



March 2011

Alice Springs Field Naturalist Club Newsletter



Semotrachia jessieana – Photo Barb Gilfedder

Don't miss Mark Carter's talk on "Native Land Snails of the Red Centre" on March 9, 7.00pm.

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month (except December & January) at 7:00 PM at Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Visitors are welcome

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NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 1st April**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – robbiemily@hotmail.com.

MEETINGS.

- Wed 9 Mar **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Mark Carter on “Native Land Snails of the Red Centre”**.
- Wed 13 April **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Grant Allen on “Fire in the Centre”**.
- Wed 6 Apr **APS** Monthly Meeting 7.30 pm at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Speaker: **Des Nelson on “The John Maconochie era in the Herbarium”**.

FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

- Sat 5 March **Postponed Until April 9** **Alice Springs Sewage Ponds Shorebird count**. Meet at the locked gate at 7am sharp. Information collected will go into the national data base as part of the Australia-wide shorebird count. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452.
- Sun 13 Mar **ASFNC** Early morning walk up **Cassia Hill at Simpsons Gap**. This is a 1.5 km walk with elevated views of the range and Simpsons Gap area. Meet **7 am** at Flynn's Grave Memorial on Larapinta Drive. Contact Connie Spencer on 8952 4694 for further information.
- Sat 19 Mar Miss Pink's birthday **Plant Sale** at Olive Pink Botanic Garden 8.00 to 11.00am.
- Sat 19 Mar **ASFNC** Afternoon/evening trip to **Ellery Creek Big Hole** to track down Spotted Nightjar at dusk over the waterhole. Then a slow trip back after dark to see other night birds and creepy-crawlies along the way. Leader: Chris Watson: Phone 0419358942 or email Roadkill.chronicles@gmail.com. Meet at Flynn's Grave 3.30pm. It would be good to keep the number of vehicles to a minimum, so please arrange this beforehand or be prepared to leave vehicles at Flynn's Grave car park..
- Sat 26/Sun 27 Mar **ASFNC** Evening /overnight at **Trephina Gorge** – Make your own way there, 85km East of Alice, off Ross Hwy. Set up camp at Bluff Campground. Go early enough, if you wish to do either the one hour Gorge or Panorama walks in the afternoon. Meet Pam Keil at Gorge Picnic area at 6.30pm for **Nocturnal Spotlighting Walk**. Bring red torches and mozzie repellent. Return at your leisure. For more information pamelakeil@yahoo.com
- Sat 2 Apr **ASFNC** Climb **Mount Sonder**. Contact Rosalie Schultz on 8953 4530.
- Fri 22 Apr – Mon 25 **ASFNC** Possible Easter weekend trip to **Newhaven Reserve** – *to be confirmed*.
- Sat 30 Apr – 2 May **ASFNC** Mayday weekend trip to **Mordor Pound** – This area is currently inaccessible and we are subject to approval from pastoralist, but hopefully conditions will improve before then. Leader: Morgan Flint 89532286. – *to be confirmed*

Dates for **Bush Regeneration** field days at **Maynard Park** 2011.

You are invited to attend our bush regeneration field days for season one 2011 at Maynard Park, Head St Braiuling, 8:30am till 10am. Dates are, March 6, April 9, and May 14, usually every 2nd Saturday of the month (except March). Contact Andy Vinter andy_vinter@yahoo.com.au

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February Speaker: Jayne Brim Box on “Central Australian Wetlands” reported by Jill Brew

The waterholes of Central Australia and the life that depends on them were the stars of the presentation made by Jayne Brim Box. She gave us deeper insight into the rich Naturalist mining possibilities close by – the “goldmine” that is Central Australia, with its precious jewels: the permanent waterholes.

Permanent or semi permanent waterholes in arid areas conserve “rare, relict and/or endemic species” that can’t survive, or no longer survive, anywhere else. And the importance of water bodies to local people in Central Australia is incalculable.

We know they are precious beyond price, but Jayne really brought it home.

