

Land for Wildlife

Conservation is in your hands



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NEWSLETTER – March 2012

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On our cover this month... Splendid Fairy-wrens *Malurus splendens*, have just returned to the Land for Wildlife birdbath after an absence of a few months. The beautiful male in full breeding plumage (main picture), contrasts with the inset showing a younger male who is just starting to develop breeding colours.

Photo: Chris Watson

Land for Wildlife News

Ntaria School Welcomes Land For Wildlife

During February, Jesse and Chris were invited to Ntaria (Hermansburg) to talk with representatives from the Tjuwampa Rangers and Ntaria School. Just for good measure, we decided to take Jacelyn Anderson from the Junior Rangers program with us.

Apart from a brief interruption from a Mengden's Brown Snake *Pseudonaja mengdeni* (see articles), the meeting went smoothly and resulted in at least two new memberships, and a great new partnership.

Plans are now afoot for full registration of the school grounds, and repeat visits from the coordinators to assist with workshops and biodiversity surveys in the area to help encourage LFW programs on Aboriginal lands.

Land for Wildlife 30th Anniversary National Conference

Jesse and Chris recently returned from the national conference down in Melbourne. The Land for Wildlife program began in Victoria 30 years ago so it was only fitting that the milestone be celebrated in the place of its birth. Over two days we received a comprehensive round up of Land for Wildlife in all its guises around the country. Coordinators and extension officers from every state except SA were in attendance as well as many Land for Wildlife property owners. Also present were representatives from Birdlife Australia, the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE, and a variety of community conservation groups.

When a community conservation organisation can not only survive but grow and thrive over three decades the news is always going to be positive. Land for Wildlife seems to be going strong in all the states that it operates in, and here in The Centre, we're doing as well or better than most of the states.

Central Australia is the only region where Land for Wildlife is run as a not-for-profit venture under the auspices of a private host, rather than being a local or state Government organisation. Central Australia is also distinguished in being the only area, other than Tasmania, that operates a Garden for Wildlife program in addition to Land for Wildlife. Our presentation was well-received and we heard plenty of positive feedback for the efforts of landholders in Central Australia.

Also present at the conference was a small contingent from the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand – often known simply as Forest & Bird. This advance party are learning about the way Land for Wildlife operates in the different parts of Australia and will be taking the program home to Aotearoa to start the first international branch – exciting times!

One of these representatives, Alan Fleming, will shortly be visiting Alice Springs. If you are able to attend the rabbit control workshop at Olive Pink on Saturday the 31st of March, then you will be able to meet Alan and give him your thoughts on the Land for Wildlife program.

Farewell to the Albrechts – Land for Wildlife stalwarts and Local Identities

After many years in the Alice, Dave Albrecht and Sally Mumford are pulling up stumps, selling their property and heading south. Many of you would know Dave or be familiar with his work in botanical circles around town.

The Albrecht's 20 acre bush property at White Gums was one of the first to gain recognition as a Land for Wildlife property ten years ago. Over the past 13 years, Dave and Sally have undertaken an intensive weed and vegetation management program, and the property is now largely weed free.

As a result of this dedicated management, the property boasts a diverse array of local plant species and wildlife that happily coexist with the property's infrastructure, including a mud brick home, large shed and converted railway carriage.

Dave's concern is that he would like the property and his hard work to continue in the care of like-minded people who will continue his dedicated property and conservation management.

If you know of any conservation-minded people who are looking for 20 acres of prime natural, weed-free bushland, have them get in touch with Dave. He can be contacted on 8951 8791 during business hours or 8952 4571 after 7:30pm.

For a look at Dave's property in more detail, have a look on the internet,

<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/52938559/house%20advert.docx>

Farewell Dave and Sally, enjoy the winters south of Hobart and congratulations on showing us all what dedicated hard work and good property management can produce.

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!

Brown Snakes in Alice Springs

It's been a fairly big year for snakes around Alice Springs. The snake catchers have reported that business has been very brisk around town during the warmer weather. On our recent visit to Ntaria we ran into a brown snake in the school yard and there was much debate as to exactly which species it was. The brown snakes are a diverse, variable, and widespread genus of snakes and can be very difficult to identify in the field, so we thought it might be interesting to have a closer look at this group and see if we can find some reliable points of identification.

