



June 2011

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Blue Argus Butterfly *Junonia orithya* - Unusual to see this species so far south.
Photo by Layne Stephenson

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

The adults occur in open areas, often sitting on bare ground. This species has a stiff flap and glide style of flight and maintains a territory; driving away other butterflies that may enter it.

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NEXT NEWSLETTER

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The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 27th June**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – robbiemily@hotmail.com.

MEETINGS.

- Wed 8 June **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Ken Johnson on early naturalist – HH Finlayson**
- Wed 6 July **APS Meeting** 7.30 pm at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Speaker is **Jane Addison**, CSIRO
- Wed 13 July **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker **Chris Watson** on The Birds he saw on his recent trip to Thailand.
- Wed 10 August **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. **AGM and Members' night**. Please bring along interesting objects or a memory stick of photos to share

FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

- Sat 4 Jun **ASFNC** Walk up **Witchetty Hill** then along the low range behind Zeil Street. Meet at 8.00am in Blain Street. A track goes off to the right into the Desert Park greater area just before the Araluen Christian School. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452
- 11-13 Jun **ASFNC** Queen's Birthday weekend – **Birthday Waterhole**. Drive in to the waterhole and camp Sat and Sun night. High clearance 4WD required. Easy day walk to Stuart's Pass below Brinkley Bluff, about 10 Km return. Hard long day walk to the lookout or as far as you want and back, on Larapinta Trail 5. Or just enjoy the environment. Opportunity for overnight walking on Larapinta 4 or 5 for fit walkers, with the campers help for drop-off or pickup. Early interest necessary for organization. Ring Rosalie Breen 89523409
- Sat 25 Jun **ASFNC Cycad Walk** – Contact Rosalie Breen 89523409
- 1-3 Jul **APS Alice Springs Show** – APS have a stand and would appreciate any help we can provide. Contact Connie Spencer 89524694 or Jenny Purdie 89538717.
- Sun 10 Jul **ASFNC Shorebird Survey** at sewage ponds – Experts needed for counting and others as scribes. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452
- 20-21 Aug **Eco-fair** at OPBG – **APS** usually have plant stall. **ASFNC** usually have a small stand with display and competition. (Has anyone got any ideas for the competition this year?)

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May Speaker Dr. Glenn Edwards : *The prospects for the camel in Australia.* Report by Jill Brew

Thanks to Glenn's years of experience in research on camels, and his work as project leader in a Desert Knowledge CRC 2006-08 study that prepared for a national approach to action on feral camels we were given both a scholarly and practical (and entertaining!) insider's look at the situation.

Glenn set out the background to the problem, the alternatives for action/management (in fact, the prospects for action) and worked through each line of enquiry in a balanced, thorough overview, (winking out a few catches) to reach considered conclusions. The best prospect of control of this pest that is here to stay is through (as Glenn put it) commitment to enduring effort.

What follows is a rough summary of his thorough talk. (Any incorrect data is my error.)

Australia's camels

The camel was acknowledged as a star in some respects – of haulage and farm work/construction, purveyors of goods and explorers - the great old photos reminded why camels are respectfully and fondly linked with the hardships of inland exploration and settlement. Importation was from 1820 (from the Canary Islands, subsequently from areas such as present day Pakistan and Afghanistan) until 1907. There was some breeding at camel studs (e.g. in SA.) An estimate of the peak domestic camel population – 1922 - had been 20,000. As mechanization increased, camels were needed less and a lot were let go. (Famously disease-free, genetic evidence indicates they are also inbred now.)



'Camel Team. Ooldea. SA 1919' - Photo Museum of Victoria

National approach to management

A Camel Action Plan workshop in 2005 debated numbers and the extent of the problem. A national action plan was recommended, and funded, as a result. Work was done on determining distribution, size of population and population dynamics. "Stakeholders" were consulted for their views on impacts of the camels and their management-to-date. The range of possible management methods was reviewed. Finally there was development of a framework for management.

