



## Land for Wildlife and Garden for Wildlife Central Australia Newsletter

November 2020

### From the Land for Wildlife Coordinators

Its time to mulch up, check dripper and timer systems, and install extra birdbaths and animal watering points to gear up for the summer heat that has now arrived. Under the increasing pains of climate change, the few things that we are currently sure of is prolonged soaring temperatures and decreasing rainfall. While a typical description of a desert region is hot and dry, climate change in the Red Centre is influencing the length and intensity of hot periods, and the reliability, timing and amount of rainfall. Water is a critical resource for all life and in Central Australia, and relief from the heat! As we do our best to reduce our water and resource use, under climate change pressures these actions become even more pressing, and more challenging at the same time. Therefore, make your 'pre-summer' preparation a priority as we hit the 40's (already!)

*"The environmental movement, in particular, must awaken to the link between population growth and environmental degradation."*

- Colin D Butler, Hon. Prof., ANU

In this edition we are again proud to showcase some of our new members and their gardens who have recently joined the program. Our 'Species in Focus' provides interesting facts about a much-loved Australian icon that is emblematic of the outback and our 'Red Centre'. The quiz, member contributions and links to other interesting reading or viewing, are all included once again.

**Annnnnndddd**, we want to give you the 'heads up'. We will be sending our readers and members a short **STAKEHOLDER SURVEY**. We are appealing for your feedback about options we are considering to support Land for Wildlife through our continuing funding crisis. Look out for it...we DEFINITELY want to hear from you. Your thoughts are extremely important to us and this is YOUR program. So how have your say about how we might move forward together...please let us know.

In the meantime, happy summer prepping and stay cool!

~ Kate and Bill

**LEFT: *Schoenia ayersii*.** The species common name is the same as their genus - Schoenia!



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*A very big thank you to the following donors for their generosity:*

Andre Sawenko  
Barbara Meichelboek  
Alecia Buchanan

**BANNER IMAGE:** GfW member, Nannette Helder's backyard has been completely transformed into a habitat refuge that seamlessly creates connectivity between an urban habitat garden and natural habitat. See [August 2019](#) newsletter for more on Nannette's story.



## In Conversation with Local Native Gardeners; Amelia & Steve

When I asked Amelia what her favourite area in their garden is, she was quick to say that it was ALL of it. Both the front and rear garden areas draw her attention during particular times of day, and even in certain seasons. These seemingly innocent observations demonstrate Amelia's keen awareness of her garden's habitat value and ecological processes. For instance, she tells me that in the early morning the front garden provides a raucous, lively show with plenty of bird activity of feeding, pestering and singing. Both her and partner Steve particularly enjoy watching the many nectar-feeding birds when the *Eremophila* is in flower. The Annual Saltbush at the front of the property provides privacy, seclusion and is an 'easy care' species that enables protection for wildlife such as small birds and reptiles. There is also plenty of leaf litter in the garden for the little creatures. Evenings are mellow times of the days end when animals perform their bedtime rituals. Amelia loves spending these times watching as birds settle, many of them roosting in the large gum trees along the back fence line.

When Amelia and Steve moved in about 8 years ago, the garden was already well established and remains much the same now as it was then. Most of the planting and 'heavy lifting' had already been done by the previous owner and the garden was planted with drought tolerant, mostly local native species. It was almost independent of supplementary watering outside of natural rainfall. However, because of the current ongoing dry conditions, Amelia and Steve have established a dripper system. Although some of the yard trees have died, since the most recent rains new growth is starting to appear on the 'dead trees'. Amelia and Steve agree that the garden feels cooler with big trees to shade the property.

Amelia and Steve have increased the biodiversity by planting a greater variety of native flora in the front area and adding what Amelia calls her 'pretty garden' at the back. With a penchant for bright colours and home-grown fresh produce, the pretty garden includes nasturtiums, bougainvillea and vegetables.

