



October 2017

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



*Rubies? .. or garnets? Photo: Rosalie Breen.
Read all about the Ruby Gorge trip in this issue.*

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 next newsletter will be November 2017.

The deadline for the next newsletter will be 23 October 2017.

Please send your contributions to Barb Gilfedder - bjfedders@gmail.com

- Sun 8 Oct** **ASFNC Planning Meeting** at Olive Pink Botanic Garden at 2.00pm. We hope all Committee Members will be able to attend. All members are welcome.
- Wed 11 Oct** **ASFNC GENERAL MEETING** at the Lecture Theatre in Higher Education Building at CDU at 7.00pm. Speaker: **Peter Jobson, Chief Botanist at the Central Australian Herbarium** will talk about and demonstrate several Botanical web sites that are useful for identifying and learning about our local native plants. **The CDU entrance 2 now has a security gate. If you drive right up to it, it should open automatically.**
- Sat 21 Oct** **The Pinch and Hells Gate.** Meet at Information Bay opposite the Old Timers at 7.30am. Drive about 15kms down Old South Road and then about 10km to a bore and yards. Stop there for a 4km round trip walk to the Pinch and Hells Gate, or if temperatures high drive to the Pinch and have a 2km round trip walk to Hells Gate. 4wd advised. Bring lunch. Leader: Neil Woolcock neilwool48@gmail.com or 0428 521 598.
- Wed 8 Nov** **ASFNC GENERAL MEETING** at the Lecture Theatre in Higher Education Building at CDU at 7.00pm. Speakers: Charlie Carter and Deb Clarke, "Volunteering for Tas Parks at Melaleuca in the SW Wilderness National Park".

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY ALICE SPRINGS

Contact: apsalicesprings@yahoo.com.au

- Wed 4 Oct** **APS AS Meeting** at Olive Pink Botanic Garden at 7.30pm. Speaker: Doug McDougall **Alpine Flora talk.** It's starting to warm up in Alice Springs. If you feel like cooling down a little, come and join Doug McDougall on a tour of Australia's alpine areas to discover the local flora that survives in these extreme conditions. ALL WELCOME. Presentation followed by light supper, tea and coffee.
- Wed 1 Nov** **APS AS Meeting** at Olive Pink Botanic at 7.30pm. Speaker: Barb Gilfedder "**Photos from Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary.**" Barb and Jim have been visiting Newhaven since 2004. Newhaven is managed by Australian Wildlife Conservancy and is located in the southern Tanami Desert. It covers many different habitats and Barb has photographed many interesting native plants there. ALL WELCOME.

FRIENDS OF ILPARPA CLAYPANS FaceBook.com/IlparpaClaypansLovers **Email:** ilparpaclaypanslovers@gmail.com

After many months of meetings, surveys and conversations, the Ilparpa Claypans Action Group is considering evolving into either becoming an Incorporated Association or a subgroup of Alice Springs Landcare Incorporated Association.

Please feel free to join us on Saturday 7th October at 10am -12pm to have a say on the future of the group.

Location: Gallery, Olive Pink Botanic Gardens.

On the agenda:

- A presentation on how we can work together with the Traditional Owners.
- A presentation on the option of becoming a branch of the Alice Springs Landcare group.
- A discussion on the draft constitution (if we decide to go down the path of becoming an Incorporated Association).
- An overview of future activities for the community organised at the Claypans.

Your voice is important as we all want the best for this place! Feel free to contact us with any questions!

Please let us know if you are planning on coming to the meeting. [Ilparpa Claypans Action Group](#).

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Committee Members:-

President	Barbara Gilfedder	8955 5452	Committee Member	Pamela Keil	8955 0496
Vice-President	Lee Ryall	8953 6394	Committee Member	Robin Grey-Gardner	8952 2207
Secretary	Anne Pye	0438 388 012	Some other Club Responsibilities:-		
Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	8955 1021	Newsletter	Barbara Gilfedder	
Property Officer	Rosalie Breen	8952 3409	Website	Pamela Keil	
Public Officer	Anne Pye	0438 388 012	Minutes Secretary	Connie Spencer	0429 966 592
			Facebook organiser	Colleen O'Malley	

Down by the pond and small is beautiful

– a talk on birds around Alice Springs by Andrew Crouch.

