



March 2012

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



This interesting native plant is *Ipomoea polpha subsp. latzii*. It is a rare plant which as well as producing these magnificent flowering trailing stems, produces large round edible tubers. You can see it flowering beautifully at the Alice Springs Desert Park Farm on the club visit there on Saturday 25 February. Photo Barb Gilfedder.

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

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Tuesday 27 March 2012**.

Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay robbiemily@hotmail.com or Barb Gilfedder fedders@octa4.net.au

MEETINGS.

Wed 14 Mar **ASFNC** - Meeting 7:00pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Andrew Bridges**, Director - Territory Eco-link, Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory

Wed 7 Mar **APS** – Annual General Meeting and talk by **Ben Convery**, Curator at Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

Sat 25 Feb A tour of the **Alice Springs Desert Park Farm** in Summer with Scott Pullyblank, Curator of Botany at ASDP. Meet at the workshop area at Alice Springs Desert Park (turn off to the left before the car park, approach the gate and it will open automatically) at 8.00am. If you are a Territory pass holder, please bring along your pass or at least the number of their pass so that ASDP can record us in their visitor numbers. Contact Barb Gilfedder.

Sat 10 Mar **Cycad Walk at Old Telegraph Station.** Meet at Gosse Street Playground at 6.00am. This is a moderate walk including a scramble up and down a rocky hill. It will take about three hours. Leader Rosalie Breen.

24-25 Mar **Camping at Gemtree.** This a great spot for birding and flora and fauna as well as for gems of course and The Chalmers family is keen for Field Nats to visit. They have Powered and Unpowered sites as well as a couple of cabins. Unpowered sites are a discount price of \$10 per head. Camp oven dinners (\$20 a head), are also served at the weekend. There is a Nature Trail (3.5km) which is a great place to spot birds and has a self-guided full-colour booklet. We do need to book in advance for camping as well as dinners, so it is essential that you contact Barb Gilfedder when you decide to go.

Closing date for bookings Friday 16 March.

6- 9 April **Easter - Barrow Creek and Davenport Ranges.** Organiser Rosalie Schultz. With the four day weekend there is a unique opportunity to explore Davenport Ranges (photo page 6). This Park is at the junction of the arid central desert region and the tropical north, with a diversity of life from both. For example, both the Northern Nailtail Wallaby and the Black footed Rock Wallaby are found there. Morgan Flint has volunteered to act as coordinator for the trip in Alice Springs.

Please contact him as soon as you consider going. morganfli@gmail.com .

28 – 29 April **Newhaven Reserve.** This is down as a weekend trip, which is not really long enough. Please extend your time for a day or two either way on an individual basis, if you can. (Anzac day is Wed 25 April, so you may be able to incorporate that.) Contact Barb Gilfedder.

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Ellery Creek Big Hole Sleepover- Friday 3 February 2012

Report by Cecily Sutton, Photos by Kate Allardice

The aim of the excursion was to have a quick trip out of town in a cool spot so that we could appreciate nature at its best ...dusk and dawn.

Some of the Highlights:-

The company... Neil and Leigh Woolcock, Connie Spencer, Morgan Flint, Kerry Rickards, Liz Moore, Kate Allardice, Gavan and Rosalie Breen.

The light at dusk, the moonlight reflections on the waterhole, the stars at night and the early morning light.

A little walk to admire the flora. I learnt that there are many different sorts of mistletoe in Central Australia, and admired the pretty green and red Harlequin Mistletoe (*Lysiana exocarpis*). A resident mistletoe bird added to the experience.



The birds are always a delight...my favourites being Major Mitchell cockatoos sitting in the tree in the campsite, and the flyover of about 100 black cormorants

The atmosphere at the Big Hole that night. Bright torches brought out the red colour of the rocks, and were good for spotlighting bats and hundreds of juvenile fish.

The impressive (and close) chorus of dingoes that night.

The morning walk on the Dolomite Track. The valley contains a fertile mix of red quartzite and Dolomite rocks, so it is a "dry jungle" with in excess of 50 species of plants. I have doubts that possums still inhabit the area as the signage suggests.

It was interesting to note some of the typical limestone loving plants.