On very hot days the couple love watching the variety of bird's queueing to take a drink in the birdbath. They proudly tell me they often see Grey-crowned Babblers. A Rufus Whistler also visits their garden and Bowerbirds utilise the abundance of resources available, but the location of any bower remains a mystery. Another intrigue is where the visiting peacocks come from??? The peacocks, which are an introduced species, wander around the local neighbourhood and have a habit of digging up gardens with their scratchings.

Amelia admits she relishes a long and growing list of characteristics about their beautifully productive habitat garden, such as easy care, no grass, watching lizards, insects and birds go about their lives, but most particularly the profound sense of peace that the garden fosters.



Amelia and Steve are delighted to add the GFW sign as a part of their garden art.

The sign recognises the garden's habitat qualities, residents' values, and is a main driver in new memberships by friends, neighbours and locals.



New plantings among the old in the front garden

The Annual Saltbush 'hedge' provides privacy and habitat for all residents at the property



# Species in Focus

## Red Kangaroo, *Macropus rufus*

Kangaroos first evolved around 30 million-years-ago (mya) when Australia was covered by dense jungle-like forests. Early 'roos' evolved from ancient possums that descended from the trees and became ground-dwelling mammals. Red-legged Pademelons, *Thylogale stigmatica*, are the closest modern-day relatives to these early possums, and are found in rainforest areas of eastern Australia and New Guinea.

Three mya, the Australian continent started to dry out and flora species began to adapt to drier, and drying, conditions. Australia became a land of much more open ecosystems with large, wider-spaced Eucalypt trees, grasses, and understory or midstory species with reduced leaf surface area that were deeply-rooted, such as *Acacia* and *Hakea* species. Meanwhile, kangaroos began evolving longer shin-bones, which became useful in open, grassy plains. In response to the increasing temperatures, kangaroo size also began to increase which allowed them to retain more water in their bigger bodies. Their increased size and longer legs gave them the enviable ability to cover long distances to source critical water points in a vast, dry landscape.



Kangaroos have a unique dental growth system. 'Molar progression' is a denture pattern where each pair of teeth move forward along the jawline as new back teeth grow. The rate of teeth growth enables scientists to be able to age an individual kangaroo.

The Red Kangaroo evolved from their macropod ancestor approximately 2 mya. Red's are the largest species of macropods in Australia and an adult male can grow up to 2 m tall and weigh 90 kg's. Courtship behaviour involves males flexing their massive biceps, making loud gravelly, grunting sounds and engorging their neck and upper torso which become noticeably redder and shows prominent veination. The alpha male will fight rival males by standing on his tail and kicking opponents torsos with their hind legs. Full-grown males can deliver a knock-down kick every 6 seconds.



Females time their breeding when there are available resources to sustain themselves and their offspring, in an otherwise harsh and unforgiving environment. Gestation times are short (1 month) and just before birthing, females lick their belly fur to form a pathway for newborns, which look like small, pink jellybeans, to assist them in navigating blindly upward to the females pouch entrance.

Joey's spend the first 11 months solely in the pouch, following which the mother relaxes her pouch muscles and forces the joey to venture outside. Females will often have a feeding joey in the pouch as well as one on foot. She provides them milk through teats which are custom-fitted to the exact size that each of the joeys' mouth size requires.

Red Kangaroos are so well adapted to the Australian desert that they only require 1/2 cup of water every 1-2 weeks. You will often see roo's resting in the heat of the day with their back turned toward the sun to deflect the heat, and licking their forearms which cools the surface veins and circulates cooler blood throughout their body.



## *A Doctor, a Growing Family and a Productive Habitat Garden*



*Clockwise from top: Acacia sp. in full bloom, providing an abundance of nectar and aroma for all residents; Bougainvillea provides a spectacular colour contrast with the natural habitat; productive vegie garden beds and happy chooks in an extensive yard which incorporates veges; self-germinating desert flowers since the recent rains*

Although Land and Garden for Wildlife members have a penchant for native flora species, it's interesting to discover that sometimes the favourite plant in a member's garden is not a local one. Such is the case with Michael Johnson who admitted to having a fondness for his Banana plant! He says that it's not really a plant for (local) wildlife and never thought of growing one when he lived in Canberra, but he's having a go at establishing a plant here in Alice and is eager to see how the venture turns out. However, Michael's favourite *location* in the garden is much more native flora-orientated and is a space where Bowerbirds and Australian Ringnecks also love to visit. Michael and wife Gill, have direct-seeded (another word for thrown around) *Ptilotus* seed in this area and are waiting to see what might germinate after the recent rains.

