

OBJECT: To foster an interest in nature

October 2020

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JAMISON CENTRE ACT 2614

# FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANBERRA INC.

## October 2020 newsletter

### No monthly meetings until further notice



*Apostle Bird at Weddin Mountains National Park*

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## A visit to Weddin Mountains National Park

A couple of weeks ago I was fortunate to be invited to join a couple of friends on a trip to Weddin Mountains and Nangar National Parks 32 km west of Grenfell on the Mid Western Highway. The brochure describes Weddin Mountains NP as consisting of a 19 km long crescent shaped range rising sharply above the surrounding plains. The park protects a range of vegetation types including woodlands dominated by trees such as Mugga Ironbark, Tumbledown Gum, Kurrajong and Cypress Pine. It is also rich in birdlife and supports a known 151 bird species.

We arrived mid-afternoon on Friday complete with our camping permits. We had a choice of camp spots. It was just as well we arrived early as by evening there were 12 groups camping (the regulations state that only 6 groups are permitted) and on Saturday night this had swelled to 17 groups, not to mention the day visitors.

I had been to the Weddin Mountains before but on previous occasions we had been in drought and the earth was parched with no undergrowth or grasses, the trees drought-stressed and the creeks dry. This time to our utter delight there had been quite heavy rain previously and everything was lush and green, the trees were recovering and the creeks and waterfalls were flowing, and if you knew where to look there were orchids.



There are a number of nice walks starting from Ben Halls Campground, varying from quite short and easy to much longer and more difficult.

We opted one day to take the Basin Gully Track to Eualdrie Lookout. We rambled along enjoying the fantastic weather, the creek running with little cascades and the cliffs bright red, lit by the morning sun.

Another nice walk from the campground is along Berthas Gully. This passes Ben Halls cave, which

legend has it was once the hideout of bushranger Ben Hall and his gang. Continuing on through different vegetation types the track eventually leads to the head of the gully and a waterfall, which thanks to the recent rain, was flowing well.

On another day we drove to Weddin Gap Track and from the locked gate walked up a fire trail. This was fortuitous as once we had our eye in we spotted lots of orchids some of which I think were different types of caladenias and others greenhoods and a single donkey orchid. The only orchid book I had was the NPA's *Field Guide to Orchids of the ACT* so I was at a loss to be able to identify them accurately. However, everywhere we went there were fields of Early Nancys, especially in the campground.



There was an abundance of birds but the ones I liked best were the eight Apostle Birds, which hung around looking for crumbs. Their noisy chatter and amusing antics kept us all entertained.



I can recommend a visit to Weddin Mountains in spring but not in school holidays and preferably not at weekends as the place can get very busy.

**Deidre Shaw**



# How to build a microbat box

Tricia Hogbin, 21 September 2015: Animals Integrated Pest Management Permaculture

Microbats are worth encouraging into your garden.

Not only are they delightful to watch at dusk – they gobble thousands of mosquitoes, moths and other garden pests each and every night.

A single microbat can eat up to 1,200 mosquitoes and small insects in an hour, which has earned them the well deserved reputation of being nature's mosquito busters.

Microbats are tiny insectivorous bats.

In contrast to their larger fruit-eating cousins microbats eat only insects. Here in Australia we have almost 80 different species of microbats. Among the smallest is the Little Forest Bat. Weighing less than six grams and measuring less than 5 cm in length. A Little Forest Bat is so tiny it could fit into a matchbox.

Combine their small size with their daytime sleeping habits and it's easy to not appreciate how widespread and abundant microbats are.

No matter where you live in Australia there are likely to be microbats fluttering through your night-time sky.

Microbats also eat many garden pests including moths, beetles, aphids, weevils, and crickets. Given their voracious appetite for insects, microbats can help control garden and agricultural pests naturally.

After feasting all night on thousands of insects, microbats need somewhere safe and dark to roost during the day. Many microbats roost in trees. They typically roost in small colonies in cracks, fissures, hollows and under bark.

Trees with cavities suitable for microbat roosts are typically old or dead. The trouble is, old or dead trees are often removed from residential areas for safety and aesthetic reasons.

Combine targeted tree removal with large scale clearing of native vegetation and microbats are running out of places to roost.

Thankfully, many microbats don't mind living in artificial roost boxes.

There are numerous designs for bat roost boxes available.

For further information on how to build a microbat box you can access this [full article online](https://www.milkwood.net/2015/09/21/how-to-build-a-microbat-box/) at: <https://www.milkwood.net/2015/09/21/how-to-build-a-microbat-box/>

A word of caution...