The number of threatened species in Australia that come under “frogs, fish, molluscs and other invertebrates” (things that live in the water) was a surprise : at last three times those of birds and mammals threatened in Australia. Molluscs account for 43% of known extinctions of animal species on Earth since 1500! Moving to another location if your current one dries up is not an option for most of these water-living creatures. Even frogs tend to stick to one waterhole, reluctant to make risky cross-country migration.

As she moved through telling us about 3 projects, Jayne showed photos of secluded shaded waterholes, and tiny delicate organisms - powerful reminders of the mysterious but vulnerable.

Studies of the waterholes can give information about climate change, ecological relationships and habitat fragmentation.

Project one, 2008, involved sampling water previously tested either 22 years (George Gill Ranges – e.g. Kings Canyon - and Finke) or 14 years (West MacDonnell Ranges – e.g. Giles Yard Spring) before – same 16 sites, same methods - alongside original researcher Jenny Davis.

Checking the “response and resilience of aquatic communities in multiple water bodies” was the purpose, in order to understand what affects long-term biodiversity in arid aquatic systems – and what wetlands in arid NT need in order to survive intact. National parks can work from this knowledge.

Results showed improvement in water quality from approx. 20 years ago, and, in 13 of the 16 sites, increases in the number of native species present. Inclusion of the waterholes in national park area in the last twenty years, and clearing up of the catchment by removal of stock in the catchment, could have caused this.

Jayne treated us to slides of (a very few of) the 2,611 specimens identified (107 taxonomic entities as against 90 in earlier surveys) that were found in these beautiful shaded spots. The original samples can be seen at her lab. Jayne has an interest in plant and animal species that could be water health “indicators,” their significance known to local Indigenous custodians and to few western scientists.

Specific species noted as indicators of water quality and the degree of permanence of a water site:

- Black fly larvae indicate high water quality, of good flow, and long-term. (for photo, see Feb newsletter)
- Mayflies appear at only permanent sites
- Water Pennies, a relict beetle from a time when CA was much wetter, are able to hang on even in polluted conditions.

- Soldier Flies can live in hyper saline conditions, and are pollution tolerant.

Speculation on arrival methods of some exotic species included via travelers clothing. Colonial hydrozoa (*Cordylophora caspia*) – from the Caspian Sea – is only found at Ormiston, so far. Jayne requests an alert if this is seen: half a small thumbnail size at its largest, and light avoiding; it's usually not to be seen if fish are around.

No amphipods, Isopods or Stone Flies were found in 2008.

Project two – impact of camels

At a small permanent spring near Mutitjulu, the degree and effect of camel usage was studied.

Camel numbers are expected to double in 8 years, and traditional owners indicate some waterholes “need help.” Information on water quality, use by camels, aquatic fauna and effects such as trampling, browsing etc was collected in February 2008, 2 months after the most recent rain. The area around the spring was crossed with camel trails. A depth logger tested barometric pressure over time so that emptying/filling of the waterhole could be checked against animal use of the waterhole.

A surveillance camera maintained a record of drinkers throughout the night. Once emptied, the waterhole took 5 hours to refill.

Camels drank heartily and deeply and smaller creatures took their turn to drink when there was space, and when it was possible to reach the water level. One reading showed 25 litres removed in 40 minutes. Charming snouts moved in view of the camera. Graphed data on slides showed the fluctuation in water level clearly as camels drank .

As well as the lowering the water level, camels trampled and grazed, creating dust and erosion. On three occasions, collecting for aquatic fauna produced none at all. At most 3 “tax” were found, in comparison with other water sites that had shown 4 to 64. The water was unsuitable for drinking.

Tadpoles in their thousands lost out to camels – 30 camels consumed 6000L of water in 2 days and left the tadpoles without a hope. Complete draining of a waterhole or pools below it can jeopardize the survival of frogs, as tadpoles cannot grow to maturity and frogs tend to stay put.

Protection of waterholes by traditional carers was the focus of the third part of Jayne’s talk. Wildlife and cultural corridors marked by waterholes, with traditional tending and maintenance of the waterholes to ensure the water did not dry out, were referred to by Veronica Dobson from slides. Taking kids out to manage land and water was important for them and the future. She cited the suffering of the country with grazing, including by feral animals, and erosion of topsoil.

