



May 2011

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Cattle Egrets (*Ardea ibis*) - Part of a flock of eleven who dropped in at the sewage ponds early in April. Photo by Chris Watson.

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month (except December & January) at 7:00 PM at Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Visitors are welcome

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## NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> May**. Please send your contributions to Emily Findlay – [robbiemily@hotmail.com](mailto:robbiemily@hotmail.com).

## MEETINGS.

Wed 11 May **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Glenn Edwards** on “Camels”.

Wed 8 June **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker: **Ken Johnson** on the early naturalist – **HH Finlayson**

## FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

Thu 5 May **ASFNC Our Water Exhibition** This special preview of the travelling Questacon exhibition is a chance for sponsors, supporters and educators and their families to view the exhibition before the general public. Afternoon tea is available. Araluen Art Centre, Witchettys Gallery 4.00pm - 6.00pm Please RSVP to 8951 1111 or [strehlow@nt.gov.au](mailto:strehlow@nt.gov.au).

Sat 7 May **ASFNC** Explore the Todd River upstream from the Telegraph Station up to what Rosalie calls the gorge waterhole and aboriginal people call Ngketyenye. There's water in the river, easily negotiable, with rock hopping, tracks and cross country. There are still some flowers out, and grasses and of course birds. We will meet at the information shelter at the Station at 8.00 am. Bring water, hat, sock protection (grass seeds) and a snack. About 3 hours. Leader: Rosalie Breen 89523409

Sat/Sun 14-15 May **APS** trip to *Acacia latzii* site – measuring seedlings - Contact Connie Spencer 89524694

Sat 28 May **ASFNC** Visit to Alice Springs Desert Park Farm, where they are growing food for some of the park's animals. Meet at the service area at ASDP at 9.00am. Turn left just before the main car park. Contact Barb Gilfedder 8955 5452

Sat 4 June **ASFNC** Walk up Witchetty Hill then along the low range behind Zeil Street – Meet at 8.00am in Blain Street - Track to the right just before the school. Contact Barb Gilfedder 8955 5452

Sun 10 July **ASFNC** Shorebird Survey at sewage ponds – Contact Barb Gilfedder 8955 5452

Dates for **Bush Regeneration** field days at **Maynard Park** 2011.

You are invited to attend our bush regeneration field days for season one 2011 at Maynard Park, Head St Braitling, 8:30am till 10am. Next Date May 14, usually every 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of the month.

Contact Andy Vinter [andy\\_vinter@yahoo.com.au](mailto:andy_vinter@yahoo.com.au)

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**April Speaker "Fire in Central Australia" talk by Grant Allen - short report from Rosalie Breen.**

Grant Allen is a scientific officer for Bushfires NT, a government agency which supports Bushfires Council and its volunteers and the community, providing training, increasing public awareness, and of course research, to develop fire mitigation and strategies for fire suppression.

We know of the water cycle, well there is a fire cycle. It is inevitable that rainfall produces green grass, this dries off producing dry grass, and fire burns it. Then it rains again for another cycle. But what are the main determinants for growth and fire events? Rainfall distribution - amount, time of year and area

We viewed a number of maps and graphs from the Bureau of Meteorology showing rainfall distribution over the years showing, as we know, its variability both in time and amount. Various ways of presenting this information tell us what is important. Rainfall was bulked into 2-year rainfall patterns, being great in late 40s, 70, and 99-02. All of these periods were followed by severe fires. Deciles (a measure of rain above and below average) indicated the relationship of the rainfall to average falls. All this data pointed to the fact that fires occur after persistent and above average rainfall for two years in succession. 1997-9 was quite dry followed in 1999-2001 with above average rainfall and then many fires north of Alice. The largest fire in the Tanami district burning 75,000 square kilometres and extending for 500km occurred in Aug-Oct 2007 following rain in 2006.

Another way to look at it was in 24 month cumulative rainfall for different areas. This showed that the spatial pattern of where the rain falls is significant for indicating the extent of vegetation, notably grass growth, and thus the incidence of fire.

TSDM the Aussie Grass Total Standing Dry Matter. If this is >2 tons/hectare it is likely to burn.

Fuel types are important. Three types were defined. Spinifex does not regrow quickly, buffel creates very hot fires, the "others" have less bulk being finer so do not burn so readily.

Fuel continuity, whether continuous or patchy, has a bearing on fires.

