

July 2018

ISSN: 1836-2761



GPO BOX 249
CANBERRA ACT 2601

FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC.

FIELD NATURALIST

MEETING—Thursday 5 July 2018

7:30 pm Australian National University

Jan Anderson Seminar Room, R.N. Robertson Building, Biology Place, ANU, ACT
details back page

Tree decline in the ACT Speaker: Greg Baines

Greg Baines is an ACT Government Senior Ecologist with decades of experience in conservation research relating to vegetation, biodiversity's inter-relationships and wildlife management. Greg's information on tree decline was presented at the 2017 EcoFocus Seminar at Gold Creek Station. Tree decline, or dieback as it's often called in the ACT, is a worldwide phenomenon where stands of trees lose vigour and health without there being a clearly identifiable cause. Evidence of tree decline in Australia dates back over a century with ACT region studies over 50 years. Despite this the causes and solutions remain elusive. Greg will bring us his findings from decades of involvement with local vegetation, habitats and species. What are the possible or actual effects of fire, Phytophthora, insect infestations, climate and loss of storey structure on our oldest trees?



A beautiful, old twisted tree that was felled for the Gungahlin Drive duplication

Contents

Not a bad workplace	2
More on Lake Ginninderra	2
Proposed peacock cull cancelled after 'overwhelming' community outcry	3
Queen's birthday honours	3
Discovery of bizarre sex ritual marsupials in Canberra rewrites scientific textbooks	4
Activities	5
Field Naturalist August meeting: launch of the Rakali survey	5
Volunteers please	5

Not a bad workplace

On several occasions I have sat in the car and prepared the Field Natter for mailing here at Lake Ginninderra. It's a great place for water-bird watching and people-watching. With minimal effort 16 species can be observed with more being present in the treed areas behind the car. The newsletters are then mailed from Belconnen 'Parcel' post office. They seem to only take a day to reach you from there.

Rosemary Blemings

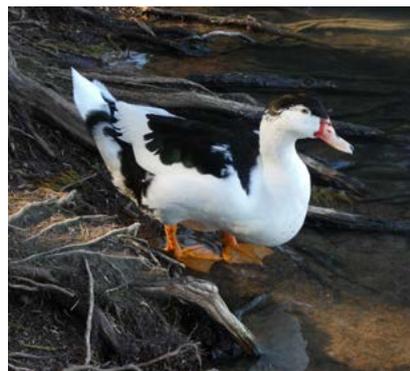


More on Lake Ginninderra

I have often walked to John Knight Park at Lake Ginninderra, and across the arched bridge to the small island. Picnickers often feed the bird so there is a large population of various waterbirds.

Over the last 10 years or so I have noted that apart from the native wood and pacific black ducks, there has been an increasing population of domestic mallards and various hybrids. Going back through my photos, around 2008 there were only about four mallards/mallard hybrids. By 2016 this had increased to around eight. Just two years later, there are

now 14 but more interesting is that there are two new additional residents that stand apart from the other ducks; both much larger. The larger duck as the red mark-



ings around the face, indicative of a muscovy.

Of the mallard hybrids, I like to think of some of them as the four sets of twins due to their similarities.



Alison Milton

Proposed peacock cull cancelled after ‘overwhelming’ community outcry

Indian peafowl are native to South Asia but have been known to adapt to colder climates. The draft plan to cull or remove the birds from Narrabundah cited fears the introduced birds could spread to the Red Hill reserve.

In the ACT, the rather noisy peafowl breeding season runs from September to January. The peafowl of Canberra’s south can sleep easy tonight - plans to rehome or euthanise the feral population have been called off following a record community response.



In April, the ACT government proposed an annual trapping program to permanently remove the colourful birds, which have divided residents in Red Hill and Narrabundah since they moved into town almost two decades ago.

While some had complained the birds were noisy, messy and even posed safety hazards, a local campaign to save them soon made international headlines as proud ‘peafowlers’ banded together for the birds they now claim as “part of the community”. Even Chief Minister Andrew Barr lent his support, signing a petition against his own government’s proposal earlier this month.

On Tuesday, ACT Minister for Transport and City Services Meegan Fitzharris said she was overwhelmed by the discussion the draft management plan had generated - both nationally and internationally.

“We have read your comments, we have listened, and I’m pleased to announce that we will not remove the peafowl from their current habitat,” she said.

Sherryn Groch

Queen’s birthday honours

A well deserved Queen’s Birthday Honours accolade has been achieved by Margaret Ning. Margaret has been awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in the General Division for service to conservation and the environment.

The actual nomination would reveal much more than this listing and show much more of Margaret as a naturalist.

Alphabetically, Margaret is a highly involved and motivated member of ACTHA and FOG. I’m sure she would be the first to admit that it’s impossible to prioritise her interests in “the environment” though we see her brilliance in organising Snakes Alive! each January and applaud her indefatigable championing of Natural Temperate Grasslands, grass and orchid species through decades of Friends of Grasslands events, field trips, memorable meetings and seminars.

I believe Margaret and Geoff were on a trip to the Pilbara as the awards were announced. There they will continue to enjoy the diversity and wonder of the natural world. They’ll be observing and sharing inter-relationships between all the organisms, communities and cultures they encounter. The specialist reptiles, amphibians, wildflowers and grasses of WA will be the subject of numerous photographs that will show Margaret’s passion for communicating the linkages between all floral and faunal groups.

Rosemary Blemings

Discovery of bizarre sex ritual marsupials in Canberra rewrites scientific textbooks

Craig Allen

A tiny marsupial — best known for its tendency to copulate to death — has popped its head up in Canberra's north for the first time in four decades.

