



October 2023

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Newsletter



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A flock of black cockatoos enjoying the sunrise. Thanks to Jane Bannister for the beautiful photo.

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of the month
(except December and January) at 7:00pm
at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

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Postal Address:

P.O. Box 8663

Alice Springs, NT 0871

Web site:

www.alicefieldnaturalists.org.au

Email:

contact@alicefieldnaturalists.org.au

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The next newsletter will be published on 1 November 2023.
We appreciate all contributions, articles and photos both local and elsewhere.
Please have them to Lisa McLean lisamclean@outlook.com by **23 October 2023**.

ALICE SPRINGS FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Sunday 1st October – Tour of Traeger Museum at Old Timers at 2.30-4.00 pm. Leader Megg Kelham.

Wednesday 11th October – Speaker night. Fiona Walsh talks about termites, including cultural aspects.

Sunday 15th October – Proposed Planning meeting

Saturday 18th October – Gecko night opposite 86 Kurrajong Drive – leader Peter McDonald – time TBC

Sunday 22nd October – Visit Pitchi Richi to see outcome of Alex Nelson's buffel clearing – leader Marg Friedel at 8 am

AUSTRALIAN PLANTS SOCIETY – ALICE SPRINGS

apsalicesprings@yahoo.com.au

Wednesday 4th October – **Monthly talk 7.00pm, Olive Pink Botanic Garden.** Join Steve Morton, author of the book *Australian Deserts*, as he talks about the ecology of our arid areas.

Saturday 7th October – **A morning exploring sand dune vegetation.** 7.30am start. Wander along a sandy road and explore plants of sand dunes to the south-east of Alice Springs. Bring morning tea and lunch if you want to wander home slowly.

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

Committee Members

President	Marg Friedel	0417 849 743
Vice-President	to be appointed	
Secretary	Lisa McLean	0412 642 987
Treasurer	Neil Woolcock	0428 521 598
Property Officer	to be appointed	

General Members

Wendy Mactaggart	0434 495 903
Peter McDonald	0427 177 450
Jill Brew	0437 223 203

Public Officer

Anne Pye	0438 388 012
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Other Club Responsibilities:

Newsletter – Lisa McLean / Barb Gilfedder

Facebook Organiser – Meg Mooney moon3@iinet.net.au

Website controller – position vacant

PLANT SALE!

Amazing bird attracting,
bushfood & medicine
plants.

Oct 7th 2023

from 8:00am - 11:00am

[or until sold out]

Olive Pink Botanic Garden,
Tuncks Road



A ringed brown snake (*Pseudonaja modesta*) sunning itself on Jane and Peter Bannister's deck.

These snakes grow to around 50 cm in length, and has grey-brown to red-brown upperparts, a black head and neck split by a cream band. There are also four to seven black bands with cream margins at regular intervals down the length of its body, and these may fade as the snake ages.

The ringed brown snake is found in arid regions across inland Australia (except Victoria). It lives in arid shrubland or grassland, where it hides in spinifex or under fallen timber.

As its specific name denotes, it's an unassuming, orderly and 'well behaved' snake which does not normally bite people.

A wonderful write up of Anett Weisheit's book *Behind the landscape of the Central Ranges: A Geological Guide to the Larapinta Trail and Tjoritja/West MacDonnell National Park* recently appeared in *Cosmos* - 'Rock stars' launch step-by-step geology of Red Centre wilderness hike <https://cosmosmagazine.com/earth/earth-sciences/rocks-geology-red-centre-hike/>

Newhaven

Report by Marg Friedel

'Flowers amongst the grass'

Two years ago, the wildflower displays at the Australian Wildlife Conservancy's Newhaven Wildlife Reserve were stunning. This year, when Suzanne Lollback and I travelled around Newhaven in early August, the displays were more muted. Continuing La Niña conditions had meant plentiful rain and a profusion of grasses, so much so that there wasn't a lot of room for wildflowers. I was surprised – and very interested – to see that Bottleneck Lake was predominantly occupied by grass, whereas two years ago it had featured the unique blue-green samphire *Tecticornia verrucosa*.



