



June 2013

## Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



Death Adder with his knitted looking skin at Sonder; Photo by Dave Sutton

**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

**Postal Address: P.O. Box 8663  
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**Web site:**

<http://www.alicefieldnaturalists.org.au>

## **NEXT NEWSLETTER**

The deadline for the next newsletter is **Friday 21 June 2013**. Please send your contributions to Barb Gilfedder at the email listed below.

## **MEETINGS**

- Wed 12 June **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm at the lecture theatre in the Higher Education Building at Charles Darwin University – Speaker Colleen O’Malley “Saltbush, Samphire, Bluebush, Copper burr – through the looking-glass”
- Wed 10 July **ASFNC** Meeting 7.00 pm - Chris Watson will show and talk about photos of birds and other wildlife from his Galapagos and mainland Ecuador trip.

## **FIELD TRIPS / ACTIVITIES**

**If you wish to take part in any of these trips or activities, it is advisable to ring or email the leader of that particular trip beforehand, as information can change.**

Friday 14 June **ASFNC** A pleasant, late afternoon walk at **Conlons Lagoon**. Meet at the Information Bay opposite the old Timers at 3.30pm. You will need to be on time, as we pass through a locked gate, which will be locked after us. This area is now protected as part of the Territory Eco-link. It is an ephemeral claypan that fills with water after periods of significant rain that supports a diverse group of wetland plants providing important food, shelter and nesting areas for a variety of animals and birds. The claypan includes a number of plant species that haven’t been found anywhere else in the Alice Springs region, including Nitre Goosefoot (*Chenopodium nitrariaceum*) a drought-tolerant shrub that provides a good habitat for small birds, mammals and marsupials. Leaders: Barb Gilfedder, Connie Spencer

Weekend 22, 23 June **ASFNC** Walk in Hugh Gorge Side Gorge, leader Colleen O’Malley: [shrikestar8@gmail.com](mailto:shrikestar8@gmail.com)

Weekend 13, 14 July Alcoota Fossils Visitors weekend –Leader: Lee Ryall (See Page 6)

**Australian Plants Society** is busy with preparations for their annual event at the Alice Springs Show as follows:

Sun 16 June – Working bee 9am at the show site - weeding, raking and pruning.

Sat 29 June – Working bee 9am at the show site. Plenty of digging for plastic containers in red sand mound and general last minute tidy-up of the site.

Thurs 4 June – Show set-up day. Meet Olive Pink Botanic Garden 9am.

Fri and Sat - 5 and 6 July – Show Days

If any Field Naturalists are interested in helping out with Show preparations or during the Show please contact Jo Smith on 0403692167 or email [joschep1@gmail.com](mailto:joschep1@gmail.com). All will be much appreciated.

## **APS meetings:**

July 2013 No monthly meeting due to Show commitments.

August 2013 Araluen garden walk and talk with Ian Coleman. This will be weekend daytime outing. Date and time to be confirmed.

Wed 4 Sep 2013 Scott Pullyblank and Rebecca Duncum on Alice Springs Desert Park record keeping. Meet 7:30pm Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

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[Please delete the xxx when emailing – their placement is an attempt to stop some spam emails.](#)