Gathering research

Information on wild camels has been gathered systematically only recently. Glenn acknowledged previous research into camels [e.g. Dorges and Heucke (1995, 2003) done around Newhaven, looking at diet, grazing impact, age distribution, social organization, behaviour, fecundity and mortality of camels.] As selective browsers (who will eat grass and herbaceous plants) camels can clear out specific species such as quondongs, an "icecream" treat for them.

Grigg (1995) and Edwards (2001) researched the movement of camels. Looking at a map of Australia, regions of less rainfall indicate areas where there is greater movement of camels. Highly mobile if necessary, and they can be expected to travel across huge areas (1500 square km?) in a year. As mentioned above, the dog-proof fence has curbed their range somewhat in the east.

Numbers now?

There was a moment in 1969 when they were thought to be in decline.

The conservative estimate of the feral population in 2008 was 953,000 (aerial surveys, begun in the early 80s, being the only reasonable method, but necessarily limited in accuracy as Glenn pointed out); most recent research suggests camel numbers double every 9 years.

Are we at saturation yet?

Eventually the numbers will plateau, but the population is still seen as “colonizing.” It is not certain that they are at “carrying capacity” as yet (though this varies from season to season.) Some stress from competition is developing, however. But they can and do use “all available habitats.” (The dog fence, fortuitously, is interrupting the drift of camels into southern Queensland and NSW.)

Where are they?

The spread of camels is over a vast area, frequently inaccessible, with low numbers at the perimeter (going on local reports) and highest density in the corner where Queensland, NT and SA meet, and in the corner where WA, NT and SA meet. The Simpson Desert is a hot spot. A high density area will have .31 camels to the square kilometre.

In terms of proportions in different land use areas, 43% of the feral camels are on Aboriginal land, 22% on pastoral property, 25% on crown land, and 10% on conservation-designated land (such as national parks.)

For and against the camel

The positive impacts of camels especially as seen through the tourism and historical lens, and their potential as an economic resource, has overwhelming counterweight in damaging impacts: road accidents; damage to infrastructure (houses, fences, gates.); a reservoir for exotic diseases, potentially; methane production; and then the more well-known environmental damage - waterhole and wetland degradation have both environmental and cultural consequences, browsing that takes some plants to local extinction, trampling waterholes, producing methane, and affecting native species (e.g. birds, dingoes, kangaroos) in other ways – including vying for water, - these were noted. The tolerable (to native herbaceous species) density of camels is estimated at .1 to .2 camels per square km.



Photo by Michael Barritt

The people most affected

I was a bit surprised at how thoroughly all views from different “stakeholders” were researched during the project. Generally feral camels are seen as a pest by the pastoral section, (culled usually, with little commercial harvest) and certainly by the conservation section (though in Queensland there has been some “woody weed control” via camels.)

Perceptions by Aboriginal people varied – the impact of camels causes concern (startling photos of the damage done by camels to housing and water sources); in some cases waterholes, especially cultural sites, were being fenced off. The meat was not eaten much, but culling was seen as wasteful in view of commercial harvest possibilities.

Management methods

Managing camels so far has been through culling (helicopter more effective in areas of higher density than by road,) harvest or exclusion (fencing.) Not used so far are chemicals (but it’s expected that results from using something like 1080 would take years), biological methods (as with rabbits) – a weakness in camels is their kidneys – and fertility control (but they are not highly reproductive anyway. Culling adult females would be more effective.)

Commercial harvesting

Trade in pet meat, meat for human consumption, domestic herds and live export - all are being tried or considered. The camel meat industry hasn’t thrived – special infrastructure is needed to capture, load and process it. There are limitations on access and markets, and interruptions to the supply when constant input is needed to maintain an economic supply chain. Only 40% of camels herded are suitable in age and size for an abattoir. Also, there has been a problem with Indigofera poisoning (of dogs) shutting out camel meat from pet meat processors.

