



April 2010

Alice Springs Field Naturalist Club Newsletter



Todd River rapids
Photo: James Armstrong

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month
(except December & 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 23 April**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – robbiemily@hotmail.com

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FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB MEETINGS

- Wed 14 April: Peter Collins, Zoo-keeper at the Desert Park with a talk about migratory shorebirds entitled "Waders, Flyways and Flagging".
- Wed 12 May: Ashley Sparrow of CSIRO with a talk entitled "Landscape Ecology in Antarctic Dry Valleys".

AUSTRALIAN PLANT SOCIETY MEETING

- Wed 7 April Michael Barrett on significant plants in the Western Macs

FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES

- April 10 – 19 Heritage Week 2010 The 150th anniversary of John McDouall Stuart's first expedition to Central Australia in April 1860. There is a big range of activities organised to commemorate this anniversary – lectures, exhibitions, concerts and a re-enactment . To find out details look at the website www.jms.thealice.com.au
- Sun 18 April Sewage Ponds. 7.00am start and at least 2 hours duration. Please be on time as gate is locked. Wear closed shoes (there are lots of ants) bring water, hat and binoculars. A folding stool might be useful if you don't like standing for too long. Please contact leader Barb Gilfedder 89555452.
- Sun 18 April Planning Meeting. 2.00pm Olive Pink Botanic Garden. All members very welcome to attend
- Sat-Mon 24-26 April Stuart's Pass. To celebrate John McDouall Stuart's Expeditions to Central Australia, we will have a camp at Birthday Waterhole on the Hugh River and from there walk on Larapinta Trail to Stuart's Pass and back, about 10 km easy, or the energetic could go further and climb Brinkley Bluff. Other walks too, or just sit and enjoy the area and the company. Come on Saturday or Sunday. High clearance 4WD vehicles are necessary for the drive into Birthday Waterhole
- Chance for fit and experienced walkers to walk Larapinta stage 4 Standley Chasm to Birthday Waterhole, with campers at Birthday to act as their pickup at the end. Contact Rosalie 89523409 well before the weekend if interested so arrangements can be organized. Flexible itinerary to suit those going.

March Guest Speaker Stuart Traynor - John McDouall Stuart's 1860 Expedition a "Natural" History.

Report summary by Rosalie Breen

Stuart Traynor considers John McDouall Stuart our greatest explorer mainly because of the consequences of his findings – the opening up of the land for pastoralism, and for reconnoitering a path for the telegraph line constructed only 10 years later. Being a good bushman his assessments of the country were sound. He also was persistent with six expeditions in all and could be considered successful from the fact that he lived to tell about his journeys. He spent virtually six years straight, venturing northwards, returning for more supplies and then back to travel further north. He learned early from experiencing a trip with Sturt up the Darling and into the deserts as a surveyor, that the key to success was to travel light, and quickly. Also on this trip he collected the first specimen of the night parrot, sent it to Gould in England who misidentified it as a ground parrot. Eventually Gould with more information recognized it as a new species and Stuart's specimen was eventually unearthed in good condition. He also had an uncanny skill in finding water, being able to read "the fall of the land". In journeying from Brinkley he was able to navigate N-W instead of direct north to locate Hamilton Springs (A feat our own Stuart was unable to emulate later for lack of any definite creek guidelines).

JM Stuart began his explorations in 1858. The first two expeditions explored areas around northern South Australia. Chambers and Finke in Adelaide were the sponsors of Stuart's expeditions and names of localities named by him were sometimes changed by Chambers for political reasons after he had submitted his notes to the sponsors. Incidentally for the last expedition names remained as given because Chambers had died.

The third expedition was mainly to search for minerals, look for gold in Davenport, and survey for pastoral land around Oodnadatta. Kekwick was with him then and three others who deserted. Conditions with Stuart were tough and the food mostly consisted of dried meat boiled with flour to make soup. After the desertion he stayed in a shepherd's hut near Lake Eyre for a month to hopefully recover from a bout of sandy blight, while Kekwick went south for supplies and more men. But he returned only with an almost hijacked 18yearold, Benjamin Head. Not daunted they continued.

