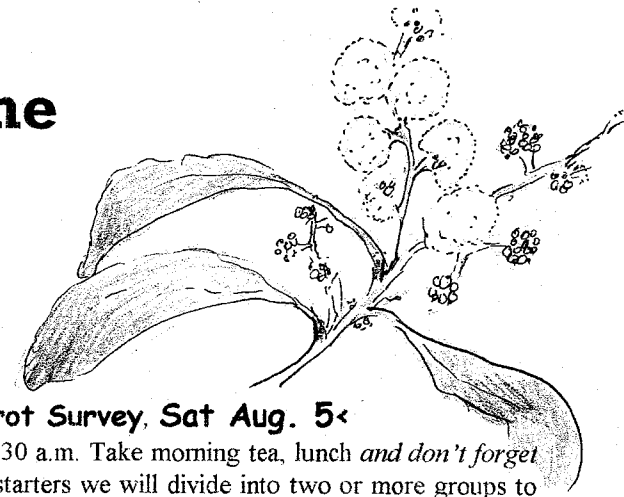


Castlemaine Naturalist

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>Swift Parrot Survey, Sat Aug. 5<

**** Leave 27 Doveton St at 8.30 a.m. Take morning tea, lunch *and don't forget the binocs!* If there are enough starters we will divide into two or more groups to cover a larger area. If you are not able to come in the morning meet at the Red White and Blue at lunchtime.

**** Margaret Badminton would like reports (date, time) of all Crescent Honeyeaters sightings, please.

Fossilizing in Riversleigh

At the end of June John and I spent ten days north of Mt. Isa having a wonderful time participating in a fossil dig.

Research into the Australian Fossil Record at the Riversleigh World Heritage Site has been conducted for approximately 25 years. The principal investigators are from the Australian National Museum in conjunction with the University of New South Wales.

We were accepted as Earthwatch program volunteers to participate in the 2000 Collection Dig based at a camp on the Gregory River.

The Miocene/Pleistocene (approx. 20 - 2 million years old) limestone deposits have trapped many, many different species of animals inhabiting the tropical rain forests of Gondwana, ranging from miniature bats to the very gigantic Diprotodons - AND WE FOUND FOSSILS OF THESE DIVERSE SIZES!

The fossil sites are identified by surface inspection of the area. A site is further investigated by breaking the rocks using sledge hammers, and if need be, blasting the rock! Needless to say, many fossils are broken by these methods, so matching the fragments of jaws, teeth and skulls is a constant task on the dig.

The "promising" rocks are bagged and helicoptered to a base camp sea-container, and then trucked back to the Sydney laboratory. There the fossils are extracted from the limestone rock by dissolving in vats of acetic acid.

The highlights of the 2000 dig "new finds" were the articulated spine of an ancient snake and the brain cast of a tree kangaroo.

In conjunction with the fossil record, a zoologist is surveying the current animal record of the area. This year records included Water File-snakes, Lavarak Turtles, Rock Python, Curly-tailed Lizard and several bat species.

We had a very physically demanding and mentally stimulating 10 days meeting University staff and other volunteers. Watch out for the Museum's Travelling Fossil Exhibition in the next year or so!

Nina Cole

p.s. En route to Brisbane we spent 3 days at the Warrumbungles and on the return trip we had 3 days in the Gibraltar Range/Washpool National Parks. (Another article coming up?! Ed.)

Another Trip to the Green Centre

In the June edition Natalie de Maccus gave a descriptive account of the flora currently abundant in the centre of Australia after the unseasonable heavy rains earlier in the year. Anne and I recently visited the centre to experience the effect on the landscape and to see the birds. Natalie's account described the flora very well, the greenness was evident everywhere and the wildflowers were prolific. It could become more spectacular as the season progresses, and the normal spring flowering activity begins with substantial moisture remaining.

The effect on the birdlife was twofold. There has been substantial breeding activity and the number of birds present was overwhelming, juveniles easily outnumbering adult birds of most species. I have never seen so many Crimson Chats - they almost became boring! Zebra Finches were knee deep in places. However, the second effect was not so positive for a birdo intent on adding the rarer species to his life list! There is still so much surface water that the birds such as the Painted Finch and Bourke's Parrot, which can often be tracked down at the few remaining water holes, had an almost infinite choice as to their drinking places. There is always next time.

Three highlights might be worth recording for other potential visitors.