Fire seasons and Fire Danger Index (low, moderate, high, very high, and extreme) and the McArthur Grassland Fire Danger Meter, have been developed to indicate risks of fires, based on five factors - the fuel load, the amount of curing (drying), relative humidity, temperature and wind. There is a monthly variation of FDI with the cooler windier spring weather having the greatest potential for intense rapidly spreading fires. January is more likely to be a bit damp. This indicates the control burning should be undertaken in April to July. And the typical Fire Season in Alice Springs is September to November, not related just to the highest temperatures.

Interesting to me were graphs of Grass Fire Danger Index by month for Alice and the daily variation which rises at 8 am and falls back after 2pm.

Grant showed us many satellite images now available to Bushfires NT which have been invaluable in research and getting information predicting the areas of possible danger and to show how fires are spreading. A very graphic set of pictures showed the extent and increasing pall of smoke in July 2002 for a fire southeast of Alice.

I guess my main impression of the talk was the extent of information available of rainfall and plant growth and how this can be collated by research, for knowledge of fire behaviour and prediction of events, to help in management of the landscape for the benefit of people and properties.

Thanks Grant. We are in capable hands. (Though it is inevitable there will be fires in the next year or two!)



**ALICE SPRINGS - SEWAGE PONDS BIRD COUNT 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2011**  
**By Rhondda Tomlinson**

7:00am and a group of very enthusiastic bird watchers, scribes and lookeroners (no skill but interested in the proceedings) gathered at the sewage ponds to listen to Barb give instructions about the bird count and hand out the sheets for recording. Will took off with his group in the baby Morris and the rest divided into groups of about 4.

I joined the group of Chris Watson, Meg Mooney and Rosalie Breen. The morning was ideal with virtually no breeze and the pond reflections perfect. We quietly made our way to our assigned ponds and saw some busy birds on the path ahead which were decided to be added to our count. Chris named many birds and then great excitement some fluffy grey chicks on the edge of the pond sneaking out from the undergrowth and darting back (*Buff-banded Rail*). Chris saw a bird that he had not seen for a while (*Pectoral Sandpiper*) and another that is very rare to the area (*Glossy Ibis*) and a photo shoot of a raptor sitting on a post that at first was unaware of our approach (*Black Kite*). There were some very high counts of a fairly common group of birds (*Black-winged Stilt*) and some birds in flight with an odd one out. I was taken by the large number of Black Swans where on past visits I had only seen one or two. I did not hear anyone mention a Spoonbill which we had seen once before on a previous visit.

Chris commented on a group of birds that were almost in a feeding frenzy (*Black-tailed Godwit*) as they were preparing for their long migratory flight to the other side of the world as they were later leaving some were starting to obtain their breeding plumage.

On our way back we went via Will's group and notes were compared and at one stage it was thought that they had counted the same group of birds due to disturbance but it was agreed that they were separate flocks.

By all accounts it was a very profitable hour's work.

*(Thanks Rhondda and thanks to all the participants. The count was indeed worthwhile. The data collected has been forwarded to the Shorebird 2020, Birds Australia team. The threats to shorebirds and evidence of their declines are growing, but they need data carefully collected in the same way each year in order to show conclusively how much trouble some of these species are in and what factors are driving their declines. Our group in Alice Springs plan to carry out a survey every three months. The next count will be on Sunday 10 July. Barb Gilfedder.)*

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**Easter 2011 at Newhaven**

John and Layne Stevenson, Neil and Leigh Woolcock spent 3 days over Easter at Newhaven Bird Sanctuary. The road to Tilmouth Roadhouse is paved, so travelling there is easy. After Tilmouth is 25km of gravel road in fair condition. The road off to the west to Newhaven is 135km long and apart from one minor nasty stretch of corrugation, is in remarkably good condition for most of the way. It's easy to travel at 80 or 90km/hour for much of the time.

We were met at Newhaven by Jo who suggested a few places to camp. We chose the west camping area which has hot showers (cold showers in the east camp). There was a BBQ fireplace and drinking quality water at the site, and very clean toilets and showers - very good value at \$10/night/person.

We were invited by Jo and Danae to join their group of volunteers at 6:30 on Sunday morning for a few hours to inspect the series of traps they had set to monitor mammals and other small animals.

Three trapping areas had been set up about 15km from the camp area. Low barriers (about 30cm high) were set up to direct any small creatures to pit traps and funnel net traps.

Away from these barriers Elliot traps (small metal cylinders baited with peanut butter and oats) were set.

The Elliot traps were very successful, catching numerous mammals including:-

Spinifex Hopping Mouse, Sandy Inland Mouse, Desert Mouse, Lesser Hairy-footed Dunnart and Mulgara.

The pit traps came up with some lizards including Leopard Skinks and a newborn Sand Plains Gecko. A camera was set up at one site to record Great Desert Skinks. Interesting to some perhaps is the way they have a communal latrine set away from their warren.

Other lizards sighted were lots of very fast moving Military Dragons, and a Thorny Devil spotted by Layne as they were leaving. The funnel nets didn't seem to come up with anything.

Of great excitement to Jo and Danae was the arrival of a Black-shouldered Kite, the first they have seen in their time at Newhaven (over 3 years).

In the afternoon we headed off on one of the well documented routes called the "Lakes Drive" which included the very large and spectacular salt lake, Lake Bennett. There are many other smaller lakes as well with varying types of vegetation. All was beautiful and amazing.



Preparing to remove animal from an Elliot Trap

On Monday the four of us set off on the "Dunes Tour", approximately 80 kilometres of varying geological and vegetative features. A highlight was a detour down Bird Road where a pond of water attracted multitudes of Zebra Finches as well as some Budgerigars, a Peaceful Dove and a Brown Falcon. A short distance beyond the pond the road finishes with a spectacular view of a pristine salt lake. We wandered across the lake until John sank to his ankles and we decided we had gone far enough.

Over the few days, between us we observed approximately 40 different bird species. Zebra finches were the most prolific.

Our combined bird list was :-

Brown Falcon, Black-faced Woodswallow, Australian Hobby, Zebra Finch, Little Crow, Magpie Lark, Black-shouldered Kite, Crested Pigeon, Black Kite, Willie Wagtail, Masked Woodswallow, Australian Magpie, Diamond Dove, Nankeen Kestrel, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Pied Butcherbird, Crested Bellbird, Cockatiel, Australian Pipit, Little Button Quail, Singing Honeyeater, Black Falcon, Western Gerygone, Pallid Cuckoo, Australian Bustard, Budgerigar, Yellow-throated Miner, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Brown Goshawk, Peaceful Dove, Grey Falcon.

Those who have visited Newhaven before will know how good it is. For those who have yet to take the trip, you will be well-rewarded for your effort if you go.

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### Nocturnal House and Desert Farm – by Rosalie Schultz

I believe that ecosystems and biodiversity have a right to exist irrespective of any value to us humans alive today, or even humanity in general. I also am not sure whether I am completely at ease with people putting other life forms into boxes for us to watch.

Nonetheless I am delighted to be a volunteer observer with the Desert Park Nocturnal House. The role of observers is to systematically examine each enclosure for a set period, and document which and how many animals in the enclosure are seen. This is to ensure that the Nocturnal House meets required standards for visitor satisfaction – 80% of animals must be seen within the 37 second time period that visitors spend at each enclosure.... so we are not doing it to increase knowledge or well-being of the animals but for the tourist attraction of the Nocturnal House.



**Tawny Frogmouth**

While this is disturbing at a philosophical level, it's still delightful and exciting to greet each of the animals. You can get really close to a Tawny Frogmouth, it stared hard at me... behind a glass wall. It is breath-taking to spend time watching animals now extinct in the wild such as the Mala or Rufous Hare Wallaby.

Exciting things are happening with the Desert Park's animal collection. Staff realised that vast resources were being used to import the fresh food that the animals were being fed. Not only is this inefficient, it is also of limited nutritional value, compared with a diverse local diet which could be harvested from local plants in the park.

The Desert Farm was born - a nursery for local plants, being cultivated for the animals of the Desert Park, also some suitable for humans who eat at the café.

An opening launch was held in April 2011. Owing to the amazing rains we have had over the past 15 months, an exciting range of produce was on display.

