



February 2024

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



A spectacular long nosed dragon (*Gowidon longirostris*) seen on the gecko walk in December. [Photo: Kylie Cowan].

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of the month
(except December and January) at 7:00pm
at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

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The next newsletter will be published on 1 March 2024.
We appreciate all contributions, articles and photos both local and from elsewhere.
Please have them to Lisa McLean lismclean@outlook.com by **20 February 2024**.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Wednesday 14 February — Monthly talk 7.00pm. Marg Friedel – 'A history of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) in Australia. OPBG.

Saturday 17 February at 4.30pm. A behind the scenes tour of Alice Springs Desert Park's conservation/breeding projects. Meet in the carpark to carpool into the compound.
Members only – numbers limited.

Sunday 18 February at 3.00pm. Planning meeting at Lisa's, 12 Burke Street, East Side.

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY – ALICE SPRINGS

apsalicesprings@yahoo.com.au

Wednesday 7 February — 7.00pm. Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Members and friends are invited to bring along something to talk about, whether a plant specimen, a short story on plants found on a walk, or some photos to show on the big screen.



a central rock-rat
(*Zyzomys pedunculatus*), one of
ASDP's conservation projects

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

Committee Members

President	Marg Friedel	0417 849 743
Vice-President	to be appointed	
Secretary	Lisa McLean	0412 642 987
Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	0428 521 598
Property Officer	to be appointed	

General Members

Wendy Mactaggart	0434 495 903
Peter McDonald	0427 177 450
Jill Brew	0437 223 203

Public Officer

Anne Pye	0438 388 012
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Other Club Responsibilities:

Newsletter – Lisa McLean
Facebook Organiser – Meg Mooney moon3@iinet.net.au
Website controller – position vacant

Welcome new members

Welcome to the following new members who have recently joined the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club.

Kylie Cowan and family

Be sure to give them a warm welcome when they attend a speaker night.

Thanks to Kylie for her magnificent photos in this month's newsletter, including the beautiful photo of a spectacular long nosed dragon (*Gowidon longirostris*).



Chrysomelidae beetles

Jane Bannister has generously shared this photo of these beetles with us, and the beetles themselves with the babblers in her garden.

These were found floating in the rain gauge in her garden. Bill Low has identified them as being from the *Chrysomelidae* family. Can you see the emerald shine? iNaturalist.org states that the beetles from the *Chrysomelidae* family are commonly known as leaf beetles, and include over 37,000 (and probably at least 50,000) species in more than 2,500 genera, making up one of the largest and most commonly encountered of all beetle families. Leaf beetles are partially recognizable by their tarsal formula, which appears to be 4-4-4, but is actually 5-5-5 as the fourth tarsal segment is very small and hidden by the third. As with many taxa, no single character defines the *Chrysomelidae*; instead, the family is delineated by a set of characters.

Sharing knowledge of the Finke River – a citizen science opportunity

A presentation on 8 November 2023 by Jayne Brim Box, from the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security (DEPWS)

Report by Marg Friedel



Running Waters at sunrise. Photo: Jayne Brim Box

Jayne began by explaining that DEPWS is revising the restoration and management plan developed for Running Waters on the Finke River. The new project will include information from the entire upper Finke River Catchment. A central aspect of the project is to look at changes in the river over time. Jayne was keen to capture ASFNC members' knowledge of the upper Finke River Catchment - the region from Running Waters north to Ormiston Gorge.

Summarising her previous talk to Club members in 2018, https://alicefieldnaturalists.org.au/19_02.pdf, she reminded us that the river in the upper Finke Catchment is relatively confined by the ranges through which it passes, unlike the lower portion where significant change can occur in big floods as the river traverses broad plains. Where there are constrictions in the upper reaches, the river occupies a single channel, and many waterholes are 'self-scouring' during floods and thus remain largely free from sediment infilling.



Left: Confined reach. Right: Unconfined reach. Photo: from Tooth and Nanson (2000)

The concern is recent changes observed in large, permanent water 'places', Running Waters being a prime example. Sites of this nature have high biodiversity value because they are a permanent resource for groundwater-dependent ecosystems and they offer habitat diversity, such as open water, riverine woodland, and the unique Palm Valley ecosystem.



