



April 2013

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



The Organ Pipes - Glen Helen Field Trip. Photo by Barb Gilfedder.

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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Web site:

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

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 19 April 2013**. Please send your contributions to Pam Keil at pamelakeil@yahoo.com .

Note: Do not send contributions to Barb Gilfedder for either the May or June newsletters.

MEETINGS

- Wed 10 April **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. – Speaker: Lee Ryall **“Trilobites”** - Pam Keil will also talk briefly about research done at **“Dalhousie Springs”**
- Wed 1 May **APS** Meeting at OPBG Visitors’ Centre at 7.30pm. Speaker: Peter Latz **“Introduced Plants.”**
- Wed 8 May **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University – Speaker: Michael Giacometti **“Simpson Desert trek”**

FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES

If you wish to take part in any of these trips or activities it is advisable to ring or email the leader of that particular trip beforehand.

- Sat, Sun
13, 14 Apr **ASFNC** Drive out to Serpentine Chalet Saturday afternoon and camp. Easy walk on Sunday morning. Leaders – Wendy and Ian Mann 89527808 wikks@gotalk.net.au
- Sun 21 April **ASFNC** “The Pinch” drive and walk to this historic site, an old road through the hills. Approximately 150km round trip. High clearance 4WD needed. Take morning tea and lunch. Meet Information Bay opposite Old Timers at 8.00am. Leaders - Jim and Marg Lawrence 89525049 margnjim.asp@gmail.com
- Tues 23 April Full Moon picnic at Il Parpa Claypans. Meet at Information bay opposite Old Timers at 5.15pm. Bring own picnic, chair and drink. Leader Cec Sutton - details below.
- 3 – 6 May Long weekend, possibly including the Friday. Old Andado, Mac Clarke Reserve, Mount Dare, Dalhousie Springs and return either on highway, or Finke track. Leaders Neil and Leigh Woolcock. 89551021 neilwool48@gmail.com
- Sat, Sun
18, 19 May Larapinta Trail stage 10. Options for camping at Ormiston Friday night or accommodation at Glen Helen before the Saturday all day walk. Leaders Jill Brew/ Connie Spencer. **Unfortunately this walk has been cancelled, but watch your emails as it may be rescheduled.**

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Please delete the xxx when emailing – their placement is an attempt to stop some spam emails.

March Speaker – Simon Ward Studying Antarctica's Flying Birds

Report by Pam Keil

Images from Simon Ward

Simon Ward and his wife Robyn travelled to Antarctica in the summer of 2001-02 to continue research Simon had conducted in 1988-1991 on the flying birds (i.e. not penguins) that call Antarctica home.

Recently (4 years ago) new airstrips have made it possible to get to Antarctica by air, but in 2001, they still had to go by ship. After 3 weeks on a cargo ship with an ice-hardened hull, they finally made it to Davis base (one of three Australian bases in Antarctica). Whale and Albatross spotting from the ship was a pleasant past-time when the seas were calm... but 3 weeks is a long time!



Various countries have research and military bases scattered around Antarctica - each country staking its claim to a part of the land. Politics is politics, but the pressing biological problem is that only 2% of Antarctica is ice-free rock - and this is the place that both the wildlife and the humans like to call home. The more countries that want to claim a slice of rock for their bases, the less room for the wildlife. Many bases are conducting scientific research, though often this is geological mining research - despite the no mining ban currently in place in Antarctica.



Davis base is a fairly large facility, but Simon and Robyn were headed for a smaller summer base camp (Law base) - just the two of them sleeping in a little red hut by a green and yellow living area. They had to check in with Davis twice a day by radio, but were otherwise alone... except for the birds. The area was a refuge of hilly, craggy rocks surrounded by ocean and ice. The little huts had nice insulation, but warm sleeping bags are a must. The main living hut (dining area and kitchen) has heating, but that's not where they slept. Waste had to be collected (solid and liquid kept separate) and shipped off for treatment. It sounded like a hard but interesting place to stay.

The species they studied were the rock nesting Snow Petrel (250 g) and the small Wilson's Storm Petrel (40 g), and their main predator the South Polar Skua. The Petrels nested deep inside rocky crevices. Simon and Robyn were studying the success of these nesting sites based on things such as size, aspect, and previous use.

Petrel parents share nest sitting and incubation duties - taking turns at feeding while they wait. Once the young are old enough to moderate their own body temperature, both parents must constantly search for food to sustain their growth. The skuas search for unprotected young during this time, but the young are not completely helpless and will spit regurgitated food at any predator that comes close (including scientists). Encrustations of spit help to point out possible nesting sites. The bodies of chicks that died before fledging in previous years can also mark the nesting spots, as decomposition is almost non-existent in the cold Antarctic weather.



It's a hard life, but the Petrels seem to be able to make the most of it. The strict waste programs at the Antarctic bases (most recently implemented in the Chinese and Russian bases) have come about largely because scientists realised that the Skuas were feeding on human waste and multiplying more rapidly than their prey could withstand. Now that the bases have stricter waste control, the number of Skuas has dropped - but the system is in a much better balance.

I can't possibly do justice to all the wonderful photos of ice caves, moss, and wildlife that we were shown. Simon gave us all a glimpse into the complexity of the Antarctic biology - much more than you could imagine living in such a harsh environment. If anyone gets a chance to visit someday, be sure to look for more than just penguins floating by on an icefloe, and think about all the life that exists on the small rocky shores.



Photos - in order: Law base; Snow Petrel; Wilson's Storm Petrel; Skua.

The walk from Meg's place

Report by Barb Gilfedder and Rosalie Breen



A lovely time of the day to go for a relaxed bush stroll.

While we waited for more walkers, we had a look around Meg's treasure trove of a garden. "*Colleen gave me this Capparis, Native Orange tree, which looks so healthy, and this Rulingia, another native that sits in a pot and flowers beautifully at the right time of year. Another friend made these 'clay feet' plant pots for me. The Nardoo sits healthily in a tub of water on the verandah. A group of friends made this bird, recycled metal based on a letterbox, for one of my birthdays. It hangs in a tree, looking very at home. Euros from the surrounding bush come and drink at my pond every night.*" "*People often take a short cut through the garden*", but Meg doesn't mind, although one year she did lose her watermelon crop.

On with the walk, only five of us followed Meg over the collapsed back wire fence, across the drain and into the bush. Sometimes she followed tracks, other times just bush bashed through the buffel and some patches of native grasses. An interesting place she showed us had white stones placed deliberately in a circle on a slight rise (picture on left). They obviously have some significance for an Aboriginal group but Meg didn't know what it was, but said they protected it. Once she noticed car tracks through it, but next time she noticed they went around, so had obviously been told about their error. As we climbed higher up the low hill, pretty pink rocks with bands and splashes of pale green through them were exposed. Rocks called Unakite that I have seen on other walks around the town. These low hills are ridges of Quartz or Pegmatite intrusions into the Sadadeen Range Gneiss and which are more resistant to erosion. Views of the Macdonnell Ranges were lovely in the evening light.

Meg has walked through this area for the past twenty years, and knows it through green periods as well as fires. A big fire went through two summers ago and many of Meg's favorite trees – Mulgas, Bloodwoods, Ghost Gums and Ironwoods were lost. But the country regenerates and many trees were regrowing from their undamaged roots, especially the Ironwoods. The large Bloodwood in the centre photo survived the fire, Meg thinks, because of an exposed rocky ridge alongside it. The balancing rock in the next photo is a remnant of what was once the vertical ridge of another later intrusion, one of many in the Alice region, of the Stuart Dyke Swarm of dark grey Dolerite rock.

We didn't see a lot of birds. A group of Galahs wheeled away, calling and flashing their warm colours in the afternoon light. We looked at one little brown bird for a quite a while, trying to identify it, till it turned and showed the red head smudge of female Red-capped Robin. Then a pair of the Hooded Robins sat still and let us compare the bold male and more muted female plumage.

As we came full circle, back to Meg's place, the light was fading but a few thin strips of cloud lit up red behind Mount Gillen.

Thank you Meg! It was very enjoyable.

Flagon Hill Walk - Sunday 24 February

Report & Photos by Margaret McDonell

On a hot Sunday morning in February, eight people set off for a walk to Flagon Hill, just west of town, led by Connie Spencer. After parking at Flynn's Grave car park we headed off at 6.30 to beat the forecast temperature of 39 degrees.

The route we took led to Flagon Hill and a couple of other high points — there was some discussion about which crest was actually Flagon Hill. It was steep in a few places and one descent required care on the part of walkers, but views to the south and west were spectacular. With the many ups and downs we calculated that we walked between 8 and 9 kilometres.



There were not many flowers out, a few *Eremophilas* and some Corkwood. The country was very dry. Because the flies were out in force some of us resorted to extreme measures — Rosalie found that the soft nature of a small branch of *Eremophila longifolia* made a good fly switch while Connie decided that the *Acacia kempeana* she had

chosen was a bit hard if you happened to hit yourself in the face!



Rosalie noted some Finches but they were too far away for a positive identification. Two Black Kites were seen riding the thermals as we walked back to the cars around 9.30 am. By then it was getting pretty hot and we were all pleased to head off for a late breakfast.

Beautiful Cycad nuts at Standley Chasm.

One of the very special plants along the walk into Standley Chasm is the McDonnell Ranges Cycad, *Macrozamia macdonnellii*. It only occurs in our local area and is on the endangered list. I always think the big dark green fronds look stunning against the rocky cliffs but at present the female plants are further enhanced by large cones of ripening red cycad nuts. Each nut is slightly bigger than a hen's egg, but has flat surfaces where it has been packed closely in the cone against other nuts. A trip to Standley Chasm is well worth while just to see these nuts falling haphazardly from their cones. I know the wallabies enjoy eating them so am not sure how long they will be around for.



Camp at 2 Mile Waterhole, swim through Glen Helen Gorge and walk to the Organ Pipes Rock Formation and beyond

Connie Spencer - A superb overnight trip. Weather perfect, flies friendly but not overly so, company refreshing as well as the water. It was all a highlight but three things that stick in my mind apart from the above were seeing two moons around Jupiter through Barb's scope, waking up to a floral display by a nearby *Capparis spinosa* and a exhilarating swim through Glen Helen with a blow-up croc on loan from Dave Sutton.

Bird List compiled by Cecily Sutton and Barb Gilfedder

Australasian Darter	Australian Ringneck	Whistling Kite
Great Cormorant	Yellow-throated Miner	Nankeen Kestrel
Australian Pied Cormorant	Willy Wagtail	Zebra Finch
Little Pied Cormorant	Australian Magpie	Purple Swamphen
Black-fronted Dotterel	Magpie-lark	Hardhead
Great Egret	Pied Butcherbird	Pacific Black Duck
Eurasian Coot	White-faced Heron	Grey Teal
Crested Pigeon	White-necked Heron	

We also saw a Long-nosed Dragon.
Also in the park were 11 cattle and 3 Horses.
(A bright green crocodile was also spotted in the waterhole!)

Glen Helen Geology by Meg Mooney

As in the Ellery Creek section we were walking south up sequence, ie through progressively younger layers of Amadeus Basin sediments. The sediments were originally horizontal but have been buried and folded. We were walking across the vertical limb of a large fold.

