



August 2024

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Susie's Lake. One of the magnificent photos from Marg Friedel's recent trip to Newhaven. See page 6 for more photos and an article about her trip.

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 September 2024**.  
We appreciate all contributions, articles, and photos both local and from elsewhere.  
Please have them to Lisa McLean [lisamclean@outlook.com](mailto:lisamclean@outlook.com) by **20 August 2024**.

#### ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

**Wednesday 14th August – 7.00pm. ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING** of the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club. This will be followed by Members' night. Please bring stories and pictures, a natural history item or a book to share.

During August we'll visit Spencer Valley (or somewhere just as good) with Sue Morrish. Date / time to be advised.

#### AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY—ALICE SPRINGS

**Wednesday 7th August—7.00 pm.** Attracting birds to your garden. *Bec Duncum will talk about how you can attract birds to your garden using central Australian plants.*

**Sunday 4th August—2.00pm.** Enjoy the flora between Blatherskite and Arumbera Ranges. Leaving from the Information Bay opposite Old Timers. Come earlier to register.

#### 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

Calling for nominations for your Committee, including the position of President, Vice President, so the important (and fun!) work of the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club can continue.

**AGM—7.00PM 14TH August 2024**

#### Thank you

Thanks to all contributors toward this month's newsletter: Jill Brew, Marg Friedel, Anne Pye, Julie Taylor, and Neil & Leigh Woolcock.

#### Welcome new members

No new members this month. It's time to tell your friends who aren't a part of Field Nats, what a great club it is!

#### Annual subscriptions are now due

Family \$35 / Family concession \$30 / Individual \$25 / Individual concession @ \$20. Members living interstate—newsletter only \$10. Subscription year is 1 August—31 July. Westpac details: BSB: 035303 / Acc: 100981. Include your name as a reference on the transaction.



Spectacular photos of Boowinda Gorge. Just two of the photos from Neil and Leigh Woolcock's presentation at July's Member night

## To Bowra and the Gulf: Travels through the NT and Queensland—Neil & Leigh Woolcock

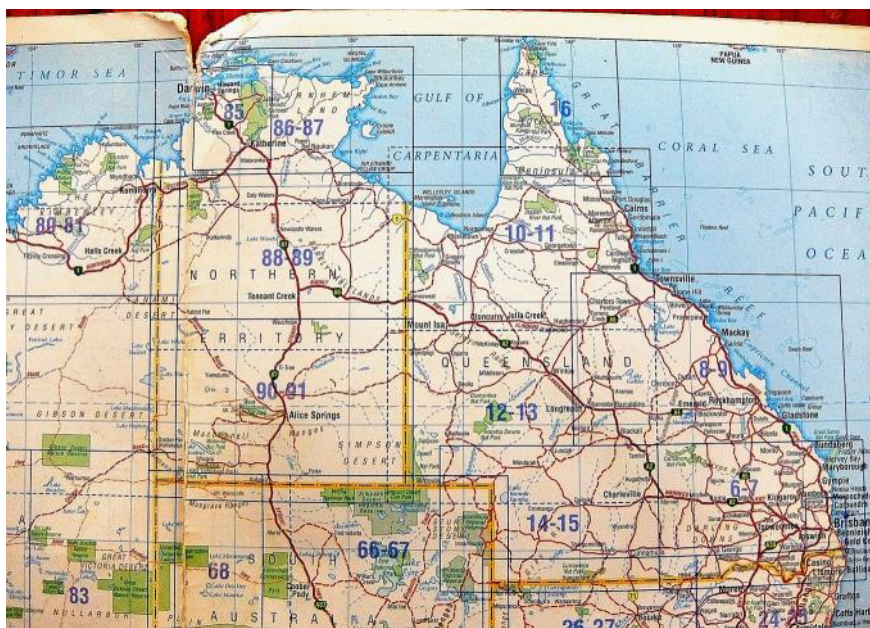
Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Speaker Night—10 July 2024

Report by Julie Taylor, Neil & Leigh Woolcock & Lisa McLean

Back in May, Neil and Leigh embarked on a long journey east, then south, then north to tour through vast areas of Queensland. Initially it looked like their plans may have been thwarted. The plan was to cross the Plenty Highway to the Queensland border, then continue east on the Donohue Highway before turning south at Barcaldine with Bowra Wildlife Sanctuary near Cunnamulla as the first destination. However heavy rains in March had resulted in the closure of the Plenty and Donohue Highways, as well as the alternative northern route of the Barkly Highway. Eventually, as waters receded the Plenty Highway reopened early in April, but not the Donohue to Boulia. The Barkly also reopened mid-

April, but only for 3 hours each way per day. Fortunately the Donohue Highway was finally opened late in April so with that route option back on the table they took off to spend many hours travelling through outback landscapes while making a spectacular collection of photographs: of country, birds, more birds, creatures and more birds. They presented a truly wonderful show to us on this Member's Speaker night.

