

June 2009
ISSN: 1836-2761



FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC. GPO BOX 249
CANBERRA ACT 2601

FIELD NATURALIST

OBJECT: To foster an interest in nature

MEETING THURSDAY JUNE 4
7:30 pm Australian National University
Meeting details back page

WEST OF CENTRE

ALAN FORD

This evening FNAC will visit part of the western deserts, the area east of Kalgoorlie and south of Alice Springs. This journey was centred on the Great Victoria Desert, 420,000 square kms of sand dunes, with an amazing plant and animal life. We will explore a small window of our inland.



A happy group having lunch and talking trees Photo Phyl Goddard
March outing Tallaganda NP March 22 2009

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VIEWS OVER BELCONNEN OUTING JUNE 14

VIEWS OVER WEST BELCONNEN WITH NATURAL & CULTURAL HISTORY

The FNAC activity for July focuses on views of the Murrumbidgee and the Molonglo Rivers. We will stroll towards Shepherds Lookout which has views over the Murrumbidgee and possibly walk part of the way down the track to Uriarra Crossing. This area was severely burnt in the 2003 fires but shows interesting signs of recovery and regeneration. It is an area where unexpectedly good birding can happen! I'd anticipate there will be time to also try the first part of a track down to the Molonglo river near the last cliffs before its confluence with the 'Bidgee. There were many Superb Blue Wrens there in mid May and two Wedge tailed eagles soared overhead mid-morning. We will then backtrack to the Strathnairn Gallery for 'Devonshire teas' and, hopefully, a glimpse at some of the artists' studios there.

The paths down from Shepherds Lookout and towards the Molonglo are steep, rocky and narrow. The compensation is that there are many viewpoints for artists & photographers. And Strathnairn has wonderful a wood-fire and homestead warmth in winter.

Meet: at the corner of Kingsford Smith and Drake Brockman Drives, Higgins off the turn-in for the Fire Station.

When: 10.00am June 14 We'll then move off for another 3-4kms' drive.

Bring/wear: sturdy footwear, clothing for changeable or colder weather, hats, sunscreen, drink bottle, snacks

Plus optional: Money for Devonshire teas usually about \$6.

Plus optional: Money for possible purchases if you have birthday gifts looming!! www.strathnairn.com.au

BOOK REVIEW IAN FRASER

Boom and Bust; bird stories for a dry country

Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn and Leo Joseph (eds). CSIRO Publishing. 299 pages. RRP \$40

This book is an excellent complement to the previous title in being entirely about Australia (in fact the three editors, who also contribute chapters to the book, are also Canberra-based researchers). It comprises a series of essays on how different bird groups and species have adapted to life in an El Niño-driven climate, but in the process we also learn how our understandings have changed. I read much of it sitting by waterholes in south-west Queensland, which made it feel even more immediate and significant. This is writing by biologists for laypeople at its very best. An excellent example is the lovely chapter *Rain and Grass; lessons in how to be a Zebra Finch* by Steve Morton, who has studied them profoundly. He outlines the history of our understanding of Zebbies, a story which features such giants of Australian ornithology as Dom Serventy, Jock Marshall and Harry Frith, and challenges the assumption that Zebra Finches' breeding is a classic direct 'boom and bust' response to rain in the deserts, while offering a more subtle interpretation of it. And perhaps best of all he brings these hyperactive, hypercharismatic dryland delights to life in the vast spaces they inhabit. I was delighted that they are Nyii Nyii to the western desert people, which is exactly how Zebbies introduce themselves. In another chapter Julian Reid tackles the eternal problem of how pelicans (and others) know when to head inland to breed; his discussions are thoughtful and thought-provoking, but I don't think we're there yet. Another pervading theme throughout concerns the implications of human-wrought climate change for these and other desert species, as well as what we can learn from them. Anyone who seeks better to understand life in inland Australia needs to read this book – and it's no hardship!

This review is provided by Ian Fraser as part of his regular book reviews. To subscribe (for free) get in touch with Ian ianf@pcug.org.au

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The dearth of Death Adders

One of Australia's most famous (and unpopular) native predators, the death adder, is actually playing a role in its own downfall.

Unlike most Australian snakes, death adders don't wander around searching for their prey - instead, they lie in ambush and wriggle their tail-tip in the air so that the tip looks like a small grub or worm. A frog or lizard that sees the wriggling tail will rush across to grab a tasty meal - and find a hungry snake instead, so likely will end up as the snake's dinner.

Professor Rick Shine and his colleagues Dr Mattias Hagman and Dr Ben Phillips noticed that death adder numbers plummeted after cane toads invaded their study site near Darwin. The scientists wondered why so they set up trials with captive snakes, and found that the death adders had fallen into an "evolutionary trap".

