



# ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

November 2009 Newsletter

Scarlet Percher (*Diplacodes haematodes*), Photo Bob Read



Learn more about Central Australian wetlands from Angus Duguid and Bob Read at this month's Field Nats meeting

**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**

**Web site: [www.geocities.com/alicenats](http://www.geocities.com/alicenats)**

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## MEETINGS

**Wednesday 11 November -** "Wetland in central Australia: Where, What and When?", Angus Duguid "Hydrogeology of central Australian wetlands", Bob Read. (Christopher Palmer's talk "Central Australian Insects" has been postponed until next year.)

## TRIPS / ACTIVITIES

**7 November** Early morning walk (2-3 hours) from Flynn's Grave to Flagon Hill using rough vehicle tracks and then cross country to Sue Fraser's place on Mparntwe Drive in Stirling Heights for morning tea. Approximately 4-5 km. Meet 7am @ Flynn's Grave. Wear sturdy shoes, bring water, hat and sun protection. Contact: Connie Spencer on 8952 4694.

If you want to attend any trips please RSVP to Trip Leader

**21 November** Visit to Northern Territory Natural History Museum in the Strehlow Building. Ian Archibald will talk us around the exhibits answering questions, and also show us the storerooms at the back of Witchetty's that contain other Natural History items. Meet in the car park between Strehlow Building and Aviation Museum off Larapinta Drive at 10.00am. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452. Those interested can meet Connie Spencer at 9.30am for a walk around the gardens at Araluen, which contain some lovely native plant specimens, prior to the Museum visit.

**6 December** Alice Springs Field Naturalists Christmas Breakfast at Pitchi Ritchi Sanctuary at 8.00am. Pitchi Ritchi is a native garden, beyond Heavitree Gap, turn left over the Todd river causeway and it is the first block on the right. It contains lovely native trees, sculptures and historical items. It is now looked after by Heritage Alice Springs. Dominic Pecorari will talk about the site and his vision for its future. Please bring a chair and plate of food to share. Tea, coffee and juice will be provided. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452.

## NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – [robbiemily@hotmail.com](mailto:robbiemily@hotmail.com)

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**From the President....**

At the October meeting, I drew members' attention to the Araluen draft development plan and its brief mention of the Natural History Museum which is currently housed in the Strehlow Building at Araluen. Rosalie Breen, Sue O'Callaghan, Bob Read and I met to formulate a response from the Field Naturalists.

We expressed concerns that the Natural History Museum was not valued in the plan and that we thought it should be properly maintained as part of the town's mix of attractions for both residents and visitors. We said that we thought Araluen should either be looking at building a specially designed on-site facility to display the museum in full, or to move the social history displays out of the Strehlow building to a more central location, leaving more room for the natural history exhibits.

I sent the response to the Director, Araluen Cultural Precinct; to the Hon Mr Gerald McCarthy, MLA for Barkly, Minister for Arts and Museums and to Ms Jodeen Carney, MLA for Araluen. Ms Carney replied immediately. She shared our concerns and mentioned them that evening in the NT Parliament, quoting extensively from our letter. I have, at this stage, had no acknowledgement from Araluen nor from Mr McCarthy.

Sue O'Callaghan and I also attended a Community Consultative Meeting called by the Friends of Araluen on 17 October and put our views forward.

If you wish to see our response, it will be tabled at the November meeting.

I hope to see you all at our Christmas Breakfast at Pitchi Ritchi on Sunday 6 December. When Elsa Corbet was living there, Field Nats spent several mornings there helping her control weeds.

I wish you all a happy and safe holiday season and look forward to some interesting talks and adventures with the Field Nats in 2010.

Barbara Gilfedder

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**October Speaker - Ornithological Field Survey Techniques with Bruce Pascoe  
by Shirley Goodman**

Mist netting, bird banding and their role as an ornithological field survey technique were the subject of Bruce Pascoe's talk at the October meeting of the Alice Springs Field Naturalist Club. Banding is just one of several ornithological field survey techniques used to study bird populations. The information provided by this activity helps to gain an understanding of site fidelity of individuals and populations and movement and life history data such as age, weight and size of individual species.

Mist net capture and banding can be seen as a method of data collection that is quite stressful for the birds. As such strict guidelines have been established that control the use of mist netting and the best use of data collected through netting and bird banding. Bird banding officially started in 1947 in Australia under the auspices of CSIRO. It is currently administered by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts as the Australian Bird and Bat scheme. A licence is required to operate a mist net and projects involving the use of mist netting must be approved by both federal and state authorities.