It's worth noting at the start, that from a safety point of view, the identification of large brown snakes is academic; they are all venomous and all bites would receive the same medical treatment and the same anti-venom. Regardless of what snake you find on your property they

are best left alone while you call the snake phone – **0407 983 276**. Watch the snake from a safe distance so that the snake catcher will be able to locate it on arrival. If someone has been bitten by the snake, apply first aid (a firm pressure immobilisation bandage, splint the limb to minimise movement, and keep the patient calm and still) and call 000 immediately.

For those of us who are interested in knowing what we are looking at, the brown snakes present a real challenge. Even one of the respected authorities on Australian reptiles, Harold Cogger, has this to say about the brown snakes in his book, *Reptiles & Amphibians of Australia* (Reed New Holland, 2000);

"The classification of the members of this genus is in great need of revision. Existing species are poorly defined, and the present classification is uncertain and unreliable. There is a high level of individual and population variability in colour, pattern and scalation,... Most species are probably composite."

The latest review of the classification of this group was by Adam Skinner from the University of Adelaide in 2005 and, though he answered many questions, especially in regards to the Western Brown Snake complex, he also concluded that there was much work still to be done.

The major change to the classification is that the snake formerly referred to as Western Brown Snake *Pseudonaja nuchalis*, has now been split into three species and further splits may be possible. The snake now referred to as the **Western Brown Snake** *Pseudonaja nuchalis* refers to the northern species with its distribution limited to the Top End and the tropical savannahs. **Shield-snouted Brown Snake** *Pseudonaja aspidorhyncha* refers to the similar species found through Central Australia and quite a long way south into SA. **Mengden's Brown Snake** *Pseudonaja mengdeni* overlaps with *P. aspidorhyncha* in Central Australia, extends further into WA and refers to the species which usually exhibits the orange-bodied, black-headed colour variation.

Confused yet?!? Remember, this is all with the caveat that this group may be further divided in future reviews. So when the experts throw their hands up and declare uncertainty, us amateurs have to be careful. This being said though, within the current classification, we have a few pointers that we can take note of that might aid in identification.

A point of confusion which is worth clearing up before looking at the brown snakes in more detail, is the King Brown Snake. In a great example of how misleading common names can be, the King Brown Snake turns out to be... a black snake. All of the brown snakes are in the genus *Pseudonaja* (translated as *false cobra*), and the black snakes are in a separate genus, *Pseudechis* (*false*

adder). So the snake that many know as the King Brown *Pseudechis australis*, actually has more in common with the Red-bellied Black Snake *Pseudechis porphyriacus* of the south and Collett's Snake *Pseudechis colletti* of western Queensland.

Again this is largely academic as the black snakes and brown snakes are all venomous, but the composition of their venom is one of the important points of difference. Black snake venom contains a higher proportion of myotoxin and haemotoxin which can cause necrosis around the site of a bite and lead to local paralysis and muscle death. Brown snake venom contains more neurotoxin which accounts for their higher ranking in venom toxicity scales; neurotoxins can shut down the functioning of the nervous system, involuntary body systems like breathing and circulation, and lead to death. Different anti-venoms have been developed which are specific to the two different groups. So you can understand that to emergency medical practitioners at least, not to mention snake bite victims, it is worth knowing the difference. But remember immediate treatment is the same, keep patient calm and reassured, call 000, immobilise, pressure wrap. To avoid any confusion, ophologists introduced the new common name Mulga Snake for *P. australis*. This is yet to be fully adopted by the wider population and many still use the misleading "King Brown" tag.

Around central Australia there are four main species of brown snake that you might encounter. (As always, regardless of which species you think you might have found, all snakes are best observed and photographed from a safe distance.)

The least dangerous, and arguably the prettiest of the brown snakes, is the Ringed Brown Snake *Pseudonaja modesta*. This dainty reptile rarely exceeds 50cms in total length and, although venomous, is not regarded as dangerous. It is found widely across Central Australia and may be encountered in sandy or rocky habitats. It is recorded as being nocturnal in warm weather and diurnal at other times. Its diet is mainly small reptiles like skinks and geckos.

The species which are regarded as dangerously venomous are the ones which are most easy to confuse; the Eastern (or Common) and Shield-snouted Brown Snakes, *Pseudonaja textilis* and *P. aspidorhyncha* respectively. The other recent addition to the classification, Mengden's Brown Snake *Pseudonaja mengdeni*, may be confused with either of these in its juvenile colours but will usually exhibit some dark edging on the mid-body scales. These snakes exhibit a huge variability in their colours and banded patterns from juvenile to adult and over the various habitats within their large and overlapping ranges.



