

*Field Natter*  
Newsletter of Field Naturalists Club  
of Canberra



*OBJECTS: To foster an interest in an awareness and an understanding of nature*

Meeting Thursday April 3, 2008 at 8:00 pm

(details on back page)

# The microbial world of soil

## David Tongway



David Tongway grew up in Bendigo, central Victoria. Trained initially as an analytical chemist, he later developed an interest in soil in a broad, ecological sense and is now a consultant to the rehabilitation industry. His prior work with CSIRO involved the development and implementation of landscape monitoring systems to assess the status of rangelands across Australia. The monitoring looks at soil properties in terms of habitat favourability for biota. His research involves land uses as varied as mining, agriculture, rangelands, national parks and peri-urban.

### Excursion:

### Honeyeater Migration- Sunday April 6<sup>th</sup>, 9am- 12pm.

A repeat from last year, but a good one.

The honeyeater migration is one of the most dramatic animal events in the ACT and occurs twice a year. Autumn is much better than the Spring migration. I will take you to a little known site near Angle crossing, (South of Canberra) that funnels the migrating birds. We are likely to see hundreds of white-naped, yellow-faced and white-eared honeyeaters. Also possibly some fuscous. Other birds should include red wattlebirds, silvereyes, even little ravens. If the weather is good it is possible to see up to 8000 birds in

half a day, but don't expect too much. Last year we saw 2000. We will sit and absorb the migration for an hour or so.

Afterwards we will visit Tharwa Sandwash. A good spot for birds in the ACT, at any time of year. Walking is easy. Bring a chair, sunscreen, hats, binos and cold and wet weather gear. Don't miss it. Car pooling from Canberra- Call Benj on 62544 556. Or meet at Williamsdale turnoff at 9:30am. Directions- About 10km S of Canberra, along Monaro Highway, turn Right at Williamsdale at the sign for Angle crossing.

Benj

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# What is an Australian naturalist anyway?

The early generations of Europeans to Australia found themselves surrounded by a flora and fauna completely different from anything seen before. Short-term visitors carried away vast numbers of specimens to fill the museum cabinets of Europe. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century astonishing creatures from distant regions seemed to turn up in London almost daily. In 1771 Joseph Banks had brought back thousands of plant and animal specimens after three years travelling around the world with Captain James Cook on the *Endeavour*.

Among their prizes were the skin and skull of a large creature with a head like a deer, said to rise up on two legs. It was also said to use those legs to go bounding across the grasslands of Australia like a hare, but with its long heavy tail serving for balance. Banks announced it to the natural world with a borrowed aboriginal name: 'Kanguru' (*Natural History*, March 2008).

In Australia, some 'naturalists' became professional collectors to supply the market for new specimens back in London. Others, less commercially inclined, sought out new species for the purpose of serious scientific study, either by themselves or, more commonly, by patrons, such as Banks, from the upper ranks of European science. As the Australian population grew so too did the number of people who took an interest in Australia's natural forms. Scientific societies formed depending on their strength on the support of the local governor. These included governors such as Sir Thomas Brisbane in NSW, 1821-1825 and Sir John Franklin in Tasmania, 1837-43. However, such societies either became involved in political in-fighting or faded once support from the governor changed with time. As the colonies expanded and became wealthier a series of scientific appointments provided the nucleus around which

strong central institutions could form. For example from 1854 to 1872, Ferdinand Mueller was a member of the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science, which later became the Philosophical Institute of Victoria. He was President of the Philosophical Institute in 1859 when it received a Royal Charter and became the Royal Society of Victoria.

With the rise of biology as a new, experimentally and professionally based life science during the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the old-style natural history became more the legacy of the amateur naturalist. As naturalist clubs formed key words in their objectives were 'field' and 'observer'. By retaining this emphasis on observation amateur naturalists, often subconsciously rejected the criteria by the professionals to always be 'scientific'.

{The description above comes from a very interesting book I have just finished reading *Paradise revealed – Natural history in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia* by Colin Finney}



Ferdinand Mueller from a photograph taken in 1865

So what is your current definition of a naturalist? I think of a naturalist as someone whose curiosity of the natural world is boundless. A person who delights in the beauty of the natural world, is in love with the whole of life and hopes to walk in harmony with

the other life on this planet. A naturalist probably believes that human growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell and ultimate disaster and believes every animal or plant has a right to be part of the chain of life.