A mist net is usually between 12 – 20 metres long and about 3 metres in height. Fixed poles at each end make it relatively easy to erect or to collapse. When carefully positioned, it is difficult to see and unsuspecting birds fly into it and become lodged in the pockets into which they fall.

Once netted the birds are carefully extricated and placed in calico bags which are hung up in a suitable place until they can be 'processed'. After the experience of being caught in the net the birds are usually calm in the darkness of the bag. Processing involves collecting as much information as quickly as possible before the bird is banded and released. This information includes head to bill measurement, wing length, weight, age and sex. There are strict guidelines as to which band should be used and each band has its own ID which can be traced should the bird be re-captured. Colour bands that help track local movements may also be used. If the bird has already been banded, this is noted as it provides useful information on a local, regional, national or perhaps international scale.

Whilst the information that has been collected is useful in itself, in many cases it adds to data that has been collected at the same place over a period of years. This is very valuable because it shows trends in population abundance, movement and perhaps physiological diversity.

The data is also sent to a central office where it is collated and contributes to an already significant database that can be accessed nationally and internationally. The international links are important for learning more about the long distance migrant birds.

In Central Australia the best time to open mist nets is between 5am and 10am before it gets too hot. Once in place the net must be checked every 15 – 30 minutes to reduce stress on the birds and nets are closed if it starts to rain because netted birds are vulnerable to becoming waterlogged.

Bruce stressed that the ethics associated with mist netting and banding mean that the welfare of the birds must take precedence over everything else.

Thank you Bruce for a very interesting talk. Although I had heard about bird banding I had no idea how much information was gathered, of its long term value or of the systematic way in which the information is stored for maximum benefit both locally and internationally and in the short and longer term.

For more information about bird banding readers may like to have a look at the web site at <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/science/abbbs/>

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**Adventures on the south side of Mt. Gillen - Aug 22nd 2009**  
**by Kaye Percy**

A small group consisting of Bob, Connie, Rosalie B, Rosalie S and myself set out from the claypans area to a slot gorge at the base of Mt. Gillen. Walking along one of the many tracks in the area and then across country over undulating small hills.

Birds in the area where Grey Shrike-thrush, Mistletoebird, Finch, White-winged Triller, Diamond Dove, Collared Sparrowhawk, Black-faced Wood-swallow, Rainbow Bee-eater and Western Gerygone. Crossing an area devoid of vegetation, a snake was spotted. About one and a half metres in length, it was possibly a Mulga Snake. Photos were taken by those keen enough to get a bit closer. After the excitement of spotting the snake, our focus was which particular slot gorge we were going to head for. It is a very interesting area out along the base of the range.

Up and over small hills, Euros were spotted, weather temperature was rising quickly after a cool start. A bird was disturbed by Connie. Bob thought it was a Spotted Nightjar. After a short rest in a shady, rocky run-off, we moved on a short way, scrambling up and over more rocks to be in the shade of the slot gorge that was chosen. We had another rest here and enjoyed the view of Ilparpa before us. Birds of prey and Painted Finches flew past several times. Throughout the morning plant life had been in abundance, too numerous for me to quote everything. Moving on again, we came down off the side of the range and a shady lunch spot under some native orange trees was chosen. Lunch over we made our way across country to where the car was parked. The day temperature turned out to be warmer than expected. Definitely an area worth exploring.

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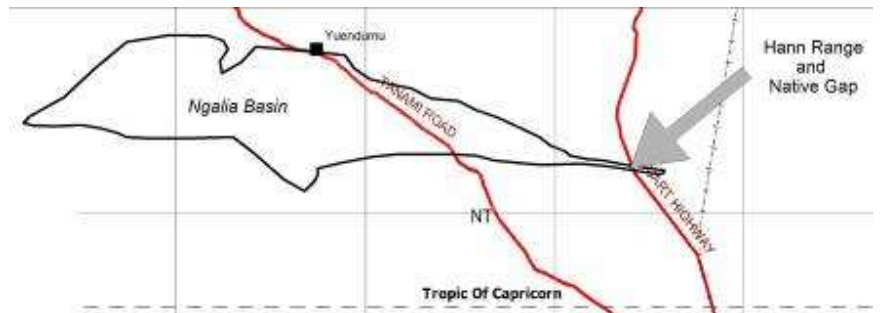
**Day trip to Native Gap Conservation Reserve – 10 October 2009  
by Bob Read**

Six of us went to Native Gap, a small reserve where the Stuart Highway crosses the Hann Range about 120 km north of Alice Springs (Figure 1). We also made a number of stops along the way in areas where a little more rain had fallen and there was a better display of wildflowers. I am hopeless at writing narratives, so I have just written notes on some features of the area.