Traditional owners chose to fence Salt and Hayes Springs for protection. A contaminated pool was cleared, and surface area and quality of water increased.

There is a plan for the Field Nats to go out with Jayne and Veronica to visit springs near Santa Teresa.

Jayne pointed out that waterholes are magnets for many creatures, and her slides showed some of the range of life. She highlighted the unfolding of mysteries at the waterholes. Information on invertebrates in the NT is lacking, and most found are new to science.

Diving beetles found in puddles at school. Water Scorpions, Damselflies, Dragonflies and Giant Water Bugs. Those who would like to develop their interest in the myriad of “things that live in water” are invited to help Jayne look through and document her photos from the projects.

Jayne ended with a quote from Katharine Graham, once editor of the Washington Post : “To love what you do and feel that it matters – what could be more fun.”

Thanks to Jayne for sharing this joy with us.

Alice Springs Field Naturalists at the poo ponds... February 9, 2011 - By Chris Watson

A great way to start a Sunday morning for any birdwatcher is to head down to the local sewage treatment plant. It isn't most folks' idea of a pleasant Sunday, but birdos know different. It was with this spirit that the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Society arrived for an early start this morning to see what we could turn up.



Early talk was about the Sooty Tern which had been blown into town by tropical cyclone *Yasi* earlier in the week. We soon got down to business though, as the first few waders were spotted just beyond the gate. A Common Sandpiper was first cab off the rank, closely followed by a few Wood Sandpipers.

All the usual suspects were in attendance - the Black-winged Stilts, Black Swans, Pink-eared Ducks, Grey Teal, Hoary-headed and Australasian Grebes. A commotion was seen off in the direction of the tip and two Australian

The happy crowd gathered for a morning with the birds.

Hobbies were stooping and weaving at high speed as they were harrassed by a mob of Torresian

Crows. It got to the point that it was tricky to distinguish who was harrassing who.

Some Black-tailed Godwits spiced up the wader sightings as we headed around Ep7 and there were Variegated and White-winged Fairy-wrens playing in the scrub beside the path. As usual the colourful males were being very elusive. From here we spotted at least six Black-shouldered Kites swooping and circling near the western end of the ponds.

The cause of the commotion was soon evident as a huge Wedge-tailed Eagle hove into view from low out of Ilparpa Swamp. This is the first time I've seen a Wedgie in this close to the sewage ponds. It seems the eagle had come in to try and get a piece of a miserable looking Purple Swamphen which had become fouled in the barbed-wire fence and, in its struggle to free itself, was very badly injured and nearing death. The kites had obviously been taking pieces from the near-dead swamphen and the eagle had come in to claim its share but the kites eventually saw it off.

After this drama, Barb Gilfedder spotted a Glossy Ibis out on a distant island. Its a very infrequent visitor so everyone was keen for a good look, and then further out the back a lone Banded Stilt was seen bobbing around on the water among the ducks. This bird was in immature plumage and lacked the distinctive breast band of the adults but is rare enough up this way to cause some excitement.

So with the Glossy Ibis and Banded Stilt as highlights, that about wrapped up the Field Nats morning at the sewage ponds. I think everyone had a great morning and we certainly had plenty to talk about.

Thanks very much to Barb Gilfedder and the Field Nats for organising these sorts of mornings. Stay tuned, because there will be a full bird survey conducted at the poo ponds in coming weeks. This is a great chance for experienced birdos to volunteer their expertise to the task of getting an accurate count of all the birds at our poo ponds and will go into the national database as part of the Australia-wide shorebird count. Less experienced volunteers are more than welcome as we will need scribes and it is a great opportunity to learn from some of the best birders in Alice.



The Banded Stilt *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*

Another proposed outing in coming weeks is an afternoon drive out to Ellery Creek Big Hole to track down the Spotted Nightjar at dusk over the waterhole. Then a nighttime drive back to Alice to see what other nightbirds and creepy-crawlies we can find along the way.

