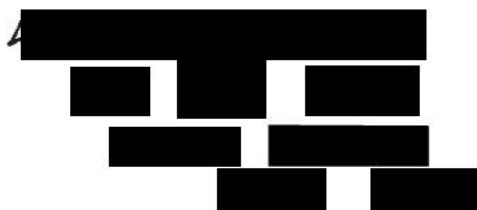


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14 August 2002



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# Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

August 2002

## CLUB NEWS

### MEETINGS

**August 14<sup>th</sup>, ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING.** 7:30 PM in the OLSH staffroom, Sadadeen campus. Kaye Percy will give a short video presentation on Field Naturalists Club trips before the AGM. Please come along; we don't twist arms very hard, but there will be some not too onerous positions available if you feel that you would like to help keep the club running. We function with an absolute minimum of committee meetings; I can't remember when the last one was, so committee positions are generally not too time-demanding.

**September 11<sup>th</sup>,** Graham Griffin, CSIRO, Spinifex.

### TRIPS

**August 24<sup>th</sup>** walk at the **Old Telegraph Station**. Meet at kiosk at 9.00am walk up river 2-3 hours. Leader Kaye Percy.

Trips to Roma Gorge, Arltunga, walk to Emily Gap or Emily to Jessie Gap? To be decided at the August meeting.

Chris Pavey to lead trip to Bat cave Sept./October.

### KINDRED ORGANISATIONS EVENTS

Stuart Traynor has revived the Olive Pink Walks and Talks program. The Nocturnal Walk on the 5<sup>th</sup> was excellent and well attended, and there are more to come.

**August 7<sup>th</sup>, Australian Plants meeting at Olive Pink Botanic Garden.** Glen Edwards on Camels in the NT - a growing problem.

**24<sup>th</sup> August 7 PM** at the Desert Park. **Spencer, the Voice of Water.** World premiere of a family performance presented by Alice Springs Environmental Educators and Friends of the Desert Park. Adults \$6, kids \$2.

**1<sup>st</sup> September** Wattle Day 2:30pm at Olive Pink, Walk & talk with focus on Wattles.

**September 1<sup>st</sup>. Spring Moonlight Bike Ride** with Friends of the Desert Park. Meet 6:30 PM at Flynn Grave for a short ride along the Simpson's Gap Bike Path, then return for refreshments. Gold-coin donation from non-members.

**September 7<sup>th</sup>, National Threatened Species Day.**

### A WALK IN LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

I recently walked the newly completed Circuit Walk in the Litchfield National Park with a friend. The park is located about 100 km south of Darwin and about 50 km west of Batchelor. The waterfalls and waterholes with road access are very popular and quite crowded at this time of year. I was told that the campgrounds often fill up by midday. The walking tracks are much quieter and although we met a few other parties we had a campsite to ourselves each night.

The Circuit Walk goes around the Tabletop Range, a plateau of sandstone that rises about 100 m above the surrounding country, high by Top End standards, though it lacks the dramatic quality of the MacDonnell Ranges. The walking was easy with only small ascents and descents. Most of the track was smooth underfoot, though there are some rocky sections, and clearly marked with posts with blue triangles. Water is available at regular intervals, and there is no need to carry more than 2 L.

Bird life was abundant, including Red-winged Parrots, Partridge Pigeons, Friarbirds, Northern Fantails and Leaden Flycatchers, but as I had just spent 10 days in Kakadu no species that I had not seen before. The Darwin Woollybutts were covered with orange blossom that attracted honeyeaters. Rabbits and foxes have not established this far north, and the small conical feeding-holes left by bandicoots are very common on the plateau. My friend Steve was fortunate enough to see one foraging close to his bunk. We had a glimpse of a small possum as it crept down a tree-trunk by moonlight. Less pleasing were the dug-up areas that showed the presence of feral pigs.

Most of the plateau is sandstone of Proterozoic age, 1800 million years old, and already very old when the rocks of the MacDonnell Ranges were being laid down. Amazingly for such ancient rocks the original beds are only around 10 degrees from horizontal, and ripple marks are still clearly visible in them.

