



February 2014

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



It is Cicada season again. This is a newly emerged adult male Golden Drummer Cicada, *Thopha colorata*. This big bug is endemic to Central Australia – usually restricted to the MacDonnell Ranges. Other places in Australia have similar ones. The males make the big noise by vibrating the large drums on their sides. The cases they emerge from remain hooked onto tree trunks for months. Birds are having a feast. Photo: Barb Gilfedder

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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Web site:

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

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The deadline for the next Field Naturalists newsletter is **Friday 21 February 2014**.

Please send your contributions to Barb Gilfedder at the email listed below

Please send photos and text separately.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

- Sun 2 February** **7.00am sharp. Alice Springs Sewage Ponds** - a look at the birds (not a survey). Wear closed shoes and bring water, binoculars and hat. Leader: Barb Gilfedder.
- Wed 12 February** **Meeting** 7.00pm at Charles Darwin University Higher Education Building lecture theatre. Speaker: **Jenny Purdie "African Images"**. Jenny is an experienced local botanical photographer. She has produced some stunning photographs of the "fauna and flora" from two trips to Africa.
- Sat 15 February** **Intertexta Forest**. Meet 6:30 am at the information bay opposite the Old Timers Home on South Stuart Hwy. Wander through the forest followed by a bring your own breakfast. Suggest you wear enclosed shoes. For further information contact Connie Spencer on 8952 4694 or constans@bigpond.net.au.
- Fri 28 Feb, Sat 1 Mar** **Ormiston Gorge** overnight camp, early morning walk and a swim. Meet 4pm Friday at Flynn's Grave or make your own way to Ormiston. Walk for a couple of hours from 6 am Saturday on Stage 9 of the Larapinta Trail followed by a swim. Leader: Connie Spencer 8952 4694 constans@bigpond.net.au. Please be sure to advise of your intention to attend.
- Sat 8 Mar** Walk up **Spencer Hill** with Rosalie Breen. No matter how many times you climb this small hill on the outskirts of town, you always see something different and interesting. An easy climb and stunning views as the sun lights up the surrounding hills. Meet at Gosse Street Playground at 6.00am. Leader: Rosalie Breen.
- Wed 12 March** **Meeting** 7.00pm at Charles Darwin University Higher Education Building lecture theatre. Speaker: **Boyd Wright** on " Fire cycles propelled by high antecedent rainfall: Have they been a selective force on plants in arid Australia?"
- Sun 23 March** **Native Gap/Aileron**. Meet 7am Sargent Street sign on the north Stuart Hwy. Wander around the Native Gap Conservation Reserve then lunch at Aileron. If time and weather permit, on our way home, we will stop at a sandplain area often home to many wildflowers and small flowering shrubs. Round trip – 260 km. Leader: Connie Spencer 8952 4694 constans@bigpond.net.au. Please be sure to advise of your intention to attend.

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY Contact: Connie Spencer constans@bigpond.net.au

- Wed 5 February** **Meeting** at Olive Pink Botanic Garden at 7.30pm. Speaker: **Peter Nunn**, Specialist Keeper - Reptiles and Invertebrates, Alice Springs Desert Park who will be talking about **Reptile Friendly Gardens**.
- Wed 5 March** **AGM** at **Olive Pink Botanic Garden** at 7.30 pm. Speaker is **Peter Jobson**, Botanist, Alice Springs Herbarium, on "Understanding the latest plant families: there is a long history of family and genera changes so the recent changes are no different."

OLIVE PINK BOTANIC GARDEN Contact: Benjamin Covery curator@opbg.com.au

- Friday 14 March** **OFFSHOOTS Exhibition opening 6:30pm** and open until 30th March 2014 consisting of botanical drawings, etchings, paintings and mixed media artworks. **ARTIST: Julie McEnery**
- Sunday 16 March** **Miss Pink Birthday Plant Sale - NATIVE PLANT SALE** - Olive Pink Botanic Garden
A great range of tube stock trees, small and larger shrubs. Starting 8.00am

BIRDLIFE CENTRAL AUSTRALIA Contact Chris Watson birdlifeca@gmail.com

- Sun 23 February** **Meeting** 5.30 pm at the ASDP Education room

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Please delete the xxx when emailing – their placement is an attempt to stop some spam emails.

Friday Walks by Barb Gilfedder, photos by Rosalie Breen



We are very lucky in Alice Springs to be almost completely surrounded by interesting small hills, to most of which we have easy access. They are covered with tracks originally created by Euros and gradually taken over and extended by walkers and mountain bikers.

For the last few months some of our members have been organising fortnightly Friday morning walks. These have been very low key and by being close to Alice require little travelling time. By making them short and early in the morning, we avoid the heat of our summer days and workers as well as retirees have been able to participate. I have personally been on a couple and found them very enjoyable. Above and below are a couple of photos by Rosalie Breen. The top one from a walk organised by Connie up Witchetty Hill behind Zeil Street and then along the low range with views one way over Araluen and the other over the Desert Park greater area. The lower one was on a walk organised by Cec, walking west from the north Stuart highway. Two weeks ago the group climbed to Echidna Point on the East side and this week there is a walk near the archery club. Well done organisers!



November 2013 Speaker: Angus Duguid: “An update on fish distributions and drought refuges of the Finke River.” Report by Pam Keil

As a follow-up to the survey of several waterholes on Henbury Station which a small party of Field Nats joined, Angus Duguid came to chat about the Finke River survey program. The talk began with a few shots of resourceful Field Nats fixing nets with dental floss, helping with fyke net setting and emptying and data recording (Barb is the data recording champion). Many fish were sampled and catalogued during the survey marathon. Stay tuned for the next survey opportunity if you'd like to help out.



Angus followed this up by presenting some of their recent survey work along the permanent waterholes of the Finke River. The first surveys were done during wet years when the many waterholes were full, including quite a few of the temporary shallow waterholes. The most recent survey was unique as it followed fifteen months of no flow in the river. The crew was interested to find the refuge sites that allow nine species of fish to survive in this desert river system. The survey sites selected were all permanent or near-permanent waterholes.

Most sites have been surveyed once per year since the project began, but Snake Hole is generally surveyed twice per year. They are also monitoring some of the temporary waterholes to see how they retain water (or not).

On the survey that Angus mainly talked about, they used a helicopter for four days, visited 23 sites with 52 pools sampled. They also measured the perimeters of the pools using GPS, the depth, the water quality, including conductivity (= salt content), temperature, pH and dissolved oxygen.

There were plenty of photos and a few great short videos. The helicopter pilot kept everyone on track and made sure all the sites were visited in a timely manner. Dip and Seine nets were used because they could sample a larger range of waterholes. In four days they surveyed a large portion of the Finke system and captured 8 of the 9 species. The only species not caught was the Catfish – probably because these come out at night and hide deep in the reeds during the day. The Murgunda were only caught at the last site.

After 15 months of no river flow, more waterholes still had water than the group expected. There was a huge variation in salinity across the remaining waterholes – and each had a different species composition.

A good map is the key! All of the named waterholes on the topographical maps were surveyed, but they also checked local information and early maps and investigated many more waterholes. The cooperation of landholders was particularly important to their study. They located one new spring during the most recent study. Several deep waterholes around 2.5m were found, but most were less than 0.1m but still had water after 15 months.

The rarest species – the Finke Hardyhead and Finke Goby – were found in shallow, extremely saline waterholes. The high salinity acted as a protection – the saline waters were not as impacted by cattle or feral animals. It was like having a Salt Fence for the ponds. The Finke River in Arrente is Lhere Pinte or “river salty.”

Several of these waterholes were so shallow that they would not have thought they would hold water without seeing it from the helicopter. The shallow saline springs provided refuges for the species most of the time. These would be connected with the larger river once per year on average, allowing the species to recolonise the other areas.

The most important thing to conducting these important long term surveys is having the support of the landowners and creating partnerships. The Finke River is the same size as the Murray-Darling system, but with no dams larger than small stock ponds. It is important to continue to find new funding to continue this work which will provide the understanding needed for intelligent land management practices.

Many Thanks Angus for an interesting talk. We hope we can help with more surveys.



Nb: Photos of the different Finke River Fish Species can be found in July 2012 newsletter available for viewing on ASFNC website.

Point Howard Camp 22/23 November 2013 - Variety is the spice of life

Connie Spencer - I like Cec's Friday afternoon starts to summer camp-outs and put my hand up as soon as she suggested the Point Howard/8 Mile Gap/Ellery Big Hole/Standley Chasm outing.

Cec picked me up at 4pm. It was sunny and 37! We made our way to Point Howard Lookout off Namatijira Drive. There were good patches of golden Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) swaying in verges along with Smoke Bush (*Ptilotus obovatus*) and Wild Tomato (*Solanum quadriloculatum*). Although past their best there were endless arrays of white paper daisy (*Rhodanthe floribunda*). By the time we arrived an hour later the temperature had dropped to 33° and overcast - quite conducive to a wander in the valley below. I was dismayed at the amount of Buffel Grass but nevertheless the Wild Orange trees (*Capparis mitchellii*), Plumbush (*Santalum lanceolatum*) and Weeping Emu Bush (*Eremophila longifolia*) were all flourishing. Most of the smaller plants had long since looked their best but they will all come back to life when it rains again.



View of 8 mile Gap from Point Howard lookout

flats back to the vehicle we noted the upper and middle storey trees and shrubs such as Supplejack (*Ventilago viminalis*), Mulga (*Acacia aneura*), Coolibah (*Eucalyptus coolabah*), Red Mallee (*Eucalyptus socialis* subsp. *eucentrica*) and Victoria Spring Mallee (*Eucalyptus trivalvis*) were thriving; whereas, the lower storey and ground covers were all past their best. After a couple of hours it had definitely warmed up so we headed to Ellery Big Hole for a very refreshing swim.

Next stop was Standley Chasm. What a special place this is with a delightful cool, green walk through mini wetlands and on to the hanging gardens of Standley Chasm! The Desert Flannel Flower (*Actinotus schwarzii*) plants were flourishing although we should have been there the week or two before to see the flowers at their best.

Thank you Cec for organising the outing.

Cec Sutton - Connie Spencer and I had a great 24 hour trip. The plan was to catch the sunset and sunrise from Point Howard. At this time of year we had it all to ourselves. The weather was overcast, which was a relief. I had doubts about the forecast rain, but did put a fly over my tent at 3am when there were a few spots.

That evening we wandered around the outcrops of rocks and gullies, which are very impressive, especially with the storm threatening lighting. I had some geology notes from a previous Field Nats trip. We mulled over them. I reckon if it took nature millions of year to produce the landscape then if it takes me a few decades to get my head around it, that is OK. There was a Rufous Whistler singing its heart out down in one of the gullies. Too much spinifex between me and it to find it! At times one must simply enjoy the ambiance.

The morning was overcast and relatively cool. A great morning for birds! It was delightful to hear them. We walked into 8 Mile Gap and back admiring the fauna and flora. Next stop was a refreshing swim through Ellery Big Hole. I like bird watching as I swim, as the Grey Teals and Australasian Grebe were there as usual.

We called into Standley Chasm on the way home. The Flannel Flowers were a week beyond their best, however it was still a pleasure to see them. The highlight of the walk was a tree covered in mistletoes that were flowering vigorously. There were about six Mistletoebirds of varying degrees of maturity, feasting in it. It is really impressive to see how deftly they grabbed the fruit, which is much larger than their beak, squeeze the seed out and get it down their throat, at the same time as disposing of the seed cover. We had refreshments at the kiosk, and then headed off home. A great little trip!

Bird List

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Black-faced Woodswallow, Masked Woodswallow, 1 Little Woodswallow, Hooded Robin, Zebra Finches, 15 Cockatiels, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Grey Shrike-thrush, Mistletoebird, Peaceful Dove, White-browed Babbler, White-plumed Honeyeater, Grey-fronted Honeyeater, Port Lincoln Parrot, Singing Honeyeater, Magpie Lark, Eurasian Coot, Grey Teal, Australasian Grebe, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Brown Falcon, Crows.

Heard - Rufous Whistler, Fairywren, Pallid Cuckoo

TRIP TO RAINBOW VALLEY

Jenny Purdie - Apart from the sheer joy of getting out into the arid landscape after 15 months away from it, the highlight of the trip to Rainbow Valley was finally encountering *Eremophila prostrata*, Rainbow Valley Fuchsia Bush, in the wild! Once we had found one plant our eyes soon zeroed in on many more. The flowers were well past their use by date as was the case with many other plants but this sometimes just added to the challenge of identifying them. Some species still had good quality flowers eg *Dicrastylis lewellinii*, *Capparis mitchellii*, *Grevillea stenobotrya*, *Lechenaultia divaricata*, *Eremophila sturtii* and *Newcastelia spodiotricha* while others were bearing fruit eg *Zygophyllum howittii*, *Senecio gregorii*, *Eremophila longifolia*, *Myoporum montanum* so I was able to add to my photo collection as one tends to photograph flowers more than fruit. The trip was a great success and the strong breeze blowing made the temperature very pleasant indeed.



Dicrastylis costelloi on Rainbow Valley trip from Connie

It has been quite some time since I had been to Rainbow Valley so I was surprised to find an extended campsite and impressed with the additional walks.

As always, plants along the roadside often outlast those in the surrounding countryside due in part to the extra water they receive from road runoff or the fact that some plants respond to disturbance from graders etc. On our return journey I was looking for a Spiked daisy bush (*Olearia subspicata*) I had seen on the roadside several years ago. I pulled up when I spied something that might be it. Well, it wasn't but turned out to be *Dicrastylis costelloi* – sorry, no common name. *Dicrastylis* is in the Verbenaceae family. The generic name comes from the Greek *dicroos*, forked and *stylos*, alluding to the deeply 2-branched style. It is endemic to Australia with most representations in WA. However, this particular species and variety (*Dicrastylis costelloi* var. *costelloi*) occurs more so in central Australia and north east SA. It is a small shrub up to 90 cm covered in soft grey hairs from its branches, to stems, to leaves and inflorescence. It appears to root sucker as does *Dicrastylis lewellinii* which was widespread on the other side of the road. I have never tried to propagate it but I suspect it would be difficult.



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Pictures: Dicrastylis costelloi var. *costelloi* – Barb Gilfedder



Lacewing Larvae by Barb Gilfedder

The small conical pits that are seen in sandy areas around central Australia, are the pit-traps of some species of Lacewing larvae, the second stage of complete metamorphosis between when they are an egg and when pupate. At the fourth stage, they become a pretty insect with large folded back wings. We call these larvae Ant Lions. They are basically a small six-legged grub with large pincer-type jaws on the front end. They wait in the base of their pit for a passing ant, who when it stumbles into the pit, finds it difficult to climb out and is grabbed by these strong jaws and eaten.

We saw a small community of them on the edge of the claypan, under a Coolibah tree on the Rainbow Valley walk. In this case there was a group of yellow and black striped larger flying insects, probably Wasps flying over the area. They seemed to be crawling out of other holes in the ground, noisily flying to the base of one of the ant lion pits, digging furiously for a while and then flying off. They were too fast for me, but Jenny managed to capture a couple of photos of them.



They did not appear to be carrying anything when they moved on. We watched for a while, quite intrigued. Trying to find out what was going on, I asked the experts and did a bit of Google research. I did find out that there are some wasps who actually parasitise ant lions. They annoy the ant lion, until it grabs onto one of their legs and then the wasp swings its abdomen around and injects an egg into the ant lion, before breaking free and leaving the egg to develop inside the ant lion and feed off its body. I don't know if this is what was happening in this case, but it is a possibility.



A few days later, I received an email from Tanya Hattingh with this photo. What appears to be an ant lion, carrying a load of debris on its back.

She found the strange creature crawling up her leg and it had bitten her. More research necessary. It appears that there are some ant lion species that don't bother with building pits, but are completely arboreal. They crawl around in trees, eating mainly aphids, hence the name aphid lion. I found some great little video clips on the web. Some hatch out of their strange stalked egg and immediately chop up the remains and attach them to hairs on their back. They continue to do this with detritus of their meals as they eat. I suppose it is a form of camouflage, like carrying a fluffy rug on one's back. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbRK6E5crbg>

CHRISTMAS AT THE BOWER by Steve Sinclair

The Western Bowerbird that owns this bower in an Alice Springs garden has been raiding Christmas baubles to decorate his bower; but only takes green and silver ones. He also helps himself to green cumquats and when they turn yellow he chucks them out! He often mimics fighting and yowling cats to protect his bower from other birds.



Christmas balls and a star



Cumquats at the bower, discarded yellow ones in foreground



This beautiful Rainbow appeared over Simpsons Gap on Christmas Eve just as the sun was setting – picture by Tom Gilfedder

A Sun Halo

By Rosalie Breen

Gavan came home at around 2.00 on Sun 22nd December, and asked if I had looked at the sky recently. On that cue I rushed outside to see the sun surrounded by a circular rainbow. This sun halo works like an ordinary rainbow in the fact that the sunlight is reflected and refracted and split into the colours of the spectrum. But instead of through water droplets, it shines through tiny ice crystals which are in thin cirrus clouds high up in the colder troposphere, 5-10 km up. These crystals, always hexagonal prisms, have to be oriented and positioned just right for the observer to see the halo. The halo is always 22 degrees around the sun and the sky within it is darker than the rest of the sky (same as under a rainbow). The colours were much fainter than a normal rainbow and the inner edge was sharply defined and red, the outer edge diffuse and bluish. For me the phenomenon lasted about half an hour more, and I felt lucky to have seen it as the right conditions rarely occur. I will be taking more notice of cirrus clouds now.



Christmas Breakfast at Standley Chasm

A few members camped at Standley Chasm on the Friday night finding Green Treefrogs, tadpoles and Leeches in the small chasm pool. Many more people turned up in the morning and enjoyed the walk in, but only finding the tadpoles. The campers had also seen 2 snakes. After their walks all enjoyed a hearty breakfast and a good social time. Many thanks to Ray and Carol.

Photos by Jim Lawrence, Max O'Callaghan and Barb Gilfedder

Kimberley Whale Watching is offering a 7 day/6 night the trip of a lifetime on the rugged and remote Kimberley coast, as we explore the Kimberley's islands and reefs on Kimberley Expeditions 34m catamaran "MV Reef Prince". The trip focuses on the Kimberley's amazing wildlife, including huge colonies of shorebirds and seabirds, the world's largest population of Humpback whales, dolphins and other cetaceans, turtles, sea snakes, manta rays and magnificent corals and marine life. This seven day trip offers exceptional value (from \$3,000 pp twin share), including a seaplane transfer and scenic flight from Broome to Adele Island. Along the way you'll have the option of participating in important Humpback whale and dolphin research as we keep records of sightings, photograph tail and fluke markings and make hydrophone recordings of whalesong.

www.kimberleywhales.com.au

info@kimberleywhales.com.au

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INCORPORATED
Minutes of general meeting at Higher Education Building,
Charles Darwin University - Wednesday 13 November 2013

Following a presentation by Angus Duguid on Fish refuges in the Finke River

Thanks to Pam Keil for notetaking and Cecily/Connie/Bev for supper.

Meeting opened at 8-40pm

Present: 23 Members, 1 visitor and 3 apologies as per attendance book.

Previous minutes – accepted.

Business arising from the minutes: Nil

Correspondence in:

- Alice News Online invited us to use their new Classified Advertising. No further action as it was not considered appropriate to our needs.
- Email from Susie Pendle introducing herself as the new Community Engagement Officer with Parks and Wildlife Commission for the Central Australia/Barkley region. (not tabled at meeting due to time constraints).

Correspondence out:

- Thank you card to Peter Jobson, last month's speaker.
- Barb Gilfedder replied to Susie Pendle's email.

Treasurer's Report:

- Not tabled due to Jill's absence. Barb forgot to bring figures. Verbal confirmation of increase in funds due to membership.

General business:

- Marg Lawrence is collecting the money for the end-of-year function at Standley Chasm.
- More cards to be purchased. Barb Gilfedder/Jenny Purdie to arrange.
- Flowers for Sue Fraser. Cecily to arrange.
- Michael Laflamme notified us that the ASFN Latz Nomination for the ANHM was not successful. However the same nomination is still valid for the next 2 years. We thank Michael for his continuing involvement in this project.
- Chris Watson, from the newly established Birdlife group, has given notification of an educational seminar on Shorebirds, 1 Feb. and bird survey at the Sewage Ponds on 2 Feb 2014. Birdlife events will be included in the ASFNC Newsletter where possible. ([The shorebird seminar and survey have since been postponed.Ed](#))
- Jill Brew had contact with Joy Taylor of 8CCC. Joy had suggested that we might like to make "community announcements" that highlight ASFN. Jill will follow this up.
- Barb organised chocolates as thank you to John and Christine for looking after us at CDU.

Past Activities/Trips discussed:

- Tanami Track Trip- lots of interesting birds, plants and insects.
- Henbury Fish Survey. 6 members attended and found it educational and enjoyable.
- Rainbow Valley. A successful trip. Having a NT Herbarium plant list was helpful.

Future activities:

- Friday 15 November 3-30pm. Talk on the Simpson Desert by Margaret Friedel.
- Friday 15 November – Frog Spotting at Simpsons Gap by NT Parks and Wildlife.
- Fri 22-Sat 23 November. Nature Walk into 8 Mile Gap. Leader: Cec Sutton.
- Fri13 – Sat 14 December. End of Year Event at Standley Chasm. See Marg Lawrence for bookings.
- Sunday 8 Dec. Shorebird Count. Barb Gilfedder.
- Friday Morning Walks on alternate weeks. Rosalie is arranging next walk on 22 November.
- Oct 2014 ANN Meeting at Hobart. Rhondda, Rosalie and Barb will attend. Other interest welcome.

Sightings

- Pam Keil- A lot of interesting and different birds at the Sewage Ponds. Including Oriental Plover, Grey Plover, Greenshanks, Ruff, Marsh Sandpiper.
- Time limited further reports.

Next meeting: 12 Feb 2014 Speaker: Boyd Wright on Masting of Spinifex.

Scribe: Volunteer needed

Supper : Marg Lawrence

Meeting closed 9pm