Nevertheless, the sand dunes supported some beautiful species in flower: *Scaevola*, *Ptilotus*, *Solanum* and *Indigofera*, daisies and *Sennas*. Myriads of tiny footprints spoke of nocturnal insects and mice, and we encountered a lone military dragon (*Ctenophorus isolepis*) and an ant nest whose inhabitants had extracted pale granules from underneath the red sand.



Top photo: *Eremophila willsii* subsp. *integrifolia*, fighting for its place among the grasses.

On the sand dunes - *Scaevola basedowii*, *Ptilotus latifolius*, *Indigofera psammophila*, a military dragon (*Ctenophorus isolepis*) and an interesting ant nest which shows how the underlying substrate differs from the dune surface.

The salty soils had their own floral gems: *Swainsonas*, *Angianthus*, *Scaevola* and quirky *Dysphania*.



Swainsona psammophila, *Angianthus cyathifer*, *Scaevola collaris* and *Dysphania similans*

Roadsides were a good place for showy flowers due to the extra run-off from past rainfall, so we admired more daisies, *Sidas*, *Frankenia*, spectacular *Hakea leucoptera* (needlewood) and *Acacia bivenosa*, *Seringia exastia* and *Ptilotus obovatus*.



Hakea leucoptera, *Acacia bivenosa*, and in the last photo *Seringia exastia* (top left) and *Ptilotus obovatus* (bottom right).



On the sandplains to the west, we encountered *Acacia melleodora* and *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *helmsii* in full bloom.



Looking westwards from the back of Mt Gurner

The surrounds of Mt Gurner provided another treat. Amongst already-familiar species, there were some new highlights: *Halgania* sp. A Kimberley Flora, *Brunonia australis* and *Velleia connata* (and more!).



Halgania sp. A Kimberley Flora Brunonia australis with its blue flowers around a Velleia connata plant.

Along the ranges to the north and northeast of the campground were further treats, one of the most interesting being the two subspecies of *Eremophila willsii* - *willsii* (below right) and *integrifolia* (at the beginning of the report) - growing within a few metres of one another, and also an inquisitive euro (*Osphranter robustus*). For more plant stories and many more photos, see Suzanne's articles in the September 2023 issue of the Australia Plant Society AS newsletter.



Left: An inquisitive Euro (*Osphranter robustus*)

And such neat paw and tail prints.

'Fire'

One of the outcomes of prolific grass growth is increasing fuel loads and a mounting risk of uncontrolled wildfire. The AWC has been implementing fire management strategies at Newhaven for some years. You can find a general introduction to Newhaven in the June 2021 issue of ASFNC newsletter, more about fire management in the October 2021 issue, and a background to the threatened species reintroduction project in the July 2022 issue.

Not surprisingly, the current fuel loads on Newhaven are needing careful management. While Suzanne and I were there, a helicopter team were dropping incendiaries along predetermined paths to reduce continuity of fuel loads and protect precious habitats. Helicopters are costly to run but can cover much more country in a day than a ground crew can, so there's a trade-off. Now that Ngalyurtju Aboriginal Land Trust (old Central Mt Wedge Station) <https://www.australianwildlife.org/where-we-work/ngalurrju/>, adjacent to Newhaven, is being co-managed with AWC, fire management is also shared there.

In our travels we saw plenty of older fire scars as well as (distant) active fires, and recovery of fire-tolerant species, such as *Acacia sericophylla*. An important challenge is managing the extensive areas of mulga scrub that died in the very dry and hot period around 2019. Grass fuel under the dead trees is plentiful and the dead wood adds to the potential fuel load. Any mulga regeneration would be destroyed by a hot fire, potentially leading to a long-term loss of mulga, to be replaced by what? I hope we don't have to find out.



Preparing for an incendiary drop, management burn along Mt Gurner road, *Acacia sericophylla* recovering from fire.

Photographing birds and other subjects – Don't bat an eyelid!

