



October 2024

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*).  
Photo by Max Rittner, taken at the Alice Springs Desert Park.

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 November 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 October 2024**.

#### ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

**Wednesday 9th October – 7.00pm.** Phill Mangion will present a talk about reptiles and his experience as a zoo keeper and wildlife officer over the years. Olive Pink Botanic Garden meeting room.

#### AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY—ALICE SPRINGS

**Wednesday 2nd October —7.00 pm.** Acacia, (and other plants) and raptors (and other birds) between Tennant Creek and Mount Isa. Presented by the staff of Low Ecological Services P/L. Olive Pink Botanic Garden meeting room.

#### Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Committee Members

President	Vacant	
Vice President	Vacant	
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—Kylie Cowan

#### Positions Vacant

The positions of President and Vice President remain vacant. The committee will continue to work together to ensure Club activities continue. Your continued support is very much appreciated.

#### Thank you

Thanks to all contributors toward this month's newsletter: Jill Brew, Marg Friedel, Kylie Cowan, Wendy Mactaggart, Barb Gilfedder.

#### Welcome new members

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

**Louise Samways**  
**Max Arkley-Smith**

Be sure to give them a warm welcome at an upcoming event, field trip or speaker night.

#### Annual subscriptions are 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.

#### Emu chicks!

Thanks to Wendy Mactaggart for this wonderful photo.

She says...

Emus apparently lay up to 15 eggs. Emu chicks are brought up by the father, not the mother. Once she lays the eggs she takes off, or she may even be driven off by the male. This bird appears to have almost that many following him around. An excellent success rate seen near Bodalla far south coast NSW. I have seen them in the area before but with fewer chicks.





## Remembering Dick Kimber

On behalf of the entire Club, we acknowledge and remember the contribution to life in Central Australia by Dick Kimber. Our sympathies and condolences to Marg, his family, and to everyone who knew, loved and respected him. What a fitting way to acknowledge his contribution, than to reprint a write-up of a talk he gave to the Club in 2012. Written by Pam Keil. With thanks to Barb Gilfedder.

### Central Australian Aborigines and Birds

A talk by Dick Kimber

Report by Pam Keil

Dick Kimber was lucky to have travelled across Central Australia in the company of several Aboriginal elders as they visited their country and performed sacred ceremonies. At our February meeting, he has shared some of his experiences with us, with a focus on birds to tie the many stories together. I can't hope to do justice to the wealth of cultural knowledge that Dick touched on during his all too brief talk, but here I'll review some of the themes that ran through his presentation.



"...Kookaburra ..... traditionally Kookakaburra...."

First of all, unlike European naming practices which tend to focus on the colouring and look of the bird, Aboriginal names tend to reflect the call of the bird. Even across different language groups with slightly different names for the same bird, the sound of the call comes through. Dick pointed out that birds with such onomatopoeic names are often the first ones we learn as children. Think of the call and name of the Kookaburra (which Dick comments was traditionally *kookakaburra* but we have since dropped a "ka"). And what about the Mopoke or Boobook Owl?

For some local examples, we have the Crow *kaa kaan kaan ka*, the Spotted Nightjar *kun kuta kuta kuta* (in which the final *kuta* can be repeated as many times as you like), the Variegated Fairy-wren *tji wirri wirri wirri* (again repeat *wirri* as often as you like), and the Major Mitchell Cockatoo *kakalerre*. The Willie Wagtail's traditional names often reflect his scolding call, with names across the country sounding very similar. But one of my favourites was hearing a reflection of a bird that may now be extinct - the Night Parrot, *tnaka tal parra* or *tnel tjel perre*, to give it two of its local names, sounds a bit like a squeaky wheel according to Spencer and Gillen. Can we use this name to find the bird through its call?

Strehlow would collect the skins and feathers of birds from feral cat kills and display them for the local people to identify. From this, he learned the names of birds that he may never have been seen in life, and he learned the stories associated with them. In the story of the Night Parrot, he is the friend or 'mate' of the Kangaroo. Spencer mentioned another bird, the *thipa thipa*, who is 'mates' with the Perentie and will give warning whenever the lizard is nearby. This makes you wonder if there might have been an ecological association between the Kangaroo and the Night Parrot to bring about the story of mateship.