The property is rented from an ex-Alice resident who was obviously partial to local native plants, hence a habitat garden was already well established when they moved in 6 months ago. There is a grand old Fork-leaved Corkwood, as well as a sensational pink-barked Eucalypt species whose identity remains a mystery. There is no doubt that Michael and Gill have green thumbs and have established a large vegie garden providing mountains of fresh produce from their backyard. Formerly, the vegie patch was bare earth and couch grass but has been transformed into a productive oasis! They have also turned their attention to native flora and along with a Smooth-barked Coolibah, *Eucalyptus victrix*, have planted desert flowers and a Quandong propagated from a seed from Michael's parents garden in Alice.



Gill, and imminent new family member still on board, happily displaying the family's new Garden for Wildlife sign





# A FILMMAKER'S GARDEN IN ALICE

*Andre Sawenko was born and bred in Alice Springs, and although he moved interstate to study filmmaking, Dre (as he is known by locals) returned home to establish his business and life in the Red Centre.*

Dre bought his house a year ago and one of the main drawcards was the established garden consisting of many native plants and trees. As he began his house-hunting, he was mystified by the high proportion of urban properties in Alice that lacked sustainable gardens, or any garden at all. "I found it startling during this time to learn just how many properties on the market had little or no vegetation.... who wants to move into a scorching dustbowl?"

The previous owner had obviously put considerable work into creating a beautiful shady, green space, and had integrated a full irrigation system for watering the natives, and a sprinkler system for the small patch of lawn. Dre currently provides the native plants with water twice a week and the lawn more often, depending on the season. Dre says he loves the landscaped native garden in the front yard particularly as it provides a perfect place to sit by an open fire in the great outdoors and in his own place. A small private side yard with plenty of shelter offered from trees and vines is a favourite place for small birds to build their nests, as it provides ideal protection and safety from predators. Dre is now intent on turning the backyard into a lush oasis full of as many plants as possible.

*"Maintaining so many plants and trees in the desert takes a lot of time and effort, but I know that the rewards are certainly worth the effort from the shade they provide and the wildlife that makes good use of it."*

# DAYS GONE BY: POISONING RABBITS

~ Des Nelson

The image of a rabbit killed by calici virus in the [November 2018 issue](#) of the Land for Wildlife Newsletter reminds me of the attitude of rabbits poisoned by strychnine; head thrown back, limbs extended and stiffened.

As a child in central-west NSW, I remember the great rabbit plague of the 1940's and early '50's when rabbits swarmed across the countryside. Many households, including mine, had a .22 rimfire rifle and rabbit shooting was a common activity. I made good pocket-money from the sale of rabbit skins and often provided the family with a meal of 'Underground Mutton', as rabbit dishes were known. I also did part-time work for a friend, a 'wheat-and-sheep cocky' and on one occasion, helped with an attempt at rabbit control.



**The famous image of the rabbit plague during the mid-1900's that wiped out vegetation and caused enormous damage to landscapes, infrastructure footings and competed every which way with wildlife and farmers for natural resources.**

**~ Image: [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)**

First, we dug up the roots of juvenile Saffron Thistles, *Carthamus lanatus*. These plants resembled thin white parsnips. We cut them into segments of 12-mm in length and placed 1,000 of them into a 2-ltr metal bowl. Some water was poured in and the segments stirred with a stick that was carefully discarded later. Sugar was added and stirred, making sure to coat the roots with the sweet liquid. A bit more water to keep the baits damp, then flour. To this concoction was added two small glass tubes of liquid pheromones which were known to be particularly attractive to rabbits. One drop from one tube, two drops from the other and mixed well to distribute those small doses. Having made sure the baits were at the right stage of moisture, the next procedure was a delicate one. Very carefully we introduced a teaspoon of pink strychnine powder stirring it in slowly for several minutes. This bait recipe, and the pheromone tubes, were provided by the NSW Department of Agriculture at the time.

