NT LANDCARE AWARDS 09 CATEGORY FINALIST

2010 Melaleuca Awards WINNER

Land for Wildlife

Conservation is in your hands

Bluebells. *Wahlenbergia communis*

LAND FOR WILDLIFE

NEWSLETTER

Contents

Low Ecological Services

PowerWater

Alice Springs TOWN COUNCIL

Northern Territory Government

Alice Springs Municipality | March 2011

Land for Wildlife Update

Hello Wildlifers,
Welcome to the March newsletter. This month our newsletter is themed with the colour **Blue**! Colours that are typical of our desert are red soils, brown claypans, green grass, and yellow flowers. So when something pops up that differs we tend to notice. Such as another wave of Bluebell flowers dotting the landscape. This newsletter outlines some of the blue things that are active at the moment, and how to attract them to your backyard.

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

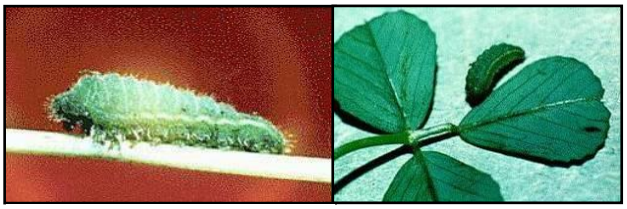
After good rains when many native plants are flowering butterflies can be found in large numbers in Central Australia. Look around the edges of water holes and puddles as butterflies can amass there. Look around flowering plants as butterflies may be feeding there. Host plants are plants that butterflies 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

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.



Photos: Martin Purvis

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.

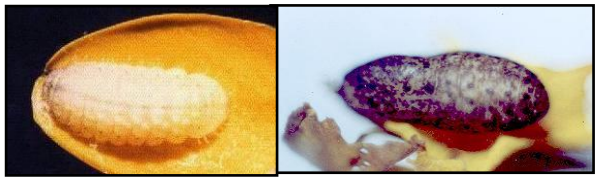
Look for these butterflies flying very close to the ground.

Pea Blue Butterfly, *Lampides boeticus*

Photos: Wikipedia

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.

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.



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.

Male. Photo: Wikipedia

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

Female. Photo:Wikipedia

Pupae. Photo: Wikipedia

Rd last week.

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.

Photo: Martin Purvis

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.

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.

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.

Red-backed Kingfisher. Photo: Wikipedia

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!".

Sacred Kingfisher. Photo: Wikipedia

Reference: Birds in Backyards website

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.

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Western Bluetongue (*Tiliqua ocipitalis*)

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.

Centralian Blue Tongue, *Tiliqua multifasciata*

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!

Workshops

Spotted Turtle Dove Trap Making

About 20 people came to Bloomin Deserts Nursery last Saturday for the trap making workshop. It was fantastic to see so many people are willing to lend a hand in controlling

these feral pests.

Everyone who attended had a good time making their own traps to take home and it was a good learning experience for the attendees and Land for Wildlife coordinators, who learnt a bit more about the dove's distribution around town.

If anyone who was not able to attend on the day, but is still interested in contributing to this useful conservation program, contact Land for Wildlife for information and trapping kits. We're only too happy to help. Phone 89 555 222 or email lfw@lowecol.com.au.
We'd also like to thank Bloomin Deserts for allowing us to use their venue. Again, they did a fantastic job with the coffees!

Announcements

Cyclone Yasi

The weather that blew in from Cyclone Yasi didn't quite live up to expectations in Alice Springs, but it seems a few unusual visitors still managed to hitch a ride on the winds. The Eggfly Butterfly (see article above) was a good example, but even more unusual was a Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscata)*. This unique visitor was found in a weakened state in a transport depot on Ghan Road.

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Sooty Tern

While this bird is clearly not at home sitting on the floor of Chris' home, it is hard to appreciate just how far off course this bird was blown.

Inland species of marsh tern are common enough in Alice Springs (Whiskered Tern, Gull-billed Tern) but most tern species are birds that are associated with coastal or oceanic habitat . Some terns in particular are known to be solely oceanic in their habits and only make landfall on remote island colonies every few years to breed – the rest of their time is spent on the wing, far from continental land masses. The Sooty Tern is one of this last group of Terns – *oceanic*. Even birdwatchers living on the coast of Australia see this bird infrequently unless they travel to one of their breeding colonies on islands off the north Queensland coast. This helps to put in perspective what must've been a very long and bumpy ride for this bird and explains why it turned up so drastically dehydrated and underweight.

It really makes you wonder what other wildlife was caught in the storm, only to end up here, unnoticed, with no way to return home. Luckily for our Sooty Tern, he was found and taken to Wildcare, who nursed him back to health. Unable to make the flight back to Queensland unassisted, he'll have an all expenses paid ride with Qantas back to Cairns! If you see any unusual birds or wildlife, contact Land for Wildlife (89 555 222), National Parks and Wildlife (8951 8250) or Wildcare (0419 22 11 28).

Environmental Youth Initiative

If you know anyone aged between 14-17 years who would like to organise and work alongside other students on environmental and social justice issues then call Jimmy, ALEC coordinator on 8952 2497 or email at info@alec.org.au. Meetings are on Thursday afternoons 4-5pm.

Calendar of Events

Sunday March 6 - Clean Up Australia Day - Maynard Park and Todd River

Saturday March 26 – Open Day at Tangentyere Nursery. Contact Mick Walters, 8953 3120

RANGELAND BIOLOGY AND ECOLOGY SEMINARS

March - April, 2011

March 4th, Friday, 3.30 at Charles Darwin University Lecture Theatre HE, Alice Springs

Noah Pleshet, PhD candidate NYU; CAT, Alice Springs

Caring for Country for a Living

April 1st, Friday, 3.30 at Charles Darwin University, Lecture Theatre HE, Alice Springs

Dr. Nora Devoe, formerly Western Region Science Coordinator, Bureau of Land Management, Reno Nevada, now NT Govt, Alice Springs **(see Bio next page)**

Rangeland Restoration in the US Semi-Arid West

Directions: **Take the second CDU entrance along Grevillia drive next to the childcare centre (not the main Centralian college entrance), and go past the Greening Australia/CDU nursery. The HE building is straight ahead on the left next to the grape vines and in front of the oval. There is parking in front of the building. The lecture theatre is on the ground floor just inside the doors to the right. Alternate entry to the room is upstairs into the back of the room.**

Take care,
Jesse, Chris & Bill
Land for Wildlife Coordinators

This newsletter has been produced by
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