Unfortunately for the snakes, the way that toads move provides exactly the right stimulus to cause death adders to wave their tails - and a wriggling tail-tip is irresistible for a hungry cane toad.

The highly poisonous cane toads have the capacity to kill native predators when the predators eat them. Professor Shine and Dr Hagman found that the snakes' unique tail-luring behaviour works too well with this poisonous invader - and so, toad approaches snake, snake bites toad, and both snake and toad end up dead. So, death adders are virtually committing suicide.

The same evolutionary trick that has enabled death adders to thrive for millions of years - the ability to lure small animals close enough to catch them - has suddenly become a fatal disadvantage.

Professor Rick Shine said, "It's a Shakespearean tragedy out there. All over tropical Australia, death adders are lying patiently in wait, wriggling their tails and bringing about their own doom."

This study was published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*.
<http://www.sciencealert.com.au/news/20092005-19168.html>

Mt Tennant Field trip report

It was a cold and windy Sunday morning at the Namadgi visitors centre. Almost everybody was there early (7 people) because it only took 35 minutes to get there when I was assuming ~1 hour. So we sat, sunning ourselves. I checked out the shop and there is a good selection of books including many hard to get ones, particularly on local aboriginal and settler history. Plus maps and some nice photos. The visitors centre area was surprisingly empty of birds with only a raven hanging around and the dam was empty. We bumped into a friend of Deidre's, who was training for the Himalayas and had already walked to the top and back in only 2 ½ hours. So that was our target. While talking, Rosemary vB noticed dozens of insect cases on the ground, which were quite large ~ 5-7 cm and the species had come out of burrows 20cm deep. Later we found a bright red bracket fungus.

Walking up the hill there was a lot of puffing and panting because it is steep, but we still managed to stop and look at plants. Initially it is kangaroo grassland but changes to shrubs quite suddenly. Jean discussed previous walks over the past few years, the fire and subsequent erosion (as there has been a lot of sheet and gully erosion). One benefit of the fire was that there are now huge swathes of *Micromyrtus ciliata* that would look fantastic when flowering white and pink in spring. The first flowers we came across was a small patch of *Correa reflexa* which had green tubular flowers with varying amounts of red/pink on the base, depending on the plant. After that we were lucky to find *Astroloma humi-*

fusum, a small cushion plant with bright red flowers. I also noticed a patch of small white puffball fungus.

Once again Jean had located a patch of one of her favourite plants *Pomaderris betulina*. Later Dierk and I argued over whether a plant was a *Cassinia* until we finally found one in flower and it was *Olearia tenuifolia* (at least I got the right family). I don't think any of us know how to say that name. While Rosemary and Deidre marvelled at the burnt Black cypress pine (*Callitris endlicheri*), I marvelled at their height. Almost all were dead. Unfortunately Judy had to turn back due to Mothers' day but we pushed on, reaching the Cypress pine lookout at 12:30. A fantastic view, even though it is only about ½ way up, if that. Finally we found some young living *Callitris*. I chatted with Warwick about his plans to travel to the outback again, including Lake Eyre. Meanwhile a pair of wedgies got into a fight with another wedgie, probably over territory.

We were a bit quicker going down, even though it was tough on the knees. We did find an extra, tiny patch of *Callitris*. Dierk decided to key-out a rough-barked gum tree: it was *E. nortonii*. Towards the bottom we found our 6th flowering species, blue bells, and Warwick and Rosemary identified a flock of birds as mainly yellow-rumped thornbills and scarlet robins. It was interesting to see so many different species compared to my, mainly, northern travels. [I have probably stuffed-up the order of species.]

Benj

A PEEK AT PATAGONIA, NOVEMBER 2008

-by Kay Hahne (Part 1)

Flights, Ferries and Footsteps

Our 17 day trip to southern Chile with local Tour Leader Ian Fraser, was a delightful potpourri of places, scenery, adventures, walks, wildflowers, wild animals, birds, guest houses, hotels, markets, shopping, museums, churches, volcanoes, mountains, waterfalls, glaciers, lakes and even a cave. We travelled by plane, by bus, by ferry (some small, one large for an overnight journey) and by foot along the roadsides, or hiking across the Steppes, in the lower mountains or through deciduous beech rainforest so reminiscent of Tasmania. Brand new experiences each day – one better than the next, with blue skies and puffy white clouds almost every day and not too cold. We expected high wind and rain, as Patagonia averages over 3,000 mm per year with an average temperature of 10°C". Robert A. Heinlein, a science fiction writer, puts it this way: "Climate is what we expect. Weather is what we get." We were lucky, and eternally grateful.

