out depending of course on the size of the item. Not long ago the dryer ceased to operate. A few birds in the store were bound in woolen thread, a preening method, to prevent them looking like a bad hair day because as they dry out the feathers can stick up.

There are a number of deep freezers all containing goodness knows what (Bodies of some sort) He pulled out of one, a set of three red-tailed black cockatoos, mounted together to show the three different colour phases, male, female and juvenile. These had not been completely freeze-dried when the dryer had failed and had to be kept safe frozen. On top of one freezer were some WA Red-tailed Phascogales passed on from the Desert Park. These will be used for research. They were meticulously pinned, each toe individually placed and secured. Further along were lots of bird specimens on sticks used for close study. Above on the wall was a display of intriguing newspaper articles, and photos taken by Ian, showing his interest in faces.

In trays of glycerol were specimens in "X-ray" mode, treated with a potassium hydroxide to macerate and decolour the flesh, and dyed to show the bones, cartilage and some of the internal organs. Really quite stunning.

The cave was chock-a-block with much more than mentioned. Everywhere bits and pieces, tools of trade, references books, building materials, chemicals, all important and useful. A fascinating morning, thanks to Ian, enjoyed by a big group of "Field Nats" and a few visitors. I left wondering how on earth he has the time to accomplish all that beautiful work and with the worry there was no apprentice to learn these skills from a very talented man.

LETTER FROM ELSA

9/10/06

Dear Field Nats

Your response to the working bee to clear Buffel Grass at Pitchi Ritchi was quite magnificent. I would just like to thank you all for the work you did last Sunday, and express my sincere appreciation to you all.

Come again! For a social visit with friends, anytime.
Yours sincerely,

Elsa Corbett.
Box 472
Alice springs NT 0871

Creature Feature

Finke River Puzzle

By Bob Read

In the portion of the Finke River near Palm Valley and the nearby Ellery Creek there is a very unusual feature. Sections of abandoned river channel are evident on air-photos and satellite imagery, as shown below. I first notice these about 30 years ago, but did not immediately realize how extensive they are, and it was only recently I got around to visiting them. On the ground the old channels can be clearly seen, some 10 m to 20 m above the present day channel. Gravel of white river-rounded stones contrasts sharply with the surrounding hills of red sandstone.

It is common for rivers to change their courses on flood plain, but in rocky areas their positions are more stable. It is difficult to understand how a river could jump over a rocky hill to a new channel. Something very strange has happened in the past.

Dr Mary Bourke, a geomorphologist of the Smithsonian Institute, was intrigued by these features. She visited the area last year, measuring levels of the river channels. It will be interesting to see what explanation she comes up with.



Figure 1 Air photo of Finke River near Palm Valley. Dashed white lines mark old channels of the Finke and Ellery

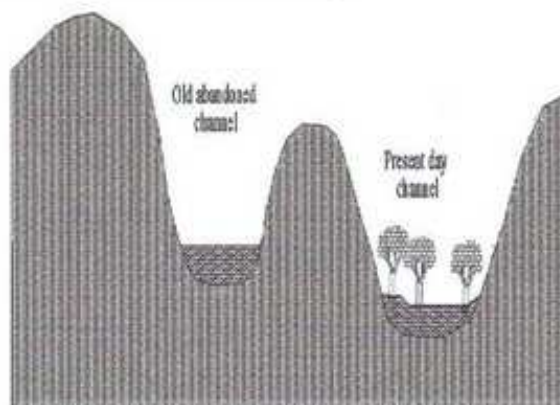


Figure 2 Diagrammatic section through the present day and old river channels

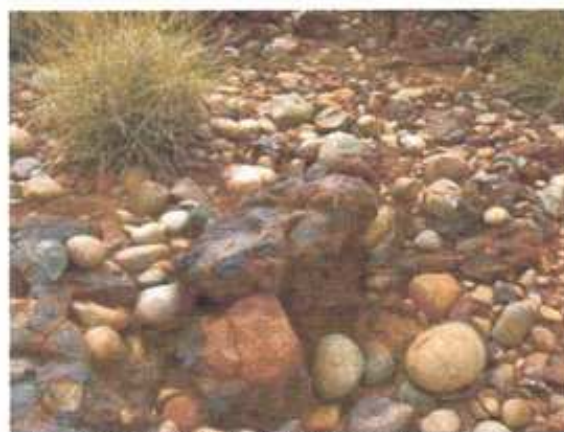


Figure 3 Partly cemented old river gravel in abandoned channel.

WOLF SPIDER

By Bob Read

The spider in the picture below was photographed in the Palm Valley area.

Beyond it being a wolf spider I made no progress on identifying it until I sent an image to Beth who forwarded it to a friend who sent it to Mike Barritt who sent it to a spider expert in the Netherlands. Ed Nieuwenhuys identified as *Lycosa bicolor*, a species he had looked for unsuccessfully on his last trip to Australia.

Ed has an excellent website with a large section on Australian spiders at www.xs4all.nl/~ednieuw which is worth looking at.

If you happen to get any images of interesting spiders he would be pleased to have them.



Wolf Spider

Photo: Bob Read

... Probably you also have read the spider houses in tubes in the ground and will not sit often on such a beautiful display as yours did.

Best regards,

Ed Nieuwenhuys
Badhoevedorp
The Netherlands



Wolf Spider

Photo: Bob Read

ANNOUNCEMENTS

This newsletter will be the last for 2006. The next will be in February with another great program for 2007. Until then all the best for 2007.

Regards,
Bob

P.S. If anyone wants to know what to get me for Christmas, a volunteer secretary would be greatly appreciated.
Bob.

Copy Deadline for articles for next newsletter
Friday 2nd February

Photocopying

Courtesy

LJ Hooker Real Estate

PHOTOS FROM 2006!
New and forgotten



Cecile and Emma in the grass

Photo: Rosalie Ereen



Lampyris Stage 6

Photo: Connie Spencer



Cecile on the trail

Photo: Rosalie Ereen



Elery Rock Hole

Photo: Rosalie Ereen



Morning Tea Stop, Emily Gap

Photo: Barb Gilfelder



The plant and Bob

Photo: Beth Hansen

