GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE

Bluebells. ***Wahlenbergia communis***

Newsletter, March 2011

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GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE NEWS

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ARTICLES

Blue is in this month!

Bluebells

Photo: Jesse Carpenter

Bluebells (*Wahlenbergia spp.*) occur in all Australian mainland states. In Central Australia we have a few species of Desert Bluebell including *Wahlenburgia communis* (Tufted Bluebell), *W. queenslandica* (Bluebell) and *W. tumidifructa* (Turgid-fruited Bluebell).

Desert Bluebells are perennial herbs that grow to 40cm tall with bluebell shaped flowers on long stems. Plants prefer moist, well-drained soils and will tolerate full sun and shade. In the dry season plants will die off and reshoot from the tap root when conditions are more favourable, generally when moisture returns to the soil and in winter. Desert Bluebells are also frost tolerant and are attractive when planted en masse. They can also be planted in pots in combination with other plants.

The summer rains have encouraged several flowering events for these species recently. One or all three of the species mentioned above occur in all Vegetation Types, with exception of 5 – 'Witchetty Bush and/or Mulga on gravelly rises of granite, gneiss, schist or quartz' and 19 - 'Saline patches on alluvial flats', so you may have noticed this splash of colour in you gardens. Bluebells can also be found along road verges as they take advantage of water drainage and disturbed soil.

Reference:

http://plantsandlandscapes.com.au/prov_site/Wahlenbergia_communis

Flora Base website

Butterflies

After good rains when many native plants are flowering butterflies can be found in large numbers in Central Australia. Look around the edges of water holes and puddles as butterflies can amass there. Look around flowering plants as butterflies may be feeding there. Host plants are plants that butterflies lay their eggs on for larvae (caterpillars) to hatch and immediately start eating appropriate food. Larvae then pupate attached to their host plants. Therefore host plants are another good

place to look for butterflies – every species has a different host plant and some species have several.

Have you noticed some of the *blue* butterflies that occur in Alice? Below are a few.

Common Grass Blue Butterfly, *Zizina labradus*

Photo: Wikipedia

Photos: Martin Purvis

This little butterfly is Australia's most common butterfly. Beginning life as a single bluish egg laid on leaves of the food plant, green slug-like caterpillars hatch to feed. Caterpillars feed on various members of the Fabaceae family, such as peas, lucerne and clovers. In Central Australia species that will attract this butterfly include native peas such as *Swainsona*, *Cullen* and *Indigofera* species. Cullen is also the host plant for Chequered Swallowtails, another Alice Springs butterfly species.

Caterpillars have short white hairs, a thin yellow stripe along each side of the body, and a darker green line down the back. The head is brown or black, although the caterpillar holds its head tucked under the thorax and it often cannot be seen. Growing to a length of 0.7cm they are hard to find, especially as they rest during day at the base of the food plant.

The pupa can be dirty pink, pale green, or pale yellow, with dark markings, and is attached under a leaf of its food plant.

The adult butterfly has a black body with purplish blue upper wing surfaces, and greyish blue undersides with a fawn pattern of spots and stripes. The wingspan is about 2cm.

Look for these butterflies flying very close to the ground.

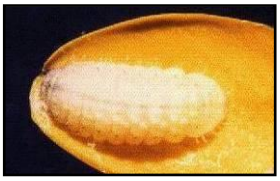
Pea Blue Butterfly, *Lampides boeticus*

Although similar in size, this species can be identified from the Common Grass Blue by the black spots at the tip of the lower wing. This species can be found all over the world.



Adult Pea Blues Photos: Wikipedia

The eggs are about 0.2 mm in diameter, and are laid singly on the *flower buds* of the food plant. Food plants are of the Fabaceae family and in Central Australia this includes Rattlepods (*Crotalaria spp*.), Darling Peas (*Swainsona spp* – which also attract the Common Grass Blue) and Sturt's Desert Pea (*Clianthus formosus*), which have germinated profusely during the summer rains. In the south this species' food plants include the Running Postman (*Kennedia prostrata*) for which the Tasmanian LfW newsletter is named after.

Pea Blue egg and larvae. Photos: Martin Purvis

Eggs hatch into slug-like off-white caterpillars with a black head. They feed on the *flowers* of the food plant, and grow to a length of 1cm. They pupate inside a flower, so that when the flower shrivels and dies, the pupa falls to the ground with it. The pupation period can vary from a fortnight to a year, even for caterpillars that pupated at the same time!

The butterflies of this species are dimorphic: males and females are different. The top of the male's wings are blue, while the female's wings are blue with wide dark brown edges. Both sexes have a brown and white pattern on the underneath side of the wing, and a tail on each hind wing with a pair of small black eye-spots beside each tail. The eye-spots and tail (fake antennae) confuse a predator as to which end of the butterfly is which. Butterflies have a wingspan of about 3cm.

Males set up small territories which they patrol and use year after year, fighting off rival males who trespass. If the resident male is removed, another one soon appears take his place.

Reference:

http://lepidoptera.butterflyhouse.com.au/lyca/lyca.html

Common Eggfly, *Hypolimnas bolina*

One to watch out for after the winds of cyclone Yasi is the Common Eggfly. Like the Peablue males and females are dimorphic. The egg-shaped. patches on the wing of the male give this butterfly its name. While normally occurring in the east of Australia, this species has been known to occur in Alice, and cyclonic winds seem to have blown some our way recently. One was seen by Land for Wildlife Coordinators near Stephens Rd last week.



