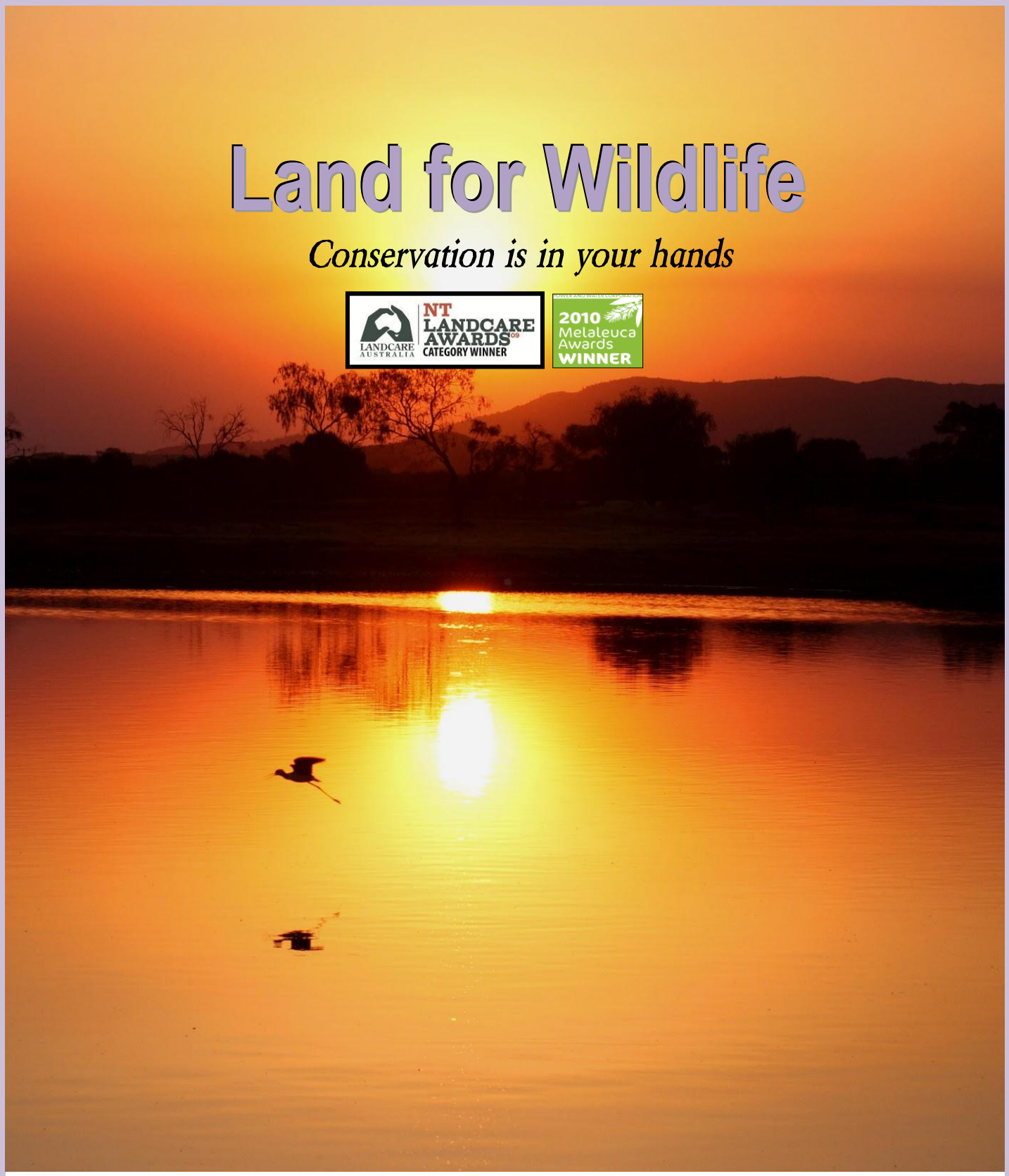
Land for Wildlife

Conservation is in your hands



NT LANDCARE AWARDS 09 CATEGORY WINNER

2010 Melaleuca Awards WINNER

NEWSLETTER – February 2012

Territory Natural Resource Management | Northern Territory Government | PowerWater | Alice Springs Town Council

Contents

On our cover this month... A bushfire sunset – we hope one of the last for a while. This is a view from the Alice Springs Sewage Ponds looking west over the back of Mt. Gillen. In the foreground a lone Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, flits across the water on the way to its night time roost.