The fourth, 1860 expedition finally achieved Stuart's aim to reach Central Australia, and part of this expedition, the arrival at Owen Springs, will be re-enacted on the 150th anniversary in April. There had been rains so it was a battle to get across many of the rivers but he reached Attack Creek where the Warramunga people "persuaded" him not to enter their land and to return south. This he did and after restocking ventured out again. Near Dunmarra he was stopped by thick growths of Lancewood and Bullwaddy. In 1962 he eventually found a corridor through this dense vegetation and in July reached the Arufura Sea at Point Stuart and was able to dabble his hands in the northern waters.



John McDouall Stuart was quite a good naturalist, with knowledge of geology, vegetation and birds. Kekwick was a botanist, and Waterhouse (1862 expedition) was a keen naturalist. Kekwick found the Princess Parrot and described it accurately. Reynolds Range, near Annie's Waterhole was compared accurately as similar in geology to Heavitree Range.

In his journal are descriptions of plants. The Darling Lily is easily recognized from his writings, as well as an "India rubber tree" which is the Native Fig, and Corkwoods. From Reynolds Range a new species was described, referred to later as Stuart's Bean-tree, but now Batwing Coral Tree, *Erythrina versperillio*. In the MacDonnells where they had to stay a day or two because Polly (his favourite horse) got staked in the fetlock, he described the cycad. He wrote "We camped at a good spring where I found a very remarkable palm-tree, with light-green fronds ten feet long, having small leaves a quarter of an inch in breadth, and about eight inches

in length, and a quarter of an inch apart, growing from each side, and coming to a sharp point. They spread out like the top of the grass-tree, and the fruit has a large nut, but when roasted is like a potato". A day or two later he remarks in his journal that the nut is not fit for consumption as two men had vomited. Stuart made of stronger stuff was OK. There is an entry of a wild rose, with thorns and perfume, still a bit of a mystery but probably a type of *Solanum*.

Stuart Traynor had brought with him a miserable looking plant. This was the native cucumber, *Cucumis melo ssp. agrestis* which the expedition's members collected all along their routes. They ate it salted, boiled as a vegetable or stewed with sugar for a fruit. This most certainly aided their survival as it protected against or relieved symptoms of scurvy. At Anna's Reservoir Stuart mentions being relieved of pain after eating cucumber and wrote "we have obtained from one plant upwards of two gallons of them, averaging from one to two inches in length and an inch in breadth". It is the same genus as the rock melon and honey dew rather than paddy melons or watermelons, (*Citrullus* species). Pigface was also boiled and eaten as a vegetable. The cucumber was plentiful because of the wet years and the fact that it is a favourite emu food. Emus spread a viable seed as their digestion system is fast moving compared to cattle's. This helps to explain why it is now not so plentiful.

After the talk the audience were able to taste some fruits of the cucumber and pour over the maps to check Stuart's route in Central Australia.

References

- Mr Stuart's Tracks by John Bailey
- Explorations of Australia – Stuart's own journal of his explorations
- Stuart and the overland Telegraph – an old pictorial comic book version of Stuart's explorations and the development of the Telegraph line. This booklet inspired an 11 year old Stuart Traynor to consider that history was exciting.

And now, Stuart Traynor has the gift to make history and natural environment stories so interesting. Thank you for a good evening.

On the web site www.JMS.thealice.com.au you can find information of Stuart's 1860 expedition and the celebrations to take place around Alice Springs in April

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Bradshaw Walk at the Telegraph Station – 27 February 2010

by Meg Mooney

It's early morning and a small group of Field Naturalists are in a quandary. When I arrive at 6.45am, a little late, Rosalie and Raf are about to head across the flooded but not too high Charles Creek to at least have a look at the Todd at the Telegraph Station, and Barb is about to drive back home.

My arrival causes yet another discussion and soon we are all driving to the Telegraph Station! The trip to a gorge to the north of the Station has been abandoned, because 'you have to see it in the sunlight' (Rosalie) and that walk would now involve crossing a flooded tributary.



So we opt for the Bradshaw Walk and disappear into a kind of fairyland in the bouldery hills just south of the Station. All the little streams are flowing, with clear water. There are frogs, moss, ferns and liverwort, miniature worlds with soft cushions and sprays of green beside little waterfalls and pools, sandy beaches.