The Plenty Highway had its usual stretches of bulldust and sharp stones, but was in remarkably good condition after the rains. It is now bitumen to Harts Range, then about 130km of dirt to Jervois station. Previous visits have had them feeling Jervois was the 'Fly Capital of Australia', but this time the flies were not too bad, making it a good place to stop for a lunch break.



Neil and Leigh shared their route via this treasured old-school map. Who needs Google Maps!

### Australian Hobby (*Falco longipennis*) — Tobermorey



Another 220km of dirt brings you to Tobermorey Station, about 15km west of the Queensland border, and a good place to stop for the night.

Tobermorey has been flooded several times in recent years and they have tried to protect the station with levee banks. You can see levee banks built over time. The first obviously was too low and presumably failed. Then a higher one was put up and this also proved too low. Now there is a massive new one recently constructed. Time will tell if this one is ever topped, but it would take a huge flood to do it.

Onwards to the border where the Plenty Highway becomes the Donohue. The road has stretches of bitumen and dirt, but was in good condition, although flood waters up to the edge of the road were still present in many sections. As they neared Boulia they passed their first vehicle since leaving Harts Range – a road train heading west.

On to Boulia where they refuelled, then the old pub at Middleton (check out the movie Goldstone with Jackie Weaver that was filmed at Middleton) and where they passed a vehicle broken down by the side of the road. The story was that he had refuelled at Boulia from the same pump Neil and Leigh had used, and then found water in his fuel. A bit of a concern, but perhaps he had sucked out all the water because Neil and Leigh had no problems. On again to Winton, Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Augathella, Charleville and finally Cunnamulla and Bowra Wildlife Sanctuary.



[L] Photographing Hall's Babblers (*Pomatostomus halli*) — and [R] the bird in question

You have to pre-book to camp at Bowra and be fully self sufficient. There are roads heading off from the homestead into various habitats which make for good and varied bird and other wildlife watching. Volunteers manage the sanctuary and conduct bird sighting meetings each evening. Usually the tally is about 70 species. Their best sighting was Halls babblers (*Pomatostomus halli*).

