



ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

March 2010 Newsletter

Reflections along Todd River by Rosalie Breen



Rosalie is leading a walk here, North of the Telegraph Station on 27th February

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

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NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 26th March**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – robbiemily@hotmail.com

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MEETINGS

Wed 10 March - Stuart Traynor - John McDouall Stuart's 1860 Expedition: A 'Natural' History.
150 years ago, in March 1860, John McDouall Stuart set off on his first expedition to Central Australia, accompanied by William Kekwick and an 18 year old boy named Benjamin Head. Stuart's journals reveal a good general knowledge of geology, while Kekwick was quite a good 'amateur botanist'. This talk will focus on the plants and birdlife they encountered on their 8 month journey to Attack Creek and back. Stuart subsequently took FG Waterhouse, the first Curator of the South Australian Museum, with them on their 1862 expedition to the Top End coast.

Wed 14 April - Peter Collins, Zoo-keeper at the Desert Park will talk about Migratory Shorebirds. More details to come.

TRIPS/ ACTIVITIES

Message from the Australian Plants Society: Field Naturalist members are welcome to attend APS trips. Please contact the leaders.

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

Sat 27 February Walk along the Todd River, bit of rockhopping, north from Telegraph Station to "Gorge Waterhole", beautiful especially in morning light and a peaceful area, now with green surrounds and plenty of water. We will spot birds, small shrubs in flower, grasses, anything else interesting and check out what's living in the water. Bring water and a breakfast snack and your camera. Meet at Telegraph Station at 6.30am (Gate will be open). Take about 3 hours. More information and booking ring Rosalie 89523409

Sat 13 March **APS - Early morning walk** around the Araluen gardens. Meet 7:30 am in the Strehlow Centre carpark. Contact Connie Spencer on 89 524 694 for further information.

Sat/Sun 20 & 21 March

Miss Pink's Birthday celebrations at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. A plant sale will be part of these celebrations plus the launch of the Friends of OPBG.

Sat 27 March

The Committee hopes to organise a **trip to Rifle Range Swamp**. At this stage we are having problems contacting anyone from the Central Australian Rifle Club from whom we would need permission. Does any member know of anyone in that club who could help us make contact with their officials. Please contact Vicki Gordan 89533981.

If unable to get permission for this, there will be an alternative short walk.

Fri 2- Mon 5 April

Camping at Newhaven. If you would like to go please contact Barb Gilfedder on 89 555 452 or fedders@octa4.net.au

Sat 10 to Sun 18 April - Heritage Week activities commemorating 150th anniversary of John McDouall Stuart first expedition to central Australia. Stuart Traynor will have details of these at our March meeting.

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From the President....

Continuing our interest in the Natural History collection at Araluen, Michael Cawthorn, the new Deputy Director South of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory has asked to meet with a few of us Field Naturalists . This will probably take place in April. Please let me know if you wish to be involved.

New display boards have been put up at the sewage ponds, with a map, orientation and precautions listed on one side and excellent bird information on the other. Thank you to Power and Water for a great addition to the ponds.



New Display boards at Sewage ponds

Barb Gilfedder

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February Speaker Northern Corroboree Frog - a last chance to save - Robert Jansen
Report by Barb Gilfedder

This is not a write-up of everything Robert said but a few items I found particularly interesting. Robert spent six years working on the Captive breeding program of the Northern Corroboree Frog at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve in the ACT. He had us fascinated by his descriptions of the challenges in initially finding frogs, collecting eggs and providing optimal hatching and managing conditions for them.

There are both Northern and Southern Corroboree Frogs. They look fairly similar with bold yellow and black patterning and are only 2-3cm long when fully grown. They both live in and around Kosciusko and Namadgi National Parks but in quite separate areas about fifty kilometers apart. Both are internationally critically endangered species. They used to be fairly common in their habitat, high-altitude sphagnum moss wetlands and their surroundings, until the mid 1990s, but then numbers plummeted. This coincided with a big drought causing their breeding pools to dry up.

Robert detailed their slow life-cycle for us – the eggs and tadpoles taking several months to develop, not breeding until 4-5 years of age and living about 8 years. Also the females only lay 25-30 eggs, each about

5mm across, a low number in the frog world. The males build nests above the water level, then call to attract as many females as possible. Each nest may contain 500 eggs.

Apart from the drought, the main reason for their demise appears to have been the introduction of the Chytrid fungus. This was released into the Australian environment with the African Clawed Frog. These frogs were imported for use in human pregnancy tests. They were all female and therefore unable to establish a feral population, but they were carriers of the Chytrid fungus. They have spread the pathogen around the world, causing devastation to many frog populations.

