



October 2012

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Field Naturalists walking through the cave system at Fenn Gap (see p. 5).  
Photo by Neil Woolcock.

**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

**Postal Address: P.O. Box 8663  
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**Web site:**

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

## **NEXT NEWSLETTER**

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 19th October 2012**. Please send your contributions to Barb Gilfedder at [fedders@octa4.net.au](mailto:fedders@octa4.net.au)

## **MEETINGS**

- Wed 3 Oct **APS** Meeting 7.30 pm at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Speaker- Geoff Miers from Geoff Miers Garden Solutions on the rather provocative topic: "native plant enthusiast: the greatest water waster."
- Wed 10 Oct **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. – Speaker: Our favourite geologist, Michael Green – GOLD
- Wed 7 Nov **APS** Meeting 7.30 pm at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Speaker- TBA
- Wed 14 Nov **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. – Speaker: Adam Yates – South African Palaeontology

## **FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES**

- 30 Sept - 7 Oct **BIRD FESTIVAL** - detailed schedule available on the [Desert Park](#) Facebook page or by emailing Pam Keil @ [pamelakeil@yahoo.com](mailto:pamelakeil@yahoo.com).
- Sat 13 Oct Biodiversity Matters Workshop at Conlans Lagoon – Contact ALEC on 89522497
- Sun 14 Oct **ASFNC** Upper Todd Walk – meet at 7am at the Telegraph Station gate. This is a cross country walk with some rocky sections to negotiate. Time – about 3 hours. Leaders: Rosalie Breen/Connie Spencer
- Sat 20 Oct **ASFNC** Museum trip to look at Finlayson Collection with Adam Yates – Leader: Barb Gilfedder
- Sat Sun 27-28 Oct **ASFNC** Winnecke overnight with Michael Green, a follow-up to his talk on Gold; contact Michael Green 0438805050 [remote.geo@bigpond.com](mailto:remote.geo@bigpond.com)
- Sat Sun 3-4 Nov **ASFNC** Walk from Serpentine Chalet, overnight camp on Saturday night followed by an interesting morning walk – Ian and Wendy Mann 8952 7808 [wikks@gotalk.net.au](mailto:wikks@gotalk.net.au)
- Fri Sat 9-10 Nov **ASFNC** Friday afternoon arrive at Stanley Chasm BEFORE 5pm to do evening walk and camp overnight OR join us for walk from 8am at Stanley Chasm on Saturday. Up the Larapinta trail to Gastrolobium Saddle and back (or less if you want to); contact Cec Sutton, details below.
- Sun 18 Nov **ASFNC** Walk in Kyumba Reserve – Leader: Barb Gilfedder
- Sat 1 Dec **ASFNC** Walk up Spencer Hill – Leader: Rosalie Breen
- Sun 2 Dec Quarterly Shorebird Count at sewage ponds – Barb Gilfedder
- Sun 9 Dec **ASFNC** Christmas Breakfast at ASDP Picnic area. Desert Park activity followed by shared breakfast.

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# September Speaker - Rick Churchill: Studying the Echidna and the Rosenberg's Goanna at Pelican Lagoon Research Institute, Kangaroo Island

Report by Barb Gilfedder; photos by Rick Churchill

Rick gave us an interesting talk, illustrated with photos and short video clips about the time he spent at Pelican Lagoon.

In 1979, biologists at the South Australian Museum were looking for somewhere to undertake long term field study of island reptiles. Mike McKelvey, a biologist, artist and photographer had purchased land on Kangaroo Island. He was approached and the Pelican Lagoon Research and Wildlife Centre was established. It is run by Mike and his partner Dr Peggy Rismiller. The whole operation is run on environmentally-friendly principles, being self-sufficient in water and solar power. There is only one permanent building on the land, a communal kitchen/dining room/office/library. All-weather tents provide sleeping accommodation for visiting researchers and volunteers. There are many long term scientific projects which are based at the Centre, with work being carried out on land management, Echidnas, Goannas, Fairy Penguins and marine vegetation. It works in collaboration with Earthwatch and Australian Conservation Volunteers. Scientists oversee the projects and much of the data collection is carried out by visiting volunteers.



This island community is very important because it does not have the same problems or negative impacts that have occurred on the mainland. On Kangaroo Island, there are no rabbits or foxes, but there is always wind. Rick showed one photo of a house perched high above the water, no doubt commanding a magnificent view, but it was reported that the verandah and bbq were never used because of the ceaseless wind.

Volunteers all have to do a couple of days of weeding and also collect seeds and study regrowth and rehabilitation after controlled burns. Rick was surprised that these controlled burns are a vital part of maintaining a healthy eco-system.

