

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

April 2009 Newsletter



Variable Stropis, *Stropis nigrovittellina*

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Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month (except December and January) at 7:30 PM at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Visitors are welcome.

Postal address: P.O. Box 8663 Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871

MEETINGS

8 Apr 2009: “*An African Kaleidoscope*” by Jenny Purdie – 7:30 pm Olive Pink Botanic Garden

13 May 2009: Adam Levensly, (scientist with Bushfires Council) “*Birds and fire in mulga*”.

TRIPS/ ACTIVITIES

Easter 10-13 April: four day trip to Newhaven Reserve. For further information contact Bob Read on 8952 1935. There are some spare seats. **NB: all participants must contact Bob.**

Sun 26 April 09 a walk in the Telegraph Station with Rosalie (2-3 hours). Meet 7:30 am Gosse Street playground. Contact: Rosalie on 8952 3409 for further information.

Sat 16 May 09 Walk from Junction Waterhole on the Todd River to Wigley’s Waterhole Contact Rosalie Breen on 8952 3409 for further information.

23 & 24 May 09 The Gem and Mineral Club have invited the Field Naturalists to their annual weekend trip to Sloan’s Gully (in the Winnecke Range area) for a bit of gold panning etc. It’s an interesting area with hills to climb, old diggings to explore and good vegetation cover. Contact: Jenny Mason on 8952 8380 (ah) or 8952 9299 (BH) or call into Outback Gems in the Coles Shopping Centre.

6 – 8 June 2009 Three day trip to “Mac Clark Conservation Reserve” and *Acacia pickardii* valley, Andado Station subject to permission from landholder (for the latter). Contact: Connie Spencer on 8952 4694

Sun 21 June 2009 Full day walk from Ellery Creek to the saddle and back again. This is part of Section 6 (Hugh Gorge to Ellery Creek) of the Larapinta Trail. Contact: Connie Spencer 8952 4694

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is Wednesday 29 April. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – robbiemily@hotmail.com

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

We extend a warm welcome to the following new members of the Club. We hope to see you at meetings or outings and hope you make new friends and have fun while learning about our environment. If you do not have transport for a trip contact the leader as other members are willing to take an extra passenger or two.

Lee Ryall, Jill Brew, Rannveig Mesler, Geoff Clarke, Mark Carter, Vicki Gordon, John and Sue Bermingham, Andrew and Sue Crouch, Caroline Lovell, Kate Anson, Liz Moore, Jan and Ian Louttit, Wendy MacTaggart

Spitsbergen

Presented by Holger Woyt
Report by Shirley Goodman

Polar bears, beluga, walrus, ring seals, bow head whales, bearded seals, guillemots, puffins, ptarmigan, reindeer, arctic foxes and glaciers were all featured at the March meeting of the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club. Thank you to club member Holger Woyt for sharing his experience of a visit to Spitsbergen and for telling us about this fascinating place that is so far away and which none of us will probably ever visit....but I would love to be proved wrong!

Spitsbergen, (which I think is sometimes called Svalbard) is located well within the Arctic Circle. Holger visited in September, which is early autumn in the northern hemisphere. This meant that he experienced long evenings that turned into mornings without the darkness that we associate with night time. September also meant that the vast swampy plains were not covered by snow but even while they were there snow fell heralding the coming winter. Holger's presentation included lots of photos. The scenery was impressive in its vastness and harshness; it has elements in common with what we usually regard as a desert landscape. Photos of glaciers with their 'leading edges' towering 18 meters above sea level were amazing

Although today the area is mostly visited because of its natural history, it also has an interesting and valued social history based around whaling and mining. This is reflected in the fact that all ruins and remains dating from as late as 1946 are regarded as part of the area's cultural heritage and are protected by law.

Spitsbergen is administered by Norway but under a treaty that was signed in the 1920's several countries have an acknowledged interest in the area. These days the interest is mostly of a research nature and the area is host to several research bases.

The biggest settlement with a population of about 2400 people is Longyearbyen. Many facilities in this town can lay claim to be 'the most northern' of their type! The other main town is Barentsburg

which is a Russian coal mining town with a population of about 900.

Inhabitants of Spitsbergen are always aware of the polar bears with whom they share this stark but beautiful area. Holger told us that the main street of Longyearbyen is the only place that is safe from bears and that outside of the township it is a requirement that people carry a gun for protection. However, polar bears themselves are protected and any deaths are investigated.

