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September 2002



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Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

September 2002

CLUB NEWS

MEETINGS

September 11th, 7:30 PM at OLSH staffroom, Sadadeen Road. Stuart Traynor, **The Voyage of the Great Southern Ark**. 100 million years ago rainforest covered much of Australia. Now it's a very different story. Come on a journey back through time and the track the evolution of Australia's distinctive landscape, flora and fauna. Note change in program, we will catch Graham Griffin later.

TRIPS

September 15th, Hugh River Stock Route. Meet 7:30 AM opposite the Old Timers. This road turns off the Stuart Highway south of Jim's Place. It is a good place to see Cinnamon Quail-thrush and sometimes Orange Chat. We have the option of returning either along the Stuart Highway or make a round trip by the Old South Road.

AGM

The following officers were elected at the AGM

President:	Bob Read	Newsletter Printer:	Beth Hansen
Vice President:	Kevin Boyle	Publicity Officer:	Rosalie Breen
Secretary/Treasurer:	Lyndal White	Property Officer:	Kaye Percy
Minutes Secretary:	Lyndal White	Public Officer:	Sue Fraser
Newsletter Editor:	Bob Read		

KINDRED ORGANISATIONS EVENTS

4th September, Australian Plants Society, 8:30 PM at Olive Pink. **Dennis Matthews** will speak on **habitat recovery at Palm Valley following horse control and buffel managment.**

5th October What Bird is That? 7.30am, Olive Pink.

3rd November Summer in Alice Slides & Guide Walk on how nature copes with summer heat & how you can help your garden survive.

OUTING TO THE OLD TELEGRAPH STATION

A select group met on Saturday morning for a short wander around the Telegraph Station. Rosalie led us along some of the lesser known tracks. Because of the dry winter very little is in flower at present. Bird life was relatively sparse, but I still recorded 16 species. The highlight was a Black Falcon, the first time that I have seen this species close to Alice Springs for about 3 years. This species is similar to the dark phases of the far commoner Brown Falcon (most of the Brown Falcons in CA are paler). Among other things the Blacks



can be distinguished by their long pointed wings. Other interesting sightings were Chestnut-rumped and Inland Thornbills in the same clump of bushes as a male Rufous Whistler, the pale Central Australian form. RR

THE MOLE PATROL

On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands of South Australia some very interesting research has been underway over the last three years into the ecology of Marsupial Moles. The rare and endangered Marsupial Moles are some of the most unique but poorly understood mammals in Australia. They spend almost their entire lives burrowing underground eating grubs, ants and termites.

There are two species of Marsupial Moles currently recognised, Itjaritjari or Southern Marsupial Mole (*Notoryctes typhlops*) from the sandy deserts of central Australia, and Kakarratul or Northern Marsupial Mole (*N. caurinus*) from the northwest deserts. They are known to inhabit sand dune and sandy plain country throughout S.A, N.T, W.A and possibly south west Qld.

They are about the size of a small rat, have golden coloured fur, a pouch that opens backwards and completely lack eyes.

Marsupial moles were first described to science over 100 years ago, but specimens are so rarely encountered that very little is known about the biology and distribution of either species.

The current research project has been successful in gaining information on the



ecology of Marsupial Moles. The success of the project is largely due to the support and guidance from the traditional owners of the Walalkara and Watarru communities. The principle researcher, Dr Joe Benshemesh, with the help of EarthWatch volunteers and Anangu, has gathered some very valuable information in designing survey techniques. As this work continues, another stage of the

project is to gain an understanding of the distribution and abundance of Marsupial Moles across Australia.

The "Mole Patrol" project, funded by Anangu Pitjantjatjara Land Management through the Natural Heritage Trust, is trying to gain a better understanding of these elusive marsupials. It will rely on volunteers across Australia to record and report Marsupial Mole sightings. The valuable information collected will help in conserving the species. If you would like to help or gain a better understanding of Marsupial Moles, **an information package containing photos and descriptions of mole signs can be obtained by contacting the Threatened Species Network, Alice Springs**, at either coolabaheco@aol.com or (08) 8952 1541.

Jarrad Holmes

Editor's Note: Joe Benshemesh gave an excellent presentation to the APS recently. The Mole Patrol plan to hold a demonstration/field day on recognising mole signs. Field Nats are invited to this. I have seen mole burrows in the past and been puzzled as to what they were. This would be an excellent project for us to be involved in.

THE SWAMP

The swamp south of the sewage ponds has water in it again. After the swamp had been drained most of the bulrushes were burnt, and essential measure to prevent the lot going up in one big uncontrolled burn. The drain has been temporarily blocked up and there is water in the swamp again. It is now a rather sorry sight, with part burnt reeds and a large area of water. It will take many years to restore it to something like its original condition.

It still provides habitat for some birds, and Spotless Crakes were reported in it recently, but I was unable to find these or any other crakes. RR

NEWHAVEN

Birds Australia Newhaven Reserve was officially opened on the 21st of August, the culmination of fundraising and a lot of work by the management committee. A basic camping ground is available and roads have



been sign-posted. Visitors have reported that birds are fairly sparse this season, but there are a variety of species including Grey Honeyeaters, Slaty-backed Thornbills and the rare Grey Falcon.

Newhaven is about 330 km by road north west of Alice Springs. Most of the Tanami Road as far as the turnoff is sealed, though the unsealed sections are badly corrugated. The road from the Tanami Road to Newhaven has been recently graded and is in good condition.

Anyone interested in a group excursion to Newhaven please let me know. RR

Note on the Grey Falcon

This species has eluded for years. I happened to be at Newhaven and saw "Grey Falcon - Robs Bore" on the ranger's blackboard. Dave, the volunteer ranger advised me that "if it is there it will flush." I had reason to go past Robs Bore on the stygofauna search, and drove in with anticipation carefully scanning all the trees. Still no Grey Falcon. RR

LETTERWINGED KITES

Latest information is that the Letterwinged Kites which have been roosting at Mac Clarke Reserve at Andado have



disappeared from there. A large flock was seen near Camel Flat Bore on the 22nd of August. Around this time last year the kites dispersed from Mac Clarke and a few were seen around Alice Springs. It appears that the same thing may be happening this year. Take a close look at any Black-shouldered Kites over the next month or so just in case they are really the much scarcer Letterwinged. RR

IN SEARCH OF STYGOFAUNA

Once again I had the good fortune to assist Dr Bill Humphreys of the WA Museum in the search for stygofauna. Stygofauna (from the Styx, the Greek river of the underworld) is a collective name for the small animals that live below the water table, usually in limestone aquifers. Most of these are crustaceans (or shrimps), a collective term for a very diverse group of animals, broken into Orders that I cannot remember.

Although small they are large enough to see with the naked eye. There are also snails, and of particular interest to Bill, diving beetles, relatives of those we regularly see in waterholes. All are blind (eyes are no use in total darkness), and most are colourless.

What they eat is not known, presumably in this region the calcretes (a rock similar to limestone) that form shallow aquifers in the Amadeus and Ngalia Basins have been the most productive, as they have reasonable sized cavities and fissures that the animals can swim in. Of particular interest was a bore at Newhaven Homestead which yielded a species of beetle that is the first of its sub-order to be found in a stygal environment. It is probably to be given the specific name "*newhavenensis*".

An interesting finding was that while diving beetles were found at 8 sites in the Ngalia

Basin, none were found in the Amadeus Basin, only shrimps.

The material collected will keep researchers busy for some time. With modern technology relationships of new species are determined from DNA sequencing. Amazingly this is done using a single leg from these near-microscopic shrimps. RR