



November 2018

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Rainbow Bee-eaters, one of our most beautiful bird species, migrate south to central Australia in late August or in September. They roost in groups, presumably to keep warm as shown in this stunning photo by Andrew Crouch. They are small birds and a cold snap can be devastating. See story by Marg Friedel on page 5.

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 February 2019.

The deadline for the next newsletter will be 23 January 2019

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

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB



Saturday 3 November - Variety Bash by foot. This early morning walk will be cross country, and on bush tracks, 4WD roads, mountain bike trails, and footpaths. Come and experience all, up on top of ridges in the hills for magnificent views and checkout new growth after our recent rains and discover whatever. Birds too. Interesting rocks. Meet 7.00am at Gosse St Playground in Old Eastside. Takes about 3 hours. Bring water and snack. Rosalie Breen 89523409, 0458155141 text



Wednesday 14 November – General Meeting at the lecture theatre in CDU higher education building at 7.00pm. **Jayne Brim Box**, Senior Scientist with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has recently been working on areas along the Finke River, particularly Running Waters. She will give a presentation titled, "**Recent work at Running Waters and lessons learned for the broader Finke River.**"



Saturday 17 November, 10.00am. "What happens to all those plant specimens?" Visit the Alice Springs Herbarium with Peter Jobson to find out. Turn left onto the service road just before the Alice Springs Desert Park car park. The herbarium is the building on the right just before the gate.



Sunday 18 November, 9.00am. Xmas Breakfast at Standley Chasm Kiosk. Some people may like to camp at Standley Chasm on the Saturday night and make their own arrangements and payments for that (\$10 a head for locals). Others may like to go out on Sunday morning for 7.30am and take a walk into the Chasm before breakfast, or just came for the buffet breakfast at 9.00am. This is the main event. Cost is \$20. **Essential to please let Barb know numbers by Wednesday 14 November.**

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY ALICE SPRINGS

Contact: apsalicesprings@yahoo.com.au

Wednesday 7 November - "Flora of the Snowy Mountains" presented By Bec Duncum, 7.30pm at Olive Pink Botanic Garden Visitors' Centre.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB COMMITTEE

President	Barbara Gilfedder	8955 5452	Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	8955 1021
Vice-President	Lee Ryall	0417 401 237	Property Officer	Rosalie Breen	8952 3409
Secretary	Anne Pye	0438 388 012	Public Officer	Anne Pye	0438 388 012

Committee Members: Robyn Grey-Gardner 8952 2207, Margaret Friedel 0417 849 743, Simon Brown 0429 359 593

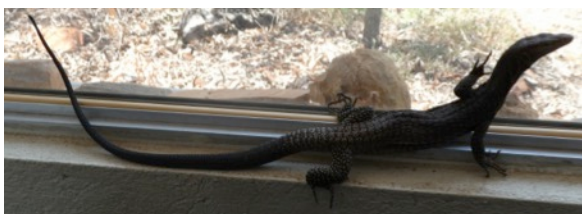
Some other Club Responsibilities: Newsletter - Barbara Gilfedder, Minutes Secretary - Connie Spencer, Facebook organiser - Colleen O'Malley, Website - Pamela Keil and Robyn Grey-Gardner

Rosalie has another uninvited guest!

Black-headed Goanna – *Varanus tristis*

I did not keep the front wire door closed all the time as I resolved after the Pheasant Coucal visit.

This morning I had an intruder in the front room again. First climbing on the curtain (gave me a big fright) and then on the windowsill.



After some thought, I blocked the way down the passage and to the back of house so to direct him out the front door. Then I herded him out. Easy!

Bilby Conservation at Kiwirrkurra and across the Desert - Talk from Kate Crossing

10 October 2018 - Report by Lee Ryall

The Greater Bilby, *Macrotis lagotis*, lives in a restricted area in the deserts of north-west of Australia. Sadly, the Greater Bilby is the only Bilby, as the Lesser Bilby has been assumed to be extinct since the middle of last century.

The Bilby's reduced home range (it could once be found across 70% of the continent) means that 80 percent of the areas it inhabits are Indigenous managed. Kate's talk focussed on the Indigenous Protection Area around Kiwirrkurra in Western Australia, in the south-eastern part of bilby country, and in particular of the work of the rangers from Kiwirrkurra to help preserve the ninu (Bilby).