Ringed Brown Snake *Pseudonaja modesta*. This one was photographed in the car park at Uluru.



Shield-snouted Brown Snake *Pseudonaja aspidorhyncha*, on the Plenty Highway, clearly showing the single large rostral scale on the end of the snout.



Mengden's Brown Snake *Pseudonaja mengdeni*, on Colonel Rose Drive in Alice Springs. This seems to be the more typical colouration of this species in Central Australia with the dark head and textured orange body.



Mengden's Brown Snake *Pseudonaja mengdeni*, this is the young animal (hence the pale head colouring) that we encountered at Ntaria School.



A large **Eastern Brown Snake** *Pseudonaja textilis*, near Parachilna in the Flinders Ranges SA.



Mulga Snake *Pseudechis australis*, eating a frog. Widely known as the King Brown Snake, it is actually a type of black snake.

Despite the difficulties presented by their outward appearances there are still a few reliable ways to separate the species, but they might require you to get a bit too close for comfort. If you were to use these marks to separate them, it might be best to wait until you can examine a road killed specimen or to get a good photograph from a safe distance and examine the picture under magnification.

The snakes once referred to as "Western Brown" all have a rostral scale, the scale which covers the tip of the snout, which is described as "large and strap-like" and is higher than it is broad. *P. textilis* has a series of rostral scales covering the end of its snout rather than one large rostral scale.

Another reliable indicator is the colour of the interior of the mouth. The "Western" Brown Snakes have a dark blue, grey, or black interior and the Eastern Brown Snake has a pink interior to the mouth.

While it is inadvisable to put yourself in a situation where you would be close enough to observe some of these differences in a live snake, they can be quite easy to distinguish in a half-decent photograph. Of course, none of this identification makes any difference to the first aid or treatment of a person who has been bitten; the venom of all brown snakes is similar and would be treated with the same anti-venom.

All pictures: Chris Watson.

Is it a stone? Is it a shoe? No... it's a Spotted Nightjar



When you're interested in wildlife there is a special delight in finding something a bit unusual. Spotted Nightjars *Eurostopodus argus*, are a common nocturnal bird in

Central Australia but they can be tricky to get a good look at.



Ecologist, Holger Woyt struck the jackpot when he came home recently to find this young bird roosting on his driveway. This species would normally be very well camouflaged sitting on the rocky red soils in the Western MacDonnell Range, but it was very obvious on the bare gravel.



Nightjars are a secretive group of birds which belong to an order called the Caprimulgiformes – literally translated as *goat-suckers* – this name arose from a misinterpretation of their behaviour by early Europeans. Nightjars were often observed to hang around in fields inhabited by livestock. It was thought that the birds might be lurking there to latch onto the teats of unsuspecting animals and drain their milk during the night. This is now known to be untrue, but still conjures a very amusing mental image! In truth, the nightjars' fondness for livestock is probably related to the insects attracted or disturbed by the beasts – nightjars are insect eating experts.

Nightjars are not equipped with strong feet and talons like an owl with which to catch and kill their prey. In fact, the nightjars are closely related to another group of birds, the swifts, which are in the family Apodidae – literally translated as; *no feet*. (The swifts do have feet, but such tiny and ineffective ones that they went unnoticed for many years. Swifts spend the majority of their lives on the wing and manage to eat, sleep, and even copulate in flight – who needs feet if you can do all that?!).

Evolution has provided a different adaptation to enable the nightjar to catch its prey. Around the edge of their beaks, nightjars have specially modified feathers known as *ristal bristles*. As the bird flies through the evening air, it can open its mouth and any insects in its path are effectively funnelled down the gaping beak aided by this fringe of stiff wires.

There are 118 species of Caprimulgiformes worldwide; here in Australia we have 3 nightjars (Spotted, White-throated, and Large-tailed), 1 owlet-nightjar, and three frogmouths (Tawny, Marbled, and Papuan) This is not counting a few vagrant species that turn up from time to time, usually in northern Australia. Many nightjar species are partly migratory and move long distances with the seasons, including significant stretches over water. Prawn trawlers in the Gulf of Carpentaria occasionally report Large-tailed Nightjars flying powerfully over offshore waters, and at least one Asian species (Grey Nightjar) has been discovered roosting on a customs vessel near Ashmore Reef.



One of the more reliable ways to see nightjars for yourself, is to park beside a waterhole right on dusk. Nightjars can often be seen hawking insects over the water in the fading light. Another common method is to find a secluded dirt track and drive along in second gear after dark; they can often be found roosting on the road which is why they frequently end up the victims of faster moving vehicles on the highways.



