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June 2002

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ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

President	Bob Read	8952 1935	rread@octa4.net.au
Vice-President	Kevin Boyle	0422006140	
Publicity Officer	Rosalie Breen	8952 3409	
Secretary/Treasurer	Lyndal White	8955 0525	LMP56@bigpond.com
Property Officer	Kaye Percy	8952 3405	
Public Officer	Sue Fraser	8952 5728	suefra@hotmail.com
Newsletter Editor	Pat Gallagher	8952 1830	pgallagher18@hotmail.com

Web site http://www.octa4.net.au/alicenats

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

June 2002

CLUB NEWS

MEETINGS

June 12th, 7:30 PM at OLSH staff room, Sadadeen Road. **Greg Fyfe**, of Parks and Wildlife, **Reptiles**.

July 10th, Chris Pavey of Parks and Wildlife, **Bats**

August 14th, **AGM**. Kaye Percy will give a short video presentation on Field Naturalists Club trips before the AGM.

September 11th, Graham Griffin, CSIRO, **Spinifex**.

TRIPS

(Contact Bob Read, 89521935 for information on any of these)

June 8th. Section 5 of the Larapinta Trail, Birthday Waterhole to Hugh Gorge. This is a **3-day walk with packs** for the energetic.

June 15th. Night trip to the Off-road vehicle area on the Old South Road, to be lead by Joel Fleming who assures that we can find **hopping mice**. Meet about 4:30 PM, meeting place to be finalised at the June meeting. Best have a large snack beforeband in anticipation of a late supper. Bring warm clothes and a torch.

June 22nd. Section 7 of the **Larapinta Trail, Ellery Creek to Serpentine Gorge**. Meet 7:30 AM at Flynn Grave. According to the Parks and Wildlife brochure this is **13.5 km of "reasonably difficult walking" that takes 6.5 hours** to complete. I expect about 8 hours with stops.

Bring hat, lunch, water (up to 4 L depending on the temperature) binoculars. This section has interesting geology and Stuart Traynor told us that this is a good place for Spinifexbirds.

Ellery Gorge, some time in August? Date to be announced.

WANTED, TRIP SUGGESTIONS AND VOLUNTEERS TO LEAD IN JULY

KINDRED ORGANISATIONS EVENTS

Wednesday June 5th. APS meeting 7:30 PM at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Joe Benshemesh on **Searching for the Elusive Marsupial Mole**.

HELP

Any contributions for the newsletter would be gratefully received. In the past there has been a good response to requests, so any items on club trips or other tips would be welcome. Often my inspiration dries up, I can't manage to write anything original and I have to resort to trawling the Net for items of interest. At least they interest me, but I am not sure whether they interest anyone else. (Comment from Bob)

Local News

Australian Plants in the Desert,

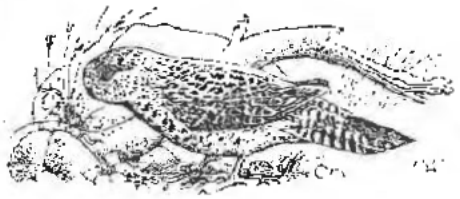
The APS SA Region Biennial Conference was held in Alice Springs on May 25th and 26th two days of entertaining talks and excursions. Congratulations to Connie and her team for an excellent conference.

Birds Australia Newhaven Reserve Update

23 April 2002

Hello Newhaven supporters.

The country around Newhaven again has a terrific amount of growth, after 130 mm of rain in late February. Alex Coppock is gearing up for as much fire management work as possible over winter.
The management plan for Newhaven is now well on the way, with the final draft due in June.
We are planning to open Newhaven to the public on July 1. Camping accommodation with basic facilities (pit toilets but no showers or washing facilities) will be available. Please book with Elaine Sheridan, preferably by emailing her at grems@telstra.easymail.com.au, with information about numbers of campers and preferred dates. Her phone contacts are (08) 8952 0190 (w) or (08) 8952 6842 (h). A visitors information pamphlet will be available soon - we will send this out on the supporters network and load it on the Birds Australia web site
The official opening of Newhaven is scheduled for mid-August, either just before or after the Birds Australia Congress, on August 17 and 18 in Alice Springs.
People interested in volunteering at Newhaven should also register with Elaine. More volunteers are needed from the beginning of May. People with experience in welding, survey mapping (theodolite or detailed GPS), firebreak or bush grader work would be particularly useful, but all are welcome.
A position description for the first volunteer ranger at Newhaven will be circulated soon
Alex Coppock is now contracted to June this year, to assist with supervision of maintenance and development work at Newhaven.
Thank you all for your support,



