

Castlemaine Naturalist

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Banded Lapwings

photo Noel Young

Swift Parrots favour Castlemaine Rita mills

The Autumn update from the National Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater Survey states that for all three eastern states and the A.C.T. a total of 299 Swift Parrots were recorded from 252 surveys. **The largest flocks of 60 - 80 birds were recorded at Muckleford!** (I think they know when someone loves them!) Other areas of Victoria where they were recorded included Pilchers Bridge, Castlemaine, Heathcote, Sunbury, Maryborough, Clunes, Chiltern, Talbot and St Arnaud.

The club is again taking part in the Survey on the first weekend in August.* We have had some good results in the past, mainly from the Castlemaine Golf Club where Debbie Worland had been keeping records for some time, and was able to notify Debbie Saunders, the national Swift Parrot Survey coordinator, that she has been able to record the parrots at the Golf Club for 90 consecutive days this year - and, after over a week since that E-mail was sent, they are still roosting at the site.

With the aid of the Club Debbie has been able to get a grant from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation that will allow her to have a professionally dubbed DVD made of the video images that she has taken of the Swift Parrots at the Castlemaine Golf Club at Muckleford. Some of her video has images of the parrots feeding and behaving in ways that had not been known or recorded before.

Did you know there is a "Friends of the Swift Parrot" group, whose aim is help make a difference in the knowledge of and therefore conservation of the Swift Parrot? Interested? There will be information about joining etc. on the back table at the August meeting.

***Our official Club surveys are on Saturday morning Aug. 2,** meeting at the **Octopus at 8.15 for an 8.30 start,** and **on Sunday Morning Aug. 3,** at the **Castlemaine Golf Clubhouse at 8.30.** Bring binoculars if you have them, and some morning tea.

The survey is also being conducted a week either side of that weekend, and if you can get out with at least one other person, and you know what you are looking for, that would help. You will need forms, and can contact me,

Rita Mills, on 5472 4553, or Mob. 0409 290 299, or

Debbie Worland on 5472 2474.

From the July business meeting -

Welcome to new members Mary and Phil Gambin

The Top End and the Kimberley

Bruce Donaldson

From June 16th to July 7th Mandy and I did a trip from Darwin to Alice via Litchfield, Kakadu, Katherine, Kununurra, the Gibb River Rd, Broome, the Bungle Bungles and the Tanami Track to Alice Springs. Here are a few of the flora and fauna highlights.

Firstly a warning. It seems the last few years the wet season has carried on longer than in the past. The tour prior to ours, i.e. one that left Darwin around the beginning of June, was not able to do the Bungle Bungles or the Tanami Track due to late rains as a result of which the dirt roads became impassable. I would advise anyone doing this route in future not to start out before mid-June or even early July to be sure of this not occurring.

Darwin Botanical Gardens are a must for birdwatchers, as are the lush gardens around the Museum. What strikes you first birdwise on arrival in the Top End is that Black and Whistling kites are about as common as Silver gulls are down south, a bird which we saw surprisingly seldom up there, which applied to Magpies too. Peewees were present in the remotest of areas and there was absolutely nowhere without a resident Willy wagtail. We also saw surprisingly few Wedgetails and not a single Emu. It was a relief that the only corvid in the Darwin area is the Torresian crow, so there was no quandary as to what we were looking at, which can seldom be said of corvids.

The birding highlights along the way were Brolgas (not very common at all), Jacanas galore on the wetlands, Jabirus (also not very common either but the one sitting on its enormous nest at the top of a solitary tree in a Kakadu swamp took the cake), Crimson finches, Long-tailed finches, Double-barred finches, Mulga parrots (not common), Red-winged parrots (quite common), Nankeen night herons (the juveniles look so like Bitterns), Imperial pigeons, Yellow-tinted honeyeaters, Golden-backed honeyeaters (the local variant of the White-naped), Rainbow pittas (spectacular), Rufous banded and Rufous-throated honeyeaters, Grey-fronted honeyeaters, Shining flycatchers, White-browed crane (one only on the Ord River), Bustards and even our first wild Budgerigar (one only).

Walking into Cathedral Gorge in the Bungle Bungles we came across four White-quilled rock-pigeons on the path that walked up to within three feet of us; they knew no fear at all.

The Plumed Whistling-ducks were so numerous in Kakadu that from a distance you thought you were looking at brown earth - carpets of thousands of them.

