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FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC. GPO BOX 708
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FIELD NATTER

August 2020 newsletter No monthly meetings until further notice



Singing Honeyeater at Franklin Ponds: A rare visitor to the ACT - Alison Milton



Brown Falcon at Jerrabomberra Wetlands - Alison Milton

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Birds in my yard

I have been treated recently to some lovely birds in my yard.

First, there were a pair of king parrots feeding on my neighbour's ash tree. This is a popular treat for them as I often see them on the tree.

Then there were the birds attracted to my *Eucalyptus caesia*. The first were a pair of destructive crimson rosellas which simply nipped off the unopened buds and left them on the ground. Then when I saw the blossoms moving again I was all for chasing away the destructive birds but on closer investigation found it was a wattle bird sipping the nectar from the flowers.

One of my greatest joys is a family of magpies, which serenade me. I think they are mum, dad and a grown up offspring. They sit on the hand rail until I go out and feed them. If I am a bit slow in coming they chastise me until I produce the food. They have been coming for several months now. At first I had to throw the food onto the path below the patio and when they had become accustomed to that and realised I wasn't going to hurt them, they were confident to come closer. So, I placed the food on the handrail and stood back to let them feed. When they were comfortable with that I encouraged them to take the meat from my fingers, which they then did with confidence.

Sadly, last week there was aerial combat over my house and several other houses involving six or eight magpies. It

would appear 'my' magpies lost the battle. Since then they have not come begging for food. Even though I can hear magpies in the vicinity and call them they now no longer come as they once did.

I miss my magpies and their cheery song and hope they have found a suitable new territory.

The last bird which I have had visit me is a what I think is a grey butcherbird. I have lived in this house for 20 years and this is the first time I have seen one, although I think it may have been attracted by the food I was giving the magpies.



Whatever the reason, it was a treat to see it up so close and personal.

Deidre Shaw

Mixed emotions

I read Lucy's wistful comment about taking care of the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos with a grim smile. I had just been out to speak severely to our three semi-resident black cockies. "Leave my wattle trees alone you vandals". They moved up a few branches and creaked and squawked back to me. So what is going on?

If you have looked at the sawn off trunk of an old black wattle you may have noticed a tunnel maybe an inch across. This is the evidence of larvae of cossid moths.



Even if you did not know that, the black cockies do and that is why they attack wattle trunks, digging in to get at the big grubs they love to eat. (I was told once that they are also the best bait when fishing for Murray Cod.) The cockies attack all sizes of wattles and often it kills the tree.

When we first moved here I put chicken wire around about 20 big wattles to stop them being felled by the cockies.



We get enormous pleasure in seeing our cockies in flight, and we welcome their warning cries telling us of rain to come (so it is said). So you can see Lucy, it is all ying and yang at our place.



Put to the vote the eyes and ears have it!

Colin Pask

P.S. There is a nice section on this in Zborowski and Edwards' *Guide to Australian Moths*.

Pasture day moth *Apina callisto*

Anytime now it may be worth your while to look more closely at ground level when crossing vacant blocks or neglected grassland areas. It's about this time that the larvae of *Apina callisto* become visible.

They have been seen on Capeweed and Cranesbill plants and there's no shortage of these species since the rain brought the invasives' seed bank to luxuriant life. However the post-fires situation continues to be worth citizen scientists' close attention as flowering and breeding events are altering the 'record books'.

On Wednesday 22 July I was in Belconnen passing the long-vacant, former Police Station site and noticed Australian Ravens patrolling the mixed weeds and short introduced grasses. Last year this fenced block was a hot-spot for *Apina callisto* caterpillars. I couldn't see any from or crossing the clayey paths. I did find a 3cm one crossing the concrete path 150 m away heading towards the offices.



If it is time for the caterpillars to be visible have birds, hungry after eating winters' food early as they recover from fires and drought, already eaten pre-spring offerings? Have the omnivorous Ravens eaten out their normal 'diets' and are now making-do on the *Apina* larvae?

If hungry resident species have eaten the larvae by the time most of the caterpillar-specialist cuckoos and Orioles have arrived how will the migrants and their fledglings fare?

Rhian wrote about these amazing caterpillars in 2019 or 2018.

They are considered pests by some graziers as they eat pasture grasses. In April there were many moths around and in open areas looking for grasses on which to lay their eggs. No doubt the moths don't have the capacity to consider graziers as pests for replacing the biodiverse native grasslands with introduced pasture species in the days when there was destain for Australian species.

Rosemary Blemings

Lost recipe for medieval blue ink found

The plant used to create a popular blueish-purple ink once used in illuminated manuscripts—and the ink's recipe—has eluded scientists... until now.

The pigment known in the Middle Ages as folium was famous for its gorgeous blue/purple colour and its staying power. Although it, along with the more well-known blue indigo pigment, was used to dye textiles, it was mostly used by monks to illuminate manuscripts.

Upon the advent of the printing press, over time the process for producing this colour was lost... until a group of chemists, scientists, and biologists at the New University of Lisbon, Portugal, found the recipe in a 15th-century manuscript written in the extinct Judeo-Portuguese language of Lusitanic.

Although the translation proved difficult, the team was able to translate enough of the recipe to identify the dye's sole ingredient: *Chrozophora tinctoria*, a plant native to the Middle East, India, Pakistan, and Central Asia. In the summer, the plant produces a fruit approximately the size of a walnut that contains a blue fluid, which then turns into a small nut in the fall.

The group scoured the neighbouring countryside for the plant and found them in the Portuguese town of Monsaraz, where the locals considered the plant a weed. After some experimentation, they ultimately followed the book's instructions on how to collect the fruit in July and then squeeze out the fluid onto linen, being careful to not break the seeds. From this substance they were able to re-create the medieval dye, which they believe is so stable that it may retain its original colour for centuries.

The discovery they hope will help manuscript conservationists repair areas with the original pigment, rather than modern, synthetic ones. The team has named their new pigment Chrozophoridin.

Submitted by Rosemary Blemings

Winter damselflies

Taken from Harvey Perkins' Blog. Harvey's Blog can be accessed at <http://hdpphd.blogspot.com/>

There are a lot of comments around at the moment by people noticing that some birds seem to think winter is over already for this year! Various species from thornbills to ravens have been seen collecting nesting material, and several species of cuckoos have been heard calling, both here in Canberra and elsewhere, quite unseasonally, suggesting they think the birds whose nests they parasitise might also be active, or nearly so.

And it's true that for mid-July we have had relatively few severe frosts or particularly low sub-zero temperatures. It seems the dragonflies and damselflies have also picked up on this.

It was a slower wind-down to the dragonfly season this year, in my view, with several species persisting for longer than I would expect them to. Wandering Ringtails (*Austrolestes leda*), and even a few Inland Ringtails (*Austrolestes aridus*), which seem to be rather itinerant here in Canberra but had a relatively good season this year, were being found well into May, and even June. Not only by me, but by number of people submitting their photographic records to Canberra Nature Map (CNM). Tau Emeralds (*Hemiscordulia tau*) also seemed to persist, admittedly in relatively small numbers, longer than I am used to, with one reported as late as 14 June.

Yesterday (17 July), a record came in to CNM of a Wandering Ringtail on Mount Ainslie saddle. What's more it was a teneral male, meaning it was only recently emerged from its watery larval home (presumably a small dam in the Mount Ainslie Nature Reserve) and was not yet fully coloured-up, and was munching into what looked like a small water beetle or some such.

It is known that in some places (that have a distinct winter that precludes pretty much all dragonfly activity) Wandering Ringtails may 'over-winter', which is not a usual behaviour of damselflies. But I never expected this would occur in Canberra which really does get very cold! I had made some half-hearted efforts in previous years to see if I could find any overwintering individuals, but had never been successful. So, when Shorty's image showed up I thought it time to have another look.

I rationalised to myself that the best bet would probably be a small, well vegetated swamp with a northerly aspect which would allow any sunshine to warm the shallow waters quickly. So I decided to check out a tiny seepage swamp on the northern flanks of Black Mountain, just off Belconnen Way, where I know Wandering Ringtails can be abundant

when the summer conditions are favourable. I had recorded a late emergence event of this species there on 14 May (32 individuals including seven mating pairs) and assumed they would be the last for the 2019–20 season.

When I arrived, the sunshine was weakly obscured by a haze of high cloud, there was a slight breeze and it was a balmy 12.5°C (it had got down to a relatively mild 0.2°C overnight). It all looked very quiet except for the four cockies and four Wood Ducks and I spent a good 15 minutes scrutinising the sedges for any perched damselflies. But then, just as I was about to leave and was doing one final scan with the binoculars – there it was. A male Wandering Ringtail. All by itself, not moving but being gently buffeted by the breeze and presumably trying to soak up as much warmth as was possible. I clicked away, even the 400 mm lens finding the distance difficult, but any attempt to get closer would mean approaching it from the other side of the swamp and directly into the low-angled sun. But I had my proof and felt quite chuffed. And it really hadn't been that difficult.

An adult male Wandering Ringtail at a tiny swamp on the northern flanks of Black Mountain in mid-July.

I went and checked out the nearby small dam, largely shaded by trees, and as expected found no activity there at all. Returning to the swamp, I went to take just a few more photos, but the damselfly had moved on. I eventually relocated it about 2 metres away, and in a clump of sedge right on the edge of the opposite bank. I worked my way around slowly and what I hoped was unobtrusively until close enough to crouch down and use the little Lumix camera on macro, getting near enough to largely overcome the poor lighting direction. When my closeness did eventually disturb it, it fluttered weakly just 20 cm away and re-perched. Poor thing, I thought, not even warm enough to be able to fly properly.

