North-Eastern Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club Inc.

The North Eastern Naturalist

Newsletter of the NE Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club

Number 190: September 2015

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MISSION STATEMENT: It is the mission of this club to encourage the study, appreciation and preservation of our natural and cultural environment, the animals, plants, geology and landforms, including those of the coastal and marine areas in the North East region of Tasmania.

From the President: I'm sure everyone enjoyed the AGM in August, generously hosted once again by Lou Brooker. Our guest speaker, citizen scientist John Douglas, held us fascinated with his knowledge and close-up photos of various Tasmanian spiders (such cute little faces!) The large number of questions from the floor provided a good indication of the audience's interest.

Yesterday I gave our donation of $100 to Norma Baker, a registered Wildlife Carer. Norma was over-whelmed by our generosity ('that's 6 bags of formula', she said) and asked me to pass on her thanks.

We have an interesting program coming up, so I hope to see you at some or all of our activities.

From the Editor: This issue contains the usual items (program for the next three months, reports on previous activities, articles of possible interest in *The Converstion*), but also a fascinating article by Lou Brooker about the Mt Victoria rock shelters, with photos by Lesley Nicklason.

I hope you enjoy this issue. As usual, feedback would be greatly appreciated on how the newsletter could be made more relevant, and submitted articles are welcome.

Pink Robin

Eucalyptus regnans

Photos by Lesley Nicklason

Program for Sep–Dec 2015

NB Please read the notice at the bottom of this page about the cancellation process.

SEPTEMBER 12th: WALK THE RAIL TRAIL

From Scottsdale to Lings Siding. This is a walk of 6 km. We will organise cars at Lings Siding to bring people back to Scottsdale. Meet at the start of the rail trail next to Mitre 10 in Ellenor Street, Scottsdale at 10 am. Cyclists may want to extend the day with some riding; others may like to adjourn to the Art Gallery Cafe at Scottsdale for coffee.

Contact Lou 0417 149 244 or Jill 0429 644 329

OCTOBER 10th: MOSSING AROUND @ PARADISE PLAINS

Many members have asked for a repeat of this outing, which was last conducted in 2007, so here it is. Led by Sean Blake, retired Assessor for Forestry Tasmania, this is an opportunity to visit high country grasslands, moss fields and unusual forest types. Grading is of 'medium' difficulty; it will be 'a bit scrubby and wet' with no formed tracks over a distance of about 3 km total on reasonably level ground. Meet at the junction of Mathinna Plains Road [C423] and Ben Ridge Road at 10 am.

Contact people: Sean 0427 946 648, Jill 0429 644 329 or Lou 0417 149 244

NOVEMBER 14th: THREATENED PLANTS

We are going to join some members of the Threatened Plants Tasmania group who are visiting the Bridport area to survey threatened species. They will be at Waterhouse on Saturday, and in the Wildflower Reserve at Bridport on Sunday. Meet at 10 am on Saturday at the junction of Waterhouse Road and Homestead Road, 27 km east of Bridport. On Sunday we will meet at the entrance to the Reserve on Main Street next to the Bridport Golf Club at 10 am. Among the species to be surveyed are *Hibbertia virgata, Pultenaea sericea* and *Xanthorrhoea bracteata.* Could members please email Lou Brooker: brooker@vision.net.au if intending to come – also if they are flexible about which day they might attend. Attendees will need to visit the TPT website: www.tpt.org.au to register for administration and insurance purposes, or Lou can do it for you if you indicate early enough.

DECEMBER 12th: BLUE DERBY, FIELD NATS STYLE

Revel Munro is interested in showing us the historical elements of some of the Blue Derby Trails. Last time we explored the area these trails had not been built; this time we'll see what was uncovered.

Meet at 10 am at the car park for the Blue Derby, Main Road, Derby. More info. closer to the date.