At dusk, my cocky mate and I went out into the paddocks taking the bait with us. My mate walked ahead with a hoe and made a small, single-stroke hole in the soil every several paces. Trailing him, I held the bowl of baits, and with coarse bladed forceps, I dropped a bait into each indent made by the hoe.

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# A COMPLETE GARDEN MAKEOVER ...FOR WILDLIFE



Hannah and youngest daughter, Matilda,

*A chance photo at the turn of the century set our new GfW member on the road to creating a sustainable native garden in the desert*

Hannah Millerick is a locally bred Alice Springs girl and has become a well-known freelance photographer in the town. Hannah and her family have just joined the Garden for Wildlife program after transforming their entire garden to a burgeoning wildlife habitat refuge. When they moved to their house some years ago, a few straggly *Eremophila*'s, a couple of drought-stressed *Melaleuca*'s and trimmed olive trees, were the only vegetation suggesting any sort of a garden. Large areas in the front and back yards sported sketchy lawn of couch grass and a regulated system which watered the lawns twice daily! Hannah, and partner Jack, soon concluded that these areas were unsuitable for desert conditions and significant water and space were being wasted.

They decided the only reasonable and responsible course of action was to go native garden! And so began a project of redesigning and revamping their entire outside area to one that was better adapted to the hot and arid Alice Springs climate. After removing the grass, they added lots of Jessie Gap sand, rocks and green mulch, planted shrubs, some trees and numerous local and non-local Australian native shrubs and grasses. They also installed a dripper system with a fitting to control the amount of water on certain plants which now conserves water, and reduces the potential to over-water particular plants. The new watering system is vital to help new plants establish themselves and sustains them in drier times. While it may take some time for the larger plants to become robust and large enough to provide yard shade, the smaller plants are already providing habitat and resources to a variety of wildlife, such as insects, spiders, ants, skinks, and some curious ground-loving birds that are ready to make use of the available resources in Hannah and Jack's garden. There is still a lot of space and potential in the garden and they are approaching it as an exercise in open-mindedness and fun. From this life-changing gardening project, Hannah tells me that she has come to appreciate the importance of soil condition and the attention required for small trees as they establish their root systems.

During her work as a professional photographer in 2000, Hannah photographed a cluster of Pussycat Tails, *Ptilotus exaltus*, at the Telegraph Station. When she developed the film (as was the photographic process back at the turn of the century!) she was thrilled with the results. After hearing this story, it wasn't hard to guess what Hannah's favourite plant in her garden was. Hannah expresses a sense of pride in their newly established habitat garden and feels satisfied knowing her family are being responsible global citizens through their contribution to the local environment, and that they are not contending with the elements.



L-R: Plants flourishing along the side fenceline; Hannahs' favourite plant; *Ptilotus exaltus*; Pigface, *Carpobrotus* sp.; daughter Rumi's fairy garden (creating habitat diversity); a delicately-flowered Myrtle (front) in a line of small shrubs

## September Quiz Answers

1. The sole member of the *Lagarostrobos* genus is the Huon Pine, *Lagarostrobos franklinii*, an extraordinarily long-lived species endemic to southern Tasmania.
2. The Gngangara Mound is a large unconfined aquifer, located north of Perth's Swan River in Western Australia. If you named the second, smaller mound located south of the Gngangara Mound as the Jandakot Mound, you get bonus points!
3. *Callitris*, or Cyprus Pine, is largely a southern hemisphere genus and 13 of the 16 species are native to Australia. France (New Caledonia) is home to the three remaining species.
4. *Megalania* (*Megalania prisca*) is the now extinct Australian relative of Indonesia's Komodo dragon and was the largest terrestrial lizard that ever lived.
5. The line drawn up by a famous English evolutionary theorist and which marks the division between the fauna of South East Asia and the fauna of Australia, is called The Wallace Line.