Other land mammals that can be seen are the reindeer that are present in small groups and the arctic fox. Sea mammals include large numbers of walrus as well as the aforementioned two types of seal and whale. The whale population was drastically reduced in the 17th century due to whale hunting.

Seabirds can be found in abundance. These include puffins, guillemot, terns, skuas and gulls. The ptarmigan is a land bird that is well adapted to the challenges of life in Spitsbergen's exposed and tough conditions.

I know that I haven't done justice to the information that Holger shared with us, my excuse is that it was dark, note-taking was difficult and I have largely had to rely on memory! However, I know that we all very much enjoyed the presentation and thank you Holger.

If your interest has been aroused I found the sites at <http://www.natureview.nl/spits/> <http://www.spitsbergen-svalbard.info/index2.html> particularly interesting, especially the Flora section.

Central Australian Frog Talk

by Michael Barritt
Friday 27 February 2009
Report by Sue Fraser

About 40 to 50 of us gathered in the creek bed on Friday night, (together with several thousand flies) with our chairs, rugs and great anticipation of what was to follow. Michael and his helpers had set up a generator to run the projector, and a table displaying lots of informative hand outs. As the

sun set, fortunately the flies disappeared and Michael began his slideshow. There are 4 varieties of Central Australian frogs that we were assured of seeing on the night, together with at least two species of snakes, which would be on the prowl for the bounty of frog life on offer. The frogs located within the park are the Main's or Sheep Frog (*Cyclorama maini*), Spencer's Burrowing Frog (*Opisthodon spenceri*, used to be *Limnodynastes s.*), Centralian Tree Frog (*Litoria gilleni*) and the Desert or Red Tree Frog (*Litoria rubella*). The snakes we were likely to see were the Stimson's Python (*Antaresia stimsoni*) and rather more harmful Eastern Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja textilis*). Michael advised parents to keep their children close to avoid any "close encounters".

Michael also suggested that as we walk along we keep our torches directed towards our feet so as not to accidentally tread on a snake, or a frog. Once we had found an interesting spot, we were advised to stop, then, direct our torches around an area to observe what was to be found. This was to prove very fortuitous, as not long afterwards, my friend Colleen told me to stop and look down.



Not a metre from my feet was a gorgeous Stimson's Python, shyly recoiling from the glare of our torches and the sudden stampede of amateur naturalists eager to observe the first snake encounter of the night. A little further on, another keen observer came across an Eastern Brown Snake quietly loitering in a sparsely grassed area on the side of the river bank, waiting for the opportunity of an amphibious meal to come its way. One group were lucky enough to observe a

Stimson's Python actually swallowing a frog it had been stalking.

As we got closer to the water's edge, we were rewarded by the sight of hundreds of Red Tree frogs, Spencers Burrowing frogs and bright green tree frogs.



Upon our approach the frogs would plop themselves into the water, or sometimes, in their confusion, jump on to legs or shoes. Some just froze in the torchlight, conveniently posing for a photo or to be observed "up close ". We all had to be very careful not to tread on any of the delicate little creatures. Michael informed us that as the nights became cooler, the tree frogs would wedge themselves deep inside cracks in the rocks where they would remain during winter. The burrowing frogs would burrow down into the sand for up to a metre, where they also would remain until conditions were suitable for breeding later in the year, during the warmer months. Frogs possess a unique trait in that they swallow their prey with their eyes. They use their sticky tongues to catch food. The food is then pushed to the back of the throat using their eyes, then through the oesophagus and into the stomach.

A fascinating evening was had by all, and I felt privileged to have observed this glimpse of the amphibious and reptile world right on our doorstep at Simpsons Gap. Many thanks to Michael Barritt and his team of helpers for organising this community event.

CASSIA HILL

8th March 2009

By Rhondda Tomlinson

12th November 2005 was the last time I went on this walk near Simpsons Gap which I enjoyed and had intended to repeat in the near future. So much for intentions but there we were 6 of us reading the introductory sign when before us we saw this very large golden orb spider and web.



It really wasn't this close to Connie

Shortly into the walk, Connie, our fearless leader, let out a yell that she had been bitten by a young dead finish bush. The general consensus was that even the young dead finish has protection. One very sharp pair of eyes spied a dingo and then they were heard howling in the distance a few times during our walk.