Swimming in the Big Hole was a delight.

So on a cool note every body headed back home, at their own pace, the goals of the trip having been satisfied.

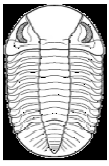
Postscript from Connie Spencer

Knowing the type of soil/rocks you are walking on can help with identifying plants and vice versa. On the Dolomite Trail, in broad terms the soil is calcareous. So, if you see a mallee and wonder which one it is, more often than not it will be Red Mallee (*Eucalyptus socialis* subsp *eucentrica*). Then there is Umbrella Bush (*Acacia ligulata*) or Hill Umbrella Bush (*Acacia bivenosa*). They can look similar and the seedpods both constricted. On this occasion it was Hill Umbrella Bush. If using common names, I guess it is rather obvious which one it is but not so clear using the botanical names. My favourite eremophila is the Dolomite Fuchsia (*Eremophila christophori*). Once again the common name points to the soil type it likes to grow in, but the botanical name doesn't offer any clues. So knowing your soil type gives clues as to which eremophila it is. In my case, I'm more likely to be familiar with the plant and therefore it gives me a clue as to the soil type. One last plant is the small grey-leaved, daisy-like subshrub, Hill /Rock Sunray (*Anemocarpa saxatilis* used to be *Helipterum* if you happen to be looking it up in an older publication).



Roe Creek Excursion

Lee Ryall



On Sunday 12 February, 14 potential palaeontologists waded through a sea of grass at Roe Creek in search of the source of Jim's pavers – an outcrop of Pacoota Sandstone. This beautiful red sandstone houses Alice Springs' water supply. It was laid down over 28 million years from the mid Cambrian (508 million years ago) into the Ordovician (480 million years ago) Periods.



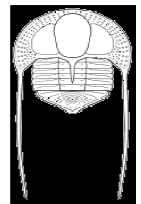
Ripple marks in Pacoota Sandstone

The rocks peeping through the buffel cried out their stories. Ripple marks chatted about currents in a shallow ancient sea. Layers of sticky-looking mudstone made our toes curl up in our boots. Fossil mud cracks showed where the surface had been exposed long enough to dry out. Rip up marks shouted that soft layers had been pummelled by storms. Layer on layer on layer of rock and layer on layer on layer of story.

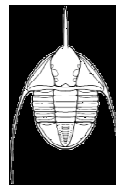


Possible worm traces

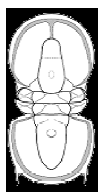
Ichnofossils- traces left by creatures- abounded. Worm tracks, sometimes infilled by worm detritus were tentatively distinguished from tool marks where bits and pieces had been dragged along the seabed by ancient currents. The highlight of the trip, however, was the ichnofossil known as *Cruziana*. Palaeontologists name trace fossils separately from the creatures that formed them, as they are not always sure of the exact species which made the marks.



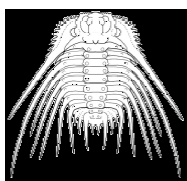
These particular marks had been formed by arthropods (a



phylum including crustaceans and insects) – probably trilobites, scratching on the sea floor, no doubt looking for something to eat. The gouges left by their claws had filled with sand and then were compressed to form sandstone with convex bulges underneath where the gouges had filled. The bulges created these stunning fossils on the base of the next sandy bed deposited.



Trilobites were three-lobed (there is an occasional logic in names) creatures having a head (cephalon), chest (thorax) and tail (pygidium). They came in weird and wonderful shapes, some with trailing spines and others like a couple of smooth discs. The thorax could have from 2 to over 100 segments, and the creature could be minute (1.5mm) or almost a metre. Some were blind, while others had compound eyes with up to 15000 lenses. Although there were trilobite swimmers, many were benthic (sea floor) feeders, like the ones that made the marks preserved as *Cruziana*. Trilobites died out in the Permian Mass Extinction about 250 million years ago... but there are claims that a form of *Cruziana* has been found from the days of the dinosaurs. So maybe not all *Cruziana* were the result of trilobite activity. Sadly this is more likely than a little group of trilobites surviving in a quiet sea corner until dinosaurs roamed the land.