Things good to eat for both humans and animals:

- Bush Tomatoes and Raisins (*Solanum ellipticum* and *S. centrale*)
- Bush Plum – *Santalum lanceolatum*
- Bush Cucumber – *Cucumis melo* – one of the best cucumbers I've had, the skin was a little tough but the flavour was rich and the flesh was juicy
- Saltbushes – *Atriplex nummularia*, *Rhagodia spinensis*
- Bush Yam – *Ipomoea costata*



**Bush plum – *Santalum lanceolatum***

A great day out, whatever you feel about looking at our native animals confined in cages, in artificial lighting, artificial days and nights, temperatures and stresses, just for our entertainment.

At least they are being fed their own food.

*(If you would like to volunteer at the Desert Park, contact Anthony Molyneux – Assistant Curator Zoology Ph: 89518722. Visit the Desert Park Farm with the Field Nats- May 28- see p.2.*

**Bush cucumber – *cucumis melo***



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### **Bird Watching in Cambodia - From Megg Kelham (currently of the Mekong)**

April is not the best of months to choose to travel in South East Asia because temperatures soar to over 40 degrees without (usually) rain. Mid-April is also Cambodian New Year - a three (to five) day national holiday which sees the nation's restaurants close, bus services halve and hotel prices double as Cambodians hit the road. Apart from joining the crowds dancing in the streets to Cambodian pop (seriously good if dusty fun!), there is little to do except get lost in a good book. Public water fights, the saving grace of a hot New Year in neighbouring Laos and Thailand are banned in Cambodia. Too many water bombs have killed too many motor cyclists.

So imagine my joy when I found myself - at the only open restaurant in Kratie in Northern Cambodia talking to a professional bird watcher who was delighted to share her knowledge of the Mekong with an arid dwelling amateur like myself and another guest for whom bird watching was an entirely new experience.

At dawn two days later, the three of us cycled to a small lotus filled freshwater lake where, over a breakfast of bananas and baguettes (one of the delightful remnants of Cambodia's colonial past), Andrea "Dre" Claassen, PhD candidate from the University of Minnesota introduced us to the birds of the Mekong. Amongst others we saw: Purple Swamphens, Indian Cormorants, Purple Herons, Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Chinese Pond Herons, Streaked Weavers, Black and Yellow Bitterns and my favourite a Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker.



Birds were plentiful though as Andrea quietly explained, it may not be this way for very much longer as a consequence of the number of dams being planned by China, Laos and Vietnam in the upper reaches of the Mekong basin. In the past twelve months Andrea has observed non-rainfall related water fluctuations of a metre or more which she thinks are probably caused by water releases from a new dam recently completed in Vietnam and which she thinks may affect bird breeding given that most of the Mekong's water birds nest on small islands which appear and disappear in the Dry and Wet. Identifying the impacts of human habitation and fluctuations in water levels on nesting patterns is part of Andrea's thesis. Identifying a base-line from which to measure changes in the Mekong's bird population is one of her hardest challenges. The Mekong, in that part of the river in which Andrea works, is almost 11 km wide, a huge area for a traditional bird survey. The challenge is even greater when one considers that a new bird is still being discovered in South East Asia every five or so years. The Mekong Wagtail is the latest of these new avian delights.

Andrea will finish her second Mekong nest survey this year, with funding to do another next year and her PhD expected sometime after that. She is really happy to have skilled volunteers on board though be warned that the work takes places in the hottest and driest months of the Cambodian year and though you'd be surrounded by water, the Mekong may not be the safest of the world's waters to swim in! If you're interested you could email Andrea on [aclaass@yahoo.com](mailto:aclaass@yahoo.com). If you do, please say hello from me.

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**TORTOISE BEETLE and ROBBER FLY by Barb Gilfedder**

I found this little beetle crawling around an apple bush in my garden a few weeks ago. I have finally found a name for it - "Dotted Paropsine Leaf Beetle" *Paropsis atomaria* - one of a group of tortoise beetles in the Chrysomelidae family. I thought he was really neat – attractive colouring and I liked the way he could hide his legs and antennae under the dome-shaped wing cases when he was sitting on a leaf. Generally both adult and larval stages feed on Eucalypt leaves. Perhaps he was trying a different diet or had just fallen off his Eucalypt leaf.



Another tiny insect we found sitting on the clothes line was this strange looking fly, hairy with big eyes and a long abdomen - a Robber Fly. *Neoaratus* sp. Family Asilidae. The adults are predatory, catching other insects in flight, and then sucking out their body juices using a hard proboscis.

