

# FIELD NATTER



THE FIELD NATURALISTS ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA

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

PRESIDENT: Rosemary Bjemings, Phone 02/6258 4724 (h)

SECRETARY: Janet Twigg-Patterson 02/6287 2086 (h)

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: GPO Box 249, Canberra ACT 2601

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Bob Ecclestone, Phone 02/6241 4512 (h)

EDITOR: Rosemary von Behrens vbehrens@actonline.com.au Phone 02/6254 1763

Meetings are held downstairs in the Division of Zoology and Botany, ANU, on the first Thursday of each month. Meetings commence at 8.00 pm and are followed by refreshments.

## NEWSLETTER - FEBRUARY 1999

**MEETING:** February 4, 8 pm. The speaker is Dr David Shorthouse, who is head of Environment ACT's Wildlife Research and Monitoring Unit. David will talk about the work of the unit which is centred around the identification and conservation of threatened species and communities; the provision of specialist advice to government, land managers and planners, and the broader community; and the survey and monitoring of biological resources. The unit has produced a series of endangered species (and endangered communities) papers eg on yellow box/red gum woodlands. Do come along and stay for supper and a chat afterwards.

**FEBRUARY OUTING:** Sunday 14. Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. Meet outside the gate at 4 pm. We'll carpool to get inside and share the \$8.00 entry fee with the driver. Of course, you can take out a membership for \$10 and visit as often as you like. The platypus are supposedly very active at this time of the year. Bring a cooked picnic tea and enjoy Tidbinbilla until 8 pm when the gates close. Pam Fenning 6251 2495

**ADVANCED NOTICE:** Sunday 14 March outing 9.30 am. We will join with the Westbourne Woods Association on an amble and information session. please meet at the entrance to the Royal Canberra Golf Club, Benson Street, Yarralumla.

**LEONID SHOWER.** Did you miss out seeing the shower in 1998 because of the inclement weather? Terry Gourlay reports that perhaps all is not lost, we may still have the pleasure, weather permitting this year. The November 1998 issue of the Canberra Astronomical Association, the Southern Cross, suggests that this year is potentially almost as good. Burnhams Celestial Handbook states that November 17 or 18 1999 is the actual date - a 33 year cycle since 1966.

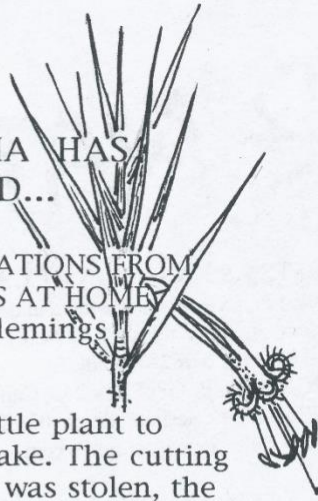
CSIRO is seeking volunteers to help with their entomological collections.

**REEF RESEARCH.** Access to research on Australia's Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area has been made easier with a new online information service. Regular news about the current state of research into corals, dugongs, seagrass, coastal sediment, fishing and climate history is now available as a free service for anyone with Internet access and an e-mail address. The CRC Reef Research centre recently launched the service on its popular web site, increasing access to contemporary coral reef research, education and training programs throughout Australia and the world. The address is <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/~crcreef>



## MY STYPHELIA HAS FLOWERED...

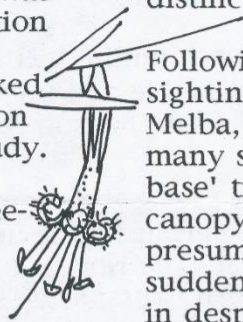
SOME SIMPLE OBSERVATIONS FROM  
SUMMER HOLIDAYS AT HOME  
by Rosemary Blemings



I'd left one bud on the little plant to prove there was no mistake. The cutting material, about 8 pieces, was stolen, the hormone second-hand, the bottom heat supplied from the fridge's updraught... propagation at its most primitive. One has survived. *Styphelia longifolia* was well represented on FNAC's Molonglo Gorge walk last May. Their delicate green, tubular flowers almost the sole providers of winter colour.

The leisure to stop confirmed there are 7 or 8 healthy, flowering *Styphelia* plants in the median strip of Belconnen Way, Weetangera. Who succeeded in propagating them 20? years ago and sold them into that unforgiving environment? A long-flowering species well worth a place in our Canberra gardens.