The Bilby is named for its ears- *Macrotis* means long-eared and *lagotis* refers to the ears of a hare or rabbit. Like many desert mammals, the Bilby is nocturnal, so the video clips Kate showed of the burrows (which also featured looming predators) were all taken by night. Bilbies are great diggers, with powerful limbs for their size, and their burrows can be up to 3m long and 2m deep, which helps to keep them at a pleasant temperature. They also have up to a dozen alternate homes and occupy this or that burrow as the fancy takes them. Setting up cameras near burrows known to be inhabited helps keep track of the population- and of the predators. After the community's 'Bilby Festival' in 2016, a tracking app was developed for use by rangers and others in monitoring the whereabouts of Bilbies (and other endangered species). The Kiwirrkurra rangers took part in a Bilby Blitz recently, which was part of an area-wide attempt to establish the number and location of the animals. The rangers find the burrows by following faeces, tracks and trails.



Photos from the top: Bilby (Australian Geographic); Map-2015- Light Green showing distribution before Europeans, and orange showing current distribution (copyright-Save-the-Bilby-Fund); Bilby tracks.

Cameras are set up around likely burrows. Eight population groups were found across the Kiwirrkurra IPA. Management of the Bilby population is done through maintaining their habitat and mitigating threats (particularly predators). Habitat maintenance involves patchwork burning of the spinifex country in order to prevent large, hot fires and to allow the growth of the plants such as the *Yakirra australiensis* (Bush panic Grass), and the *Cyperus bulbosus* (Bush Onion), which the bilby eats, along with such things as maku or Witchetty Grubs and Termite larvae. The Kiwirrkurra rangers have a history of burning in this way, as evidenced by the fire map Kate showed, with many larger, hotter fires in the surrounding areas. A side benefit of this process for the Kiwirrkurra community is that the plants, which are enjoyed by the Bilbies are also tasty bush foods for the rangers.



The major predators for Bilbies are foxes and feral cats. Foxes are harder to hunt than cats, so feral cat hunting around the known population locations is one way of protecting these fragile Bilby (and the also endangered Greater Skink) populations. Kiwirrkurra is not a large community, but Kiwirrkurra people have killed 104 cats over the last four years. A bounty of \$100 is paid for the stomach and tail of each cat and the remainder is often eaten. The management program undertook



training for killing the cats in as humane a way as possible, and one lady gleefully demonstrated the powerful swing of the stick that is needed to do this. A slightly gruesome poster reinforced this methodology. Tracking a cat generally takes at least a couple of hours- even if one of the cameras has shown one sniffing out a burrow in a particular location.

The program is also running camps with children from other western desert community schools, teaching them about Bilbies and tracking skills-and how to use a mix of both traditional and technologically innovative processes.

While the elusiveness of the full Bilby population prevents any scientific evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, it seems likely that this process, which is an ongoing one, is helping

Bilby survival. However, it appears that despite the efforts of people such as the Kiwirrkurra rangers, the habitat of this marsupial may be contracting northwards. Thanks Kate for an interesting talk and a chance to learn a little more about these creatures. The app, "The Tracks App" is available on Google Play (and, I imagine, on iPhone)

[Photos : ex-cat at Kiwirrkurra; feral cat caught on camera; school children at Bilby Camp.](#)

Interesting that some of the excellent cat-catchers from Kiwirrkurra went over to Newhaven to help Australian Wildlife Conservancy get rid of the feral cats inside the new feral proof fence. Ed.



Mass death of Rainbow Bee-eaters

Report by Marg Friedel

A rather grisly sight greeted Pastor Neville Doecke as he toured his Hermannsburg garden on the morning of 22nd September: 22 dead Rainbow Bee-eaters and another still alive but dying. “They all were lying in the one space about 2m in diameter, below a large thickly-foliaged tree that overhangs the fence. It is often used for the bee-eaters to roost in overnight. Up in this tree were two crows each feasting on a bee-eater!”

Neville asked Barb Gilfedder for advice, concerned that the crows may have been responsible. Barb sought Andrew Crouch’s opinion, Rosalie Schultz checked in with Mark Carter and Environmental Health and I contacted Chris Watson. There appeared to be three potential explanations, starting with the least likely:

1. The bee-eaters consumed too many pesticide-filled insects
2. The crows picked off individual birds one-by-one
3. A sudden drop in temperature caught the birds out, weakened by their long flight from the north.