Photo: Chris Watson

Land for Wildlife News

Coordinators Invited to National Conference

While Land for Wildlife here in Alice Springs is celebrating its tenth anniversary, the program marked its 30th anniversary in Victoria last year. Down south, where the program is administered by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the national conference will be held in March this year and Jesse, Chris, and Bill have been invited to deliver a presentation on the differences of coordinating the Land for Wildlife program here in Central Australia.

As the ten year anniversary ticks over here in Alice, it gives us cause to look back and see how well the program has done in its time here, and to give Alice Springs Land for Wildlife members a pat on the back. The combined Land *and* Garden for Wildlife program protect and manage a total of almost 16,000 hectares of Central Australian habitat. Considering the population of Alice Springs, this equates to a bit over 2 hectares per person – however; we only have 291 members. This takes the *per capita* area of protected habitat up to almost 55 hectares. It has often been said that Alice Springs is an amazing little town, filled with some amazing people, and this is certainly further evidence that when it comes to conservation at least, our citizens are once again punching well above their weight.

Jesse and I are greatly looking forward to communicating the tremendous achievements of our members to a national audience in March.

Congratulations one and all!

Pastoral and Indigenous Membership Drive

Territory Eco-link have been a long time supporter of Land for Wildlife in Central Australia. Late in 2011, an agreement was reached for the provision of additional funding to support the expansion of the Land for Wildlife program into Pastoral and Indigenous lands surrounding Alice Springs.

These are areas which hold some large tracts of valuable wildlife habitat, much of which has already been under diligent and sustainable management practices, but which might benefit from the assistance of a program like Land for Wildlife. Through this new effort we hope to assist landholders to achieve the very best in conservation management on their land and to provide much-needed recognition of these efforts and, in some cases, access to funding for further conservation work.

This is all very well, but we need to get these landholders involved, and this is where our member network comes in handy. If you have any friends or contacts with ties to indigenous or pastoral lands in Central Australia, we'd love to hear from them. The Land for Wildlife coordinators already have a few areas in mind but we are keen to hear from any landholders in these areas who are interested in investigating the benefits of a partnership with Land for Wildlife.

So the circle is expanding! Please feel free to pass on Jesse and Chris' contact details to any landholders who you think might be interested.

It's Official! Ayers Rock Yulara Resort Joins The Family

The big news in the last few weeks has been something of a landmark registration with the Land for Wildlife program. Adrienne Horton is the assistant manager of Mulgara Gallery at Yulara, and approached the LFW coordinators several months ago about the possibility of getting full registration for the property.

After months of collaboration with Jesse and Chris, and a very detailed property assessment, resort management has just given the green light for the partnership to go ahead.

This is a really interesting property to have as a new member, not least because of the several species of national significance which are found in the area. The fauna list reads like a who's who of fascinating arid zone species; Southern Marsupial Mole *Notoryctes typhlops*,

Brush-tailed Mulgara *Dasycercus blythi*, Tjakura (Great Desert Skink) *Liopholis kintorei*, Princess Parrot *Polytelis alexandrae*, and Scarlet-chested Parrot *Neophema splendida*, have all been recorded in the area around Yulara. Throw in the proximity to recent (unconfirmed) reports of Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis*, in the APY Lands south of the border, and Yulara quickly becomes a tantalising place to be conducting biodiversity surveys.

Adrienne has plans for several new conservation projects around the resort grounds, and is hoping to bring an enriched visitor experience to the resort with some interesting interpretation of the local landscapes. Other possibilities for future activities may include monthly bird surveys around the resort, an ongoing rabbit control program, and spotlighting walks through the resort grounds.

Articles

Would you like to share some of your stories and experiences of managing your property for wildlife? Maybe you've implemented a successful weed control program or simply have some interesting wildlife hanging around?

If you do, send us an email or better yet, write a short article about your experiences of natural resource management in Alice Springs. We'd love some member input into our newsletter and blog content!

Managing Australia's Feral Camels

By Quentin Hart.

The following article was sent to us by Penny Hussey, our Land for Wildlife colleague in WA, and appeared in the January 2012 edition of their newsletter *Western Wildlife*.

Above; Feral camels in the Petermann Range on the eastern edge of the Gibson Desert. Photo: Penny Hussey.

Many Australians understand only too well the impact feral camels can have on the environment, their livelihoods, our flora and fauna, and important Aboriginal sites. With more than one million feral camels found across more than 3 million km2 parts of WA, SA, the NT and parts of western Qld, and a $10 million annual damage bill, there is an urgent need to act to reduce their impacts. Funding of $19 million from the Australian Government's Caring for our Country initiative for the Australian Feral Camel Management Project unites a broad group of people in working together to manage feral camels.