We stayed for three days in Alice Springs at a bed and breakfast establishment on the western edge of town, called Hilltop, run by Robin and Roesanne Bullock, who are the most hospitable people imaginable. Their verandah has stunning views over the Alice Springs Desert Park to the Heavitree Range. They have two mountain bikes for hire and the cycle path to Simpson's Gap runs past the property. We decided to go for a few hours one day, leaving around 9 am and intending to be back by lunchtime to visit the Desert Park. The birding and scenery was so good that we didn't get back until 6pm! We listed 50 species for the trip including Western Bowerbird, Pied Honeyeater, Splendid Fairy Wren and Grey-headed

Honeyeater. Cycling is a great way to birdwatch; you can stop quickly whenever you need to and can move through the quieter country at a good pace. This track is fully sealed and well designed in that there are no steep sections. We had been told that Cassia Hill, near to Simpson's Gap, is a good spot for Redthroat, but we failed to find one. The Dusky Grasswren at Simpson's Gap itself also proved elusive but the other birds we found more than made up for those disappointments. Perhaps the visual highlight was on the return trip with the sun low in the sky. We were on a ridge and a flock of perhaps 1000 Budgerigars swept past us in perfect unison, the yellow and green picked out by the setting sun and silhouetted against the bright red escarpment of the Heavitree Range. All in all this was as good a day's birdwatching as I can remember.

During our stay with the Bullocks, we took our hire car to the Alice Springs sewerage farm. It was a Sunday and we drove to the main gate, having been oblivious to the earlier signpost which said "Birdwatchers turn left here". The gate was open, so we drove in and became absorbed by the birds on the various settling ponds. Nothing of great interest, but a good variety all the same. An hour or so later we returned to the gate to find it had been locked! No-one in sight anywhere and no obvious alternative exit. We did what most normal people would do under the circumstances - panicked! Having realised that this was not helping, we remembered that we had fortunately left our mobile phone in the car, and we had the Bullocks' phone number. When they stopped laughing they drove to where we were but there was still a cyclone fence between us. They phoned the local water authority and spent some time talking to someone before they realised he was in Darwin - such is the way with call centres these days! They eventually found someone in Alice Springs who promised to send a rescue party. We waited some time and no-one arrived, then Robin spotted another car in the reserve a long distance away. We quickly drove over and found another intrepid birdwatcher dressed in a bright yellow and blue soccer referee's costume. The situation was becoming quite "Pythonesque". He kindly explained that he had just come from refereeing a match and that there was a secret gate which was always open. We made our escape into the Alice Springs showgrounds and, after some time, found the exit and freedom! Who says birdwatching is boring?

After a touristy trip around the Western Ranges, King's Canyon and Ayers Rock, during which we found the Redthroat and Dusky Grasswren, we had a final two days at a cattle station called Bond Springs, north of Alice Springs. It is fairly expensive to stay there and the ambience was not enhanced by a generator going all day, but the birdlife was terrific. We listed 50 species in a day and a half, including Crimson Chats (hundreds), Spotted Harrier and Grey Honeyeater. I also suspect a Slaty-backed Thornbill, but the views were not quite good enough for positive identification. The sheer number of birds on the property was startling.

I imagine that the next year or two in the centre will be of great interest to birdwatchers. As the country dries up the birds will be attracted to the remaining

water. Raptors will, no doubt, be attracted by the increased number of birds concentrated into smaller and smaller areas. The rarities (which might also have bred up) will again have their choice of drinking spots reduced. It all adds up to another trip next year - unless it rains again!

Nigel Harland

Outing to Vaughan Springs

As most of you are aware, we had to cancel our trip to Bullarto reservoir on July 15th because we were just a wee bit late for the fungi as it was a very early year for them this year. It was decided at the meeting to go to Vaughan Springs and along the Porcupine Ridge Road instead.

The Vaughan destination was so we could have a look at the restoration work, being done out there, but this was also the weekend the long term caravan residents had been asked to leave. I must admit it all looks a bit bare, what with the tree clearing and an almost empty camping area, but it is to have long-term benefits (we hope!).

The bird life was as prolific as usual at the far end of the camping area, and we were delighted to find several Crescent Honeyeaters out there amid the many other honeyeaters, including White-naped, Yellow-tufted (in great numbers), New Holland and Fuscous. We also saw a Golden Whistler and a Crested Shrike-tit as well as many other birds. Rita kept a bird list which is at the end of this article.

We walked back along the ridge overlooking the park to the head of the slide, but ZOe was the only one to make her decent to the car park via the huge slide!