The Finke goby (Chlamydogobius japalpa) is classed as 'vulnerable'. Photo: Ashley Murphy

Jayne noted a 15 m stretch of the river bank at Running Waters had collapsed into the water between June and October 2013. The resultant sediment island created by the collapsed bank buried the previously rocky substrate and did not scour out during the 2022 floods. Both the 'vulnerable' Finke goby (*Chlamydogobius japalpa*) and the 'near threatened' Finke gudgeon (*Mogurnda larapintae*) are cavity spawners and attached their eggs to rocky substrates. Without access to this substrate, are these species at greater risk? Has habitat degradation occurred at Running Waters? What might be driving change, if recent flood events are different to past events: could it be due to large herbivores (but they have been present for the past 150 years)? invasive grasses? neglect? climate change?



In June 2013, the marked section of Running Waters' eastern bank was intact. Photo: Google Earth



By October 2013, over 15m of the eastern bank had sloughed off, leaving a sediment island in the waterhole. Photo: Google Earth

Jayne's audience responded with enthusiasm, suggesting sources of information predating the 2000s, such as TGH Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, with its stories of major floods in the early 1920s; Lutheran archives; 1950s aerial photos; Graham Griffin's years at Palm Valley to 1974; Geoff Pickup's 1980s analysis of Finke River slack water deposits and geomorphology; and Des Nelson's fish data from 1984.

The changing nature of the river's banks was pointed out, not only the increase in buffel grass but also shrubs, especially since the establishment of the Finke Gorge National Park and control of feral livestock. Interestingly, Perry's mid-1950s land system descriptions report *Chloris [Enteropogon] acicularis* as the almost universal river bank understory species, sometimes accompanied by *Themeda* spp., *Bothriochloa ewartiana* and *Eulalia fulva [aurea]* – all perennials.



Livestock and feral animals can destabilise river banks by grazing and trampling the vegetation and by channelling water flows along walking pads. Photo: Jayne Brim Box.

These observations pre-dated the drought years from about 1957 up to mid- to late-1960s, when grazing pressure might have become particularly intense. As a consequence of the changing nature of river bank vegetation, the fire regimes are also likely to have changed.

Entire waterholes can potentially come and go too. Junction Waterhole was reported to have appeared after 1988, but Strehlow and others mention that Rubula (Junction Waterhole) was a very large waterhole complete with visiting ducks. An image from 1950 shows a continuous body of water from below Boggy Hole up to Junction Waterhole. Other observers (including this writer) remember camping there in the 1970s and later.

Clearly this was a thought-provoking talk, which stimulated plenty of discussion. Thank you Jayne!

Subsequently, Jayne asked members for further input in the form of images and/or written recollections (a paragraph or an essay!) via email to jayne.brimbox@nt.gov.au.

1. Are there waterholes or areas of the upper Finke that have changed over the years?
2. Were there more or less domestic or feral horses, cattle, camels, etc. along the river back in the day?
3. Has the water changed over the years – quality and quantity? For example, more or less turbid, more or less filling after rain, more algal blooms, etc.
4. Have you noticed waterholes are deeper or shallower than they use to be?
5. Have you noticed changes in bank cover in places (e.g., more buffel and/or shrubs, less native grass, etc.)?
6. Have you noticed river banks slumping or places where sediment has accumulated? Conversely, have you noticed places where gully erosion has occurred?
7. Have you noticed places in the river that were once open water that are now smaller or dry?

It's not too late if you want to contribute!

Ref: Tooth and Nanson 2000. Equilibrium and nonequilibrium conditions in dryland rivers. *Physical Geography* 21, 183-211.

Last Hurrah for 2023!

The last Field Nats excursion for 2023 was a really memorable one!

Report by Deb Clarke

30 or so folk, ranging in age from about 7 to 77, came out on a hot Saturday night pre-Christmas, for a Gecko Hunt, instead of staying home under their air-con or socialising with friends. There must be something special about geckos that draws a crowd?!

Aside from the familiar ones that frequent our urban walls, geckos are rarely seen as they are mainly active at night. They are renowned for their adaptive camouflage which takes numerous forms. But could it also be, dare I say it, that they are 'cute'? An unusual descriptor for a reptile but they do tick all the 'cuteness' boxes: proportionally large head, snub noses, stubby feet and toes, nice patterns, soft texture and most importantly large eyes. So perhaps we humans are hard-wired for Gecko appeal.

It wasn't just the usual suspects who came on the gecko hunt, there were new faces and a couple of families, including our leader, gecko expert, wildlife scientist Peter McDonald and his two children. At 7pm, in the last of the light, we gathered at the trail head of the Inarlange Bike Path on Kurrajong Drive, with a buzz in the air, friendly chatter, the sound of crickets, grasshoppers and children leaping through backlit buffel. A steep lumpy hill, and an even bumpier bike path ahead of us.