Meg Mooney
Publicity Officer, Birds Australia Newhaven Reserve Management Committee

Encounter with a Cat

On a recent bush-walking trip Anne, one of my companions saw a cat start up nearby, where it had been eating something. A quick search of the spot revealed a rodent, slightly larger than a House Mouse with its head freshly bitten off. The specimen was passed on to an expert in Parks and Wildlife, but unfortunately the lack of a head prevented positive identification. It was probably a species of *Pseudomys*, one of the mouse-like Old Endemics. The catastrophic effects of the feral cat are well known, but it is rare to see one and still rarer to come across direct evidence of their predation. RR

Marsupial Vision

From an interview by Fiona Peppler with Cathy Arrese and Lynne Beasely on the Science Show 11/5/2002

A team from the Zoology Department at the University of Western Australia has found that, contrary to previous thinking, marsupials have much better vision than most placental mammals.
Animals that were previously assumed to be out at only night were often out during the day. Cathy found that the marsupials were not as nocturnal as generally thought, and realised that colour vision could be particularly important for these species.
Using the only facility in the southern hemisphere that can look at precise spectral sensitivity, the team explored how marsupials see the world.
They discovered that some marsupials can see from the red through to the ultra violet. They have full colour vision, over a broader range than humans, and much more than most placental mammals. One of the species that Cath studied is the honey possum, a diminutive West Australian creature that climbs up banksias to reach the flowers, which are yellow or red when ripe, and green when unripe.
A second species, the dunnart, has a very different life style. It scurries around on the floor of the forest in more open sandy areas, and lives on insects and other small vertebrates. It does not need to see as far into the red as the honey possum, but it still has the three colour vision. Its whole spectrum is just shifted down a bit to concentrate on the green and brown colours which are crucial to its life style. Each species will probably carry a different profile, but species such as kangaroos and wombats have yet to be studied.
Reptiles and birds use four visual pigments, two of which have been lost to most mammals in the course of evolution. Cathy's work suggests that, unlike placentals, marsupial mammals did not lose the red pigment.
This goes back to a few million years when the Australian marsupials were isolated from other mammals and were not exposed to such strong predation and competition. Therefore they would have retained those visual pigments that placental mammals lost when they became nocturnal species with less need for discriminating across the spectrum.

But beyond that, it's of much greater philosophical interest in terms of the evolution of the marsupials and their relation to the placental mammals Cathy feels that it's one up for marsupials, who on the whole have been regarded as rather as a rather inferior group of mammals. Clearly they have much better vision most of the placental mammals.

Getting foxes out of Tasmania (The editor's obsession) – Bob's –

From the ABC News in Science Monday, 27 May 2002

The hunt is on – to track down the foxes in Tasmania before the start of breeding season.
Today sees the launch of Out Fox, a program devised by the Pest Animal Control CRC that is asking for the public's help in finding out where the foxes in Tasmania are hiding.
"It's a community based program for anyone who wants to be involved in all of Tasmania to participate in the eradication of the fox from the island," explained Dr Tony Peacock, the CEO of Pest Animal Control CRC.
Sometime in the last couple of years foxes were introduced into Tasmania. Apparently it was a deliberate act, perhaps for the purpose of hunting or perhaps in retaliation for Federal gun laws. Cubs from two litters are believed to have been smuggled into the state, reared in secret and let go in at least three separate locations.
There are between 16 and 19 foxes in Tasmania, and the urgency is that they are just going into the breeding season. Foxes breed once a year during the winter. "That will be starting up now in Tasmania," said Dr Peacock, "so this program is trying to involve as many people as possible.
"We have a lot of public support," said Professor Joan Dawes, the Chair of Pestat Pty Ltd a company that devises biological control programs for pests. "What we want to do is provide a training program to show the public what to do."
The program is aiming to spot signs of fox activity rather than sight the animals – foxes can be very secretive.
"The group are calling on school students, farmers, conservationists, and anyone who is interested to make sand plots - using raked sand - so they can detect footprints.
If people do see signs of fox activity they ring a fox hotline.
The authorities will come in and deal with the fox."
There are about 25 people on the fox taskforce who are currently spotlighting at night. "If they spot a fox they will have a go at shooting it if they have a clear shot," said Dr Peacock.
"But it is fairly unlikely," said Professor Dawes. "Foxes are very smart and know to hide."
The preferred method of eradicating the foxes will be with 1080 poison baits. "We are specifically targeting carnivores by putting the poison in meat," said Professor Dawes. "And we will be minimising the impact on Tasmanian Devils by putting it up off the ground on logs." Foxes can climb and Tasmanian Devils cannot.
Funded by Australian Wool Innovation, the program is a joint effort of the Pest Animal Control CRC, CSIRO, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment.

