



October 2011

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Photo by Anne Pye

*The Field Naturalists visit
to Ooraminna Rockhole
18th September 2011*

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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**Postal Address: P.O. Box 8663
Alice Springs, Northern Territory
0871**

Web site:

<http://www.alicefieldnaturalists.org.au>

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 28th October 2011**. Please send your contributions to Rhondda Tomlinson – rhondda.tomlinson@bigpond.com

MEETINGS.

- Wed 12 October **ASFNC** – Meeting, 7:00pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Michael Green** – “**Climate Change – a geologist’s view.**”
- Wed 9 November **ASFNC** - Meeting, 7:00pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Anthony Molyneux** “**Two good seasons – Camel Treks to Eyre Creek (2009) and Ethabuka Reserve (2011)**”
- Wed 5 October **APS** – Meeting 7:30pm at Olive Pink Garden. Speaker Ben Convery, Curator of Olive Pink Botanic Garden, who will be talking about the future of the garden.
- Wed 2 November **APS** – Members’ night.
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FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

- 1-9 October** *Red Centre Bird Week* – guided tours, tagalong excursion, lecture evening, children’s activities, and 24 hour twitchathon. Find full program at www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au
- Sat 8 October** **ASFNC** – Explore **Alice Valley behind Ellery Creek** . This trip was originally scheduled for October 1, however it was necessary to obtain a permit from CLC to cross Aboriginal Land. CLC thought it was unlikely that this was possible by then, so we have postponed it to October 8, providing that it has been obtained by then. Otherwise it will need to be rescheduled again for 12 November. Contact Barb Gilfedder
- Sat 8 October** *Friends of the Larapinta Trail* – 4 km walk and brunch on section 1 – contact Phill.Cowan@nt.gov.au
- Sat 8 October – Tues 11 October** *Land for Wildlife Biodiversity Surveys. Setting traplines on the Saturday and checking them and recording data at first light on the subsequent days. Chris and Jesse would appreciate any help with this interesting activity. Contact them directly via email on lfw@lowecol.com.au or by phone on 89 555 222.*
- Sun 16 October** **ASFNC** - **Field trip with Michael Green to Ellery Creek** to view the geology and the record of climate change from about 1 billion years ago. Contact Barb Gilfedder.
- Sat 22 October** **ASFNC** -**Walk from Jessie Gap to Emily Gap along the top of the range.** Contact Chris Watson 0419358942 or Roadkill.chronicles@gmail.com
- Sun 23 – Wed 26 October**- *Land for Wildlife Biodiversity Surveys – See Sat 8 Oct.*
- Sat 29 October** Shorebird Survey at Alice Springs Sewage ponds – birders and scribes needed. Contact Barb Gilfedder
- Sun 30 October** **ASFNC** - Ormiston Pound Walk. Contact Pam Keil 89550496 pamelakeil@yahoo.com
- Sat 19 November** **ASFNC** – A short Walk from Flynns Grave part way up Mount Gillen to the fenceline. (Keen walkers can continue) followed by morning tea at Sue’s. Contact Sue Fraser.
- Sunday 4 December** **ASFNC** - End of year breakfast at Olive Pink Botanic Garden .

A big Welcome to our newest Field Nat

ARCHER BEN HENDERSON

Congratulations to Emily, Robbie and Fynn!



President	Barbara Gilfedder	8955 5452	fedders@octa4.net.au
Vice-President	Sue Fraser	8955 0675	suefra@hotmail.com
Secretary	Neil Woolcock	89551021	neilwoolcock@yahoo.com.au
Treasurer	Jill Brew	8953 0551	jillinalice@yahoo.com.au
Property Officer	Sarah White	89550961	sarahsg2@dodo.com.au
Public Officer	Rhondda Tomlinson	89531280	rhondda.tomlinson@bigpond.com
Committee Member	Rosalie Breen	89523409	rosalie.breen@email.com
Committee Member	Connie Spencer	89524694	constans@bigpond.net.au

A Weather History of Central Australia.

September speaker - Stuart Traynor

Report from Rosalie Breen.

