



July 2011

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* - Photographed in Thailand by Chris Watson.  
Don't miss Chris's talk at the July meeting.

**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

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The deadline for the next newsletter is **Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> July**. Please send your contributions to Barb Gilfedder [fedders@octa4.net.au](mailto:fedders@octa4.net.au) or Rhondda Tomlinson - [rhondda.tomlinson@nt.gov.au](mailto:rhondda.tomlinson@nt.gov.au). Emily Findlay is taking a break from editing the newsletter as she and Robbie prepare to welcome their new baby in late August. Many thanks to Emily. We wish her and all the family the very best. Also thanks to Rhondda for taking over the newsletter in the meantime.

### MEETINGS.

Wed 13 July **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. Speaker **Chris Watson** on “**Birds he saw on his recent trip to Thailand**”.

Wed 10 August **Field Naturalists Club** Meeting, 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University. **AGM and Members' night**. Please bring along interesting objects or a memory stick of photos to share

### FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES.

Sun 10 Jul **ASFNC Shorebird Survey** at sewage ponds – Experts needed for counting and others as scribes. Meet at 9.00 promptly at the gate. Contact Barb Gilfedder 89555452

16-17 July **ASFNC Old Hamilton Downs** – Camping or accommodation \$25 per person. Arrive about 3pm, settle in, then walk to the top of the (small) range behind the old homestead. From there, the view of the Chewings Ranges, looking down to Brinkley's Bluff, is wonderful, as will be the sunset. On the Sunday, we can walk up the creek, and around back to the homestead via the stand of Cycads and the petroglyphs, (about which few people know anything. Sunday walks can be taken by "day-trippers" the first of the walks would start at about 9.30. Contact Morgan Flint 89532286 or 0437422494

20-21 Aug **Eco-fair** at OPBG The third desertSMART EcoFair will be held at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens August 19-21. The EcoFair has developed into Central Australia's premier sustainability event. With more than 1100 people attending previous events, 2011 will see the EcoFair grow to festival proportions. The days will be jam-packed with workshops, speakers, children's activities and up to 60 green business and community stalls. **APS** usually have plant stall. **ASFNC** - Barb has organized a competition for this event and Sue Fraser will be contacting the membership to organize a roster for Saturday and Sunday.

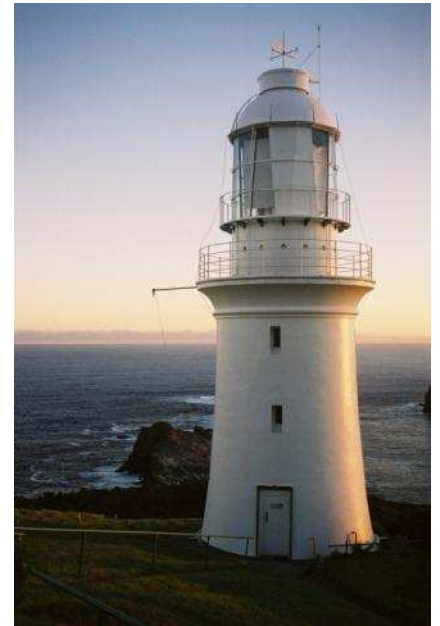
Sun 28 Aug **ASFNC** Planning meeting at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. Please come along to share your ideas about trips and speakers you would be interested in or send your suggestions to Barb before the date.

President	Barbara Gilfedder	8955 5452	<a href="mailto:fedders@octa4.net.au">fedders@octa4.net.au</a>
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## June Speaker - Wendy Mactaggart - Maatsuyker Island – Report by Rosalie Breen

Maatsuyker Island is a very wild place in the roaring forties, 15 km south of Tasmania. It is 3km by 1km, with sheer cliffs all round and at the south end is a line of rocks in the sea, Needle Rocks. Wendy was volunteer co-caretaker of the Island and its lighthouse,

Abel Tasman in 1642 named the island using a Dutch word meaning “measure of sugar”. The tea trees were in flower at the time and their white flowers looked like a sprinkling of sugar all over the island. This is the story and sounds more interesting than being named after a person. There is evidence of aboriginal visitation in middens around the gulch area, the only landing place on the island. Remains of seal, mutton birds and abalone have been found. In 1880s when Tasmania was being colonized from Hobart with ships plying to the south of the island from England via Cape of Good Hope, there was need of a warning light in the area. Maatsuyker Island was chosen as more suitable than South West Cape. And in 1891 the opening took place on the first of June on a rare and luckily calm day with dignitaries arriving by boat, and flags bedecking the lighthouse. Early there were three families living on the island, as the light had to be attended in three eight hour shifts. So there are three houses, and other buildings.



