

Castlemaine Naturalist

March '99
#253 Vol. 23.2



Six Thousand Feet in Summer

Another Summer, and another interlude in the mountains with the Victorian Nature Photography Group, a happy bunch of Photographer/Naturalists and Naturalist/Photographers. The first group are capable of sitting in the one spot for hours waiting for the light to be just right - the rest are like me! A number of non-photographers went too, mainly from Bendigo Field Nats, so we had people like John Lindner and Rod Orr to help us out with identification of plants if we couldn't find "it" in the books.

We stayed in Pygmy Possum Lodge in Charlottes Pass Village, a very pleasant place to stay, with views from the windows across to Mt Guthrie opposite, or the Snow-gums out the back. The main birdlife in the village was Little Ravens, though there was a pair of nesting Crimson Rosellas between Pygmy Possum and Southern Alps Lodge, a few Starlings and fleeting glimpses of Thornbills and Flame Robins.

The greatest surprise of the week for me was finding no snow-patches at all on the mountains. At the last two campouts in the Kosciusko area there were over forty. There were fewer flowers, because the season was earlier, but we saw hundreds of Gentians this time, and also the Mauve Leek Orchid, *Prasophyllum suttonii*, and Alpine Sunrays, mainly yellow at lower levels and white up in the higher ridges.

We were up 6000 feet (whatever that is in metres) and were surrounded by far more than 6000 feet on just the Phasmids! It really was the year of the insects this time. People were hurrying off to Island Bend Rest Area in the wee small hours to catch the sunrise when the dew was still on the wings of butterflies, dragonflies, lacewings, stick insects, katydids, or whatever happened to be around, and after that, when the adults had flown, they went chasing after Emperor Gum Moth, *Antheraea eucalipiti*, caterpillars, and even one of the much less common *A. helena*, (which has a pink lateral stripe instead of a pale green one), and any other things chewing the leaves.

Several people, including myself, did the Main Range walk, first down onto the Snowy, which had more water in it than I had seen before, then a 3km steady climb up past Hedley Tarn and Blue Lake - quite a few of the photographers could be seen down on Blue Lake at any time - and up to Mt Carruthers. There are magnificent views of the Victorian Alps, layer upon layer of blue fading away into the distance, from both Carruthers itself and the saddle before it. Just below the saddle the Sentinel juts out from the main range, a sharp triangle of rock that is irresistible to photographers and adventurers alike. The saddle in particular has a very uncommon form of habitat for Australia, feldmark, consisting of stoney ground interspersed with small herbs. Alpine habitats are rare in Australia because of the lack of very high mountains, and consist of only .15% of the Australian Landmass.

Alpine communities are found above the snowline, where the average maximum temperature of the warmest months is below 10°C, which is too cold for trees. Rod Orr gave this explanation of the Alpine ecology early in the week at an evening get-together. He explained that the balance between incoming solar energy and energy expended determined the ecology of a region ie, insufficient excess energy for woody growth exists in alpine areas - hence the feldmark, alpine herbfields, sphagnum bogs, and scree

slopes, etc. All have their own typical plant and animal life - for example, the Burramys, or Pigmy Possum belongs to the scree and Plum-pine habitat. On the Alpine herbfields we found, to name a few, Alpine Sunray, Gentians, a brilliant pink form of Grass Trigger-plant, Waxy Bluebells, Mauve Leek Orchids and some Euphrasias.

After Carruthers the track gradually winds downhill 'til it is above Lake Albina, where we had our lunch on the side of the narrow track out of the quite cool wind. Just before we got there we had been watching a family of, I think, Little Falcons. At first we saw only two, but one soared up, and stooped, but instead of coming up with some sort of prey (Pipits seem to be the main fare up there), another two falcons joined them in the air.

After lunch we puffed our way up the ridge that leads up to Kosciusko, continually stopping to look back over that magnificent scenery, watch Nankeen Kestrels hunting or watch the little spotted skinks darting away from us. Because there were no snowpatches this time the rocks seemed to stand out more than they have on other years and the whole area seemed to have taken on a much different colour with green and grey-brown dominating.

