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Inc. PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

April 2008



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Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club 2008

REMINDERS FOR APRIL MEETING

Gate Opener for April: Bob Supper: Marilyn Note
Taker: Sarah

MEETINGS

7.30 pm on the second Wednesday of the month.

Venue: Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Road

9th April. Speaker Jon Delaine. "Invasive bird species in Alice Springs". The feral birds that have established here, the ones that have tried and failed, and the ones that are a threat.

14th May, Dick Kimber, "History of Natural History in central Australia". Dick is the authority on early biological exploration in the region and this should be an entertaining and informative.

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS MEETINGS

Australian Plants Society meets Wed 2 April, 7:30 pm at the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. Speaker: Tim Collins, Alice Springs Desert Park Nursery Manager on the topic "Rare, relictal and elusive plants of the Petermann Ranges". All welcome.

Australian Plants Society meeting Wed 7 May, 7:30 pm at the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. Speaker: Alice Quarmbly, Seed Bank Curator on the topic: "The Millennium Seed Bank Project: conserving native plants of the Northern Territory for future generations". All welcome.

TRIPS / ACTIVITIES

April 5th. Walk through Fenn Gap to the very unusual cave. 8 km walk (3 or 4 hours) and a moderate climb. Bring lunch, water, hat. Meet Flynn Grave 7 AM. About 30 km of sealed road with a short dirt road at the end.

April 26th, Owen Springs, drive through Lawrence Gorge. 4WD needed, about 150 km round trip. Meet 7:30 AM at Flynn Grave. Bring lunch.

May 3rd to 5th, Ruby Gap. 4 WD needed, about 300 km round trip. Meet 8:30 AM at the Date Farm. We will probably walk up to the Gap in a day, though it is possible to drive up to it.

May 17th to 18th, Stage 11 of the Larapinta Trail, Glen Helen to Redbank Gorge. For those who do not want to do the overnight walk there is the option of walking from Redbank to Rocky Bar Gap and back.

May 31st, Old Telegraph Station to Wigley Gorge, morning walk of about 2 hours.

NEW MEMBERS

A big welcome to Cheryl and Elmer Wolfenden and to Raf Abdul Rashid.

GUEST SPEAKER REPORT

BIOPHYSICAL MAPPING IN PARKS

- a natural resource management tool

Illustrated talk by Chris Brock
March 13th

by Rosalie Breen.

To map the vegetation of the Northern Territory is a slow process; with limited personnel, it takes about three years to map one reserve. Chris Brock has been working in and has completed surveys of Watarrka National Park.

Mapping begins with aerial photos from which the topography can be seen and plant communities can be judged. This is checked in the field by surveys along transect lines. Sixteen communities were defined involving 700 plant species, with 80 new ones discovered, such as the Marble Gums in the western part. From this, cell-based summaries were collated on 1.5 km blocks, counting the number of different species (up to 390 different species in the most diverse areas) and the number of rare plants in each block. Most diversity is around the edges of the range.

These maps can be used in park management.

Weeds

Buffel grass, even low density growth is detected using helicopter sightings. It prefers the more fertile areas, roadsides and creeks. Combining information, a biodiversity-based weed management priority map can be produced which indicates best and most urgent places for control, taking into account ease of access and susceptibility to buffel infestation.

Fauna

The distribution of fauna records in each vegetation community (1200 records in 2006) combined with Park Rangers records indicates the best areas to survey in the future especially in comparisons between buffel infestation or buffel free areas. The count of possum food plants in each block indicates preferred possum habitats to aid in the search for these animals. Birds like the Crested Bellbird and Shrike-thrushes are more common in the denser vegetation of Witchetty and Mulga in the ranges.

Fire

A map of fire tolerance of the vegetation guides the burning programs e.g. where to put fire breaks. Or the vegetation mapped for fire intensity can indicate how often you can burn without degrading the habitat.

Chris is now working on the area around Simpsons Gap.

TRIP REPORT

ALICE SPRINGS SEWAGE PONDS.

Sun 2nd March 2008

By Meg Moonie

It's a perfectly still, fresh morning. The sewage ponds are sparkling blue. There's a salty smell in the air, like a slightly pungent beach. The ranges to the north and south are rusty pink, the hills in the distance pale violet and blue.

Barb and Liz have already set up the telescopes to home in on the sandpipers, one of several groups of mainly speckled waders with longish beaks, straight or curved slightly up or down, all designed for collecting juicy morsels on mud or sand flats. These groups of birds with probes have wonderful names, like Dowitchers and Tattlers, Godwits and Stints.



Smelly pond.

Photo: Rosalie Breen

Anyway it's Sandpipers, medium-sized waders with medium to long straight beaks, we are looking at. The smaller Common Sandpiper is pale greyish brown on top, not speckled, and bobs up and down frenetically, so you wonder about its state of mind. It's one of the 'teetering' Sandpipers, who apparently bob their heads around so they can see the ground better.

We also see lots of Wood and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, distinguished respectively by a spotty or scale-like pattern on their backs. A few Greenshanks – greenish legs and long, stout, slightly upturned bills – seem to be often just visible down a bank some way off.

Amazingly, all the Sandpipers and Greenshanks we see tottering around have flown ten thousand kilometres or more to get here this summer. They breed in the northern summer, in Scotland, Siberia, Mongolia or elsewhere in Eurasia, and migrate south in August or September.

Moving west and south along the earth banks between the network of ponds, like large swimming pools, we have beautiful views of some native waders, Avocets and

Stilts, mirrored in the water. The delicate Black-winged Stilts balance on long, thin red legs, which drag behind them when they fly. Avocets are larger and even more elegant, with rust heads, white bodies, black and white wings and long, fine upturned bills, which are apparently good for grabbing tiny animals swimming near the surface.



Avocet Pond

Photo: Rosalie Breen

I got to know Black Ducks well as a child, because my father used to shoot them and we used to eat them. They and Grey Teal are two of the main ducks we see, quite similar but the teal doesn't have a black line through its eye. There are also Wood Ducks, with grey bodies and brown heads, and the odd chestnut brown hardheads – the female has a distinctive white ring around its eyes.

Two types of Grebes, little duck-like birds (but they're not ducks) dabble around, periodically disappearing underwater. The Grebes are in their breeding outfits, the Hoary-headed with streaky hair dos, and the Australasians with smart little yellow patches behind their beaks.

Around at the south eastern pond, where the water is very shallow and especially pungent and mudflats often exposed, we see Marsh Sandpipers, busily swishing their very thin beaks back and forth through the water, like someone has told them breakfast time will be up in an hour.

A large smelly mass of bright green algae in this area is the result, apparently, of an artificial geyser, which we unfortunately don't get to see in action. Rosalie bravely collects a sample for microscopic identification.



The smelly Geysir

Photo: Rosalie Breen

Heading west, we see three types of Dotterels skittering around in the reeds and mudflats. The Black-fronted Dotterels, with a smart white front with a black V, are particularly common around waterholes in the Centre.

Barb says the Red-kneed Dotterels, with their black caps and breasts and white 'bibs', remind her of nuns, with red knees from kneeling down to pray. They have a very neat look about them. The Red-capped Dotterels are generally pale with reddish heads and are good at melting into mudflats.

We see a couple of Black-tailed Native Hens run along, stop and pose, and then run on again. This large really out-there black bird has a distinctive frill of tail and hot red legs.

Whiskered and White-winged Terns are doing still lives on logs, reflected in the water. The Whiskered Terns have reddish beaks and blackish heads. The little White-winged Tern has a little black smudge in front of and behind its eyes, somehow giving it an unassuming look.

Our final destination is a large western pond with lots and lots of birds. We add Black Swans – we see two – and Pink-eared ducks to our list here. Their small pink ear spots are hard to see but these are very striking ducks, with zebra-stripes on their sides, black patches around their eyes and big, clunky beaks.