### CAT TRAPS & NATIVE PLANTS available for sale!!!

#### GOING FAST, DON'T MISS OUT!

One of our GfW members has a home nursery with a growing range of 'hard-to-get' LOCAL NATIVE PLANTS. Please [contact us](#) if you are interested in buying some locally raised and loved plant stocks

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*Part of plant and trap sales are  
donated to Land for Wildlife*



**\$70 ea.**



## November Quiz

1. *Notoryctes typhlops* is a desert-dwelling Australian marsupial, while *Talpa europaea* is a common European placental. Despite their different origins, the two species have many similarities. What are their common names?
2. How large can the Red Kangaroo grow (i.e. height and weight)?
3. What is the common name for *Eucalyptus pachyphylla* and what does their scientific species name refer to?
4. Which species of saltbush, common in the Alice Springs area, is native to Australia and occurs in all other mainland states, and is well adapted to arid and semi-arid inland regions?
5. How do [all] plants obtain their food and water?

The next morning we would visit the same paddocks to record the number of dead rabbits. The score was always 800 - 900 carcasses. This procedure went on for nearly a week and, really, I'm not that sure we made much of a dent in the rabbit population at all. Thankfully, sheep disregarded the bait laid in the paddocks and the only other non-target species we observed to have died was a single Ringtail Possum, *Pseudocheirus peregrinus*. The toxin acted very quickly on the rabbits which was evidenced by the stretched bodies, but some would have gotten to their burrows before dying and would have likely increased our tally if we could have accounted for them.

Shortly after this episode, in about 1951, Myxomatosis swept through the landscape. Suddenly, the rabbits were gone, and nearly as suddenly the countryside's vegetative ground-cover responded with a remarkable increase in productivity. The rabbit rifles started gathering dust.

However, the rabbits did persist and the battle against them ever returning to those huge plague proportions continued. Strychnine was a readily available commodity for a long time and could be bought from produce stores and stock-and-station agencies. One man who threw much energy into rabbit control was the late Bernie Kilgariff, who spent many hours on a tractor ripping warrens on Erldunda, when others his age would have taken on retirement. Bernie also co-operated with researchers who did a lot of work on rabbit control in Central Australia.






The largest rabbit warren I ever saw was at the western end of the Petermann Ranges, about a quarter of a hectare in size. And one of the longest continuous stretches of a local rabbit population stretched from Simpsons Gap, along Roe Creek to its junction with the Maryvale road. The drought of the 1950's and 1960's decimated the rabbit population in both these areas, while the spread of Myxomatosis and other control measures have assured the continuing general demise of rabbits.



A few dead rabbits!!!  
~Image: nma.gov.au



Images L-R: *Solanum* sp. with a full crop; Large Green Pussytails, *Ptilotus xerophilus*; Native grasses flourish after rain in Red Centre soils

<b>Further Reading</b> Click the link symbol to be redirected to the website		<b>Video link:</b> ABC Landline showcases evidence for a 'new age of time' we may be entering: <i>from the Anthropocene...to the 'Pyrocene'</i> . Out of the frypan and into the fire...literally!
		<b>Factsheet:</b> COOLmob Energy Saving Tips. How to reduce costs and increasing cooling abilities in your home. There are tips here you may not know, or don't currently do and just need the prompt!
		<b>Video link:</b> ABC has digitally remastered and rereleased an old favourite nature show: 'Australia Remastered'. This episode describes the evolution of kangaroos
		<b>News article:</b> Link to the Mike Gillam's article 'A Touch of Light: Kangaroo Clans' on Alice Springs news online
		<b>Discussion article:</b> Bob Brown is right – it's time environmentalists talked about the population problem

**Happy reading!**  
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...to support our wildlife

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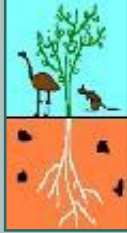

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