## May Speaker – Michael Giacometti - Report by Lee Ryall

### Sturt's Hell – Michael's Trek across the Simpson Desert

“It looked like the entrance to Hell” ... Charles Sturt

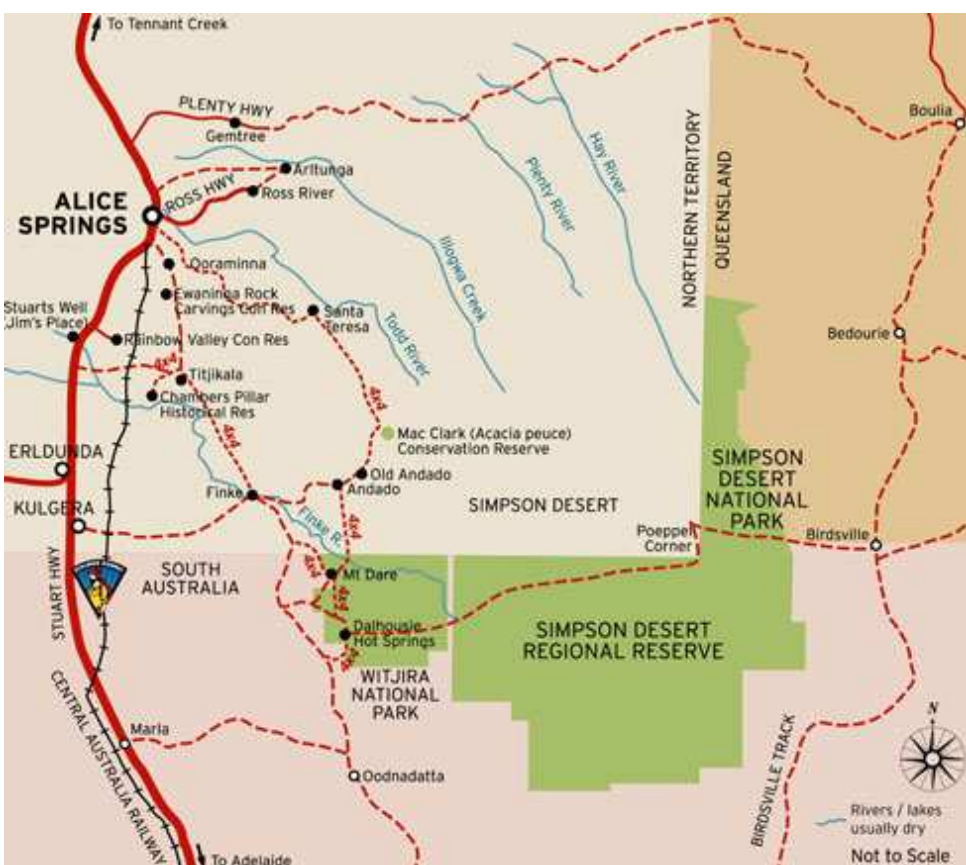
On May 8, Michael Giacometti, pictured right, spoke about his solo unsupported walk across the Simpson Desert in June 2008.



#### Preparation

Preparation for the walk was extensive- he decided to walk from East to West despite having to walk up the 20 degree slope on the eastern sides of the dunes instead of the significantly gentler 12 degrees on the west. He researched the likely weather conditions and information about the desert itself. He read the records of people who had already crossed or partly crossed the desert, and, where possible, talked to them. He spoke to station owners, and arranged sponsorship.

The decision-making was an endless debate- whether to allow 4 or 4.5 or 5 litres of water per day, what route to follow, what design of cart to pull, how wide it should be, how to have the lightest but strongest construction, whether it should be higher off the ground and therefore more tippy or lower, making hummocks and low scrub more of an obstacle, and how much weight to allow himself, knowing he would have to pull it up each one of reportedly 1000 dunes. When someone asked why he did it, he hadn't an answer. It seemed like an idea that grew until it had so much momentum, it took him with it.



#### The Plan

In the event, he took four 20 litre containers of water, and planned to walk from Bedourie to Mount Dare via Mudloo Well and Madigan's camps 17 and 16, a trek of over 500km, and allowed himself 24 days to complete the walk. He knew Old Andado (450 km) was a possible alternative destination. He would carry a sat phone and an epirob for emergencies, and planned to get to the nearest road (if he he could) for a pickup if needed. He would call in his location every second day. He would strap himself between the shafts of his cart, taking the weight on his shoulders and through the base of his

stomach. He had poles to dig into the steep uphill slopes. The weight of the cart would be about 165 kg at its heaviest. He knew that after he left Bedourie there was a bore at Lake Torquinie, but that this was the last occasion he would be able to rely on finding water.

## The Walk

He set out on 24 June from Bedourie. Spiky burrs were up to 1" long, and on the first day he had a puncture. ...because he removed a burr from a tyre. However, the silicone goo generally worked overtime and there were no more punctures despite myriad burrs. On day 4 he reached Lake Torquinie and managed to collect 93 litres from the bore, which gave him the princely allowance of 5 litres of water per day. He had his last wash of the trip, and set out from there hauling maximal weight.



For the next five days he could not pull the cart up the steeper slopes. He would stop at the base of a dune, unstrap himself, unpack two containers full of water and carry them to the top of the ridge, leave them, descend, strap himself into the cart, haul it to the top via the easiest looking route, unstrap himself, reload the cart, re-strap himself in, and set off for the next dune. Similarly, in the first days, when he was walking through properties, he had to unstrap, unload, wiggle the cart through the wire, reload and strap in. Not surprisingly, he fell behind his scheduled progress.