It wasn't until I got home and downloaded the photos that I realised the macro shots were of an individual with a malformed wing-tip, and obviously different to the individual I first photographed with the long lens. So – at least two males were present on this tiny swamp in mid-July. There's no way to know if they were survivors of the emergence I recorded two months previously in mid-May, or had emerged much more recently, like Shorty's male on Mount Ainslie, but it is clear that, at least this year, this incredibly hardy little species (they are only about 35–40 mm long and incredibly slender) can survive a Canberra winter!

With permission from Harvey

New book: Black Mountain a natural history of a Canberra icon

It is exciting to say that 23 July 2020 is the 50th Anniversary of Black Mountain becoming a conservation reserve.

It is even more exciting to say that Ian Fraser and Rosemary Purdie have written a wonderful book, *Black Mountain a Natural History of a Canberra Icon*, which is being published by the Friends of Black Mountain as part of the 50th Anniversary celebrations.

Single and multiple copies of the book can be ordered now at a special discount price (\$25 per copy before 20 August 2020) by sending an email to FoBMPublicationSales@gmail.com or by phoning 0404 148 721.

This book is a fabulous read containing lots of tantalising information about people, plants, animals and the mountain, which Ian and Rosemary have gathered from a wider range of wonderful and very knowledgeable people.

Book prices (including GST)

\$25 Pre-order before 20 August 2020

\$30 Friends of Black Mountain Members after 20 August 2020

\$35 Recommended Retail Price

\$10 Postage for up to 5 copies delivered to the same address in any Australian state or territory; overseas enquiries welcome.

Order at: FoBMPublicationSales@gmail.com

or call 0404 148 721

Links from Ian Fraser

Ian Fraser's Bog: [Talking Naturally](http://ianfrasertalkingnaturally.blogspot.com/) (<http://ianfrasertalkingnaturally.blogspot.com/>)

[Wombat Wanders](https://youtu.be/dndxE2yJ0zU) on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/dndxE2yJ0zU>

Wombat Wanders follows a population of engaging Common Wombats (*Vombatus ursinus*) by day and by night as they come out of their burrows and go about their bush lives, even venturing near the filmmaker's cabin and its water and grass. Some of the beautiful creatures that these marsupials share the bushland with are also seen. Though common, Wombats face threats including roadkill, mange disease and habitat destruction. It is lovely to see them in the wild, and to glimpse their young both in and out of the pouch.

The Australian Platypus Conservancy

The Australian Platypus Conservancy (APC) recently worked with Holbrook Landcare to produce a short video about the platypus and its conservation needs. For those hoping to see a Platypus, August is the best time of the year.

The video can be viewed via the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5UOWchDoIU&fbclid=IwAR2SJRBM7CygPI8M80ghS5g3Y1fIP_OGkVOUkGVBxohE-I5JfIVHn52ftpc

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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Jerrabomberra Wetlands visitors

Last September the Jerrabomberra Wetlands had a rare (and first) visitation of a Northern Shoveller, which incited much interest. The male Shoveller has again arrived at the wetlands in the past week; a lot earlier than last year's visit. It will be interesting to see how long it stays this time: last year only about 10 days.



Another rare visitor to the ACT is the Brown Falcon that has been resident at the wetlands for two weeks or more and seems to have no intention of moving on. It has been photographed by numerous birdwatchers and has been very easy to find and photograph.

Alison Milton



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

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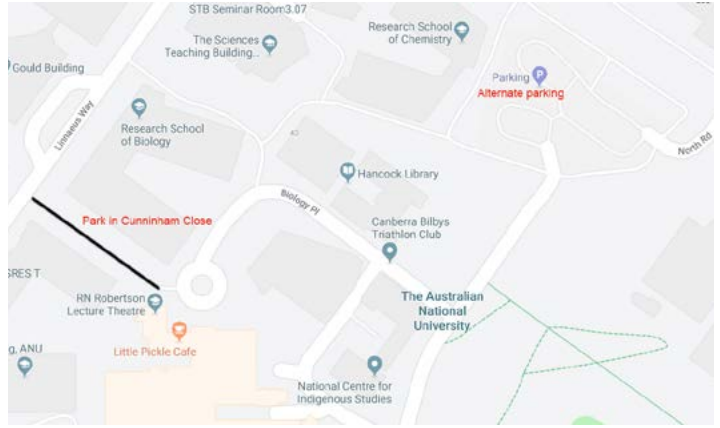
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Monthly meeting venue: Jan Anderson Seminar Room, R. N. Robertson Building, Biology Place, Australian National University

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Membership application or renewal

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