The landing place for the island is on the north side and everything had to be hauled 400 feet up the steep cliff using a whim powered by two horses with two trolleys, one going up, the other going down the wooden tram line. Everything, really meant “everything”, like all the building bricks and the light equipment, lenses etc. even goats and pigs with their legs tied and secured to the trolleys. The horses had to make their own way up the cliff. The remains of the track are still there as well as a few metal posts at the landing site. As technology changed much of the old equipment was just thrown over the cliff and bits have been located like the whim horse bracket and the winding wheel. There was a story of a new family landing and much of their possessions were stored in the shed at the landing to be hauled up the next day. But next day it was discovered heavy seas had obliterated all infrastructure and the family spent six months rather frugally before more supplies arrived. The landing was demolished several times by storms. Nowadays supplies come in by helicopter, introduced in 1976, although haulage continued till 1983, diesel replacing the horses in 1930. From the top of the haulage, gear still had to be taken 3.5km to the light buildings via a horse and sled on a track cut into the cliff. The track is still maintained and looks fascinating, a tunnel through the tea trees bent over by the wind to form a roof.



Seals have taken over the haulage area. In the beginning there were no seals as they were wiped out by sealers. Watching them was a fun pastime for Wendy. The water is very clear so you could also see them playing and swimming in the water. On the land they have removed the vegetation and most traces of the middens as they slide down into the sea. The wildlife became friends for Wendy, especially a white goshawk which seemed to be often “eyeing me off” as she did outside work such as track clearing. The top of the island being 500 ft above sea level meant that bird cruising height was at eye level – great for watching. Other animals on the island were mostly birds of course, including Penguins and Prions and Muttonbirds. There was not much else, an Antechinus and a skink. There are no snakes and no ferals.

For more on Muttonbirds -see the following article.

Communication early on was by signal flags to passing ships. In 1907 a wreck occurred at South West Cape. Survivors made it to Maatsuyker Island where they lived for some months. This incident led to “pigeon post”. Three birds were sent off on a three hour flight to Hobart hoping at least one would arrive. A warning came back - “do not tie the note on their legs too tight!”.

The main job for Wendy and her co-caretaker were the weather reports. They received training for this beforehand. It entailed a walk to the weather room. Pictures showed a railed fence leading to it, very valuable as the wind could be

fierce and easily blow you over. The moisture in the air could be like needles assaulting you and you needed to turn your head to take a breath. Observers needed to know the difference between fog and mist. Fogs which have smaller water particles which reduce visibility to 1km, and mists which have a visibility to 3 km. were very common. Sea fogs could completely blanket the Needles. These rocks were used as an indicator of waves. If the “low rock” was covered by waves it was a 3-4 metre swell. Then there was a medium seas indicator rock. And if the waves came over the rocks of the seal haulage there, it was a heavy swell. Wendy had many beautiful pictures, often including a rainbow because there was almost always rain about. It rains on average 225 days a year and there is almost a constant gale. Rain also means lots of grass growth which needs regular mowing. The area around the buildings was kept clear and tracks were maintained as a safety precaution to keep the landing area accessible. A vegetable garden needed to be tended and supplemented fresh supplies. Incidentally the mower, apart from the generators was the only machine on the island, a precaution against accidents.

Usually to go to a lighthouse means going up. Here you walk down from the house, through those tea tree tunnels. It is a fairly short tower and has a range of 20 nautical miles. Every lighthouse has a different sequence of flashes. This one is 2 flashes, 30 second pause. This is determined by the differing patterns of the ground glass. It is this lens which turns, originally on rollers, the clockwork mechanism for moving the glass powered by a weight slowly falling down the tower (needing to be wound up again every hour), and later in a bath of mercury. The light was first fueled by whale oil, then kerosene, both needing constant attention to keep the fuel going and attend to the wick. In the late 70s three generators were installed on the island – electric power! The local fishermen complained it did not have quite the penetration of the kero light. The original mechanisms were kept, and Tilley lamps are available in the tower for emergencies. Under the spiral staircase are stored a set of signal flags requiring weekly practice.

Wandering around the island yielded some old treasures of life in the past. Wendy set up a room in one of the buildings with schoolroom articles and other items including a lonely pair of child’s shoes, as a reminder of the families who made it home. She hopes other caretakers will continue the idea.