**Geology**

The Hann Range is outcropping Vaughan Springs Quartzite (Figure 2), of similar age and lithology to the Heavitree Quartzite that overlooks Alice Springs, but in the Ngalia Basin. The Ngalia basin was active at about the same time as the Amadeus Basin, but is smaller. In the main part of the basin to the west sediments are over 5000 m thick, but the Hann Range is at its eastern extremity where the basin is only a few km wide.

**Figure 1 Locality map and outline of Ngalia Basin**



**Figure 2, looking east, showing north dipping Vaughan Springs Quartzite of Hann Range (courtesy Jenny Purdie)**



**Mammals**

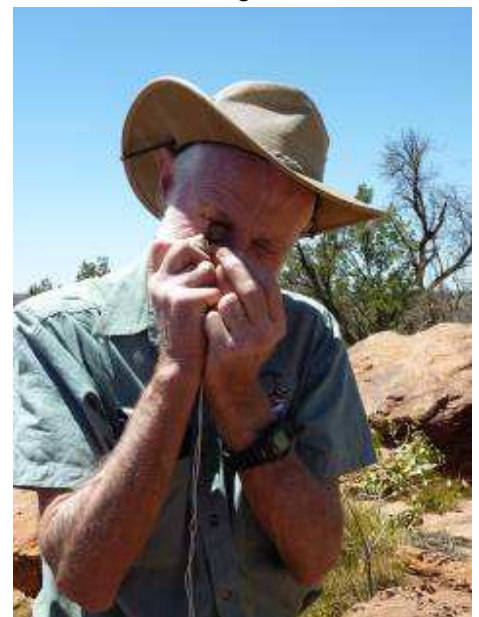
The information leaflet states that there are both Euros and Black-footed Rock Wallabies on the ridge, and Echidnas on the flat.

We saw one Euro and lots of dung, but no sign of the wallabies. Echidna scats (cylindrical, with termite casings, soil and pieces of grass), were abundant on the ridge and some fresh scratchings showed that the echidnas are still around.



**Figure 3  
Echidna scat  
(courtesy Jenny Purdie)**

**Figure 4  
getting a close  
up view of a  
scat (courtesy  
Jo Smith)**



## European History

John McDouall Stuart travelled from Stuarts Pass to Anna Reservoir to the west of the Hann Range, and his map shows it as a stony rise which he must have seen in the distance. From the NT Place Names register I got the following.

“It is believed that the Range was named after Frank and William Hann by John Ross during the exploration of the route of the Overland Telegraph Line in 1870/71. ...The range first appears on A. Ringwood's 1874 "Plan of the OT Line.”

The Hann brothers were explorers and pastoralists. William Hann led an expedition to Cape York which discovered the Palmer River gold field. (The History of Australian Exploration website).

*Frank Hann, who named more places in WA than any other explorer, was the younger brother of William Hann who did much to open up northern Queensland and Cape York.* (Moon Adventure Publications website).

Native Gap was apparently named for a “native well” in the gap. The explanatory sign states that it was destroyed by an ill-advised attempt to increase the supply by deeping. We can only imagine how the Anmatjere would have felt about this. As would be expected for such a water source there is an important story involving an ancestral carpet snake.

## Birds

Because of the dry conditions relatively few birds were seen. On a previous visit I recorded 32 species, this time only 9; Whistling Kite ; Rainbow Bee-eater; Willie Wagtail; Inland Thornbill; Variegated Fairy-wren; Little Wood-swallow; Mistletoebird; Grey-headed Honey-eater; Torresian Crow. In particular I was unable to find the grasswrens that live on the spinifex-covered ridge.

## Plants

The plants are the area's great attraction. The northern slope with thin soil over sandstone is covered with shrubs including *Acacia monticola* and *A. melleodora*, mallee form *Eucalyptus gammophylla*, and *E. sessilis* on top of the ridge. The south side of the ridge and some of the crest, where areas of bare rock provide protection from fire, are well-wooded with Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*). The largest specimens of these grow in fire sheltered spots.

