



September 2015

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



*Commersonia magniflora*, previously *Rulingia magniflora*. What a stunning little flower that blooms from July to September. Photo 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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## NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is Thursday 24 September 2015.  
Please send your contributions to Pamela Keil [pamelakeil@yahoo.com](mailto:pamelakeil@yahoo.com)

Please **send photos and text separately** as combining them causes formatting issues.

- Sat 5 Sept**                    **Woodland Trail Walk** - Take a Saturday morning walk along the Woodland Trail and into Rocky Gap (one and a half – two hours' walk) and spend two or three hours enjoying the quiet of the surroundings. Investigate, photograph, draw, paint, write, read, meditate or just lie back and relax in the shade. Bring a picnic for lunch.  
Time projections (can be varied): Start walking by 8. Back to start of the Woodland Trail by around 2.  
If interested, contact Jill Brew: 89530551 ; 0437 223 203.
- Wed 9 Sept**                    **Meeting** 7.00pm at Charles Darwin University Higher Education Building lecture theatre. Talk by **Ben Beeton - The ecology, geology and deep time history of landscapes in art form.**
- Fri 25 Sept**                    **Walk or cycle to "the Knoll"** along Simpsons Gap bike track. Walkers start from Flynns Grave at 5.30pm, Cyclists start at 6.00pm. Bring picnic tea and torches for returning by moonlight. Leader Connie.
- Wed 14 Oct**                    **Meeting** 7.00pm at Charles Darwin University Higher Education Building lecture theatre. Talk by **Andy Vinter** on "**Tackling the prickly problem of invasive cacti in Alice Springs**". He will have his Landcare and Batchelor Institute hats on for the talk.
- Sat/Sun 17,18 Oct**            **Weekend at Arltunga** – Leaving 8 am, North along Gardens Road, camp at Old Ambalindum. Explore Arltunga Historical Reserve and back along Ross Highway. Approximately 300km. Need 4wd and be completely self-sufficient. Leaders Rhondda and Charissa. Contact Rhondda to express your interest by Sat 10 October [rhondda.tomlinson@bigpond.com](mailto:rhondda.tomlinson@bigpond.com) or 8953 1280

### AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY

Contact: [APS Secretary Jude.pringle@nt.gov.au](mailto:APS Secretary Jude.pringle@nt.gov.au)

- Wed 2 Sept**                    **Meeting** 7:30 Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Presentation by botanist Peter Jobson "*Not all Pine Trees and Redwoods: The Sagebrush desert country of Eastern Oregon*"
- Sun 20 Sept**                    Visit Helen Kilgariff's block on Ilparpa Road. 10.00am. Email Bec Duncum to get directions.  
[becduncum@y7mail.com](mailto:becduncum@y7mail.com)

### BIRDLIFE CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Contact: [birdlifeca@gmail.com](mailto:birdlifeca@gmail.com)

- Sun 6 September**            **Birdlife Social birdwatching outing.** Meet at Alice Springs Waste Stabilisation Ponds gate off Commonage Road near tip at 8am. We may then drive to a different location as a group. Free for members of Birdlife Australia, gold-coin donation for non-members. All welcome. Experienced birders will be on hand to assist beginners.
- Wed 23 September**        **Birdlife Monthly Branch Meeting** at Alice Springs Desert Park Meeting Room 7pm. Presentation 'Newhaven Bird Surveys- Find your way there' by Chris Armstrong & Anne Stokes. All welcome. Visitors may choose to leave after the presentation or stay for the meeting if they wish.

**September 1-5**                The Fifteenth **Conference of Australasian Vertebrate Evolution Palaeontology (CAVEPS)** will be held in Alice Springs this year, hosted by the Museum of Central Australia and the Strehlow Research Centre.

