



FIELD NATTER

Field Naturalist's
Association of
Canberra

July 2006

Field Naturalist's Association of Canberra

Conservation in Costa Rica — a photographic journey

Thursday July 6th, at
8:00 pm. Meeting de-
tails are on the back
page of the newsletter

Deb Saunders

Costa Rica is unique in many ways, including the fact that it has the greatest proportion of land protected in conservation reserves of any country in the world. As a result, nature tourism is the second biggest income earner in the country and large natural areas remain relatively untouched. Costa Rica is a relatively safe destination with little of the turmoil experienced elsewhere in Central America. With coastlines on both the Pacific and Caribbean Oceans

and numerous mountain ranges dividing them, there is an amazing diversity of natural environments and wildlife to be discovered. These environments range from mysterious cloud forests and active volcanoes, to tropical palm fringed beaches and crocodile infested lowland swamps. This presentation is a photographic journey of my experiences in Costa Rica as a conservation volunteer, aiming to provide a unique perspective on this tiny country, its people and wildlife.



Butter Tiger Butterfly—Costa Rica

Field trip- Lake Ginninderra Beginners Bird walk Sunday July 9 at 2 pm

Lake Ginninderra is a wonderland for birds in Winter. We will be meeting at Beissel St (In the middle) and then walking along the Western edge of the Lake. A great diversity of birds can be found here even in Winter. Such as darters, pied comorants and other cormorants as well as honeyeaters, woodswallows, hopefully

brown quail and crested shrike tits, finches and swallows. Bring good walking shoes but otherwise the walk is relatively easy. Contact Benj Whitworth on 0409 544 557 if you need to. Please bring binos and a bird book and beginners are encouraged. If you are experienced, then please come and help the beginners.



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Book Review

The Bedside Book of Birds

I received an unusual bird book for Christmas this year, *The Bedside Book of Birds – An Avian Miscellany* - by Canadian birdwatcher Graeme Gibson, who spent fifteen years collecting these “literary and artistic forms our affinity for birds has taken over the centuries”. Included among the articles on human/bird interaction are stories of mythology and folk tales and such diverse writers as Ovid, Kafka, Gilbert White or Darwin are quoted. It's a truly beautiful book with, as a bonus, many reproductions of bird paintings going back to the 14th century. I dip into it every now and then as is intended, usually to be amazed by the fanciful and cruel attitude of our ancestors to birds. In spite of its lack of Australian content I thought *Natters* might nevertheless be interested in an occasional quote so here goes with the first one, by Graeme Gibson himself:

“... On the way back it occurred to me that there were undoubtedly more skins of Gundlach's Hawk in museums around the world than there were live birds in the whole of Cuba. In the 19th century most people treated birds as if they were stamps waiting to be included in the prize collection. As a result, countless thousands of birds and their eggs were collected. Considered a necessary part of scientific behaviour, this kind of killing was done by men as important as Audubon, who once wrote that he felt incomplete if he didn't kill a hundred birds a day. As one of the first bird artists to use fresh models – which he meticulously posed after threading thin wires into their bodies – Audubon would sometimes kill a dozen individuals before finding the one he wanted. Most of us are defined by the age we live in – Audubon included – and in the nineteenth century birds were routinely slaughtered in astonishing numbers. Audubon reports that in a single day forty-eight thousand Golden Plovers were gunned down near New Orleans.”

Contributed by Phyl Goddard

The Bedside Book of Birds: An avian miscellany by Graeme Gibson, Allen and Unwin, *Crows Nest*, 2005 hb, 370pp, colour illustrations. RRP \$59.95

Wildflowers on the Web

Containing 87 watercolours, Marianne Collinson Campbell's album *Wild flowers, fruit and butterflies of Australia* has now been digitised. The album was acquired by the National Library in 2005 and is a beautiful example of the way in which nineteenth century Australian women painted as a pastime. It provides an insight into the life of a member of the Campbell family who were early settlers in the Canberra region.

Many of the botanical species depicted have been identified by National Library volunteer Barrie Hadlow.