In another riverine environment, as a family enjoyed a few final antics playing in Murrumbidgee, the focus was on birds. Surrounded by the degradation of almost monopolistic introduced vegetation the river's banks are masked and overhung. The attitude of a bird on a distant sandbar demanded closer study. Suddenly, as if investigating our resented intrusion, eight Rainbow bee-eaters alighted in a brown arboreal skeleton. There was scarcely time to absorb the magnificence of their colouring before they dispersed in a flash of myriad hues to take up vantage points on the further bank. One watched, sentinel-like, from a dead briar rose branch. Others regrouped high in eucalyptus foliage, fading light perfecting their camouflage. At a hidden signal the little flock took to the air over the placid water, treating watchers to an aerial ballet enhanced as the final rays transformed the copper of their wings into a burnished glide of auburn light. The air was filled with the aerial artistry of Bee-eaters and Tree



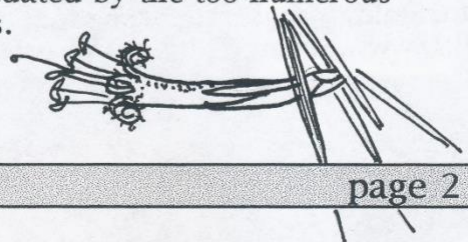
martins dancing, feeding and ignoring the strange, harsh call of a solitary Dollarbird.

There was just enough light left to capture the iridescence of its plumage. An insectivore whose brooding, almost pugnacious attitude, when perched, is transformed into spectacular food-gathering manoeuvres when insects are taken on the wing.

Mt Rogers is also a degraded landscape. Its summit fired four times last year and once, so far, this summer. It is home to a ravage of Oats, Phalaris and Salsify. Yet twenty or more years ago understorey native plants were added to the patchy tree cover. In one Acacia I came on my first binocular close-up of Superb parrots on Christmas Eve. Feeding quietly on the still unripe-ripe seed pods these magnificent, threatened birds gave almost three weeks of delight to many locals and several COG Hotline (6247 5530) listeners. The flock developed to 24 though they are difficult to count as there's so much coming and going. Adults fly off to forage and return to regurgitate for young begging protractedly, and possibly more annoyingly than juvenile magpies. They also appear to fly, in their distinctive, dashing way, just for fun.

Following evening and early morning sightings over Flynn, Fraser Spence and Melba, dusk observations confirmed that many seemed to roost in their 'Fraser base' trees, high in the camouflaging canopy foliage. The young are, presumably, told to desist for all is, quite suddenly, quiet. Did three males fly off, in desperation, to forage together in a separate tree 30 metres away and enjoy some time away from the children?

King parrots piped their presence, indicating on most days that North Belconnen is now acceptable habitat. Leaden flycatchers present months ago, return in mid January outraged at the proximity of a Currawong. Perhaps the navy-plumaged flycatchers' first nest was predated by the too-numerous villains.





On some colder mornings, amongst the hubbub of the Superb parrots, fluffed-up Black-faced cuckoo shrike juveniles were missing the comfort of their nest. New siblings first showed their beaks on 17th January, the parents feeding them but also giving them feathery insulation against the next day's cooler start.

Someone placed a cautionary sign warning 'Christmas-fat humans' of a determined and accurate attacking Noisy friarbird. Many were swooped as they pursued their New Year's revolutionary walks. I don't think the bird ever made contact but the victims were certainly unnerved by the bird's quick turn-around, clamorous defence of its fledglings.

Just 100 metres away a Cootamundra wattle has been host this season to dozens of exquisite Imperial hairstreak butterflies. The remaining pupae and a few larvae are attended by 10 mm long ants who, presumably, also recycle the remaining pupal cases. Both wings show a blue-green iridescence. Orange spots and hairstreaks decorate and distinguish their hind wings. These butterflies are kind to admirers. They often pause to absorb the sun's warmth, their unfolded wings allowing their beauty to be appreciated.

An egg was found and brought home for identification...perhaps the now-wasted labour of Willie wagtails. Slightly cracked it was clear that the contents remained, if hard baked, inside. One morning it was the focus of activity for hundreds of small ants (for which the neighbourhood is infamous). They had widened the crack, created a hole a quarter the size of the egg, and spent the day clearing out the contents, micro-bite by micro-bite. The nature table has lost a near-perfect egg. Ants, eating vacated pupal cases and now eggshell, continue to present as amazing invertebrates.