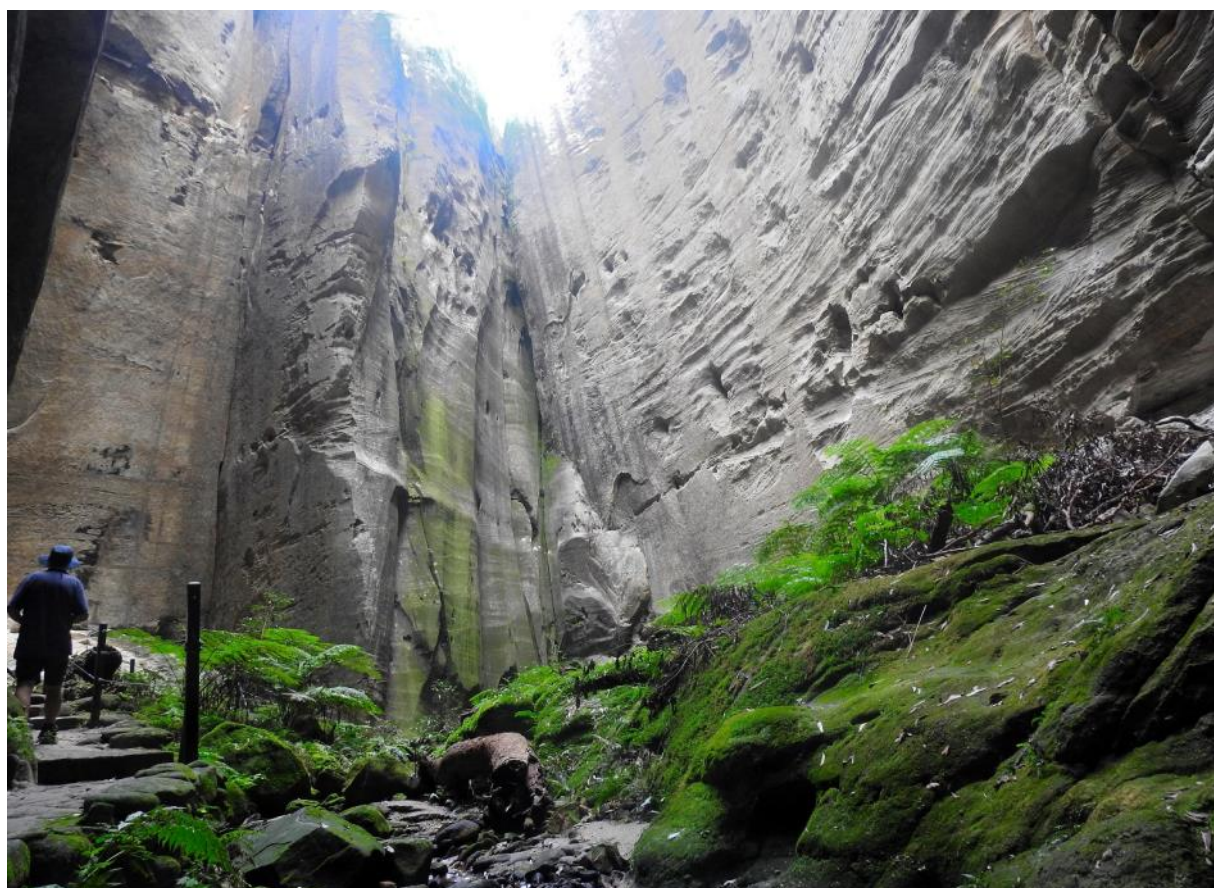


The art gallery at Carnarvon Gorge

From Bowra they headed about 600km north to Morven, Mitchell and Injune to Carnarvon Gorge National Park with its amazing huge, narrow rock crevices, moss and ferns gullies and cliffs. Allow at least 3 days to get the best out of this incredible national park.

Then north again through Emerald, Clermont (the worst Chinese restaurant in Australia), Belyando Crossing and Charters Towers to Townsville and then Balgal Beach to stay with friends. Interesting floating stinger net set up that was also seen at several beaches further north.

Then on to Ingham and the wonderful Tyto wetlands, Tully, Innisfail and Cairns to visit their son who is an



Amphitheatre — Carnarvon Gorge



Little kingfisher (*Alcedo pusilla*)  
Cattana Wetlands



Azure kingfisher (*Alcedo azurea*) — Ingham



Lewin's honeyeaters (*Meliphaga lewinii*) —  
Eacham



Sarus cranes (*Grus antigone*) — Normanton



Brolga (*Grus rubicunda*) — Boulia

intensive care nurse at Cairns hospital. Yorkeys Knob, just north of Cairns, has the Cattana Wetlands where they got good photos of a little kingfisher (*Alcedo pusilla*). Then south west into the Atherton Tablelands to Lake Eacham where Victoria's riflebirds (*Ptiloris victoriae*) and spotted catbirds (*Ailuroedus maculosus*) fight over bits of fruit with Lewin's honeyeaters (*Meliphaga lewinii*) and other tropical forest birds.

Further south through Millaa Millaa where the rain never stops, and then west to Ravenshoe and Mount Garnet where elusive squatter pigeons (*Geophaps scripta*) were photographed pottering around on the caravan park lawns. Then past the Undara Lava Tube national park to Georgetown, Croydon and Normanton.

Wonderful wetlands near the Norman River, with brolgas (*Grus rubicunda*) and sarus cranes (*Grus antigone*), magpie geese (*Anseranas semipalmata*), egrets and many others.

Then south to Burke and Wills Roadhouse and Cloncurry, and west past Mary Kathleen uranium mine with its incredible blue lake in the old mine pit.

Then Mt. Isa and the Georgina River at Camooweal. This is an incredible sight after rains, with water lilies and hundreds of waterbirds including flocks of nankeen night herons, Pacific herons, egrets and more.

Then continuing west past the Barkly Homestead to Tennant Creek, and finally south again to Alice Springs and home.

A worthwhile itinerary for anyone considering an interesting and varied road trip with ample rewards of scenery and bird watching.