## FABULOUS FUNGI by Barb Gilfedder

I started taking photos of Central Australian fungi last year, when we found Earth Stars in the garden. Since then we have had so much rain that they were popping up everywhere for a while. We bought Bruce Fuhrer's "A field guide to Australian fungi" and started trying to give them names. A few I felt unsure of and contacted Gaye Drady, a fungi 'amateur' expert who lives in the Hunter Valley in NSW. We discussed different photos and only then did I realize just how difficult a job identifying fungi is.

These are the names we came up with for this collection:- Clockwise from top left.....Pleated Inkcap - *Parasola plicatilis*: Puffball *Pisolithus sp.*: Stinkhorn - *Phallus rubicundus*: Little Puff balls – scientific name unknown: Ink cap - *Coprinus sp.*: Earth star - *Geastrum sp.* probably *G. triplex*: Unknown – LBM (Little Brown Mushrooms): Unknown – LBM: Unknown – LBM: Jelly fungus - *Calocera sp.*. Centre picture:- Plantpot Fungus *Leucocoprinus birnbaumii* – yellow fungus often seen in plant pots.

Thank you Gaye for all your help. Field Nats you may wish to check out her wonderful website [australianfungi.blogspot.com](http://australianfungi.blogspot.com).



## ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED

### Minutes of general meeting held on 13 Apr 2011

Thankyou to Grant Allen for providing an interesting presentation on Bushfires.

Thankyou to Rosalie for taking notes and Leigh for supper.

#### Attendance and apologies

**Present** : Barb and Jim Gilfedder, Rosalie Breen, Marilyn Hall, Neil and Leigh Woolcock, Jill Brew, Sue O'Callaghan, Bev Gray, Wendy MacTaggart, Morgan Flint, Richard Bentley, Grant and Coral Allen

**Apologies** : Jenny Purdie, Steve Sinclair, Rhondda Tomlinson

**Minutes for previous meeting** : approved.

#### Business arising from minutes:

- Thankyou cards printed – grey-headed honeyeater.
- Shorebird count went well 33 wood sandpipers, 1 pectoral sandpiper and many other waterbirds. Thankyou to participants. Copy of full report to participants. Will send copies to people interested

#### Correspondence in:

- NT Field Naturalist newsletter – Apr 11
- WA Naturalists Club newsletter – Apr 11
- Jimmy Cocking – ALEC Co-ordinator phone call and email re mention of ASFNC as Community Support in applying for grants to run bi-monthly seminars.
- Gemtree Caravan Park “birds everywhere” advertising email.
- Exhibition launch at museum Central Australia at Araluen on 15 Apr at 10.00am
- Flyer Desert Lantern Restaurant
- Letter Doreen Braiuling lecture.
- Thankyou Jacelyn Anderson.

#### Correspondence out:

- Thankyou card to last month's speaker, Mark Carter
- Wiser Earth – ASFN details updated

<b>Treasurer's Report:</b>	Opening balance :	\$2760.56
	Plus: Bank interest :	2.25
	Less : Public liability insurance :	350.00
	Rental for Post Office Box :	86.00
	Closing balance (end March 2011)	\$2326.81

#### General Business:

##### Sewage Ponds:

Members of ASFNC are covered by insurance if attending a club activity.

Jill was advised that to collect a key she would have to fill in papers and they would get back to her 2 days later. This is not suitable for interstate visitors.

##### Information:

Chris Watson's website is well worth reading. <http://www.comebirdwatching.blogspot.com/>

##### Library:

ALEC is sorting out books and had 8 boxes to dispose of. Barb, Rosalie and Connie went through them and found some that were useful. Barb to bring books to next meeting. Eventually in our library at OPBG.

##### Activities:

- Sunday 17 April – Planning meeting at Olive Pink at 3.00pm.
- Easter weekend at Newhaven. At this stage only 2 couples going.
- Mayday weekend. Andy Hayes concerned about vehicles going into Mordor Pound. Other suggestion is Winneke, in same area. Morgan to email Barb, and Barb to pass on to membership.

##### Sightings:

Boobook owl and katydids at Trephina nocturnal walk.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo – Rosalie and Gavin Breen and Meg Mooney – OTS - 10 April (probably escapee)

##### Next meeting: 11 May

Speaker: Glen Edwards: Camels

Note taker: Jill Brew. Supper: Marilyn Hall.

Meeting closed: 8.50pm.