SPENCER HILL by Jenny Purdie

On Saturday 19th February Rosalie Breen organised an early morning walk up Spencer Hill to watch the sunrise. Rosalie had hoped that some of the newer members of the club would come along but perhaps it was too early for them as none turned up. However five old stalwarts enjoyed the beautiful sunrise in the east with a full moon still high in the sky in the west. Most of the vegetation was at its very best with the grasses lushly green, the Witchetty Bush healthy & flowering & *Indigofera leucotricha* a spectacular silver grey. Some of the *Eremophila freelingii* was flowering & there were ferns (*Cheilanthes* sp) sheltering amongst the rocks. Ghost gums in the distance looked stunning with their stark white trunks.



Sunrise from Spencer Hill



A blackfooted rock wallaby watched us from nearby for a while before disappearing over the rocks. Rosalie pointed out some of the geology of the rocks including dykes of Pegmatite amongst the Alice Springs granite.

Desert Park - Animal Observations

The Desert Park wants people with an hour (or more) to spare on any day of the week to help out with animal observations in the Nocturnal House.

The Desert Park is committed to giving our visitors the best possible experience we can provide. By knowing more about the habits of all our animals we are able to deliver a better experience for all our visitors and we also increase our knowledge and understanding of the animals at the Desert Park. You can be part of this.

All that is required is some spare time; as little as one hour or more if you can spare. You will get the opportunity to meet some of the Desert Park staff and find out more about the interesting and amazing lives of the Nocturnal House animals, including reptiles, mammals, birds and insects.

Training and assistance will be provided. For more information contact;

Anthony Molyneux – Assistant Curator Zoology.

Ph: 8951 8722 Email: anthony.molyneux@nt.gov.au

Olive Pink Birthday Celebration.

Saturday the 19th of March 2011, 8am- 11am

An open invitation to come along for the morning and support your local Botanic Garden.

8am –Plant sale. Autumn has arrived meaning it's a great time for getting your hands dirty out in the garden. Choose from a huge variety of local native plants including some rare and unusual species to add some colour to your home.

10am – Reading 'The First Garden' a script by Chris and Natasha Raja based on the extraordinary life of Miss Olive Muriel Pink. Come along and listen to a short preview from local Authors accompanied by cello and guitar.

10:30am - Presentations and launch of the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens Master plan.

11am – Morning tea Take part in the Olive Pink tradition of Madiera cake and Bickfords lime cordial accompanied by some other light snacks.

Giant Water Bug (Lethocerus insulanus) by Barb Gilfedder

Jayne Brim Box mentioned these strange creatures in her talk last month. Since then several have been found in car park areas in town. Interestingly they are also called Electric Light Bug. Although they generally live in fresh still water, they fly between hunting sites and are attracted to lights, including car headlights. These bugs are the giants of the bug world - adults may be up to seven centimetres long. They are formidable underwater predators. When hunting, Giant Water Bugs breathe using a syphon at their rear end which acts like a snorkel while the bug positions itself head-down on a submerged plant stem and hunts by ambush, taking tadpoles, small fish, frogs, snails and aquatic insects. It catches prey with its grasping forelegs before piercing the body with its sucking mouthparts. They are known to occasionally bite humans when disturbed - a very painful experience. Giant Water Bugs are found in eastern Australia and the Indo-Pacific as well as central Australia.



A gentle encounter with Cyclone Yasi by Sue Fraser

Donning sneakers and a wet weather jacket, I set out on Sunday 6/2/11 for a walk. A fine misty rain was falling, and together with a gentle breeze and the luscious scent of wet vegetation in the air, conditions were perfect.

John Flynn's Grave is a short walk from my home, and I found myself taking the track behind Flynn's grave into the foothills of Mount Gillen. Diverging slightly from the track, I walked along a deep creek gully to investigate some holes in the bank of the creek bed. I wondered if maybe they were burrows made by Rainbow Bee-eaters, although I hadn't seen any recently.