Only one of the party detoured up to the summit, while we three wandered on down the easy track back to the Charlottes Pass car park. We stopped for a few minutes on the Snowy about 1 km after Seamans Hut, which was built as a memorial to a young American man who lost his life with a friend when they tried to reach the summit of Kosciusko on skis back in the twenties. The water was quite shallow at the bridge and we enjoyed watching the "native trout" (Galaxias) darting about in the clear water.

We took 9 hours and ten minutes to walk the 20 kms, while two of the men, on separate days, walked it in 5 hours!

Doug and I went on several of the Walks, twice to Porcupine Rocks, which is an outcrop on the top of the ridge between the Crackenback River Valley and Perisher Valley. The first day, leaving from the Perisher village water supply, we often walked in mist and we didn't see any view from the top, but we did see lots of Richards Pipets, female and juvenile Flame Robins and a Striated Calathalmus, which someone else confirmed. There were still plenty of flowers including Grass Trigger Plants, white Mountain Baekea sprawling over the granite rocks, Bluebells, Pale Vanilla Lilies and Alpine Speedwell to name but a few. On the afternoon of the day after the Main Range walk, when it was sunny and we could actually see that there was a view to be had, we went by a different route over Wheatley Gap and saw a Swamp Harrier as we crossed a boggy area. Further on, closer to the original track we took, I again spotted the birds that had me tricked the first time, and finally managed to identify them as singing Bush Larks. These walks were 6 and 5 km return respectively.

Another day we went down to Sawpit Gully at the start of the park, and did the 6km Waterfall walk. There is so much to see. At the start of the track along the creek the water is all but hidden by thickets of Woolley Ti-tree. The track is through tall trees, including Alpine Ash, Mountain Gum and Black Sallee. Huge Granite outcrops keep appearing among the trees, and there are lots of interesting shrubs and herby things. Two that took my eye were a small Ballart with pink fruit, and a yellow flowered ground cover which I later identified, and Rod Orr confirmed, as a prostrate Geebung. While we had lunch by the waterfall I spotted two Summer Greenhoods near the little bridge and tried to photograph them without falling into the creek. Another feature of this walk was the number of Jumping Ant nests built by the side of the track. It didn't pay to stop without looking to see what was at your feet!

Another Walk, which was only about 3 km return, 4 if you walked around the lake, was to Rainbow Lake which is the old reservoir for the Kosciusko Hotel which burnt down in the 50's. I again tried to photograph the Wavy Marshwort, *Nymphoides crenata*, and, unlike a proper photographer would, didn't have the patience to wait another half hour until the lovely fringed yellow flowers opened, but settled instead for

a polarised shot of the leaves and underwater stems. I found that one of the P/Ns also took the same subject and she also photographed the flowers. She arrived later than we did. We had met her and her friend when they were on their way in, hunting for a green beetle they thought they had seen. At the evening program someone had managed to catch one and bring it in for identification. It was a vivid, iridescent green, and most attractive, but unmistakably a cockroach.

Our last walk of the week was up, and I mean *up*, the track to the saddle on the east side of Little Stillwell, down over the creek and up to the ruins of a restaurant and ski lift which was abandoned many years ago. This time we couldn't always find the path, and the walking over springy Snowgrass, and, occasionally, marshy ground, was quite tiring - more so than the Main Range walk. It was really quite hot though we had a cool wind at times.

During the day we saw Crimson Rosellas, a Black Falcon, again lots of Richards Pipets, the ubiquitous Little Ravens, Silvereyes and Red Wattlebirds. As we sat by the creek having our lunch we watched Galaxias in the clear shallow water. Doug dropped a tiny piece of his bread in for them and though they immediately darted up to it they showed quite clearly that they are not into junk food. We climbed Mount Stillwell on the way back, scrambling up to the Trig point, and taking shot after shot of the ranges, from Jagungal far away to the north to the nearby Ramshead Range.