## **Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Committee Members**

Congratulations to all who were re-elected and our new Committee Member, Claire Meney

President	Barbara Gilfedder	8955 5452	Public Officer	Rhondda Tomlinson	8953 1280
Vice-President	Lee Ryall	8953 6394	Property Officer	Rosalie Breen	8952 3409
Secretary	Charissa Allan	0400 343241	Committee Member	Connie Spencer	8952 4694
Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	8955 1021	Committee Member	Claire Meney	0448341795
Website and Newsletter	Pamela Keil	8955 0496.			

## President's Report 2014 - 2015

Membership numbers this financial year have stayed about the same with some members moving interstate but others filling their positions.

A new initiative that our Club has taken this year has been to help fund a publication – the *Central Australia Flora Brochure*. The brochure put together by Jenny Purdie, Bec Duncum and myself is an attractive educational tool for both locals and tourists. The money to produce it was put forward by our Club, the Australian Plants Society Alice Springs and Jenny Purdie. The brochure is selling through various retail outlets and has been embraced by Parks and Wildlife as well. Jenny has already been reimbursed and ASFNC and APS will be reimbursed in time. I think this is the direction that our club needs to go in. Our recurring main expense appears to be insurance, our newsletter is now mostly sent out by email so costs are low and we are extremely lucky that the Charles Darwin University continues to let us use this excellent venue at no charge. Therefore money has been gradually accumulating.

As usual we have had some excellent speakers at meetings. We have stayed within Australia this year with Michelle Rodrigo exploring the Lake Eyre Basin and Doug McDougall taking us behind the scenes in Werrabee Zoo. More general topics were chosen by Adam Yates talking about beetles and Pam Keil talking about shorebirds. Local subjects were chosen by Pete Nunn who had made fascinating discoveries about Black-breasted Buzzards breeding habits, Ian Coleman gave an interesting talk and walk about Olive Pink Botanic Garden, and Jen Kreusser got us interested in the cunning feral cats around town. Graham Ride took us through the evolution of Northern Territory Parks while Fiona Walsh showed some beautiful films taken locally – My thanks to all the speakers and also to the note takers and supper bringers.



Adam Yates, the showman, talking at the Alcoota dig. Photo: Rosalie Breen.

We have also had some excellent Field Trips. There has certainly been a lot to learn and lots of willing, sharing, knowledgeable people to learn from. In the last twelve months we have had many organised activities – thank you to the organizers - as well as lots of walks around the developing mountain bike track network, many thanks to Cecily. The longer trips stick in my mind – an excellent long weekend at Newhaven and I understand that the Alcoota fossil dig was well attended and very interesting and the end of year festivities at Hamilton Downs Youth Camp were not to be missed. Thank you to everyone who led all of these activities. Remember this club belongs to the Members and each of you has the capacity to lead a walk, drive or excursion. The Committee is always open to suggestions of activities or interesting places to visit.

There have been two shorebird surveys at the sewage ponds in this period. We have always managed to attract enough counters and scribes to conduct these and counts are always followed by interesting birding discussions. We are lucky that Power and Water allow us access to this great birding site.

All these things have been reported in our monthly newsletter. I frequently hear comments from people about how much they enjoy reading it and looking at the stunning photos our members take. Many past members continue their membership just to enjoy the newsletter. Well done to all the contributors and to Pam Keil for putting it all together.

Unfortunately, Morgan Flint finally lost his hard fought battle with cancer earlier this year. We miss him.

Lastly my thanks to the Committee, who have all performed their duties efficiently and who are always willing to help and support the club and me in any way they can. I look forward to another year of interesting talks, walks and trips with as many members as possible organizing and participating.

Barb Gilfedder



## Treasurer's report for the 2014 – 2015 financial year

The Financial Report, audited by Rebecca Duncum, is presented for approval.

The club's account balance was \$773.17 as at 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015 (down from \$3227 in 2014).

The club recorded a loss for the year of \$2453.83.

The major expenditure was \$2500.00 for the printing of the plant identification folders.



Part of the crowd at the launching of the central Australian Flora Brochure.

Much of this expenditure is expected to be recovered over the coming year or so as a portion of the income from the sale of the folders is credited to the club.

The other major outgoing for the year was \$385.70 for public liability insurance.