There is a lot of *Grevillea wickhamii* (none in flower on this occasion) and some *Gossypium* species, some with their large showy flowers.



Figure 4 *Callitris glaucophylla*

Native Gap appeared to have had less rain than some of the country to the south. On a stroll up the ridge we found some fine specimens of a *Gossypium* species in flower. The area N of the Tropic of Capricorn had obviously had more recent rain than to the north or south and had a better showing of wildflowers. We stopped for one of the leafless plants that are characteristic of our region. Connie's opinion was that it was *Anthobolus* sp.. The specimens had the globular galls that seem to be characteristic of this species. It would be interesting to find out what insect causes them.



Figure 5 *Gossypium* sp. with detail showing native bee getting nectar

## Insects

Not much was around, only the ubiquitous Spur-throated Plague



Locust and one of the many species of Spinifex-dwelling *Macrotana*, which I failed to photograph. One small Grass Yellow butterfly, and a bee, species unknown feeding on the Gossypium.

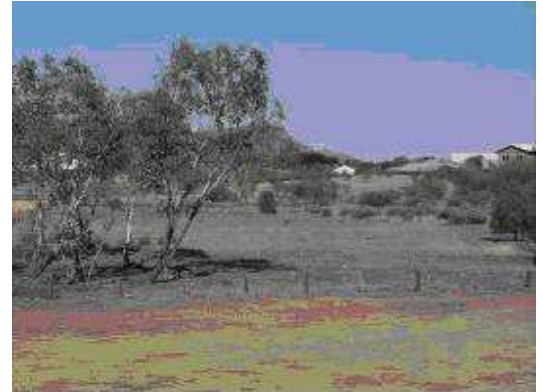
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**Land for Wildlife site at O.L.S.H. College Sadadeen Campus  
17 October by Rhondda Tomlinson**

My only previous experience with O.L.S.H was when we used to have our Field Naturalists meetings there and that was at night. I was in for a very big and pleasant surprise. Rosalie welcomed her co-presenter, Bill Low, and told us about the area we were overlooking. It was quite dry as rain was not a recent happening and from a distance there was not a lot to see.

Rosalie explained how they had nearly cleared all the buffel grass from an area surrounding what was a proposed oval. The latest proposal is to build a large hall and sporting facility right in the middle of the conservation area that is also a flood plain. This raised many questions.

Bill gave us a talk on the work that Land for Wildlife do and how they are trying to encourage local land owners to plant local natives, even on small residential lots.

Moving down into the conservation area there was an interesting discussion on an ants' nest which has a slit rather than a round hole type entrance.



Looking up there were some itchy grub nests. It was commented that the aboriginal people have been known to use these as bandages but there is a problem with the fine hairs which can cause respiratory problems.

Walking out onto the flood plain area it was amazing how many different plants and grasses we saw and the closer you looked the more you found.

Bill talked about the introduction of buffel grass as a soil stabiliser and also

as a sustainable feed for cattle in the drought years. This plant can overshadow the less dominant local native plants.

Rosalie has an interesting dish for a "waterhole" out in the woodland area in which is growing algae and from which a zebra finch had a quick drink just after we passed by.

We saw some areas flagged and this is where the students have done some line survey work as part of their biology course.



There were too many plants named and discussed to mention in this report but Dead finish, Needlebush, Desert Rose, Bush Banana, Ironwood, Senna, Witchetty Bush (look for the non-aggressive point on the end of the leaves), Spinifex and Wild Passionfruit were among those brought to the attention of the group. Some plants even in adjacent sites and similar conditions can grow at different rates. This is due to soil, weather conditions, environmental occurrences and the quality of the plant.

Rosalie nominated one Native Pine for an award as it has survived a fire, student pruning and even though much smaller than other similar much younger plants has the determination to live. The Desert Raisin was spreading over a large area as its underground roots extend the plant, with new shoots popping up here and there.



There is a rabbit problem as well as problems with frost, saline soil and heat, which all have to be a part of the plants' survival regimes. Nearing the end of our walk we came across another ants' nest. This time the hole was round and the ants were medium size and a red colour with many tiny black ants also around the nest. Bill said that the worker ants can travel large distances from the nest to forage but have a homing sense that guides them back home. Then it was time for us to head back to our homes but on the way back to the cars Rosalie took us for a detour through the school gardens which are tending also to be native plantings. The bird sightings in such an interesting setting were Pipit, Willy Wagtail, Babblers, Galahs, Crows, Black Kite, Singing Honey-eater, Rainbow Bee-eater, Spiny-cheeked and White-plumed

Honey-eaters.