The idea of the captive breeding program for the N Corroboree frog was to raise frogs for release in order to increase the size of small populations and to provide opportunity for disease resistance to develop. The young frogs tend to stay around the wet areas for 4-5 years, so by keeping them in a captive disease-free environment for these years it was hoped that they would be less likely to succumb to the infection.

First, to breed frogs you need some eggs to start the program. To find the eggs, first find the nests. The male frogs only call during the breeding season. So the calls were recorded and searchers then tried to locate the frogs by playing them back. That didn't work. Then one of the searchers called out "Hey Frog" loudly and the frogs responded. Success, and a few nests were located. Robert said it was quite embarrassing wading through bogs yelling out to the frogs.

Robert did have success with the breeding, hatching 170 tadpoles in 2008 and 1000 in 2009.

Unfortunately, after he left the program, there was a temperature control malfunction and 45 degrees caused the demise of all those young frogs. Still the methods have been worked out and successfully trialled. The need to involve other institutions in the program became obvious, rather than have everything in one place.



Thank you Robert for a very interesting presentation.

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Ramblings in the Intertexta Forest – APS Trip with Connie Spencer by Barb Gilfedder

The Intertexta Forest is one of my favourite locations close to Alice. Only a small area but with enormous richness and diversity of flora, which of course leads to richness of fauna as well. Connie told us that the whole of the Ilparpa valley is a site of national botanical significance because of this diversity. It all comes down to a wide range of habitats based on the many different soil types.

In Dave Albrecht's book *The Vegetation and Plant Species of the Alice Springs Municipality Northern Territory* this small area is listed as *Vegetation type 23 - Drainage depression with Bastard Coolabah*. This is a useful guide as it lists the species that occur in this particular vegetation type. The shade of the beautiful old *Eucalyptus intertexta* (Bastard Coolabah) and a few *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (River Gums) is wonderful and no doubt helps retain the moisture in the soil and protects more delicate plants.

In the past, concerned citizens have cleared much Buffel grass and rubbish from the area, which has encouraged more of the small natives to thrive. Smaller trees, *Pittosporum angustifolium* (Native Apricot), *Hakea leucoptera* (Needlebush), young *Acacia estrophiolata* (Ironwood), *Acacia sessiliceps* (Curtly pod wattle), *Grevillea striata* (Beefwood) *Eremophila longifolia* (Emu bush) and others form a thick middle storey. The *Capparis spinosa* var. *nummelaria* (Native Passionfruit) which always seems to thrive under gums, was showing flowers, green fruit, orange ripening fruit and split fruit shells, emptied by the ants, no doubt. The ground is covered in *Marsilea exarata* (Little Nardoo) along the creek line and patches of a larger leaved species as well. Further back there are areas thick with *Cyperus bulbosus* (Yalka or bush onion) and other *Cyperus* species grow along the creek line. Many native grasses are seeding, all individually beautiful.

Every time we go there different plants seem to draw attention to themselves. This time it was the vines that were showing off.



Head-ache Vine

Firstly the *Cucumis maderaspatanus* (Head-ache Vine) with its heart shaped leaves and smooth berries growing lushly in great mounds over broken branches and scrambling up trees. Its name is Indian in origin. The plant also occurs there too, the *maderaspatanus* meaning “of Madras”. Peter Latz in *Bushfires and Bushtucker* tells us that the Pitjantjatara pulped the leaves, moistened them with a little water and used them as a cold compress to relieve headaches and induce sleep, hence the common name.

Another climber responding the rain was *Marsdenia australis* (Bush banana). Peter Latz tells us that almost every part of the plant is edible with the flowers and young fruit being the most favoured portions. We tried some small fruit and the slightly sweet nutty flowers.



Bush Banana Fruit

The *Einadia nutans* (Climbing Saltbush) was producing clusters of small red berries but the verdict was that they were not as sweet as the Ruby Saltbush. I refer again to Peter Latz who tells us that they are rarely eaten, but are used for colouring hair or as face paint.



Native Jasmine

Another climber, *Glycine canescens* was showing its small mauve flowers. *Jasminium didyum subsp. lineare* was climbing strongly and heavy with flower buds. I remember going out there last year after rain when it was in full flower and the whole atmosphere was thick with its rich fragrance. I noticed the *Vigna lanceolata*, (Pencil Yam) leaves looking healthy and also flowering.

