June 2007

FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA

FIELD NATTER

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

MEETING THURSDAY June 7, 2007
8:00 pm Australian National University

Meeting details back page

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF PATAGONIA

IAN FRASER
LOCAL FAUNA AND FLORA EXPERT

Patagonia; the Andes, the Straits of Magellan, vast plains and ancient beech forests. It is a huge lightly populated land of great and dramatic beauty pointing far into the Southern Ocean towards Antarctica.
The land face has been – and continues to be – shaped by glaciers. The plants and animals however are the result of three quite separate episodes of South American history. This was the time as part of Gondwana, with the subsequent sharing of old plant and animal groups with other southern lands; the long isolation of nearly 60 million years, during which evolution proceeded uninfluenced by the directions being pursued elsewhere; and finally the recent collision with North America, which introduced a host of new players. Local naturalist Ian Fraser visited there last summer, and is keen to share his delight and excitement at what he found there.

GLACIAR PERITO MORENO, PARQUE NACIONAL LOS GLACIARES,IS ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING IN THE WORLD AND ONE OF THE FEW THAT IS STILL ADVANCING.

INSIDE

DETAILS OF THE JUNE FIELD OUTING
Coppins Crossing- Sunday 10th June 2pm

Field trip-
The proposed Molonglo valley development may include building a dam downstream of Coppins Crossing. We will be visiting this area to get a better understanding of the site. The area includes good patches of casuarina (recovering after 2003 bushfires), kangaroo grassland on the slopes. And interesting riffles and pools where waterbirds can be found and you can see water dragons in warmer months. Birds usually seen include scarlet robins, speckled warblers, lots of finches, overwintering honeyeaters. Sometimes diamond firetails, wedgetailed eagles, hobby's and varied sitellas can also be seen.
Meet at Coppins Crossing at 2pm. Although the walk is not far the path isn't good, being stony (river stones), steep in parts, sandy and slippery/rocks in other parts. I would rate it as medium to medium-difficult and is not appropriate for people with walking difficulties. The walk will take about 2 hours. Bring good walking shoes, binos, camera, For further information, contact Benj on 62544 556.

Outing: Bungonia Gorge- report

The last time I went to Bungonia Gorge it is possible the freeway wasn't there. So my directions confused people a little because you couldn't turn off easily at Goulburn. Nevertheless, all the Field Nats travellers managed to find Bungonia Gorge, most turning off just before Marulan (27km from Goulburn). (The Signs are good from there).

After meeting-up, the Field Natters and visitors had lunch at Adams lookout in the Bungonia State Conservation Area. Some like Kevin couldn't wait to see the Gorge, while our Table of George, Damon, Paula, and Helen and Bob Lehman ate lunch. Many years ago when I visited the Gorge I thought it was impressive, and was a little worried I had exaggerated it in my own mind. So I was pleasantly surprised when all the Field Natterers saw the Gorge and they, and I, were amazed! We had great views of the steep-walled 'Slot Canyon' and precariously growing grass trees on jagged cliff edges. While down the bottom were wet forest gullies and rainforest. Girt read the signs, while Damon was snapping away photos, and Philip and Maureen Bell looked over the edge. So it was very hard to pull people away.

We drove off to another lookout 'Bungonia Lookdown' where we had great views of the Mine. The geology and geography of the region is explained at this lookout, as is the history (Goulburn Field Naturalists played an important role). While a Lyrebird nearby serenaded us on local bird calls, including imitating currawongs and whistlers. An Eastern spinebill was also heard. Some flowering Senecio daisies and westringias (?) lined the path.

While George and Sylvie walked the local area, the other 16 of us headed off on a 2km walk back to Adams Lookout. Some of us lagged behind. The path was rough, rocky and steep. The very sparse vegetation, mainly Stringybark forest, was very dry. I heard a grey butcherbird, but there wasn't much bird life. Heading down into a totally different Wet Gully we finally caught the main walking group. Some of the more brave hikers walked down a slippery track (where I lost my Binos down a cliff), to the Mass Cave. A very steep entrance was investigated by Kevin and Ania and they found a big canyon that had caved in. Bungonia is known for its caves and caving.