The sign says that this is a very easy walk taking no more than an hour but this was a Field Naturalists adventure and would you believe it took a bit longer.

Lacking Bob in our midst we did manage a good bird list of budgies, zebra finches, butcher birds, wood swallows, yellow-plumed honeyeaters and spiny-cheeked honeyeaters.

We had the thrill of discovering a stone coloured grasshopper and also a very large green grasshopper nearby pretending to be part of the tree branch.

Our plant list included bloodwood, mulga, lichen, whitewood and the cassias of course. The eremophilas, as were many other plants showing heat stress but this did not detract from the excitement, panoramic views and interest in this area.

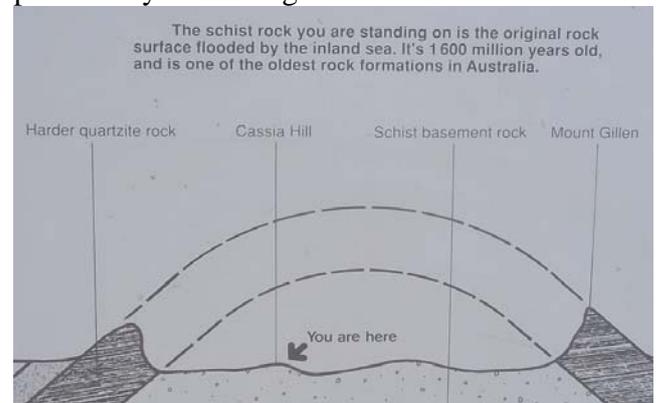


*Find the grasshopper
(Common Toadhopper, Buforania crassa)*



It is worth a stop and chat to appreciate the view

I found the shaley outcrops we walked across and the information sign on the ancient landscape particularly interesting.



Connie had printed out a copy of the Cassia Hill Self Guided Walk put out by Parks and Wildlife

for us and this is a recommended sheet to take with you on this walk.
Thank you Connie and all participants for a great morning.

New Curator for Olive Pink Botanic Garden

Olive Pink Botanic Garden's new Curator – Mark Carter is a passionate naturalist and brings experience of worldwide arid zone floras and faunas as well visitor services skills honed in the eco-tourism industry.

Originally from a small island off the west coast of Scotland, Mark is no stranger to extreme, rugged environments! He has spent several years in deserts around the world in roles as diverse as ethno botany research in the Sahara to birdwatching tours in the Israeli Negev. The Australian deserts are his undisputed favourite – “they are bursting with life, and despite major challenges they are still some of the most intact desert ecosystems in the world.”

In recent years Mark has worked in the Guides unit at the Alice Springs Desert Park and as a Senior Interpretation Ranger for the Parks and Wildlife Service NT. He is excited to be coming in as the new curator at OPBG: “It is a real honour to take on the role of Curator, to contribute to the future of this wonderful Botanic Garden.”

By curious coincidence, Mark happens to share a birthday with the famous Miss Pink.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR NEWHAVEN

I have the letter below from Josef Schofield, Sanctuary Manager at Newhaven. This could be a great opportunity for anyone with the time.

Hi Bob,
We are currently doing our annual tracking and trapping survey on Newhaven. This involves surveys on 240 different sites across the Sanctuary. We are looking for voluntary assistance to complete the vegetation surveys.

Following are the details of the vegetation surveys as discussed:

- Vegetation surveys are performed at 60 sites.
- The surveys take approximately 30min/site.
- The sites 100 X 100 meters.

- A good knowledge of Central Australian botany would be required.
- Dominant trees, shrubs and ground cover species will be recorded with specimens collected if an identification is unable to be made.
- General habitat observations such as fire impact, slope, aspect, rock cover, grazing impact etc will also be recorded on a comprehensive datasheet.
- For OH&S reasons we will require two people to participate in this survey.
- An AWC sanctuary vehicle and all necessary equipment will be provided for the work.
- The surveys will ideally take place between the 9th and the 15th of April.

Thanks for distributing this request for assistance for us.
Cheers,
Joe.

