

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

NOVEMBER 1986 #118

VOL. 11 - 6

CASTLEMAINE FIELD NATURALISTS
CLUB INC. P.O Box 324.



A TALE OF A TANGO

(Or a Tangle of Two Tails?)

From Polly Woods

Oct 13 '86



On Sunday, it being exceptionally warm and sunny, Barrie and I were taking the opportunity to wire up the last lap of a rabbit-proof fence which had been occupying us for several weekends. I heard a thumping and rustling in the grass behind us, and turned, expecting to see the cat. Instead I saw two small snake heads heading our way in tandem.

I alerted Barrie, and we both crept forward cautiously to get a better look. The

fawn heads were so small, and the six inches or so of upright snake showing through the tussocks of grass were so fine, we thought perhaps we were witnessing two young snakes hatching. This might have explained the curious way they moved in perfect unison, standing upright from the grass like identical question marks, gliding in the same direction, perfectly and evenly spaced, like swans, heads and necks gracefully arched.

Suddenly, as one, they stopped and changed direction, and tacked back again across the grass, still keeping their perfect spacing, like well drilled dancers. Then, just as suddenly they stopped again, and bowed and curtsied to one another, and then coiled necks, and drew back, and coiled necks again the other way. Then they entangled themselves in an ecstasy of writhing and inter-twining, and so vigorous was the knotting and coiling that they leapt into the air, and left the ground completely, with a smack of shining scales, and fell in a tangle to the ground. But instantly they were uncoiled, and heading back again in perfect coordination, repeating the first step of the dance.

It was when they leapt that we realized that we had been quite mistaken about their being baby snakes. They were large mature brown snakes, each about four feet long, as thick as my wrist in the middle, but tapering very finely to the tail and head. Their length was perfectly hidden by the tussocky grasses. All that was visible were the dancing necks and heads moving in perfect accord.

We stepped back hastily to a more respectful distance when we realized how large they were, and watched for some minutes this perfectly executed tango. First the glide to the right for three yards. Then the sudden stop and turn to glide back, eyes straight ahead, heads pointing in the same direction. Then another abrupt halt, and the slow bowing and sensuous embrace of the neck. Then off again at right angles for another three yards... stop and turn, glide back, heads proudly averted... stop... and another sensual embrace, which once again was continued into a frenzy of coiling and another leap into the air.

We watched in frozen fascination, only backing off when the dancers came too close for comfort. They seemed quite oblivious of our presence, even when we made some considerable noise gathering up our shovels and wheelbarrow out of the path of the dance.

And so they crossed and recrossed the grass, and coiled and leapt and uncoiled several times. And who knows how long this dance would have gone on, or how it might have developed, or what new steps they might have invented, if one of the dancers had not suddenly caught sight of us, and in one terrified turn, set off across the grass away from us, its head still above the ground for a better get away, closely followed by its partner, who chose to go head down instead.

And so the two of them disappeared unanimously from sight, and we turned once again to our fencing.

Wednesday Evening Outings

Those who have been meeting at 4.15pm on Wednesday afternoons at various locations during September and October have had some very enjoyable outings, lasting for just an hour or so, to some very pretty patches of bush nearby.

The outing to the bridge on the Maldon railway line at Walmer was to be a bird outing, but there were few birds there at the time, but the flowers were in profusion, including some magnificent patches of Wax-lips, and Pink Bells. Another outing to North Castlemaine yielded a "plants in flower" list of 26 different species, including some quite tiny ones as the tiny Slender Stylewort (*Levenhookia sonderi*) which belongs to the Trigger-plant family.

The walk through the Botanic Gardens proved to be very popular, while the highlight of the outing to Kalimna was the number and variety of orchids seen.

Two of the outings had to be abandoned due to heavy rain, but it's been suggested that the leader restrict her outings to drought years in future!

Friday 21 Nov - Mon 24 Nov. B.O.C. Spring Camp at Costerfield.
If you are interested in a day excursion to join the group contact
K. Turner, 72 3548

A SAD LITTLE TALE

from Maggie Oliver

One crisp, clear dawn in September, two fishermen were about to cast their lines into the waters of Cairn Curran, when they noticed a family of Mountain Ducks, (Chestnut-breasted Shelduck, *Todarna todarnoides*) not far off shore.

Mother and Father duck were coaching their little brood of at least six ducklings, when, from out of nowhere, silently, gracefully, gliding into the water were three pelicans - in a flash the ducklings were gone, and the pelicans calmly swimming away. The parents became frantic, calling and swimming around in circles - but not one duckling was left. I didn't think pelicans could be so rotten.

A Little More Local History from Major Mitchell's Journal, vol 2 (of his 1836 Expedition, pub. 1839)

.....we descended along the hollow of a ravine, after making it passable by throwing some rocks into the narrow part near its head. The ravine at length opened, as I had expected, into a grassy valley, with a fine rivulet flowing through it, and from this valley we debouched into the still more open granitic country at the foot of Mount Byng. The pass, thus auspiciously discovered and opened, over a neck apparently the very lowest of the whole range, I named Expedition-pass, confident that such a line of communication between the southern coast and Sydney, must, in the course of time, become a very considerable thoroughfare. The change of soil, however, introduced us to the old difficulty from which we had been happily relieved for some time, for we came once more upon rotten and boggy ground. We met with this unexpected impediment in an open-looking flat, near a rivulet I was about to cross, when I found the surface so extremely soft and yielding, that from the extreme resistance, a bolt of the boat-carriage gave way, a circumstance which obliged us immediately to encamp, although we had travelled only four miles.

Because of the accident to the boat carriage Mitchell decided to make an excursion towards the mountains to the south, one of which he subsequently called Mount Macedon, while the carriage was repaired.

OCTOBER OUTING

After checking out the spot at Taradale that we were to visit for the October outing, and finding no trace of the Bird Orchids, very few violets (result of the 1982 drought?), and only one of the red Spider Orchids, I decided to take the excursion to the Elphinstone Ridge road, turning in at the tunnel, as it had been recommended at the meeting. The old road proved to be very rough in spots, and one little car even needed a push to get it up one steep pinch just below the fire tower. We saw a lot of Common Beard-heath up to this spot, but here we also found another two species, one probably Twin-flower Beard-heath which is known in the area, and another which had us baffled at the time. There was a very nice patch of Fairy Wax (*Eriostemon verrucosus*) inside the fence around the tower, and all along the road the Pink bells (*Tetratheca cilliata*) were in profusion.

We finally joined the new road, much to the relief of a couple of anxious drivers, and took that back to Tunnel Hill, passing, just after we joined the new road, a superb patch of *Hardenbergia violacea* (False Sarsparilla), spilling over the cuttings and banks in several places. We found another place to explore on this road and found, among other things, some really beautiful Guinea Flowers. The Love Creeper was at this spot.

Thrill of the day was had just before we joined the highway again when an F111 roared over us, nearly scaring us all into the bush!

Frank Duffin suggested we ought to have afternoon tea at the "chimney" spot near the Monk. They had detoured that way when they came in to Castlemaine, and, he said, it was a real picture. It certainly was! On the sides of the Monk were thousands of Billy Buttons, Yam Daisies, and Wax-lips as well as Pink Bells and Rice flower. There was much more, but these were the ones to catch my eye as I drove along.

We stopped for a cuppa, and found the large flowered Pink Fingers (*Caledonia carnia*, var. *gigantea*) as well as some Beard Orchids (*Calochilus robertsonii*) and a Spider Orchid (*Caledonia dilitata*). On our walk afterwards down the otherside into a gully and around into the "chimney" gully we got thoroughly sidetracked because of all the orchids in a small reef alongside the track. Frank came back to see where we'd got to, and no wonder. He'd found hundreds of Pink Fingers and Wax-lips (*Glossodia major*), as well as Yam Daisies (*Microseris scapigera*) and Billy Buttons (*Craspedia glauca*), but, best of all, a lovely patch of about 30 quite large Greencomb Spider Orchids, just near the chimney itself, where it becomes upright in the uphill side of the race.

We drove out to the Fryerstown/Campbells Creek road, oo-ing and ah-ing all the way as we drove through a veritable garden of wild-flowers - and there's still plenty to come - Onion Orchids, Leek Orchids, great golden Karalla (Wedge Pea) and more.



This is the list of plants that we saw in flower on the excursion to Elphinstone Ridge and the Monk, 11/10/86.-

Caledenia dilitata	Greencomb Spider-orchid
C. carnea	Pink Fingers
c. carnea var. gigantea	Large flowered Pink Fingers
C. cuculata	Hooded Caladenia
Glossodia major	Wax-lip Orchid
Pterostylus nutans	Nodding Greenhood
P. longifolia	Tall Greenhood
Diurus maculata	Leopard Orchid
Calochilus robertsonii	Common Beard Orchid
Acacia armata	Kangaroo thorn, or Hedge Wattle
A. acinacea	Gold-dust Wattle
A. aspera	Rough Wattle
A. lanigera	Woolly Wattle
Rutadosis multiflora	Small Wrinklewort
Stackhousia monogyna	Candles
Hibbertia fasciculata	Bundled Guinea-flower
H. exutiaces	Guinea-flower
Gahnia sieberiana	Red-fruited Saw Sedge
Comersperma volubile	Love Creeper
Davisia ulicifolia	Gorse Bitter-pea
Davisia genistifolia	Broom, or Long-leaf, Bitter-pea
Hardenbergia violacea	False Sarsparilla
Dillwynia sericea	Showy Parrot-pea
Platylobium formosum	Handsome Flat-pea
Kennedia prostrata	Running Postman
Millotia s.	
Helipterum demissum	Moss Sunray
Brachychome perpusilla	Rayless Daisy
Anguillaria dioica	Early Nancy
Drosera auriculata	Tall Sundew, or Errienellam
Correa reflexa	Common correa (yellow-green form)
Tetratheca ciliata	Pink Bells
Grevillia alpina	Grevillea, or Cats Claws
Pimilea linifolia	Slender Riceflower
Leucopogon virgatus	Common Beard-heath
L. Ericoides	Pink Beard-heath
L. biflorus	Twinflower Beard-heath
Goodenia sp. (un-named)	Native Pansy
Erriostemon verrucosus	Fairy Wax-flower

Wildflower Safari Aug/Sept 1987

Kingston Tours, operating from Stawell, offer tours specifically for Field Naturalist and Nature Photographers, and are highly commended by those who have been on them. Next year they are offering a 27 day Gunbarrel Highway - Western Wildflowers Safari. they are also exploring the possibility of 4-wheel drive safaris in a sixteen seater vehicle if enough interest is shown.

If you are interested the Club has brochures with application forms.

NOTES FOR OCTOBER

SPRING 1986 This is one of the wettest springs for many years, and noted for the magnificent display of wildflowers. Many of the plants are flowering much later than usual.

GRASS STALK was displayed at the meeting. It had gradually become shredded on the lines of a flax plant.

PHOTO DISPLAYS. Two sets of photographs were on display at the October meeting. One set, by G. Leidl, showed a beautiful selection of local wildflowers. The other, by M. Dunne, featured interesting trees from the Castlemaine Area. Included were large River Red Gums from the Loddon, a young Red Stringybark and White eucalyptus (Yellow Gum?) fused together, and a large Red Box with branches pointing downwards on all sides. Also shown was a window with white 'spittal' from a Blue Wren guarding his territory from the 'mirror' bird.

RED BROWED FINCH. A dead specimen was displayed; found in Castlemaine township.

DERWENT SPEEDWELL A sample was collected in the Upper Loddon State Forest. It is a plant of the sub-alpine areas - possibly seeds were washed off four-wheel drive vehicles.

CRESTED GREBE AT HARCOURT NORTH Club members returning from the excursion at Salomon Gully saw three Crested Grebe on the North Harcourt Reservoir. This is the first club record for the resevoir, and only the second record for the bird list.

FESTIVAL PUBLICATIONS Some of the publications of this club, or from kindred groups include

- Castlemaine Bird List (C.F.N.C. Edition 3 is in press. \$1)
- Castlemaine Plant List (E. Perkins. Edition 4 on sale at \$2, with 50% discount for Club members)
- A Tour of Castlemaine City (C.F.N.C. for festival. 50c.)
- Kalimna Point Walking Trail (Kalimna Committee, free)
- Kaweka Plant List (Plant list prepared by Kaweka Committee)
- Muckleford Wildflowers (C.F.N.C. Select plant list, free)
- Tree list for Botanic Gardens (prepared by City Council. Photocopies are available from the club at \$1)

ADDITIONS TO BIRD LIST #2 (All for area d)

Galah	Cockatoo	Grey Shrikethrush
Yellow Robin	Blue Wren	White-thr Treecreeper
Dusky Woodswallow		

BIRDS OF BELLARINE PENINSULA Two members have reported seeing, in September, a small flock of Glossy Ibis (at Leopold) and a large flock (about 80) of Cattle Egret in breeding plumage (at Drysedale)

PLANTS OF MURRAY VALLEY AREA is latest of the publications by Cliff Beauglehole, and shows the distribution and conservation status of plants in the Murray Valley area. Cost is \$8 posted, from 3 Beverley St, Portland. If you are interested in the plants of that area, the book is a bargain. A large coloured map is included; it alone is worth the \$8.

From "Ecos", Winter 1982.

On Matters Taxanomic

"Until recently, ornithologists called all ravens by the same name, *Corvus coronoides*.

"In 1965, when Mr Ian Rowley of the C.S.I.R.O. Division of Wildlife Research was studying ravens, he attracted them by playing a recording of one of their calls. On one occasion his curiosity was roused by a nearby bird that ignored the recording, while another raven flew in from the best part of a kilometre away. The 'obstinate' bird was collected, and on close examination, showed several small differences in plumage from *C. coronoides*. This discovery led in due course to the naming of the new species of raven *C. mellori*.

"The separation and naming of species is the traditional discipline of biology museum workers. Because they investigate the very processes by which species arise and maintain their individuality their findings may turn out to have economic importance. For example, *C. coronoides* does occasionally kill newborn lambs-although less often than farmers used to suppose - but *C. mellori* does no damage."

"Ecological studies by the C.S.I.R.O. Division of Wildlife Research scientists led to the setting up of a collection of bird specimens... A study of rosellas in South Australia lead to about 1000 of these taxonomically intriguing parrots making their way to Canberra. In these and other ways the Collection has grown to about 23,000 specimens, of which 15,000 come from Australia, and represent more than four-fifths of the species found here.

"Being so new the fird collections attract many taxonomists. The specimens are fresha nd equipped with all the information that a modern researcher needs and generally cannot obtain from older collections; not only traditional items such as place and date of collection, the sex of the bird and the colour of its soft parts (bill, eyes, feet), but also the habitat in which it was found, its weight, and a number of observations that give valuable insight into the species biology.

"From the condition of the specimens sex organs a zoologist can tell whether the bird was caught during or about its breeding season. It the roof of the skull is not completely ossified, the bird must be young and a researcher may be able to estemate its age, and hence deduce the time of year at which the species breeds. Likewise the amount of fat deposited under the skin and the stage of moult gives important clues.

"Concidered altogether, all this information, which is recorded on labels, may enable a biologist to deduce a great deal... even though the original observer may only have been able to spend one or two weeks collecting in an area."

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. AGENDA

Excursions leave promptly at the times shown. Date, time and locality of excursions may be changed at the monthly meetings, so if not at the meeting check with a committee member. Monthly meetings at High School, Lawson Pde. Room 309 at 8.00 p.m.

Fri 14 Nov. FLINDERS RANGES with G. Leibl. 8.00 p.m. at High School.

Sat 15 Nov. HARCOURT WILDFLOWERS Visit some of Harcourt's famous wildflower areas, with Rita Mills as guide. Meet at S.E.C., Mostyn Street at 1.30 sharp.

Thurs 27 Nov. BUSINESS MEETING at 7.30 p.m., 38 Campbell St.

Fri 12 Dec. MEMBERS AND VISITORS NIGHT. Bring a friend, and if possible, a short talk, or say half a dozen of your favorite slides, or tell us about something of interest to you. And bring a plate.

Sat 13 Dec. EXCURSION to be arranged.

Fri 13 Feb. ANNUAL MEETING. This is the first general meeting for the year.

CASTLEMAINE FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INC. BOX 324 CASTLEMAINE.

COMMITTEE Ern Perkins(Pres), Barabara Maund(Sec), Geoff Sitch(Treas), Maggie Oliver(Vice Pres), Kaye Turner(Exc. sec), George Broadway(Libr), Rita Mills(Newsletter), Gunter Liebl, Margaret Dunne, Elma Kelly, Jack Dare(I/P Pres), Berri Perry.

Articles for the magazine can be left at Tonks Hardware.

Subscriptions for 1986 are

Pensioner/student	\$3	Single	\$5
Family	\$8	Supporting	\$12

The Committee is planning for next years activities. Have you a suggestion for a program? What kinds of program? Have you suggestions for an excursion? Have you a favourite spot that you would be willing to show others?