Although the names of the birds often reflect their calls, the traditional stories often focus on the bird's appearance and its ecology. For example, the splash of red and black on the Variagated Fairy-wren represents the fires they spread through the land. The Bush Turkey ancestor once had to carry a torch on his head which burned him, leaving behind the black cap and V on his chest. A series of lies between the Bush Turkey and the Emu resulted in the Emu cutting off his wings and the Bush Turkey laying only one egg. The Bower Bird is a thief in the stories - always stealing others' voices.

The ancestors created the land and the landscape is built into the stories. A lumpy pile of rocks may represent the innards of an animal killed by an Eagle. Chamber's Pillar and nearby Castle Rock are reminders that you must never lust after your mother-in-law. Chamber's Pillar was once the Knob-tailed Gecko man who travelled the country killing men to steal their wives. The people decided that this should not be, so they gave the Knob-tailed Gecko man some wives of his own, the Princess Parrot people. When the Knob-tailed Gecko man meets his mother-in-law, he wants her too. As punishment, he is fixed forever as Chambers Pillar, and the Princess Parrot people who were his wives are fixed as Castle Rock.

As is the case with Chambers Pillar, the stories often reflect the lessons of life that must be learned. As the ancestors travelled across the land, they left behind evidence of their journey. These ancient passages have become the songlines



which connect the landscape and the people. Following a songline is not just a spiritual journey, but also a practical one, as these lines often follow important natural features that provide food, shelter, and - most importantly - water. For example, the Emu dreaming begins east of Alice Springs, passes South of Alice, then up through Ormiston and past Haasts Bluff, where it goes into the ground. The track later comes up out of the ground and continues westward into WA. Along this track are many permanent waterholes, but also many smaller rock holes and soakages that would be easy to miss if you strayed from the track.

Along these songlines, important areas were often marked with art. Here in central Australia where finding traces in the sand are often the best way to locate an animal, the artworks often mimic the tracks of the animals. Feet are important. Hand signs for important animals also mimic these tracks. When locals do draw a portrait of an animal, they always begin with the feet. In the north, the artwork is much different, and portraits much more common.

Today you can see local rock art at the protected sites, Ewaninga and N'Dhala, but unfortunately much is being damaged and lost, both by the elements and by people who are defacing the rocks. It is important to protect these sacred sites - which may once have been used as road maps and road signs that helped people to survive in this dry country.

Ceremony helped youth to learn the songs that would guide them through the land. Sacred knowledge was passed on by example, and perfection was expected. In a ceremony, each man has his own paint symbols that represent the ancestor he is to represent. Feathers are often used to bring the power of the ancestor. As the man covers himself in paint and feathers, he must sing the proper song. This brings the power of the ancestor into him. By the time he is ready to perform, the dancer has become the recreation of the ancestor - he is the true descendent. Through the dance, sweat and purposeful smearing of the paint bring him back from perfection, and he returns to earth as a man.

These ceremonies are sacred, often secret, and must not be taken lightly. Dick tells us of one example where a sacred object was broken during a ceremony - all the men involved were put to death and the ceremony was stopped for a long time. When the men decided to revive it, they had to make sure they could find all the lost knowledge - both of the songs and the proper paint symbols - before they could dare to resurrect the sacred ceremony.

Though this seems as though the ceremonies and their lessons are completely inflexible, some of Dick's stories indicate that this is not entirely true. As the landscape changes - more rapidly since settlement - so too can the stories. He tells us of a rock that was placed by a prospector to mark a small rock hole and which was then incorporated into the Bell Bird dreaming stories. And of the chook feathers that are now beginning to replace white cockatoo feathers for the dancers. And of the man who was telling the story of a snake dreaming, and told how the snake ancestor had eaten a rabbit - but when prompted, he remembered that it was a Bilby. This flexibility probably helped the people to survive in this landscape over thousands of years of change.

And I'll leave you with a funny tale of the interesting things that can happen as you travel this land with its traditional owners. Dick told of the time he was in a small ute with 14 people and their swags piled in the back when the men decided to go hunting... they got an emu, and somehow managed to stuff it in among the bags... then they saw a kangaroo and out came the guns again. When Dick asked where they would put it, across the bonnet was the obvious answer... Luckily, they missed!