Many seeds are distributed to local landowners who are keen to revegetate their properties with natives and attempt to attract native animals to their properties.

Much research has been done by Peggy Rismiller into the Echidna, *Tachyglossus aculeatus* meaning quick-tongued and spiny. It is the only mammal that can dig straight down, due to very strong front limbs attached to a reptilian style shoulder girdle. Something I did not know previously was that it does not have a hinged jaw, the lower jaw being reduced to a couple of thin struts. The palate has horny ridges that it uses to mangle the food against with its fifteen centimeter long sticky tongue. Many of the local Echidnas have been fitted with radio transmitters so they can be tracked. A few spines are trimmed off and the transmitter stuck on the skin. They are regularly caught and various measurements taken. One female being studied is known to be 45 years old and still reproducing.

This method of locating animals, does not work with the Rosenberg's Goanna, *Varanus rosenbergi*, because lizards regularly shed their skin. Instead they are fitted with microchips, so when a goanna is found it can be identified. Rosenberg's Goanna is almost extinct on the mainland.



Both Echidnas and Rosenberg's Goannas make use of termite mounds for rearing young. The Echidna digs a two metre long burrow under a termite mound for her young. She lays a single egg directly into her pouch, which is really just a fold of skin. The egg hatches and the young stays in the pouch for about 55 days. There are no teats but milk-producing glands which ooze milk which the young puggle laps up. Then it is left in this burrow under the termite mound, which mum visits daily, refilling the hole when she leaves.

The puggle uses the burrow for about 12 months. The Goanna digs a hole for itself but when ready to lay eggs, digs a hole straight down into a termite mound 50-60cm deep where she lays 3-19 eggs. The hole is refilled, and the eggs left to hatch in a constant 30 degree temperature and 90% humidity, and the young Goannas have a perfect food supply when they hatch. Strangely the carbon dioxide level inside the mound is 3%, much higher than our normal atmosphere, yet the baby Goannas cope with it and thrive on it. On a sunny day they dig themselves out and are completely independent.



Rick had an amusing video clip of Mike McKelvey catching an adult Goanna in its burrow. He first put a stick into the burrow, testing how far in the Goanna might be. He then blocked the hole and dug straight down where the end of the stick went to. He followed this procedure several times until he finally extracted the creature.

There was a lot more information that Rick imparted, along with photos of the animals and video clips of experts and volunteers doing their work. It certainly appeared a fascinating place to visit and volunteer. It left Rick with a real sense of achievement to have worked there.

Many thanks for sharing your experiences with us, Rick.

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## SUBSCRIPTIONS REMINDER

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 (P.O. Box 8663) or direct into the club account at Westpac BSB No.035-303 and Account No 100981

Be sure to put your name in the payment details. If personal details have changed please indicate, especially email address. New members to fill in complete form (available in the August or September newsletter).

# Trip through the Cave at Fenn Gap

8th September 2012 ; Report by Neil Woolcock

**Participants : Neil Woolcock (leader), Dave and Cec Sutton, Colette Johnson, Irene Davies, Jill Brew, Connie Spencer, Michael English, Kristy Broadhurst, Frank Cadman, Gabrielle English**

We met at Flynn's Grave at 9:00am, then headed off in a small convoy to Alyson and John Veverbrand's property about 10km west of Simpsons Gap on Larapinta Drive.

We were able to drive right up to the creek at Fenn Gap, saving a 500m walk from house.

Fenn Gap is a very pleasant and quiet spot situated at the western end of the line of ridges that begin at Burts Bluff, about 2km west of Honeymoon Gap. Being on private land this is a place not often visited by the public, so we were privileged to be able to see it.

While we were getting ready to set off we spotted a family of Crimson Chats in the creek bed, as well as Australian Ringnecks and Fairy Martins.



We headed off down the creek to a fence with a sign saying the land is leased by White Gums Station. Under or through or over the fence we went and continued on along the creek for about 300m. Connie has done this cave trip before (a real cave woman) and remembered that there was a track somewhere. This was soon discovered and we continued along that for maybe another 200m then left the track to bush bash our way across to the gully where the cave is situated.



It is maybe 1km from the creek at Fenn Gap to the gully and this was soon covered, although Connie suggested that staying on the track may have been easier.

Not much in the way of flowers along the way, but we did see Everlasting Daisies and other small Daisies and Cassias in flower.

The Eremophilas have given up at the moment and are looking sorry and tired. As if to vent their annoyance at the dry conditions they have formed patches of tough woody bushes which are hard to walk through and are best avoided.

Apart from a few stretches of uninviting Buffel Grass most of the walk through the scrub was quite easy and relatively open.

Soon we reached a fence and road that marks the place where the gully begins.

From that point you can't see the cave entrance, which is tucked behind a red rocky outcrop on the left of the gully about 300m in from the start of the gully.

Jill decided to stay at the bottom and enjoy the peace and beauty of the spot whilst the rest of us began the climb.

This is a basically a rocky scramble, but it's not too difficult and soon we were all at the cave.

Once you walk in you can see that the cave goes upwards for about 150m and has a large opening at the top which brings you out near the top of the ranges. There is plenty of light coming through the top exit so no torches are needed. Again, to traverse the cave you have to do a bit of a scramble over rocks, but soon you reach the upper exit.

A Barn Owl swooped over from his roost in a gum on the other side of the gully to check out the intruders in its territory.



It's quite an amazing experience to sit in the middle of this very big and long cave and be able to look out both ends.

We all scrambled up through the cave and out the top where we stopped for a drink and a bite to eat. I'd previously walked along the ridge line from Burts Bluff to this gully but hadn't done the last 1km to Fenn Gap, and suggested that some of us may want to choose that way back to Fenn Gap. This would be an exploratory adventure as I didn't know how hard it would be to get down off the ridge line at Fenn Gap.



Connie and Colette decided to go back down through the cave to meet up with Jill, then walk back along the track to the creek and back into Fenn Gap. The rest of us headed off west along the ridge line. The walk along the ridge isn't too hard, but it does involve a lot of rock-hopping. That is rewarded by amazing views of the Larapinta valley and the next line of ranges heading west into the distance.

Kristy had to get back early, so it had been agreed that if someone would go with her she would head off first. Dave went with her.

Soon we were at the Fenn Gap end of the walk and were faced with the challenge of getting down to the creek bed. Looking way, way down we could see the cars and Kristy and Dave walking along the creek, so we knew it could be done. However, it is not easy.

I was walking with Cec and Irene, and together we scrambled and slid on our bottoms and grafted our way down the slope. The rest of the group were also scrambling down a little to the south of us. Someone had to tear the backside out of their pants and that honour went to Irene.

Finally we got near the bottom where we spotted Connie, Colette and Jill walking along the creek. Eventually we were down, but the descent is certainly not for the faint hearted. Cec needs to question Dave on how he and Kristy got down so quickly.

We walked back along the creek, through the fence and to the cars where we stopped for a drink and another bite to eat before heading off home at about 1:30pm.

## **Fenn Gap Perentie - From Connie Spencer**



Being the last to finally make it to the top of the range, after struggling up the rocky slope and even rockier climb through the cave, Colette and I were not too keen to follow Neil across the top of the range with an unknown descent into Fenn Gap. We opted for the "devil we knew" and headed back the way we came. Besides we had to pick up Jill who had decided to sit in the shade of a tree halfway up the slope and ponder life. We were rewarded by an encounter with this gorgeous Perentie.

### **Bird Sightings for Fenn Gap trip:**

- Crimson Chat
- Port Lincoln Ringneck
- Little Woodswallow (up on the top of the ranges).
- Willie Wagtail
- White-plumed Honeyeater
- Yellow-throated Miner
- Barn Owl
- Fairy Martin

There is evidence of Euros on the ranges, but we didn't see any.

# Ridge Walk to the West of the Old Ghan Railway Museum

Sunday 26th September by Jill Brew (photos by Rhondda Tomlinson and Connie Spencer)



We (4) left the wafting scent of frying eggs and bacon behind at the Truckies breakfast (Stuarts Kitchen), and walked towards, and then up and along the ridge running west, following a 4WD track.

There were bright purple/white clumps of the mini-flowered perennial *Ptilotus parvifolius*, especially on lower slopes.

Standouts for me (apart from sweeping views) along the rocky top were specimens of the arresting lime green Native Currant - *Psydrax latifolia* (Connie pointed out the bush as being of special cultural significance for women), the deep dark green Native Orange – *Capparis mitchellii*, and a sprawling confused Caustic Vine - *Sarcostemma australe*.

A Brown Falcon stayed close for some time, viewing us from a perch in a dead tree, then dropped away to continue gliding.

In the left distance a colony of white puff balls appeared to multiply as we got closer, while the dull sound of gunfire started heating up at the rifle range on the right.

After 4.2 km of ups and downs and a rest stop on a convenient broad rocky outcrop, we took a judicious right hand turn at the bottom of the hill (before the fence) and came back along a flat track.