Back on the track, squadrons of Zebra Finches rose cheep-cheeping into the air, disturbed from their foraging amongst the grasses by my passing. A family of Weebills darted busily within the sheltered foliage of mulgas, calling urgently to each other. An abandoned Zebra Finch nest hung gloomily in a Dead Finish, ready to be "refurbished" for a new clutch.

With a light rain still falling, the track was becoming a channel of rivulets, draining run-off from the skirts of Mount Gillen, gaining momentum as more rain fell.

As the track began to rise, I came upon a mulga ant's nest whose occupants, sensing Yasi's arrival, had built up the opening to their nest into an impressive 15 centimetre chimney, and in so doing, ensured the safety of the nest.

I climbed higher to the end of the fence line, and gazed in awe at the panorama of the Larapinta Valley below. A rain squall was approaching from the West, so I decided to perch myself on a boulder, tighten the hood of my jacket, sit it out, observe and enjoy. The view of town became obliterated and the walking track transformed into a mini waterfall, as I marvelled at the lush grasses and slick, wet, boulders like battlements, clinging to the apron of Mt. Gillen's slopes.

When the squall had passed, I made my way warily down, observing shelves of white fungi clinging to a rotting log, a snake vine with bright red berries draped over a dead mulga, its tiny springlike tendrils reaching for the next anchor point. A young Dead Finish, its prickly spikes daintily holding tiny droplets of water like a crystal chandelier.

I was soaked, jubilantly happy, delighting in sloshing through puddles and observing the responses of nature to the wonderful, soaking rain provided by cyclone Yasi. At the same time, I was thankful Yasi's fury had dissipated into veils of gentle rain, by the time she reached the Centre .

After a warm shower, dry clothing and a bowl of home-made pumpkin soup, my afternoon adventure felt so good for the soul.

Desert Park – Bird Surveys

The Desert Park carries out Bird Surveys on the first Wednesday of every month. We survey 10 sites of which 5 are inside the core area of the Desert Park and 5 are outside the core area over a 30 minute period. Survey times vary depending upon the time of year but generally are 7am in summer and 8am in winter. Tea/coffee/biscuits are provided for each survey.

The data we collect from these surveys gives us an idea of the different bird assemblages and species that are present at different times of the year. We have so far identified about 120 species within the Desert Park core area.

If you want to be involved then all you need is some enthusiasm. You can bring along your binoculars and be paired up with other surveyors so you don't need to be a 'bird expert'. Or simply come along and you can be a 'scribe' that writes down the bird names as they are seen by the surveyors.

For more information contact; Anthony Molyneux – Assistant Curator Zoology. Ph: 8951 8722

Email: anthony.molyneux@nt.gov.au

Want to save water in your home?

Maybe you need a desertSMART COOLmob water audits. COOLmob water audits involve a trained water auditor coming to your home, walking through your house and garden with you and finding simple ways to save water in your home. It costs \$10, takes around an hour and could save you hundreds of dollars on your water bill. The audit will also introduce you to range of water saving incentives for your home.

COOLmob client comments:

“I was surprised how a few simple, cheap actions could really reduce my water bill. “

“I had no idea how much water my garden was using and that a few quick changes could save so much water. My garden is still thriving, on much less water.”

“ I wish I'd had one sooner”.

desertSMART COOLmob Ph:8952 0299 audit@desertsmartcoolmob.org



Have you had your desertSMART COOLmob home water audit yet?

Cost \$10, takes an hour and could save you hundreds off your water bills Ph: 8952 0299

audit@desertsmartcoolmob.org

Larapinta Trail Foundation

Field Nats are invited to attend the very first public meeting on the establishment of the Larapinta Trail Foundation. The meeting will be held at the Andy McNeill Room, on Thursday 24th of March at 6.30pm (tea, coffee and snacks provided).

The Larapinta Trail Foundation will be a *community based* not for profit group that will work closely with the NT Parks and Wildlife Service to manage and maintain the Larapinta Trail. In its first year, the Foundation will hope to build a solid membership base (*the friends*); establish links with tourism, Parks and others to actively promote the trail; encourage community involvement in the trail, through a variety of events and activities; work with Parks to repair and maintain the trail through friends volunteer projects; seek funding opportunities; and to foster support and involvement in the trail from the wider community.