The most difficult part of this newsletter was choosing the accompanying photos. A most spectacular presentation, presented with humour, in Neil and Leigh's inimitable style. Thank you both. 🐦



Mary Kathleen was a mining settlement in north-western Queensland, located in the Selwyn Range between Mount Isa and Cloncurry.

## Newhaven after rain

Marg Friedel

Heavy rains before Easter brought new growth in abundance to central Australia after some very hot summer months. Newhaven was no exception. By mid-May the wildflowers and grasses were flourishing. On the roadside approaching Newhaven we (Suzanne Lollback, Wendy Mactaggart, Connie Spencer and me) were attracted by stretches of *Scaevola* sp., *Lechenaultia lutescens*, various *Solanum* species and numerous flowering shrubs, and stops were frequent. Once in the Conservancy, there were continuous delights awaiting us over several days, including lakes brimming with water, prolific shrubs and herbs, and lush grass growth. Not so delightful was the increasing presence of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*), encroaching on roadsides, lake margins and a bluegrass (*Dichanthium sericeum*) swamp at Tecticornia Lake.

Susie's Lake [see photo on the front cover] was 2 metres deep in water, Bottleneck Lake was seething with invertebrates in the shallows and Swan Lake was home to hundreds of waterbirds.



*Scaevola* sp.



Fairy circle near Mt Gurner

Notably, despite the pre-Easter rains and follow up rain, there was little sign of mulga germination in the extensive stands of mulga that had died in the extreme heat and dry of 2019. The undergrowth was otherwise thick with grasses and forbs, so the potential for loss of any mulga regeneration to fire was high. Perhaps, on the other hand, a fire might stimulate germination. We will have to wait and see.

Local wildlife was plentiful. A grey falcon (*Falco hypoleucos*) made a slow circle over our campsite one morning, giving us a clear view. It had been seen in the area earlier and seemed unfazed by human activity, taking a close look at us before gliding silently away. Major Mitchell cockatoos (*Lophochroa leadbeateri*) also came visiting and are a familiar sight around the

campground and worksite. While they are also called 'pink cockatoos', that name seems unhelpful as it also evokes galahs. The AWC camp host, having learnt of our interest in ecology generally, brought a spectacularly large beetle (unnamed) for us to admire one morning. At the smaller end of the scale, I was very taken by the sight of tiny frogs (also unnamed), about 2 cm long, ducking for cover under grass tussocks on a damp lake margin. Their habitat appeared to be terrestrial rather than aquatic.

As a result of the exceptional rains, parts of the Siddeley Range tour road had been badly damaged and the route was closed. That still left four other routes to explore, all yielding their particular treasures. Newhaven rewards its visitors with something new on every trip. Make sure you include it in your travel plans! 🦋 (Photos continue over the page.)



A formidable beetle



A very small frog



Tracks of shield shrimps on receding shoreline at Bottleneck Lake



Lake Bennett



*Marsilea exarata* near Mt Gurner

*Vicetoxicum lineare*—Bush bean



*Vicetoxicum lineare*— buds and flowers



Ghosts of ephemeral floodwaters

## Cassia Hill walk—13th July

Jill Brew

What could be better than a crisp sunny morning's walk up a not-too-steep hill with spectacular views, flowering shrubbery, and knowledgeable interested companions? a) Morning tea with chocolate-chia gluten-free slice? or b) the surprise of a hidden man-made land feature offering scads of new close-to-town bird-viewing possibilities, only a short distance from the familiar road on the way back home? Lucky us, we didn't have to choose: we had them all on Wendy Mactaggart's Cassia Hill itinerary.

Wendy had prepared well, but everyone was able to contribute knowledge on the day. Marg found no end of things to point out and consider, and we were drawn in to stories and observation, histories of ideas, discoveries and new appreciation.

Not surprisingly, it was a colourful walk up Cassia Hill! I remember the close proximity of three subspecies of Cassia at one point on the track. There was Desert Cassia\* (*Senna artemisioides* subsp. *alicia*), Silver Cassia (*Senna artemisioides* subsp. *artemisioides*) and Blunt-leaf Cassia (*Senna artemisioides* subsp. *helmsii*). Big leafy mounds topped with purple flowers (*Eremophila freelingii*, in top form) and the red flowers of the Native Fuchsia (*Eremophila latrobei* subsp. *glabra*) stood out. Both are medicinal plants, I understand. Charming (yes!) slews of fluffy low-growing purply-pink *Ptilotus* (*P. helipteroides*) showed up in the sun on the way down.