If the uphill were gruelling, the downhill were exciting, with the weight of the cart pushing its driver in front of it, as he desperately tried to steer between towering spinifex humps. Strapped into the shafts, he would inevitably smash into the ground (or the spinifex) if the vehicle tipped, and that was foremost in his mind each time he plummeted towards the base. Fortunately, Michael and the cart only tipped over once, towards the end, when the load was light, and the cart bouncy. In general, the cart went well. The sand on untrodden sand dunes was so firm the cart wheels sat on top of it, leaving no mark. Even on the softer, windblown crests, they barely made an imprint. The 'flats' between were lumpy and bumpy with spinifex or low scrub, so the claypans (quite common in the east) provided some brief respite.

Water was strictly rationed, and when Michael had drunk his backpack allowance (2.5 litres) each day, he stopped walking and made camp. Often he camped in the dune swales, the gentle hollows between the crests of a double ridge, or in the eastern desert under gidgee trees. He made a cooking fire each evening and drank the remainder of his water allowance, including the washing up water. Every time he stopped he knew he was falling further behind his schedule. Every night (as well as while he was walking), his thoughts churned over and over, wondering how he could make up the time he was losing, asking himself if he could push his body any harder on such rations, not knowing if he could make the distance. The mental exhaustion was as intense as the physical. By Day 12 he was thinking of heading for Old Andado and was aiming directly for Geosurveys Hill rather than travelling via Madigan's campsites. Day 14, midway between Torquinie Lake and Old Andado, was the mental low point of the trip.

Michael reached Geosurveys Hill on Day 18. At this stage the routes to Old Andado and Mount Dare diverged. He was two days behind his plan and headed for Old Andado. It wasn't until the last week that he knew he would make the distance. Over this last 140 kilometres the cart was the lightest it had been, but the ridges were numerous and close together, allowing no relief between them. Michael breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the radio tower of Old Andado Station on the horizon.

## Over

Michael reached Old Andado with 3 litres of water remaining and blackly dirty legs. He had crossed some 1500 sand ridges the hard way, walking from sunrise to sunset every day, and was gaunt but muscular. He had seen no people or cars, and very little wildlife, but he had crossed the Simpson Desert solo, on foot and unsupported, and was the first to do so from east to west, a momentous feat.

## Mac Clark Reserve, Old Andado, Dalhousie Springs 3-6 May 2013

Report by Cecily Sutton

First stop Santa Teresa to admire the beautiful artwork in the church.

Nest stop, for lunch, under the shade of a tree somewhere between those long parallel sand dunes either side of Old Andado Track. (No point mentioning the flies)



Waddywoods, mature and juvenile in a stark landscape – Dave Sutton

Mac Clark Conservation Reserve was impressive. According to NT Parks website "The *Acacia peuce*, or Waddywood is one of the rarest and most striking trees of the Australian arid zone. It grows in this Reserve on a stony wind-swept plain in one of the driest places in Australia." The approach is over expansive gibber plains. In the shimmering distance there was empty space...until, yes something tree-like was observed. We drove closer, and gradually realised that those large Casuarina-like trees were in fact Acacias, the *Acacia peuce*. It was interesting to notice the difference between the juvenile trees and the mature trees - the juveniles having a bristly appearance with a very sharp needle-leaf. An obvious defence against getting eaten!