Do not touch or pick up a microbat! Microbats in Australia can host Lyssavirus – which can be transmitted to humans through bites or scratches.

And lastly, if you discover an injured microbat, contact WIRES or your local wildlife rescue service.

## When helping nature doesn't help

Often well-meaning people thinking to help nature, 'help' when no help is needed or actually do more harm than good. This can relate particularly to young birds. Surprisingly, young Magpies that have fallen from a nest before they are fully fledged can actually manage to hop up on to low branches and find their way back up off the ground high enough away from most predators and enough for the parents to continue to feed and protect them. Similarly, apparent 'abandoned' fledglings such as parrots, will still have the flock nearby and not need rescuing.

Two recent reports on the COG Chatline show that 'helping' can have a detrimental effect. The reports both relate to the same pair of nesting Masked Lapwings in Gungahlin. The first report (accompanied by a photo of the bird on the nest) was that Masked Lapwings had laid 4 eggs in the car park at Gungahlin Lakes Golf Club.

Four days later there was a second report as follows:

*Heavens to Betsy! Some well-meaning ignoramus decided the lapwings forgot to build a nest, so did it for them! Hopefully the birds will breed again somewhere less likely to be interfered with by foolish do-gooders!!!*

The accompanying photo with this report showed the same location with four eggs nestled in a homemade nest. The email implies that the nest has since been abandoned due to the interference of these 'do-gooders'.

It is obvious that people think they are doing the right thing but don't realise that they should not interfere with nature.

*I would include the photos but the chatline requirements mean that the photos are of such low resolutions that they can't be used.*

**Rosemary Blemings and Alison Milton**

## Bird watching in downtown Sydney

**A**s cruise boat passengers returning to Sydney from South America in late March–early April 2020 we were obliged to be quarantined in a Sydney Hotel, absolutely not allowed to travel home to Canberra even at no expense to the government, unlike government ministers and princes of industry.

With just a small window on the world from our dingy urban hotel in Newtown, and forbidden to leave the 3rd floor room, we had to find an activity to prevent us sinking into depression. The answer was obvious really, we'd continue our on-board activity – birdwatching, albeit through a dirty window we could wind open about 30 mm.

Well, you don't have to do much to justify hours spent at the window. Rewards, I expected, would be few and far apart, that is until I saw the first of three flocks of small migrating honeyeaters wafting by. At the other end of the scale was the large Australian Ibis cruising daily up Station Road at 10 m altitude and doing a right hand turn at the traffic lights into Enmore Road down to the river, which was out of sight for us.

We joked that the ubiquitous feral pigeons perched on the wall opposite were ASIO agents watching and reporting back on our every move. Their number varied from 1 to 8 and it was rare that none of them were on duty except at night when we pulled the curtains closed against their prying eyes.



*ASIO spy*

The other common aviators were the Common Mynas, which seemed to gang up on any other bird except the busy Noisy Miners who gave them heaps of cheek. Almost forgot to mention the other bully bird, the Rainbow Lorikeet, but its brilliant flash of rainbow hues at sunset was reason to forgive its nasty nature.

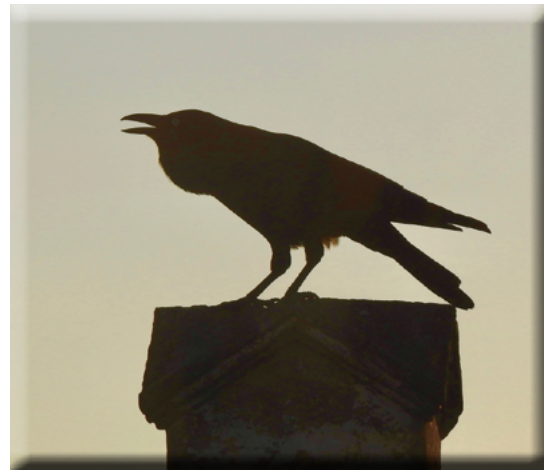
A small raptor hurried by one day to the dismay of all the local birds but it was just en passant and my ID skills were found wanting.

It was surprising to see so many of the Canberra bird scene visiting downtown Sydney: Galahs, Corellas, Ravens and Pied Currawongs, a Magpie and the ubiquitous Welcome Swallow.

A notable spotting was the Spine-tailed Swift: an Asian visitor from November to April, we just caught it leaving.



*Judgmental Indian Myna*



*A lost Raven in the city*

Year-round locals were the Spotted Dove and Silver Gull scratching about on the footpath below for discarded bread crumbs or cigarette butts, which, discarded by one gull would be pounced on by another.