*Whenever we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe – John Muir US naturalist, founder of the Sierra Club*

Chris Bunn

**"There was nothing in nature as cruel and savage as a greedy human being"**

— Abel, the hero of Tim Winton's *Blueback*, watching a large but dying shark trapped by debris from a buoy.

## PATAGONIA encore...

Paul and Janet's presentation in March was quite different since their approach was to show how they had achieved a strenuous series of walks as a party of 12 similarly-fit adventurers. They skilfully blended PowerPoint-presented maps and aims with slides of their January-February visit and others from previous years' treks. They traversed a myriad of surfaces carrying 15-20k packs...lava strewn slopes, screes, rocks, lush Gondwanan forest-floors, river and stream banks and precarious-looking bridges.

The sheer 'youth' of the mountains ensured that views were powerfully un-Australian. Towers, peaks, spines and spurs surrounded the travellers. Painting the effects of sunlight would surely be impossible but the colours reminded us of *our* sunsets and sunrises. Thank goodness for Paul's photographic skills.

With details of some of their meals and sketches of local lives and customs we felt we had really been to these spectacular places.

Thank you for taking us on your long journey so we could limit our carbon emissions!

Rosemary Blemings

### Excerpt from the Prime Minister's speech at the ABARE Outlook conference, March 4, 2008

Today I want to announce one opportunity that the Government will be investigating: soil carbon.

A few days after the Government was sworn into office last year, I visited Matt and Anna Ahern's cattle stud in Roma with Queensland Agforce President Peter Kenny and with Tony Burke, the Minister for Agriculture.

We discussed soil management practices on farms, and the scope for productivity improvements and reduced emissions from improving cropping practices.

Peter's plea to me was that if the Government wanted to do something about carbon emissions for agricultural Australia, we should focus on the soil.

I am hearing more and more about the possible potential of enhancing the carbon stored in our soils.

That is why today I am asking Tony Burke – as part of the our *Australia's Farming Future* initiative – to investigate how better soil management can be part of Australia's response to climate change.

I recognise that this is a complex area and there is a variety of view points.

I am told that there are significant challenges to measuring the emissions from different farming techniques and estimating the carbon stored in our soils.

Those obstacles may make it difficult for soil carbon to play a role in our response to climate change, but we must examine the options.

The truth is that, as in many aspects of climate change, we are only just beginning to look at soil carbon.

'Low till' or 'no till' soil management practices were first promoted for their environmental benefits through the previous Labor Government's Landcare program that began in the early 1990s.



### **Publications of interest to Field Natters/teachers/parents/grandparents/the concerned public in general**

If you go to the website of the Dept of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts <http://www.environment.gov.au/about/publications/index.html> , there is an amazing list of booklets, fact sheets, posters, etc. for both adults and children which you can then order to be mailed to you. Unfortunately the Easter Bilby story books are currently out of print and Maureen reports that the Department has been overwhelmed with requests.

Maureen Bell

**Next Month — Leonie Andrews: Tibet — people, geology and plants and the occasional animal**



**Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra**

**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:

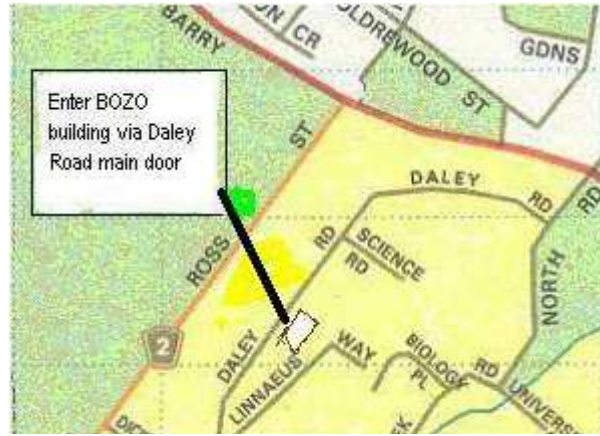
**President:** Benj Whitworth, tel w 6272 3192 h 62544556

**Secretary:** Rosemary Blemings, tel 02 6258 4724

**Website:** [www.geocities.com/fieldnaturalist/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/fieldnaturalist/index.html)

**Newsletter editor:** Chris Bunn <chris\_b@webone.com.au> Tel 02 6241 2968. Member contributions welcome.

Published and distributed by Philip Bell



**Monthly meeting venue:** Division of Botany and Zoology, Building 116, Daley Rd, Australian National University. Park (occasionally the adjacent building 44). Meetings start at 8 pm and are followed by refreshments.

**FIELD NATURALISTS ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC.**

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**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 \$20) Donation: \$.....

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