I only took two 36 frame slide films with me beside the half finished one in the camera, plus a couple of 27 frame print films for the old Canon and I wished I hadn't been so miserly, but Doug took about 2½ hours of video film. I have dubbed it onto VCR, but I'm afraid our holiday movie sent me to sleep, and I missed the bits I most wanted to see - but at least I can relive some of our week in the mountains any time I want, but I won't inflict it on all and sundry!

Rita Mills.

The Min Min Light

The Min Min light has long been one of Australia's best-known natural mysteries. Stories about it occur in Aboriginal mythology and, over the years, it has been the subject of countless newspaper and magazine articles, radio talks on natural history, television programs and at least one book, "The Mystery of the Min Min Light" by Maureen Kozika. This light phenomenon is very much associated with western Queensland. But credible sightings have been recorded in all states, more in some than in others, and more in some localities than others. The township of Boulia in Queensland memorializes this light with a neon replica on top of a tower in the main street. In some Queensland places you might pass signs saying YOU ARE IN MIN MIN COUNTRY.

The Min Min is a small light, often said to be like a lantern-light or the head-light of a car seen from a distance, and for which it has often been mistaken. In some areas it may be given the name Jack 'o Lantern. It can move slowly or at times quickly and rarely rises higher than about two metres from the ground. Often its flight is undulating and punctuated by bouts of hovering. It might make a sudden dive to earth and disappear. A number of reports have spoken of it sitting on posts or fence rails. If approached it will move away and if followed it will never let the investigator catch up with it. It may vanish in an instant and a minute later reappear somewhere else nearby. It is able to move

against the wind and makes no perceptible sound.

A number of possible causes of the light have been put forward. These include luminous gas, light refraction, electrical fireballs, swarms of luminous insects and owls covered in luminous fungus picked up from tree hollows.

A substantial body of evidence does support the owl idea, but not the contamination by fungus. The bird under suspicion is the Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*. Work recently carried out at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) found on the torso of a number of Barn Owls dermal structures bearing similarities to photocytes (light-producing organs) possessed by some species of luminous fish. Work on this finding is continuing.

Bioluminescence, the emission of light by a living organism, abounds in the sea but occurs in very few terrestrial animals. Also, it is not unusual for a species to possess luminosity and there not be a trace of it in closely related species. Therefore, if self-luminosity did occur in birds it would not be unusual if this characteristic were possessed by only one species. An example of characteristic-crossing is that found in the New Guinea bird, Pitohui, which produces on its skin homo-batrachotoxin, a substance found nowhere else but in the skin of the Poison-arrow Frog of South America.

If the Barn Owl is capable of 'intrinsic' luminosity it may be the only bird on earth so endowed. If the case for luminosity in this bird is proven, what a wonderful extra dimension this would be, not only to the species, but for the whole family of birds, and be yet another example of the fascinating make up of the natural world.

Fred Silcock

N.B. Over the years there have been a number of credible sightings of this light within about a 50 km radius of Castlemaine. One very interesting sighting at Cairn Curran reservoir has been reported. A number of reports from the St Arnaud area have been noted. In the history of Woodend there can be found information on typical sightings. The writer would be pleased to receive any information on lights that might meet the Min Min criteria. Part of the research does involve the map recording of sightings.

F.S.

(Any relevant information you might have can be handed to Albert Golden, who will pass it on to Fred Silcock.)

Babblings from Barkers Creek N°14 Superb Blue Wrens.

I have always felt envious of our friends in the neighbourhood whenever we have visited them for they all seem to have their own colonies of Blue Wrens. We have had several groups on our block but none near the house to observe and enjoy. However, this season we were adopted by a cock and a hen. After an initial busy, scolding period when many of our windows were attacked and our pot plants "painted" the cock gradually adopted his full plumage and the pair took possession of our back yard and commenced breeding.

Their new territory must suit them because they have presented us with two broods, each of two chicks. Bit by bit they have extended their territory until it now encompasses the whole of our garden.