Camels in Australia

Camels played an important role in the development of central Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The advent of motorised transport resulted in camels being released into the wild and a feral population emerged. Feral camels breed unchecked as they have no natural predators and they often inhabit large tracts of sparsely populated, semi-arid and arid areas and are therefore largely 'invisible'.

Feral camels have a low mortality rate, generally only dying from 'old age' and in prolonged drought events. Over time, the feral camels have increased to such an extent that their numbers are now estimated to be in the vicinity of 1 to 1.2 million and doubling every nine years. The issue is not just the large number of animals but the damage they cause, particularly where densities are high.

Feral camel damage

Feral camels cause more than $10 million in damage to infrastructure, lost production, and direct management and control costs.

Where feral camels are found in high densities they can have a devastating impact on vegetation through feeding behaviour (browse on trees) and trampling resulting in erosion. Where this occurs in wetlands the fouling, trampling and subsequent sedimentation can destroy vital waterholes. Feral camels can cause the local extinction of populations of preferred species such as the quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*), bean tree (*Erythrina vespertillo*) and curly pod wattle (*Acacia sessiliceps*). They compete with native animals for food, water and shelter, and also contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

Disaster in a drought. Destruction of a waterhole, death of many animals and extreme distress of others, combined with overgrazing and destruction of the surrounding area. Photo: Australian Feral Camel Management Project

Feral camels can cause significant damage to sites of cultural significance for Aboriginal people: water places (water holes, rock holes, soaks, springs, etc) are special places for desert Aboriginal people. Many of these sites are sacred, and damage to them constitutes damage to their social and cultural life. The destruction of sources of bush tucker and water holes can have a profound impact on remote Aboriginal communities.

About the Australian Feral Camel Management Project

The Australian Feral Camel Management Project is a national approach which brings together for the first time all of the relevant state and territory governments (SA, WA, Qld, NT), Aboriginal organisations across the four jurisdictions (land trusts, corporations and land councils), NRM boards, conservation groups, the pastoral industry and commercial interests to protect identified refuges for biodiversity in northern and remote Australia that are under threat from feral camels.

The Australian Feral Camel Management Project is supported under the Australian Government Caring for our Country initiative and has been set up to reduce the densities of feral camels in areas of high conservation and cultural value. Methods to be used include mustering for sale (for live export and meat processing) and aerial shooting. Exclusion fencing is used at high value sites where appropriate. Some project activities will support the National Feral Camel Action Plan, developed as a plan to provide, 'comprehensive, coordinated management of camels and their impacts that maintains and promotes the biodiversity, agricultural assets and social values of the rangelands for all Australians'.

How far do camels travel? East of Marble Bar, a camel is caught and fitted with a collar that will report its position daily via a satellite. Photo: Australian Feral Camel Management Project

Commercial operations

Moves to establish a sustainable camel industry can contribute to the reduction of feral populations, particularly where commercial approaches are viable and provide employment and economic activity in arid Australia.

A significant challenge for the establishment of such an industry is that feral camels are located in very remote parts of the country and there are long distances to domestic markets, let alone international markets. Commercial camel operations will need to be driven by economic considerations and address animal welfare issues associated with mustering and transporting camels over large distances. Successful commercial activities will depend on the development of secure markets that are prepared to pay the real costs of harvesting and transport of camel products and live animals.

Community support and action

The Australian Feral Camel Management Project is a major logistical exercise, involving expert teams of people using sophisticated equipment and all following standard operating procedures which incorporate strict animal welfare and safety protocols. Generally there is little scope for the general public to be involved in on-ground management.