Thank you Rosalie for all your many years of hard work and dedication and that you made it possible for us to come and appreciate what is being done and to see the opportunity for the children to study in such a great environment. Bill, thank you for sharing your knowledge and telling us about the aims of the Land for Wildlife Group.

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**Wader watching - Saturday 24 October 2009  
by Connie Spencer**

Over 140 bird species have been recorded at the Alice Springs Waste Stabilization Ponds. Apart from the bird watching opportunities the ponds offer, they are a pleasant place to wander around. The surrounding ranges make for splendid vistas and there is usually a cool breeze. Nine Field Nats assembled at the gates ready for a pleasant bird watching morning with four experts and five novices in tow.

Our first stop was to look at Australasian Grebes in breeding plumage giving them a smiley face appearance. Fairy Martins were in flight above us. A comment was made that the Fairy Martin could be distinguished from the Tree Martin by its clean rump as apposed to the dirty rump of the Tree Martin. I had not heard of that distinguishing feature before! I think the different coloured heads might be an easier feature for id purposes.

An Australian Pipit was spotted running along the ground nearby. Pete advised that there is a move to split this species into four. The new species would be based on DNA and names would represent their geographical location otherwise impossible to tell apart just by looking at them - and, I thought the plant world was the expert in splitting up species!

Next we viewed the Common and Wood Sandpiper together through Barb's scope. It is so much easier to note distinguishing features when you can look at 2 or 3 birds of similar appearance together – the Common with its finely scaled back and the Wood with its spotted back. I am always amazed when the Sandpipers are spotted in the first place as they blend it with the rocks on the edge of the pond so well. To me it is only when they move that I can see them and then I have trouble following their movements!

Rosalie S. commented on her favourites, the Black-winged Stilts. They must have had young about as they were protesting our presence very loudly as they flew overhead with their long legs trailing behind. We wandered along stopping here and there to view Greenshanks, a Masked Plover, Eurasian Coots with their distinctive white bill and forehead, Black-tailed Native Hens and a Black Swan with five cygnets. There was a fly past of a flock of Whiskered Terns, some in breeding plumage (crimson bill, black head and belly). Will tried to point out an Oriental Plover in the distance but I couldn't really see it but I did observe several Red-kneed Dotterels which were much closer to me.

We moved along the bank towards a large old Date Palm where a Reed-Warbler was making its presence known with a delightful call but once again keeping well hidden in the dense cover of the Date Palm. Further



along, Barb pointed out a female White-winged Fairy-wren on top of an Old Man Saltbush. Once again, we had a good view through the scope. On to the dilapidated bird hide, where I had the pleasure of viewing a Pink-eared Duck through Pete's binos. What a difference to mine! The striking 'zebra' plumage was so clear, although I still did not manage to see the pink patch behind the eye!

We were enjoying the sit down when a call was made that ready or not we were moving on and so as not to be left behind or miss out on something we obeyed the leader of the pack. A White-faced Heron was pointed out and then there was much excitement and a great debate as to whether a small bird in the distance was a baby Pratincole or not. The excitement died down when the powers that be decided that they got the "baby" bit right but that it was a Black-fronted Dotterel.

By this time the weather was warming up and tours of the Water Reclamation Plant on site were about to start so the novices said their goodbyes and thank yous to the more avid bird watchers amongst us. Thank you so much to Barb, Bob, Pete and Will for sharing your expertise with us. We nearly had one on one tuition!

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### Gums for Galahs – By Rosalie Breen

Last month during Bird Week I went to the Telegraph Station for Birds before Breakfast with Mark Carter. There were lots of birds out and about, until it got a bit windy. But I found out about something which puzzled me for some years. On the riverbank at the point where the track crosses the river to the east is a leaning old river red gum.

Some years ago on a few occasions I noted Galahs systematically biting the bark cover from the trunk. Wonton destruction I thought. They had denuded quite a large area. Mark explained that rather than being destructive they are caring parents. They have a nest in a hollow higher up for a nursery, and to prevent big lizards who might take young chicks from the nest, the birds strip the bark from the upper side of the sloping trunk, making it impossible for the lizards to climb up (too smooth for a toehold) to the nest.

My regard for Galahs went up a notch.

