

LAND FOR WILDLIFE NEWS



Newsletter of the Land for Wildlife Scheme in Alice Springs Municipality, NT

Vol.1 No.6 February 2003

Land for Wildlife Update

Workshop

This weekend LfW will be holding a 'Property Planning and Landscaping' workshop. Col Stanton and Colleen O'Malley will introduce you to key strategies that aim to enhance and conserve biodiversity on your property and local landscaper Geoff Miers will share some of his landscaping tips assisting you to create a dream 'back yard' for the local wildlife.

LfW Workshop Surveys

Thankyou to those who responded to the survey sent out. This information will help to guide further workshops and help to identify where information gaps occur. If you have not returned the survey it would be greatly appreciated. If you need another form, give us a call 89555222 or email LfW@LowEcol.com.au

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Environment and Heritage visits Alice Springs

This week the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Environment and Heritage, Dr Sharman Stone will be visiting Alice Springs. She would like to see some of the on ground work showing the successful application of EnviroFund.

Dr. Stone is aware that the benefits to wildlife are not only due to national conservation efforts such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but also from the efforts of private land holders. The LfW program funded through EnviroFund has helped to facilitate and assist private land holders to achieve a good result through consultation, workshops, newsletters, advising on kinds of plants appropriate to particular areas, providing criteria for assessing success and providing expertise to assist landholders to achieve a best result for conservation.

She is hoping to visit some LfW properties during her visit and we look forward to showing her some of your successes in encouraging wildlife by providing appropriate habitat.

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Books Worth a Look



'Field Guide to the Plants of Outback South Australia', by Frank Kutsche and Brendan Lay is comprehensive field guide which draws together the knowledge of the more common plants within the outback region of SA, many species are also common to the NT. It has been designed with all interest groups in mind by using non-technical terms.

'Reptiles and Frogs of Alice Springs' by Nic Gambold and Deb Metters has been reprinted so if you want to buy a second copy or to let your friends know they are available, send us an email or call us 89555222. Also available at ALEC, Olive Pink Coffee Shop and the Desert Park.

Spotlight On

Introducing the Sociable little Zebra Finch

The Zebra finch is the most widely distributed of all Australian grass finches and is found in a wide variety of habitats. It is more numerous within the drier interior but also visits coastal areas, especially during periods of drought inland.

Within central Australia the Zebra finch is found in shrublands and in those parts of the spinifex country where shrubs or low trees provide cover and nest sites.

All over their wide range the one essential for the occurrence of Zebra finches is surface water. Therefore the distribution of this species in central Australia is patchy, being restricted to the vicinity of natural or artificial waterholes. To good bushmen the finch is regarded as a good indicator of water.

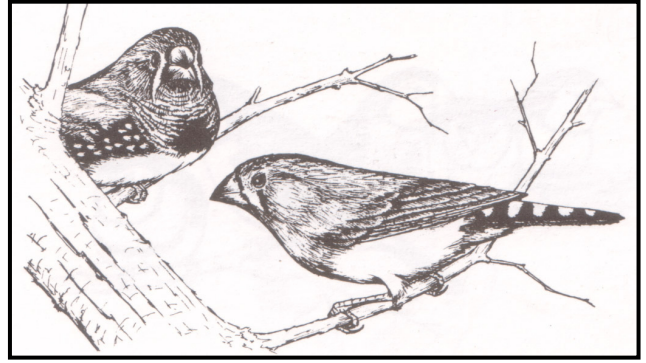
Zebra finches spend most of their time foraging on the ground where they move by hopping with both feet simultaneously. Their flight is fairly rapid and strong, with slight undulations.

Food

Like most Australian grass finches, the Zebra finch mainly feeds on half ripe and ripe grass seeds. It will selectively choose native grass seed avoiding exotic species such as Buffel Grass. Some insects are also taken year round.

Courtship and Mating

In contrast to the majority of grass finches the Zebra finch never holds a piece of grass during courtship. Perhaps the bright orange red bill of the courting male is sufficient to attract a receptive female? In the introductive phase of courtship both the male and female hop to and fro between two branches with tails continually twisted



towards each other, with frequent beak wiping. After this little dance the female stops and the male advances towards her in a rhythmic pivoting dance, signing continuously. During this performance the crown feathers are depressed and the feathers of the back and sides of the head are raised. The white belly feathers are fully fluffed out. As the male advances along the branch the female begins tail quivering and then copulation takes place.

Usually the birds court in a bush or tree, preferring dead branches where their movement will not be hindered.

As with most species of grass finches, pair-bonding is very tight. It is thought that the birds pair for life. The pair keeps together for years and if environmental circumstances permit use a definite roosting nest where they retire at dusk and sometimes during the day.