Previous page: Probably the more common way for visitors to the Red Centre to see a Spotted Nightjar – stuck under the windscreen wipers of a tourist coach. You'll notice the overall darker plumage on this adult bird which lacks the pink tints of the juvenile. Also visible is one of the prominent white wing spots for which the bird is named.

All pictures: Chris Watson

Pie Dish Beetle

With a bit of rain about lately, the bugs and beetles have been a bit more noticeable. This beauty showed up on a Land for Wildlife doorstep in Ross earlier in the month. Commonly known as a Pie-dish Beetle *Helea* sp., this armoured beetle is about the size of a fifty cent piece.



The purpose of the edged carapace is that when the beetle is attacked by a potential predator, it tilts its entire body toward the attacker. It then digs the lip of the carapace into the ground to prevent anything getting underneath and flipping it on its back.



Pictures: Chris Watson

For more images of Pie-dish Beetles, see the cover of our February 2011 newsletter.

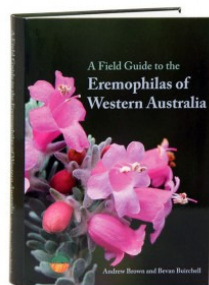
Websites Worth a Look

STEWED THOUGHTS

<http://www.stewartmacdonald.com.au/blog/2011/05/doing-alice/>

Stewart Macdonald has an obvious passion for Australian wildlife in general and reptiles in particular. His blog is a herper's dream. Stewart has many articles covering a huge variety of Australian habitat, including several on Alice Springs and the surrounding region. His blog features high quality images of local reptiles, insects, and mammals and a few stories about where he travelled to find them.

Recommended Books



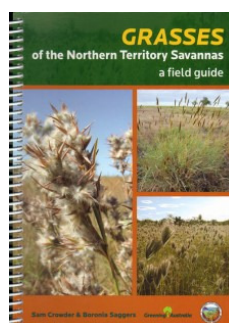
A Field Guide to Eremophilas of Western Australia

Brown, Andrew and Bevan Burtchell

Simon Nevill Publications, 2011. Octavo, paperback, 336 pp. colour photographs, maps.

A great field guide guide with photographs and maps. Although focussing on WA, this book also covers several NT species that are also found in the Alice Springs area. The book covers derivation of species names, flowering period, description, distribution and habitat, and notes.

Many WA species will happily grow in Alice Springs gardens, and the book is a valuable guide for those wishing to plant bird attracting shrubs in their backyard.



Grasses of the Northern Territory Savannas: a Field Guide

Crowder, Sam and Boronia Sagers

Greening Australia NT/NTRETAS, 2010. Octavo, spirally bound, 84 pp. colour photographs.

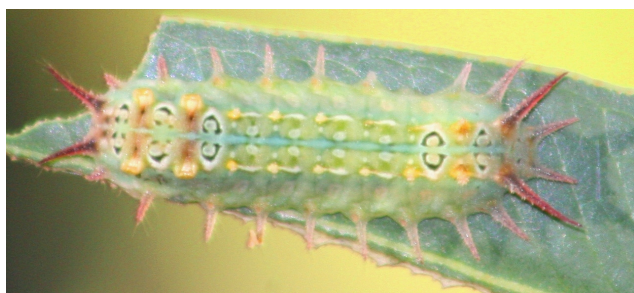
This field guide identifies 66 grasses of the Northern Territory savannahs. Each species is accompanied by colour photographs, succinct descriptions, notes on habitat and distribution as well as a grazing value guide.

Letters

Sightings from Uwe

Land for Wildlife member Uwe Path has been finding so many new critters on his property that he almost warrants his own section in the newsletter – “Sightings from Uwe”...

A moth caterpillar...



Larva of the **Four-spotted Cup Moth** *Doratifera quadriguttata*.

Uwe has sent in another great photo from the ever-growing menagerie that can be found on his property. This caterpillar had us stumped initially but in the search for a positive identification, we found a very useful website.

The Coffs Harbour Butterfly House website has a resource for anyone trying to identify caterpillars, moths or butterflies. If you're ever trying to pin down the identity of a caterpillar in your yard try visiting <http://lepidoptera.butterflyhouse.com.au/>

The database here is by no means exhaustive but provides a fair cross-section of the more common species that you might come across.

A mystery tern species...



Uwe originally thought this might have been a vagrant Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*, in non-breeding plumage. After consultation with the Land for Wildlife Coordinators, he was able to take interstate twitchers off stand-by mode,

as we realised it was a Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*, in non-breeding plumage – note the short tail. This is still a very beautiful bird but not quite the megararity that was initially thought.

Arctic Terns have only infrequently been recorded around the Australian coast and never very far inland. But you never know... keep your eyes peeled!

Ripley's Believe It or Not!

Hopefully it has been long enough that copyright laws will not be triggered by my shameless invocation of Jack Palance's breathless rasping. Newly rejoined original Land for Wildlife member Sue Ripley has sent us a truly astonishing example of natural art.



Sue found these Processionary Caterpillars in her back yard one evening making a very good hash of drawing a balletic emu prancing across the gravel driveway.

What do you think readers? Has anyone else out there got a photograph of wildlife creating art?

Calendar of Events

31/3/2012 Land for Wildlife Workshop: Rabbits in Central Australia

Olive Pink Botanic Garden, 10am

Land for Wildlife is about to assist landholders to embark on a rabbit control program by setting up demonstration control on several properties, a project funded by Territory Natural Resource Management. To launch the project, we're holding an information session where we will present a history of rabbits in central Australia and share experiences on controlling them over the past 30 years. This will be followed by an overview of the current project with the opportunity for people to talk to Land for

Wildlife Coordinators about how they may be able to be involved in the project.
Contact
Phone: 8955 5222
Email: lfw@lowecol.com.au

Website: www.pillowfightday.com/

1/4/2012

National Smile Day

Organisation: The Humour Foundation
Smile Day is the Humour Foundation's annual fundraising activity. The day helps the foundation raise funds to continue making sick children smile.
National/State: National
Contact
Phone: 02 8978 4500 or 1300 486 687
Fax: 02 9982 8208
Email:
fundraising@humourfoundation.com.au
Website:
www.humourfoundation.com.au/
Address: Suite 3.5, Level 3, 126 Greville Street
CHATSWOOD NSW 2067

7/4/2012



World Health Day

Organisation: United Nations
World Health Day is a commemoration of the founding of the World Health Organisation. It functions as an opportunity to focus on health issues that affect the international community.
National/State: International
Contact
Website: www.who.int/world-health-day/en/

7/4/2012

Pillow Fight Day

Organisation: The Urban Playground Movement
International Pillow Fight day is an Urban Playground Movement initiative. It is a free, public all-ages event, with an aim of getting people off the couch and out of the house to appreciate the fun they can have in their cities.
National/State: International
Contact

13-

22/4/2012

National Youth Week

Organisation: Joint Australian, State, Territory and Local Government initiative
National Youth Week is an annual, weeklong celebration of young people (12 to 25) throughout Australia. National Youth Week encourages youths to share ideas, attend events, discuss youth issues, showcase their talents and even have a bit of fun.
National/State: National
Contact
Phone: 1300 363 079
Email: nationalyouthweek@deewr.gov.au
Website:
<https://youthweek.com/Pages/default.aspx>

15-

21/4/2012



International Creativity & Innovation Week

Each year International Creativity and Innovation Week is a celebration of new ideas, imagination and anything that has made the world a better place.
National/State: International
Contact
Website:
www.creativityday.org/Welcome.html

22/4/2012



Earth Day

Organisation: Earth Day Network
Earth Day is a celebration of the environment we all share. It also acts as a day of conservation awareness.
National/State: International

Contact

Email: michelson@earthday.org

Website: www.earthday.org/about

26/4/2012



Pay it Forward Day

Based on a concept from a Catherine Ryan Hyde novel, Pay It Forward Day urges people around the world to commit random acts of kindness. It is a day to do good deeds, and instruct the recipient of your good deed to 'pay it forward', and return the good deed to another person.

National/State: International

Contact

Phone: (612) 9540 5150

Website: payitforwardday.com/

Take care,

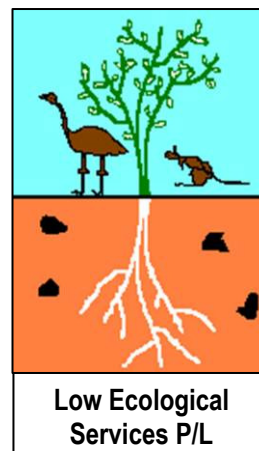
Jesse, Chris & Bill
Land for Wildlife Coordinators



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