



July 2024

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Purple flowers from the sandhill native fuchsia (*Eremophila willsii*) contrast with the orange tones of Rainbow Valley's ancient Hermannsburg Sandstone. Photo: Patrick Nelson

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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📘 Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

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

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Wednesday 7th July – 7.00pm. *To Bowra and the Gulf: travels through the NT and Queensland.* Neil and Leigh Woolcock
Saturday 13th July—time to be confirmed. Field trip to Cassia Hill and nearby dam, led by Wendy Mactaggart.

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY—ALICE SPRINGS

No meeting this month due to the Alice Springs Show. Come down and see what's on offer at the APS stall site! This year's site theme is *Eremophila*.

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Committee Members

President	Marg Friedel	0417 489 743
Vice President	To be appointed	
Secretary	Lisa McLean	0412 642 987
Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	0428 521 598
Property Officer	Jill Brew	0437 223 203

General Members

Kylie Cowan	0418 477 450
Peter McDonald	0427 177 450
Wendy Mactaggart	0434 495 903

Public Officer

Anne Pye	0438 388 012
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Other Club Responsibilities

Newsletter—Lisa McLean
Facebook—Meg Mooney moon3@iinet.net.au
Website—position vacant

Positions Vacant

See the piece at the bottom of this page about how you can continue the important (and fun!) work of the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club, established in January 1978.

Thank you

Thanks to all contributors toward this month's newsletter: Jill Brew, Leigh Woolcock, Patrick Nelson, Connie Spencer, Kylie Cowan

Welcome new members

While there were no new members this month, be sure to tell your non-ASFNC members friends about the Club and the great activities and meetings the Club holds. Or, if you're at the next meeting and see an unfamiliar face, be sure to welcome them and introduce yourself.

Nominations for the ASFNC Committee—an important message from Club President, Marg Friedel

We are less than two months away from the ASFNC AGM, and I want to encourage you to think about who you would like to have on the Committee, well in advance of the AGM. The current Committee is noted above, as well as other Club responsibilities (non-elected but needed to be renegotiated each year).

I won't be standing for President again due to personal commitments, made rather more challenging due to the lack of a Vice-President. Please don't assume that current Committee members will wish to continue, although I hope they might.

This means that you, the Club members who are the backbone of the Club and make our events a success by turning up in numbers, need to consider whether you would like to contribute just a bit more by becoming a Committee member or by nominating someone. There will be at least two vacancies created by me leaving and by the lack of a Vice-President.

Please help to refresh the Committee by being willing to be nominated or by nominating someone - don't leave it to everyone else, if you value what the Club does.

A nomination form was distributed on 19/6/2024, however if you'd like to be emailed it again, please contact Lisa lisamclean@outlook.com

Thank you.

Pitchi Richi historic records

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Speaker Night—12 June 2024

Report by Jill Brew /Photos Rhondda Tomlinson

Pitchi Richi, on the southern outskirts of town, has been fond familiar territory to the Field Naturalists Club over many years. It's a place where excursions (as recently as November last year) have been taken, working bees worked on behalf of Heritage Alice Springs (a 2009 Field Nats newsletter article notes the ever-encroaching buffel grass, (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) and social gatherings enjoyed).