We decided to travel on to Porcupine Ridge Road for afternoon tea as it was very noisy in the park (a group of young ones were playing on ZOe's slide). At this stage George was joined as leader by Penny Garnett. We now know why Penny drives a four wheel drive. The road was very rough and the rest of us had to travel very slowly because of pot holes, but it was well worth the trip. The display of Common Heath was magnificent and there were quite a few other shrubs in flower; Spreading Wattle, *Correa reflexa*, Woolly Wattle, *Grevillea Alpina* (Cats Claws), the local *Hakea* and we found some plants of *Grevillea obtecta*, a rare plant which is indigenous to this area. Rita found one Tall Greenhood. Just to round the trip off beautifully quite a few fungi were found as well. Penny took those home to have them identified.

All round, it was a good day out, and the weather fined up nicely for us. Many thanks to George and Penny for leading us.

Maureen and Ken Dredge

Birds recorded - Blue Wren, Grey Shrike-thrush, Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, White-naped Honeyeater, Red-browed Finch, Long-billed Corella, Golden Whistler, Crescent Honeyeater, Mistletoebird, Red Wattlebird, Crimson Rosella, Little Eagle, Eastern Spinebill, Little Raven, Galah, Welcome Swallow, Grey Currawong, Brown Thornbill, White-browed Scrub-wren, Silvereyes, Blackbird, Kookaburra, Yellow Robin, and, added on the Porcupine Ridge Road - Buff-rumped Thornbill, White-throated Treecreeper, Lapwing and White-naped Honeyeater.

PLANTS OF THE MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE:-

Honey Pots (*Acrotriche serrulata*)



In this district I have found Honey Pots flowering in winter and early spring.

The flowers are tubular, with the 5 mm long swollen tube filled with nectar, but closed at the top. The five 1-2 mm green petals have a sharp recurve near the end and tiny white hairs sprout from this spot.

The five anthers appear between the petals, against the outside of the tube. They seem to have no stalk. The flower I had under the microscope so I could draw it was oozing nectar from a tiny pore at the top of the tube where the petals join.

This small groundcover is a matted semi-prostrate shrub, growing to about 10-15 cm high in this area. The leaves are small (to 5 mm) narrow, rather stiff, pointed and have very few hairs. The plant is apparently quite variable. The ball of flowers is found under the mat of leaves on the old woody stems. Rita Mills

Some Local Flax-lilies

The surveys for the Calder Freeway listed several new taxa of flax-lily. This follows the recent revision of the flax lilies. Plants that were formerly classified as Pale Flax-lily, *Dianella longifolia*, have been split off.

The key in the Flora of Victoria gives the major differences for the local species

1 Anthers brown to almost black; leaf margins revolute (rolled backwards) above basal sheath; midrib almost or quite smooth **D. revoluta**

I. Anthers pale yellow or yellowish brown; leaf margins flat or slightly recurved (curved backwards); midrib usually scabrous (rough) or toothed 2

2 Leaves usually more than 2 cm wide. Cooler forests **D. tasmanica**

2. Leaves mostly less than 2 mm wide. Anther longer than the swollen part of the filament 3

Plant extensively rhizomatous (forming large loose mats to 5 m wide); leaves to 40 cm long; margins of midribs with closely spaced or distant prominent finger-like projections to 5 mm long **D. amoema**

II. Plant usually tufted; leaves often more than 40 cm long 4

Flowers opening early mid-afternoon, collapsing mid-evening; leaves 35-160 cm long **D. tarda**

4. Flowers opening in the morning, collapsing mid-late afternoon. Leaves 20-80 cm long 5

5. Plants forming tufts usually less than 5 mm wide at base; leaves 4-12 mm wide **D. longifolia** var.

longifolia

Plants forming tufts usually more than 4 mm across basally; leaves 8-25mm wide **D. longifolia** var **grandis**.

The common names are Matted Flax-lily (for *D. amoema*, because of its growth habit), Late-flowering Flax-lily (for *D. tarda*, because it flowers late in the day) and Pale Flax-lily (for *D. longifolia* var *longifolia*, because of the pale flowers). All three are on the Victorian rare and threatened species list.

The Late Flowering Flax-lily and Pale Flax-lily are distinctive plants, and are much taller than the common Black-anther Flax-lily that is abundant in the local forests. They are fairly common in granite areas, but were found last summer in both basalt and alluvial areas.

Flowering time is another matter. Last summer visits to some of the local populations, at various times of the morning and afternoon, showed that sometimes they were in flower early in the day, and sometimes not. Others have reported similar problems in distinguishing between the Pale Flax-lily and Late-flowering Flax-lily. However, Pale Flax-lily appears to be the more common locally.

E Perkins

Observations

- From Margaret Badminton - "3/7/00 While at the kitchen sink, to my surprise, two crescent Honeyeaters landed in the bare branches of the

Wisteria, but flew off immediately, joining the Yellow-faced Honeyeaters feeding in the flowering Yellow Gum."

- Robin Holden also has seen Crescent Honeyeaters, this time near Kalimna Park.
- Tom Garnett sighted 3 Yellow-billed Spoonbills north of Maldon.
- On a cold moonlight night after heavy rain Rita Mills spotted a glowing light in the shade of the shed as she was feeding the dog. Closer inspection, and putting the rather squashed creature under the microscope showed it to be a translucent white annelid worm. Does anyone else have any experience of glow worms in this area?
- Ken Dredge thought he heard a large swarm of bees and was ready to take cover when he saw a large flock of some 400 birds on a north - south course. A little while later another 200 passed over, going the same direction. They appeared to be raven sized and dark grey, but he was unable to identify them.

Ken also saw two flocks of Swift Parrots flying north - south, heading for the Otway ranges, at Colac. The first flock consisted of 20 birds and the second of 8 birds.

- Maggie Oliver has had Wood Ducks inspecting her chimney and the chimneys next door, and Barbara Maund heard a loud rapping noise and found that she had Wood ducks on her roof. Rita Mills spotted a pair carefully inspecting the parapet on McDonald, Scott and Waters' building.
- Magpies have been spotted collecting nesting material - dried grass from where some had been left when hay-making in Blakeley Rd. (Rita Mills), and Maureen Dredge finally found that the reason for a local Magpie visiting her verandah was that it was pinching the coconut fibre out of her hanging baskets.
- Nodding Greenhoods *Pterostylus nutans* were found in the Wattle Flat bush 17/7 by George Broadway. Golden Wattle and *Grevillea alpina* also coming in to bloom.
- There was a single plant of Fairy Wax and one of Ploughshare Wattle found in flower on 12/7 during the U3A walk out at Chewton on O'Hallorans road between Expedition Pass Road and the road past the cemetery.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING

Magazines and Newsletters available :-

- ✓ The Great dividing Trail Newsletter
- ✓ Wirrakee
- ✓ etc. Check the back table at the meeting.

Unfortunately the follow-up information re the VENCA spring Campout went missing at the last meeting. However we have asked for more copies, and hope they will be here for the August meeting. The Campout is to be based at Kismet Riverside Retreat in Howlong on the north bank of the Murray., 35 km west of Albury. A blanket booking has been made for accommodation and it is hoped most members will be accommodated here where the activities and evening functions will be based. Enquiries re facilities and bookings should be directed to Kismet. Ph 01 6026 5748.

There is a sheet with fuller details available at the meeting.

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST, AUGUST 2000

PROGRAMME

EXCURSIONS General Meetings Are held in the Uniting church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm 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 ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. Aug. 11. **Gluepot, its History and Natural History.** Speaker is Dr David Baker-Gabb, long-time member of RAOU, now Birds Australia. UCA hall. 8pm.

Sat. Aug. 12 **Huntly - Wirrakee Wattle and Woodlot.** Leader is E. Perkins. Leave 13 Mostyn Street at 1.30 sharp.

Thurs. Aug. 17. **Broom Pull.** Meet at the cr. of Froomes Rd. and Mary St. at 9.30am., bring a drink and snack, suitable gloves, footwear etc. Barbecue lunch after.

Wed. Sept. 6. First of the **Spring Wildflower Walks.** Leave 27 Doveton St. at 4 pm, back around 5.30pm.

Fri. Sept. 8. **Eucalypts of the Mount Alexander region.** Speaker is Ern Perkins. UCA hall. 8pm.

Sat Sept. 9. **The Real Thing** A tour of some of the most diverse Eucalypt areas of the district. Leader is E. Perkins.

Wed. Sept. 13. **Spring Walk.** Leave 27 Doveton St at 4 pm. Leader, Frances Cincotta.

Sat 9 - Wed 13 Sept. -**Campout at Gluepot.** If you are going to Gluepot please let Maureen Dredge know.

Sun. Oct. 8. **Castlemaine Box/Ironbark Forest in Spring.** An Excursion with Ballarat F.N.C. Leader is E. Perkins.

Thurs. Oct. 12 - Sun Oct. 15 **VFNCA Campout at Howlong.** It will be based at the Riverside Lodge. Host Club is Albury Wodonga. **Accommodation details available at the meeting.**

Fri. Dec. 8. **Members and Visitors Night** - including Gluepot Reminiscences.

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

2000 Committee M. Dredge (President) ph 5470 6474E. Perkins (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, J. Turnbull (treas.) ph. 5474 3005, R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, Z. Thomas, B. Maund.

Subscriptions for 2000 -

Ordinary Membership: Single, \$22 Family, \$30

Pensioner or student: Single \$19 Family \$24

Supporting: \$31

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