Other management methods touched on included fencing (expensive, and has strategic use only) and fencing off or turning off water sources at the most vulnerable times (unless there is alternative provision of water, animal welfare laws disallow this.)

The management framework decided on Zones are to be set up, with the highest density zones to be concentrated on first.

A long-term management plan will be undertaken, much as you might approach control of weeds (with no expectation of extermination.) The ideal would be to reduce, then keep, numbers to .1 to .2 camels per square kilometre.

Options for degrees of management

- First, no management may be preferred by some, but is not viable or acceptable in the wider picture. Camels will perish, in any case, in drought times (At Docker River during drought 3,500 camels had to be culled.)
- At the other extreme is complete eradication. At present, there is no chance of this. Camels are an “established pest.”
- The middle option is managing camels to reduce their impact ? The government and landholders are in favour of this, so there are “strong drivers.” For this to be successful, though, maintenance of an “enduring effort” has to be committed to.
- Another option is “sustained yield harvest “ – this would perhaps suit Indigenous communities’ wish for paying labour possibilities. But to have numbers at a level where mustering was easier and more viable, to maximize profit, the density would have to be higher than the “damage threshold.”
- On the other hand, there could be “opportunistic harvesting” as the market demands – and there could be Indigenous involvement in this too. If maximum profit wasn’t expected, this might fit with the managing to reduce impact.
- Taking camels to a husbanded situation or a “transitional farm situation” (and the Australian Cattle Industry Association has some real interest in this) is possible, and could also mesh initially with the managing to reduce impact. (But farming of camels would eventually lead to feral camels being left to happily increase, neglected for the more attractive husbanded ones!)

Funding to target key environmental assets

Alison Anderson, as Environment Minister, championed reducing impact on, and protecting, key environmental assets, through targeted large scale population reduction – mustering, culling and fencing. Caring for Country seems the current spear-head for engendering action. In the next 4 years, \$19m will be spent through the CFC on these sorts of programs.

The presentation we saw is to be given in London by co-author Petronella Vaarzen-Morel, and Murray McGregor.

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Telegraph Station Treasures by Rosalie Breen

One of my favourite areas is the Telegraph Station, right at my backdoor. There are any number of walking explorations possible. This year Field Nats have enjoyed Spencer Hill, and lately the Todd River and gorge area.

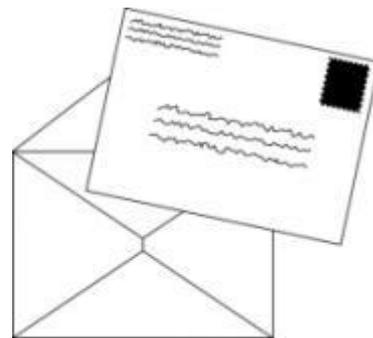
Saturday 7th May Connie, Sue O’C, Denise, Bob, James and Michael and I started out up the Todd River from the Telegraph Station. Just to the north of Trig Hill the river divides. The west branch has a long water hole with milfoil growing in it and blocked by a wide ridge of stones. We tracked through to the east branch first on the bank, noting the many native grasses, then got “lost” in the massive growth of Buffel trying to get down into the river again, for walking on the rocks and sand between many pretty pools of water and tiny waterfalls. As we climbed up on to the eastern bank we were greeted by the blue Rock Isotome (*Isotome petraea*) sheltering in amongst the rocks. On these rocks above the waterhole looking at the red rock wall opposite is a great place for morning tea, or for meditating (and a swim if it is hot). Gavan turned up and joined us for a snack and the journey back, walking cross country and on a bike track, with good views over the area and to Mt Gillen (can’t get lost if you can see Mt Gillen!) past Fig Hill and back into the river where a five legged giant lives near the Nardoo Pool. Up on Trig Hill we saw a few Rock Wallabies showing off their rock climbing skills.

Third treasure for the year will be visiting the Cycads on the 25th June. Don’t miss it. Get to know what is there right on your doorstep. Another treasure I found last weekend was pink trigger plants, *Stylidium* species probably *inaequipetalum*, about one km up Larapinta Trail 1.

Todd Gorge Walkers



Kempe St. Detention Centre.
Kempe St.
Alice Springs.



April 2011.

Dear Mum and Uncle Norm.

As Matron told you some time ago, the Field Naturalists here in Alice took me out on one of their trips for the Bangtail Muster long weekend; there were 11 of them, and me. (Mr. O'Callaghan and Mr. Flint had an argument over whether it was really about the beginning of the muster season, or, as Mr. Flint says, a celebration of the workers of the world!!! I think I heard someone say "bullshit".....Mr. Stevenson, I think).

Anyway, we set off on Saturday.....I won't tell you who had to go back for something he forgot.....(or, someone else who should have gone back for something he and Leigh, forgot). We were aiming for Winnecke, the old gold mining town out near the Garden Station, and after nearly going all the way to a pool of water which John and Susanna thought was near the Garden,(but was way over by Ambalindum), we headed for the ruins of the town. (John and Susanna are friends of Mr. Flint's, from the Stride'n'Stretch group. They were out at Trep'hina for the Natters nocturnal excursion, Layne told me. Rosalie and Mr. Breen belong to that group too. (And I just have to tell you about Mr. Breen Mum, but I'll do that later.....Sue who is Mr. O'Callaghan's wife, said that I shouldn't get ahead of myself).

Mr. Flint and Rhondda were in the lead, and stopped us at what the Hayes's (who own the Garden) called 2 Lakes. It was here that we saw the first of the 42 birds we saw on the whole trip. Among those were Hoary-headed and Australasian Grebes, Eurasian Coot, and Masked Plover. In the camp, we woke up each morning to the sound of the Crested Bellbird.....a beautiful sound Mum, it really was. Nearby too were Babblers nesting. Sue told me that Babblers are one of the few birds which roost in their nests throughout the year, so are constantly making repairs.

And you should see the beautiful photographs of those birds which Layne took.....they should be in a book!

One of the birds, by the way, was called an Old Grey-Bearded Drongo. I didn't actually see one over the whole weekend, but Mr Woolcock said there was always one in and around the camp; it had a sudden, loud call, and you could hear it every time Mr. S told a joke. Funny about that.

On one of our walks around the old township, we saw a butterfly. Rosalie identified it as a Blue Argus, very much south of its normal range. (See photo on page one.)

Sunday night we had a splash of rain which made camping fun.

We had a bit of trouble finding the site of the old town on the way in, as a matter of fact; the long grass made seeing it difficult, with the result that Mr. Flint led us too far in the wrong direction. We eventually turned around, and on the way back, there it was, "Voila!!" , (Susanna taught me that, my first words of French).....a little hill off to our right, that showed signs of mining, stone chimneys/fireplaces and mounds of dirt which came from the shafts dug into the ground many years ago.



Mr. O told us that gold in payable quantities was found, in 1902, Mum, and this started what was a rush, but it didn't last too long for most miners. They dug shafts, but as Leigh told me, they also looked for alluvial gold. The police station was nothing more than a tent and a bough shelter. There was an outbreak of typhoid in 1903, and 7 people (including an infant girl) are out there in graves.

You know Mrs. Blaiklock Mum, well, she was born Mary Gagliardi, and her father and grandfather were out here in the 1930's. As well as digging for gold themselves, they ran goats for milk and meat for the miners. Mr O showed us where the flattened metal fence for their yard was.

And just as well we had Rhondda with us, because she warned us all (not just me), when we arrived at the campsite, to be careful of shafts which would be covered with grass, and which we might fall down. We were walking around what was obviously the old town when Mr. O and Mr. F found a water well which still showed the workmanship (Mr. F said that is all one word, Uncle Norm) of the early miners. It was me who found what Rhondda had warned us about, a very deep shaft which was covered with long grass.