We see one big fat Spencer's Burrowing Frog – we see quite a few of these frogs – scrabbling desperately not to get washed down a little stream, finally failing and disappearing spreadeagled up side down near the surface of the water.

The 'bok-bok' of these frogs, a little like gentle knocking on a door, is a

major feature of the soundtrack of our walk.

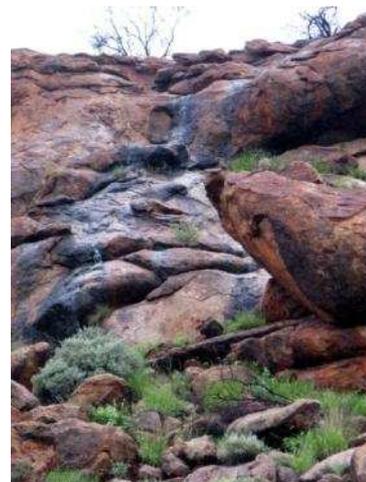
Trickling, tinkling, splashing, and the occasional low roaring, of water are the main other sounds. We do hear and occasionally see some Pied Butcherbirds and Willy Wagtails but birds are generally silent and not to be seen.

There's a big waterfall down a taller ridge. A rock-wallaby watches me climb up to see if the fall's fed by a pool at the top, then scoots away. There's no pool, just a tiny, winding stream.

Under witchetty bushes beside some streams we find clusters of little white puffballs, like tiny Pine Gaps. (Does anyone know exactly what these mushrooms are?)

Rosalie, who walks here often, points out some of her special sites. There's the tree (a bloodwood? – I've forgotten) with branches grown together to make a spy hole; a big Bullock Bush (*Alectryon oleifolius*); a darker green, thicker moss growing on a boulder, different to the softer, bright green moss on the ground; a relatively rare *commelina* (Native Wandering Jew) plant with bright blue flowers.

Eventually we come out on to the banks of the Todd, largely taken over by Buffel Grass and Couch. Still, it's an unusual, and wet-footed (the gullies), experience to walk back north beside a great expanse of churning, milk coffee water.



Australian Plant Society trip to Araluen Cultural Centre gardens - 13 March 2010

By Rosalie Schultz

A mixture of Plant Society and Field Naturalists Club members (some both) re-visited the wonderful Araluen Cultural Centre Gardens on Saturday 13 March.

Alice Springs has had unusually high rainfall over the past few weeks, and months. Gardens everywhere are thriving, flowering, seeding and germinating, and also hosting larger numbers and diversity of insects. Connie gave an excellent commentary.

Non- plant highlight of the walk

We visited the garden to examine and enjoy the plants. However a few insects deserve mention.



Processionary caterpillars had spun their web at the base of a Witchetty Bush. They perform nightly processions as they go for food, end to end along a trail they make, then come home at night to a meshwork of silk forming a nest at the base of a tree.

Grasshoppers of assorted shapes and sizes and colours have been multiplying rapidly in the fresh new growth.

The picture here is of *Gossypium bickii*, Low Desert Rose, similar to the taller and more familiar Sturts desert Rose

Capparis spinosa var *nummularia* or Native Passionfruit is a favourite of the Caper Moth, but the specimens we saw had not been eaten. We enjoyed the coiled stems on the fruit.



A few plants of special note in alphabetical order.

Acacia cyperophylla, Red Mulga has red curly bark peeling over the whole of the trunk and branches. This is a most beautiful tree.

We saw two attractive daisies near the driveway to the Centre. One was a brachycome, and the other *Chrysocephalum semicalvanum*. This plant had elegant grey, aromatic stems and was previously called *Helichrysum*.

We saw lots of *Eremophila longifolia*, Weeping Emu-bush near the paths where we began our walk. They may have been planted, but more likely they are spreading through suckering of the roots. Also we saw *Eremophila polyclada* Twiggy Emu-bush which commonly grows in Alice gardens. They flower in Summer when much else is hiding itself from the lingering summer sun and heat. Philip Moore's book "Plants of Central Australia" describes it as a "shapeless, intricately branched shrub" – but it is very attractive in flower. However it is uncommon in the wild, native to areas of southern Queensland, northern NSW and a small population in the Nt North-east of Alice.