Emu footprints



## How do you spell Conlon?

Marg Friedel

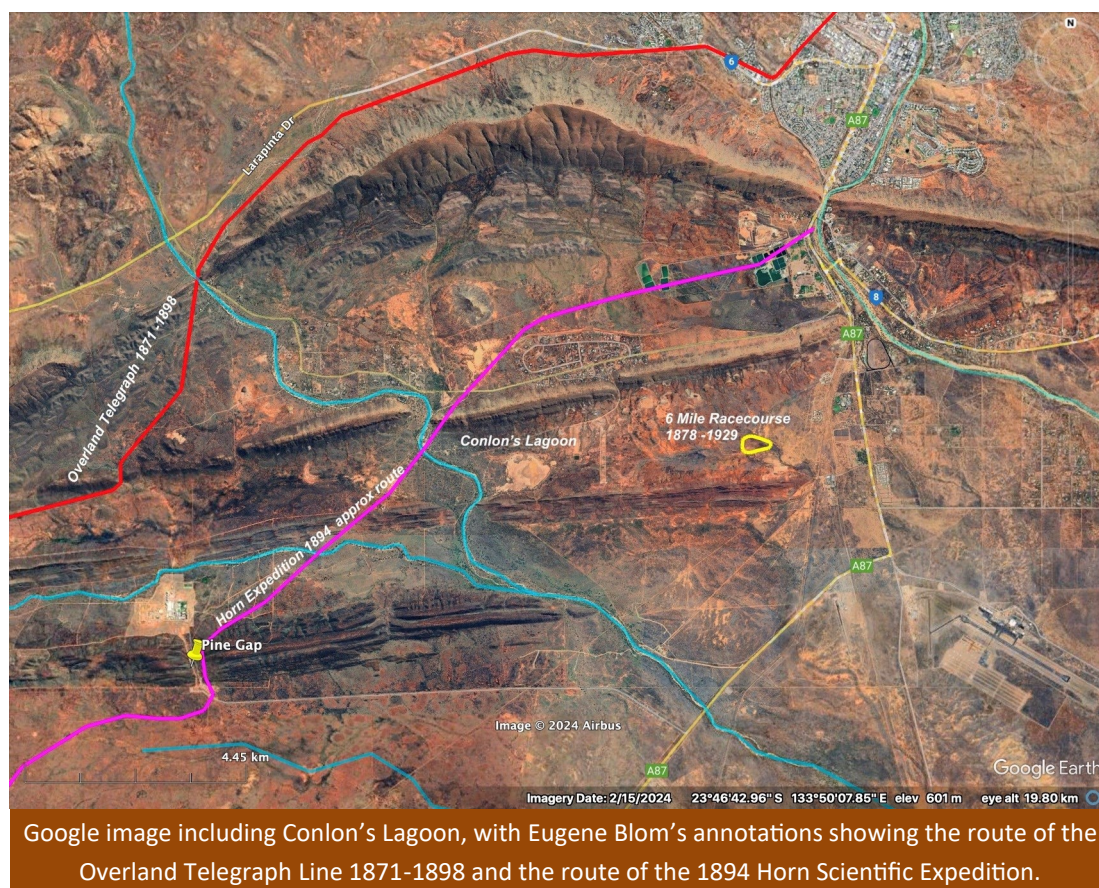
Um, isn't it obvious? Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club members are familiar with Conlon's Lagoon, which the Club has visited many times over the years, and it's there on Google Maps.

I made a (not-so-quick) survey of all the Club's newsletters from 2006 to 2024 and made some interesting discoveries. In 2006 (March and April editions) it was Conlin's Lagoon (with and without the apostrophe) – also referred to as Rifle Range Swamp. In June 2010 it was Conlin Lagoon and, in October 2011, Conlon's Lagoon but, interestingly, in the same article, Duguid *et al.* (2005) are cited referring to Conlans Lagoon. In April 2012 it's Conlon's Lagoon but, in July 2013, it's Conlons and Conlans and, in April 2015, it's Conlan's. A month later it's Conlons, while in July 2021 it's Conlon's and in July 2023 it's Conlons. Confused? Yes!

So I went in search of the 'right' name. What better authority than someone who was there not so very long after the establishment of the Overland Telegraph Line? Baldwin Spencer wrote in his narrative of the 1894 Horn Scientific Expedition "... Professor Tate and myself went out to a big clay-pan known as Conlin Lagoon" (p. 132). I looked for any Conlins associated with central Australia but only came up with Constable Conlin in Katherine NT. Looking more closely I noticed that, also on p. 132, Spencer referred to the "McDonnells", so maybe his spelling prowess was not to be relied on.