Income for the year was \$1209.95, with \$1165.00 of this amount coming from membership subscriptions (up \$105.00 on last year). There was a \$30 donation from Marie Ryan.

We have 59 financial members, including 3 life members.

10 new members joined during the year.

A few members were deemed as no longer active and were deleted from the membership list.

Membership subscriptions for 2015/2016 are now due.

These subscription payments will boost the club's funds to about \$2000.

I recommend that subscriptions for membership remain the same as last year :-

Family membership \$30. Concession \$25

Single membership \$20. Concession \$15.

A life membership can be taken out at 10 times normal fee.

The club is in a position to pay standard expenses and remain financially secure in the coming financial year.

Neil Woolcock  
Treasurer



Keen botanists trying out the central Australian flora brochure at the launch.

## A BIT SNAKY by Rhondda Tomlinson

July 2015 I spent in Queensland on holidays and one of the highlights of my trip has to be said to be "A bit snaky". I was on an International Parks Tour for part of the time and we were asked if we wanted to do an additional half day fishing charter in our free time. This appealed to me as I had never done it before and being half a day I thought I would manage no problem. One other guy from our tour and I set off before sunrise to meet the organizer at the boat ramp at Karumba (on the Gulf of Carpentaria). The night before our travelling mates had made jokes about us bringing back lunch for them. I knew from my part this would never happen and luckily the tour guides thought the same and arranges for an alternative meal. We were joined by three other guys and we set off witnessing an amazing sun rise.



The first catch was a blue swimmer crab and then the fish started happening (mackerel).



I was feeling a bit left out then all of a sudden I yelled "Snake," and sure enough that what it was. I knew that Sea Snakes were deadly poisonous but as the captain lifted the rod the snake let go and sank back into the water and disappeared. Life went back to the business of catching fish. Then again I yelled "Snake" and this time things looked a little more serious as it



had really swallowed the bait. (bottom right) The snake could not be brought on board and we could not just cut the line and leave it to die.

We were getting serious in our thoughts to try and kill the snake when it regurgitated the first hook (it was a double hooked bait) and thoughts were still going on when it regurgitated the second hook and swam away. (left) Wow! We were very relieved.

In my snake book there is an Ornate Sea-snake and a Spine-bellied Sea-snake both are found in the northern waters off the Australian coast and both have a similar description. One has 39 to 59 scale rows at mid-body and the other has 23 to 45 scale rows at mid-body. I would love to know a bit more about my snake type friends.





## Intertexta Forest ... end of winter

The Alice Springs Field Naturalists hosted a walk in the Intertexta Forest as part of Arid Lands Environment Centre Bio-diversity Program.



The sennas are bearing their beautiful golden showers of flowers.



The native passionfruit leaves are yellow-brown and crunchy now from the frosty nights but the plant will soon regrow and provide leafy food for the caper moth caterpillars and later, orange ribbed fruit for the ants and bowerbirds in the summer.

The native jasmine is growing strongly, long sturdy stems swinging round searching for handholds to support them to the next level. In the warmer months the perfume from their dainty white flowers will fill the forest.

Other vines - bush banana, bush bean and glycine twist around anything they can reach, while dried headache vine tumbles in a heap on the ground.

So many plants grow from underground roots of a parent plant pushing their way through the leafy mulch and sticks that cover the ground – needlebush, weeping emubush, and nardoo. Some are bigger than the big Tasmanian trees in mass, only here most of the tree is underground and protected. That way it can recover quickly from any setbacks.

No buffel here, many volunteer hands have forced it out, so native grasses dot the woodland. Their identity is still recognizable from a few dried heads – native millet, queensland blue, silky brown top, woolly oat grass, golden beard and curly windmill. On the other side of the fence where the cattle roam, the buffel still maintains its strangle hold.