Environmental Health responded that there did not appear to be a public health risk and they wouldn’t investigate further. This wasn’t a refutation of the first option but see later for more about insects. Chris commented:

“Toxicity is a possibility but I think unlikely. Bee-eaters only take live prey so the idea of all of these birds consuming live insects that had been dosed with enough pesticide to influence the bird (but not yet kill the insect) is hard to conceive of. It is also possible that the crows came upon the roosting bee-eaters, killed each one in turn and then sat there eating them. But I think this is pretty unlikely”.

Mark’s comments summarise all three birdos’ replies: “Bee-eaters can be prone to die-offs at this time of year if it is either very cold or very dry. It’s thought to be because they have just completed their migration down here and are very low on fat reserves and anything that limits the availability of prey in the crucial few



How Neville first found the Bee-eaters



A crow eating one of the dead birds



The dead Bee-eaters collected for counting



This one little bird was still barely alive. It felt very light---like a handful of feathers.

weeks afterwards can be lethal for them. I recall one spring a few years back was very cold with few flying insects resulted in many dead bee-eaters. It's just one of the risks these birds take living in a boom and bust landscape".

I checked Bureau of Meteorology records at the Alice Springs airport for daily maximum and minimum temperatures for August and September. From mid-late August, when I estimated the bee-eaters began arriving, maximum temperatures were relatively high: the coolest day until well into September was 19th August at 19.1°C and on other days ranged up to 30+°C. Looking at maximum temperatures around the time of the bee-eater die-off, it was 34.6°C on 18th September, then 18.5°C, 21.0°C and 17.9°C for the three days before the event – a 'cold snap'. Checking the minimum temperatures, the last below-zero temperature for winter had been on 21st August. In the week before the die-off, minimum temperatures varied from 2.5°C to 14.9°C, and on the morning itself, the minimum was 4.9°C – quite low after three cool days.

Rainfall is also important, because it will affect the supply of prey for the bee-eaters. The last rainfall recorded by the BoM at the Alice Springs airport had been 0.2 mm on 13th April, over 5 months previously, so it's fair to assume that food supply for the bee-eaters would have been very limited. As Neville remarked: "It has been very dry, so less nectar for the bees and insects, so maybe less around as food for these birds". He added: "Plus, when I picked up the bee-eater that was still alive (barely), I recall thinking 'hey there is not much to you little birdie!!'meaning it felt very light.....like a handful of feathers".

At the time of the die-off, the BoM registered 1.2 mm rain to 9 am on 22nd September. Neville sought weather data for Hermannsburg and found that only rainfall records were kept. These told a similar story – 0.5 mm to 9 am that morning. [While temperature records might have been nice, it's fair to say that they are much more uniform over distance than rainfall, so Alice Springs temperatures were useful indicators.]

So it seems that low temperatures and low food supplies, plus some drizzle to make it more miserable, were the culprits.

Thankyou to Neville Doecke, Barb Gilfedder, Rosalie Schultz, Andrew Crouch, Mark Carter and Chris Watson, who all contributed to this story.