Some birds we recognised by their calls: all Canberrans are experts on the Koel; and one of our favourite backyard winter visitors, the Eastern Spinebill, was nearby;- who could doubt its signature piping call? The unmistakable Kookaburra cackle was probably broadcast from a hidden loudspeaker courtesy of the local council to impress the last of the overseas visitors.

In all we counted 22 species in the two long weeks in downtown Sydney and I am sure, had our gaolers permitted us to jog down to the river, there would have been a few more sightings. This number surprised me.

**Kevin McCue**



## Observations this month

This month I had three very interesting observations. Firstly, I visited the Gungahlan Valley Ponds where I observed a pair of Australasian Grebes.

When I arrived bot were on the water at the southern end of the main pond but one then moved off up the pond emitting a call I hadn't heard from them before. Later I realised that the second one was sitting on a nest while her mate was off feeding. As the mate was returning to join her I watched as she stood up and I could see at least two eggs.



She then began to pull muddy vegetation over the eggs to hide them before venturing into the water to feed herself.



I made the presumption of male and female as the mate did not then sit on the nest but rather firstly checked the nest then continued to swim close by, occasionally checking the nest again. He continued to do this till the female returned.

My second observation was much closer to home.

With the arrival of spring I've noticed a return of moths around my back door light. One night there was one small moth that seemed to have transparent wings so I caught it to look at it in more detail in the daylight the next day. I wasn't even sure it was a moth until the next day.

I took photos but then when I looked at the photos in more detail on the computer I was stunned and excited. A few months ago I jealously looked at a sighting of a Many Plumed Moth in Ainslie—the first record of such on Canberra Nature Map. My moth was obviously also a Many Plumed Moth. While only about 10 mm in size, when looking at the magnified photo the moth's wings looked like feathers.



Lastly, a little further from home, but still fairly close by, I was making a study of the insects on a stand of Eucalyptus trees that line the western end of the drainage outlet behind the Higgins shops. I was amazed that I found Coconut Ants, which if you recall, are crucial to the breeding of the rare Small Ant Blue Butterfly. What was amazing is that this is the first recorded sighting of these ants outside of a nature reserve. Because of this I hadn't even considered this species when I found them. Also, there were none of the tell tale 'cartons' and they were trailing up the trunk of a 5 metre or so tree with no low shrubs or fallen timber in the vicinity, none of which is typical of previous finds. It may be that these ants are more prevalent in suburban streets but have just not been recorded before.

**Alison Milton**

## Flea Bog Flat

**B**elconnen is not alone in having emerging landcare initiatives that focus on community-valued places but Emu Bank, Lawson, Kuringa Woodlands and Flea Bog Flat have exciting projects reconnecting their locals with heritage, culture and nature through reclaiming habitats for all species' benefit.

Flea Bog Flat (FBF) has a recent, colourful history as a challenging section of Old Weetangera Road; a parish road extending from present day Lyneham to the Molonglo River and connecting the rural properties of Weetangera's settler families. As Belconnen took shape and Weetangera changed, the little creek that flowed west from Bruce Ridge towards what became Lake Ginninderra, became overgrown.



*The creek*

It was convenient to locate utilities such as power and sewer lines, water mains and footpaths along creek corridors that had provided pathways and flight paths for seasonal migrating species for millions of years. The bird-borne berries of privets, hawthorns, firethorn, honeysuckle, cotoneaster and blackberries took root as did introduced grasses. FBF became a treasure house of cryptic native flora and fauna masked by invasive species.

Drivers at 80 kph along Belconnen Way or cautiously negotiating that road's junction with Haydon Drive see a few eucalypts towering over untidy, undefined 'bush'. Until May 2019 when introduced to the area through its Old School Bus history by Dave and Jim, I didn't know much either.

Subsequent visits and the Pocket Sights APP developed by Julia R showed FBF to be an exploring naturalist's delight.

Dave has partly delineated the Old Road and created bush-crossings for pedestrians over the creek and swampy areas. There are people-, ant- and kangaroo-worn pathways that the APP takes advantage of but the spirit of following your own curiosity whilst discovering habitat values is strong. Hollow-bearing trees, for example, host possums and gliders, bats, birds, reptiles and scores of invertebrate species.

Several ancient trees, 300 or more years old, are in diverse stages of decay with each unharvested fallen branch, each cut or natural stump providing material for the 'decomposition' squad: fungi, beetles, bacteria, borers and the larval stages of bugs, insects and moths that, in turn, satisfy the diets of a range of birds.