In the dry cracked creek bed a small carpet of what were once squirming tadpoles in the last crowded puddle of water, are now dry and still, but the frogs will be well buried somewhere waiting for the next flood to lay more eggs. A couple of yabbies, now reduced to empty shells still stand guard over a hole in the bank. I wonder how their species survive the dry. Are some buried somewhere or are there eggs that will hatch when moistened?



A few fresh flowers bloom - perennial yellowtop (pictured), mauve daisies, grey wrinklewort and dead finish.

The bastard coolibahs *Eucalyptus intertexta*, big trees, shade the whole area. Some have multiple trunks because their first single stem was cut short by fire many years ago. Birds are always here, flashes of colour, darting through the branches, calling to each other and nesting in hollows.

*This is only a small snapshot of the intertexta forest. Every time you visit it is different. But always the biodiversity is evident.*

## **Tim Low Presentation Olive Pink - 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2015**

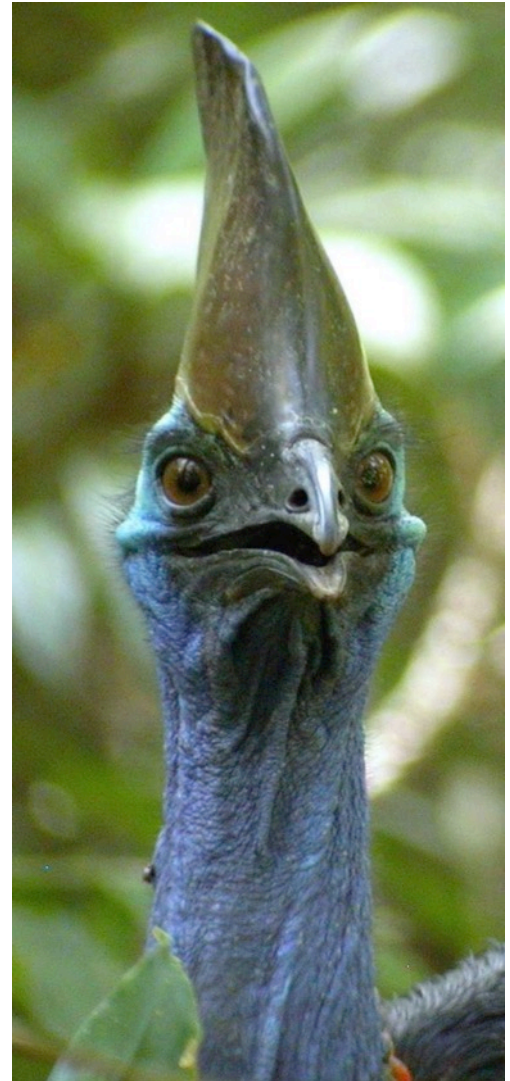
**By Rosalie Schultz**

*Tim Low spoke to a mixed group of Olive Pink Botanic Garden Friends, Australian Plant Society Alice Springs Members and Alice Springs Field Naturalist Club Members.*

What a delight to be invited to hear the master ecologist- educator Tim Low speak at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. (And what a delight for me to be invited to write about it!)

Beforehand I reviewed some of Tim's work and the presentation of this on Catalyst. His books have won awards, and his recent masterpiece *Where Song Began* is the first nature book to win the Australian Book Industry General Non-Fiction Book of the Year.

Today he spoke about the subject of his previous book *The New Nature*, how people are driving nature. Everyday observations such as the spread of red-back spiders into our



*Left: The scrub turkey feels at home among humans. Right: The splendid but endangered cassowary is spreading one of the Australia's most threatening weeds, the pond apple. Photos: Mat and Cathy Gilfedder.*

gardens and houses, and the diversity of birdlife at sewerage treatment plants are part of a bigger picture of change in the natural world. Tim used examples from his home state of Queensland where scrub turkeys are multiplying and coming closer to the Brisbane CBD, digging dangerous holes in suburban gardens and otherwise inconducive to urban human ecology. The splendid but endangered cassowary is spreading one of Australia's most threatening weeds, the pond apple (*Annona glabra*), facilitated by humans.