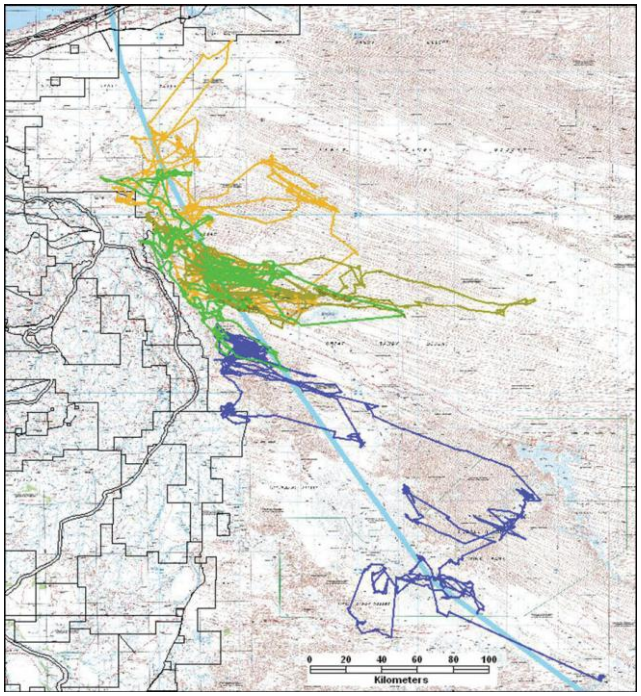
The opportunistic shooting of feral camels by members of the public is not condoned on the grounds that strict codes of practice and standard operating procedures cannot be enforced to ensure feral camels are killed quickly and humanely. In addition, landholders are generally not comfortable with firearms being used on their land without their permission, including along public roads that traverse their land. That does not mean that community support is not vital in tracking and monitoring feral camel numbers and damage. CamelScan has been developed as a free Google mapping tool available at

www.feralscan.org.au/camelscan to help Australians report sightings of feral camels in their area or seen while travelling.

CamelScan has been developed by the Invasive Animals CRC, NSW Department of Primary Industries and Ninti One Limited (which manages the Australian Feral Camel Management Project), and is part of the FeralScan program being rolled out across the country.

Quentin Hart is National Manager of the Australian Feral Camel Management Project.

The map below shows the tracks, over approximately one year, of four collared camels. Clearly, one community or one property owner cannot undertake control on this scale. It requires a coordinated approach. Images: Australian Feral Camel Management Project



Mozzie Control in the Backyard Pond

A backyard pond's a great idea for attracting wildlife to your garden or property. Even a small puddle can potentially become a watering source for birds and aquatic fauna such as frogs and aquatic insects. Using a range of local plants, river rocks and sand, you can effectively create your own central Australian wetland and bring some unique species within view of your kitchen window.

One aquatic insect that people are not happy to have in their backyard pond, however, is that ever-present biting annoyance, the mosquito. Most species of mosquito need water to maintain their aquatic larvae and small, predator free, still flowing garden ponds are a perfect place to raise a thriving mozzie colony.

A great way to manage the mozzie 'wriggler' population in any pond is to remove the predator free status of your homemade wetland. This can easily be done by adding some fish to dine on your pond's unwanted inhabitants.

For many people, this means going down to the pet shop and buying a few exotic goldfish. Goldfish are great – they're colourful, hardy, aren't fussy about water quality and will happily get to work ridding your pond of mozzie larvae. They're also cheap to replace when a hungry heron comes to spend a few nights!

Goldfish, however, may also eat those tadpoles and frogs you're trying to encourage and of course are not a native species themselves. Elsewhere in Australia, they have become pests in waterways when they've been released or escaped into the wild.

Did you know, however, that central Australia has several native species of fish that are often perfectly adapted to a life in the habitat a backyard pond provides?

Desert fish that inhabit local rivers, such as the Finke and even the Todd, are well adapted to extremes in water quality and temperature that a small pond is likely to experience. They are also quite happy to live in small, still and stagnant pools, as these conditions often closely replicate natural water conditions found in drying river beds.

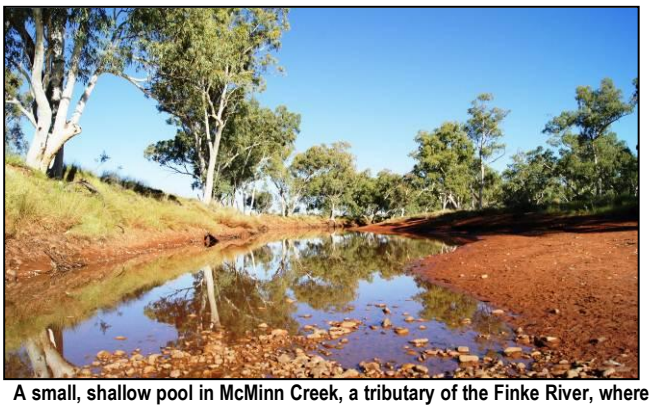
Smaller species, such as the Desert Rainbow Fish (*Melanotaenia splendida tatei*) even make great aquarium specimens, being hardy, easy to feed, colourful and quick to adapt to a well-planted fish tank or pond. They'll even breed, allowing you to enjoy generations of colourful Rainbows.

Rainbow Fish are omnivorous, eating small invertebrates (yes, mozzie larvae are on the menu!), plants and algae. In a well planted pond with some algal growth, you may not even need to feed them. In the wild, they live in the Finke and its tributaries as well as other river systems of the Lake Eyre Basin.

Desert Rainbow Fish have amazing powers of dispersal, travelling hundreds of kilometres up rivers when floods occur. They then eke out an existence in tiny, shallow pools that remain as desert rivers dry up. These pools are often crowded with fish. The waterhole in the photograph below teemed with literally hundreds of Rainbow Fish. Several were caught in a small dab net and placed into clear water for photography. They were then returned to their pool unharmed.

A Desert Rainbow Fish (*Melanotaenia splendida tatei*), fresh from a McMinn Creek waterhole and placed in clear water for photography.

The same fish after being in clear water for ten minutes. The colour change is obvious.



A small, shallow pool in McMinn Creek, a tributary of the Finke River, where the above fish was collected. 3 weeks later, this pool was dry.

Although perfectly suited to a pond or aquarium, Desert Rainbow Fish are not often kept by people and they may be difficult to obtain. Having searched the internet on the subject when writing this article, I can tell you that there are several businesses that breed and sell many species of native freshwater fish, including Desert Rainbows. The local pet shop may also be able to get their hands on some for you. So if you're interested in an interesting and environmentally friendly goldfish alternative, consider a centralian local.

All captive bred stock of Desert Rainbow Fish likely originated from wild-caught specimens. Although it's not illegal to collect fish from the wild in the Northern Territory (except in the case of some endangered species and size and bag limits), we don't encourage you to get your fish from a local river. Also, it is illegal to release aquarium and pond fish into the wild, even if the fish you release are native to the area. Introduced fish or diseases could have a serious impact on our desert wetlands.

Just as an end to the story, three weeks after photographing the fish above, this pool was revisited. It had completely dried up. Not even the desiccated carcasses of the hundreds of fishy inhabitants were visible where the waterhole had been. Only meat ants squabbled over a few remaining tails and fish heads in the sand. No doubt when the rain comes back, Rainbows will swim up McMinn Creek from the Finke and begin the boom and bust cycle all over again.

References for this story:

Merrick, J.R. & Schnida, G.E. *Australian Freshwater Fishes.* Sydney: Macquarie University, 1984.

http://www.desertfishes.org/australia/

Be sure to read next month's LFW newsletter. We'll feature an article on some central Australian wetland plants to give your pond a more natural setting and keep your aquatic ecosystem healthy.

Websites Worth a Look

This month – a couple of relevant blogs to have a look at...

RED CENTRE NATURESCAPES
http://redcentrenaturescapes.blogspot.com/

Whoever this mystery photographer is, they are producing some of the finest wildlife and landscape images in Central Australia at the moment.

There is very scant information about the identity of the elusive snapper on this website - they may turn out to be our very own "Banksy". You can explore this clean and simple blog for an outstanding selection of photographs which are updated fairly regularly.

For aspiring snappers, you might find some inspiration for your own work here and a few technical tips along the way.

AUSTRALIAN FUNGI – A BLOG
http://australianfungi.blogspot.com/

Run by a mycologist whom we only know as "Gaye", this blog is run from the Hunter Valley in NSW, but has information covering the whole of Australia.

Fungi are a bit of a hit and miss affair here in Central Australia. With our dry climate, fungal species aren't always obvious but we have a reasonable diversity living just under our noses.

You will usually find a few bracket fungi around, even in dry weather, but after a bit of rain you might find something that hasn't bloomed in years. That's where this blog can come in very handy. The various types of fungi around Australia are usefully catalogued in a format which makes

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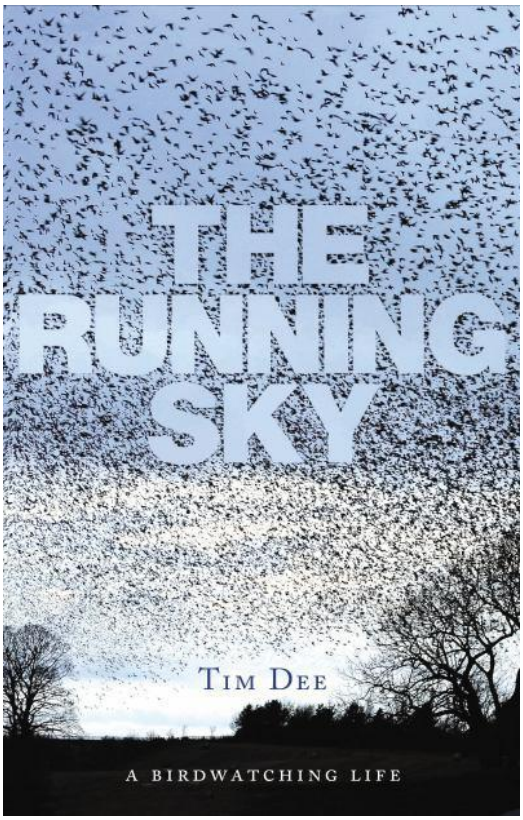
it reasonably straightforward to identify any fungi you might stumble across.