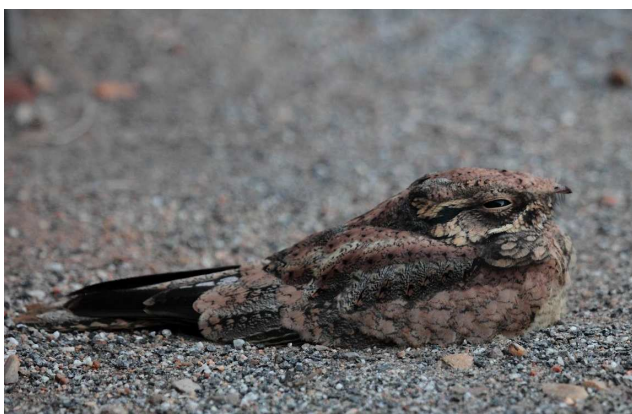
The Glen Helen sequence starts, I think, with the base of the Pacoota Sandstone, that conglomerate ridge at the northern edge of the waterhole. This was a pebbly and sandy layer at the bottom of shallow sea around 505 million years ago.

We were still in the Pacoota Sandstone, maybe 10 or 15 million years further up, at the Organ Pipes. Those vertical burrows of Skolithos worms, the U-shaped ones of, I think, Diplocraterion worms, and Trilobite scuffles on bedding surfaces are all typical of the Pacoota.

By googling Pacoota Sandstone, central Australia, or something like that, I discovered that someone from Adelaide Uni. did an honours thesis in 1982 on the trace fossils of this unit, in Ellery Creek. His abstract, the only part online, has a list of genera of trace fossils in the Pacoota. That's how I tracked down Diplocraterion. You can look up this genus and Skolithos and Pacoota trilobites like Cruziana and Rusophycus in Wikipedia.

I think after the Organ Pipes, we were walking across the Horn Valley Silstone, the unit that has all those trilobite, snail, brachiopod etc fossils, and outcrops at Maloney Creek. Siltstones mean deeper water. The next gorge was probably in Stairways Sandstone.

Photos on next page by Barb Gilfedder and Rhondda Tomlinson – Mount Sonder catching the morning sun, *Capparis spinosa* flower, Wonderful rock formations, reflections and intrepid swimmers and floaters, and unfortunately Mexican Poppy flowering.



Spotting Spotted Nightjars

Ruth Morley, who was a visitor on the Glen Helen trip, was keen to show us some Spotted Nightjars, that she had spotted coming in to Albrecht Oval most evenings at dusk. A small group of us went down on the following Tuesday. As soon as the footballers finished their practice, and the dog walker numbers had diminished somewhat, along came the Spotted Nightjars. Really all we saw were dark birds with long rounded wings swooping low over the grass. Some landed and became dark blobs sitting on the grass. It was certainly too dark to take any photos. This photo is from Chris Watson's blog spot, just to show you what we were looking at.

Thank you Ruth for sharing... and thank you Chris for the photo.

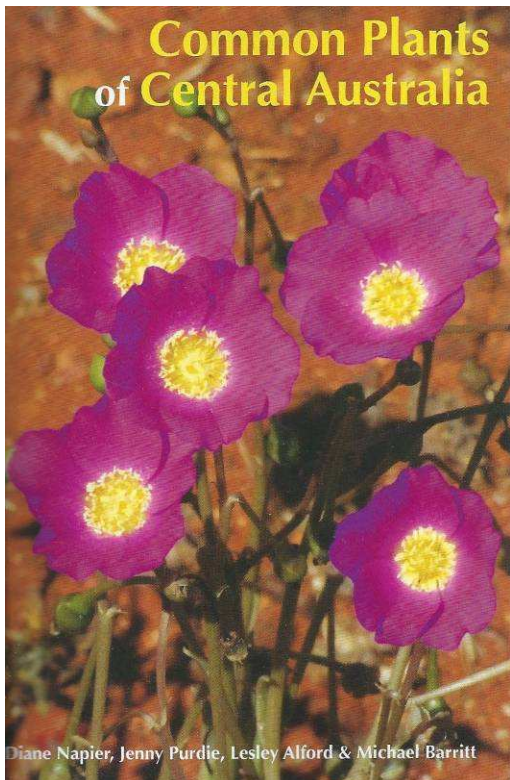


“Common Plants of Central Australia”

by Dianne Napier, Jenny Purdie, Lesley Alford and Michael Barritt

BOOK REVIEW by Peter Fannin, March 2013

Common Plants of Central Australia by Dianne Napier and colleagues fills a gaping gap left as *Plant Identikit* was allowed to go out of print. When only 37 plants can be accommodated in an A6, \$13 book, not everyone will agree on selection and details, but by and large these are good. Sensibly, the poisonous *Solanum quadriloculatum* illustrates the Wild Tomatoes, so that novices can live to learn the tricky details of the edible ones. “*Eucalyptus coolabah*” and “*Senna artemesioides*” skate prettily past complexities. I’d have preferred White Cypress Pine for *Callitris glaucophylla*, but as said, opinions are bound to differ.