As the last cars arrived Peter garnered our attention and briefed us on what to expect: An approximately 3-kilometre walk, mostly in the dark, along designated mountain-bike paths to locations where he and his children has previously found geckos. He explained that he would locate them by detecting their 'eyeshine'. This being the light of his super head torch reflected off the back of their unusually large eyes, an adaptation for night vision. He said he would attempt to catch them in his hands and hold them for long enough for us to all see them. He assured us he was appropriately licenced for such activity. But I'm sure he was as surprised as we all were at the numbers and wondered, as we all did, how 30 people would have sufficient opportunity for a good look at a terrified gecko in his hand. He asked us to be quiet as we walked, as geckos are frightened by noise. Quite an ask for a Field Nats mob!



Off we head up the trails, and Peter McDonald with the first found gecko. Photos: Kylie Cowan.

So, into the heat of the evening, in failing light we set off up the big hill in single file, negotiating the rocky bike path, with Peter and his kids in the lead. It was not simple walking and many of us marvelled at the strength it would take to ride a bike up such a track. But unlike bike riders we had the chance to take in the lovely views as they revealed themselves: the darkening profile of the range, the streetlights of Kurrajong coming on below and a row of late lit pink clouds. This in itself was rewarding, just walking up a hill in the falling dark, taking it all in.

Excitement rippled down the line after about 20 minutes. Our first gecko! A Western beaked gecko, (*Rhynchoedura ornata*). We all filed past as Peter held it delicately between two fingers. Turning it over to determine its sex revealed a gravid female with 2 eggs on board. It was surprisingly small, about 10cm long, pale in colour with a delicate pattern and despite its name a seemingly short snout and of course large eyes. A definite tick for cuteness!



Despite no clear evidence of obvious eyeshine for us novices it wasn't long before Peter found another Western beaked gecko, also a pregnant female. Peter explained that they would be constantly reproducing during the hot summer months.

We reached the top of the ascent as the dark began to engulf us. The path became flatter and broadened out, winding through what seemed to me to be mulga, witchetty bush and tall buffel grass, seen only through the circle of the head torch. As we approached a rock wall, where Peter has frequently found geckos, we were asked to Shhh! We watched as his powerful light flickered over the rocks but no eye shine was revealed. So we walked on a little more quietly, chastened in case our chatter had yielded this disappointment.

Our first sighting, a Western beaked gecko (*Rhynchoedura ornata*) [Photo: Kylie Cowan]

But it wasn't long before another gecko was in hand. This time a Variable Dtella (*Gehyra versicolor*), the house gecko we are all familiar with, but in this instance, it was wearing the colours of the local rocks not our pale urban walls. Its underside was lighter however and when Peter turned it over two eggs could be clearly seen through its translucent skin. Apparently female geckos generally carry 2 eggs at a time.

Next thrill was a large hairy wolf spider, detected right on the walking path by its brilliant red eye shine. We all gathered around, blinding it with our torches while it scurried for its sheltering hole somewhere off the track. Interesting for sure but it wasn't a gecko. So, we continued the hunt through the entrancing dark bushland.

*Marg F notes: Somewhere around here, Peter also found this Spencer's burrowing frog (*Platyplectrum spenceri*).*

At last Peter produced what we had all hoped for, the Inland marbled velvet gecko! (*Oedura cincta*). Named for the softness of its scales, it was darker in colour than the previous gecko species, with a faint pattern on its back and again paler underbelly. This one was a male. It was larger, almost twice the size of the Western beaked geckos, and far more fierce than cute. After putting up quite a fuss about being captured it quickly latched onto Peter's finger and did not want to let go.



*Variable Dtella (*Gehyra versicolor*), seen at home [Photo: Marg Friedel]*



*Spencer's burrowing frog (*Platyplectrum spenceri*). [Photo: Kylie Cowan]*



*L: Inland marbled velvet gecko (*Oedura cincta*). [Photo: Kylie Cowan]*

R: Holding on tight! [Photo: Deb Clarke]



After the excitement of the velvet gecko, we were all starting to feel a bit weary, and I'm sure the velvet gecko was too. The group became more spread out along the now sandy trail, so some people missed out when another gecko was found further down the line, not by Peter himself. I was able to take a photo and Peter later identified it as a Variable fat-tailed gecko (or burrow-plug) gecko (*Diplodactylus conspicillatus*) [see next page for photo]. It was a tiny creature with a remarkably chubby tail which it apparently uses to plug the hole of its burrow, sometimes an abandoned spider hole. The word Snake! brought the straggling group to an excited bottleneck. Peter and his children were crouching down on the ground and in his hands was a very vigorous little snake, doing its very best to escape. Clearly non-venomous or he would not have been holding it, he explained it was a Unbanded shovel-nosed snake (*Brachyuropsis incinctus*). Not to be confused with the highly venomous juvenile brown snake. With a similar pale brown colour this snake however has distinct bands on its head. It hunts at night, its primary food source being lizard eggs. Clearly in good territory as we found such a high proportion of gravid female geckos.