Today the main emphasis on Maatsuyker which is now administered by Parks and Wildlife is the weather observations and the protection of heritage with the caretakers also acting as a “presence” on the island. Every month fresh supplies come in by helicopter which can only land if the wind is less than 35 knots. One picture showed the helicopter and the wind sock full and horizontal. Landing and takeoff were very quick turnovers. Visitors rarely stayed more than an hour. The light has been replaced by a fully automated solar powered light, one of the last in Australia to be converted. Electricity from the generators provides lighting for the house and for the fridge. Gas is used for cooking and hot water. There is no heating to save on fuel needs. So lots of warm clothes for indoors. They have a telephone and access to internet for emails. Wendy was there from February to August and said she wouldn’t mind going back for the other six months to have a whole year’s experience.

Special thanks to Wendy for filling in as speaker at the last minute, and for the wonderful pictures.

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### Muttonbirds by Pam Keil

Maatsuyker Island hosts an annual breeding colony of a couple million Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*, also known as Muttonbirds), which is the second largest colony in the world (the largest is 3 million birds on Babel Island - which was named for the noise the birds make). These were definitely noisy neighbours while they were around! The Muttonbird life story is fascinating and Wendy’s descriptions definitely sparked my interest!

Muttonbirds spend the Southern summer breeding on islands in the Southern Ocean and the Northern summer feeding in Arctic Waters (Bering Sea). Yep, it’s summer all year round for these birds, though they choose some pretty cold and windy spots to hang out! They follow the plankton blooms, and thus the krill, which is their favourite food, and

also why they’re called Whale Birds up North, where they feed on krill forced to the surface by baleen whales.

Muttonbirds breed in burrows, and the same pair (which have mated for life) return to the same burrow year after year (30 years is the record so far)... Imagine trying to find your own burrow among a million others after half a year on the other side of the globe!

Muttonbirds are synchronized breeders, which means that the whole colony arrives in September after their nonstop migration



from the Bering Sea in the Arctic, and their first priority is to fatten up. The majority lay their eggs within a span of three days (85% between the 24th and 26th of November). The eggs then hatch in January. Both parents share incubation and feeding duties, heading out to sea every day and returning just after dark. At dusk huge rafts of birds congregate on the sea, waiting until dark, then they all return at once, in a single-minded path to their burrows. Birds have been known to fly straight into people on their way to their burrows. Young call for parents and parents call to chicks, until everyone finds each other. Apparently a sight to behold and a noise to experience!

The parents fill the chicks with food, and the chicks start putting on the fat. They'll need this, because in early April all of the adults suddenly disappear - they're off on a great migration back to their feeding grounds in the Bering Sea. The chicks are left as oily, fat filled, down balls in the burrow, to finish growing and develop their adult feathers.

Once their feathers are developed, the young start to emerge from the burrows, stretching their wings and waiting for the gales to start. In the early mornings, when the winds are strongest, they come out and try to catch the breeze. They need 40 knots of wind to get them off the ground! Once they are off on their first flight, they head instinctively to the Bering Sea. With no adults to show them the way, the group heads off on their first flight - halfway round the globe! And if you don't make it off the ground, there are plenty of ravens waiting....

An amazing bird, and an amazing place from the sounds of things. To learn more about Muttonbirds, you can go to the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Website:

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=5100>

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### Witchetty Hill Walk by Margaret McDonell

Saturday morning 4 June saw a group of eight meander up Witchetty Hill and along the ridge behind Zeil Street. It was a pleasant morning, not too cold – indeed, Connie Spencer put the rest of us to shame, turning up in shorts. By the end of the walk, about two hours later, we'd most of us peeled off the top few layers of winter clothes.

From the top of the ridge – accessible after a short scramble from the path that leads off beside the Christian School – we were treated to the sight of most of Alice Springs shrouded in a layer of smoke. In the opposite direction, Mt Gillen looked splendid across the valley.



**Euros watched us cautiously**

As we wandered along we saw a number of curious Euros that were happy to sit and watch us watching them. We also spotted some bird life: a Brown Falcon that swooped down and flew slowly above us, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters, Crested Pigeons, Grey-crowned Babblers, Australian Ringnecks, Rufous Whistler, Black-shouldered Kite, Mistletoebird, Red-capped Robin, Brown Songlark, and Willie Wagtails.