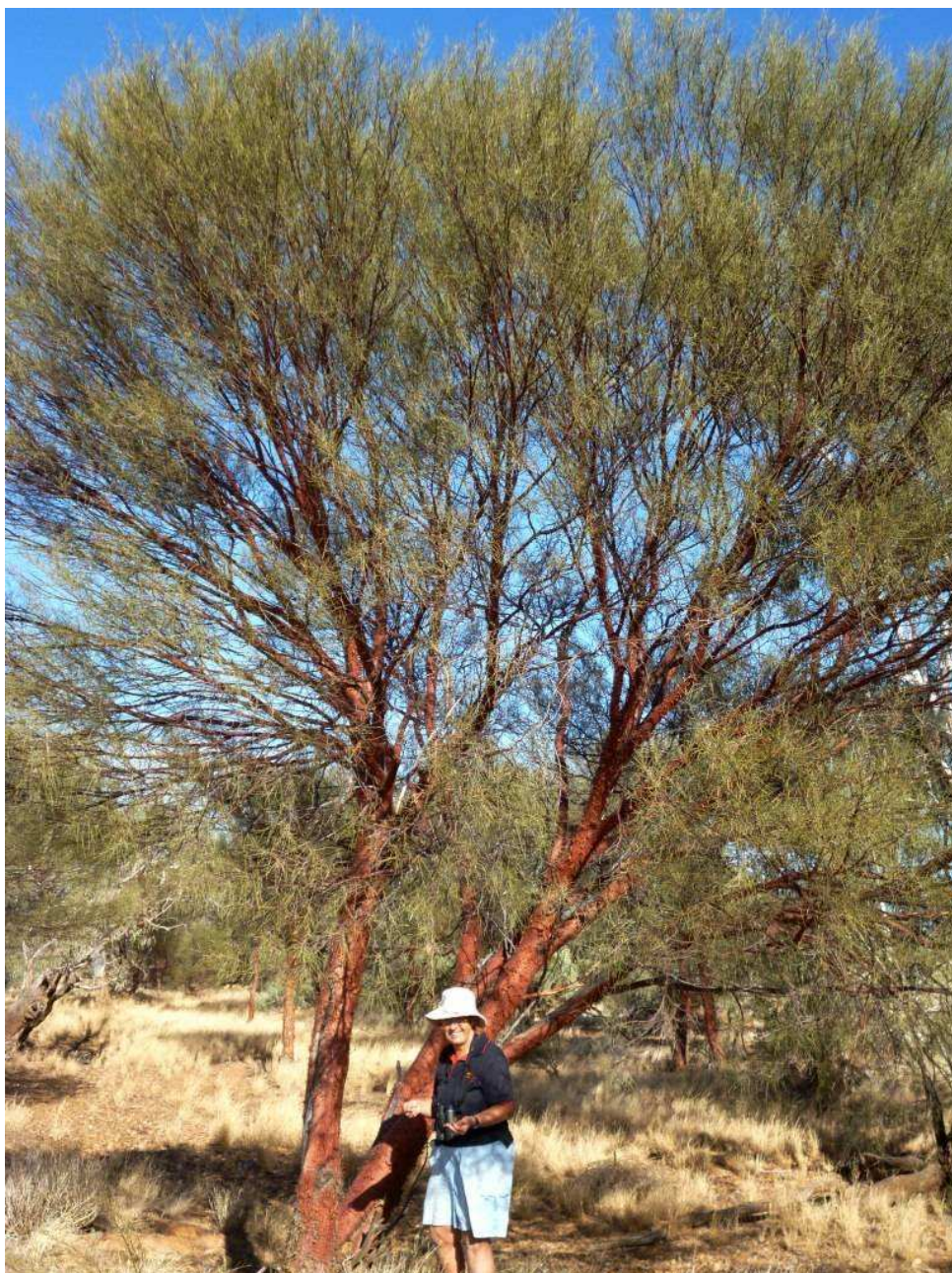
Our overnight camp at Old Andado was a great insight into the pioneering days. We are grateful to Molly Clark for preserving it. The evening light was savoured from the top of a sand dune.

The next day's highlights were the rapid changes of habitat. From wide open gibber plains, to red sand dune country, to dense mallee trees, to river beds. We had a prolonged stop at Mount Dare, watching life and death in nature – the Brown Falcons swooping at hundreds of Zebra Finches perched in the tree by the pond.

Right: Molly Clark's lounge room at Old Andado. – Neil Woolcock

Below: Red Dunes of the Simpson Desert – Neil Woolcock





Cecily by a Red mulga tree *Acacia cyperophylla* – Dave Sutton

It was a bit of a bumpy drive over the rough gibber shortcut track after Mount Dare - all part of the 4WD experience! Dalhousie Springs was an impressive campsite for the next 2 nights. We enjoyed floating in the Springs at dawn watching the birds circling overhead, and walks to nearby mound springs.

The Finke fish?.. little fish nibbled at us as we sat on the steps into the springs.. how close to nature is that!

The trip home was long, but we managed a few nature stops for Red Mulgas and Gidgee trees. We paid our respects to the pioneers of the Overland Telegraph at Bloods Creek and Charlotte Waters; and modern technology by diverting to the Lambert's Centre of Australia.

**Flower of the trip:** Harlequin mistletoe (*Lysiana exocarpi*) at Bloods Creek. It was a magnificent display of colour in such a desolate place.

**Bird of the trip:** Cinnamon Quail-thrush on the gibber plain - the only living thing for miles.

In all, it was another enjoyable excursion in the great outdoors.

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## WA Naturalist News now available to Members

An electronic version of the WA Naturalist News is now available as a reciprocal agreement with the WA Field Naturalists.

You can download this, along with previous editions, directly from the their Club website.