The grassy woodland that's on either side of the creek and its boggy areas is home to several frog species; their calls are being regularly monitored by Frogwatch volunteers. The 1940s school bus quite often became bogged in the deep soil where the Weetangera Road crossed the creek. Even during our explorations on 12 September, whilst other Landcare volunteers sought out rubbish, muddy areas were slow-going even with sedges and rushes as indicator species.



*The Old School Bus by Marc Polglaze (2019) "It wasn't really a bus. It was a panel van with two doors at the back that never really closed properly so it sucked in heaps of dirt and fumes....."*

*Sometimes we got bogged at Flea Bog Flat and all the kids would pile out of the van to push it."*

Soaks and drainage lines were glistening gold as the tiny dew-dropped leaves of Sundews waited for flies and minute insects to make fatal moves towards their attracting odours. These fields of gold included Early Nancy in flower and yellow Bulbine Lilies almost in profusion.

So much of this spring 2020 wonderland is overwhelmed by woody and herbaceous weed species. The newly active Friends of Flea Bog Flat Landcare group for FBF has staged plans and partnerships in place with TCCS and Ginninderra Catchment Group and no shortage of enthusiasm for their unique boggy place and nearby Gossan Hill's totally different dry sclerophyll forest.

You can visit the [Flea Bog Flat Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/fleabogflat/) (<https://www.facebook.com/fleabogflat/>) for more information or to keep updated.

**Rosemary Blemings**

*Editor: For the curious, this area was named Flea Bog Flat because the original track was so muddy that 'even a flea would become bogged'.*



## Pinnacle bird walk

John Brannan led his usual annual spring bird walk on 20 September. The weather did not favour us as it was forecast to rain. However, in retrospect this was perhaps in our favour as around 50 people had registered for the walk. The forecast reduced this number to a reasonable number and the group did not need to be split into two. Even better, we only had an occasional light shower and only one period of heavier rain.

Despite the weather we recorded an incredible 32 species.

The large gum tree at the end of Dungowan Street has always been of interest. In past years up to seven bird species have been known to nest in this tree in the same season. Of note were the Tawny Frogmouths, who roosted in a nearby tree off season. They moved up the hill to nest for a few years but have not been seen for the last couple of years. This year it seems they are back. We were unable to spot the nest but the sentinel bird has been in the same location for at least two days and there is undoubtedly a nest somewhere in this huge tree.



In past years there had been three nesting pairs of Tawny Frogmouths at the Pinnacle but over the past few years they had either moved on, died, or just could not be found so it was heartening to see the return of this pair. In this tree there is also a Willie Wagtail and Magpie Lark nest.

On the far (eastern) side of the Pinnacle John also found a pair of Tawny Frogmouths perched together on a tree branch the afternoon before our walk. He found a nest but there was no bird sitting on it, which he found surprising at this time of year.

On this walk we thought we were going to be disappointed as we couldn't find the birds again. Then just as John was looking at the nearby White-winged Chough's nest, he suddenly spotted the Frogmouth sitting on a different nest. The female wasn't found but she would have been not far away.

Unlike the previous few years, this is a good year for Frogmouths at the Pinnacle as there are at least two other nesting pairs that have been found. It's good to have them back.



We also found a trio of Speckled Warblers; a threatened species in the ACT as they are mostly ground dwellers so vulnerable to prey.

However, it wasn't all about the birds. There is a wildflower walk scheduled for 10 October but there is already an abundant number of Early Nancy, more than I've ever seen there before, as well as other flora. Of particular note is that a few years ago we found a single *Swainsona sericia*: a rare species for the region. There are now numerous plants spread far and wide in the area. Why have we not seen any of these other plants in the intervening years? Have they been here but the conditions not been good enough for them to flower? To me it seems almost impossible that they have spread so far and so prolifically in the few years since we found this one plant.



To end on an exciting note (for me at least), nearing the end of our walk we came across a male Red-headed Mouse Spider on the track; my first sighting of this species. Apparently the males like to wander in wet weather looking for females who (sensibly) remain in their burrows.

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

**Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra**  
**GPO Box 708**  
**Jamison Centre ACT 2614**



### Membership application or renewal

Surname: ..... First name: .....

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

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How did you hear about FNAC? Please circle: Friend

Other Please specify: .....

Subscription (Single/Family \$25) Donation: \$.....

*Subscription renewals are due on 1 July each year*

**Pay by post** (include completed form)

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**Bank transfer** (renewals only: form not needed)

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BSB: 325 185  
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