On the way out, Mr. Flint gave each of the vehicles a task, to think of as many words as possible, in which the letter c was sounded as s; for example, "decent" and "celestial" (John taught me that second one, Mum). Layne and her husband, Mr. S, had a good idea too.....she said that we could also list the states of the United States. Around the campfire Sunday night, we started going on our list of words; there are bloody hundreds, just "arks" Rosalie and Gavan! And then we went through our lists of the states; Rhondda and Mr. Flint failed (again), but top of the class were Rosalie and Gavan (again). Mum, a little while later someone raised the question of the capital cities of those states; Gavan knew them all!! Someone moved that we Natters put him up for "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?", as a quick way to raise money. That was seconded by Leigh and passed unanimously. Stay tuned.

Around the fire one night too, Mr. O taught me some good tricks to play, tricks he used to play when he was a kid growing up in Alice, in the olden days. One was, you put brick inside a paper bag, and then you put that on the road. Then you hide, and watch cars run over the bag, not expecting there to be something hard inside.

Mr. S was good fun too, always telling jokes, especially to Mr. Flint.....that's when we heard the sound of the Old Grey Bearded Drongo, now that I think about it. I wasn't allowed to hear many of the jokes, but here's a couple.....What do you call someone who sits above your mantelpiece?Art. And what do you call it when there are arms and legs of him?.....Pieces of Art

It was a good trip Mum. The Natters are nice people; no-one looks for glory, or to grandstand or to score point against others, (except Mr. W who likes to take the mickey out of Mr. Flint, and does so very cleverly, it was generally agreed).

Of the 11, I haven't mentioned Dave Sutton, who rode out on his motor bike. I heard someone say (Mr. Flint I think, who back in '93, rode around Europe for 6 months, on a big 1000cc BMW), that Mr. Sutton's bike wouldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding; but he made it without falling off, and Mr. Flint was only joking, anyway.

See you next time I get day-release,

Joey Karella.

Birdlist From Winnecke Ruins Weekend Compiled by Layne Stephenson

Masked Plover	Black Swan	Eurasian Coot	Grey Teal	Australasian Grebe	Black-fronted Dotterel	Hoary-headed Grebe
Zebra Finch	Willie Wagtail	Magpie Lark	Crow, Galah	Brown Falcon	Red-capped Robin	Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike
Mistletoe bird	Black honeyeater (male and female),	Budgerigars	Grey-crowned Babblers (building their nest)	Australian Ringneck	Red-backed Kingfisher	Crested Bellbird
Grey Shrike-Thrush	Yellow-rumped Thornbill	White-winged Triller	Pardalote	Rufous Whistler	Singing Honeyeater	White-plumed Honeyeater
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	Little Button Quail	Diamond Dove	Australian Magpie	Nankeen Kestrel	Whistling Kite	Scarlet-chested Parrot
Cockatiel	Wedgetail Eagle	Black Kite	Hooded Robin			

Southern Boobook and Owlet Nightjar were heard

Crested Bellbird at Winnecke



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Desert Park Farm Visit by Barb Gilfedder

It was a frosty morning, so it was some well-rugged-up Field Nats who followed Scott Pullyblank, Curator of Botany at ASDP on a walk around the Desert Park Farm.

We started the tour at the Bush Tucker Garden which was first developed about 10 years ago to provide samples of native foods and medicines for the Desert Park guides to use in their demonstrations and talks. We fully explored the plants there, before moving on to the Desert Park Farm. This has many of the same plants but the planting is on a larger scale, rather like a market garden.

There were several reasons for starting the farm –

- Most of the fruit and vegetables used to feed ASDP animals come from the Lockyer Valley in Queensland, travelling on refrigerated truck via Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. This transport alone, was creating a carbon footprint larger than ASDP would like.
- Local native plants apart from being fresher, more nutritious, and what the animals were used to in the wild, might have other beneficial effects, such as particular foods setting off the oestrus cycle in some species and so aid breeding.

Rosalie Schultz listed many of the plants in our last newsletter, so I will just comment on a few things that I found particularly interesting.

- *Ipomoea costata*, Bush Potato. The yams can grow up to one and half metres below ground level and up to 6 or 7 metres away from the main stem. Aborigines can locate them by looking for cracks in the ground.
- *Ipomoea polphus*, another Bush Potato. A more prostrate plant than the *I. costata*, these grow much larger yams (Scott had dug one up recently that weighed 3.8kg) and they are nearer the surface so easier to locate. They can be roasted, or when eaten raw are about the same texture as Nashi pear. They were sometimes carried whole by Aborigines for a moisture fix between waterholes.
- *Marsdenia australis*, Bush Banana. All parts except the woody stems are edible. Last year Scott picked many of the young shoots, for a function at the café. These were made into small bundles, wrapped with another shoot, steamed and served as a side dish. Diners raved about them. The older fruits can be grated to provide a large percentage of the mix fed to native birds.
- *Acacia species*. Several species of these have been planted as a wind break and hopefully frost protection around the farm. It was noticed that mainly Pigeon species will eat the seed as it falls to the ground. However, ASDP have discovered that by sprouting the seed first, they become appetizing to a much wider group of birds.
- *Panicum decompositum*, Native Millet. This was a staple food for local Aborigines but the seed head does not all ripen at the same time. The Finches love the seed, don't seem to mind the degree of ripeness, so whole

seed heads are picked and fed to the birds. How much nicer and better for them to eat from a fresh seed head, than a bowl of dried imported seed.

- *Themeda triandra*, Kangaroo Grass. Macropods love to eat this when it is green, but do not find the browned off grass appetizing. However they still like the roots, so in winter, get good nutrition from a few plants pulled up and placed in their enclosure.
- *Austrobryonia centralia*, a curcubit, commonly known by Peter Latz and others as Kangaroo Balls is very well liked by kangaroos and appears easy to grow on a trellis.

There were lots of other interesting bits of information about the plants on the farm. It has been a steep learning curve for Scott and his staff, active research with practical applications.

Another use of the farm will be as a teaching area, where groups of students mainly from Aboriginal Bush Communities can gain some of their CDU "Conservation and Land Management Course" units. They can learn about irrigation as

well as growing and caring for the plants. At the beginning of the course they could bring seeds or cutting material from their own country and at the end return with the plants and knowledge to establish their own gardens.

There is a wide array of opportunities for locals to be involved with the Desert Farm ranging from individual participation to group involvement from the corporate sector. All assistance will ultimately aid the Desert Park in reducing its 'carbon footprint' and benefit the Park's birds and animals. Contact the Alice Springs Desert Park at asdp@nt.gov.au



Crop of Themeda at Desert Park Farm. Photo by Jenny Purdie

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Update on Inland Thornbills you from Don Haddon

Dear Field Nats,

The Thornbills up here at Ti Tree have been markedly different. Some are heavily streaked as one would expect and some have no streaking at all.

I get 4 Thornbills here. Very occasionally a Chestnut-rumped, Yellow-rumped quite often and Slaty-backed and Inland are quite common. I can id the first 2 OK but I would differentiate the other 2 by the streaking on the breast. Then I found Inland with no breast streaking at all. I discussed this with Jeff Davies who is doing the new field guide and he tells me these unstreaked birds are what used to be called the Tanami Tit and were considered a separate species.

They are now considered juveniles but I think there is still more to be found out about these birds. So now I have to look for either a scalloped forehead on Inland or streaked head on Slaty-backed.

Is that what you do when you come across Inland Thornbills? Have any of you heard of Tanami Tits before?

Don