An evening storm blurs the outlines of the hills prevaricating in its slow approach to the night's lucky suburbs. Behind it another stunning sunset has its hues rent by brilliant lightning

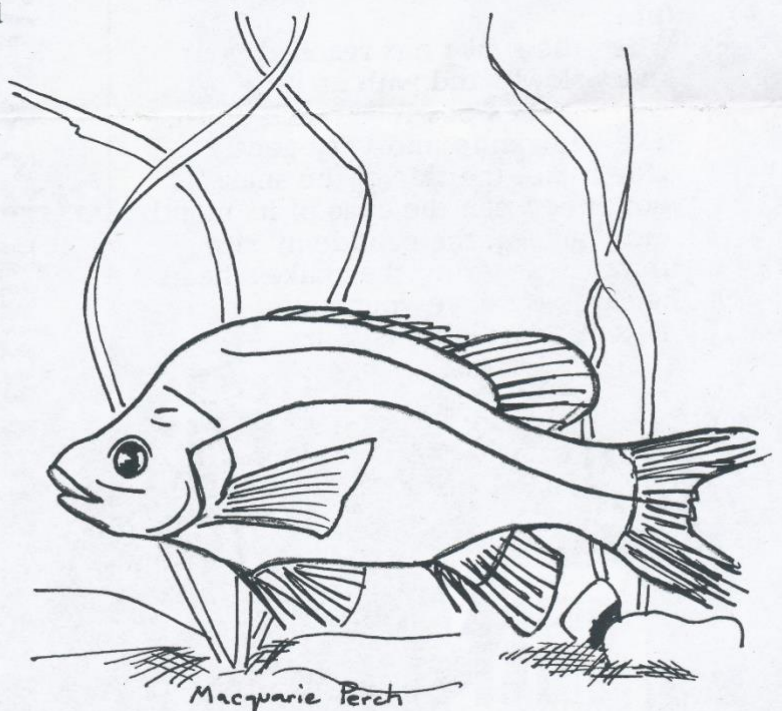
flashes before the rain finally falls here. A few minutes local wetness rather than a repeat of the phenomenal territorial drenching that broke the droughts last year.

## HELP CONSERVE OUR LOCAL RARE FISH.

The four species to be conserved are the trout cod (*Maccullochella macquariensis*), macquarie perch (*Macquaria australasica*), two-spined blackfish (*Gadopsis bispinosus*) and the Murray River crayfish (*Euastacus armatus*). These fish live in the Murrumbidgee and Cotter rivers. The trout cod only exists in this area. Their presence is a good indication of clean water.

The fish are protected under the Nature Conservation Act 1980 and are threatened by habitat changes, overfishing and introduced fish species. Recent droughts have also depleted fish supplies.

Anglers should immediately return these fish to the water. A hooked fish has a better chance of survival if it is freed without being removed from the water and with a hook in its mouth rather than a damaged mouth. The use of drum nets in these rivers is banned.



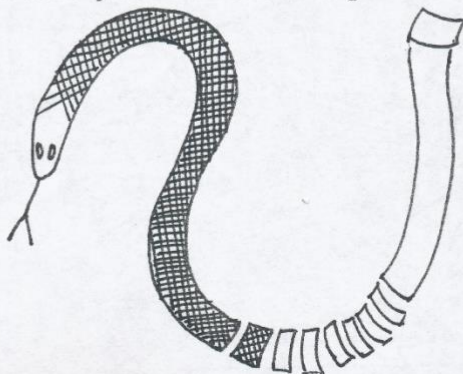


## THIS CAN'T BE SERIOUS ..... OR CAN IT???

Off the Net from Bob Ecclestone, who'd love to see our expressions I suspect.

The following is from the US Government Peace Corps Manual for its volunteers who work in the Amazon Jungle. It tells what to do in case you are attacked by an anaconda. Now an anaconda is the largest snake in the world. It is a relative of the boa constrictor, it grows to thirty-five feet in length and weighs between three and four hundred pounds at the maximum. This is what the manual said:

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight against one another.
3. Tuck your chin in.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and climb over your body.
5. Do not panic.
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet and - always from the end. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic.
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time.
8. When the snake has reached your knees slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife and very gently slide it into the side of the snake's mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg, then suddenly rip upwards, severing the snake's head.
9. Be sure you have your knife.
10. Be sure your knife is sharp.