The camping ground in Kununurra had dingoes roaming all over it at all times of the day, but particularly at night. We'd been warned not to leave shoes outside the tent as they are a favorite target of the dingoes. And what is it about camping grounds that attracts Bush stone-curlews? Kununurra had oodles of them and that was not by any means the first time I'd seen them in such a situation.

Camping on the banks of Lake Argyle in Kununurra one evening we suddenly became aware at last light of a million (so we were told) flying foxes leaving their day roost to disperse over the area for their night-time feeding.

You hear so many people go on about the monotony of the landscape along roads such as the Tanami Track but we found there to be a lot of variety in the vegetation as we put the 1056k between Halls Creek and Alice behind us. Some parts were quite heavily forested with sizable eucalypts while in others the two-foot high termite mounds were the tallest thing in site. The termite mounds throughout the trip differed greatly in architectural style - most were not magnetic.

The eucalypts of the far north are bewilderingly different from those we get down here - I wished I'd been able to find out more about them - but good old *E. camaldulensis* was pretty wide-spread. But by far the most intriguing tree was the boab. Their distribution is pretty well limited to the Kimberley. You seldom see anything that resembles a forest of them but where they do occur, they can be quite prolific. Curiously enough, all the way to Derby the boabs were leafless, but in the Derby-Broome area they were heavy with leaf. I had just seen an episode of the Bush Tucker Man who said the white pith around the seeds in the large seedpods is edible. That was an invitation to try it - it was for all the world like powdered milk gone hard in the tin. You see quite a lot of large, multi-trunked boabs, but looking at the younger ones, I guess that the multi trunks are simply the result of several trees seemingly fusing together as they swell.

The numerous three-foot long barramundi dangling almost motionless in the turquoise water of Howard Springs just outside Darwin formed a lasting impression. Any commercial tour you do puts a heavy emphasis on crocodiles, but we found crocs all a bit ho-hum. Salties are occurring ever further inland with the floods of the Big Wet stranding so many of them miles from the sea. In the Katherine Gorge there were large cylindrical traps with pigs' heads in them attempting to trap any that might have got left behind by the receding floodwaters. The main swimming hole at Wangi Falls in Litchfield NP still had a roo carcass floating in it to test if all salties had left or been removed and was still not open for swimming six weeks after the dry had begun. Many much more isolated places further inland had billabongs where the fresh water crocs were quite numerous and it was theoretically safe to swim, but no one in our group quite found the courage - freshies don't look much smaller than salties up close, but at least they don't grin like the latter!

Excursion to Maryborough aboriginal sites

Natalie de Maccus

Just as well the purpose of our field trip to the Maryborough area on 12th July was to see aboriginal sites because as an excursion in search of flowering plants it would have been a total loss. Although we went into Maryborough Regional Park and the Craigie State Forest, the closest we came to finding a flowering plant was by the discovery of a few small greenhoods (*Pterostylis*) in bud. Suggestions as to their identity were *nana* (? too early) or *parviflora* (? too late). It was not possible to tell from their stage of development whether they were to be single-flowered or multi-flowered. I believe the bird enthusiasts didn't fare much better.

Having met up with half a dozen members of the Maryborough Field Nats, ably led by Lorraine O'Dal, we then proceeded along the Carisbrook-Bendigo Road where we were shown many examples of 'scar' trees. Some of the 'scars' were quite small whilst others were large. The literature suggests that the aborigines removed bark "...to provide them with articles for their everyday needs." Not very specific!

Next we went into the Craigie State Forest where we visited the Battery Dam area, which included the eucalyptus distillery. Originally the steam operated Cornish boiler was used to drive the stamp battery to crush quartz during the gold era. Later (1917 – 1950's) the equipment was used to run a eucalyptus distillery.

Bull Gully was our next stop. This is a remarkable site where there are four aboriginal wells at the base of a rocky ridge. Water collection was maximized, by digging (with stone tools) through the rock to form what appeared to be four separate wells. However the diagrams with which we were supplied showed that three of the wells were connected, making one well with three narrow openings. The openings were kept narrow to minimize pollution by animals or falling vegetation. The openings could also be covered by stones to help reduce evaporation. There is evidence to suggest that the fourth well was in the process of being joined to make one large reservoir. Past theories by Europeans concerning the use of the wells included the notion that the holes had been dug by animals. In 1919 the Melbourne Herald posed the theory that the site was used as a "sacrificial altar". In 1920 A.S. Kenyon decided it was a pigment quarry supplying yellow ochre. Sadly now the area has to be protected with a high cyclone wire fence topped with barbed wire as the site has been vandalized.