First you need the password, which is available from Cecily Sutton, ASFNC Club Secretary. Then go to <http://www.wanaturalists.org.au/members> and sign in with the password. The link to the newsletter will be at the top of the page.

Enjoy this interesting newsletter.

It might give you some ideas for a trip over West to do some wild flower viewing!

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## Alcoota Reminder

If you are interested in visiting the dig at Alcoota on the weekend of 13-14 July this year, you will need to register, as the Museum wants to know numbers in advance (and to limit them if necessary) so they can be prepared. Please contact [ryall.lee8@gmail.com](mailto:ryall.lee8@gmail.com) or ring her on 0417401237 and she will forward the registration forms which need to be filled in and sent to the Museum.

Once again there will be no fires apart from the main barbecue pit, but stoves are fine. Please bring all your own camping gear (including water) as the supplies out there have to last the dig participants a month. Last year we had a couple of great geological and palaeontological talks from Adam Yates and some plant walks conducted by Peter Latz, as well as a walk to the creek to look at birds.



Because the fossils are extremely fragile as a result of being alternately crushed and swollen in the clay soil, there may not be an opportunity to participate in the dig, but there will be the chance to watch people delicately brushing grains of sand off emerging bones, or even gently blowing the sand away with a straw. The bones themselves vary from tiny claws or teeth to massive diprotodontid jaws and leg bones of *Dromornis*, the giant bird which is related to geese. Some bones are so tricky to work on they take the full four weeks of the annual dig to extract. The bones are jumbled- although the animals died approximately 9 million years ago around a water source which gradually dried up, they have been tumbled and tangled in a subsequent mud flow, creating chaotic bone beds (left).

Cowpat Hill (below) has fossils around 6 million years old, so a comparison of the species found in this and the main pit shows the changes taking place in the animals over this period.

An artist's re-creation of *Dromornis stirtoni*, the bird found at Alcoota which stood over 3 metres tall and weighed half a tonne.



3



The Giant claw found at last year's dig.

What was it from???

**ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED**

**Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building,  
Charles Darwin University on 8 May 2013**

Following presentation by Michael Giacometti on Simpson Desert Trek.

Thank you to Lee Ryall for taking notes.

**Present:** 24 Members/ visitors and 3 apologies as per attendance book.

Meeting commenced at 8-40. Chaired by Vice President, Lee Ryall.

**Previous minutes** – Accepted.

**Business arising from the minutes:** Nil.

**Correspondence in:**

- Certificate of Placement received from Austcover dated 12 April 2013. This is ASFNC Public Liability and Personal Accident Policy.
- Book reviews of B Gammage's book "Biggest Estate on Earth. How Aborigines made Australia". This came via Email from Bill Lowe.

**Correspondence out:**

- A nomination for Peter Latz and the Aboriginal botanists of Central Australia for the Australian Natural History Medallion. This was written and submitted by Michael Laflamme for the ASFNC. It will appear in the next newsletter.
- Thank you card to Michael Giacometti for his interesting talk.
- Thank you card to Michael Laflamme for his impressive work in preparing the nomination of Peter Latz for the Australian Natural History Medallion.

**Treasurer's Report:**

Balance at 8 May 2013 \$3101

Credits: Hat payments \$54

Debits : Insurance \$355

Stationary (including printer ink): \$100

**General business:**

- The regular expense of colour printing the monthly newsletter was discussed. Cecily will investigate other options.
- An apology from Morgan Flint to any members who may have inadvertently received unwanted Emails from LinkedIn

**Past Activities/Trips discussed:**

- Recent trips include Serpentine Chalet camp/walk, The Pinch walk and Old Andado/Dalhousie trip. Newsletter articles have been written. All articles for next newsletter to Pam Keil by 24 May.

**Future activities:**

- Larapinta Trail Stage 10 postponed at present. Jill Brew will Email details to members.
- 22-23 June. Walk in Hugh Gorge. Leader Colleen O'Malley
- 14-15 July. Alcoota Visitor Weekend. Please contact Lee Ryall to book for this event.

**Sightings:**

- Forest Wagtail in Will and Anne Cormack's garden. This vagrant bird has received Australia-wide press. Chris Watson said that it has probably appeared as a result of reverse migration. More details on [Birds Central Australia](#) website.
- Black Cockatoos in Pam Keil's backyard.

**Next meeting:** Wed 12 June.

Speaker: Colleen O'Malley "Saltbush, Samphire, Bluebush, Copper Burr - through the looking glass"

Scribe: Rosalie Breen; Supper: Jill Brew

Meeting closed 9pm.