## If you think its a snake, you haven't got a leg to stand on

A new exhibit at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve features three unusual inhabitants: striped legless lizards which not only have no legs, but have been found to squeal.

According to Environment ACT staff, the striped legless lizard, or *Delma impar*, has been found to make a high mouse-like call which it apparently uses to communicate with others.

The high ultrasonic pitch of the squeal is hard for humans to pick up and is similar to that of some bats, but very unusual for lizards.

The three small lizards were rescued from development sites in Canberra and transferred to Tidbinbilla.

Visitors to the reserve can now observe them in a new information display at the visitor centre and gain a greater understanding of the creature, which is native to the local area.

The striped legless lizard looks similar to a snake, but is harmless. It has teeth, not fangs like a snake, and if examined closely can be observed to have small vestigial stumps where its legs once were.

It shelters in grass tussocks and spends its winters underneath them, or in the burrows of spiders and insects, on which it feeds.

It is listed both locally and internationally as a threatened species. Major threats to its

survival come from loss and fragmentation of its habitat, modification and degradation of grassland, and urbanisation.

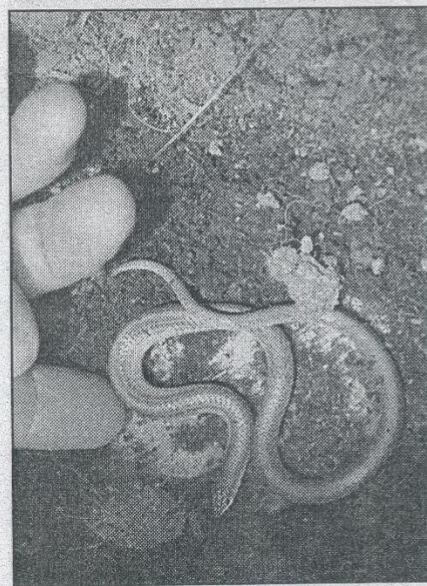
The manager of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Peter Hann, said the display featured the three lizards in a habitat constructed of other threatened local flora.

"The grasses are all from the local area, and are threatened by the changing environment," he said.

A member of staff said the lizards also squealed when they were handled or moved.

"It freaked me out when I first heard it," she said. "It's not the kind of sound I expected a lizard to make."

— ANDREW PURCHES

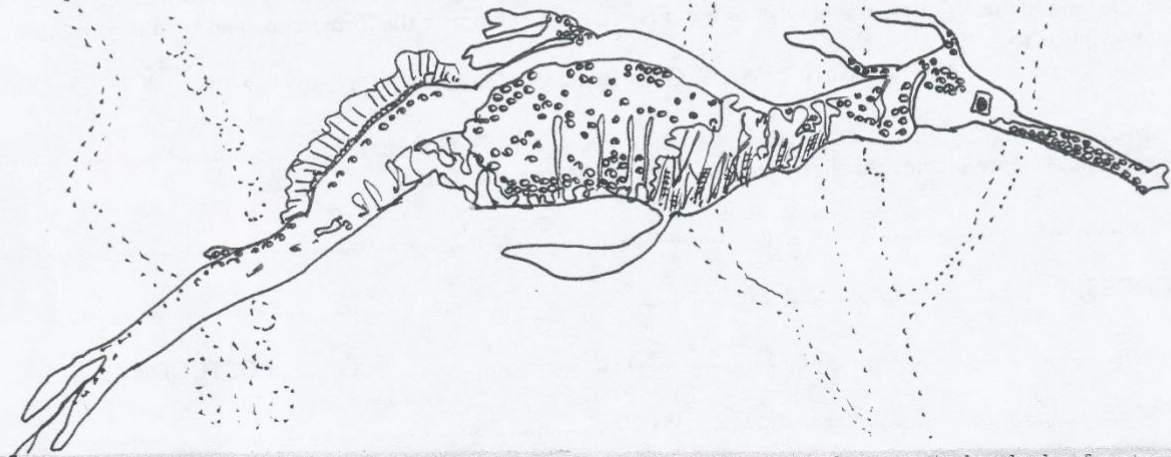


New exhibit at Tidbinbilla: a striped legless lizard.



## A SMALL DRAGON WITH BIG FUTURE.

Canberra Times December 27, 1998



### Adelaide

Scientists are unravelling the mystery of a unique Australian sea creature, the exotic star of a budding international tourism industry.