The hydrology of the plateau is interesting. Large springs are common just above the steep scarp that forms the edge of the plateau. These support extensive patches of monsoon forest with tall palms and feed creeks that plunge over the edge as the spectacular waterfalls. For lack of a better explanation it seems that there is a zone of weathered rock capping the plateau that is porous and stores water to discharge during the dry season.

The weather was warm and pleasant, but the mosquitos were savage after dark and I was very glad of my new net. The walk was not nearly as challenging as some I have done, and the landscapes are not the most dramatic, but it was a very enjoyable few days. RR

### ***Good News from Bougainville***

From *The Age*, 26/7/02.

Woodford's Rail is a flightless bird only ever known from Bougainville (PNG) and two islands in the Solomons, Guadalcanal and Isabel. It was thought that a small population on the latter were all that survived.

Following the 1998 ceasefire on Bougainville, Don Hadden, a New Zealand teacher and ornithologist, arrived in the capital Arawa for a stint as a volunteer aid worker. Locals told him about a strange black bird they were seeing around town. Mr Hadden had lived in Arawa previously for five years before the war and had never seen such birds.

"It wasn't long before I saw these birds running across the road everywhere I went," Mr Hadden said. "I asked my students to catch me one. Then I had a beaming year 10 student on my doorstep holding a very lively, very angry black rail. There was no doubt I was holding the presumed extinct Woodford's Rail," he said.

It seems that there must have been a very small population of Woodford's Rail remaining on Bougainville. During the conflict, fields and plantations on the coastal plains around Arawa were neglected, and became over-grown with native grasses 3 m high. This is an ideal habitat for the secretive rails, which are now so numerous they can be seen foraging

among the ruins of buildings in Arawa that were burnt during the conflict.

*Editor's note.* We must hope that in the reconstruction of Bougainville it is possible to leave sufficient areas of native grass to maintain a healthy population of Woodford's Rail.

### **FLUORESCENT KOALAS**

CNN July 23rd

The Redlands Shire Council east of Brisbane is to paint koalas killed by cars a fluorescent red and leave them on the road for 24 hours as a 6-month trial. It is hoped that this may make Australian motorists drive more carefully through the marsupials' breeding grounds.

Last year 609 koalas were hit by cars and trucks on the shire's tree-lined roads, and 146 of those died.

*Editor's Note.* The problem of wildlife and motor traffic is of course widespread. On my recent trip to Kakadu I was struck by the speeds that people on holiday travel at, through the Park.

### **Another Fire in the West MacDonnells**

I have heard that Stages 4 & 5 of the Larapinta Trail have been burnt since the Field Nats' walk through Section 4. The distribution of the fire suggests that it was started by a careless walker.

### **Cane Toads**

The Cane Toad has now reached Kakadu. Nothing can be done to stop the invasion of the toads. Parks Australia are monitoring their spread and the effects on wildlife. Cane Toads are poisonous to other wildlife at all stages of their life-cycle from eggs to adults. Experience in Queensland suggests that initially predators such as quolls, goannas, frogs, freshwater crocodiles and pythons will suffer as they attempt to eat the toads, or their tadpoles, and are poisoned. In the longer term predators may learn to avoid them or only eat the non-poisonous parts.

The winter 2002 edition of *The Web* reports that CSIRO is still researching a control method. Earlier trials of viruses from the toad's native America were discouraging, as the viruses tested proved lethal to native frogs. Research is now being directed at trying to identify and manipulate a gene critical for toad development. The present phase of the research will finish in 2003, but it will take about another eight years to develop and test delivery mechanisms for a modified development gene into wild populations of Cane Toads.

Meanwhile the toads will continue to spread west. If a means of control cannot be found they will eventually occupy all of Australia's wet tropics from the Queensland coast to the Kimberley.

Please excuse the "decorative"? black marks through this edition. - I couldn't access my usual copier, so had to resort to my own, which definitely needs a service/clean. I've checked that all pages are legible, but the presentation is not up to our usual standard.  
Pat.