If not claimed within 14 days please return to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

October 2002

[redacted]

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

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Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

October 2002

CLUB NEWS

NEXT MEETING

October 9th 7.30pm at OLSH staffroom, Sadadeen Rd.
Guest Speaker: **Felicity Forth** (Waterwatch Coordinator) on **Lessons from Wigley's: What we can learn from monitoring Wigley's Waterhole.**

TRIPS

Sunday September 15th Hugh River Stockroute. Turn off 95km on South Stuart Highway.Past Jim's Place. Quest for the Cinnamon Quail Thrush.

Saturday September 28th Rosalie suggested **Kyunba Reserve** for a half day walk in Pine Valley. Meet at Old Timers 7.30am

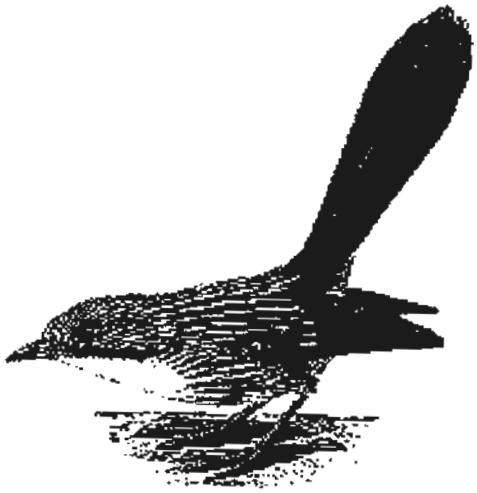
Sunday Nov 17th Waterwatch. Meet at 8.30am at the Sargent St. sign, North Stuart Hwy.

KINDRED ORGANISATIONS' ACTIVITIES & EVENTS

Please confirm details with the organisations.

Dates	Activities	Venues
Sept. 22nd 11am	Greening Australia: Inaugural AGM followed by BBQ at noon	Desert Park (next to main carpark), Larapinta Dr.
Oct 2nd	Australian Plants Society: Guest speaker at 8.30pm. * Monthly meeting starts at 7.30pm	Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Rd
Oct 5th 7.30pm	Friends of Olive Pink: What bird is that ?	Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Rd
Oct 12th	Desert Park Youth Activity: Threatened Species, get into the spirit of Weed Buster Week	Desert Park, Larapinta Dr
Oct 12-13th	National Trust trip to Horseshoe Bend to visit Karl Strehlow's grave.	
Oct 30th	Closing date for Waterwatch Photo competition.	Waterwatch, C/- D.I.P.E., (Alice Plaza) P.O. Box 2130, A Sp. NT 0871
Nov 3rd 2.30pm	Summer in Alice Slides & Guide Walk: how nature copes with summer heat & how you can help your garden survive	Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Rd
Nov 9th	Desert Park Behind the Scenes: Fabulous Frogs – get into the spirit of Frog Week	Desert Park, Larapinta Dr

* Barry Baston, CSIRO Land Ecologist
Change in Tree Cover in NT, 1972-2002



In Search of the White-throated Grasswren
by Bob Read

The White-throated Grasswren is one of several species restricted to the Arnhemland escarpment country. In size and shape it is similar to our local Dusky Grasswren, though with a distinctive white throat.

On my holiday in Kakadu I thought that it would be nice to see the White-throated Grasswrens. My confidence was boosted by the ease with which I found the Eyrean Grasswrens last year. White-throated Grasswrens are often seen on the escarpment near a place called Gunlom. This is a beautiful spot, also known as UDP Falls, where a large creek coming off the escarpment has formed a huge plunge pool, some hundred metres across. There is an excellent managed camping ground, and I had no trouble persuading Leoni to spend two nights there. On the afternoon of the day we arrived, we took the steep path up the escarpment to the lookout for a reconnaissance. We discovered that at the top of the waterfall there were other smaller more secluded pools, and Leoni decided that it would be nice to spend a day sitting by one of these.

The problem with that plan was that Leoni does not believe in early starts, and by the time we got to the top of the escarpment with our picnic lunch and thermos it was 9 AM. I set off in hope, but failed to find any sign of the grasswrens. I found plenty of White-lined Honeyeaters, another species limited to the escarpment, but no grasswrens. By a stroke of luck I met a birder, obviously an expert on the grasswrens, who indicated the area where I should be looking and explained that they were only active for an hour or so after sunrise. At midday I gave up and returned to the waterhole where I had left Leoni to enjoy herself knitting and chatting to some of the German tourists who had wandered up that far. Adventure tour groups occupied the next waterhole down . The adventure apparently consists of a short hike to a waterhole and then spending some hours swimming and sitting around it. Somehow this version of eco-tourism seems little different to the sitting around a hotel swimming pool that it replaces.