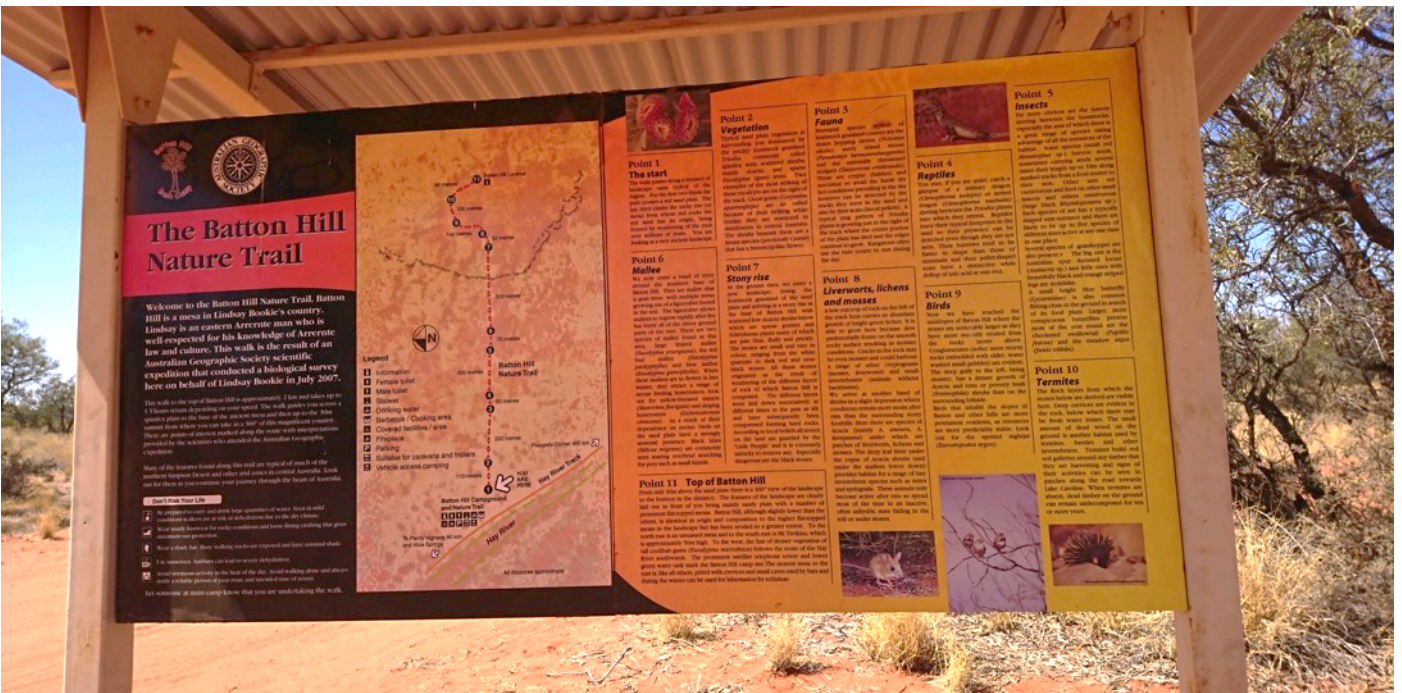
Batton Hill Nature Trail, Batton Hill Camp on the Hay River Track - 2018

By Beth Hansen

The Batton Hill Nature Trail is at Batton Hill Camp, 350kms east of Alice Springs, on the Hay River Track. With help from Jol Fleming, DIRECT 4WD, Traditional Owner, Lindsay Bookie set up the Camp that is now maintained by the Bookie, Dixon & Drover families. (Bookings and Central Land Council permits for the Camp and the Hay River Track are coordinated by Jol Fleming Contact: jolfleming@gmail.com)

The Camp is 410kms by road:- take the Stuart Highway north for 65kms, continue for 265kms on the Plenty Highway and, just past the Plenty River crossing, turn right at the track marked *Batton Hill Bushtucker Camp*. This turn-off is a short distance before Jervois Station – fuel, snacks, public phone. etc. The next 80kms are mostly flat on a red sandy track, passing through the gates of Jervois and of Tarlton Downs Stations before reaching the gate on the right side, marked *Central Land Council. Private Land ...etc..* This gate is the northern entry for the Hay River Track and the Camp is just 5kms ahead.

There are well-made camping sites, shade trees, bough shelters, ground and raised fireplaces, bush ovens, water taps and the best toilet and shower facilities of any bush camp – well worth the \$20 /night camping fee. On my visit, in August this year, the camping areas were as clean as a whistle, with garbage bins supplied and a protected garbage disposal area. Wood for cooking fires needs to be brought in from at least 10kms away.



The Batton Hill Nature Trail is well marked with a large poster prepared by the Australian Geographic Society scientific expedition in July 2007. *“The walk to the top of Batton Hill is about 2km and takes up to 1.5 hours return depending on your speed and interest spots on the way. The walk guides you across a spinifex plain to the base of the ancient mesa and then up to the 30m summit from where you can take in a 360° view.”*

The poster also has a trail map with marked points described in more detail. The first part of the trail crosses spinifex grasslands with scattered acacia and senna shrubs and a few eucalyptus trees. This is habitat for the Desert Hopping Mice, the Sandy Inland Mice and the threatened Mulgara – all nocturnal, so watch out for tracks and scats – as well as Kangaroo. You might also see Military or Netted Dragons here. The Australian Geographic Survey identified at least 2 varieties of grasshoppers (Bob Read reckons there'll be plenty of others), several varieties of butterflies as well as shaped nest entrances of seed-carrying ants or other omnivorous or carnivorous ants.