Stage two of the rock viewing took place on an Alice Springs street corner where Jim's collection was on display in a buffel free environment close by an outstanding collection of slices à la Marg. The stars of the day were all there- ripple marks, worm casts, *Cruziana*, tiny puzzling spheroids and behind all, the flaming Pacoota Sandstone. The scratchings of some of the world's oldest complex animals had helped build the nesting place of a couple of members of a much younger species half a billion years later.

For more information about these fascinating animals, have a look at: www.trilobites.info



Treasures in the Telegraph Station. Rosalie Breen

In January, while walking in the eastern part of the Telegraph Station Reserve, I heard lots of Bowerbird "carryings on", so looked around a bit and found a well constructed bower, with three piles of treasures. Within the bower was, almost exclusively, a pile of ten greeny-yellow smooth pebbles, which people use to decorate flowerpots or the like. This was obviously where you put the show pieces of your treasures. Interesting too were a few items hung on the wall. What I called the front end pile had mostly white goodies including a pair of scissors, lots of bones, bottle tops and various pieces of white plastic. Green glass pieces featured, as well a few grey items, a plastic horse, a shaver, rubber rings and lids. At the other end was a smaller pile similar to the front.

A month later I made another visit, saw no birds, the items in the piles were much the same but had been re-arranged a little. In the low sun of that afternoon the coloured pebbles sparkled with occasional red lights. I marvelled at the work of the bower construction and also at the extent of the collection and distribution of the display items. Can you imagine a bird travelling a couple of kilometres with one of those big pebbles in its beak?

More treasures to discover on a walk on Saturday 10th March. Cycads and a turtle and other things.



Bush Stone Curlew seen on survey

Desert Park Bird Survey

Neil and Leigh Woolcock

This is a very pleasant early morning activity, and a good way to improve your bird identification knowledge. No problem for those whose feel they may lack the necessary bird identifications skills. They are more than welcome as they can accompany more experienced bird watchers and assist as scribes.

At 7:00am on the first Wednesday of every month Anthony Molyneux coordinates a bird survey in the eastern end of the Desert Park. Park rangers and volunteers meet near the Desert Park rangers' staff dining area. This is located just through the automatic gate which is down the road marked 'Workshop', off to the left of the main Desert Park entry road.

The survey is done on Desert Park land, some of which is not generally open to the public. Anthony divides the survey area up into sections and allocates these to two or more people depending on their bird identification skills. Sheets with a list of all the birds you are likely to find in the park are provided for you to record the names and numbers of the birds that have been identified.

Binoculars are also provided, but it is probably better to bring your own.

The aim is to record, in your allocated section in a 30 minute period, all birds identified either visually or by their call.

That means it should all be done by about 7:30am which should still give you time to get to work if you need to.

This bird count survey is a wonderful opportunity to explore parts of the Desert Park that you may not be familiar with, and to experience the amazing birdlife that is up and about at this time of day.

This is a great way to improve your bird watching skills whilst providing valuable assistance to the Desert Park in generating statistics about the birds in the park. Afterwards you're welcome to join the rangers for coffee and biscuits.

Come along to the next survey. All are welcome. It would be encouraging to the Desert Park staff to have more people show an interest and be involved.



Ringed Brown Snake and other sightings

Sarah White

I found this beautiful little critter while mapping a recent fire scar in the Desert Park greater site. I found it while clambering up the side of a hill that had been burned. I needed to steady myself on the rocks and this was sitting where I was about to put my hand. It's a Ringed Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja modesta*). It was about 30cm long and the photo doesn't do its colours any justice. It was a beautiful dark orange with striking black head and rings. Even though this species is part of the same genus as the highly venomous Brown Snakes, this little snake which only grows to 50cm, isn't regarded as dangerous. No one told this little dude though. It was feisty! It reared up to strike at me when I got closer for a photo and actually lunged at me only to tumble off the edge of the rock before scurrying into shelter. All I could think was "How cute!" To top off a good morning out mapping, not long after taking this photo I found a beautifully patterned Ridge-tailed Monitor (*Varanus acanthurus*). Unfortunately it was moving too quick for a photo. And then soon after that, a big Perentie (*Varanus giganteus*) wandered across the path. Together with

spotting my first ever Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*) earlier in the day, it made for a great day of wildlife at the Desert Park.