Report by Colleen O'Malley

Andrew's previous talk in May on birds in our backyards was so popular that he was invited back to share some more of his knowledge and this time the focus was on birds seen at the sewerage ponds plus those smaller sometimes overlooked bush birds we may just catch the odd glimpse of or hear calls of in the distance.

Each species was spectacularly brought to life by Andrew's brilliant photographs and for each bird he talked a bit about the habitat you might find them in, whether they were resident or just passing through and how common they were around the region. Often a titbit around the birds behaviour or appearance was also shared.

Like other keen birders, Andrew has spent a lot of time at the sewerage ponds watching the local waterfowl and migrant waders that stop in at their ponds on their way to the Arctic in September and then again on their way back home in May. He described the different collection of species present on each pond and how the first water birds you were likely to encounter on each visit were the resident Hoary-headed Grebes and Australasian Grebes that flourished in the first pond from the gate.



When it comes to identifying ducks, Andrew told us that a good thing to look at is how the duck is sitting in the water. Some, like Pink-eared Ducks, which are reasonably common at the ponds, sit much lower in the water. Often a spotting scope is needed to pick out some of the finer identifying features of waterfowl and particularly of the migratory shorebirds in their non-breeding plumage.

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (left) is one of four species of sandpipers found at the ponds. Its rufous crown distinguishes it from the Wood Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper which can also be spotted over the summer. All are arctic migrants, and while there is only one Common Sandpiper in residence at the ponds at the moment, both Wood Sandpipers and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers can occur in flocks of tens or hundreds when they stopover briefly at the ponds.

Waders are another group of water birds seen at the sewerage ponds. Amongst the non-migratory waders the Black-winged Stilt (below left) is one of the most commonly seen waders at the ponds, and a large number reside there permanently. Another reasonably common resident wader is the Red-necked Avocet (below right) with its distinctive red cap and upturned beak used to sieve invertebrates out of the top layer of the water.

There is not a lot known about what the shorebirds and waders are feeding on at the ponds, and as far as Andrew knew no one had undertaken research about this. It is also not well understood why some years see a large influx of particular species of migratory waders at the ponds whilst in other years there are much smaller numbers. It may be more about perturbations in food supply in their main staging grounds in North Korea and China, rather than seasonal differences locally.



Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club





The Black-fronted Dotterel (left) is one of the smaller non-migratory waders found at the ponds. It is very distinctive in its breeding plumage and can often be spotted running furtively along the water's edge. It is reasonably common but never in big numbers, and is much more conspicuous than the Red-capped Plover which will lure potential predators (including birdwatchers) from its nest by doing a very convincing broken wing display.

Moving away from the sewerage ponds Andrew went on to describe several of the less commonly seen small bush birds around Alice Springs including the White-winged Fairy-wren (below left), one of five wrens in the region (the others being the Variegated Fairy-wren, Splendid Fairy-wren, Dusky Grasswren and Rufous-crowned Emu-wren) each of which occupy very distinct habitats.



Much less striking in plumage and way less extrovert in behaviour is the Southern Whiteface (above right), which is another of the insectivorous birds which hangs out in small family groups – its distinctive characteristic is its pale face marking.

Another bird Andrew talked about which can still be heard calling in bushland on the edge of town at the moment is the Red-browed Pardalote (pictured below), a gorgeously patterned tiny bird that flits about gleaning insects in the upper canopies of trees.



Andrew's talk opened our eyes to the diversity of avian species that call Alice Springs home, or who pass through en route to summer feeding grounds or are lured here after rains or by our warmer summers.

His stunning photographs let us see some of the markings or bill shapes that help to identify some of those less conspicuous species.

Hopefully some of you got to put into practice some of the bird ID skills acquired through this talk in the recent twitchathon that was part of the Red Centre Bird Festival that finished recently.

Gems from our August picnic weekend at Ruby Gap

By Jocelyn Davies, Megg Kelham, Gavan Breen, Rosalie Breen and Suzi Lyon

Here is Megg Kelham to set the scene:-

“Didn’t for a moment think, when I set off for Ruby Gorge, that I would find myself looking at the brain of a microscopically enlarged mayfly nymph! But that’s exactly what happened when, not long after our arrival, Rosalie set up her microscope and began identifying the tiny specs of life inhabiting the remnant flows of the Hale River. Nor could I have anticipated the shrieks of horror as Shrike watched the same magnified Mayfly nymph digest another of Rosalie’s petri dish inhabitants. Such microscopic delights were the icing on the cake of a glorious weekend of walking, talking, eating, swimming and speculating on what life must have been like at the height of the infamous Ruby Rush which sparked the short term habitation of Glen Annie Gorge which William Lindsay, like all loyal explorers, named after his wife.”