Researchers discovered three agile antechinus while conducting a routine check of traps inside the Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary a fortnight ago, suggesting there was a small but self-sufficient population.

The discovery is now rewriting scientific textbooks, but researchers do not believe it is a coincidence that the marsupial has been found in that location.

After ridding the 485-hectare reserve of predators like cats and foxes, ecologists created a perfect environment for vulnerable species to live and breed—even those not spotted for decades.

Senior ACT Government ecologist Dr Murray Evans said the discovery effectively turned back the environmental clock to a time before the introduction of Australia's feral pest species.

"Agile antechinus were once reasonably widespread in the woodlands and forests of the ACT," he said.

"They're still found in the south of the ACT in places like Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

"But the last records of the species from the north of the ACT are from the 1970s — and that's despite numerous surveys."

Dr Evans said the tiny animal was able to slip in and out of the meshed sanctuary fence, but, understandably, seemed to prefer the safe environment inside the sanctuary.

"To have antechinus just turn up out of the blue and make the sanctuary their home, is just wonderful. You couldn't ask for better," he said.

"Our hope is now that they're in a predator-proof sanctuary, that these animals might be able to increase their populations and become firmly established as one of the woodland animals in this environment."

Once-in-a-lifetime sex

At first glance the tiny marsupials could be mistaken for a native mouse or rat, but the antechinus is no rodent—in fact it is more closely related to Tasmanian devils.

And in many ways the species is much more endearing, due to its bizarre mating rituals.

Males of the species have long baffled researchers with their habit of mating to the point of collapse and death—or, as scientists put it, semelparity.

At first it was thought to be an altruistic genetic trait to allow surviving females access to scarce food resources.

But it is now believed to be a way of passing on the most *ahem* 'energetic' breeding genes.

"At the end of the breeding season, all males die, so that's about the end of August in this part of the world," Dr Evans said.

"That leaves only females in the population, and the only males present are the unborn males being carried by the pregnant females."

He said females themselves usually died soon after their young were weaned, at about 18 months of age.

Sanctuary about to triple in size

The good news for the agile antechinus—as well as the eastern bettongs and eastern quolls that share their sanctuary home—is that Mulligans Flat is about to triple in size to about 1,200 hectares.

Within a month, construction will be completed on a massive new section of fence behind the growing suburb of Throsby.

But it will still take several years of intensive pest control to eradicate all the rabbits and foxes still living there.

Only then can the joining fence be snipped, and the vulnerable species be released into their new home.

Mulligans Flat Sanctuary manager Dr Will Batson said building fences was not ideal to protect endangered animals, but was the best option ecologists had.

"It's the reality of the world," Dr Batson said.

"These sanctuaries really buy us some time, so we can establish populations that we can then use in the future.

"It also allows us to learn better and develop new techniques that we can use outside those fenced reserves."

Activities

Sunday 8 July 2:00–4:00 pm; National Tree Day

Enjoy a gentle and informative walk with local ecologist Michael Doherty. Learn how to identify Mount Majura's woodland and forest trees, see where they occur and hear how they survive fire and drought. Meet at the Mackenzie Street nature park entrance roughly opposite Grayson Street, Hackett. Wear sun protection, appropriate clothing for the weather sturdy shoes and bring drinking water. Tree guides will be available for a gold coin donation.

Field Naturalist August meeting: launch of the Rakali survey: 7:00 pm 2 August

The Field Naturalist's August meeting is scheduled to start at the earlier time of 7:00 pm at the Robertson Building. It is our usual meeting night and location though earlier and in the larger Slatyer Seminar Room on the building's first floor (also accessed via a ramp).

The National Parks Association and Field Naturalists have created a joint venture co-operative to stage the launch of the Rakali Project. The project will be launched by Brett McNamara.

The aim of the project is to promote interest in the Native Water Rat *Hydromys chrysogaster*; encouraging all who are 'out and about' near waterways to record Rakali presence and abundance.

Geoff Williams of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (APC) is extending a Victorian initiative to our region. Over the years, the contributions of Rakali data have greatly augmented what was known about the species and its habitats. (It was APC's efforts against the opera house yabby traps that caught Lucy's attention resulting in action against these deadly traps in the ACT region.)

Would you make a special effort to attend the launch meeting on 2nd August and invite your friends? We are offering 'finger food', coffee, tea, juice and are asking please, whether, members can prepare the finger food for the occasion?

Thank you all very sincerely for coming to the FNAC meetings at the new venue to hear the range of speakers we've enticed so far this year....it's a speakers' organising nightmare that too few will turn up to be respectful to our voluntary speakers but each month you've been there and really engaged!!!

Rosemary Blemings

Volunteers please

Please contact Rosemary Blemings on 6258 4724 to offer food for the 'spread' at the 2 August meeting. As they say, many hands make light work. It would be good to see members other than the ever hard working committee pitch in to help with providing the food and helping to set up.

Editor



Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra Inc.

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.

President: Rosemary Blemings, et al

Email: fieldnaturalist@yahoo.com.au

Website: under construction

Editor: Alison Milton All newsletter contributions welcome. **Email:** apm56@optusnet.com.au



Monthly meeting venue: Jan Anderson Seminar Room, R.N. Robertson Building, Biology Place, Australian National University.

Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra
GPO Box 249
Canberra ACT 2601



MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

Family name: First name:

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

.....

Postal address:

Suburb: State: Postcode: Home phone:

Work phone: Email address:

Subscription enclosed: \$.....(Single/Family \$25) Donation: \$.....

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