Jacqui's many pots and her potting shed and nursery are almost bug free as our brood dash in and out, forever searching for any offending bugs. They all seem very comfortable with our presence and barely move from under our feet as we water the garden.

Owlet Nightjars

After a year or two of absence the Owlet Nightjars returned this year to once again sit, like old contented men, at the entrances of the nesting boxes closest to the house. They bred, only two chicks this year, but again, successfully, and after fledging they moved off to greener pastures. Has anyone read as to where Owlet Nightjars migrate?

Angry Bees

While playing golf recently I was attacked by two very irate bees which flew around my head, buzzing loudly and refusing to move off or to be brushed away. They even ignored the spray I had used to distract the flies. They were not content until one of them quickly settled onto my neck and stung me.

At home we have four nesting boxes which have been occupied by bees so our garden is always a profusion of bees, all of whom ignore Jacqui and myself whenever we are watering so I was surprised at the behaviour of these two bees. That is until recently, when I was again attacked by a very over stimulated bee. I went inside until it had cooled off and flown away!

Electricity and a Possum

I was woken one night this week (written 26/2) by a loud bang and then the chorus of the local dogs. Sometime later I noticed our bedside clock was not alight; no electricity.

In the morning a search found that the high tension lead fuse had blown near the pole outside our property. A further search found one very sick and sorry Ring-tailed Possum whose tail was badly burnt. It

was close to death, probably due to the electric shock, the fall and the overall trauma, but I carried into our back yard and made a nest out of the reach of the foxes. All day long he struggled for life but was not distressed by our presence. Jacqui attended to his damaged tail and dispensed with the ants. I quartered an apple, but he showed no interest in food.

So, the following morning, expecting the worst, I visited the nest to find that he had breakfasted on the apple and had departed a much wiser possum. However, the following day Jacqui discovered that a small unknown creature had found its way into our wallaby-proof enclosure and feasted on the succulents. We have our suspicions!

A Black Kite

On the morning that we lost our electricity, Jacqui and I were having breakfast looking out over our little world and contemplating how different our life is now that we live in the country, how peaceful our surroundings are, and how quiet our location is when compared to our previous lifestyle.

Suddenly there was what seemed an enormous explosion in our kitchen. Shattered glass flew everywhere, some of settling twenty feet away from the wrecked two metre square window. We thought, in those first few moments before logic has a chance, that we had been shot at and our window blasted into pieces.

Recovering, I went over to view the scene and there in one of the kitchen sinks was an adult Black Kite looking as confused as we felt. Looking at his strong, hooked beak I grabbed him before he could recover and took him outside and released him. He staggered for a moment, gave us one angry look and then flew away.

I am sure the Blue Wrens had a smile on their collective faces.

John Turnbull

Observations

* "The suspect beheader(s) of my Ring-tail Possum has/have been identified. As suspected, it was Brush-tailed Phascogales! I set my alarm for 6.30am to get up and set my wildflower sprinkler system. When I got out there something very fleeting, running up and down the trunk of the tree with the nesting box in it, caught my eye. Two Tuans (I'd never even seen one before) were darting in and out of the nesting box. One went to ground temporarily, but they soon they settled in the box for the day a few minutes later." Margaret Badminton, 26/2.

* Margaret also reported seeing an albino Noisy Miner at Bendigo.

* There were more reports of Bluefaced Honeyeaters at Newstead.

* Brenda Envall has had a Bird Dropping Spider living in her Grevillea at Harcourt.

* Four Rainbow Bee-eaters were seen by Maggie Oliver in White-gum Road Barkers Creek, and Maureen and Ken Dredge reported seeing a

flock at the Quince Tree at Muckleford.

* Margaret Badminton reported seeing White-throated Needletails at Yapeen. She also heard and eventually spotted a Collared Sparrowhawk on her property. The call, which is unlike any other raptor, helped her to identify it.

* Large flocks of Musk Lorikeets are still at North Harcourt. George Broadway.