The Birders

Photo: Rosalie Breen

Oh, and there were a couple of Yellow-billed Spoonbills, managing to look dignified despite their ridiculous bills, and lots of Lapwings, which I find rather ugly and tend to forget

Thanks to Liz and Barb for all their patient aiming of scopes and pointing, and explanations of how to tell this bird from that one when they looked almost exactly the same. It was a great morning.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thanks to all the ASFNC members who have provided wonderful articles and photos for the newsletter over the past 2 years when I have been the Newsletter Editor. (Thanks also to the not so small team who got the newsletters to your mail boxes.) Your efforts have made the newsletter expand occasionally to 12 pages of enjoyable reading. By getting your postings to me on time you have made my job easy. Special thanks to Bob Read for proof reading and leading us into the computer age of PDF files for happy emailing to members. I will keep in touch with the adventures from Umbria and what follows.

Liz Carpenter
lizcarpenter@bigpond.com

Creature Feature



Litoria rubella

Photo: taken Simpson's Gap by Barb Gilfedder

Litoria rubella

A very common frog species, 28 - 43 mm long. Notice the reddish colour, with the side of the head darker than the back. It has short limbs, short fingers and broad discs on the fingers and toes.

Barb Gilfedder

Farewell, thanks

This is the last newsletter to be edited by Liz who has done a sterling job. Liz is off to do some travelling, before moving to Adelaide. Michelle Walker has kindly agreed to take over the editor's job temporarily. The AGM is in August, and the opportunity is open for anyone who would like to try their hand.

Copy deadline for articles for the next newsletter.

Friday 2nd May 2008.

PLEASE NOTE that from this date Michelle Walker has kindly taken on the job of **NEWSLETTER EDITOR**

**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
MINUTES OF GENERAL MEETING HELD AT OLIVE PINK BOTANIC GARDEN
WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH 2008**

OPEN:

President, Bob Read

PRESENT:

As per attendance book

APOLOGIES:

Marg Lawrence

PREVIOUS MINUTES:

Connie moved that the minutes of the previous meeting (Wednesday 13 February 2008) be accepted as a true and correct record. All in favour.

TREASURER'S REPORT:

Not available. Bank statement not received.

CORRESPONDENCE - IN:

- The Naturalist News (Western Australian Naturalists Club Inc.
- Australia Post – PO Box rental renewal
- Central Australian Bushwalkers – Walk Schedule through to May 2008
- NT Field Naturalists Club Inc. – Nature Territory Newsletter
- Threatened Species Network Newsletter

GENERAL BUSINESS:

- Bob has been approached by Desert Discovery re trip to Colson's Pinnacle. Purpose of the trip is to conduct various surveys, eg bird, flora, fauna and marsupial mole field work. Anyone interested please contact Bob for details.
- Bob moved we donate \$250.00 towards part sponsorship of a sign for Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. Seconded by Shirley Goodman. Carried unanimously.
- Deadline for newsletter items is 24/3/08
- Bob thanked Liz for her efforts as Newsletter Editor and was joined by club members in wishing her all the very best in her future endeavours.

OUTINGS:

- Morning walk Easter Monday (24/3/08) in the Kurrajong Hills. Meet 6.30am opposite 88Kurrajong Drive. 2 – 3 hours approximately 5 kms.
- Plant sale Saturday and Sunday 15th and 16th March at OPBG.

SIGHTINGS:

Flock of cockatiels sighted at two mile.

Little curlew at sewerage ponds

Channel billed cuckoos appear to have gone.

Several rainbow bee eaters sighted

Shirley sighted several bronzewings coming down to drink at Simpsons Gap.

Sue sighted a Sacred Kingfisher in front garden at Spencer Street.

Gate Opener for April: Bob **Supper for April:** Marilyn **Note Taker for March:** Sarah

Meeting Closed: 8.50pm