As I said at the start, the fauna was visible as well. Tiny Froglets (*Limnodynastes spenceri*) hopped off to find cover in the leaf mulch; a wolf spider skipped through the group at a great speed; a large black wasp was searching the ground; a range of different sized grasshoppers and katydids were taking advantage of the new growth and a few butterflies – Caper White, Lesser Wanderer and Two-spotted Line-blue were fluttering around their host plants. A visit to this place is worth it for me for the birds alone. Rufous Songlarks serenaded us all morning; a Sacred Kingfisher was spotted with his breakfast firmly in his beak; Willy Wagtails complained at our presence; a Peaceful dove sat peacefully on a branch; Yellow Throated Miners, White-plumed Honey-eaters, a Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike and Australian Ringnecks occasionally dived noisily through the foliage and, on the edges of the forest, the Zebra Finches chattered and flittered around the Corkwoods.



Pencil Yam

Thank you Connie for getting us all out there again and sharing your broad knowledge. It is never a disappointing place. And thank you to all the other APS and Field Nats members who came and enjoyed and discussed the flora and fauna.

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**Frog Spotting at Simpsons Gap
Report by Sue O'Callaghan**

It was a merry band of intending frog spotters who enjoyed a BBQ/picnic tea at the Simpsons Gap schools area on the evening of Friday 12th February. But then it started to rain and most decided to frog spot on another occasion. The few who ventured on to the Gap itself were indeed amply rewarded!

As we approached the picnic area, and still a long way from any water, our headlights picked up tiny shapes sitting on the road. Much to our astonishment, these shapes sprang into life as we got closer. Rosalie and I actually stopped the car and got out to check. Yes, FROGS! Dozens of them. It was awful really, we tried not to run over these gorgeous little creatures as we made our way to the parking area.

We saw many more of these Spencer's Burrowing Frogs (*Limnodynastes spenceri*), light brown in colour with heavy irregular splotches on the back and heavy dark bands along the hindlimbs) as we walked along the path to the waterhole itself, but the highlight at this point was just one solitary Main's Frog (*Cyclorana maini*), another burrowing frog, perched on a rock and quite distinct from the others with a closer look, irregular patches on the back too but with a pointier nose and a fine stripe running along the spine.

Spencers Burrowing Frog photo by Regina Yurkonis



Main's Frog

The night was very dark but in the Gap itself our torch lights gave us a glimpse into frog wonderland. Frogs of all sizes were hopping away from our feet as we walked through the sand.

We saw Centralian Green Frogs (*Litoria gilleni*), glistening, iridescent, with gleaming eyes sitting on the sand beside the water and clinging to the wet rock faces; we saw Red Tree Frogs (*Litoria rubella*), brown actually, with smoother skin with occasional dark brown or black flecks and black button eyes perched in rock crevices and on the sand. At the bottom of a rock face we noticed Burrowing Spencer's all lined up and doing just that - hiding themselves away in the damp sand. I was surprised that we did not see frogs swimming as I had expected. They were all out in the fresh air enjoying the evening and the rain!



Centralian Green Frog

We saw several other interesting creatures as we peered into the clear waters of the various smaller ponds and puddles. Jim noticed a bright point of light - the eye of a large spider resting quietly.

In fact, the rain petered out after a while and the evening proved a wonderful experience for us all. A handful of enthusiasts went back for another look the following Wednesday night.

Red Tree Frog



It was a perfect Alice Springs evening - cooler, clear sky, slight breeze. We saw frogs again - all four varieties we had seen previously, but nowhere near in the same numbers.

The road in was dry and empty, as was the pathway into the Gap itself. We definitely saw many more of the Main's Frog this time in and around the smaller areas of water - perhaps they develop a little later than the others? A point of interest on both evenings - we did not hear frog singing at all. I wonder why?

Other creatures caught our attention this time too. We saw a snake, later identified as possibly an Unbanded Burrowing Snake (*Simoselaps incinctus*) about 40 cm long. It was lying along the bottom of the rock face when I saw it - later it moved along and I noticed 2 little frogs leaping away in panic. Would it have eaten them? We also saw a centipede, many grasshoppers lying on the water, wriggling leeches, some tadpoles and several other little water beetles and nymphs.



A highlight this time too was a Black-footed rock-wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis*) relaxing on a boulder quite close to us - until we shone our torches on him! As we left we stopped for a while to admire the heavens - always glorious on a clear night and for me especially magnificent when viewed from Simpsons Gap, my most favourite place in the world!

And frog spotting - it proved to be at its best and most rewarding on a wet evening in the Alice.

Black-footed Rock-wallaby Photo by Robbie Henderson

Unusual Visitors at the Sewage Ponds

A flock of over 100 Plumed Whistling-ducks arrived at the Alice Springs sewage ponds after the January rains. Many of them are still here in the middle of February. They are beautiful birds with long necks and a spray of creamy plumes over each wing. They whistle when they fly.



Plumed Whistling Ducks photo by Mat & Cathy Gilfedder

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of General Meeting held at Olive Pink Botanic Garden
on Wednesday 10 February 2010

Open: President, Barb Gilfedder declared the meeting open at 9.15pm.
Present: 19 people in attendance book , 14 people stayed for the general meeting
Apologies: Marilyn and Punch Hall.

Minutes of previous Meeting:

As usual minutes of the previous meeting had been circulated as part of the newsletter. Note taker should have read Jill Brew. Minutes were accepted with this amendment.

Matters Arising:

Araluen Precinct Redevelopment Plan: Barb verbally up-dated developments so far as per her report in the February ASFNC Newsletter. It was not possible to arrange a meeting with Gerry McCarthy, NT Minister for Arts and Museums. Michelle Smith is now working at the museum; she plans to enhance the natural history section by including background information with who and how the collections were made. Mike Cawthorne, Deputy Director South of Museums and Art Galleries would like to arrange a meeting for further discussion with us.

New ASFNC Website: The URL for the new website can be found in the February Newsletter. At this stage a Google search does not provide a link to the website. Bob is looking after the website. Members are urged to have a look at the site.

Alice Springs Town Council Directory: ASFNC details have been updated.

John McDouall Stuart 150th Celebrations: Barb has more details about this event that will take place in April. Stuart Traynor will make them available at the next meeting.

Correspondence In:

Western Australian Naturalists Club	The Naturalist News - Dec 2009, Jan/Feb 2010
NT Field Naturalist Club	Nature Territory – Dec 2009, February 2010
CSIRO Publishing	Advertising a Selection of Natural History Publications
Field Naturalists Club of Victoria	Invitation to nominate someone for the Australian Natural history Medallion
	Invitation to donate to Australian Natural history Medallion Trust Fund
Bill Lowe	Dec seminar – Peter Latz, 'Botanising in the Musgraves'
Lloyd Neilsen's Birding Directory	Request for current information about the club
Birds Australia	Seeking donations for Threatened Bird Network

Correspondence Out:

Angus Duguid	Thank you for speaking at November meeting
Bruce Pascoe	Thank you for speaking at October meeting
Lloyd Neilsen's Birding directory	Reply – see correspondence in
Dom Pecorari	Thank you for addressing End of year breakfast at Pitchi Richi

Treasurer's Report:

There is a current balance of \$3114.05.

Report was moved for acceptance by Rhondda Tomlinson, seconded by Margaret Lawrence.

General Business:

January Committee/Planning meeting. Barb gave a brief account of the meeting and tabled the minutes.

Club Laptop. This has been discussed at the planning meeting. Bob used to make his Laptop available at meetings for presenters to use, this is no longer the case. A computer could also be used for archiving ASFNC documents and photos. Sarah has given this some thought and done some research about costs. Sarah put the motion 'That the club spend up to \$1200 to purchase a suitable laptop with virus protection and suitable software'. Seconded by Rhondda. Carried.

Bird Week: Ben Covery (Curator at OPBG) has approached the club for support for the 2nd Central Australia Bird Week which will take place in October. This could include having extra people with knowledge about local birds at bird watching events. The committee has given support in principle.

ASFNC cards. 20 cards featuring the Spinifex Pigeon have been purchased. These will be used during the year for thank you notes to speakers etc.

Buffel at Pitchi Richi: Members are invited to contact Dom Pecorari if they are interested in helping to remove buffel – it has grown well as a result of the January rains.

Future Outings/Trips

Friday 12 Feb. Picnic tea and frog check at Simpson's Gap. The picnic will take place at the school camp area as the barbeques there are more reliable.

Saturday 27 Feb. Early morning walk along Upper Todd starting at the Telegraph Station.

Barb asked for expressions of interest in a trip to **Newhaven at Easter**. John Bermingham and Lee Ryall expressed interest – there may well be more.

Sightings:

Rosalie saw a Perenti swimming in a pool in the upper Todd area

Ducks with ducklings were also seen in an upper Todd pool indicating that they must have bred there.

Barb reported that there has been a big flock of Plumed Whistling Ducks at the Sewage Ponds.

Bev Gray commented on seeing Rufous Song Larks, a sighting that was echoed by others.

Next Meeting: Wednesday 10 March 2010

Note taker: Rosalie Breen
Supper: Sue O'Callaghan
Gate: Barb Gilfedder

Meeting closed at 9.45 pm