NOTE ON THE COVER PHOTO

We need an interesting photo to use on the cover each month.
This time I have used one of mine. This species of grasshopper was seen on the trip to the Eucalyptus intertexta forest. However since the photos from this trip did not turn out well I this is another out of my files.
If you have an image that you think might be suitable send it to the editor.
Bob Read

Climate Change

The signs of climate change are getting more and more alarming. On the one hand we have the real possibility that we are approaching tipping points, on the other governments are very much dragging their feet. I toss the following idea in for discussion. Should we limit outings to relatively close localities, say no more than 50 km from home. On the one hand any action we take will have no effect, on the other hand the problem is that very little is being done.

Bob Read
President



ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of General Meeting held at Olive Pink Botanic Garden
on Wednesday 11 March 2009

Open: President, Bob Read declared the meeting open at 9.00pm

Present: 16 of the- 26 listed in the attendance book stayed for the meeting

Apologies: Rhondda Tomlinson.

Minutes of previous Meeting:

As a General Meeting had not been held after the February talk, the November Minutes were presented for acceptance with the correction that it was Jim Lawrence and not Jim Gilfedder who was at the Sewerage Ponds with people doing 'The biggest Twitch'. With this amendment, the minutes were accepted.

Matters Arising:

Nil

Treasurer's Report:

Bob read the report as presented by Rosalie. The club currently has funds of \$3607 so Bob asked for constructive suggestions about how some of the money could be spent – see General business

Correspondence in :(including correspondence for Feb meeting)

Threatened species Network-	TSN News Summer 08 and Autume 09
Western Austraian Naturalists Club-	The Naturalist News, December 2008, Jan/Feb and March 2009
NT Field Naturalists Club-	Nature Territory December 2008, March 2009
Birds Australia-	Flyer and letter requesting donations
Memberships-	Ian Fox and Trish Hammond, Jackie and Graham Shaughnessy Jenny and G Kenna, Dorothy Grim, P Peterkin, Lee Ryal, Marie Ryan, Vicki Gordon, Sue Gregory/John Bermingham.
Central Australian Bushwalkers-	Schedule March-May 2009
Aust Natural History Medallion Fund-	Calling for nominations for award and committee (Meetings are held in Melbourne)
Westpac bank	Statements
Australia Post	PO Box renewal notice

Correspondence Out: (including for Feb meeting)

Michelle Walker – thank you for speaking at September meeting
Jocelyn Davies- thank you for speaking at October meeting
Mark Carter - thank you for address to Feb meeting

General Business:

- Newsletter- Emily Findlay has volunteered to take on this role. Thank you to Connie who has organized the last two Newsletters and to Rhondda who did the one before.
- After some discussion Sue Fraser moved that ' \$500 should be donated to Olive Pink Botanic Garden and \$500 to Birds Australia'. Seconded by Shirley. All in favour. The club still has a healthy balance that is more than adequate for its predicted expenses so members are invited to put forward their suggestions as to how some of the funds could be used. Please send your constructive ideas to Bob or Shirley for discussion at the next meeting.
- Congratulations to Robbie and Emily on the birth of Fynn Jacob Henderson, the club would like to send a card and flowers. Action- Shirley.

Outings/Trips

- Saturday 28 March- an early morning walk around the Eucalyptus intertexta dry jungle, near Ilparpa claypans. Connie will lead this trip.
- Easter at Newhaven? This is yet to be confirmed. Bob will follow it up, firstly to see what conditions are like there and if promising to make a booking. Quite a few people indicated interest.
- Night walk at Desert Park -also to be followed up.
- Bob asked for ideas for future trips. Suggestions included Lake Lewis, Owen Springs and Davenport Ranges. There will be a committee meeting to plan for the next few months. Your ideas are invited- please talk to a committee member.

Sightings:

- Leonie saw large goannas and a brown snake on the road out to Warburton
- Will (not present) has seen 3 Snipe at the ponds and a Little Curlew
- Bob saw a Nankeen Night Heron
- Sue reported that there was lots to see at the Frogwatch evening on 27 Feb at Simpsons Gap, this included 4 types of frog, a Stimson's python and an eastern brown snake
- Holger reported seeing cockatiels at Redbank Gorge

Next Meeting: Wednesday 8 April 2009

Note taker: Jenny suggested that if a club member is the presenter, they also provide the write up. So in April this will be....Jenny.
Supper: Marg Lawrence

Meeting closed at 9.25 pm.