Stuart Traynor's early readings and involvement with the environment including his entries in Gould League diaries, led him to think in terms of Aboriginal seasonal calendars rather than Winter-Spring-Summer-Autumn which does not apply to central Australia. You can read about this in the book 'My Desert Diary' produced by the Friends of the Desert Park. Now Stuart is interested in looking at longer periods of weather changes and patterns, thus the inspiration for this talk.

The oral history of the Aboriginal people of central Australia, according to Dick Kimber, tells of a massive flood in the 1700s. The extent of this can be gauged by lines of River Red Gums and Coolibahs, which would have grown up on the edge of the flooded area. They can be seen around town, for example around Araluen.

In recorded history, the first white man in central Australia was John McDouall Stuart who around 1860-2 travelled in wet years. Again the building years of the Overland Telegraph Line were wet. Cattle stations were soon established and from 1873 onwards there was much movement of cattle (One story told of a cattle mob holed up at the Telegraph Station waiting for the "wet season").

1893 saw the longest dry spell of 214 days at the Telegraph Station, but even so in that year there were the biggest cattle movements to stock Barrow Creek Station from the South and Ridley Williams brought cattle from Quilpie in the East.

Then with the country drying out, cattle numbers still increasing, the Aboriginal people found it hard, and interference with cattle occurred. A notorious confrontation occurred at Anna's Reservoir. This put pressure on the SA Govt to get a police corps in Alice Springs. During this period 1884-1891 possibly 900-1000 aboriginals were killed under Willshire. All this upheaval led to a breakdown of traditional land care.

With cattle needing to be moved south to markets, SA Govt instituted the "Conservator of Water" with Ryan in charge and a series of wells were dug for the stock routes.

1891-92 mining at Arltunga was stopped because of lack of water

All these happenings in history were related to the weather.

1897-1903 were the years of the Federation Drought. It affected most of Australia (even the Murray dried up) and impacted both on cattle and people. Around this time rabbits began moving in, and there was a decline in native mammals. The Horn expedition of 1894 recorded possums and many other small mammals were common. The increase in cattle numbers and the spread of rabbits, the disruption of Aboriginal traditional methods of patch burning all led to devastation of country during dry years. Native mammals were unable to recover from this extensive degradation of country and 1920s were the worst period of extinctions, the small remaining populations were easy pickings for ferals like cats and foxes. Before the 20s drought, two years of big summer rains starting in 1919 produced much plant growth which in turn gave rise to very big and extensive fires, exacerbating the drought conditions. Remember that during droughts there can be rains and floods but these are infrequent and cannot sustain vegetation.

Gradually as people learned more of the working of the weather, and the growth of computers gave us the capability to "wind back the clock" and correlate information, we had more opportunities to relate events and weather. El Nino became the new buzz word. The sinking of the Titanic could be linked to weather - the unusual appearance of icebergs so far South, into the normally safe shipping lane. More new words - Indian Ocean Dipole and La Nina. Incidentally these last two phenomena combined to give the Alice its very wet 18 months only ending in March this year.



How green the Red Centre is after rain- taken in Feb 2011 - Barb

Circulations of air and water in distant oceans have a big impact on our weather. Around every 30 years we have big rains in the Centre.

Aboriginal patch burning was done as they criss-crossed the country walking along dreaming trails. Now of course people move along roads so do not penetrate so much of the land. The sand of the rivers used to act as firebreaks. Now they act as a wick with couch grass choking their banks and beds. Buffel grass has taken a toll. First introduced as dust suppression for the severe droughts in the 60s the grass was a small species. Now it has hybridised with many other introduced species into the "mongrel buffel" big and tough, taking over from native grasses and creeping over the land.

During the talk we heard anecdotes from Members who had been living here during the periods of dry, dust or floods. And afterwards we had good discussions on buffel grass, and how crime rates related to drought years.

Thanks Stuart, as always an extremely interesting talk.

Books Stuart used for references and that would make good reading.

Beyond the Farthest Fences Margaret Ford.