Glen Annie Gorge (Jocelyn Davies)



Waterhole in Glen Annie Gorge (Rosalie Breen)

The track into Ruby Gap wasn’t as rough as I remembered it, though it is definitely terrain that needs a high clearance 4WD. Our party of four vehicles and ten people took a break on the five hour drive at the old Arltunga Hotel, whose signposts and birds were very welcoming although (or maybe because) the place was devoid of people. A second short stop in a creek bed helped me learn some more bird voices– thanks to Shrike/Colleen O’Malley. Now I know that the Black-eared Cuckoo’s advertising call is as distinctive and memorable as sightings are elusive. And learning the Red-browed Pardalote’s call meant I recognised them as our frequent companions during the whole weekend.

The Hale saw a big flood in January, which closed the track in until April. Flood debris abounded. Although none of the vehicles encountered any trouble on our way in (or out), one of the fences did. Gavan Breen was travelling in Shrike’s car and was closest to the action. Here’s Gavan’s story:

“It was a new and very welcome experience to be a passenger instead of a driver, especially in such spectacularly rugged and picturesque country. Thanks Colleen! It was a long, hard drive, and with a hopeless conversationalist alongside you.

I was able to do a small something to pay for my transport when someone had to open a rickety-looking gate connecting a crude wire fence crossing the river to the bank. I was in the lead car and the gate turned out to be manageable by one person. The first car went through, and the second, and suddenly there was no gate. I hadn’t seen it go, and I had no idea what had happened — wondered for a moment if I had done something disastrous.

My theory later was that the left rear wheel of that second car had run over the chunk of concrete supporting the gatepost. What do you think, John? No real harm done, anyway.”



The gate in Ruby Gorge Nature Park (Rosalie Breen)

Rosalie Breen takes up the story: -

“What a delight to find at Ruby Gap an expanse of water among the rocks of the river bed and a waterhole where three scruffy little Grebes were swimming and feeding among the green reeds and reflections. They were not even disturbed by Liz taking a refreshing swim.”

“But the biggest delight for me was finding two different types of charophyte. A Chara species, similar to what we have found before, and new to me, a *Nitella*, looking like an underwater garden of green, round little bushes. I likened them to stromatolites. Having the water close to the camp made it easy to net for macro-invertebrates, and we found many. Especially intriguing to some, looking through the microscope, was a Damsel Fly nymph cannibalizing a small edition of itself. We watched it being munched, entering and moving down the gut. All its internal structure was visible because it was transparent. Even saw the brain, or lines of ganglions. Mayfly nymphs have gills on the side of their abdomen and these were beating rapidly to gather oxygen. Some diving beetles on the other hand pop up to the surface and collect a bubble of air under their elytra (hard wing). There were a few Whirligig beetles doing just that, whizzing around on the surface of the water. Other animals hide away among the algae, which was mostly *Spirogyra*. We found Non-biting Midge larvae, and I noticed a few clouds of midges flying around. There were a few fly larvae, and round worms or nematodes. Interesting are the Caddis Fly larvae which live in small hollow sticks. You see a moving stick with a head and a few legs emerging from one end walking around but quickly retreating into its house if disturbed.”



Liz Moore flanked by flood debris



View from our campsite (Rosalie Breen)



Rippled Grebe (Rosalie Breen)



Nitella and Spirogyra algae (Rosalie Breen)

Rosalie continues:

“The focus of a bush camp is the fire. We brought wood, so plenty of hot coals for camp-oven cooking, and enough room to sit around and talk. It really was a pleasant site, some slept near the cars, others – up market - crossed on the rocks and set up tents on the sand on the west side of the river, which caught the sun in the morning. Views of the waterhole, the river rocks and sand and all around rocky cliffs and mountains made it beautiful.”