I like to feel grounded where I live, through understanding of how we humans are living with nature locally. Tim's analysis and expertise enhances this grounding. It is exciting for him to be visiting central Australia to learn from nature here, particularly under the guidance of our veteran botanist Peter Latz, in preparation for his next work.

With the changing global climate we fear loss of biodiversity, and Tim is an expert on ecological impacts of climate change. He discussed the importance of observation to complement conceptualisation. Some species with very restricted ranges can survive in very different conditions. For example some alpine plants can survive at much lower altitudes. It appears that competition with other species rather than limitations in physiology have limited their range. Thus they may be relatively resilient to climate change despite the small range recorded in historical observations.

With increasing levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, both directly and through the greenhouse effect of blanketing and heating the earth, some plants are growing more strongly. Peter Latz observed that in central Australia plants appear to grow more than he anticipated with rainfall. Tim noted how little is known about this effect, and in general how inadequate are resources for conservation and ecology.

Tim's blog says "It is difficult to argue with the propositions that Australia has serious environmental problems, and that these stand a better chance of being tackled if the population is ecologically literate. Environmental management would presumably improve if Australia had more



people communicating ecology to the public.”

Tim is doing an excellent job and this presentation is part of it.

### Membership Fees are due.

If you have not paid yours yet, please do so as soon as possible.

#### 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 \$ .....

Please circle relevant membership 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.

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.

### Wildflower Brochure made good use of by Ormiston children



Lenny Gardner (5) and his sister Edie (3) who live at Ormiston enjoying the Central Australian Flora Guide. Their Dad, Paul is one of the Parks and Wildlife Rangers out there. Nadia, their Mum says it is the best thing he has brought home from work to share. Lenny is at School of the Air Pre-school and can read most of the flower names. Thanks to Vicki Skoss, Lenny’s Pre-school teacher who shared the photo.



Crotalaria cunninghamii, Parrot Pea. One of the flowers featured in the brochure and flowering at the moment.

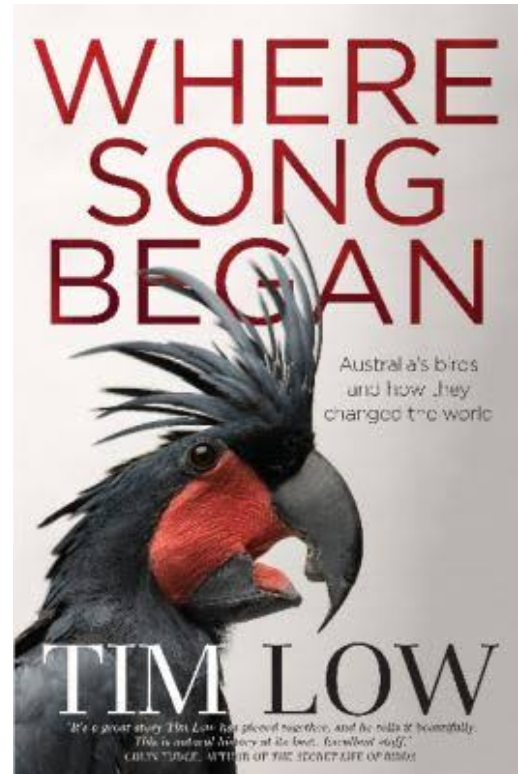


## A Nest of Delights at the Desert Park Bird Festival - report by Lee Ryall

Among the pleasures offered at the Desert Park Bird Festival this year were the Art Exhibition featuring bird-related artwork, the Twitchathon, morning bird tours and two intriguing presentations.

### Where Song Began Tim Low

Remember walking with a book on your head while a magpie with a baleful look in his eye swooped from streetlight to streetlight behind you? Or your dog being dive-bombed in the Todd by ferocious miners? Or watching aerial bird fights? Apparently this doesn't happen outside Australia. The prevalence of aggressive behaviour is one of the differences between Australian birds and those found elsewhere. Tim Low spoke engagingly about the theory behind his book- Where Song Began.