Man of all Seasons Stephen Davis

God, Guns and Government on the Central Australian Frontier Peter Vallee

A Son of the Red Centre Kurt G Johannsen

Ooraminna Rockhole

Sunday 18 September 2011

By Connie Spencer



I first visited Ooraminna Rockhole in 1973. I don't actually remember the trip but my slides show that I was there. The country was dry. There was little or no ground cover. The smaller shrubs were just dead sticks with only the more mature trees providing greenery. I'm fairly sure I visited in the 80's, but again can't remember any of the details of what the country or the rockhole looked like, so I was looking forward to this trip and I wasn't disappointed.

Our short convoy of 4 vehicles led by Jim and Margaret Lawrence travelled down the Old South Road past the turnoff to the Ewaninga Rock Carvings on our left! How can that be I asked myself? Sure enough, the road has been moved! The next points of historical interest were two quarries. The sandstone was mined for the Lutheran church from one and the Catholic church from the other

Our first stop on the track into Ooraminna Rockhole was on a rise through a pass of interesting silcrete rock formations. The little Rock Isotome (*Isotoma petraea*) found niches in the rocks in which to grow. There was also an array of other flowering plants such as Colony Wattle (*Acacia murrayana*), spectacular with its rich yellow flowerheads blowing in the breeze and Mintbush (*Prostanthera striatiflora*) covered in masses of white tubular flowers. The Purple Fuchsia Bush (*Eremophila goodwinii* subsp. *goodwinii*) was still flowering although past its best but the sheer number of plants was of interest to me.



Upon reaching our destination we gathered around the rockhole discussing the amount of water (not much considering the exceptional rainfall last year) the large amount of soil that had been washed into it and its history. The concrete wall on two sides was probably constructed around the 1920's. On the internet, I found a photograph of the site which was taken in 1925 and the concrete walls were there then. A massive Wild Fig (*Ficus brachypoda*) overhangs the rockhole and has a good load of fruit.



We continued wandering, following the creek into a wide open valley. The Coolabahs (*Eucalyptus coolabah* subsp. *arida*) had to be admired due to their sheer size and age. The valley floor was covered in dry native grasses and the creek lined with Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*). The mulgas (*Acacia aneura*) were a picture of health and covered in seedpods. And what about the Bean Trees (*Erythrina vespertilio*)! I have never seen such large healthy looking specimens this far south and certainly not at this time of year. Their location along a creek and sheltered from frost was probably the key to their condition. As some of us were admiring and photographing the Bean Trees, there were cries of excitement from those in the creek and Bob moving rather quickly with his binoculars. A Grey Falcon caused all the excitement!

The day was warming up and we had wandered further than anticipated, we headed back to the vehicles noting a teetering mulga with roots exposed and barely hanging on high up on the bank of a bend in the creek. Back at the vehicles we gathered under the shade of the mulgas for a cuppa and more chit chat about this and that.

Thank you to Jim and Marg for leading the trip, to the Hayes family for their permission to visit the area and to the other travellers for their companionship.

CONLON'S LAGOON 22/9/2011

By Chris Watson

Conlon's Lagoon is a little-known ephemeral claypan and swamp area to the south of the Alice Springs Shooting Club. As I have recently discovered, through a Land for Wildlife assessment of the Tennant Creek Pistol Club, the safety funnels of shooting ranges are excellent places for conservation initiatives. By necessity, these facilities are usually sited in areas away from human disturbance and are further protected by the fact that no-one is permitted to enter the "danger zone" – not usually anyway. This is where membership of clubs like ASFNC/APS comes in really handy; we have these amazing people who can organise permission to visit places like this. What an amazing trip this turned out to be. I'm not exactly famous for my attendance at ASFNC outings, but I can confidently say that this is the best activity I have been involved with since joining the club; I hope it is a trip we can repeat when we get a bit of rain.



The Claypan looking towards a smoky horizon to the west

Not long ago, Conlon's Lagoon was listed with the Territory Eco-link program and is now protected by a conservation covenant. It has become part of this ambitious project to create a continuous chain of reserves crossing the continent from the Arafura Sea all the way to Port Augusta, protecting chunks of every IBRA (Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation or Australia) bioregion along the way. Conlon's Lagoon protects several uncommon/rare species of plant, has some spectacular old Coolibahs, and turns out to be a birder's paradise.