Campfire (Rosalie Breen)



John Stevenson, Megg Kelham, Jock Morse and Jocelyn Davies around campfire (Rosalie Breen)

Dramatic geology was our backdrop. In the more downstream parts of Ruby Gap Nature Park, the Hale River has cut through big blocks of Heavitree sandstone, that slid along faults during the Alice Springs Orogeny 320 million years ago. The massive quartzite rocks remained unfolded and came to rest on top of the softer limestones and siltstones of the younger Bitter Springs formation, which were tightly folded and squashed up in the same mountain building events.



Unfolded Heavitree Quartzite over folded Bitter Springs formation (Rosalie Breen)



Densely folded rocks of the Bitter Springs formation (Rosalie Breen)

Diverse native grasses in the side gorges that cut steeply through the Heavitree quartzite were a welcome change from the buffel and couch along the edges of the main river valley. Blue Mallee (*Eucalyptus gamophylla*) was common on the rocky slopes, and a few native Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) of varied ages indicated gullies have provided some refuge from bush fires. After climbing steadily up shattered rocks on the side slopes of one small gorge, Jock and I came into a patch of mulga, a species or variety with somewhat broader phyllodes than standard *Acacia aneura*. Most of it looked to be long unburnt, and the ground had a thick bryophyte crust. The upslope edge was regrowing from fires, maybe in 2012, and a family of Fairy-wrens were enjoying that dense cover. They were one of few signs of vertebrates that we saw in the couple of hours we spent exploring the gorge and its upper slopes. We wondered how different the soil in the unburnt mulga would have been 'back in the day' before livestock and feral animal grazing and changed fire regimes accelerated soil erosion. Intact bryophyte crust such as this mulga grove had, is taken as a sign that the soil has not been disturbed by 'hard-hoofed' introduced grazers. But perhaps that same unbroken thick crust now signifies another kind of contemporary land degradation. Once Bandicoots and Stick Nest Rats would have been digging through it, looking for food and habitat in it and under it, and mixing its organic matter into the top soil. Extinction of central Australia's medium sized mammals means the crust now seems to have a very passive role in the landscape, it sometimes seems like a shroud, covering dead soil. The soil surface of the medium size mammal enclosure at the Desert Park looks so very different.



Heavitree Quartzite cliffs (and Rosalie and Gavan) at the bottom of a side gorge (Jocelyn Davies)

Fox's grave: Jock tries rubbing and Shrike tries a photo to help decipher the year on the gravestone (Jocelyn Davies)

No trip to Ruby Gap would be complete without a search for Mr Francis Fox's grave. Some of us went looking, after working on our rock skimming skills in the deep waterhole at Glen Annie Gorge. The bend in the river above which the grave sits on a low ridge is marked by a large outcrop of dark ironstone formed from the Bitter Springs limestones through heat and chemical changes along fault lines. The gravestone's record of Mr Fox's year of death was illegible. But now we know that he died on 25 May 1888, thanks to our historian, Megg Kelham who writes:

"Since returning to "civilisation" I have read a short history of the Ruby Gap field which tells me that: many of the ruby miners formed working partnerships with local Aboriginal women who learn very quickly how to select the best gems from those mined. At the height of the rush there were two stores, which, though they often lacked goods, sold what they had at extraordinarily high prices. The minefields also had two butcher shops, which supplied reasonable quality beef and mutton at reasonable prices. The people who appear to have done the best, financially speaking, from the ill-fated rush, were however, the camp cooks, who earned in excess of £2 per week in addition to being allowed to collect ruby for their own benefit. Afghan cameleers also appear to have done well from transporting goods into the field and "rubies" out. Beyond the field, lies a whole complex story of stock market speculation, which took place primarily in Adelaide and London, until the boom turned to bust. News of the bust is said to have reached the field on May 24th 1888. Next day Francis Fox, whose beautiful gravestone appears to be all that remains of the field, shot himself. He was 55 years old. When the government geologist visited the field in June it was all but deserted. "

THE RUBY MINES IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA.

LONDON, Nov. 15

The precious stones obtained from the Macdonnell Range Ruby Mines, in Central Australia, and which were brought to London by Mr. Pearson, are selling freely. Rubies under one carat weight sold at 35s., and carat and heavier stones realised from £3 to £6. The average price obtained is £2 per carat.