A little bit of history

Megg Kelham

In the process of writing an encyclopaedia entry on the history of the Centralian Advocate I came across the attached news article which I thought you might want to include in the Field Nats newsletter. It records the formation of the Field Nats in 1956.

I was personally delighted to discover that the society's objectives include encouraging the conservation of historic objects as well as natural ones ... an objective I am hoping/assuming is still in the constitution?

From your 'in house' historian

(Sorry to disappoint you, Megg, but the 'conservation of historical objects' is no longer in our constitution. Perhaps we should reinstate it. Ed.)



The Davenport Ranges offer beautiful views and permanent water- ASFNC visit at Easter.

legacy, and their with those of ad resulted in ing one of the s to Adelaide any years past. at the breeders sale had indivi-ld be prepared gesture for the ain next year. gratifying and ern people had of the splendid

the more gratifying to know that the sale itself was generally a success," Mr. Syme commented.

N.T. FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

At the monthly meeting of the Northern Territory Field Naturalists Club, held on 20th April, the draft constitution of the club was discussed and ratified.

Points of interest are :-

1. Objects :-
 - (a) To promote interest in the study of all natural sciences and natural history in the Territory, and to disseminate any knowledge gained thereby.
 - (b) To impress on the members of the community the importance of wild life preservation and to encourage the conservation of all natural and historic objects in the Territory.
2. Meetings shall be on the third Wednesday of each month.
3. Fees shall be -
 - (a) Ordinary members £1/1/-.
 - (b) Country members 10/6.
 - (c) Junior members 2/6.
 - (d) Any member joining after 1st January need only pay half fees for that year (to 30th June).
4. At least one excursion per month to be held, when practicable.

At the conclusion of the business, several films on natural history were shown, and two of these were of special interest. One gave some good shots of bird life in the western marshland of North America, and showed how the community was seriously interested in maintaining these birds, even to the extent of causing artificial flooding when drying of the marshes robbed the birds of their natural habitat. Another film showed the wonder of Niagara Falls, and while the area seems to have been commercialised somewhat the falls provide a grand spectacle of natural beauty. The film and the commentary explained the geological history of the Falls.

An excursion to the Jesse Gap area will be arranged for members and friends on 14th May, but the hon. secretary, Mr. G. Chippendale requests those intending to go on this excursion to notify him (phone 54) on or before 1st May, so that transport can be arranged.

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ormerly well strip section Works and in and Alice win on May Mr. Blom, e Northern rs, will take he electrical in Western

Central Australian Aborigines and Birds

A talk by Dick Kimber

Report by Pam Keil

Dick Kimber was lucky to have travelled across Central Australia in the company of several Aboriginal elders as they visited their country and performed sacred ceremonies. At our February meeting, he has shared some of his experiences with us, with a focus on birds to tie the many stories together. I can't hope to do justice to the wealth of cultural knowledge that Dick touched on during his all too brief talk, but here I'll review some of the themes that ran through his presentation.



“...Kookaburra traditionally *Kookakaburra*...”

First of all, unlike European naming practices which tend to focus on the colouring and look of the bird, Aboriginal names tend to reflect the call of the bird. Even across different language groups with slightly different names for the same bird, the sound of the call comes through. Dick pointed out that birds with such onomatopoeic names are often the first ones we learn as children. Think of the call and name of the Kookaburra (which Dick comments was traditionally *kookakaburra* but we have since dropped a "ka"). And what about the Mopoke or Boobook Owl?

For some local examples, we have the Crow *kaa kaan kaan ka*, the Spotted Nightjar *kun kuta kuta kuta* (in which the final *kuta* can be repeated as many times as you like), the Variegated Fairy-wren *tji wirri wirri wirri* (again repeat *wirri* as often as you like), and the Major Mitchell Cockatoo *kakalerre*. The Willie Wagtail's traditional names often reflect his scolding call, with names across the country sounding very similar. But one of my favourites was hearing a reflection of a bird that may now be extinct - the Night Parrot, *tnaka tal parra* or *tnel tjel perre*, to give it two of its local names, sounds a bit like a squeaky wheel according to Spencer and Gillen. Can we use this name to find the bird through its call?