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### Bush Stone-Curlew Babies

By Barb Gilfedder



These wild Bush Stone-Curlews chose to breed at the Alice Springs Desert Park this year.

The chicks are very well camouflaged but the parents are standing on guard either side of them, as well.

#### **AGE OF STUPID- FREE Screening at Araluen Friday November 13.**

Alice Solar City is sponsoring a free screening of the climate blockbuster AGE OF STUPID at Araluen. Drinks and nibbles at 6pm, Film 7pm. Stick around for a panel discussion on climate change issues for Central Australia. Ph 8950 4350 for details.

**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED**  
**Minutes of General Meeting held at Olive Pink Botanic Garden**  
**on Wednesday 14 October 2009**

**Open:** President, Barb Gilfedder declared the meeting open at 8.30pm.

**Present:** 22 people were present as per attendance book

**Apologies:** Sue Fraser, Sarah White, Vicki Gordon, Rosalie Breen.

**Minutes of previous Meeting:**

As usual minutes of the previous meeting had been circulated as part of the newsletter.

It was noted that as Barb was not at the meeting she was not able to express an interest in making up a team for the Twitchathon – her potential interest had in fact been expressed on her behalf.

With this correction noted the minutes on the September meeting were moved for acceptance by Rhondda Tomlinson and seconded by Bev Dawson. Accepted.

**Matters Arising:**

It was considered that the ASFNC stand and bird call identification competition was successful. Bob has collected feedback and compiled a list of ‘useful things to remember’ for future stands.

**Treasurer's Report:**

In the absence of the Treasurer there was no report.

**Correspondence In:**

None (as the secretary has not been to the mail-box).

**Correspondence Out:**

Stuart Traynor Thank you for talking at the September meeting

**General Business:**

- Araluen Cultural Centre Development Plan. Barb brought to the club's attention plans for the Natural History section that forms part of the NT Museum at Araluen. The current brief suggests a part relocation to the Desert Park followed by the securing a new facility off-site for long term display. This seems very vague and marginalises the future of the Natural History section. Comments have been invited so a sub-committee of Sue O'Callaghan, Bob Read, Rosalie Breen and Barb will meet to discuss a response from the club.
- Parks and Wildlife Draft Management Plan for the West McDonnell Ranges. Bob brought this to the club's attention. He pointed out that information about the ‘special protection zones’ and how to get a permit to access them is quite vague. He will make a personal comment requesting clarification about this and keep the club informed.
- Bird Week came out with an excellent program. See Sarah White's report in the September newsletter.

**Outings/Trips- Reports**

- Native Gap Trip – 6 people went. There was evidence of recent rain.

**Future Outings/Trips**

- Saturday 17 October – visit to OLSH Sadadeen Campus to see the ‘Land for Wildlife’ site. Ecologist Bill Lowe will be coming along.
- Sat 24 October – Walk around Sewage Ponds. Ornithologist Peter Collins to attend.
- 7 November – Morning walk to Flagon Hill, followed by morning tea.
- 21 November – conducted tour of Natural History section at Araluen including behind the scenes. This will start at 10.00am; people interested in having a look at the plants outside first can meet up with Connie at 9.30.
- 5 December – Christmas Party breakfast at Pitchi Ritchi. Bring a plate to share. (Now changed to 6 December.)

**Sightings:**

- Leonie Read found 2 snake skins in her garden
- Several members commented on the numbers of Rainbow Bee-Eaters around

- Lots of waders around at the Sewage Ponds, including Red-necked Stints, Oriental Plovers, and Australian Pratincoles – Barb Gilfedder
- Holger Woyt saw a Slater’s Skink, an endangered species, in the Krichauff Ranges- an unusual location for the reptile in the hills. It is more usually on flood plains.
- Holger also reported seeing Bourkes Parrots and Kultarrs south of Alice Springs in the proposed Pamela/Angela mining site area.
- Discussion about reported sighting of Square-tailed Kites at the Telegraph Station - which is unusual but the observers, Bev Gray and Iain Campbell were sure the birds sighted birds were not Black Kites.
- Iain Campbell reported that he has seen only one Sacred Kingfisher this year in the area where he has usually seen two nesting in past year.

**Next Meeting:** Wednesday 11 November 2009

Note taker: Rhondda Tomlinson  
Supper: Sue O’Callaghan  
Gate: Barb Gilfedder

**Meeting closed** at 9.05 pm.