There is a band of several species of mallee trees that seasonally attract a range of honeyeaters and miners near the start of the rise to the rocky hilltop. *“The different layers of rock were laid down successively at different times in the past as silt and have subsequently been compressed forming hard rocks.”*

To the left of the trail up and over the hill are bright green lichens, and moister cracks in the rocks here could contain small invertebrates that become active after rain. Under the acacia trees are patches of liverworts, lichens and mosses. At the top of Batton Hill there are larger stones, more recently eroded, and conglomerates and water-washed pebbles, with views to Mount Knuckey and Mount Tietkins.

The families caring for Batton Hill Camp are in the process of producing some laminated leaflets and would really appreciate some help in identifying more birds, fauna and flora on the trail and around the camping sites. [Contact Tanya Dixon or Jol Fleming at the email address above.]

Rhonda Tomlinson wrote an article on Batton Hill in our newsletter in December 2011 that you can see in the link below. http://alicefieldnaturalists.org.au/11_12.pdf



Photos clockwise from the left:- shady campground; flashest loos and showers; entry to Batton Hill camp; cooking facilities.



Minutes of the general meeting held at the Higher Education Building Charles Darwin University – Wednesday 10 October 2018

Open: Rosalie Schultz declared the meeting open at 8:25pm following on from Kate Crossing's presentation on *Indigenous protected area Bilby management program at Kiwirrkura*.

Thank you Connie Spencer for supper, Lee Ryall for note taking and Rosalie Schultz and Jill Brew for also offering to take notes.

Present: 20 members, 4 visitors and 8 apologies as per attendance book.

Minutes: The Minutes of the September 2018 general meeting as printed in the newsletter were accepted by the meeting.

Business Arising:

- Website newsletter index – held over until next month due to absence of Robyn Grey-Gardner.

Treasurer's Report:

Balance of all funds (including petty cash) end of August 2018	\$3,052.56
Income for September 2018	
Membership	90.00
Interest	.23
Expenses for September 2018	0.00
(Petty Cash	\$1.85)
Total of all funds (including petty cash) end September 2018	<u>\$3,142.79</u>

The meeting accepted the Treasurer's report.

Correspondence:

- Reminder sent out to members who have not renewed their 2018/2019 membership.
- Neville Doecke from Hermannsburg wrote about a strange event where he found 22 Rainbow Bee-eaters dead under one tree and wondered if we could offer any explanation. Barb forwarded email to Andrew Crouch. Both Andrew and Barb suggested possibility that being migratory, a sudden cold night could have killed them. Another suggestion was that they may have eaten something poisonous. Rosalie Schultz suggested the relevant government authority and environmental health be made aware of the event and Marg Friedel suggested Chris Watson be contacted. Barb to forward Neville's email for Rosalie and Marg to follow up on their suggestions.
- Invitation from Field Naturalists Club of Victoria to Australian Natural History Presentation in Blackburn, Victoria on 12 November 2018. If anyone is interested in going Barb will forward email.
- All other relevant information forwarded to members

General Business:

- Parrtjima Light Festival– Rosalie Schultz queried the initial concern by some the lights would have on the black-footed rock wallaby. Marg Friedel advised that several people with knowledge on the subject were quite comfortable with any effect the festival had on the wallabies and that the light intensity was no more than full moon light.

Past Events:

- 14 - 16 September – Tower Rock with Neil Woolcock. Trip report in the October newsletter.

Future Events:

- Sat 3 Nov 2018 – Skyline walk with Rosalie Breen. Connie will lead if Rosalie not able to.
- 17 Nov 2018, 10.00am - Alice Springs Herbarium with Peter Jobson. Barb will also invite Australian Plants Society members.
- Barb also announced APS events as follows: Sunday 21 Oct – Propagation workshop with Karlee Foster at the Desert Park Nursery. Time to be announced. Limited numbers. Wed 7 Nov 7:30 pm – Bec Duncum will present *Flora of the Snowy Mountains* at Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

Next Meeting:

Wednesday 14 November 2018. Presentation by Jayne Brim Box on "Recent work at Running Waters and lessons learned for the broader Finke River".

Scribe: Rosalie Schultz

Supper: Jill Brew

Meeting Chair: **volunteer required**

Sightings:

Rosalie Schultz – Rainbow Bee-eaters in Spencer Valley.

Bev Gray – also Rainbow Bee-eaters in her garden in Gillen

Meeting closed at 8:45pm.

Minutes compiled by Connie Spencer