In View of Volcano Osorno

Upon landing in Puerto Montt, we were picked up by our first bus driver, José, who took us to Puerto Varas for three night's stay. A walk around town got our bird list under way. We can now look back and laugh at our excitement in seeing our first Black-faced Ibises and Southern Lapwings on nearby house roofs, an Austral Thrush in a garden – looking and sounding so like the American Robin – and a Chimango Caracara on an electricity pole (along with millions of wires criss-crossing like spaghetti). Those four species we must have seen every day thereafter! A few steps further, and we had our first glimpse of the perfect snow-topped cone of Volcano Osorno (2652 m) behind the large Lake Llanquihue (300 m). This lake was so deep and cold it did not support much flora or fauna.



Gunnera tinctoria

Gardens were full of blooming rhododendrons; street trees were ablaze with the native 'Notro' or Red Firebush *Embothrium coccineum*, a Proteaceae with loose clusters of red Waratah-like blossoms. The red of 'Notro' we saw everywhere, from the coast to stunted shrubs in the mountains. Roadsides were yellow with introduced Broom and dotted with the native Fuchsia *F. magellanica* with pendulous, narrow, fuchsia-pink and purple blossoms. But most fascinating to us were the large clumps of 'Nalea' *Gunnera tinctoria*. This plant had huge palmate leaves similar to rhubarb, with a large flowering stalk. Unlike rhubarb, it is the flowering stalk, cleared of blossoms, which is edible. We had a chew on some raw stalk at the markets. It was very tart, needing a lot of sugar in cooking. And what does the Guest House serve for dessert one evening? Apple and Gunnera cobbler! However, what Chileans are very proud of is their long-living Patagonian Cypress trees *Fitzroya cupressoides*, or 'Alerce' in Spanish. We saw a 400 year old specimen, but the oldest living one in Chile is estimated to be 3600 years. The only other longer-living tree is the Bristlecone Pine *Pinus longaeva* of western USA.

Chiloé Capers

No, it is not something you eat. Isla Grande de Chiloé is the second largest island in Chile – the largest being Tierra del Fuego. To get to Chiloé one must catch a small ferry. Amongst other seabirds, we got our first good looks at Peruvian Pelicans. Once landed we headed off to a little sheltered cove with a fresh water stream. Here we spotted the Black-necked Swans, one pair with fluffy white cygnets, either swimming behind or catching rides on Dad and Mum's back. Also Specked Teal, Chiloe Widgeons, Franklin's Gulls and our first of many looks at the ever-present, bouncy little black and rust Negritos (meaning 'little black one') – both male and the duller coloured female. On the western seaward side were Flightless Steamer Ducks (they really can't fly!), Sanderlings, Baird's Sandpipers and a sand bar full of Black Skimmers, with their lower red and black mandible longer than the upper.

Next it was off with the shoes and on with full-length hip boot waders, Gortex jackets, beanies and bright orange life jackets before we waddled down to the waiting open motor boat for a short poke around some nearby offshore islands. As promised, we saw a few Humboldt Penguins along with many more Magellanic; four species of Cormorants – all black Neotropical, handsome black and white Imperial, Rock with red faces and Red-legged with both red legs and faces. Plus we got a fantastic view of a sleek Marine Otter *Lutra felina* that swam to a rock, clambered on top and proceeded to guzzle down the crab it caught.

Next day included an easy, calm cruise down the Chepu River to see hundreds of nesting Brown-hooded Gulls in the reed beds. Also we managed a good view of a Coypu *Myocastor coypus*. This creature looked like the proverbial 'drowned rat' when it climbed out of the water and dragged its round hairless tail behind. They are Chile's largest rodent, 4-5 kg, and look

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

more like a beaver – except beavers have a flat tail and are generally 18 kg or more. Coypus feed on aquatic vegetation, small crustaceans and garden crops. Their dense, soft pelt is highly valued in the fur trade, but they are protected in the National Parks of Chile. We were fortunate to see this nocturnal animal in the daytime.

Patagonia takes Shape (from about 36° or 40° to 55° latitude South)

An overnight ferry from Puerto Montt south to Puerto Chacabuco took us between some of the northernmost of the 3000+ islands of the archipelago and the Mainland. It gave us the opportunity to see some open ocean birds such as Sooty Shearwaters, Black-browed Albatross, non-breeding Arctic Terns with white foreheads, breeding South American Terns with all black heads, Southern Giant-Petrel and White-chinned Petrel.

Upon docking we were met by our second bus driver, Eduardo from Coyhaique. Eduardo was very striking in his beret, neck scarf and pin and he showed us his true Patagonian spirit as he boldly drove along mountainous gravel roads with extremely low guardrails (one rail high) or more usually none at all. The occasional low rail wouldn't even keep a tricycle from careening over the edge! The initial drive to Coyhaique was awash with escaped garden lupins in tall drifts of blue and pink on both sides of the road. I haven't seen that many in the Rocky Mountains! But each day as we explored further NE or SE we emerged into the true Patagonian Steppes which occupy the eastern slopes of the Andes, stretching across Argentina to the Atlantic Ocean.