Bush Orange with older blooms and young fruit

Where to begin? The trip was well attended which is always a good start. I think there were 14 attendees in all which is an excellent group size for a field trip like this. Connie was the nominated leader as the plant guru *du jour*, and one of the few with previous experience at the site. One of the few plants that I do know is *Sclerolaena bicornis*, Goat's Head Burr or Copper Burr. Those with thick trousers on were grateful as we made our way down to the edge of the claypan through thick Buffel Grass *Cenchrus ciliaris*, and the ankle-destroying *bicornis*. Along the way there were a few old Bush Orange trees *Capparis mitchellii*, which were blooming well and just starting to put out some young fruit. Unfortunately, it will be many weeks before these fruits are an edible size so a return visit is now all the more imperative!

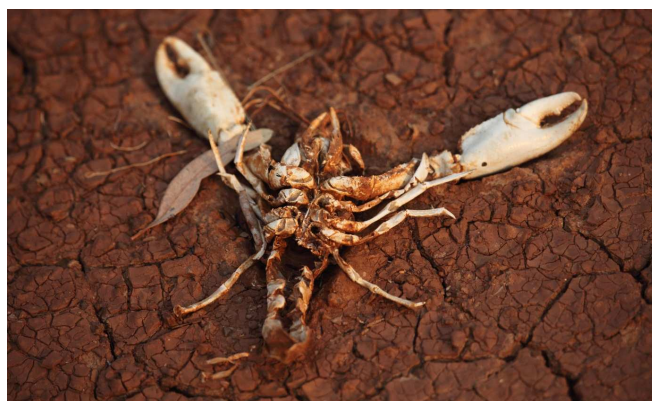
In conversations about this area I had been told of the vast claypan and the wondrous variety of waterfowl it could hold. I hadn't expected the area to still be holding water and as we reached the shore line my expectations proved to be spot on – the claypan was bone dry. So no ducks perhaps, but this didn't mean there would be nothing else of interest. Almost immediately the botanists started to point out unusual plants; the Cane Grass *Eragrostis australasica* which I hadn't remembered seeing around Alice Springs before, and a handful of other low plants springing out of the cracked surface, none of which I could recall seeing before. At the time of writing, the botanists are still poring over the books looking for the exact identity of some of these species so perhaps it is best that I leave it to them to inform us of them at a later date.



Dave on the trail of a wandering Emu

Across the surface of the claypan it was common to find rocks, often quite large ones. These obviously couldn't have floated there and must have been transported by people over the years. Jock and Meg pointed out several chunks of silcrete that had been used to chip flakes for use as blades and these edged tools could also be found widely scattered through the area.

The highlight of the day, for me anyway, was the discovery of a single set of adult Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae*, tracks meandering their way across the surface of the claypan. Later, we found further tracks of what appeared to be at least three young Emus, also on the surface of the claypan and moving in a tight little cluster as young emus tend to do. This is really big news. The recent reshuffle of the NT Threatened Species List took many people by surprise when it *downgraded* the status of two of our more scarce species in central Australia, Emu and Australian Bustard *Ardeotis australis*. I encouraged people to have their say through the submission process based on my own very infrequent observations of these species in the southern portion of the NT despite frequent and widespread searching. These tracks seem to suggest that, perhaps, I am



An ex-yabby, *Cherax destructor*

just not looking hard enough. There is obviously a few of these enigmatic desert wanderers living, at least sometimes, right under my nose. The fact that the claypan would almost still have been wet as recently as March/April this year means that, conservatively, these tracks are probably less than 6 months old and probably much more recent than that. The tracks were shallow enough that they must have been made when the surface was already drying out but still muddy enough to create an impression. On the way back to the car we also found a filamentous plume that I am quite sure is from the under down of an Emu. We never saw these birds but it is an exciting find and very reassuring to think that there might be some out here wandering about.

The other interesting highlight was the quantity of Yabby *Cherax destructor*, remains on the surface. Their diggings were evident around the bases of many of the cane grass clumps so it was exciting to find their remains and confirm the identity of the digger. There seemed to be some disagreement among the experts about the identity and distribution of the Yabby but the following excerpt, from the brilliant 2005 study of Arid NT Wetlands by Angus Duguid *et al*, leaves little doubt that these have been introduced from populations further east and south.

Distribution of *Cherax destructor*

Populations of Yabbies (*Cherax destructor*) that were encountered by the Horn Expedition are considered to be indigenous, although it is possible they were previously translocated by workers on the Overland Telegraph Line or by early non-aboriginal travelers. The Horn Expedition recorded *C. destructor* at Running Waters and Hermannsburg in the upper Finke River. Yabbies were recorded at five locations in our survey. Those at Two Mile Waterhole on the upper Finke River and at Nora Waterhole in the Georgina River system (Toko Ranges tributary), are considered indigenous. Three other records are presumed to be introductions. One, at Allungara Waterhole, is presumed to be from a stock dam as the drainage system is isolated in the Burt Plain and has no long-term natural waterbodies. One, in the upper catchment of Lilla Creek in the lower Finke River system was confirmed as resulting from introduction to a stock dam. The third was at Conlans Lagoon, a claypan/swamp near Alice Springs. This swamp is adjacent to Roe Creek, which in high flows may link Conlans Lagoon to swamps and pans in the Illparpa Valley, where yabbies have also been introduced.

Full text available at: <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/wildlife/nature/pdf/aridwetlands/invertebrates.pdf>

Also of interest on the invertebrate front was a single Amber Snail shell *Succinea sp.* that was found under a clump of buffel on the return journey to the cars. While these are by no means uncommon, and I can't identify these little buggers beyond their genus, it is always good to see evidence of their presence around these ephemeral swamps.

Until we found the Emu tracks there was really very little on show for the birdos. It was a warm afternoon and the pall of smoke that has been shrouding Alice for the last few days from fires in the northern Simpson Desert remained. It was otherwise a perfect afternoon for birding with only a light breeze and some gentle light for photography. The early slowness of bird activity was replaced with frenetic activity as we hit the far (south) shore of the claypan. The claypan sandwiches a thick stand of old corkwoods and *Acacia victoriae* between the shore and the ranges and all of these plants were flowering heavily and abuzz with honeyeaters. The most exciting of these, and instantly distinguishable by its call, were a large group of White-fronted Honeyeaters *Purnella albifrons*. This is another rare find this close to town and had me galloping through waist high buffel to try and get a better look. I eventually found them being harassed by Singing Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus virescens* and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters *Acanthagenys rufogularis*. I had to resist an urge to intervene, “*fellas, fellas... can't we all just get along? There's plenty to go around, just look at all these flowers!*” But I held back. The White-fronted Honeyeaters seemed to be holding their own and I counted at least 6 individuals and heard many more so it seems they have a very happy home here. Imagine! Emus and White-fronted Honeyeaters just a stone's throw from town.

The group also had some great views (well what counts for great views with pardalotes) of 3 Red-browed Pardalotes *Pardalotus rubricatus*, and Neil Woolcock saw a few Brown Quail *Coturnix ypsilophora* as they shot off into the scrub. Earlier in the trip, some had good views of a Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* and a Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*, and with a Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, remained the only raptors seen all afternoon. No report would be complete without a birdlist, so here is what I picked up on the afternoon with a few contributions by other sharp eyes and ears;

Brown Quail
Black Kite
Brown Goshawk
Wedge-tailed Eagle
Diamond Dove
Crested Pigeon
Galah
Australian Ringneck
Mulga Parrot
Rainbow Bee-eater
Variegated Fairy-wren

White-winged Fairy-wren
Red-browed Pardalote
Western Gerygone
Weebill
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater
Yellow-throated Miner
Singing Honeyeater
White-plumed Honeyeater
White-fronted Honeyeater
Brown Honeyeater
Hooded Robin

Grey Shrike-thrush
Willie Wagtail
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
Black-faced Woodswallow
Pied Butcherbird
Torresian Crow
Australasian Pipit
Mistletoebird
Fairy Martin ..

and along with a few Emu tracks that's more than enough to keep this birdo happy.

Thanks very much to the organisers and leaders. Looking around I saw nothing but delighted faces and energetic discussion about plants, invertebrates and birds; in many ways a typical ASFNC/APS outing I suppose, but it was great to see everyone so involved. Thanks are also due to everyone who managed to take the afternoon to participate so enthusiastically. Now we just need to wait for the rain and find a canoe for the next trip.

SUBSCRIPTIONS NOW DUE

Membership fees were due as from the Annual General Meeting in August. Prompt payment would be appreciated, paid at meeting nights or posted to the Treasurer or direct into the Club account at Westpac BSB No.035-303 and Account No 100981. **Please put your name in the reference so we know who has paid.**

If personal details have changed please indicate, especially email address. New members must fill in complete form.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

Name(s)

Address

Phone Contact (home) (work) (mobile)

Email (print carefully)

Renewal/new membership ?.....

Payment enclosed \$

Fees: Family \$30. Concession \$25. Individual \$20. Concession \$15. Life member 10 times annual fee

Interstate past member. Newsletter only \$10

Subscription year begins at August AGM.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED

Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building, Charles Darwin University
Wednesday 14 September 2011.

President Barb Gilfedder declared meeting open at 8.30pm following Stuart Traynor's presentation on "A history of weather in Central Australia"

Attendance and Apologies as per attendance book.

Previous minutes – accepted by Pam, seconded by Jim Gilfedder

Business arising from the minutes: Nil

Correspondence in:

- Field Nats WA newsletter
- CSIRO flyer on new books available.
- Beth Hanson - Note of appreciation. Jenny, a friend she brought to the field trip to Desert Park Farm Field trip last year, died recently. Jenny was in last stages of breast cancer had enjoyed her visit to central Australia and especially enjoyed the ASDP trip.

Correspondence out

Thank you card to Albert Sage for auditing books

Thank you card to Hookers for loan of marquee for Eco-fair

Thank you card to OLSH for loan of display boards for Eco-fair.

Treasurer's Report (finances to end of August)

Opening Balance (30 July 2011) \$2170.88

Subscriptions : \$ 300.00

Closing balance in account (31 August 2011) \$2470.88

More subscriptions have been taken since then.

General business:

- Thanks to Sue Fraser for supper and Rosalie Breen for taking notes.
- We have been asked to keep noise down during our supper break, and move further towards the main doors as lectures being held in the room near the kitchen.
- Bob has brought in old Wingspan and Nature magazines. Chris Watson offered to take magazines. and as the OPBG library is not often open, it was agreed that he should. Rhondda and Barb borrowed the Nature magazines and will return them so others can read them too.
- Chris Watson advised that the bird hide at the sewage ponds needs restoration. Alan Whyte, Chairperson of Power and Water donated \$500.00 towards renovations. Chris suggested more bird hides are required and Chris was willing to spend time and purchase supplies from the Tip Shop. ASFNC appreciates the good access we have to the sewage ponds. Bird hides were initially paid for by Power and Water who recognise the significance of this wet area. Chris to hold meeting at the sewage ponds on 24 Sept at 10am to discuss ideas. Motion by Neil Woolcock to donate \$500.00 for this work. Seconded Rhondda Tomlinson, Passed.
- Emily and Robbie had a baby boy on 1 Sept – Archer Ben Henderson. Neil suggested a \$50.00 donation from the ASFNC for a present. Barb to purchase. Passed.

Activities/Trips:

- Ooraminna – Jim Lawrence on 18 Sept 11. Five cars only, to meet at Old Timers.
- 22 Sept (Thurs). – Conlon's Lagoon. Meet at 2.45pm at the information booth opposite Old Timers. Wendy Kittle to open gate.
- Alice Valley – Need for CLC entry permit as 8 Mile Gap on an Aboriginal land trust. This is unlikely to be approved on time, so may need to reschedule.
- Night stalks – One on 5 October at Simpsons Gap, the other on 6 October at Ormiston Gorge. Contact Jacelyn Anderson 8951 8247
- Red Centre Bird Week 1 – 9 October. Lots of activities including tagalong bird tour at Owen Springs.
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9.00pm Meeting Closed.

(Barb forgot to ask for a note taker for the next meeting and would appreciate any offers. Rosalie Breen volunteered to bring supper.