The Bull Gully site can be reached from the Battery Dam site via a good walking track (about a 45 minute walk). We took the quicker option by car as we were expected at the Maryborough Station Café for a late afternoon tea.

Unfortunately we were unable to gain access to the Stone Arrangement at Carisbrook. This consists of four outlines – a boomerang and three circles - and is thought to be associated with aboriginal initiation rites.

ANN Get-together May 10-18, 2008 Kakadu and Arnhem Land Tour Geraldine Harris

On Saturday May the 18th approximately 90 people arrived at Mary River Park (south-east of Darwin) from all over Australia to take part in the 2008 Australian Naturalists Network Get-together. Our hosts for the week were a small group of Northern Territory Field Naturalists and they had a full programme mapped out for us.

A visit to the Annaburroo Station and billabong on our first morning was an introduction to a tropical world of strange new plants and unfamiliar birds. I recall Green Pygmy-geese among waterlilies on the billabong, Crimson Finch among the reeds, the yellow flowers of the Kapok Tree and green ants! I also learned about the tall, introduced Gamba Grass that has been declared a noxious weed in WA and Qld because of its high fuel rating and potential to cause very destructive wildfires.

A "Welcome to Country" ceremony danced by a local clan of Aborigines lit up by a large open fire under the trees at night was a reminder of a long association of Australia's indigenous peoples with this country.

We were privileged to have author/educationalist/ecologist Ian Morris as our guide on our two visits into Kakadu National Park and also as our evening speaker on two occasions (when he spoke about Kakadu National Park and Aboriginal Kinship in Northern Australia). Ian talked about "the need to value undeveloped land" and how, after 57 years, he continues to "learn every day I am out here". Ian has spent years learning from Aboriginal people and the importance to them of "managing your father's country".

Our first day in Kakadu was spent at the Kakadu Culture Camp at Muirella Park. We went on a billabong cruise, a bush tucker walk, and learned about basket weaving, spear throwing and camp cooking.

The next day some of our group went on a flight over Kakadu and on to the Bardedjilidji Sandstone Walk and Ubirr rock art gallery. The sandstone walk was still smouldering from being "burnt" the evening before, a practice we were to see much of in the territory and which is thought to provide access, improve pasture and also reduce fuel. The rock art and scenery at Ubirr were outstanding and I spent a lot of time trying to capture the sunlit grasses among the rocks and the view out over the country from high up on the rock outcrop.

We spent Wednesday "mooching" down the Marrakai track, stopping to look at flora and fauna along the way. Although it was very hot we found quite a lot of interesting things including a rufous morph of a Butcherbird, Bush Stone-curlews, Radjah Shelduck, Double-barred Finches and some Red-tailed Black Cockatoos. We didn't find much while spotlighting at Mary River that night but were amused by collected Cane Toads as we went.

On Thursday we spent the whole day at the Territory Wildlife Park where we were treated with so many close-up encounters with everything from dingoes to Pacific Bazas – there was so much of interest in fact that I put my camera away and decided to just enjoy all there was to see.

Friday morning we were up early for a Mary River boat cruise and good views of a saltwater crocodile and a Black Bittern. A day at Fogg Dam provided an amazing array of birds (especially waterbirds) and butterflies including Magpie Geese, Wandering Whistling-Ducks, Royal Spoonbill, Darters, Glossy Ibis, and Jabiru. We managed to drag ourselves away from the birds just long enough to walk through monsoon and paperbark forests. Some members took the opportunity to enjoy the scenery from yet another perspective and spent time with a local artist sketching.

Our last day was spent exploring and identifying more new plants, birds and insects in the bushland at the Brian Creek Reserve and along a walk to Mistake Billabong where we had a long encounter with a very handsome Yellow-spotted Monitor Lizard.

After our week together some of the group went straight home, others stayed on to explore the Kakadu or other parts of the territory further and still others headed off on extended trips that would eventually take them home. I finished with a list of over 80 birds, photos of lots of plants I still have to identify, and notes I still have to sort through.