**Mt Gillen from the top of the ridge**

There are a couple of spots along the ridge where others who enjoy the views and the peace and quiet have kindly provided seats for those of us who need a rest. Someone recounted the tale of a local resident who earned the ire of the Desert Park's administration by building a pathway and steps down the southern side of the ridge. He was severely reprimanded and told to destroy the path and return it to its original condition. We may have found a few of his steps as we descended the ridge, overgrown with buffel but sturdy enough beside the eroded path beside them.

Despite the cold there were still a number of plants in flower including *Hakea lorea* with lots of flowers and attracting the Honeyeaters, a few Mulgas and some *Eremophilas* – *Eremophila freelingii*, *E. latrobeii*, *E. longifolia*.



***Hakea lorea***

Other plants included a little sedge half way up the hill, making do with not a lot of moisture; a tiny fern nestling in the buffel grass, as we climbed back down the ridge; an outcrop crowned with many beautiful Ghost Gums, a small clump of Kangaroo Grass and a smaller one of Native Millet. Despite the name, Witchetty Bushes were few and far between. The buffel was all too obvious, and we had to force our way through it as we came down the ridge and made for the track that leads back to our starting point.

It was a beautiful morning and a pleasant walk, close to town but far enough away from the traffic noise. I'll certainly be back there for another stroll along the ridge, though without the pleasant company of the Field Nats' mob!

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**A note from Bob Read re past newsletters**

"We are in the process of up-loading past newsletters onto the website. There is still some way to go, but the display of thumbnails of front covers is a tribute to the efforts of past and present editors and members who have contributed the diverse images.

Bob Read"

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**Recent sightings from Mark Carter**

12-19 June - 4 White-fronted Honeyeater, 6 Rufous-crowned Emu-wren, 20+ Orange Chat, 13 Varied Sittella (*leucoptera* ssp) at sites along Santa Teresa road (3km past the tyre on pole site) on the Wed (14<sup>th</sup>). 30+ Orange Chat moving across Ilparpa Swamp on Friday (17<sup>th</sup>).

20-27 June - 3 Gull-billed Terns, many Banded Lapwing, Spotted and Spotless Crakes at Sewage ponds (adult and juv birds) present all week. Male Peregrine Falcon seen hunting over ponds on Wed morning (22<sup>nd</sup>). There was a cloud of White-backed Swallows over the town dump on Wed. (ie.20+).

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**DesertSMART COOLmob Water Survey**

The Alice Springs Water Resources Strategy is currently under review and desertSMART COOLmob is asking desertSMART COOLmob members and the wider Alice Springs community about their opinion on water in Alice Springs.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/desertSMARTCOOLmobSurvey>

Please respond to the short survey (less than 10 minutes) to be in the running for a \$150 gift voucher from Home Hardware or Harvey Norman.

Thanks,  
Maggie Turnbull  
Program Manager  
desertSMART COOLmob  
Ph: (08) 8952 0299 Fax: (08) 8953 2988  
[www.desertsmartcoolmob.org](http://www.desertsmartcoolmob.org)

*DesertSMART COOLmob is a network of sustainable households in Alice Springs supported by the Arid Lands Environment Centre*

**Razorback Ridge**

paperbark bushes  
silver in early sunshine  
we trudge the sandy creek

scarlet and yellow  
of grevillea and wattle  
adorn winter slopes

a creek still tinkles  
in and out of mossy rocks  
up Spencer Gorge

bright pink hakea  
flowers brighten our way up  
the rocky gully

Gavan lopes along  
the last of winding rock paths  
high up against blue sky

one brown falcon hovers  
above Razorback as I climb,  
the other swoops over me

as we huddle in sun  
among mallee and spinifex  
two mice peer at us

the wind sends us down  
off the ridge, it's so warm  
back in the gully

Rosalie and I  
sit in the last of the sun  
study Paisley ridge creeks

**Meg Mooney**



In the centre:-

- Birthday Waterhole. Plenty of water this year and Milfoil growing green in the water and red where the water has receded.

Clockwise from top left:-

- In Spencer Gorge, so many plants, Cycads, Native Pine, Holly Grevillea, Poison Peach and so many rocks and orange rock walls.
- Along the sandy Hugh River, the morning light silvered the tea trees and lit up the grasses.
- Stark white trunked Ghost Gums in all shapes grew on the rocky cliffs
- Mintbush Springs was a small wet oasis. Here ferns including Blanket Fern *Pleurosorus rutifolius* grew in the crevices. The little creek was perfumed with *Stemodia viscosa*, hence the name.
- The track included a scramble up a rocky creek gully.
- *Hakea grammatophylla* was flowering on the higher ridges along with blue *Halgania cyanea*
- Looking down the track towards Paisley Bluff which towers above Spencer Gorge.