We regathered and headed up the steep gully, some lucky person (was it Lyndall/Sybil) found a huge Greenhood orchid. People chatted and walked until Leonie and Steve spotted a lyrebird flashing across the trail (although I didn't see it). While the walkers at the back observed a very tame pair of WT treecreepers. Before we knew it we were walking up through allocasuarinas (?) to Adams lookout. Some of us headed to the lookout for a final afternoon view and found 2 photographers (in fact Ania became a model!). Most of us didn't want to leave, even though it was 4:45pm and the gates may be locked at 5, yet Paula and Damon stayed back to take more photos and maybe they still haven't left. I think everyone on the walk was very impressed and vowed to go back, and I encourage everyone else to do so if they have the chance (only 26km from the Frwy).

Benj

Snippets

Ravens stealing golf balls

The mid-week walk (COG) visited the Molonglo/Duntroon region. "As our group walked up Hopkins Road in Duntroon a group of golfers greeted us and suggested there were enough crows around for us to loo-kat. They then commented that they had had 10 balls stolen by crows that morning. A number of responses, some involving cattle, sprang to my mind but they were pleasant guys so I kept my peace.

This was just as well, since we hadn't gone more than 20 metres when we heard the golfers yell something like "Get out of there!" and on looking up the fairway saw a raven pushing one of their balls around. As the irate golfer whizzed up in his buggy the raven flew off with ball in beak landing at Cambell Rd where it positioned the ball on a tree stump and attempted to open it up. It failed and eventually flew off in the general direction of the War Memorial (and perhaps Russell Offices)."

Martin Butterfield

Photograph by Margaret Kalms taken on the Sept 2006 Field Nats outing

An enterprising snail

Most people will have noticed that paper left lying on the ground or in the garden is gradually eaten by snails & slugs. Here's a variant on that theme.
I had place two sheets of A4 (letters) in a plastic wrapper recycled from protecting a journal. This was placed by trays of plants outside awaiting collection.
After a couple of days I changed my mind about including the letters & picked up the plastic. There was a snail adhering to the plastic. When I took the snail off I realised there was an eaten-through area of paper inside the plastic. This was approximately the size of a ten-cent piece. I then realised the snail had eaten the paper by 'chewing' through the regulation 2.5mm hole in the plastic. It had also been able to manipulate the hole so that it could reach more of the paper.
Needless to say I was impressed & tossed the snail into the garden rather than destroying its valuable genes.

Rosemary

A brave but hungry magpie

One day last week I ate my lunch, seated cross-legged at a lonely site close to Burley Griffin lake. I took scant notice of a magpie who flew up seeking some morsels, until I felt a little peck. Looking down the maggie was almost under my upraised foot having s little peck from the sole of my shoe. Naturally, although my offerings were meagre I had to then share them with this brave (or stupid!) magpie.

Chris

Nature on the net

(Information from the Dubbo Field Nats newsletter March 2007)

The Canowindra fish field was discovered by a road worker in 1956. He put aside a slab of rock which looked interesting. When it was fully examined 114 fish fossils were reveled. This took some years. And more years to locate the site again. Finally a trial dig started in 1993. The fossil stratum yielded 3,70 specimens of many types of fishes, including one fish two metres long. The site is thought to be a small lake that dried out 360 million years ago.
The Canowindra fish field is now fenced and *The Age of Fishes* museum has been set up in Canowindra with specimens and replicas. The fish field is considered a world class fossil site of considerable scientific value.
Canowindra is about 2½ hours north of Canberra
More detail can be found at the Australian Museum website shown below

http://www.amonline.net.au/palaeontology/field_sites/canowindra.htm

MACQUARIE ISLAND CRISIS

Editor's note—this is an extract from a number of internet sites but especially the WWF. Many conservation issues are difficult to overcome, but this one just needs some extra effort

Macquarie Island is a subantarctic island located in the Southern Ocean

Macquarie Island, or "Macca" as it is generally referred to, is a Tasmanian State. Australia operates a research station at the northern end of the island

Macquarie Island is 34 km long and up to 5 km wide. It consists of a long, north-south trending plateau, 200-350m above sea level, surrounded on all sides by steep slopes or cliffs. The highest point is Mt Hamilton at 410 m, and there are only two peaks over 400 m. Macquarie Island was listed as a World Heritage Area in 1997

The climate of Macquarie Island is cool, moist, windy and typically unpleasant. Macquarie Island's oceanic climate means that the island does not experience large temperature extremes and aside from changes in day length, there is little difference between the seasons. Mean temperatures for summer and winter are 7.0^{o} C and 3.3^{o} C respectively, and annual mean rainfall is approximately 900mm and falls an average of 310 days each year. Winds generally blow from the west or northwest at an average velocity of 29 km per hour (13 m per second).

Macquarie Island is unique in its origin in that it is formed purely of deep oceanic crust that emerged above the surface of the ocean approximately 600 000 - 700 000 years ago.

The island is a breeding ground for approximately 100 000 seals and 3-4 million seabirds. There are four main species of seal present: the southern elephant seal, subantarctic fur seal, Antarctic fur seal and New Zealand fur seal; and four species of penguin: royal penguins, king penguins, gentoo penguins and rockhopper penguins. Penguins comprise 90% of the islands bird life. The remainder of the bird fauna includes petrels, albatrosses, skuas, gulls, cormorants, ducks, redpolls, starlings, prions and shearwaters.

Macquarie Island is home to 45 currently recorded species of vascular plants (but no true woody plants), around 150 bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) over 150 lichens, more than 260 fungi (excluding microfungi), 25 slime moulds, at least 120 freshwater algae, and 110 marine and littoral algae. There are no trees, shrubs or other woody plants.

In the past a range of animals (including horses, donkeys, pigs, goats, cattle, sheep, dogs, cats, rabbits, rats, mice and wekas) have been introduced to the island, but only four introduced mammalian species have remained in recent times. They are: feral cats (now believed to have been eliminated), rabbits, black rats and house mice. These animals have had notable impacts on the indigenous flora and fauna. Since control programs were implemented in 1978, rabbit numbers have decreased from 150 000 to 10 000-20 000 animals but since the elimination of cats their numbers have increased significantly.

The rabbit infestation on Macquarie Island has reached a crisis point. The island is in a critical state and its condition is worsening, according to WWF's Andreas Glanznig, the independent observer on the Commonwealth-Tasmanian government Macquarie Island inspection team.

"This is the most cut and dry issue I have seen in nearly twenty years of conservation work - the Macquarie Island rabbit plague has resulted in the most severe impact to any of Australia's World Heritage properties. It has set a new low in Australia's management of its World Heritage estate," said Mr Glanznig, WWF-Australia's Biodiversity Program Leader. The luxuriant blanket of vegetation that encouraged expeditioners to call the island the 'green sponge' or the 'green emerald' is no more," said Mr Glanznig.

Most of the island has been trashed by the plague of rabbits devouring the island's vegetation, leading to increased erosion and land slips. Much of this damage has only happened in the last few years.

Unless key parts of the eradication plan now the program will be delayed from winter 2009 until winter 2010. This will result in further irreversible impacts and wildlife deaths.

"It is an absolute folly that the Tasmanian Government is holding their own island to ransom, rather than working cooperatively with the Australian Government at high levels to get the rabbit and rodent eradication plan started and maintain the momentum," said Mr Glanznig.

"The Tasmanian Government needs to demonstrate its good will by putting some dollars on the table. Alternatively, if they can't afford to properly manage the island, ownership should be quickly transferred to the Commonwealth," said Mr Glanznig.

Australia's two other sub-Antarctic islands, Heard and McDonald, are already controlled by the Commonwealth. Macquarie Island is a sub-Antarctic island halfway to Antarctica.

In an disappointing move, Tasmanian Environment Minister Paula Wriedt this week confirmed the Tasmanian Government is refusing to be part of the solution and will not contribute any funding towards the eradication plan for rabbits and rodents on Macquarie Island.

"Despite a commitment from the Australian Government to pay half of the $24.6 million needed to carry out the vital eradication plan, the Tasmania Government is simply refusing to take any responsibility to implement the long-term solution for the island," said WWF's Invasive Species Policy Officer, Julie Kirkwood.

In refusing to co-fund the Macquarie Island rabbit and rodent eradication plan, Tasmania is increasing the vulnerability of the threatened grey-headed albatross to extinction in Australia. The only known breeding site in Australia for the birds is on Macquarie Island's Petrel Peak and this area is being rapidly degraded by severe rabbit overgrazing.

"The simple fact is that Tasmania owns the island and is responsible for its day-to-day management, including feral

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Species of the Month
Diamond Firetail Finch (Stagonopleura guttata)

Description

This small bird, a finch, is about 12cm long. It has a red beak, grey crown, brown back and wings, white belly and throat, with a black bar across its chest and black flanks with white spots. Its call is deep for a small bird, with a short descend, then long rise, 'two- bourrr' (2, 3, 4, 5).

Confusion species

From a distance might be confused for a redbrowed firetail because of the small size and red beak and rump, but Diamonds have black on the chest and spots on the flanks. Distinguished from Double bar finches by the spots on the side and rump. Brown quail have a similar call.

Distribution

In the grassy woodland belt and fringing mallee, in South Eastern Australia (2, 5). Mainly West of the coast (5), on the Slopes and Tablelands in our region.


Diamond Firetail

Habitat

They occur in grassy woodland and are described as a declining woodland bird (1). It is hard to obtain any definitive micro-habitat requirements. I have never seen them in 'pure remnant patches'. They often occur in, or adjacent to, farms or recently re-claimed farms, and yet they still appear to have reduced greatly in numbers and range since settlement. I suspect they need a specific range of habitat structure requirements, including some tall remnant gum trees (where they are often seen preening and calling, sometimes nesting), open areas with short grass and bare dirt (where they are often seen feeding), and areas of regrowth gum trees about 3-4m high (for roosting/nesting) (5). They are often found near large water bodies, i.e. the Murrumbidgee.

Physical requirements

Diamond firetails eat mainly grass seeds which they seem to collect from the ground, and will also eat insects (2, 3, 4, 5).

Life cycle

They will mainly breed in spring and autumn, but can breed at any time of year. They lay from 4 to 7 eggs which take about 12 days to hatch (from laying of the 4th egg) and young leave the nest after around 24 days (4, 5). In the *Complete book of Australian birds* it says fledging takes 10 days (2), but this must be a mistake. They remain dependent on the parents for at least a further 3 weeks (4), but probably remain with the parents for an extended period, as small family groups.

Status and Threats

Diamond firetails are described as declining in the ACT region, and listed as 'threatened- vulnerable' in NSW (1: 43). They occur in Yellow box-red gum grassy woodlands, an endangered ecological community, and other lowland woodlands (1).

References

1 ACT Government (2004) *Woodlands for wildlife: ACT lowland woodland conservation strategy*. Action Plan No. 27. Environment ACT, Canberra.

2 Readers Digest (1986) *Complete book of Australian Birds*, Readers Digest, Sydney.

3 Clement, P., Harris, A. and Davis, J. (1993) *Finches and sparrows: an identification guide*. Princeton Uni Press, Princeton.

4 Kingston, R. (1988) *Keeping and breeding Finches and seed-eaters*. Indruss. New Farm.

5 Immelmann, K. (1965) *Australian Finches*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney

Article submitted by Benj

(Continued from page 4)

animal control," Julie said.

"The State has a statutory obligation to responsibly manage the island under its own laws. Not meeting the Australian Government half way on funding the plan, or announcing a reasonable counter-offer continues the stalemate between the Tasmanian and Australian governments."

At worst, WWF was expecting the Tasmanian Government to put a reasonable counter offer to the Australian Government's offer to pay half the $24.6 million bill for the eradication plan but this week's announcement shows the Tasmanian Government has no interest in fulfilling its legal obligations.

"Tasmania's mismanagement of Macquarie Island and continued stalling on finding a solution to the problem of invasive animals on the island is damaging Australia's international reputation as a strong steward of important natural values," Ms Kirkwood said.

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 0409 544 557
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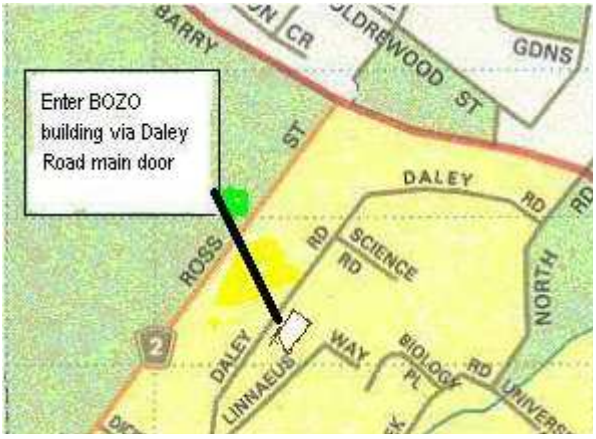

Monthly meeting venue: Division of Botany and Zoology, Building 116, Daley Rd, Australian National University. Park (occasionally the adjacent building 44). Meetings start at 8 pm and are followed by refreshments.

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