On the flat were good specimens of the Harlequin Fuchsia Bush - *Eremophila duttonii*, one up to 3 metres, with brilliant red/yellow flowers.

Our convivial walk completed - in about 3 hours – we sidestepped the approaching truck convoy and rounded things off with refreshments and armchair bird-watching at the Old Ghan cafe.

Thanks to Connie for leading, and for clearing the way for the walk with the necessary checks for walker safety.





## Interesting Sighting by Barb Gilfedder:

Photos by Barb Gilfedder and Bob Read (in flight)

Every time we go to Mac Clark Reserve on Andado Station, the sign at the entrance tell us about Letter-winged Kites breeding there in 2002. I have always regretted not going down there then and seeing them. As far as I know they haven't bred there since.

But this year, at the end of August, Bob Read was travelling, the more interesting way, back to Sheffield, Tasmania, after a stint of work in central Australia. He was excited to see two Letter-winged Kites near the reserve.

Jim and I finally got down there ten days later, and found four of them roosting in what I think was the same tree Bob saw them in. It was a real thrill to see them at last.



They are interesting birds, looking on first impression very similar to Black-shouldered Kites. However the feathers look softer and more owl-like and the eye is ringed by a larger black patch that doesn't extend back to a line as it does in the Black-shouldered Kite.

In flight the birds are unmistakable with a line of black feathers running the entire length of the underside of the wings, rather than just the black wing-tips of the Black-shouldered Kites..

They are nocturnal hunters, with a particular taste for the Long-haired Rats. These occur in large numbers with good seasons. In the daytime they like to roost in communal groups.

In 2001, Bob Forsyth reported seeing roosting groups of up to 90 birds together in South West Queensland.



**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED**  
**Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building, Charles Darwin University**  
**Wednesday 12 September 2012.**

Speaker: Rick Churchill on volunteer work at Pelican Lagoon, Kangaroo Island.

Also a short video that Pam Keil had put together about the dramas taking place in her aquarium.

**Present:** 18 Members, 1 apology as per attendance book.

**Previous minutes** – accepted.

**Business arising from the minutes:** Nil

**Correspondence in:**

- Field Nats WA Newsletter
- CSIRO flyers on new books available
- Invite to NT Young Achievers Awards 21 September
- Letter from Power and Water re new system for visitors accessing sewage ponds

**Correspondence out:**

- Letter to Power and Water about visitors' complaints about difficulty accessing sewage ponds.
- Thank you card to Albert Sage - Auditor
- Thank you to Emily Findlay for editing the club newsletter over the years
- Thank you to organisers of the Alcoota weekend:-  
Michael Cawthorn, Adam Yates, Ian Archibald, Peter Latz and Jared Archibald.

**Treasurer's Report:**

Balance at 12/9/12      \$3540.20

Subscriptions      \$690.00                      Donation \$10

Debits none

Membership paid since 1 Aug 17 individuals (inc 1 life member) and 12 families

**General business:**

- Recent Planning meeting - Barb Gilfedder is preparing an information sheet for members and trip leaders. Please let her have anything you think should be included.
- Thanks to Sarah White for her work as Property Officer. Rosalie Breen agreed to take over this role.
- New cards purchased from Patricia Weeks. Barb to let Jill have the invoice.
- Jill is to investigate the suggestion of Club hats.
- Thank you card to be sent to Alyson for access to Fenn Gap

**Past Activities/Trips discussed:**

- Day walk to ridge behind Transport Museum. Jill is writing report.
- Day trip to Fenn Gap- Neil to write report.

**Future activities:**

Sun 16 Sept - Ormiston Pound walk or part of. No interest so far.

Sun 23 Sept - Aileron walk followed by lunch at the pub – Leader Neil Woolcock.

He has to know numbers to book lunch.

30 Sept - 7 Oct BIRD FESTIVAL organised by Desert park

Sat 13 Oct - Upper Todd Walk – Rosalie/ Connie

Sat Sun 27-28 Oct - Winnecke overnight with Michael Green, follow up to his talk on Gold.

Sat Sun 3-4 Nov - Walk from Serpentine Chalet, overnight camp on Saturday night

Fri Sat 9 - 10 Nov - Walk out of Stanley Chasm. Cecily Sutton

Museum excursion to see Finlayson collection to be arranged

**Sightings**

Not discussed due to lack of time

Next meeting: 10 October

Speaker: Michael Green on Gold.

Scribes: Rosalie Breen/Jill Brew.

Supper: Sue O'Callaghan

Meeting closed 9.05