For more information or to RSVP please contact Phil Cowan on Phill.Cowan@nt.gov.au or Ph: 89550 310.

our water

PROUDLY SPONSORED BY THE NATIONAL WATER COMMISSION



If you were in control of Australia's water, how would you use it? Sponsored by the National Water Commission, Questacon's Our Water exhibition engages and inspires visitors to expand their understanding of Australia's water issues and delve into our unique water situation.

Our Water is an enjoyable learning experience for the whole family and has strong links to maths and science curricula for both primary and secondary students. Targeted primarily at visitors from 10 years through to adults, but with topics of varying complexity, Our Water will allow exploration for people of all ages.

Featuring 28 hands-on exhibits, Our Water is designed to inform and challenge visitors to make decisions about water and to examine the consequences of different uses and re-uses of water in Australia. The interactive exhibits in Our Water explore the themes of agriculture, urban water, recycling and water sustainability, environmental water and water treatment. The exhibition will allow visitors to play the role of the farmer to decide how they are going to use their water allocation, dance to make it rain and use a pinball game to see the water cycle as never before!



Arluen Art Centre, Witchettys Gallery

Exhibition Dates: 7 May – 12 June 2011

For further information and educational resources please go to: <http://water.questacon.edu.au/>

To make a school booking please call: 8951 1139.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED

Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building, Charles Darwin University

Wednesday 9 February 2011

President Barb Gilfedder declared meeting open.

Present: 16 members at meeting (25 at talk) as per attendance book.

Appointment of Secretary: Neil Woolcock, supported by Leigh, appointed as secretary.

Apologies: Rhondda Tomlinson, Sue O'Callaghan, Anne Pye, Jenny Purdie and Steve Sinclair.

Correspondence in:

Various emails re. booking of lecture theatre at CDU for the year.

Christmas card from Karl Hampton

Note from Western Australian Naturalists asking for hard copies of our newsletter.

Correspondence out:

Thank you to Eleanor Dennis from Rotary who donated two excellent plant books for our library.

General business:

- Pam Keil shared a new book, "The Butterflies of Australia" - \$45.00 from Dymocks. Proposed that club buy one for the library. Library is at Olive Pink Botanic Garden and shared with Australian Plant Society, Olive Pink and ASFN. Everyone agreed.
- Thank you to people who attended planning meeting. Michael LaFlamme offered to be contact for Australian Naturalists Network.
- Discussed purchase of publishing program – approx. \$150 to make it easier assembling the newsletter for Emily, particularly useful for others if Emily away. Everyone agreed
- Poster put together by Emily Findlay for Eco Fair – 20 copies printed and laminated by Barb Gilfedder and distributed around town by Morgan Flint.
- Birds Australia Waders Group doing studies of shore birds, want data. Barb has agreed to organise a bird count on Sat 5 Mar at sewage ponds. Need volunteers – 7.00am. Experts for identifying birds and others as scribes, This will be a trial session, maybe once every 3 months. Valuable info can be obtained from surveys carried out all over Australia.
- Guest speaker Mark Carter at next meeting to talk about native snails. He is willing to organise field trips but with limit of 6 each time, maybe at Ilparpa. Barb to keep a list and ring people at short notice. Barb to send a note out.

Trips:

- 26, 27 Mar – overnight trip to Trepina Gorge. Pam Keil and Anthony Molyneux offered to do nocturnal spotlighting walks on Saturday evening. Trepina Gorge walk and Panorama walk could be done as well, one Sat afternoon and the other Sunday morning. Two camp grounds at Trepina.

Treasurer's report:

Opening balance (end October 2010)	\$2353.56
Plus Subscriptions	\$245.00
Interest	2.00
Less	0.00
Closing balance (end January 2011)	\$2600.56

Next meeting: 9th March 2011

Supper: Rosalie Breen. Notetaker: Pam Keil.