Finally, I turned to Stuart Traynor's 'Alice Springs', finding his description (p. 157) of Frank Gillen and Joe Skinner reaching the MacDonnell Ranges in June 1875 and meeting Alice Springs operators Ted Harris and Hugh Conlon at Fenn Gap, 25 km from the Alice Springs Telegraph Station. "Conlon was relieving at Alice Springs because the stationmaster John Mueller had gone south for his first holiday after three-and-a-half years on the line."

According to an 1883 obituary, Conlon had "...commenced his career in the post and telegraph service as a lad" in the late 1860s. In conversation and email exchanges with Stuart (Traynor) and Eugene Blom, I learnt that Conlon had worked on the Port Darwin Line for five years from 1873. Stuart suggested that Conlon may have 'found' the lagoon in 1875 while seasons were good, and that Gillen may have named it after him. Maps show that, at the time, the route of the telegraph line was within 7 km of the lagoon at its closest point and within easy reach on horseback. It's unclear how long Conlon stayed at Alice Springs, although Mueller returned in December.





Eugene explained that, after the 1894 Horn Expedition, Spencer left Gillen with his camera lens, to take more photos to complement their anthropological work (see 1895 photo below).



Original glass plate sleeve (handwritten annotation, likely by Gillen): "Conlons Lagoon. MacDonnell Ranges." Dated circa 1895 (Museum Victoria).

Stuart and Eugene identified four photos in the SA State Library, taken by Tom Bradshaw, showing a telegraph station picnic trip to the lagoon in 1901. Stuart said "It is interesting there was so much water there at that time, given it was the middle of the Federation drought of 1897–1903. That was one of the worst droughts in Australian history, affecting virtually the whole country, not just central Australia."

As many readers will know, Eugene has done some remarkable work relocating and re-photographing historic images (see photo pair below).



Left - Doris Bradshaw and MC Brookes' children, Conlon's Lagoon July 1901 (B-22509 State Library of South Australia). Right - Eugene's photo taken February 2018: "In Feb 2018 it was a bit drier..." he says.





B 22565

[R] Eugene noted that the picnic party travelled 16 kms from the Telegraph Station, although the party from Undoolya Station first travelled at least 17 extra kms from their homestead to the township of Stuart, to meet up with the Bradshaws (B-22564 (CCNT 2030) State Library of South Australia).

[L] A picnic at Conlon's lagoon in July 1901 for the Alice Springs Telegraph Station and Undoolya Station families (B-22565 (ASTS 1574) State Library of South Australia).



B 22564

[L] This photo is taken from the Arumbera Range, looking north. Note what appear to be mulla mullas (*Ptilopus nobilis*) at bottom left. In the year 1st July 1900 to 30th June 1901, the telegraph station recorded 232 mm of rain so, depending on the monthly distribution, conditions were not so bad. The following 12 months produced only 43 mm (B-22548 State Library of South Australia).



B 22548 Reproduction rights: State Library of South Australia

So Conlon's Lagoon it is, popular with European settlers for close on 150 years, and no doubt an important place for the Arrernte people for thousands of years before that, with a very different name, unfortunately not known to me. The European name has never been officially gazetted, so the diverse spelling is understandable, but I recommend 'Conlon's'.

My thanks go to Stuart and Eugene, and also to Andrew Crouch and Rod Cramer, for their assistance with this article. Stuart says he enjoys keeping in touch with people, by sharing information, and people are welcome to ring him if there are aspects of local history he may be able to help with.

Contact me at [capparis@iinet.net.au](mailto:capparis@iinet.net.au) for Stuart's mobile number, his biographical sketch of Hugh Conlon and his list of all the people in B-22565. Find Eugene's excellent collections of matched historic and current photos on House Elf Adventures on Facebook. 🍷

## References

ASFNC Newsletters, as specified in the text.

Duguid, A., Barnetson, J., Clifford, B., Pavey, C., Albrecht, D., Risler, J. and McNellie, M. (2005). *Wetlands in the arid Northern Territory*. A report to the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage on the inventory and significance of wetlands in the arid NT. Northern Territory Government Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts. Alice Springs NT.

Express and Telegraph (1893). *Death of Mr H.J. Conlon*. Monday 6 November 1893, page 2. [nla.news-article208301099.3.pdf](https://nla.news-article208301099.3.pdf).

Spencer, B. (1994). *Narrative of the Horn Expedition of 1894*. First published Melbourne and London 1896. Facsimile reprint Corkwood Press, Bundaberg Qld.

Traynor, S. (2016). *Alice Springs: from singing wire to iconic outback town*. Wakefield Press, Mile End SA.