Some parts of s. Patagonia receive over 3000 mm rain per year with average temperatures of 10°. But in the Steppes there is less than 612 mm of annual rainfall due to the rainshadow effect of the mountains. The vegetation is very different: grasses, low tussock, some woody prostrate or creeping shrubs and spring wildflowers galore. Such as: Yellow Orchid *Gavilea lutea* (20-60 cm), Yellow Violet *Viola maculata* (4-11 cm) – all the violets we saw anywhere were yellow; yellow Buttercups *Ranunculus sp.* (10-60 cm); yellow Dandelion *Taraxacum gilliesii* is a native, but the exotic Common Dandelion *T. officinale* has spread everywhere after introduction from Europe; creamy Anemone *Anemone multifida* (20-60 cm); and very low growing pinkish-mauve 'Ojos de Agua' *Oxalis enneaphylla*. Luckily our bilingual guide Emma spotted the tall, dead stalks of the green, lined 'Pico de Loro' Orchid *Chloraea magellanica* from the moving bus. It didn't take long to stop, disperse and discover some small new flowering spikes along the roadside.

Do you not think of Flamingos in the same breath as palm trees or warm, shallow lakes or lagoons? Think again. We found pink Chilean Flamingos up in the high, cold lakes of the Andes – sporting red knees and feet with bright pink on their wings. And handsome Upland Geese, he with snow-white head and breast and she with a cinnamon head, both with striking barring below. Also on or near these montane lakes were: Red-gartered Coots (some on nest mounds), Black-necked Swans, Silvery Grebes, Red Shovelers, the inevitable Southern Lapwings (reminded me of the numerous, ever-present Masked Lapwings in Tasmania!), Ashy-headed Geese with ashy grey heads. We were rugged up with parkas and beanies to keep the wind out, but there was no rain to interfere with us seeing so much wildlife, including a Ratite - a Lesser or Darwin's Rhea strutting through the grass. One male had seven striped chicks in tow. Adults measure up to 100 cm in comparison with our Australian Emu at 150-200 cm. Like the Emu, the females lay the eggs, and leave Dad to brood and care for the young for several months. Emus, Cassowaries, Kiwis, Rheas and Ostriches are all large flightless birds of Gondwanian origins in the Order Struthioniformes. Go South, young man, and find out why?!



Marsh Lady Slipper - *Calceolaria biflora* - bright yellow Scrophulariaceae (not an orchid)

At a lower elevation we walked through a green, deciduous southern beech forest consisting of 'Lenga' *Nothofagus pumilio*. Here these beeches can reach up to 40 m. Big trees with little serrated leaves and wispy strands of lichen called Old Man's Beard *Usnea spp* growing on the trunk and branches. Underneath were more yellow violets and yellow orchids, taller anemones, probably *Anemone decapetala*, gorgeous bright yellow Marsh Lady Slipper *Calceolaria biflora* (10-35 cm); a different, slender white Dog Orchid *Codonorchis lessonii* (20-40 cm); and a tiny wild strawberry *Frutilla silvestre*.



Maiden's Slippers - *Calceolaria uniflora* - orange/white/bronze. Another Scrophulariaceae (not an orchid)

**ALL PHOTOS BY
HORST HAHN**

TO BE CONTINUED

Friends are welcome at our monthly meeting

Who are the Field Naturalists?

The Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra (FNAC) was formed in 1981. Our aim is to foster interest in natural history by means of meetings and regular field outings. Meetings are usually held on the first Thursday of each month. Outings range from weekend rambles to long weekends away. Activities are advertised in our monthly newsletter. We emphasise informality and the enjoyment of nature. New members are always welcome. If you wish to join FNAC, please fill in the member application below and send it in with your subscription to the FNAC Treasurer at the address below:

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Member contributions welcome.

Published and distributed by Bob Lehman



Monthly meeting venue: Division of Botany and Zoology, Building 116, Daley Rd, Australian National University. Park (occasionally the adjacent building 44). Meetings start at 7:30 pm and are followed by refreshments.

Next month “The microscopic Structure of Trees by Roger Heady

WEBSITE OF INTEREST

Travelling Birder

<http://www.travellingbirder.com>

The **Travellingbirder.com** birding trip report search engine guides you to 7,000+ birding trip reports on the Internet plus other sites such as magazines about birds.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

Family name: First name:

If a family membership, please include the first names of other members of the family:

.....

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Subscription enclosed: \$.....(Single/Family \$20) Donation: \$.....

How did you hear about FNAC? Please circle: FRIEND? OTHER? Please specify: