

May 2007



FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA

FIELD NATTER

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

MEETING THURSDAY May 3
8:00 pm Australian National University
Meeting details back page

DUGONGS and SEA GRASS MEADOWS

George Heinsohn

"Dr. George Heinsohn (a committee member of the Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra) is a zoologist, ecologist and conservationist who taught and carried out research at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, for more than 30 years. He has done research on marsupials, rainforest rodents, dugongs and dolphins. In 2005, a new species of dolphin, *Orcaella heinsohni* (the Australian snubfin dolphin) was named

after him. His research on dugongs began in 1968 at James Cook University. The talk will cover the biology, ecology and conservation of dugongs, which are the largest grazing mammals that occur naturally in Australia. Although dugongs are tropical and sub-tropical marine mammals, individuals have strayed as far south as the south coast of New South Wales. Dugongs are endangered over most of their range and are vulnerable to extinction in Australian waters.



The **Australian Snubfin Dolphin** (*Orcaella heinsohni*) is a recently recognised species of dolphin. The discovery of a new mammal is rare, experts say. In fact, the Australian Snubfin is the first new dolphin species to be discovered in 56 years. Two scientists at James Cook University, took DNA samples from the population of dolphins off the coast of Townsville, Queensland. The results showed that George Heinsohn, was correct in his hypothesis that the Townsville population was in fact a new species.

Editorial

The article on page 5 of this month's *Field Natter* is a first — a contribution from a friend about the rhythm of life. Hopefully this may encourage others to produce similar articles, with the only proviso being a connection with nature.

Also many thanks to Benj, not only for a wonderful outing in April, but also through contributing a description of the outing on page 4. I feel sorry for any who couldn't make it to this outing. As we know nature can be fickle, but on this outing we hit 'paydirt' with at least 2000 honeyeaters moving through on their annual migration.

First documented in the early 1950s, the autumn exodus of many thousands of honeyeaters from the Canberra region to lower elevations nearer the coast is a special phenomenon. The birds mass together and move from the higher ranges in a general west to east direction following various land features, especially the river systems including the Murrumbidgee Valley.

The availability of tree cover along the Murrumbidgee River is a particular issue, as the migrating honeyeaters prefer to make short distance flights between cover rather than crossing extensive open areas. Historically, Point Hut Crossing was a major location for exiting the river corridor but the Angle Crossing area has emerged as a major gathering and exit point in recent years. East of the river at Angle Crossing, the Ingeldene pine plantations used to provide a corridor of cover before the 2003 bushfires. Urban development close to Point Hut and lack of vegetation cover may be the reason for the shift in movement patterns. Revegetation with trees and shrubs at strategic nodes along the Murrumbidgee River is likely to assist movement along and exit from the corridor. (Comment from the **ACT AQUATIC SPECIES AND RIPARIAN ZONE CONSERVATION STRATEGY**)

DETAILS OF THE MAY CLUB OUTING Bungonia Gorge- Sunday May 6th 12pm- 5:30pm

Bungonia is one of NSW's oldest conservation reserves; sections of it were first protected as a water reserve as early as 1872. Bungonia Gorge is a hidden jewel that is easily accessible to Canberrans. Just past Goulburn and off the Freeway (~1 hr from N edge of Canberra), it is the western edge of spectacular limestone gorge country eroded by the Shoalhaven river and also is reminiscent of the Sydney region. Tall cliffs allow for beautiful landscape photo shots, particularly if a sunny afternoon. This is a good spot for birds, also Lyrebirds should be calling at this time of year. Bungonia is 2 or 3 degrees warmer than Canberra and so some plants could still be flowering, particularly with the weather this year, plus Banksias should be in flower.

Although it can be warmer than Canberra still bring your cold and wet weather gear because it can be windy and changeable. Walking is 'medium' depending on the trail, as it can be quite rocky. Bring sunscreen, hats, binos and cold and wet weather gear. Car pooling from Canberra would be useful because of distance and Bungonia Gorge has a park fee (~\$7/car to NPWS)- Call Benj on 62544 556, or Work on 6272 3192

Website- <http://www.argylecounty.com.au/nature/bungonia/index.html>

SLOWING THE CANE TOAD INVASION

Cane toads are the animals that everybody loves to hate, and there have been many attempts to stop the toads' rapid march through tropical Australia. People have tried everything from traps to golf clubs, and from 'toad musters' to proposals for high-tech genetic manipulation – but the toads have marched on regardless. They reached Darwin last year, and now are well on their way to the Western Australian border.

But now, researchers at the University of Sydney think they have found a chink in the toads' armour – a parasite that attacks the toads' lungs, and may be used to reduce toad populations at the invasion front. Importantly, this is a parasite that already occurs in Australian cane toads – but not in all populations. (from the invasive species newsletter)

FIELD NATTING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

You are out in the field and you come upon a strange plant (not an uncommon event for me). You unclip your GFS (global flora scanner) from your belt, take a tiny bite of leaf with a hole punch and press "ID" on the keypad. You soon get a response that, for example, it is the hoary ray-flower (*Anthocercis albicans*). Please you press "Record" and the system marks the time, date and location into your personal database.

Behind this possibility in the future is one of the most exciting biological projects since the sequencing of the human genome. Known as DNA bar coding, the new project is an international effort to develop a data base of life by sequencing short species specific regions of DNA from every living species on Earth.

Lava Tubes - nature on the net



What could be more exciting than hiking inside a volcano, along tunnels that had flowed with molten rock glowing yellow at 2000 degrees.

Lava tube caves are found throughout the world in places where fluid lava has flown over the surface. The longest and most vertically extensive lava tubes known are on the Big Island of Hawaii. Most tubes form when fluid lava flows down the sides of volcanoes, the upper layer begins to cool, and the lava beneath continues to flow in tubular conduits beneath the surface. Due to the insulating effects of the hardened lava above, molten lava is able to travel a considerable distance underground with very little cooling. Tubes may also form when lava follows trenches or gullies on the surface, which then roof over as lava accumulates along the top edges.

Lava tubes contain many features similar to those in limestone caves, such as stalactites and stalagmites, helictites, and a sort of flowstone.

The Undara lava tubes in Queensland are among the longest in the world and provides a wonderful home for colonies of bats. (<http://www.undara.com.au/geo>)

The story begins about 190,000 years ago when volcanic activity was shaping and re-shaping this part of northern Queensland. Undara, the region's second youngest volcano, was funnelling enormous volumes of molten rock out onto the Atherton Tablelands.

Gently sloping plains were flooded in places by an estimated 23 billion cubic metres of lava. It oozed, at

initial temperatures of between 1,175°C and 1,220°C, across 1,550 square kilometres of land. Researchers studying the depth, width and distance travelled estimate that Undara's geological cocktail spewed forth at about 1,000 cubic metres per second - enough to fill 1,500 semitrailer-sized tankers every minute.

This incredible volume along with the terrain, not too steep and not too flat, allowed the lava to flow at a rate conducive to tube formation. Where is filled an existing depression (probably a watercourse), the flow gradually formed a tube.

Once Undara's eruption ceased, the insulated lava drained away, leaving a 100-kilometre-long pipeline. Hundreds of thousands of years have seen weaker sections of the tube collapse to form today's line of depressions and caves. It is this remarkable lava-cast environment in which bats have triumphed.

Find out more about the Undara lava tubes at (<http://www.undara.com.au/geo>)

I hope to make 'nature on the net' a regular feature of the field natter. If you have any favourite nature type website suitable for publication in the newsletter let me know (with a bit of a blurb about it)

NOTE: Those that receive the natter by email should be able to click on the above website direct from your field natter.

- the editor

Extremely rare owl spotted in Peru

The extremely rare Long-whiskered Owlet (*Xenoglaux loweryi*), a species that wasn't discovered until 1976, and until now was only known from a few specimens captured in nets after dark, has been seen in the wild for the first time by researchers monitoring the Area de Conservación Privada de Abra Patricia - Alto Nieva, a private conservation area in Northern Peru. The sighting is considered a holy grail of South American ornithology and has not been accomplished in thirty years, despite the efforts of hundreds of birders. The species is among the world's smallest owls. It is so distinct that it has been named in its own genus: *Xenoglaux* meaning "strange owl" on account of the long wispy feathers or whiskers that stream out from its wild-looking reddish-orange eyes. The owl inhabits the dense undergrowth of mountain forests in a remote part of northern Peru. Its population is estimated to be less than 1,000 birds, and possibly as few as 250. Due to the rapid destruction of its forest habitat and its tiny range, it is inferred that the species is in serious decline. Until recently, the owlet's key habitat was completely unprotected.— from *Science Daily*



CLUB OUTING STORY

Honeyeater Migration Report- April.

I was woken at 7am by rain on the roof, but the shower lasted only 20 seconds. I picked up George and Phyl and we met up with 13 other Field Naturalists at the corner of Monaro Hwy and Angle Crossing Rd at Williamsdale. Crossing the Murrumbidgee, it felt like a Leyland brothers tour, and the river seemed surprisingly deep. I noticed 7 dusky wood swallows 'hawking' from powerlines (presumably also migrating North). We passed numerous farmers in their utes and an abandoned car until we reached our spot on a ridge between Murrumbidgee and Gudgenby rivers.

Honeyeaters: No sooner has we gotten out of the cars when a flock of about 50 honeyeaters flew up, swirled, then headed North East over the ridge. I breathed a sigh of relief. We pulled out our chairs, morning tea, and chatted to each other while flocks of Honey eaters flew over our heads for the next, nearly 2 hours. Flocks were quite large, mainly of 100-200 birds. The most common honeyeaters, by far, were the yellow-faced honey eaters and white-napes. Yellow-faced are easier to see while perched because they tend to sit at the top of the trees, while white-napes tend to sit within branches. But when flying white-napes appear slightly smaller and if you have time to focus your binoculars on them, they have black head, white front and collar on the nape, and red above the eye. Yellow faced are slightly larger, most flocks contained about 50% of each from what I saw. Other honeyeaters seen on the day included a few white ears (a lot bigger with a metallic call), a couple of white plumes, an Eastern spinebill (seen by Philip and Maureen Bell), a fuscous and some par-



dalotes, mainly heading East. Excitingly, a yellow-tufted honeyeater which seemed to be heading in a Northerly direction. Over the two hour period an estimated 2000 honeyeaters were seen, although most people thought many more were seen. It was great discussing honeyeater migration (and how much still isn't known).

Predators: A Hobby zoomed around the area for half an hour and numerous wedgies were seen gliding over, at least 4 at one time. Leonie told us about her experience of being stalked by a Wedgetail. A loose flock of little ravens was seen (about 20 birds) heading South. Later in the day a peregrine flew through.

Tharwa Sandwash: After watching honeyeaters for a couple of hours we headed down to Tharwa Sandwash on the Murrumbidgee river. The water level was the highest I have seen. A grey butcherbird could be heard, we headed South along the river and saw lots of evidence of wombat digging. 3 speckled warblers were seen, redbrows, and a Brown falcon. In summer this is a good spot for rainbow bee eaters and rufous songlarks. Debbie, Nicki, George, and Lyndall lagged behind talking about birds and other animals, while other conversations such as Chris, Maureen, and was it Sylvie and Paula, focussed on weeds.

The Field Nats walkers seemed reluctant to leave. This was gratifying considering I was thinking about cancelling the Field trip when no honeyeaters were reported on the COG-list. Lucky people made it home, because I misdirected people through 'Pine Island' when I meant 'Point Hut crossing' and thanks for oil from Bob and Helen. The next

day at Angle crossing a COG field trip saw only a couple of dozen birds so they really missed out.

Benj

Book Release

Clive Hamilton has a new book to follow *Silencing dissent* about the erosion of democracy in Australia. It's **Scorcher: The dirty politics of climate change.**

Scorcher blows the whistle on the politics of global warming in Australia. Why have our political leaders been so slow to act? Which are the fossil-fuel lobby groups that still set the policy agenda? How many ways can one spin, deceive, lie & obfuscate instead of facing facts and looking for the solutions that are desperately needed?....

It's being featured in the ANU's Meet the Author Series at The Manning Clark Lecture Theatre 1

Tuesday 8th May at 6:30pm

It's free & bookings/ free information are on 6125 4144 or events@anu.edu.au

Silencing dissent came out long before its launch. That may be the case with this one.

The Australia Institute of which Clive's director is now in Manuka. 6162 4140

- Rosemary Blemings

The rhythm of life.

I run and I am learning how to write.

My writing teacher, Mark Tredinnick, in his excellent "the little red writing book" suggests, on just the third page "if you want to write, take a walk. Take it again, sitting down at your desk".

I am in a hurry. This morning, 5 April, 2007 I shall enjoy my regular training run.

It is a slightly foggy morning. The sun barely shows its presence but is warming. I set off nice and early. My first impressions are of spiders' webs woven into the back fence onto the golf course where I start my exercise. The web's tracery holding drops of liquid. I expect that I shall be stopping to admire the spiders' art on my run but the season is wrong. During the winter, one day, I shall take my camera to record these works of art. Today it does not happen. The grass on the course is long but I am soon on the track I understand is the "National Equestrian Track" that celebrates the ride of William Lovell and Hamilton Hume during their exploration of a way between Sydney and Canberra in the 1830's. The track, which also allows access to the ACT Horse Pound, is ten metres wide and shows the defined two lane horse routes. The grass here is uncut, fine and a metre high, in no time my legs and socks are sopping wet and the socks sagging around my ankles. The grass is vividly green in places showing the water course taken after recent rains. The predominant colour of the wild flowers is yellow enlivened occasionally with the regal splendour of Patterson's curse.

I am soon off that part of the track and on the made up road to the stables associated with the Belconnen Pony Club. I again run on the grass verge hoping to reduce wear and tear on my knees but it is most likely too late. Where are the birds that accompany me? Not many about this morning? The stables are alive with activity. The magpie larks screech my approach to warn their kind and the superb fairy-wrens, the yellow-rumped thornbills and the willie wagtails. I could not be happier to be out and about. Once through the stables I am running between the horse paddocks frightening a mob of four and two other kangaroos deeper into the paddocks. One roo bounds the five-wire fence with an insolence – was I ever that agile? I think not. The sky larks fly along the fence in front of me. I get the impression they are enticing me along. They are not singing at this time of morning. A pair of migrating swallows is searching for flies.

I think about this piece of writing that Chris Bunn has suggested I might write to get myself 'published'. The rhythm of life strikes me as a good title for, at the 3K mark, I am running quite well and my footfall has a pleasant regularity. When I am running badly I need to count a rhythm to

achieve a regular stride pattern. At the end of races I sometimes count the number of paces for the last kilometre to help me get to the finish line. 826 paces and I am going quite nicely – over 900 paces and I am certainly out of medal contention. My path undulates, but not too much, and bends to afford glimpses of the Ginninderra Creek. The creek is very placid this morning. In December / January the creek was reduced to a series of tepid pools. The carp were obvious as they sought food with their backs out of the shallows and in danger of sun-burn. I am enjoying my run. I am also looking out for a fox near to the creek although I am probably out a bit too late this morning – I have not seen one since the Spring.

My soliloquy is disturbed when a field duck explodes into flight beneath my feet. I had not been concentrating – neither had the duck, sat in a mere puddle. I am approaching a weir. I often see herons here. Not today. But I do spy two kookaburras on a tree branch, sitting apart and looking like two winos huddled against the cold. They do not laugh at me. Perhaps I am running quite well? I have reached the 6K mark and bigger birds are more apparent. I have magpies for company and the pied currawongs gurgle at me though the small copses. The cockatoos are silent, for a while, while they feed on the ground. In the air the galahs chatter on their way. Crested pigeons whistle out of my path. A raven allows me a cursory 'skwark' from his taller tree perch. I ponder the fact there have been no blackberries this year. The past two years I have collected berries, enough for my wife to be able to share them with workmates, from the side of the path. None this year. I suppose it was too hot and too dry for the berries to form?

I am nearing the end of my run. I am approaching 'civilisation' again. The background rhythm changes to one of the clang from the refuse collection and the sound of a lawn-mower blades scraping against stones. It is a different rhythm and evocative. I am nearly home. I have been out for approaching an hour. Thinking about recording the run has made it easy and fun. I start the warm down back on the golf course. I notice the straw-necked ibis on the course, they were most likely there when I went out. The front of my vest has accumulated a fine layer of fog but I am warm. What's that? I spy a striated pardalote and follow his movements as he seeks insects under the tree leaves. The pardalote has his own distinctive rhythm. I have enjoyed sharing it briefly with him.

The rhythm of life has a powerful beat.

an original article by Chris Yardley

Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra

Who are the Field Naturalists?

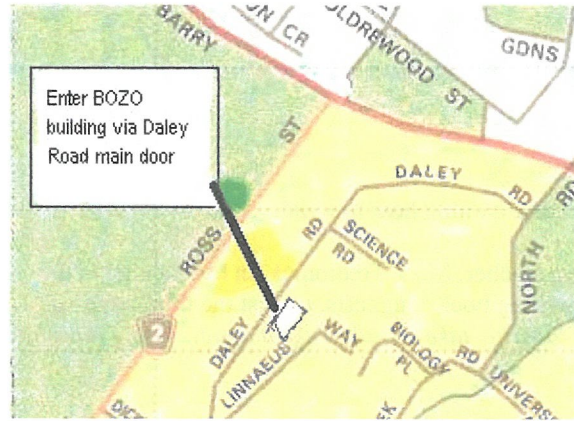
The Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra (FNAC) was formed in 1981. Our aim is to foster interest in natural history by means of meetings and regular field outings. Meetings are usually held on the first Thursday of each month. Outings range from weekend rambles to long weekends away. Activities 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

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 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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CANBERRA ACT 2601

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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: