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# Land for Wildlife

Conservation is in your hands



NEWSLETTER

Alice Springs Municipality May 2011

## Land for Wildlife Update

### On our cover this month...

White-plumed Honeyeater, *Lichenostomus penicillatus*.

It's been flat out here at the Land for Wildlife offices. We've had a lot of interest from new members, and both coordinators have been up and down the highway conducting assessments and writing up reports.

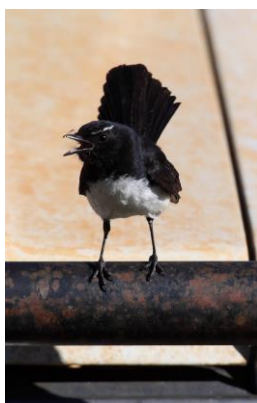
The cooler weather has arrived so it is a good time to take advantage of the respite from the heat and get some work done in the garden. Several new weeds have been identified in Alice Springs this year following the rains. We urge all members, but particularly those in rural areas, to remain vigilant and let us know as soon as you find any new or unusual plants on your property.

This month we're asking members to consider conducting some bird surveys on their property as a way of measuring the success of your conservation efforts. With the hotter weather now gone, we have also included an article about snake-proofing our homes and changing the way we view snakes in preparation for next summer.

## Workshops

## Articles

### Conducting Bird Surveys on Your Property



This is a great way of judging the success of your conservation efforts. Doing monthly or weekly surveys of the bird life on your property will help you to appreciate the way any changes in your garden effect the wildlife in your area. Some plants will attract more birdlife than others and some species of

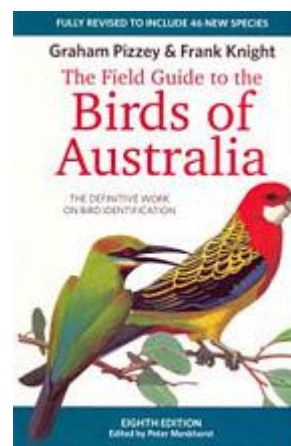
bird are more common at certain times of year. These factors aside, birds are usually the best barometer for any improvement in the local habitat.

The other exciting aspect of bird counting is the amount you can learn about the huge variety of birds that may visit your garden and the ways to identify these from each other. Many birds that are common in arid woodlands are quite small and very active so it

can present a real challenge to correctly identify an Inland Thornbill from a Slaty-backed Thornbill. Fortunately a little bit of learning goes a long way and if you manage to get photos we are always here to help!

The first step to conducting surveys on your property is to know what you are looking at. For this you will need a field guide. We are fortunate in Australia to have several choices when it comes to a well-produced, comprehensive, and useful field guide to all of our birds. Any book shop will usually stock at least one of these but if you can it is best to go for one of the "big four". These are, by author, Morcambe, Pizzey & Knight, Slater, and Simpson & Day. Hardcore birdwatchers will point out strengths and weaknesses in each of these publications but the reality is that they are all excellent references for backyard birdwatchers.

Modern field guides are ordered *taxonomically* which sometimes seems unhelpful to new birdwatchers. Once you get used to this order though, it will make sense as birds are grouped with other birds that are closely related. So for Alice Springs, for example, you are fairly safe in skipping straight past the section on albatross and other seabirds.



Once you are familiar with your field guide it is a good idea to go outside and look at the most common birds in your area and find them in your field guide. As a basic exercise this will get you used to finding the birds in the book and it will accustom you to the reality of any nature-watching – often what you see in the bush is not exactly like what is in the book. Males and females of many species can differ in size and appearance – a phenomenon known as *sexual dimorphism*.

The other useful feature of your field guide is the distribution map. If you are ever unsure of the identity of a bird it is often a simple matter of checking its distribution and it will resolve the matter quite quickly. You may have narrowed the identity of your bird down to two species but if one of them is limited to an isolated population at the tip of Cape York and the other is widely spread throughout Central Australia

then you've got your bird! Many people find the successful identification of difficult birds to be one of the most satisfying aspects of birdwatching.

There are many different ways to conduct bird counts on your property but the most important thing is to do it the same way, at the same time of day, and for the same duration each time you count. This way you will be generating counts that can be compared over time. You can sit on your back step and count all the birds visible from this point for 20 minutes. On larger properties, maybe you could walk a regular path around your property and record the birds seen as you walk. Generally the best time to count birds is first thing in the morning, but if you aren't an early riser you can count at any time of day. Keep in mind that in the middle of searing summer afternoons the birds will be staying out of the heat and being much less active.

The next thing to do is to record what you have seen. A useful habit to get into is to take notes. You never know when something that you observe might later turn out to have been significant or unusual. On these occasions having some notes, however untidy and incomplete, can be a useful aid to memory and further documentation. If there is a bird that you can't identify, try sketching it or writing down whatever you can notice about it's appearance – the size and shape of the beak, colour of the belly feathers, the colours of the wings or back, the length of the tail, the colour of the eye, and any other impressions that you can get from the bird. Behavioural features are also useful to identify birds. Does it forage on the ground or perch in trees? Does it perch in high branches or down near the ground? Does it move its body in an unusual or characteristic way? For the purposes of your surveys, all you will need to do is keep a list of the species you identify each time in your yard, and the most accurate count of the number of each species of bird that you can manage. Sometimes you can only estimate the number of birds in heavy undergrowth or in large flocks but always try to estimate on the conservative side.

Now it just depends on how serious you want to get! You can put your surveys into spreadsheets and store them at home and see how the birdlife in your garden changes over time or you can send your lists into us here at Land for Wildlife as we will be keeping a database of bird surveys from members' properties. Another option is to enter your surveys online. This can be much quicker and you'll get the satisfaction of

contributing to a national body of data from like-minded folks everywhere.

Eremaea Birds, [www.ereмаea.com](http://www.ereмаea.com) allows you to enter lists of birds and plot their position on maps from Google Earth. This is linked to the Birds Australia Atlas of Australian Birds and all of your sightings will be automatically collated and displayed in distribution maps online.

For those of you who might be new to birdwatching but are keen to get into it, Land for Wildlife will be conducting a "Beginning Birdwatching" workshop as part of Red Centre Bird Week in September. We'll have more details for you as it draws closer.

## Snakes in Your Garden

Alice Springs is famous for its diversity of reptile life. This is great for us nature lovers, but there is a reputation among a certain group of the Australian population that we all have Taipans and King Browns living under our beds. While we all know that this is clearly not the case at all, we do have a much greater chance of encountering snakes and other reptiles around our homes, simply due to where we live.

But this needn't be anything to worry about, indeed for many of us it is a big part of the reason we choose to live here – nature is always close at hand. Furthermore, not all the snakes you might find in your garden are bad news. In fact even the ones you think are bad news are less of a danger provided you know a bit about their world.

We have a rich diversity of snake species in Central Australia. There are the dangerously venomous species that everyone is aware of; Mulga Snakes or King Browns, Western Browns or Gwardars, Desert Death Adders, and the less venomous Yellow-faced Whip Snake. Then there are our three beautiful python species; the Woma Python, Stimson's Python and the Centralian Carpet Python. There are also a host of lesser-known and usually smaller species; Orange-naped or Moon Snake, Bandy-bandy, and Desert Banded Snake to name just a few. Some of these smaller species can administer venom but are usually considered less dangerous due to the much smaller amounts of venom they are capable of delivering or the reduced toxicity of the venom itself.

Any of these species might turn up in your

back yard and everyone knows the horror stories about snake bites that turn up in the media from time to time but it's worth knowing a few facts about snake venom before we look at some of the snakes that you might find in your garden.

An important distinction, when talking about snakes, is the difference between *dangerously venomous* and *dangerous*. The toxicity of snake venom is measured using a toxicity scale called the LD<sub>50</sub>. This stands for Lethal Dose and 50%. It measures the amount of venom that is required to kill 50% of a 1kg sample of laboratory mice. It has been widely criticised as a general measure of snake toxicity as it is only gauged on mice. Extrapolation of toxicity data from mice to humans may be dodgy but the LD<sub>50</sub> test still provides a useful baseline from which to compare the different snake venoms to each other. Another problem with the LD<sub>50</sub> test is that it only measures fatal effects of toxins and doesn't take into account non-lethal effects, which with some snake venoms can be significant. Some snake venoms can cause lasting damage to the central nervous, vascular, and muscular systems of the human body. So some venom is dangerous, but this doesn't necessarily translate into the snake itself being dangerous.

All of this only starts to matter if the snake gets the venom into you. Venom is highly costly for a snake to produce. They produce it for killing their prey and will often go to great lengths to avoid using it for defence. Just about any snake bite that is inflicted on a human can be categorised as defensive. The only logical reason that a snake has to bite a human is if it feels threatened. There are no snakes in Central Australia which come anywhere close to the sort of size where even a small child could be considered a potential prey item. Australian *Elapid* (front-fanged) snakes also have some of the smallest fangs in the snake world, usually measured in a few millimetres rather than a few centimetres like some exotic viper species. A shallow subcutaneous scratch is about as much as many of our *Elapid* snakes can inflict, so this makes intra-muscular envenomation rare, and intra-venous almost unheard of.

We have 9 of the 10 most venomous terrestrial snakes on earth (based on the LD<sub>50</sub>), but we have a very low rate of snake bite and even lower rate of death from snake bite. The most *dangerous* snakes on earth, in terms of numbers of deaths caused annually, have venom which is only a fraction as toxic

as the species found here. Their deadliness is due to the overwhelmingly rural populations in third-world countries where these snakes are present and the relative low availability and quality of emergency medical treatment.

The most important thing to remember when you encounter snakes around the home is *empathy*. A snake's view of the world is drastically different to ours. It has no hands to investigate the world around it and relies instead on a superlative sense of smell. Most snakes have relatively poor visual acuity and rely on their ability to detect sudden movements. If you are not moving and don't smell like food, there is every chance that a snake will ignore you very quickly. As soon as you move, you become a threat. You are a much larger animal, towering over the snake and you may stand on it at any moment.

Aside from someone indulging in some ill-advised amateur snake-handling, this is how many snake bites are caused – someone accidentally surprising or standing on a well-concealed snake. (Interestingly, figures released by the University of Texas show that snake bites inflicted upon women are usually around the feet and ankles – those inflicted on men are usually on the face and hands. This suggests women might get bitten when they accidentally stand on a snake but men will be right in there with a stick or a shovel trying to get a photograph or manhandle the snake). Around the garden, there are several steps you can take to reduce the risk of unexpected encounters with snakes.

1. Keep lawns trimmed and vegetation clear of pathways around dwellings.
2. Don't have standing water close to living areas.
3. Chicken coops or aviaries should be positioned away from living areas. These attract rodents and therefore, snakes.
4. When gardening or tidying unclear areas wear gloves, covered shoes and long trousers.
5. Keep woodpiles and rubbish away from living areas. These are excellent habitat for snakes and animals that they prey on.
6. Have well-fitted weather seals on all doors and windows to reduce the chances of snakes entering your home.

If you find a snake around your living area, treat it as venomous unless you know otherwise. Keep pets



clear and observe the snake from a safe distance (at least a few metres away) and call the snake catcher. Do not approach the snake or attempt to capture it.

The Emergency Snake Removal number for Alice Springs is **0407 983 276**. They will humanely and safely relocate the snake to a suitable habitat away from human habitation.

It is worth considering also that the majority of snake species around Alice Springs are nocturnal hunters. Walking around in the weeds after dark is never a good idea without proper footwear and long trousers.

Snakes can live in your garden and be an important and beautiful part of your local ecosystem without necessarily being a feared presence lurking around every corner.

**NB. All species of Australian snakes are protected by law and killing or harming them is an offence under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992*.**

## Announcements

### Feral Dog Trapping Project

The project to mitigate the threat of feral dogs to Black-footed Rock Wallabies has gone well over the last few weeks and we are now continuing monitoring in the areas to assess the impact of the trapping period.

X dogs were trapped during the period and handed over to ASTC Rangers. Of these animals, x were subsequently claimed as pets and returned to their owners and the remainder were humanely put down by veterinarians.

## Websites Worth a Look

[www.eremaea.com](http://www.eremaea.com)

### Eremaea Birds

This is a website which will help you to catalogue bird sightings on your property and upload them to a national database. Best of all – it's free!

<http://www.birdata.com.au/homecontent.do>

### Birds Australia's Atlas of Australian Birdlife

This is the database that your bird records will eventually end up in if you enter them through Eremaea Birds.

<http://www.ala.org.au/>

### The Atlas of Living Australia

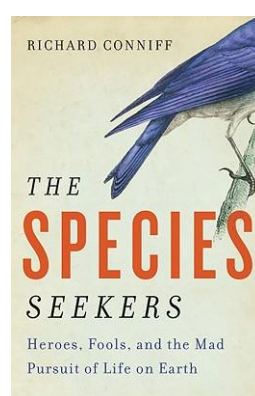
This is a much more ambitious project in the making. Any sightings reported through Eremaea Birds or Birds Australia will also be contributed to this gargantuan database of all living organisms in Australia.

## Recommended Books

### The Species Seekers: Heroes, Fools and the Mad Pursuit of Life on Earth

by Richard Conniff

This is a book which will either have you climbing up



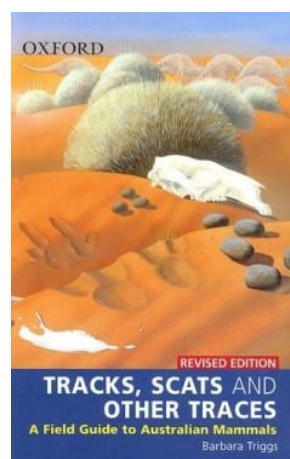
and down Mt Sonder looking for the next new species for science or pinned to the couch to the very last page. Richard Conniff has produced a biography of natural history collectors in the heyday of the pursuit for new species in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a rich tale which provides much food for

thought as the subject matter is inextricably linked to human origins and questions of faith, race, religion, morality, and mankind's understanding of its place in the grand scheme of it all. This is a fascinating account, meticulously researched and entertainingly written. The narrative is full of rogues and eccentrics and culminates with the tales of the ultimate specimen collectors, Alfred Russell Wallace and Charles Darwin.

**W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.**

### Tracks, Scats, and Other Traces: A Field Guide to Australian Mammals

By Barbara Triggs



This field guide is an invaluable reference for anyone who enjoys looking for wildlife in Australia, but particularly here in the desert where sandy areas can be perfect for deciphering animal tracks. The book treats all of our terrestrial mammal species and helps you to find them or interpret their passage by analysing a range of

different signs. This is a great box to keep in the glove box of the car next time you go camping to sort out the identity of all those overnight visitors in the sand around your swag.

**Oxford University Press, 2005.**

## Calendar of Events

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>xx</b>        | Land for Wildlife feral dove trapping workshop for Junior Rangers. |
| <b>5/6/2011</b>  | World Environment Day.   |
| <b>5/6/2011</b>  | National World Whale Day.  |
| <b>8/6/2011</b>  | World Ocean Day.   |
| <b>15/6/2011</b> | Global Wind Day.   |
| <b>17/6/2011</b> | World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought.                   |
| <b>19/6/2011</b> | World Sauntering Day   |
| <b>20/6/2011</b> | International Ride to Work Day.                                    |



Take care,

Jesse, Chris & Bill  
Land for Wildlife Coordinators

This newsletter has been produced by  
Jesse Carpenter, Chris Watson and Bill Low, *LfW*  
coordinators, W.A. Low Ecological Services,  
Contact Ilse on 89555222 or [lfw@lowecol.com.au](mailto:lfw@lowecol.com.au)