Male, Female, pupae. Photo: Wikipedia

Watch out for black wings with a white spot edged in blue on both upper and lower wings to identify a male; the females have white, orange and blue blotches on black wings. Males are aggressively territorial and will chase other butterflies entering their territory. Males usually rest on the same spot about two meters above ground, protecting his territory and waiting for a mate. It is believed he searches for a mate by eyesight. Territories are 30 – 40 metres apart, and male's wings are often seen broken or tattered due to combat with other male Common Eggflies that enter a territory.

Common Eggfly caterpillars are black in colour with orange-yellow spines. They feed at night on plants such as some *Solanum* species (Bush Tomatoes), Lesser Joyweed (*Alternanthera denticulata*), succulents such as Munyeroo (*Portulaca oleracea*) and Buttercup Pigface (*Portulaca intraterranea*), *Ruella tuberosa*, and Sida's such as *Sida rhombifolia* and *Sida rholenae*. We would not recommend planting *Sida rhombifolia* as it is a bit of a weed.

Photo: Martin Purvis

To attract all three of these butterflies a good combination of plants to include in your garden would be Swainsona species, Solanums, Cullen species – all small shrubs with purple or pink flowers and Yellow Rattlepod, *Crotalaria smithiana*.

In addition, another blue butterfly to watch for is the Icilius Blue (*Jamenus icilius*) butterfly which is attracted to wattles, such as Mulga, and possibly Sennas, and the Amaryllis Azure (*Ogyris* amaryllis) caterpillars feed on Mistletoes. These plants are common in most gardens so keep your eyes out for little blue butterflies!

Kingfishers

Have you seen Kingfishers in your garden? Kingfishers like to feed on grubs, small lizards, snakes, small mammals and caterpillars, so if you are attracting lots of butterflies to your garden you may be lucky to attract this beautiful bird. If your garden is lizard friendly with lots of leaf litter, rocks and logs you may notice a Kingfisher perched on a dead tree branch eyeing a meal. Or if you have small tree hollows in dead or live trees on your property, watch for nesting activity or listen for harsh alarm calls given near a nest.

Red-backed Kingfisher. Photo: Wikipedia

There are two species of Kingfisher that occur in Alice. The Sacred Kingfisher and the Red-backed Kingfisher. How to tell the difference? Well the Red-backed Kingfisher has an orange-red to chestnut patch on his lower back and rump which is visible during flight and when perched.

The female is duller overall in coloration, and immature birds have speckling on their breasts. Their call is a descending whistle, with a harsh alarm call given by birds near the nest.

The Sacred Kingfisher (below) has a turquoise back, turquoise blue rump and tail. It's chest is off-white or creamy in colour compared to the Red-backed, and its call is a staccato "kek-ek-ek-ek!".

Reference: Birds in Backyards website

Sacred Kingfisher. Photo: Wikipedia

Bluetongues

There are two species of bluetongue lizards you might see in your gardens around Alice. The Western Bluetongue (*Tiliqua occipitalis*) and the Centralian Bluetongue (*Tiliqua multifasciata*) are both large, distinctive members of the skink family that have adapted well to life around people. They thrive on insect pests such as locusts, cockroaches and snails that thrive around human habitation. They're not above chewing on a few vegetables and flowers from the garden either.

The two species are easily distinguished from one another. The Western is an olive brown colour with 4 – 6 broad, dark brown or black bands around its body and another 3 – 4 rings around its tail.

The Centralian species however, is pale brown with up to 14 narrower orange/brown bands (typical 'centralian' colours) around its body and another 8 – 10 bands on its tail.

Western Bluetongue (*tiliqua ocipitalis*)

Centralian Bluetongue, *Tiliqua multifaciata*

Active all through the warm part of the year, the 'blue' is obvious when either species performs its typical threat display – turning towards danger and opening its jaws wide to reveal a dark blue tongue. Quite a show!

1. Plant Profile – Spinifex

Most Centralians would be at least a little familiar with this hardy group of grasses. Not to be confused with the true *Spinifex*, a genus of plants that occur only on coastal dunes, inland Spinifex belongs to the genus *Triodia.*

Triodia are hummock forming grasses. They dominate vegetation communities over more than 20% of Australia, primarily in arid to semi-arid sand plains and rocky ranges. There are about 60 species, with representatives in all states except Tasmania. 34 species are found in the Northern Territory, both in the arid south and parts of the top end.

These grasses typically grow as expanding dome or dense hummock formations, usually lower than 1m, but sometimes reaching heights of twice that. Green, living leaves cover the outer surface of the hummock, the interior consisting of densely matted stems and dead leaves. When the leaves are young, they are flat and relatively soft but as they age, the edges roll under and the leaf becomes stiff and pointed. This forms the sharp needles typical of a Spinifex hummock.

As the plants age, the centre of the hummock may collapse, a ring structure forming with this dead material surrounded by living leaves. In areas where it's been 25 years or more since a fire, these rings of Spinifex may be common. In an area long unburnt, these rings continue to expand, often linking up to smother any competing grasses or short lived annual plants.

WORKSHOPS/ANNOUNCEMENTS

YOUR LETTERS

WEBSITES WORTH A LOOK

All your invertebrate questions answered. A forum for Australian invertebrate questions. If you have any unidentified creepy-crawlies from your garden should be able to find a name for it here:
http://www.inverts.com.au/

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

CALENDAR OF EVENTS