NEWS

New Members Welcome to **Shirley Daniels** (and Warwick), from Wanniasa and **Lyndall Young**, from Phillip

Field Naturalists Association of Canberra Prize - 2005

FNAC has received a letter from ANU advising us that the 2005 prize has been awarded to Jessica Bolton. The prize is awarded annually to a student studying 4 or more courses from Botany, Zoology and Ecology and Evolution. The awardees each year have achieved the best result across all the relevant courses. We'll offer Jessica a book voucher to the value of \$100 and hope that she'll be able to come to a meeting for an informal presentation.

ANU also acknowledged our generosity which allows the University to acknowledge high academic achievement. Although prestige underlies the value of our prize, I think it would be appropriate to increase the value of the prize & will suggest this to our committee. (Rosemary Blemings)

Early Advice The Burbidge/Chippendale spring wildflower celebration on Black Mountain is Sunday morning 15 October 2006. It will be led by Gwyn and Geoff Clarke. Further details will appear later or contact Jean Geue 6251-

The Darleks of the future -or how robots could control animals

A team of Belgian researchers have developed robots that are specially designed to control insects and they say similar techniques could be used on farm animals.

In the experiment, cubic insect-like robots, or insbots, were used to control a colony of cockroaches.

The robots, which are no larger than a thumbnail, are fitted with two motors, wheels, a rechargeable battery and several computer processors.

They were coated with cockroach pheromones for the experiment, and programmed to respond to the cockroach movements. Cockroach pheromones were used because they are better understood than those of other gregarious insects, according to the researchers.

The robots were used to make the cockroaches behave in ways

that were against their natural tendencies. Specifically, the researchers managed to get the cockroaches to move into a pool of light, which is something they would not naturally do.

The autonomous insbots react to signals and responses from individual insects. This results in a chain reaction or reaction between the artificial and natural agents.

The researchers also collected data and developed mathematical models describing the collective behavior of sheep, such as clustering together in a field.

The information could eventually be used to make robots control animals. A robot interacting with animals, even if it is not mobile, could be used for numerous tasks, such as herding or milking.

The indian myna - species of the month Chris Bunn & Jean Gene

'Because it is mainly a scavenger of streets, parks and rubbish dumps, the bird has not caused any economic harm, and on the other hand, it is esteemed as an "entertainer" — its strutting mannerisms and rollicking chatter amuse many people.' So wrote Neville Cayley in my second edition of *What bird is that?* published in 1958 — most people I think would disagree with this statement today.

Introductions

This semi-domesticated bird appears to have been introduced from its natural home in South-east Asia in 1863 and 1872. The Common Myna, a member of the starling family, is closely associated with human habitation along the east and south-east coasts of Australia. In 1883, it was introduced into the cane fields of north-eastern Queensland to combat insect pests, particularly plague locusts and cane beetles. Other releases occurred throughout the east, and by the 1940s and 1950s the Common Myna was established in many metropolitan areas. The attempted introduction of Common Mynas at Launceston, Tasmania in 1900 and later in 1955 both failed. Some sightings have occurred since, however, probably of birds that have flown there from the mainland. Between 1968 and 1971, one hundred and ten mynas were intentionally released in the ACT suburb of Forest

Distribution

The Bioclimatic Prediction System, BIOCLIM, has been used to produce a climate profile for the present distribution of the Common Myna in Australia. This climate profile was then used to predict further areas in Australia which are climatically suitable for colonisation by the Myna. Suitable areas were predicted as occurring throughout the eastern regions of Australia from north of Cairns, through to south-east South Australia. Further areas predicted as suitable occurred on the gulf peninsulas of South Australia and in the extreme south-west corner

of Western Australia. Much of the predicted area occurs in the more intensively settled regions of Australia where considerable suitable habitat for the Common Myna exists. The hypothesis that Common Myna range expansion is limited above latitude 40°S due to unsuitable climate was supported by this study. Colder regions of south-eastern Australia were also predicted to be unsuitable.

Interestingly, although earlier bird books describe the bird being present in the suburbs of Adelaide there are no records in the present bird atlas. It seems that every time they have appeared they have been destroyed.