Rod Connolly, a marine biologist from Queensland's Griffith University who has travelled to South Australia just to study the Leafy Sea Dragon — also known as the Weedy Sea Dragon — said research into the ecology of the animal was a priority with the species under pressure from illegal collectors and vulnerable to coastal pollution.

And he said learning more about the Leafy Sea Dragon would help inform tourists who travelled from around the world to see them. "They're just amazing to look at and there is a budding tourism industry where international

visitors come to dive with these creatures," Dr Connolly said.

"They have to come here, this is the only place where they live — in southern Australia."

Leafy Sea Dragons are found mainly in Western Australia and South Australia with a few in Victoria and are thought to be rare, although scientists are still finding out how rare they are.

They belong to the same family as sea horses but have a spectacular camouflage of seaweed-like appendages.

Dr Connolly's research, supported by the SA Research and Development Institute, has involved trials in tracking the animals with interesting results.

He found that while the Leafy Sea Dragons tended to stay in one area for a number of days, they would swim to

places up to hundreds of metres away before returning to their original spot, for reasons not fully understood.

"They're homely creatures. This is really important because in terms of management plans for this species, it's really important to know whether, if you lost the animal for some reason from an area, there is any chance that they will re-colonise that area," he said.

"There are several pressures on these animals. One is collectors are always keen to take them. And they are caught accidentally by trawlers. Secondly, because they live in our coastal waters, there is a chance that they will be directly affected by pollution, or their habitat will be affected by pollution and they might be lost from an area."

## Science explores new frontiers to preserve historic red gum

By SIMON GROSE

In 1824 William Hovell and Hamilton Hume camped by the Murray River during their expedition from Yass to Port Phillip Bay. To mark the occasion, Hovell carved the date into the bark of a Murray River Red Gum.

Some 175 years later the tree is dying but its genetic code will survive in new trees "cloned" from shoots taken from the old survivor.

At CSIRO Forestry's Yarralumla laboratories Vic Hartney, a specialist in micropropagation of trees, is halfway through the process.

"We grafted the shoots to root stock of river red gum,"

Mr Hartney said yesterday.

"Successful grafting from an old river red-gum tree like the Hovell tree is always difficult, but we managed to produce a number of healthy plants."

These grafts were done in late November. As they grow, the best-performing individuals will be selected and copies propagated as cuttings or tissue cultures.

"Within six months we'll have some copies of the Hovell tree," he said.

These new and vigorous copies of the original tree will be supplied to Albury City Council for replanting in the city. But the project

has a wider value, of enlarging the laboratory's resource base and providing a test-bed for its propagation techniques.

"We intend to use these clonal propagation techniques to get superior trees into our breeding nursery," Mr Hartney said.

The work focuses on developing improved strains of Murray River Red Gum, *eucalyptus Grandus*, and hybrids of the two trees.

"We select the best hybrids and the best pure species for farm-forestry developments or planting in areas of saline or acid soil."

CT  
13/1/98



# FIELD NATURALISTS ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA Incorporated

The Field Naturalists Association of Canberra was formed in 1981. The aim of the club is to stimulate interest in the natural history of the ACT through regular meetings and field outings. Meetings are usually held on the first Thursday of each month. Field outings are also planned each month and range from day outings to long weekends and camping. The emphasis is on informality and fun. New members are always welcome, especially family groups and young people. Information on activities is circulated in the monthly newsletter. If you wish to join FNAC, please complete the form below and send it with the appropriate subscription to:

The Treasurer, FNAC, GPO Box 249, Canberra ACT 2601

FAMILY NAME: ..... FIRST NAME: .....

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

POSTAL ADDRESS: .....

SUBURB: ..... STATE: ..... POSTCODE: .....

PHONE: HOME: ..... WORK: .....

SUBSCRIPTION ENCLOSED: \$..... Single/Family \$20; Concession \$12 (pensioners and F/T students).

How did you hear about FNAC? FRIEND  SHOPFRONT  OTHER

## FIELD NATURALISTS ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC.

TO FOSTER AN INTEREST IN, AN AWARENESS AND AN UNDERSTANDING OF NATURE.



If unclaimed return to:  
THE SECRETARY  
GPO BOX 249  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Registered by Australia Post

POSTAGE PAID  
AUSTRALIA

SURFACE  
MAIL

Print Post Approved  
No PP233744/00022

PRINT POST

NO. IN BUNDLE

POST TOWN OR SORTING DIVISION

STATE

POSTCODE