Travelling with a group of Field Naturalists provides the best opportunity to learn about any environment as there is continual discovery and sharing of knowledge, they love being out in the open (regardless of the heat) and according to one young waitress at Mary River Park, “they never complain”. It was our first ANN trip and it certainly won't be our last.

Notes by Richard Piesse

If the mix of sun and rain continues, it looks like a good season ahead for Scented Sundews, Wax lip Orchids and Chocolate Lilies, and probably an excellent flowering year for Red Box. The Sticky Boronia gully should be a picture (some individual flowers already open on 23/7).

27/6 Chewton to The Monk: *Acacia genistifolia*, *pycnantha*, *E. tricarpa*, *Astroloma humifusum*, *Correa reflexa*, *Hakea decurrens*, *Melichrus urceolatus*, *Philothea verrucosa*, *Pterostylis melagramma*

28/6 C.D. Nat Heritage Park - Sebastapol Gully: *Acacia aspera*, *gunnii*, *lanigera*, *pycnantha*, *Correa reflexa*, *Epacris impressa*, *Leucopogon virgatus*, *Melichrus urceolatus*, *Pterostylis melagramma*.

3/7 East Wombat Forest and Macedon Regional Park: *Epacris impressa*, *Pterostylis melagramma*

17/7 Kororoit Ck valley (Deer Park): Rare and endangered Growling Grass Frog, Nankeen Kestrel disturbing Plovers.

18/7 Poverty Gully circuit walk: *Acacia aspera*, *genistifolia*, *gunnii*, *pycnantha*, plus weed Cootamundra wattle, *E. tricarpa*, *Astroloma humifusum*, *Correa reflexa*, *Pterostylis melagramma*.

Observations

- ◆ Red capped Robin still at Muckleford – Geoff Harris
- ◆ Early Rough Wattle at Taradale – Rita Mills
- ◆ Denis Hurley showed photos of his resident Echidnas and Speckled Warblers at the meeting
- ◆ Christine Kilmartin had a photo of a Jacky Winter taken on the Happy Valley walking track
- ◆ *Pterostylus parviflora?* in bud on our block – Natalie De Maccus
- ◆ Two foxes running across White Gum Road – Geraldine Harris
- ◆ Yellow Gums flowering more profusely than usual this year – Hans Van Gemert
- ◆ Pied Currawongs in large numbers near Poverty Tk. - Chris Morris

Bird list for Burnett Rd 12th june to 7th july – Peggy Munro

Wood Duck – a pr.	Masked Lapwing	Common Bronzewing
Crested Pigeon	YTB Cockatoos (fl~40)	Galah
L B Corella (fl~20)	S C Cockatoos (fl~20)	Crimson Rosella
Eastern Rosella pr.	S Fairy Wren – 2 families	Spotted Pardalote – fam.
Striated Pardalote – pr	W B Scrubwren – pr	Thornbill sp.
Wattlebirds	Yellow faced Honeyeater	Yellow tufted Honeyeater
White naped Honeyeater	New Holland Honeyeater	E. Spinebill
Grey Fantail	E Yellow Robin	Magpie
Kookaburra	Pied Currawong	Grey Currawong
Raven	Red browed Finch	Goldfinch
Sparrow	Silvereye	Blackbird

CAN YOU HELP?

A member involved in trying to protect the bush from a large proposed housing estate in Diamond Gully, Castlemaine is keen to hear how to contact a member or supporter who photographed a dead brush-tailed phascogale in Ranters Gully Road. He understands this photograph was shown at a recent Field Naturalists Meeting.

This type of evidence can be important, as in general habitat used by threatened species like the brush-tailed phascogale cannot be cleared for optional projects like rezoning land for housing estates. If you can help please contact Frank Panter 5470 5072.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

August 2008

Fri August 8 meeting: Sheila Houghton on Fungi

Sat August 9 field trip: Fungi walk at Firth Park – Leader Sheila Houghton. **NOTE: 12 noon start** at the usual place, or 12.45 at the Pig and Whistle hotel, East Trentham.

Fri Sept 12 meeting: Listening Earth presentation - "Appreciating our local bird song"

Sat Sept 13 field trip: Morgans Track walk - leader George Broadway.

Wed Sept. 17 First weekly wildflower walk - leader Rita Mills. These walks will depart from the Duke St. car park at 4pm sharp and return at 5.30

Fri Oct 10 meeting: Geraldine & Geoff Harris' N. T. trip.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Natalies; 65 Johnstone Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2008

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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