A surprising factor in the evolution of Australia's diverse bird population is sugar. Australia has a large cohort of nectar-bearing plants, including forests of eucalypts and melaleucas. It also has a diversity of honeyeaters that is unrivalled in the world. Australia's biggest honeyeater, the wattlebird, is five times the size of the largest found overseas. A host of Australian plants is pollinated by birds. In the northern hemisphere this process is rare and plants are mostly wind or insect-pollinated. The presence of a rich food that can be approached again and again, unlike nuts and seeds, nectar invites re-visiting and may have meant that this feeding ground was worth defending, so that aggression became a valuable character trait. One of the most aggressive foreign birds is the hummingbird, another nectar eater.

Tim's talk ranged from discussing the northern-hemisphere-centric point of view of academics of the last two centuries to magpie attacks and bird genetics. The evidence for the development of song birds occurring amongst Australian birds is hidden in the genome and is demonstrated in complex phylogenetic charts. Apparently the lyrebird family is one of the oldest of all. This should not surprise Australians, accustomed to living with such ancient relicts as the platypus and the echidna. Tim's talk was not an in-depth discussion of the relationship of bird families, but it did provide a tantalising taste of what the book might contain. It was certainly thought provoking and made me want to go away and do some research.

### Where do eagles dare? Simon Cherriman

Simon Cherriman's film documents his project tracking eagles in central outback WA. It features some stunning photography including a bandicoot looking truly golden, ancient gidgee trees in red sand country, and an eagle stretching down gently to feed her chick.

In outback WA, on Lorna Glen Station near Wiluna, the Department of the Environment is re-introducing a number of mammals which are extinct or scarce in the area. Burrowing bettongs, for example, have been brought back to burrow mazes which were dug out many years ago, leaving huge mounds of rubble at the front door.





There is concern that eagles may be preying excessively on the newly re-introduced animals in the enclosure and Simon was then asked to track the eagles. Although this is frequently done overseas, it hadn't previously happened in Australia.

He started by mapping the eagle nests on the Station. This involved climbing tall, somewhat spindly trees, and then, legs splayed across branches, one hand gripping the tree and the other holding his binoculars, surveying the surrounding high points, usually gidgee trees or mulga, for the stick structures the eagles call home. His survey completed, he chose two pairs of eagles to track, one pair living at the boundary of the fenced off re-introduction area and a pair from further away.

Having checked, using rescued and caged birds, that the recorders wouldn't harm the birds, Simon then went about trapping a bird from each pair. He built a wire enclosure, open at the top so the birds could fly down into it, but it was too small for them to get a run up in order to take flight. The bait, impeccably sourced road kill roo and feral cat, was anchored. He succeeded within a couple of days – two birds were caught, tagged and fitted with solar-powered GPS transmitters.



*Above : Eagle with transmitter.  
Right: Eagle at the Desert Park*

Watching the birds being handled, both the wild ones and the practice runs, was a joy. People handling a bird held it gently and calmly, hooded it to minimise stress, and took pains to ensure that the transmitters and the straps wouldn't chafe. A delightful shot showed an eagle delicately preening the transmitter wire when investigating the new growth on her back. A month long trial preceded the final operation.

The data not only showed the area, but the height of the birds' movements, some flights achieving a height of 6.5 kilometres above the ground. The territory of each pair was clearly defined. The study concluded that, as expected, the eagles were preying on the threatened species, but not enough to cause a problem for the small mammals.

The documentary ended here, but for me fascination flared when Simon showed us data from the teenage explorations of the daughter of one of the original

birds. She zoomed across the deserts of Western Australia from deep inland to the coast and back again, journeying thousands of kilometres before returning years later to the neighbourhood of the nest where she was born.

Simon is continuing to chase funding to continue studying this eagle population. One of the things which came through loud and clear was his passion for eagles and his delight in these "most powerful, enormous predators who hunt down these enormous kangaroos, and yet..." are also "the most tender, placid creatures". He has put a lot of information on the web, which can be found by gogging his name.