## Field Nats Noticeboard!

### Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Incorporated Annual General Meeting

**When:** 7.00pm Wednesday  
August 10th

**Where:** CDU Higher Education  
Building Lecture Theatre.

**Note:** If you would like to nominate yourself or another member for a committee position please contact a committee member.

Annual membership fees will also be due at this meeting. Please help your Treasurer by renewing promptly.

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**19-21 AUGUST 2011**

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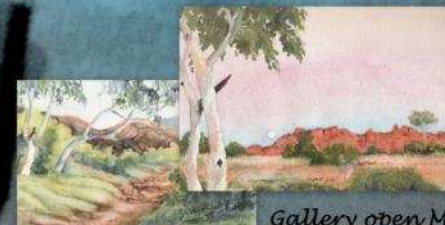
## "Water Dabblers Five"

An Exhibition of recent works in watercolour  
by five Alice Springs artists : Bronwyn Beesley,  
Cecilia Price, Jude Mapleson, Nina Jansons  
and Patricia Weeks

The June Marriott Gallery at Central Craft  
Araduen Cultural Precinct

Opening: Friday 15th July 2011, 6.00pm  
Opening Speaker: Iain Campbell

Exhibition: Saturday 16th July  
to Sunday 31st July



Gallery open M-F 1000-1600  
S-S 1100-1500



**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED**  
**Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building, Charles Darwin University**  
**Wednesday 8 June 2011.**

**Present:** 17 members and one visitor as per attendance book

**Apologies :** Steve Sinclair, Michael Laflamme, Jill Brew

**Minutes from last general meeting** - accepted. **Business arising from the minutes** - Nil

**Correspondence in:**

- Mark Carter requesting that his details be listed on the ASFNC website as a bird guide. [This has been done as well as links to Nathaba B & B, Pathdorf B & B and Chris Watson's website.](#)
- Atlas Living Australia. CSIRO. Briony Cowper inviting ASFN to add photos to their website of any living species in Australia. See their website : [www.ala.org.au/](http://www.ala.org.au/)
- Southern Cross Media :- announcing the launch of Southern Cross Community Connect. They are offering 'not - for- profit' organisations to log onto their website to showcase their groups. May be only Queensland – [so no action.](#)
- NT Nature Territory newsletter [ASFN to ask to have the website info rather than hard copies.](#)
- Western Australia Naturalist News.
- Birds Australia want donations. [ASFN prefer to donate to specific local projects.](#)
- David Kowalick – reported seeing a Koel.
- Jacelyn Anderson – Junior Ranges. Wondering if Field Nats interested in a night stalk later in the year. [Barb has advised her that we are interested but need more information.](#)

**Correspondence out:**

Thankyou cards to:

- Grant and Coral Allen re Grant's presentation on bushfires
- The Hayes family for allowing access to Winnecke on the May Day weekend
- Glen Edwards re his talk on camels.
- Scott Pullyblank for acting as a guide around the Desert Park Farm on 28 May.
- Congratulations to Chris Watson for being awarded Power and Water's Melaleuca individual environmental award

**Treasurer's report** - No business to report this month..

**General business:**

- Disappointing response to the planning meeting with only 6 people attending. Barb wondering if time or dates of planning meetings unsuitable.
- We need more volunteers to lead walks.
- The AGM needs to be advertised in the next newsletter.
- Need for committee nominations.

**Activities/Trips:**

- Rosalie is arranging a trip to Birthday Waterhole next weekend.
- 10 July – Shorebirds survey at the Sewage Ponds.
- Morgan Flint – Hamilton Downs weekend 16 – 17 July.
- Pam Keil – Ormiston Pound.
- Eco fair , Olive Pink Botanic Garden 19, 20 & 21 Aug.
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**Sightings:**

- Large number Straw-necked Ibis – Jenny Purdie.
- Ground Cuckoo-shrikes at AZRI – Pam Keil
- Wildflowers – many on the Larapinta Trail – Cecily Sutton
- Creature – 5 to 7 mm, banded bright red and black, furry, oval-shaped body - Mandy Webb. Pam Keil thought maybe a type of Centipede – she will research further.

**Next meeting : 13 July 2011**

**Speaker** – Chris Watson

**Supper** – Jenny Purdie

**Notetaker** – possibly Iain Campbell