* Six people went for the spotlighting outing at Guildford along Pound Lane. There were plenty of Eastern Grey Kangaroos, several Brush-tailed Possums, several pairs roosting Kookaburras, and Magpies and a Tawny Frogmouth seen. It was lovely just being out in the night bush, with a half moon above and Jupiter and Venus side by side on the horizon.

* So far no one at the business meeting has seen more than one or two European Wasps this year, and mostly back in August. Perhaps the lack of rain has been to some advantage?

* Maggie Oliver remarked on the extraordinary amount of bark shed by the gums this year.

Frogs - Harcourt, 1998

Crinia signifera - Common Eastern Toadlet. July - November

Upenoleia laevigata - Small Toadlet. After Rain.

Limnodynastes tasmaniensis - Spotted Grass Frog. Warm months, in creek, after rain.

Limnodynastes intenious - Giant Banjo Frog. In garden.

Limnodynastes dumerillii - Eastern Banjo Frog. Sept - Oct. In creek, and also in garden.

Litonia verreauxii - Verreaux's Frog. Sept - Oct. A tree frog.

Dick Turner, 18/11/98.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING

* The decision was made to take out Public Liability and Volunteer Workers Insurance with Ardalay Insurance Company, which caters for groups such as ourselves. The Combined Public and Products Liability is to \$10m. and the Volunteer Workers Accident Policy covers death and permanent disablement to \$100,000. Other injuries are also covered. The yearly Premium is \$75.

The Club will be covered by the policy from 1/4/99.

* When you receive your Castlemaine Naturalist check the label.

If you have a "-" your subscription is due now.

If you have a "p" your subscription has been paid.

Members joining later in the year will receive back issues of the C.N.

* Only copies of the back page of the C.N. will be placed in the box in the Library with the information folders.

C.F.N.C. PROGRAMME

General Meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall, at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street.

Excursions leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held at 38 Campbell Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSION

Fri Mar 12 **Black Hill Reserve.** Speaker is Carl Nielson of Kyneton, a founding member of the Reserve committee. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat Mar 13 **Black Hill Reserve, Kyneton.** A walk in the reserve. Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30 sharp. Leader is Albert Golden.

Fri April 9 **Wombat Forest, Past, Present and Future.** Speaker is Greg Morgan. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat April 10 **A Walk in Wombat Forest.** Leave 13 Mostyn St at 1.30pm.

Sat May 1 **Ironbarks, Diggings and Autumn.** Part of the Castlemaine State Festival. "A 5 km walk in Muckleford Forest along formed tracks through gently undulating forest". Meet at the corner of Bells Lane Track and Talbots track. Full instructions in the Festival brochure. This is being led by the Field Nats Club and the Mt Alexander Walks Committee.

Sat May 15 **Mopoke Gully, Yapeen.** Leave 13 Mostyn St at 1.30pm. Leader is M. Badminton.

Fri June 11 **The Ecology of Box/Ironbark Forests.** Speaker is Annette Muir, who has been working with DRNE. UCA hall, 8pm.

Fri Aug 13. **Microscopy.**, Peter Sansom and Ern Perkins. UCA hall. 8pm

Fri Sept 10 **African Parks** John Turnbull.

Committee; M. Dredge (President), E. Perkins (V.P. and Grievance Officer), B. Maund (Sec.), M. Badminton (Treas.), R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), G. Broadway, J. Turnbull, M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, Z. Thomas.

Subscriptions – Ordinary membership: Single \$22, Family \$30

Pensioner/student: Single \$18, Family \$24. Supporting : \$31

The Membership Subscription now covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450.

Incorporation N^o A3010

GDT PUBLIC WALKS – Sun 21/3/99, starting 9am. Creswick Land Care Walk. Starts and finishes at Slatey Creek Picnic Ground and will give walkers about 2 hours at the "Landfest". Finishes 3pm. Rated easy/medium. You must contact leader Barry Golding, Ph 5348 3059, or Ed Butler, ph 5348 3059, 4 days beforehand to book for the walk. NO WALKS ON DAYS OF TOTAL FIRE BAN.