**Camel trek in sand country and the magic of outdoor education. Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Member Night  
11 September 2024**

**Jill Brew**

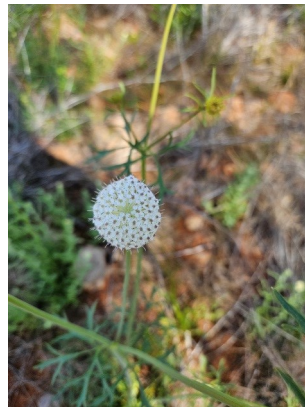
A long long walk to Rainbow Valley and back, with plodding camels hefting the luggage: very appealing. Who wouldn't enjoy the 5-day walk through the country on Orange Creek Station? Our speakers on 11th of September took their own individual approach to stepping us through the unfolding trek and campouts, adventured by 10 young people and their adult companions.



There was a 'nature diary' aspect to it, reminding of Kylie's presentation at our AGM – observations and considerations, wondering what and why... 'not always with the answers'. There was surprise and veneration. Less tethered to accepted names for species of plant and animal than other FN presentations, this one peered at living specimens in the landscape from a stance of fresh curiosity and wonder.

There were slides with the talk (lights off!) shown on a free-standing screen. A magical old-fashioned feel, I thought, with the recollections by the speakers of the joys and tests of the trip matched by the luminous pictures materializing in the darkness.

Megan Hatton explained the purpose and ideas behind outdoor education offered to students at the Steiner School, including benefits of immersion in the wider natural world, exploring and discovering its complexities at their own pace. Co-presenter



L to R: *Calandrina pumila* (Tiny purslane); *Isotoma petraea* (Rock isotome); *Trachymene glaucifolia* (Wild parsnip); *Calandrinia balonensis* (Parakeelya)

Novvy brought us in closer with personal responses to discoveries along the way. Delicate small flowers, fascinating small creatures, details seen by walking through the country: the slides kept coming!

The walkers were able to escape from the spreading 'oceans' of Buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris* and *C. pennisetiformis*), and enjoy spreads of native grasses (Woollybutt, *Eragrostis eriopoda* was mentioned) and massed flowerings. As it was a shared venture, social shifts over the several days were naturally part of the experience. Confidence in being 'out there' grew. The camels (5) were the big companions in the walk. How they settled in to the rhythms themselves, as well as how the humans made their adjustments to the group, the walk and the camels, was part of the story. Both got to know each other a lot better, and feel on more trusting terms, by the return to Stuarts Well camel farm.

Rainbow Valley—Wurre with its well-known but always absorbing profile, featured—it was the goal and rest site and turnaround point. Less familiar landscape was documented in the photographs taken by the crew as they travelled this 'cross country' route, giving us a look 'behind the scenes'. The presentation was a satisfying blend of territory we love to see and hear about, and an approach with a difference. Thanks to Megan, Novvy, and the photographers for coming and reminding about the less-travelled areas, and the joys of slow quiet travel for deep observation and regenerative wonder. 🌱







[L] Central netted dragon (*Ctenophorus nuchalis*)  
 [R] Vine hawk moth (*Hippotion celerio*)  
 Below:  
 [L] Annual yellowtop (*Senecio gregorii*)  
 [R] Pink everlasting (*Schoenia cassiniana*)



[Above] Camel trek. [R] *Polycalymma stuartii*  
 (Poached egg daisy) and *Acacia* sp. (Mulga)



## Threatened Species Bake-off

Text Kylie Cowan, photos Kylie Cowan and Rebecca Duncam

Early in September, staff from the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security got together for the 2024 Threatened Species Bake-off! The Bake-off coincides with National Threatened Species Day and aims to shine a spotlight on at-risk flora and fauna. This year there were over 400 entries submitted nationally, and if you are on Facebook, I'd highly recommend checking them out on the [Threatened Species Commissioner's FB page](#) or [#TSBakeoff2024](#)

Well done to everyone who joined in the fun raising awareness of Threatened Species and the challenges they face. 🦋



Eastern Barred Bandicoot (*Perameles gunnii*)  
Made by Emma Street



Gouldian Finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*) and  
Jessie Gap Squat Snail (*Semotrachia jessieana*)  
Made by Rebecca Duncum



Mac Clark (Acacia peuce) Conservation Reserve  
Made by Sam Kendall



Grey Falcon (*Falco hypoleucos*)  
Made by Kylie Cowan



Desert Quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*)  
Made by Kylie Cowan