Next morning I rose before dawn (Leoni says that I woke the whole campground, but I am sure that that is an exaggeration) and was up on the escarpment before sunrise. I spent some hours carefully searching the areas of spinifex with ledges of bare rock. There was still no sign of White-throated Grasswrens. As a consolation I did find the Banded Fruit-Dove, a species that is restricted to areas of relict rainforest near the escarpment a flock of Lavender-flanked Fairy-wren and Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeons.

My suggestion of spending another night and trying again the next morning was over-ruled by Leoni, and we moved on to another campground Maguk, where I by accident I found the rare and elusive Grey Whistler (another of the hard to find "greys").

The pictures are scanned out of Cayley's "What Bird is That?".

Monitoring Wigley's Waterhole
by Felicity Forth

On Sunday the 8th of September, I had the pleasure of accompanying three filed naturalists as they recommenced Waterwatch monitoring at Wigley's Waterhole. Waterwatch had stalled at the waterhole over the recent months die to a lack of resources – the kit ran out of chemicals. The kit has finally been restocked and is now ready to go. Rosalie demonstrated her fine water bug identification skills, and taught Barbara and Jim a thing or two about a wide array of tiny water bugs including bright red mites and freaky little goggle-eyed water bugs called cyclops. I spent most of the morning speechless with awe (due mostly to a sore throat, but also possibly to Rosalie's fantastic invertebrate knowledge!).

We also conducted the chemical tests on pH, phosphate levels, dissolved oxygen, salinity, turbidity (muddiness) and temperature. Very few waterholes in Alice Springs are regularly monitored for water quality, so the work of the Field Naturalists monitoring Wigley's provides

part of a very valuable water quality database. The next Waterwatch monitoring at Wigley's will be on Sunday Nov. 17th (See Trips above.)

Clever Crow
from a University of Oxford news release

Birds may have a basic understanding of physics, recent research by Oxford zoologists suggests. In an article published in Science today, the researchers report the findings of an experiment in which New Caledonian crows bent wires to make hooks appropriate to retrieve food from a cylinder. This is the first time any animal has been found to show some understanding of cause and effect, and to make a new tool for a specific task. The experiment built on a chance observation, when a captive female crow spontaneously bent a piece of wire and successfully used it to lift food from a vertical pipe.

To examine such tool-making behaviour by crows more systematically, the researchers set up an experiment where a male and a female crow were presented with a straight piece of wire and a glass tube with some food located at the bottom. The birds needed some tool or implement to get the food out of the tube. The female crow bent the piece of wire and retrieved food successfully nine times out of ten. The birds had used hooks before but never made any. While they were familiar with similar experiments they had no experience with wires. The findings may have wide-ranging implications regarding birds' understanding of physics and their quality of reasoning about cause and effect.

The team is now exploring whether New Caledonian crows are exceptionally clever in many other respects, or whether they have brains specially evolved for the use and manufacture of tools. Alex Kacelnik, Professor of Behavioural Ecology, said: 'Although many animals use tools, purposeful modification of objects to solve new problems, without training or prior experience, is virtually unknown. Experiments with primates, who are much closer relatives of humans than birds, have failed to show any deliberate, specific tool making and human-like understanding of basic physical laws.

'We are now keen to elucidate if New Caledonian crows are outstanding in all aspects of their intelligence or only in those related to tool manufacturing and use. In other words we want to understand what kind of mind these crows have. This will give us the opportunity to test hypotheses about the conditions which are needed for complex cognition to evolve.'

* The findings are the subject of an article to be published in Science (9 August 2002), 'Shaping of Hooks in New Caledonian Crows' by Alexander Weir, Jackie Chappell and Alex Kacelnik.
* In the wild, New Caledonian crows make at least two sorts of hook tools using distinct techniques, but the method used by the female crow in the experiment is different from those and would be unlikely to be effective with natural materials.
* The Behavioural Ecology Research Group at Oxford University's Department of Zoology investigates animal and human decision-making with the tools of experimental psychology and of evolutionary biology. The main experimental models, apart from New Caledonian crows, are European Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris). Some current and previous issues include: risk-sensitive foraging behaviour, animal decision-making, parental and begging behaviour, and time perception.

For those with internet access a movie of the crow can be seen at

- http://www.sciencemag.org/feature/data/crow/weirmovie.mov