We shared morning tea before Wendy took us on to something 'extra'.

Two things that really stuck in my mind's eye after the morning: the explanatory 'An Ancient Landscape' sign at the top of Cassia Hill, drawing the connections between the past outline of the landscape's forms and the present living landscape in front of us; and the spreading emerald-red palette of massed tiny resurgent plant life taking over the damp earth after the level had dropped at the shallow end of a dam. Yes, that dam was a super surprise! Who would have guessed?

Thanks, Wendy, for organizing a beautiful and informative walk. 🦋

\*Desert Cassia is also the common name for *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *fili-folia* – common names can be confusing!



Girija, Marg, Michelle, Jill and Wendy on the dam wall (Photo: Julie Taylor)



View from Cassia Hill, looking east (Photo: Anne Pye)



*Ptilotus* (*P. helipteroides*) (Photo: Anne Pye)

## Cassia Hill Walk—part two

Marg Friedel

Wendy's Cassia Hill walk included an opportunity for bird watching at a dam about 500 m north of the old station homestead, now the Simpsons Gap workshop and living area.

Curiosity got the better of me and I began asking around amongst long term associates of Simpsons Gap – what was the history of the dam? There was a suggestion that it related to the time when the Larapinta Trail was being built in the 1990s. Other suggestions were that it was a stock water supply, a household water supply or a flood levee, dating back to the 1970s or earlier.



Remaining water in the dam, after earlier rains. Note the T-pipe in the water, left mid-ground enlargement (Photo: Marg Friedel)

Prior to Simpsons Gap being gazetted as part of the NT Reserves Board estate, Bob Darken owned it, and was running it as a cattle station. Cattle were removed in the late 1960s and Bob became the first ranger at the new Park. Rod Cramer remembers he, his brother Lance and their father working on various jobs around the homestead in 1972-3, through contracts with the Reserves Board. One job was moving an overhead tank and stand from the Old Telegraph Station in early '72 and re-erecting it just outside the northeast corner of the homestead garden fence. Another was removing the stockyard from 100 m north of the homestead, probably in '73; Lance did this on his own, at the age of 15.

Rod said "I recall going for a drive to have a look at that dam with Dad and Bob in Bob's grey Land Rover ute. There weren't all the trees about it then, but I don't think we were looking at a very new dam, and I think it was nearly, if not completely empty. This may well have been before the '72 Reserve Board contracts". He thought that that the

dam was installed for Bob, to water the stock at the yard near the homestead. Others have suggested that water was used on the garden, which may well have been the case after the installation of the overhead tank in '72. Des Nelson remembered seeing the dam around 1971.

Examining a Google map, Lance noted that the dam appeared to have been constructed with a silt trap, confirming it was intended to be a dam, and definitely not a levee bank.

In the absence of access to early (1950s and 1960s) air photos, it's not possible to be specific about the



Nardoo (*Marselia drummondii*) with enlargement of sporocarp (Photo: Jill Brew)



*Ptilotus helipteroides* (Photo: Jill Brew)

construction date, except to say it was built in the 1960s or earlier. The presence of a T-pipe at a low point in the dam indicates that water was piped out, although it seems that the water was fairly ephemeral. It proved to be the case when we visited – the waterbirds had left, but we were able to appreciate the budgies and black-faced cuckoo-shrikes instead.

There was plenty to enjoy, as Jill's article suggests. Julie noticed a lone bright green plant in amongst the leaf and bark litter under the river gums, which turned out to be nardoo: *Marsilea drummondii*, with sporocarps on longish peduncles (stems). On close examination, we could see that older leaflets were relatively hairless, while the younger ones were densely hairy. Where the water had recently receded, as Jill describes, we found plenty of young nardoo plants, looking almost blueish due to the dense hairiness of the developing leaflets.

Many thanks to Des Nelson, Chris Day, Peter Latz, Dave Albrecht and Rod Cramer for responding to my questions about the history of the dam.

If you'd like to read more about nardoo, see [https://alicefieldnaturalists.org.au/23\\_06.pdf](https://alicefieldnaturalists.org.au/23_06.pdf). 🦋



White Paper Daisy (*Rhodanthe floribunda*)  
(Photo: Julie Taylor)



*Ptilotus* (*P. xerophilus*) (Photo: Julie Taylor)