Editor's Note: *This operation has been left very late, with the fox-breeding season just about to start. The future of Tasmania's wildlife hangs in the balance over the next few months. If most of the breeding vixens can be eliminated it may still be possible to stop the fox establishing in Tasmania.. If a number of foxes breed successfully we will be witnessing the beginning of the end for some Tasmanian species, an end that could have been averted by more rapid and effective action, by the Commonwealth Government.*

Cloning the Thylacine

This project has had considerable coverage in the media recently. (*The Weekend Australian Magazine* 1/6/02, ABC Science Show 1/6/02).
I have mixed feelings about this project. On the one hand it is an intriguing scientific challenge and would be a stupendous achievement if it could be done. On the other hand the resources that would be needed for this project, if in fact it is ever possible, are in stark contrast to the resources available for conservation projects. There is a terrible irony in the fact that at the time this work is being done the fox is becoming established in Tasmania for lack of the commonsense to recognise and deal with an emergency, (see the story above). There is a very real possibility that species will be lost.
In defence Mike Archer, the project leader, says that none of the money for the project has come from donors who might have otherwise ~~have~~ supported conventional conservation projects.
There are many questions about this project:
What could be done with a pair of multi-million dollar thylacines? They could be hardly let go in the bush to take their chances.
If a small population were bred up where could they be established? True,there is a lot of wilderness in Tasmania, but little, if any, is good thylacine habitat.
Would success lead to even more carelessness with our endangered species if there were a perception that the slogan 'Extinction is Forever" might not be true?

A great topic for coffee-break discussions. What is your opinion? RR

Trip Report

25 th. May Woodlands Trail.

With the cooler weather now upon us, a pleasant walk was to be expected along the Woodlands Trail. Rather disappointed that only myself and my daughter Amanda turned up for the walk.

Setting out at 8 a.m. , evidence of where the fires had been a few months earlier was seen, but it hasn't taken long for the buffel to regenerate. Some sections between Rocky Gap to Larapinta trail were overgrown with buffel.

Half an hour into the walk we came across 4-5 wrens darting about in the mulga trees. We also heard and saw lots of finches during the day as well. Before reaching Rocky Gap we had to negotiate our way under or around 5 Golden Orb spider webs strung between trees across the trail, with me actually walking head on into the 5th one, as I was looking to my right at the time. I quickly flipped off my hat and sitting on top of the hat was a very large angry female Golden Orb Spider, who took a couple of minutes to climb down off my hat.

On reaching Rocky Gap more evidence of a recent fire was apparent, with the air smelling of charred wood. With having explored the Rocky Gap area a few times before hand we continued on to connect with the Larapinta Trail, reaching this junction at 10.30 a.m. , having walked 8 kms so far.

After a ½ hour rest and a ~~snack~~ snack we headed back east along the Larapinta Trail to Simpsons Gap car park, being 6 kms away. At about the 1 km mark to the carpark a turn to the right provides a 2.8 km trail back to the Woodlands Trail carpark, but this trail comes out at the Cassia Hill carpark, which still left us with a bit of a walk along the road to finally reach where our car was parked. So a round trip of nearly 16 kms. for the walk, finishing at 1.15 p.m.

Wildflowers were a bit scarce, coming across a few mulla mullas, desert rattlepods, long leafed corkwoods in flower, rock fuchsia, billy buttons and bluebells.

Trip Leader Kaye Percy.