Recommended Books

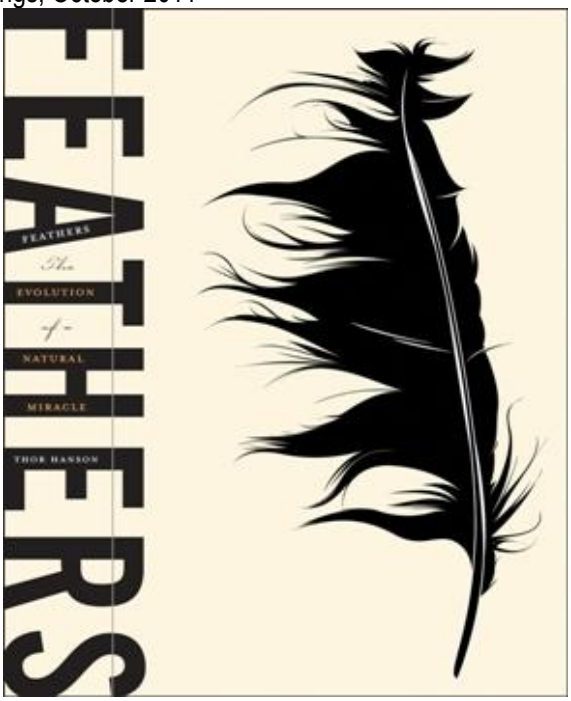


THE RUNNING SKY: A Birdwatching Life.
By Tim Dee

Don't worry we're not entering the realm of super bird nerdiness here. This magnificent book is a condensed biography of the author's life watching birds all over the world, but it contains entertaining observations on many aspects of life. Described using a 12 month calendar but spaced over a period of 40 years, it describes in languid prose the innate urge we all possess to a greater or lesser degree to seek out and observe nature.

There is much here other than just observations of birds; the writing itself is a revelation. At times this verges on a work of epic poetry as Dee bends the language to his will, but never so much that it feels strained.

An outstanding Sunday morning book.



FEATHERS: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle
By Thor Hanson

When was the last time you actually looked closely at a pigeon feather you found on the ground? Have you ever considered where all those feathers come from in your pillows and doonas? How can feathers help an albatross stay aloft for months on end and also allow an Emperor Penguin to navigate the frigid climes of Antarctica with impunity? Did you know that it is now widely held that many dinosaurs had feathers? What is *snarge*, and why on Earth did investigators discover the remains of a Reindeer in the mangled wreck of an aircraft that had been flying at 1500ft? .... on Christmas Eve??? Did you know the most valuable items of cargo on the manifest of the Titanic were the numerous bales of plumes destined for the milliners and fashion houses of New York City?

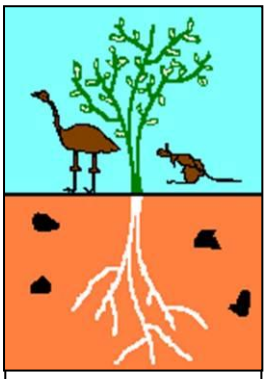
This riveting book provides thrilling answers to a bunch of intriguing questions, and will have you looking much closer at feathers (and their owners) in future. Truly a natural miracle, there is a whole industry and economy based on the acquisition and trading of all sorts of feathers.

A gripping read. Get into it.

Calendar of Events

Saturday 17 March – Native plant sale at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. Starting at 8am - get there early for the best choice of local native pots and tube stock.

Saturday 29 March – Land for Wildlife Rabbit Control Workshop. Time and venue TBA.



Low Ecological Services P/L

This newsletter has been produced by
Jesse Carpenter, Chris Watson and Bill Low, *LfW* coordinators, W.A. Low Ecological Services,
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That's it for this month folks.

Take care,

Jesse, Chris & Bill
Land for Wildlife Coordinators

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