Diet

They find most food on the ground walking or hopping about. Their diet is a mix of invertebrates and fruits, scraps found at rubbish tips, on roads, and from places where stock and poultry are fed. They also eat chicks, eggs and lizards.

Nesting

They are pugnacious birds that compete successfully for nesting sites in buildings, tree hollows and fence posts, where they create an untidy nests from a range of materials.

Current Action

As mentioned in last month's *Field Natter* a new action group has been formed that aims to protect native birds from the threat posed by Indian Mynas through a strategy that involves:

- raising public awareness that this bird is a serious environmental threat, not just a nuisance;
- informing the public on how to limit the Myna's spread by reducing its feeding, nesting and roosting opportunities; and
- a humane reduction program.

To join the group or their email network contact Bill Handke on 6231 7461 or handke@grapevine.com.au

Editorial

Philip Bell's article on the regeneration of Mount Painter raises yet again an extremely important issue— fire protection and the environment. Only last week *The Australian* published an article on the recent disfiguration of Fraser Island with a fire trail across the island. Apart from the loss of natural habitat fire trails provide an easy pathway for predators. In Bendigo a small reserve had a number of rare plants destroyed, not by the fire trail but by the vehicles creating the fire trail.

We must protect human life and property, but in doing so, do we have to mutilate the natural bush. As Philip's article demonstrates we need also to protect the environment and especially encourage the regeneration through protection of saplings.

Chris Bunn

Note—All opinions in this newsletter is from the contributor and does not necessarily reflect the views of the club

Regeneration of Mt Painter - bad news and good

Philip Bell

During the century of white settlement before the Canberra area became our national capital in 1913, most of Canberra's forest and woodland was cleared for grazing.

This transformation of our landscape was largely caused by colonial social policy adopted after the end of the gold rushes. Poor unemployed gold diggers flooded Sydney looking for work. Food riots erupted. So the colonial government scattered the poor by offering them small and uneconomic plots of land for farming, far removed from Sydney, including around Canberra.

In order to retain their leases, new landholders had to prove they were "working the land", mainly by tree clearing for agriculture. This is when Mt Painter and other Canberra hills were rendered bare and treeless.

We are all familiar with W B Griffin's vision for the inner hills of Canberra to be re-

Large numbers of saplings were destroyed on Mt Painter

afforested to form our city's landscape backdrop. In 1996, Mt Painter became the last of the "inner hills" of Canberra overlooking Parliament House to be taken out of grazing.

On that date, the Mt Painter hilltop paddock was incorporated into Canberra Nature Park and hilltop rehabilitation began.

The friends of Mt Painter wondered how long this might take. Would it be 50 years or 150 years or longer - given

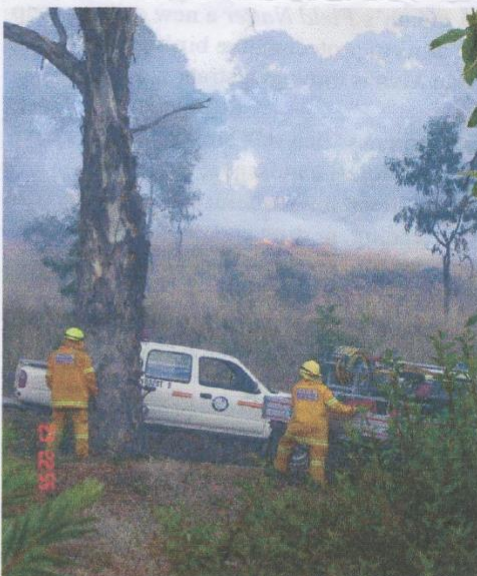
that degradation from overgrazing had been so prolonged?

Black Mountain forest was able to bounce back within 50 years or so of the end of grazing, because clearing and grazing there had lasted only some 50 years - and weeds had not become so established.

In recent months there are two stories to tell about how well Mt Painter's regeneration might proceed - both a good news and a bad news story.

First the bad news

The Parks Service has been destroying valued plantings and regrowth on Mt Painter.



April 2006 a backburn of the northern slopes of Mt Painter, behind my back fence in Cook. Well established cassinias which we planted 15 years ago and hickory wattles were slashed and burned beyond regeneration.

Regeneration of Mt Painter (continued)

Our recent disastrous bushfire experience – caused largely by poor judgment and incompetence by the authorities – has recently seen a more energetic slash-and-burn policy integrated into Canberra Nature Park land management. Last April, Aranda bushland and Mt Painter were backburned for fuel reduction.

Large numbers of saplings were destroyed on Mt Painter

Followed by the good news

Choughs appear to have moved onto Mt Painter. I have always envied Black Mountain and Aranda Bushland their families of choughs, so well studied by Rob Heinsohn. Until recently, choughs have



Above, a flock of a dozen choughs foraging where fire crew were standing two days beforehand last April – behind our back fence, almost



We see the same flock of a dozen choughs in late June in our back garden (cowering from magpie bullies).

made only cursory daylight foraging visits across Bindubi Street onto the lower eastern edge of Mt Painter.

Following last April's extensive backburn of Aranda Bushland, a flock of choughs moved onto the northern slopes of Mt Painter. I wondered at the time if this visit was just a one-off, a desperate response to the scorched earth policy being implemented in Aranda Bushland. But see below It looks as if choughs have moved onto Mt Painter as a new home.

Bird List – Collector 4th June 2006

Compiled by Grahame and Nicola Clark during the June Field Nat's outing

- Sulphur-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*) – a few flying over
- Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*) – several small flocks
- White-throated Treecreeper (*Cormobates leucophaeus*) – spread throughout area
- Spotted Pardalote (*Pardalotus punctatus*) – heard once
- White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*) – several seen and heard
- Weebill (*Smicromis brevirostris*) – two parties heard
- Brown Thornbill (*Acanthiza pusilla*) – a few seen and heard
- Yellow Thornbill (*Acanthiza nana*) – quite a few flocks
- Striated Thornbill (*Acanthiza lineata*) – several flocks
- White-eared Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus leucotis*) – several heard
- White-naped Honeyeater (*Melithreptus lunatus*) – one flock
- Eastern Spinebill (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) – two heard
- Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*) – a pair seen
- Grey Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*) – several seen and heard
- Mistletoe Bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*) – one bird

Also at one stage I thought I briefly heard Glossy Black-Cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*) but was unable to confirm as there were no further calls. The habitat would have been suitable but there were no obvious signs of feeding anywhere.

Grahame Clark



**Field Naturalist's
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:

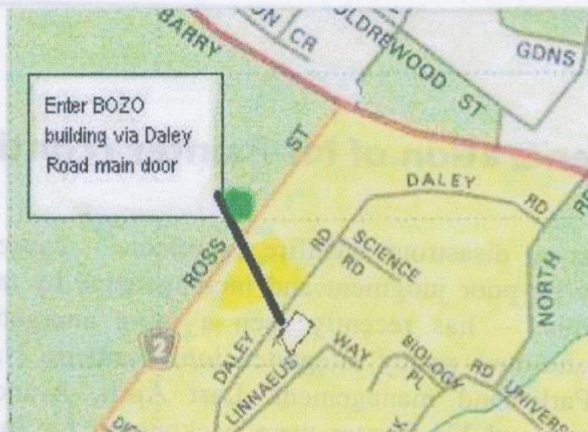
President: Benj Whitworth, tel 02 6254 4556

Secretary: Rosemary Blemings, tel 02 6258 4724

Website: www.geocities.com/fieldnaturalist/index.html

Newsletter editor: Chris Bunn <chris_b@webone.com.au

Tel 02 6241 2968. Member contributions welcome.



Monthly meeting venue: Division of Botany and Zoology, Building 44, Daley Rd, Australian National University. Park in Linnaeus Way. Meetings start at 8 pm and are followed by refreshments.

FIELD NATURALISTS ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC.

GPO Box 249
CANBERRA ACT 2601

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MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

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