Nesting

Most commonly the nest is built in the terminal twigs of shrubs, thorny shrubs being preferred. The male holds the responsibility of indicating suitable locations for nesting. It is the female who finally chooses the exact site. If both are happy with the site they either hop back and forth or sit drowsily at the potential nest site. If she rejects the site she flies away and the male continues to search.

The nest is built of harsh grasses externally and softer grasses internally. The nest chamber is lined with feathers, plant down or any soft materials. Both sexes participate in nest construction, with the male collecting

the material and the female weaving the materials into a nest. However within central Australia it has been observed both sexes participating in the collection of materials. This is thought to reduce the time needed to make a nest therefore achieving a quick start in breeding.

Breeding

The breeding season of the Zebra finch is strongly influenced by rainfall. In central Australia the species will breed after rainfall, irrespective of the time of year. In good seasons it may rear several broods in succession or breed all year round. Whereas during extended dry periods there may be no breeding activity for a year or more.

Usually 3 to 7 eggs form the clutch. The young are fed half ripe seeds and insects by both parents. They first leave the nest within three weeks. They are lead by the parents for feeding during the day and back to the nest for the night. Young and parents roost together in the nest until the next breeding cycle begins.

Social Activities

The Zebra finch is very sociable. Outside the breeding season the Zebra Finch forms flocks of about 50 to 100 birds and are resident all year round. Unfavourable conditions may force the flock to move to an area where surface water remains available. The flock remains together throughout the breeding season and most breed in colonies of about 5 to 25 pairs. Usually each pair has its own nesting bush, however, when suitable nesting sites become rare several nests may be found in a tree or bush.

The members of the breeding colony keep together and know each other by calls. Neighbours may visit each other at their nests, whereas strangers are chased away from the vicinity. Several times a day almost all members meet to drink or bath together, preen each other or fly to a feeding place.

As with other finch species the most extended social meeting occurs late in the afternoon.

References

Immelmann, K. 1965. *Australian Finches*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

Slater, S. 1970. *A field guide to Australian Birds – Non Passerines*. Toppan Printing, Hong Kong.

Buffel Update

When Dave Leonard has some spare thought time, he thinks of nothing more than ingenious ways to help him rid his property of Buffel. Dave and Carmel have had success using spray and follow-up digs (when the ground permits). Their property is free from large dominating patches of Buffel with few plants resprouting, and only the occasional seedling trying to get an unnoticed head start.

Seeds in excessive numbers get sent adrift in removal and collect around the plant can sometimes become a little discouraging. What's the good of removing a plant when hiding in the sheltered Buffel habitat lays a bizquillion seeds. Ideally we would aim to remove the Buffel plant before it does seed, but this can't always be the case.

And Dave has had some of that spare thought time lately.

Vacuuming the seed stock and the dry seed heads is what has come to mind this time. Dave himself has never tried this and wonders how well you think this technique would work. Has anyone else ever wondered what to do with the vast amounts of Buffel seed that collects under plants and in corners? If anyone has tried this method or is willing to give it a go let LfW know.

Watch out For

Tips on how to ID those Soaring Birds

Black - Breasted buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*)

Description

Size: 51-61cm long

Wingspan: 150cm

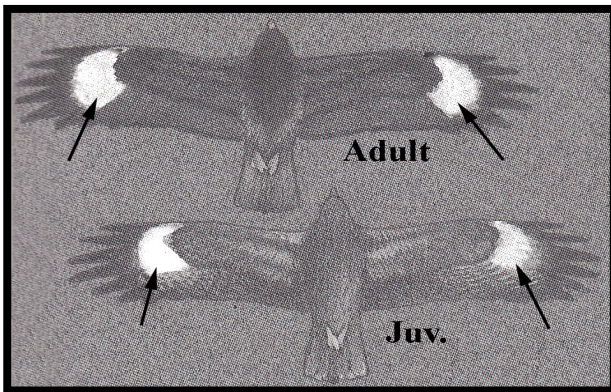
Colour: Blackish above and below with rufous nape, shoulders and thighs. Prominent white windows on the underside of the wing.

Call: short sharp calls.

Distinguished by: Large and robust with short tail. Prominent white windows on the underside of the wing (see right).

Habitat

Found in open woodlands and savannas, and in arid areas stream beds lined with coolibahs and red gums.



Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*)

Description

Size: 48-55cm long

Wing Span: Up to 120cm

Colour: Dark grey-brown to black.

Call: weak, “whinnying”

Distinguished by: Forked tail, often twisted in flight. Often seen in flocks of 5 or more. Soaring flight pattern.

Habitat

Uncommon in woodland and savannah, common around human activity areas.



Black Shouldered Kite (*Elanus axillaris*)

Description

Size: 33-38cm long

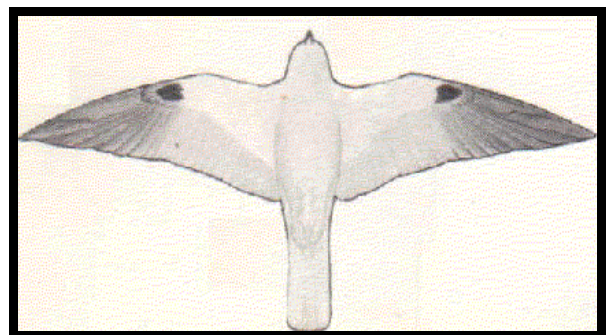
Colour: Body white, wings grey and white with prominent black shoulders.

Call: Harsh “kar” or quiet “chep”

Distinguished by: Black shoulder markings, small black patch under wing and on wing tips. Similar to Letter-winged Kite but lacks black “W” markings on the underside of the wing.

Habitat

Prefers woodlands and partially cleared forests.



Brown Falcon (*Falco berigora*)

Description

Size: Female 50cm long

Male 45cm long

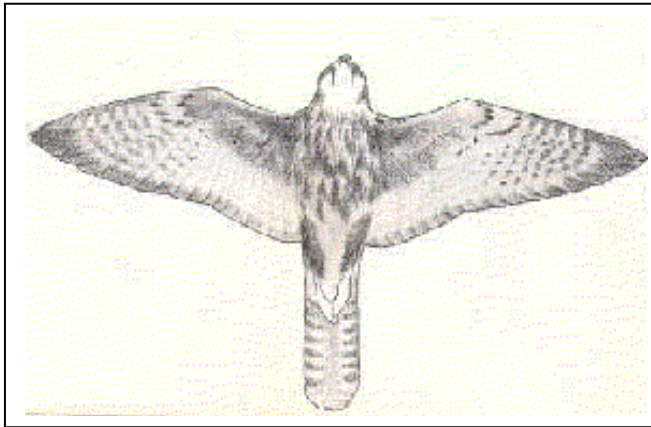
Colour: Very variable in colouration (pale sandy brown to almost black). Three basic forms occur: *red phase* with reddish plumage; *brown phase* with brownish plumage (shown bottom right); and *dark phase* with very dark-brown plumage above and below. The red form is most likely to be seen inland.

Call: Loud cackling calls, uttered frequently. 'Yeah-cook', 'yeah-cook-uk-uk'.

Distinguished by: Upswept wings, slow over-arm wing beats, and slow, hovering flight. Barred tail and pale underwing. There are usually pale patches on the hind neck, obvious when the bird looks away.

Habitat

Primarily open grassy woodland and can also be found in forested country



Little Eagle (*Hieraetus morphonoides*)

Description

Size: Female 55cm long

Male 48cm long

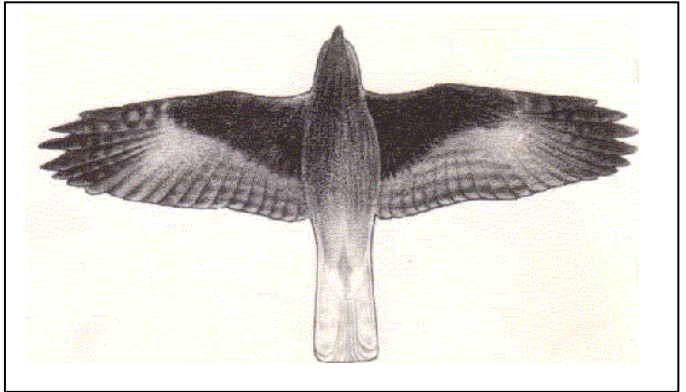
Colour: Two colour phases. The more common light-phase birds are brown with black flight feathers and paler bars on wings. Dark-phase (shown below) birds are dark brown and black all over, except for paler bars on wings. Juvenile birds have chestnut coloured underparts.

Call: Loud rapid 'wh-whee-whit' or 'kuk-kuk-kuk', or a loud slow 'swk swk swk'.

Distinguished by: Short square-tail, broad wings with pale wrist bands, feathered legs, slow wing beat and easy gliding flight.

Habitat

Wooded country.



Nankeen Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*)

Description

Size: Male 31cm

Female 35cm

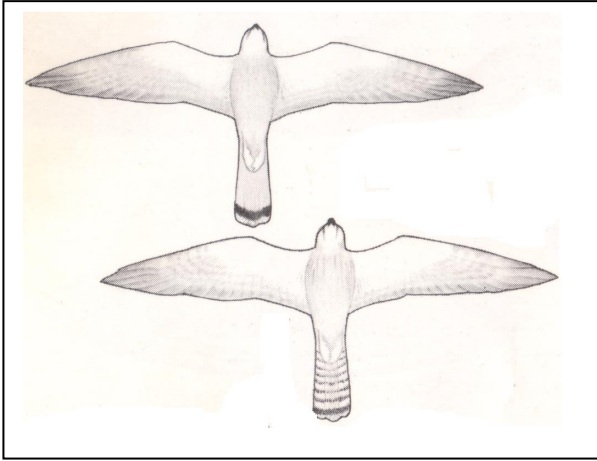
Colour: Male has a pale blue-grey head, black wing feathers with pale streaks, pale grey tail with a white tip, underparts are white, and there are dark streaks on the breast. The female has a rufous head, and a rufous tail with black bars.

Call: A rapid 'kek-kek-kek-kek', a quavering 'ee agh', followed by slow clucks 'tek-tek-tek'.

Distinguished by: They glide and soar with wings outstretched or hover with rapidly beating wings. Their pale underparts appear white to the observer below.

Habitat

Common in most open country but require open grassy areas for hunting so is most common in open woodland and agricultural land.



Wedge-Tailed Eagle (*Aquila audax*)

Description

Size: Female 100cm long

Male 90 cm long

Wingspan: 2.5 metres

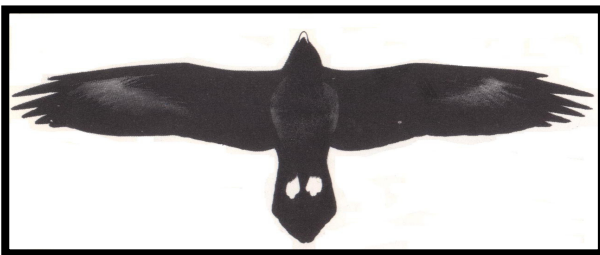
Colour: Adults are black with grey-brown nape, wing-coverts, and undertail-coverts. Juveniles are brown with brownish-white undertail-coverts.

Call: Repeated whistling 'yessir' and 'coo-ee-el'; yelping 'pseet-you'; and cat-like screeching, especially when disturbed from the nest.

Distinguished by: Large size (largest bird of prey in Australia), dark colour, long wedge-shaped tail, fully feathered legs, soaring flight.

Habitat

Widespread throughout Plains and forests.



In winter time wedge tails (and many southern raptors) return north where, historically, prey animals remain active in the winter and longer day length provides sufficient foraging time. During this normal seasonal distributional change large

numbers of Wedgies can be seen gathered around road kills. Do your bit by removing fresh carcasses of roos well off roads so wedgies have distance to get airborne when cars approach.

Workshops & Events

22nd May, Saturday. *Land for Wildlife.*

9.30am. LfW Workshop, Property 'Planning and Landscaping'. For further information contact Danae Moore on 89 555 222.

2nd June Wednesday. *Alice Springs Plant Society.*

Monthly meeting 7:30 pm at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Guest Speaker, Mark Harris with an update on the Central Australian Herbarium plus plant survey and planning projects.

4th June, Friday. PhD student Boyd Wright will talk at the **Rangeland Biology and Ecology Seminars** on vegetation response to bush fires in the Western Desert. 3.30 pm at CSIRO conference room.

5th June, Saturday- *Alice Springs Field*

Naturalist Club. Walk from Wigleys Waterhole to the Telegraph Station. Meet 7:30 am at the Sargent Street sign on the Stuart Hwy. Contact Rosalie Breen on 8952 3409.

9th June Wednesday. *Alice Springs Field*

Naturalist Club. Monthly meeting 7:30pm at OLSH College, Sadadeen Road. Speaker: Helen Puckey on Carpentarian Rock-rats.

20th March, Saturday, 9am to 12.30pm

Native Plant Propagation Workshop Learn the secrets of propagating local native plant species at the Greening Australia Nursery. **GA** members free, non-members \$10, phone 8953 2882 to register.

7th April Wednesday, *Australian Plants Society.*

Propagation by cuttings: demonstration/workshop. Meet 7:30pm in The Gazebo at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

This newsletter has been produced by *LfW* coordinators W.A. Low Ecological Services with the assistance of the Alice Springs Town Council and the Australian Commonwealth Government's Natural Heritage Trust EnviroFund.