Strehlow would collect the skins and feathers of birds from feral cat kills and display them for the local people to identify. From this, he learned the names of birds that he may never have been seen in life, and he learned the stories associated with them. In the story of the Night Parrot, he is the friend or 'mate' of the Kangaroo. Spencer mentioned another bird, the *thipa thipa*, who is 'mates' with the Perentie and will give warning whenever the lizard is nearby. This makes you wonder if there might have been an ecological association between the Kangaroo and the Night Parrot to bring about the story of mateship.

Although the names of the birds often reflect their calls, the traditional stories often focus on the bird's appearance and its ecology. For example, the splash of red and black on the Variagated Fairy-wren represents the fires they spread through the land. The Bush Turkey ancestor once had to carry a torch on his head which burned him, leaving behind the black cap and V on his chest. A series of lies between the Bush Turkey and the Emu resulted in the Emu cutting off his wings and the Bush Turkey laying only one egg. The Bower Bird is a thief in the stories - always stealing others' voices.

The ancestors created the land and the landscape is built into the stories. A lumpy pile of rocks may represent the innards of an animal killed by an Eagle. Chamber's Pillar and nearby Castle Rock are reminders that you must never lust after your mother-in-law. Chamber's Pillar was once the Knob-tailed Gecko man who travelled the country killing men to steal their wives. The people decided that this should not be, so they gave the Knob-tailed Gecko man some wives of his own, the Princess Parrot people. When the Knob-tailed Gecko man meets his mother-in-law, he wants her too. As punishment, he is fixed forever as Chambers Pillar, and the Princess Parrot people who were his wives are fixed as Castle Rock.

As is the case with Chambers Pillar, the stories often reflect the lessons of life that must be learned. As the ancestors travelled across the land, they left behind evidence of their journey. These ancient passages have become the songlines

which connect the landscape and the people. Following a songline is not just a spiritual journey, but also a practical one, as these lines often follow important natural features that provide food, shelter, and - most importantly - water. For example, the Emu dreaming begins east of Alice Springs, passes South of Alice, then up through Ormiston and past Haasts Bluff, where it goes into the ground. The track later comes up out of the ground and continues westward into WA. Along this track are many permanent waterholes, but also many smaller rock holes and soakages that would be easy to miss if you strayed from the track.

Along these songlines, important areas were often marked with art. Here in central Australia where finding traces in the sand are often the best way to locate an animal, the artworks often mimic the tracks of the animals. Feet are important. Hand signs for important animals also mimic these tracks. When locals do draw a portrait of an animal, they always begin with the feet. In the north, the artwork is much different, and portraits much more common.

Today you can see local rock art at the protected sites, Ewaninga and N'Dhala, but unfortunately much is being damaged and lost, both by the elements and by people who are defacing the rocks. It is important to protect these sacred sites - which may once have been used as road maps and road signs that helped people to survive in this dry country.

Ceremony helped youth to learn the songs that would guide them through the land. Sacred knowledge was passed on by example, and perfection was expected. In a ceremony, each man has his own paint symbols that represent the ancestor he is to represent. Feathers are often used to bring the power of the ancestor. As the man covers himself in paint and feathers, he must sing the proper song. This brings the power of the ancestor into him. By the time he is ready to perform, the dancer has become the recreation of the ancestor - he is the true descendent. Through the dance, sweat and purposeful smearing of the paint bring him back from perfection, and he returns to earth as a man.

These ceremonies are sacred, often secret, and must not be taken lightly. Dick tells us of one example where a sacred object was broken during a ceremony - all the men involved were put to death and the ceremony was stopped for a long time. When the men decided to revive it, they had to make sure they could find all the lost knowledge - both of the songs and the proper paint symbols - before they could dare to resurrect the sacred ceremony.

Though this seems as though the ceremonies and their lessons are completely inflexible, some of Dick's stories indicate that this is not entirely true. As the landscape changes - more rapidly since settlement - so too can the stories. He tells us of a rock that was placed by a prospector to mark a small rock hole and which was then incorporated into the Bell Bird dreaming stories. And of the chook feathers that are now beginning to replace white cockatoo feathers for the dancers. And of the man who was telling the story of a snake dreaming, and told how the snake ancestor had eaten a rabbit - but when prompted, he remembered that it was a Bilby. This flexibility probably helped the people to survive in this landscape over thousands of years of change.

And I'll leave you with a funny tale of the interesting things that can happen as you travel this land with its traditional owners. Dick told of the time he was in a small ute with 14 people and their swags piled in the back when the men decided to go hunting... they got an emu, and somehow managed to stuff it in among the bags... then they saw a kangaroo and out came the guns again. When Dick asked where they would put it, across the bonnet was the obvious answer... Luckily, they missed!



Emu footprints

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building, Charles Darwin University
Wednesday 8 February, 2012.

Meeting was preceded by presentation from Dick Kimber about Birds and Aboriginal perceptions of them. Thankyou to Sue O'Callaghan for supper and to Pam Keil for taking notes.

Present : Members and visitors as per attendance book.

Apologies : As per attendance book

Previous minutes – accepted.

Correspondence in:

- Letter from CDU confirming the meeting venue. Field Nats are fortunate to have use of this facility free of charge.
- Dec and Feb WA Naturalist Club
- NT Darwin Field Nats Club – Dec and Feb. Article about dragonflies. Only black and white but colour version on website.
- Birds Australia, inviting donations prior to 25 Dec.
- Aust. Natural History Medallion award in natural history, looking for nominations and donations.

Correspondence out:

- Thankyou card to Anthony Molyneux.
- Thank you card to Paul Rilstone, OPBG

Treasurer's Report: Opening balance \$2829.07. Closing balance \$3093.05.

Most income from subs. Spent \$68.48 on gifts for Emily and Robbie's baby and for CDU Security man, John.

Jill suggested moving account to Bendigo Bank. In Alice Springs they are not making a profit but when they do they will put money back into the community. Query raised about charges. Jill will look into it.

Activities/Trips:

- Sun 12 Feb – Jim Lawrence leading excursion to Roe Creek. Meeting at info bay opposite Old Timers at 7am. Short trip, back at 9am, followed by morning tea at Jim's, 2 Battarbee Street. Michael Green hoping to be back.
- Sat 25 Feb – Desert Park Farm – Scott Pullyblank. Meeting 8am at service area.
- Sat 10 Mar - Rosalie's cycad walk meet at Gosse Street, scramble up to Cycads.
- Wed 14 Mar. next meeting. Andrew Bridges, co-ordinator of Eco link. Trying to establish corridor parks from north to south of NT and into SA. Possible trip later to Mac and Rose Reserve, McDonald Downs.
- Mar 24 – 25, Gemtree. Carmel Chalmers needs numbers for the camp oven meal. Morgan to check old Ambalindum, or Pinnacle Road as alternative routes to get home.
- Easter – Barrow Creek, Davenport Ranges to be led by Rosalie Schultz with Morgan co-ordinating Alice Springs departure.

Possible guest speakers:

- Angus Duguid – something about wetlands
- Emily Findlay chasing up Patrick Honan for a talk – live hook up to Melbourne
- Glen Marshall – studying "hobbit" remains Indonesia
- Desert Park rangers about what's going on in Parks and options for people to be involved.

Recent activities:

- End of year party (breakfast). Misunderstanding about Paul taking walk. Thank you for food.
- Shorebird survey on 29 Jan. Experts counting, learners scribing.
Next one on Sun 22 Apr – every 3 months.
- Cecily led a trip to Ellery Creek last weekend. Everyone enjoyed it. Cecily is writing report
- 8/2 Desert Park survey – Good for Field Nats to volunteer. Neil to do a write up of what goes on.

Sightings:

- White-fronted Honeyeaters – Iain Campbell
- Baby Perenties, Black-tailed Goannas – Pam Keil
- Collared Sparrowhawks at Ellery Creek Big Hole – Rosalie Breen and Neil Woolcock
- Sarah White photographed a juvenile Banded Brown Snake near Zeil Street. (See page 6).

Next Meeting: 14 March

Supper – no volunteers

Note taker – Morgan Flint.