The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Thursday 17 November 1887, page 7

Megg suggests:

“For more on the history check out: Enever, J., 2015. 'The rush that ended': The quest for rubies in central Australia. *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, 13, p.42, which should be accessible from the Informit database in the Alice Springs Town Library and from which the above was taken. Enever pays tribute to: Rivers of rubies : the history of the ruby rush in Central Australia by Barry M. Allwright, also in the local Library.”

Suzi Lyon and Karin both reflected that their weekend tagging along with Field Nats, brought up childhood memories of parents who were avidly interested in the natural world and instilled a love of nature. Suzi makes big connections:

“I loved camping with the field nats, all the interesting science and birdy type discussions, that Rosalie had her microscope, (I never did get to look down it, but I know I have a date coming up with her and Shrike), everyone’s lovely easy going-ness, all the different meals cooked up on the campfire, and of course that beautiful gorge and its stories.

“Places and times interconnect elsewhere. Following the White-necked Heron down the river from Annie’s Gorge, watching its languid flight, and I was with my father who also loved the herons and named his boat Matuku moana, after the Blue Heron. He was an avid bird watcher and would horrify us every morning when he came in to wake us up by giving us a rendition of the latest bird he had heard while we were still sleeping, also the weather, the tides and what the barometer was doing. Yes, I do appreciate it now.

“But further inter-connectness. A few days later doing some catch up reading of NZ and penguin activity off the southern South Is, Stewart Island and Snare Islands, which are ‘washed by the sub-tropical front, a body of water rich in iron from dust blown into the ocean out of Australia’s arid interior,...stimulating phytoplankton growth, creating a rich feeding ground for penguins.’ <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/life-on-the-edge/>
“Who said polar bears don’t have anything to do with central Australia?”



Rock Skimming, Glen Annie Gorge (Rosalie Breen)



White necked heron (Suzi Lyon)



Rock skimming (Suzi Lyon)



ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of the general meeting held at the Higher Education Building
Charles Darwin University – Wednesday 13 September 2017

Open: In the absence of the President and Vice President, Neil Woolcock opened the meeting at 8:40 pm following a presentation by Andrew Crouch on Birds. Thank you to Colleen O'Malley for scribing and to Connie Spencer for supper.

Present: 16 members, 7 visitors and 4 apologies as per attendance book.

Minutes: The Minutes of the August 2017 meeting were presented on the screen for members to read. Minutes accepted by the meeting.

Treasurer's Report:

Balance of all funds (including petty cash) end July17		\$2,662.09
Income August17		
Membership	\$655.00	
Hamilton Downs Youth Camp Refund	60.00	
Bank interest	<u>.43</u>	<u>715.43</u>

No expenditure for August 17

Petty Cash	
Opening Balance	\$10.15
Added from m'ship fees	<u>20.00</u>
Petty cash balance end August 17	\$30.15

Total of all funds (including petty cash) end August 17 \$3,377.52

Correspondence In/Out:

- LfW change of date for birthday celebration from 23 Sep 2017 to 30 Sep.2017
- Yogita Thompson offering to help at LfW birthday celebrations.
- Natasha Porter, CSIRO advising that date for *Recent Ecological Change in Australia Project* survey has been extended to later in the year.
- Invitation to join in Olive Pink Landcare Group working bee Sunday 17 September 2017
- Michelle Marion – note praising the newsletter.
- CSIRO Publisher catalogue

Past Events:

- 19/20 August Serpentine chalet camp and walk into Inarlanga Pass cancelled due to lack of participants.

Future Events:

- Neil Woolcock will set a date and contact landholder to lead a drive/walk to The Pinch in October.
- Barb has emailed Jayne Brim-Box re day visit to Santa Teresa Salt Springs sometime in October.
- Red Centre Bird Festival 20 – 24 September 2017. Programs available.
- Friends of Ilparpa Claypans walk and talk last Tuesday of the month 5pm to sunset. Meet western clay pan.

Newsletter:

Pam Keil advised she is having technical difficulties with newsletter. Hopefully issues will be resolved by the weekend 16/17 Sep.

Next Meeting: Wednesday 11 October 2017. Speaker: Peter Jobson on botanical websites.

Volunteers required to scribe and for supper.

Sightings:

Marg Lawrence – Sacred Kingfisher in her garden in Battarbee St.
The Bee-eaters are back. Masked Woodswallows seen.
Reptiles are waking-up.

Close: The meeting closed at 9 pm.