September speaker night – Dorothy Latimer

Report by Lisa McLean

This month's special guest speaker, Dorothy Latimer, has seen the evolution of photography, having started photographing birds almost 25 years ago. Photographing birds with film cameras was challenging and the results were often blurry – not to mention having to wait for the chemist to develop them. Starting off with a little pocket camera, Dorothy now uses a very fancy digital camera she promised not to buy. The results are spectacular, and we are all better off for her purchase.

Dorothy had the group spellbound with amazing photographs of finches, teals, ducks, and many other birds – and some other creatures - wallowing about in water.



Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*). The smallest Australian dove, with a very distinctive red eye-ring, blue-grey head and breast. The back and wings are smoky brown with white spots on the wings.



A pair of Painted Finches (*Emblema pictum*) having a good old chat. Their name comes from the red and white spotted and mottled underparts of both males and females.

Dorothy told the story of regularly staying at a caravan park on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, getting to know the birds of the area. Travelling with a shallow dish always in the boot, and filling it with water, waiting for our feathered friends to come down for a swim, a bath and a drink. Another tip if you don't have a dish is to make a natural depression in the ground, fill it with water and wait with bated breath and camera at the ready. As Dorothy's photos attested, water gives plenty of opportunities to catch the birds in action. Spending time in one area helps you get an understanding of where the birds might land, and you can get to know regular visitors. Be patient and dress a bit like a bird – not in feathers, but in brown and khaki, sit under a tree and wait. Watch and see where they might land over the course of time and be ready for them. Mating time and nesting time are also good times to catch the birds on (digital) film.



Red-kneed Dotterell (*Erythrogonys cinctus*). Contrary to its name, it does not have red knees. Instead it has pinkish upper legs. Adult has solid black hood and white chin with a black breast-band and chestnut flank patch.



Pink-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*) and Grey Teal (*Anas gracilis*). Note the large spatulate bill of the Pink-ear. All the better to scoop up food with.



Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

In Warlpiri, the budgerigar is called Ngatitjirri and features in dreaming stories (jukurrpa). They can be found around waterholes and their presence provides critical clues as to the location of water. Explorers and early colonisers sometimes followed budgerigars, hoping the birds would lead them to water.

Dorothy's advice is to just sit and wait. No talking, no moving your arms around and they'll forget you're there. In other words, don't bat an eyelid!

Dorothy also notes that car parks are also great places to photograph birds, but wonders why? Do you know? As locals would know, the Alice Springs Desert Park is also a great place to take photos, keep your eyes peeled for opportunities for birds, insects, flowers and buds.

While Field Nats members are known for their use of binoculars, photography will capture features you can't see! Take the chance, snap away – keep your battery charged and SD card empty and ready!

To be honest, this recap of Dorothy's talk is slightly dry and boring, however, her enthusiasm for her work was absolutely infectious, her photographs magnificent, and her generosity in sharing her tips and tricks, gratefully received.

Thank you Dorothy!



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*). The males are very loud and boisterous singers, which they learn from their fathers, and start singing at puberty. Females do not sing.

Rainbow Valley Trip – 16 September 2023

Fiona McKean

This field trip was my first visit to Rainbow Valley. I was introduced to several new people and thousands of flies. It was also an introduction to central Australian plants for someone more familiar with those in the Top End. My gateway drug was *Calytrix* at a roadside stop on the way in. This was a delight to me, as I hadn't seen any before in central Australia. In the Top End, *Calytrix exstipulata* or turkey bush is often found in two contrasting environments: disturbed gravel at roadside verges or up in the high sandstone country, until recently one of the last places you could wander around without too many signs of other people doing the same thing. I think I also remember *Calytrix* from my recent first trip to southwest WA. You have to admire a genus that flourishes from sandstone escarpment to red sands to coastal heaths, and I'd be keen to hear more about the ethnobotany of central Australian species. The central Australian species is *Calytrix carinata* (picture above by Fiona).



Eremophila prostrata.

First photo showing the more common colour (Barb Gilfedder); second photo showing a different colour (Suzanne Lollback).

Suzanne tells us it occurs with a variety of flower colours, from very dark purple, to mauve to almost crimson and white.

Other highlights were the rare Rainbow Valley *Eremophila* (*Eremophila prostrata*) and I was puzzled by one that looked different to its mates. Was it definitely the same thing?

Another roadside stop yielded five species of *Ptilotus* and had me wandering around imitating the Count from Sesame Street as I ticked them off--the number fortuitously matching the digits of one hand, as the brain was a bit done by then.

Thanks to those who shared their knowledge and vehicles.



Four of the *Ptilotus* species: *P. clementii*, *P. exultatus*, *P. helipteroides*, *P. sessilifolius* and *Scaevola amblyanthera* which dominated the same site. Photos two by Fiona McKean, two by Suzanne Bitar, and one by Barb Gilfedder.



Suzanne Bitar

Years ago there was an artist named Christine Dickinson whose subject matter was generally landscapes of the Western MacDonnell Ranges, or at least those were the ones that seemed to sell and were on display at various galleries around town. They were appealing but I always thought they were over saturated, the ranges not quite that bright, the wildflowers not quite that colourful and numerous. Last Sunday's excursion to Rainbow Valley made me rethink all that, the rocks were in fact that colourful, the flowers that numerous. I tried to find one of Christine Dickinson's works online to compare, I know she produced many but sadly she seems not to have left an online legacy. I contacted a friend



who owns one of somewhere nearby and she shared a photo for comparison (above). I'm a visual person. I love to join the ASFNC excursions to enjoy and photographically document while listening to the discussions by those members with so much more knowledge of our environment. I let their conversations and knowledge flow over and around me like gentle dust, happy when some settles and stays with me.

Julie Taylor

Rainbow Valley is such a delightful destination.

I am so grateful to have had this opportunity as it is some years since I was last there.

We enjoyed the many stands of desert oaks along the road in, including heaps of new ones taking their chance to survive after such a good season.

Seeing such a wonderful variety of wildflowers showing their delicate little blooms was truly amazing. It seemed that every time you took a few steps in a new direction there was yet another, different kind. I saw many that I had not seen before and felt very privileged to be in the company of knowledgeable enthusiasts. The roadside stops along the way made the journey even more interesting because we saw more and more.



For example, the shrubs, *Newcastleia cephalantha* with what look like little white balls of cotton wool all over them as they progress to their seeding stage (left by Julie).

Barb showed me a very small pepper cress *Lepidium phlebopetalum*, so I experienced the surprisingly pleasant and complex flavour of its leaves. It

would make an excellent bush-tucker sprinkle when serving up a favourite dish, but I would never dare to pick them!

One of the highlights was when Connie with her sharp eyes, spotted the rare and endangered *Eremophila prostrata* just off the road. It was a thrill to see these in bloom, displaying their unusually deep-mauve coloured flowers.

Many thanks to organisers and drivers enabling this lovely excursion.

Megg Kelham

Flies, heat and hot, gusty winds did not detract from the sheer joy of seeing the wild blooms a third year of good rains has produced.

Favourite Moment: watching Julie get down on all fours to smell a bloom no bigger than a pimple on a pumpkin.

Favourite Bloom: the deep purple flowers of a dozen or so incredibly healthy looking *Eremophila prostrata*.

Favourite thing: two tiny fungi casting larger than life shadows across the red sand (sitting in Megg's bangle for size comparison).

With thanks for another glorious day in the desert.



Above: At one of the roadside stops there was much discussion about a small shrub (Julie). We later identified it as *Dicrastylis beveridgei*. Close up below (Barb).



...and more Rainbow Valley trip photos...



Clockwise from top left:
Polycalymma stuartii, *Swainsona burkei*, *Anemocarpa saxatilis*,
Goodenia mueckeana, *Goodenia glabra*, *Dicrastylis lewellinii*,
Thysanotus sp. *eremaeae*.

All photos by Suzanne Bitar, except
the two *Goodenias* by Barb
Gilfedder.