The book is very welcome indeed. *Plant Identikit* optimistically tells visitors to ask a ranger. This book improves the chance of at least some success when they do!

Jenny Purdie also pointed out that this book is one of a series, including one on plants of the Savannah Way that contains some plants that also occur in Central Australia.

For example :-

Carissa lanceolata, *Crotalaria novae-hollandiae*, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, *Gossypium australe*, *Grevillea refracta*, *Grevillea wickhamii*, *Gyrocarpus americanus*, *Macropteranthes kekwickii*, *Ptilotus exaltatus*, *Salsola tragus*.

Both books mentioned, and the one on Top End Plants can be purchased from Lone Dingo, Garden Solutions, Bloomin Deserts, Bean Tree Café, Desert Park gift shop and book stores; Lone Dingo also have on-line purchasing.

Below: Geoff Miers launching the book at OPBG on Sunday 17th March. Three of the four authors are behind Geoff L-R Jenny Purdie, Lesley Alford and Di Napier.



ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building,
Charles Darwin University 13 March 2013

Following presentation by Simon Ward on "Birds of Antarctica"

Present: 12 Members, 5 visitors and 6 apologies as per attendance book. Not all stayed for the meeting.

Meeting commenced at 8-40pm.

Previous minutes –Accepted after correction - Brown Quail were seen by Meg Mooney not Pam Keil

Business arising from the minutes: Flowers have been sent to Rosalie Breen on behalf of ASFNC, by Colleen O'Malley.

Correspondence in:

- Standley Chasm -Emails exchange with Ray Prunty re visit to Standley Chasm to meet with TOs. Barb will confirm a time when Rosalie is able to attend.
- Annual bill from Altiora Insurance Solutions for Community Sector Liability Policy Insurance.

Correspondence out:

- Email to WA Field Naturalists asking if we can receive their monthly newsletter via the web rather than as hard copy

Treasurer's Report:

Balance at 28 Feb: \$3591

Subs \$95 Debits : \$99 Australia Post Box payment

General business:

- Barb reported that Rosalie was going well the day after her operation.
- Cecily to send card to Simon Ward as thanks for interesting presentation.

Past Activities/Trips discussed:

- Enjoyable walk in Meg's Garden and surrounding hills.
- Connie led an energetic walk to Flagon Hill.
- Shorebird count was successfully held with 14 people

Future activities:

- 15-16 March. Camp at Finkle 2 Mile, swim/walk through Glen Helen Gorge to Organ Pipes- Cec Sutton.
- 13-14 April. Serpentine Chalet camp and walk. Wendy and Ian Mann.
- 21 April. "The Pinch". Drive and walk led by Jim and Marg Lawrence
- 23 April. Full moon picnic at Ilparpa Claypans. Cec Sutton.
- May day long weekend – Andado, Mount dare, Dalhousie with Neil and Leigh Woolcock.

Sightings:

- Shorebird count - Great and Intermediate Egrets, Darter, Australian Spotted Crake, Nine Nankeen Night Herons, Long-toed Stint and Australian Shelduck.
- Little Woodswallows on Desert Park greater site walk - Barb.
- Painted Finches at pond at Desert Park – Will Cormack
- Firetail Skink in Jim and Barb's garden

Next meeting: 10 April

Speakers: Lee Ryall will speak on Trilobites. Pam Keil will speak briefly on research done at Dalhousie

Scribe: Colleen O'Malley

Supper: Connie Spencer

Meeting closed at 9pm