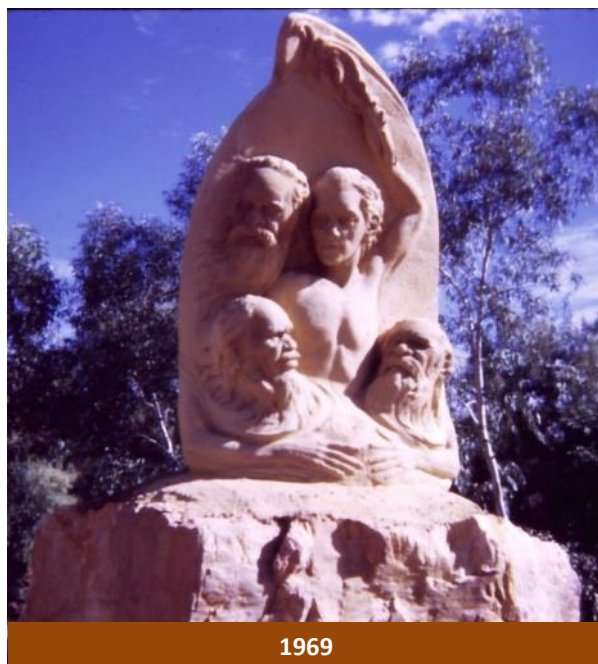
Information below has come from a few sources. Alex Nelson, as caretaker, outlined the history of Pitchi Richi sanctuary, some humorous sidelights, and its current condition after fire and buffel management. (Alex is thorough in his research. Any mistakes and shortcomings in this writeup are not his.) A former member of Field Nats, Rhondda Tomlinson, had a particular interest in Pitchi Richi, and kept records and photos of it over time. Marg Friedel was able to draw on these in the second part of the presentation, and give some surprising detail on the 1940s lead-up to the creation of the William Ricketts sculptures that Pitchi Richi is famous for.

Alex noted Pitchi Richi is derived from Arrernte, an English translation being 'come and look/visit' (Source: Pat Miller). 'Pearly Gates' was its name under Charles Chapman, who set up there in 1944 after successfully establishing the Granites goldmine, and built the eye-catching two-storey house, but the present name came from Leo Corbet, taking over the holding after his friend Chapman died in 1955.

Corbet established a 'wild-bird' sanctuary on the 12 acre property. It was a year before Olive Pink in 1956 established the Australian Arid Regions Floral Reserve – on grazed land a little further north along the Todd River bank – that would become the 40 acre Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Alex noted these two conservation areas were forerunners of the parks and reserves system in the Northern Territory. (Pitchi Richi was heritage-listed in December 2008 after a strenuous and dogged campaign. Three months later, Olive Pink Botanic Garden received heritage listing too.)

Leo Corbet in the 50s 'saw the tourism wave coming to Central Australia'. He collected together geological and historical artifacts for a 'man-made tourist attraction' (i.e. not the stunning landscape) in his sanctuary, with an open-air museum/showcase of exhibits offering insights in to pioneering life, animal-based transportation, as well as the attractions of plants, birds and animals in the sanctuary. He also offered insights into aspects of Indigenous life and worldview, with demonstrations of tools and weapons.

There was an art side of the sanctuary too. Painting exhibitions were held there occasionally. Most importantly for Pitchi Richi today, Corbet was on good terms with ceramic sculptor William Ricketts, who had travelled from Melbourne to Central Australia in the 1940s for the purpose of finding Aboriginal models and motifs for his figures. From 1955, Ricketts was able to



Some of Leo Corbet's exhibits, featuring Elsa Corbet's hand painted signs

permanently display twenty sculptures based on Central Australian figures/models in Pitchi Richi. (Ricketts can be easily identified in some sculptures, but names of his other models were not recorded.) His Dandenong forested property in Victoria displayed the rest (the bulk) of the sculptures depicting Central Australian figures.

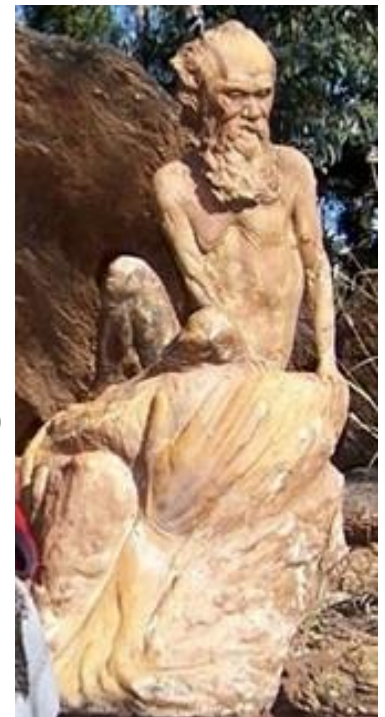
One of the 'four must-see' tourist attractions of the 60s, with links to past ways of life in Central Australia, Pitchi Richi lost visitors as more attractions opened up. Only a few of the historical artifacts still remain in good condition, apart from the sculptures, set among trees on the property. The long history of dedicated effort and rehabilitation work, including by Elsa Corbet, who supported the sanctuary (her hundreds of interpretive signs were a feature) and survived her husband Leo, has not been able to keep the sanctuary viable and functioning. It closed permanently in 2000.

People have forgotten what it is, and how it was. Despite working bees and open days, and some grant funding won by concerned citizens, finance has not been sufficient to maintain and renew the displays. (Remnants of exhibits like a mighty old timber wagon, bread ovens and a giant timber spool to hold extended rope used in drilling exceptionally deep for water, still give an idea of the enormity of human effort that made things happen.) Volunteers working with Alex more recently have continued to control buffel, prune trees and do restoration work, but Pitchi Richi's future continues to be doubtful and worriedly discussed.

But... seventeen of the original Ricketts sculptures are still there. They are the most arresting feature of Pitchi Richi, despite weathering and vandalism attacking them. ('The Rainmaker' was smashed, but the pieces have been kept).

Marg, with the material supplied by Rhondra Tomlinson, was able to flesh out the background to the extraordinary mission/s Mr Ricketts came on to get the material he wanted to work on: Aboriginal models. Permission from the Director of Native Affairs in Darwin to venture 'out bush' in Central Australia to find local models was sought in 1941 via enquiry to TGH (Ted) Strehlow, who passed it up the line. A 'queer type of fellow', 'helpless' and 'I would be a bit anxious about him being alone at Haasts Bluff' wrote back The Director of Native Affairs, Ernest William Pearson Chinnery, from Darwin, in November 1941.

'An outstanding modeller in clay', whose work 'captures the spirit of the Australian bush... and ...to a large extent, the atmosphere of aboriginal folklore,' wrote Jay Creek patrol officer Strehlow to Mr Chinnery. Strehlow wanted to assist a sculptor he admired but also firmly believed to be 'totally inexperienced as to living conditions out bush.' Following consultation, he advised Ricketts to go to Hermannsburg, Ernabella or Jay Creek to find models, as 'costs' would 'be half the price' of Haasts Bluff.



Above: The Rainmaker—June 2010

Below: Just a month later July 2010



*The Sanctuary
Mt Dandenong
Dec 9th 41*

Dear Mr Strehlow

Very many thanks for your letter of 7th 6 October. I am looking forward to the permit being granted. As soon as I hear from you to say the permit is granted, I shall get in touch with Hermannsburg about the hire of camels. I have had a great deal of camping from a very early age. Also I am able to cook food from a very early age. I do not eat meat so there should be no trouble to get all I wanted. I will come up about the middle of May as you said it is the best time for travelling.

I am truly
Yours truly
William Ricketts

Alice

*The Sanctuary
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Very many thanks for your letter of 7th October. I am looking forward to the permit being granted. As soon as I hear from you to say the permit is granted, I shall get in touch with Hermannsburg about the hire of camels.

I have had a great deal of camping from a very early age. Also I am able to cook food that would please anyone. I do not eat meat so there should be not much trouble to get all I wanted. I will come up about the middle of May as you said it is the best time for travelling.

May I send my good wishes at this Christmas time.

I am,
Yours truly
William Ricketts

Happy Ricketts received a permit, assured Strehlow he would organize hiring camels at Hermannsburg, that he was a good cook and, as he didn't eat meat, 'there should be not much trouble to get all I wanted' (Dec 1941). Eventually, Ricketts came with his 'half- hundredweight of clay', and the results can be seen still at Pitchi Richi. These are what Pitchi Richi is 'famous for'.

Marg's presentation moved on to the sculptures (including the Rainmaker – now in pieces) and photos recording some of the museum exhibits, the history of determined community support for keeping Pitchi Richi, the cheerful volunteers on working bees, and Field Nats on excursions and celebratory occasions, rounding off the evening.

From my perspective, William Ricketts seems to have stirred diverse opinions in the past as well as now. He appeared eccentric. He incorporated himself into many of his sculptures, conveying the impression that he had a special relationship with Aboriginal people and nature, a message that does not sit comfortably with many people. On the other hand, the sculptures as artistic works clearly have standing, and are valuable assets for Pitchi Richi. In 2017, conservator Isabelle Waters recommended provision of interpretive information that gives 'an understanding of the sculptures in their time and place'.

Many thanks to Alex, Marg and (by proxy) Rhondra for presenting and contributing their knowledge and memories of Pitchi Richi. It is still very much in the thoughts of the Alice Springs community. 🍂

References

Correspondence from TGHS 7 Nov 1941: from EWPC undated (Nov 1941?); from WR Dec 9 1941.

<https://alicespringsnews.com.au/2017/10/09/saving-reopening-pitchi-richi-another-step-forward/>



Williams Ricketts' sculptures—2005



First sound recording of the Tanami Toadlet at Newhaven Sanctuary!

Kylie Cowan

Many of you will be familiar with the popular [FrogID](#) app, a useful and free resource to identify and record frog calls as part of one big national citizen science project. In recent news, the Australian Museum who developed the FrogID app and are responsible for verifying all submissions, shared their 'Frog of the Month', the Tanami Toadlet (*Uperoleia micromeles*). This small desert-dwelling species was first described to science in 1981... and has only just had its call recorded close to home at Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, 43 years later! Earlier this year after significant rainfall in Central Australia and Newhaven's third wettest month on record, Dr Tim Henderson and the team from the Australian Wildlife Conservancy tracked down the frog and had the exciting privilege of submitting the first ever sound recording of its call.



Tanami Toadlet (*Uperoleia micromeles*)



Sparkling claypan full of water—and maybe a Tanami Toadlet or two

Growing to just 4cm the distribution of the Tanami Toadlet extends across the Tanami and Great Sandy Deserts in the NT and WA. They are not closely related to toads, but bumpy skin is a feature of the 28 species in their genus, *Uperoleia*. They are known to share burrows with the larger Desert Spade-foot Toad.

In a claypan full of water, the AWC team heard a distinctive call, one that was different from the frogs they had heard regularly before. They pinpointed the call and recorded it with their smart phone using the FrogID app. It matched the toadlet's call and was confirmed by the Australian Museum. You can listen to it yourself on [YouTube](#) or by downloading the [app](#). 🦎

Sources:

- Frog ID News, May 2024, Australian Museum
- Call of tiny desert-dwelling frog recorded for first time (australianwildlife.org)

Arltunga field trip—16 June 2024

Words Connie Spencer / Photos Connie Spencer, Marg Friedel & Leigh Woolcock



Arltunga holds a special affinity for me as in some ways it set in motion the course my life has taken. I was a young single 25-year-old in the winter of 1971, working as a house maid at the YWCA on Stuart Tce, Alice Springs. My roommate Ann, an exchange teacher from the UK, had the opportunity to go to a *Back To Arltunga* weekend where she met a young SAATAS pilot called Doug who as it turned out had a flatmate called Stan. Later that week I happened to answer the only phone in the residence. The caller, Doug, invited Ann to a movie night at his flat and asked her to bring that Canadian girl he had been talking to in order to make a foursome with his mate Stan. The rest is history! Stan & I married in August 1972 and built our life together here in Alice Springs.



Gidgee (*Acacia georginae*)

Enough of that sentimental stuff! Our first stop – a Gidgee Grove on the Ross Hwy near the turn off to N'Dhala Gorge. The Gidgees (*Acacia georginae*) weren't flowering but, still an impressive grove and always worth a wander. Of more interest this time were the hills behind the Gidgee where Hill Umbrella Bush (*Acacia bivenosa*) was in full flower as well as several *Senna* species. A valley between the hills was very alluring but we decided to leave that trek for another time and continued on to Arltunga.

After a stop for morning tea at the campground and a tour of the Arltunga Bush Pub renovations with Belinda it was on to the Visitor Centre and lunch. As time was marching-on we decided to give the Government Works a miss and headed to Joker Gorge.

What a treat we were in for - a true botanical spectacular with the hillsides as a backdrop. Once again, we were seeing a variety of *Sennas* fully adorned with yellow buttercup flowers as well as several *Acacias* with long yellow tassel flowers or globular buds. Blue-flowered Dolomite Fuchsia (*Eremophila christophori*) and the low growing *Scaevola* species (possibly *glabrata*) always a stand-out amongst so much yellow not to mention the red-flowered Holly-leaf Grevillea (*Grevillea wickhamii*). And then, to top it all off within the gorge a magnificent specimen of Showy Indigo (*Indigofera basedowii*) with its long racemes of pink flowers.

As always, good times must come to an end and we headed home ever so happy having spent a euphoric (it was for me) day out with plants and friends.

Thank you to Neil and Leigh for leading the trip, to Marg for inviting me to travel with her and to Tassie Bob.

For information on the Arltunga Bush Pub and Eco Retreat go to www.arltunga.com.au 🍂

Blue-flowered Dolomite Fuchsia
(*Eremophila christophori*)



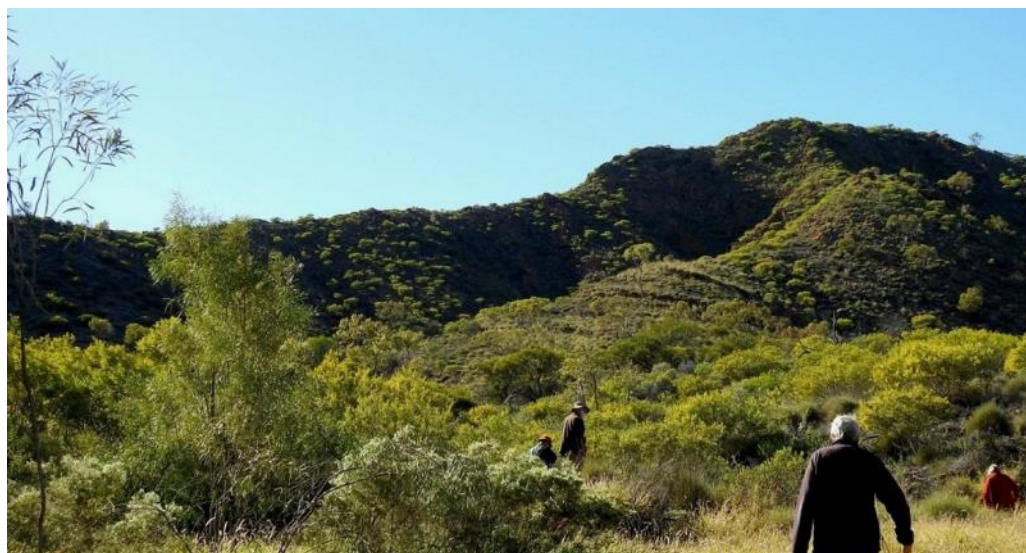
Holly Grevillea (*Grevillea wickhamii*)



Showy Indigo (*Indigofera basedowii*)



Senna sp.



Sennas and *Acacia bivenosa* behind the Gidgee grove



Acacia macdonnellensis

Photos from a recent visit

Patrick Nelson

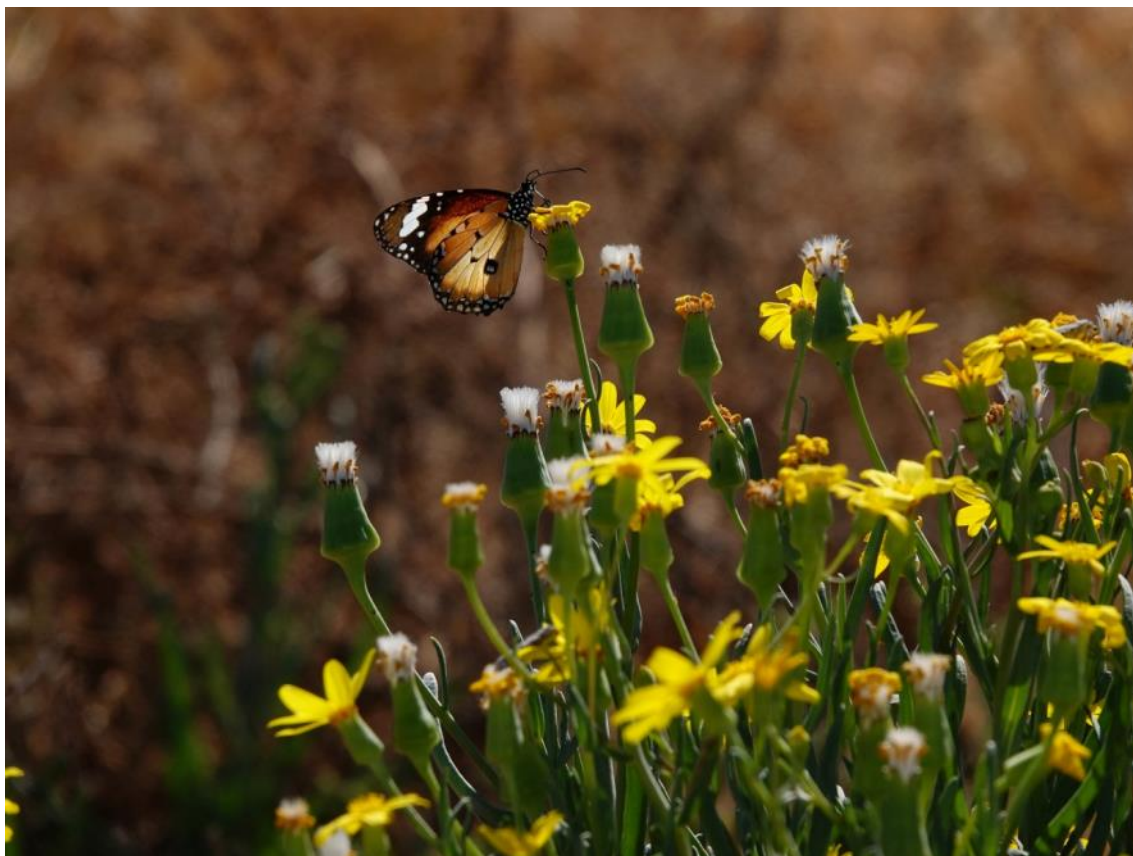
Patrick Nelson made a brief trip to Central Australia during May and has shared some fabulous images taken during that time. While here he visited Rainbow Valley, Owen Springs Reserve and the Ewaninga claypan. While his primary interests were arthropods and trace fossils, he has a new interest in early terrestrial plants, such as bryophytes. As such, he reports he was thrilled to find the liverwort, which *iNaturalist* suggests is *Riccia inflexa* (though, he's not convinced it is—what do you think?). 🌿



A liverwort; possibly *Riccia inflexa* at Ewaninga



A trilobite *Rusophycus* trace fossil from the Pacoota Sandstone, Lawrence Gorge, OSR.



[above] A lesser wanderer butterfly (*Danaus petilia*) on yellow top daisies (*Senecio gregorii*) on the main track through Owen Springs Reserve.

[right] A droplet of rain takes on the colour of beer as it makes its way to the end of a blue mallee (*Eucalyptus gamophylla*) capsule at Ewaninga.

Thank you again Patrick for sharing these amazing photos with the ASFNC. 🍂





**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD
NATURALISTS CLUB
SPEAKER NIGHT**

**Wednesday 10 July 2024 7.00pm
at Olive Pink Botanic Garden**

Neil and Leigh Woolcock

***To Bowra and the Gulf:
travels through the NT and
Queensland***

**Please join us for Neil's and
Leigh's talk, and for supper
afterwards**

Visitors welcome