*Variable fat-tailed gecko (or burrow-plug) gecko (*Diplodactylus conspicillatus*) [Photo: Deb Clarke]*



*Unbanded shovel-nosed snake (*Brachyurops incinctus*) [Photo: Deb Clarke]*

Finding a nocturnal snake was a grand finale for a Gecko Hunt. So as a more cohesive and careful group we began the descent down the rocky trail back to the carpark. There were no further adventures and thankfully no mishaps, which was quite remarkable considering the broad range of ability in the group. We all felt relieved and quite tired when we reached the bottom and gathered briefly to count heads. All accounted for, we expressed our delight and thanks for this wonderful nocturnal adventure. No better way to spend a hot summer night!



Marg also notes that the evening brought opportunities for a spectacular web display! Too small for a golden orb spider, but spectacular, nonetheless. [Photo: Kylie Cowan].

Heading back down the trail with finds of geckos, snakes, spiders and frogs on our minds. [Photo Kylie Cowan].



A walk along Regent's Canal, London

Life in one of the world's largest cities

Report by Lisa McLean

Peter and I were fortunate to spend Christmas in London, and one of our favourite things to do whenever we visit that extraordinary city is to walk the canals.

While it was close to freezing, it was a very enjoyable afternoon with a variety of bird – and other – life also enjoying the afternoon. While these birds are quite common, and squirrels rather pesky, to these eyes they were a real delight.



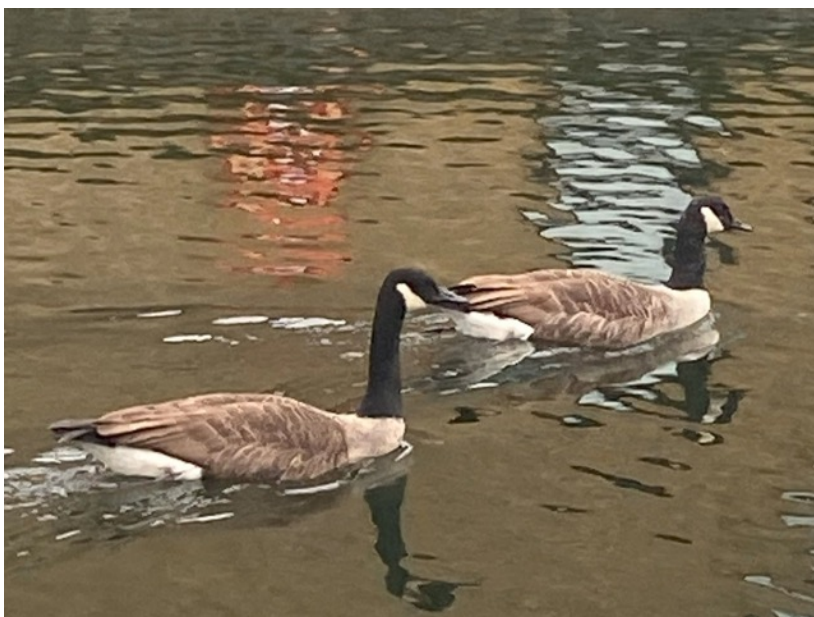
*Seen as a bit of a pest by London residents, it's hard to resist the cuteness of the grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)*



*This bird reminded me of a Willy Wagtail on steroids, my phone identifies it as a Eurasian magpie (*Pica pica*)*



*An English classic, the mute swan (*Cygnus olor*)*



*Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*), native to North America, but prevalent across many parts of Europe.*



*Common coot (*Fulica atra*) found across many parts of Europe, and Australia!*



Egyptian goose (Alopochen aegyptiaca), considered sacred by the Ancient Egyptians and appearing in much of their artwork; feral populations have become established worldwide.



Appropriate street art along the banks of the canal.

Happy new year to all members, family and friends of the ASFNC!



The club ended the year with a bang for sure, with a damp, but cheery, Christmas breakfast at Telegraph Station. The Todd River even ran for a few hours, to add to our enjoyment. Thanks to all who came along in the cold, we look well rugged up for Winter! Thanks to Marg Friedel and Suzanne Lollback for the photos.