Eremophila longifolia

Big trees are the showpiece of gardens given time to mature, or protected when gardens are established. Sacred and ancient River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) have been preserved and protected at Araluen for their magnificence and mystery. Then we saw the "Bastard Coolibah" or, more pleasantly, the Gum-barked Coolibah (*Eucalyptus intertexta*) – which has fibrous bark.



Eucalyptus intertexta



Eucalyptus minnirichi



Corymbia opaca

Tessellation of the bark is one of the distinguishing characteristics of bloodwoods. This group of eucalypts are now classified with the corymbia genus, our common Desert Bloodwood on the sandy plains being *Corymbia opaca*.

Eucalyptus minnirichi is the Round-leaved Mallee. This is a very attractive tree with appeal in the bark which peels in long strips, the round leaves like pages in a little book, the densely growing yellow flowers, and even the bell shaped gumnuts.

We enjoyed the beautiful pale pink flower on the *Glycine canescens*. *Hakea divaricata* the Fork-leaved Corkwood had soft new growth in the upper leaves.

There were lots of *Lysiana exocarpa*, the Harlequin Mistletoe, along our walk. On host plants growing in good conditions, the mistletoe shares nutrients and water, and both can survive and flourish. However if the host plant is under stress, the mistletoe can kill it.

Ptilotus parvifolia – unlike most ptilotus which are ephemeral, this one is perennial and grows into a woody shrub. After the rain there was healthy new growth and lots of small flowers, less showy than many other ptilotus, but sharing the silky feathery appearance with a flash of purple.

Radyera farragei is in the Malvacea family. This one is every eye catching, up to 150cm in height, with lots of large green leaves and purple hibiscus-like flowers.

Swainsona formosa – our much-loved Sturt's Desert Pea, regenerating from last year's plantings, and still beautiful.

**These amazing photos and many more were taken by Margaret McDonnell, so full credit to her, and digital photography.*

Rain wakes up the snails - By Barb Gilfedder

We found three small snails in our garden during the week of rain. I photographed them and then put them in an ice-cream bucket while I tried to find out if they were native or feral. I sent the photo to six people who I thought might be able to help me. After a few days and a reply from Bob Read saying that he thought they were native, I released them where we found them. They hadn't eaten any of the silverbeet leaf I had put in for them.

I finally got a 'probable' identification from Mark Carter, who had shown my photo to Gareth Catt, a Ranger at Finke Gorge, also interested in snails. Although not 100% sure, they think the snails are Adcock's Land Snails, *Pleuroxia adcockiana*. I checked in the Horn Expedition books and found that this species, then called *Thesites adcockiana* was collected abundantly by Ralph Tate of the Horn Expedition in 1894. He states that "It is one of the few species which extends throughout the Larapintine area. It proved to be very variable in shape, sculpture and colouration"



In a 2003 Junior Ranger Review, Stuart Traynor writes "Snails are essentially 'leaky bags of water' in constant danger of desiccation. Most live in shaded rocky gorges in the leaf litter beneath fig trees. Some are 'free-sealers' which cover the opening of their shell with a thick coating of mucus so they won't dry out. Others are 'rock-sealers', attaching themselves to a rock like a marine snail. The desert snails can survive long dry periods by sealing themselves inside their shells and aestivating until rain falls".



By coincidence Mark Carter also sent in a photo for our newsletter of a much rarer character. It is *Semotrachia jessieana*, an endangered snail that only occurs in a very small area.

This one was out for a slide on a wet rock after probably many months of aestivating.

The much bigger Common Garden Snail, *Helix aspersa* is a feral from Europe and can be a significant pest. He wouldn't have turned his nose up at my silverbeet.

Banded Stilt

Three Banded Stilts flew in and rested for a few days at Alice Springs Sewage Ponds last month. They are uncommon visitors. I last saw the species here in 2002. (Just before going to print I had a report that there are now 16 Banded Stilts at the Sewage Ponds.)

Barb Gilfedder



Perentie, *Varanus giganteus*

This young Perentie was photographed by Rhondda Tomlinson. He has been sunning himself regularly on the lawns at AZRI over the last few weeks.



The Perentie is Australia's largest lizard and second largest in the world after the Komodo Dragon of Indonesia.

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

Open: President, Barb Gilfedder declared the meeting open at 8.55pm.

Present: 35 people at the talk, 24 stayed for the meeting

Minutes of previous Meeting:

As usual minutes of the previous meeting had been circulated as part of the newsletter. Barb asked for the spelling of Convery to be corrected. With this correction the Minutes were moved for acceptance by Shirley Goodman, seconded by Connie Spencer. Accepted

Matters Arising:

Purchase of club laptop- An ACER laptop has been purchased with a 3 year warranty at a total cost of \$1088. Thank you to Sarah who undertook the research for a suitable computer and organized its purchase. In the immediate future, the computer will be passed to Emily to facilitate collation of the newsletter.

New ASFNC Website: At this stage a Google search does not direct people to the new website. Bob has made enquiries about this with the Host of the website who say that this is not part of their responsibility. It was suggested that we seek advice of someone who knows about websites. Ian Richter suggested that Councillor Jane Clarke may be able to help.

Bird Week: Mark Carter has contacted Barb Gilfedder asking if ASFNC would be interested in taking over the community aspect of 2010 Red Centre Bird Week. After consulting with the committee Barb has replied that ASFNC does not want to take on this role. She offered to conduct a 'Birds before Work' session at the Sewage Ponds and for the club to run another bird based quiz at the Annual Garden Fair. Barb will stay in touch with Ben Convery who will be co-ordinating activities for Bird Week.

Correspondence In:

Western Australian Naturalists Club The Naturalist News – March 2010

NT Field Naturalist Club Nature Territory – March 2010
February 2010

Bill Lowe Email about seminar at CDU - 17 March Jane Addison "Land tenure policies in the Gobi Desert

Michael Dunlop Enquiry re membership

Treasurer's Report:

There is a current balance of \$2026. Report was moved for acceptance by Shirley Goodman, seconded by Vicki Gordon.

General Business:

Aliceonline website. The editor of this website is Dave Richards and his aim is to create a venue where local groups can share their interests with a bigger audience. Meg Mooney suggested that ASFNC may like to make some newsletter articles available for display on the website. Barb circulated this to the committee and the general feeling was that it would be a positive thing to do and would be a useful way for ASFNC to be promoted. The website can be viewed at aliceonline.com.au

Outings/Trips- Reports

27 February-Due to heavy rain, The Bradshaw Walk replaced the proposed walk in the upper Todd. Four members participated and had an interesting time in unusual conditions.

Future Outings/Trips

13 March - Opportunity to join an APS visit to the gardens around Araluen.

21 March - Olive Pink Botanic Gardens for the Launch of the Draft Management Plan for OPBG, the launch of 'Friends of OPBG' followed by Miss Pink's Birthday afternoon tea.

27 March - Morning visit to Rifle Range Swamp if permission can be gained or if not, a walk in Ilparpa Claypans area.

April 1-4 – Camping trip to Newhaven

April 18 - Sewage Ponds

April 24-26 – Camping weekend and walks at Birthday Waterhole

Sightings:

Rosalie saw a Perenti at the base of Spencer Hill and....a Western Brown Snake

Barb saw 3 Banded Stilts at the Sewage Ponds, the first that she has seen there since 2002

Following recent rains the Tar vine (*Boerhavia coccinea*) has flourished as have the yipirina caterpillars that feed on it. Yipirina moths are also about

Barb has had a Australian Admiral (*Vanessa itea*) butterfly in her garden

Vicki has a Brown Honeyeater nest just outside her front door, the tiny nest is suspended at about waist height. – Hopefully they will stay.

Have the Channel Billed Cuckoos left? Bev reported that the babies that she has been aware of have left the nest.

Next Meeting: Wednesday 14 April 2010

Note taker: Vicki Gordon

Supper: Rosalie Breen

Gate: Connie Spencer (and thank you Connie for opening up for the March meeting when Barb was delayed)

Meeting closed at 9.25 pm.