Cancellation of Field Nats Outings

In case there is unpredictable and severe weather, or for any other reason, it may occasionally be necessary to cancel with short notice. Here is the process for cancellation. An outing will be cancelled if the leader considers that the conditions are not safe. If an activity is cancelled, a global email will be sent by 0700 (i.e. 7.00 am) on the day of the outing. If members are uncertain, it is their responsibility to contact Jill, Lou or the leader. Note that phone reception is not always available, so you may have to try alternative numbers.

JUNE: WATERHOUSE CONSERVATION AREA

Words by Mike Douglas; Photos by Chris Forbes-Ewan and Jenny Davey

On a crisp, fine winter's day, Mike Douglas led a group of 19 people on a tour of the country inland from Blizzard's Landing in the Waterhouse Conservation Area.

We had previously visited this area seven years ago, and it was pleasing to note the dense, vigorous regeneration of drooping sheoaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) following the fires of 2005 and earlier.

Drooping sheoaks – photo by Chris Forbes-Ewan

The understory of the sheoak forest on these rocky dolerite slopes includes occasional patches of the rock fern *Cheilanthes austrotenuifolia*, also known as 'resurrection fern' from its habit of dying off in summer, then reviving in autumn.

Rock Fern – photo by Chris Forbes-Ewan

One of our keen-eyed orchid spotters discovered some flowering specimens of the small gnat orchid, *Cyrtostylis reniformis* hidden among these ferns.

Approaching the One Tree Hill area (which is actually home to a small forest) we emerged from the sheoak forest onto the crest of an old longitudinal sand dune, now covered with healthy vegetation (*see photo next page*).

This and other similar dunes—which align east-west (or more accurately ESE-WNW)—are from the Pleistocene age. *(Continued on the next page.)*

WATERHOUSE CONSERVATION AREA (*continued from previous page*)

Heath-covered Pleistocene dune – photo by Chris Forbes-Ewan

That is, they were formed during the last glacial advance, which reached its peak about 20 000 years ago. The sea level was more than 100 metres lower than at present, with Bass Strait and coastal plains comprising a vast, sandy, cold and wind-swept desert.

These 'fossilised' coastal dune systems—found in the Waterhouse region and parts of the north-west near Stanley—are one of Tasmania's unique geomorphological features. They are older than the fringing dunes and sand sheets seen on the N-E coast today. The latter are from the Holocene age, formed from sand washed ashore after the sea level rose.

The coastal heath on the dunes is dominated by wind-pruned dwarf oaks (*Casuarina monolifera)*, silver banksia (*Banksia marginata*), sweet-scented wattle (*Acacia suaveolens*) and various guinea flowers, particularly the silky guinea flower, *Hibbertia sericea.*

Silky guinea flower, *Hibbertia sericea* – photo by Chris Forbes-Ewan

Many other species—some in flower—were noted and the whole expanse presented as an interesting, colourful 'garden', enhanced by the striking scenery. We were also rewarded with views of Waterhouse Island, Tomahawk Island, Mt Cameron and the northeast highlands.

Small remnant patches of mallee* peppermint eucalypts occur in the protected fire and wind shadows. The juvenile forms of the leaves of some of these trees are suggestive of the Smithton peppermint *Eucalyptus nitida*, which replaces the black peppermint *Eucalyptus amygdalina* in western Tasmania, and is also found on the Furneaux Islands. These two species intergrade.

During the return walk—which was along the crest of the Pleistocene dune—we were rewarded with a sighting of two tawny-crested honeyeaters. This is a handsome bird with a flute-like song. It is restricted to the coastal heathland.

Tawny crested honeyeaters – photo by Jenny Davey

*Mallee *refers to the growth habit of certain eucalypt species that grow with multiple stems springing from an underground lignotuber, usually to a height of no more than 10 metres. It is most common in plants of the genus* Eucalyptus*, many of which naturally grow in a mallee habit, and some of which grow as single-stemmed trees initially, but recover in mallee form if burnt to the ground by bushfire.*

Reference: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mallee_(habit)

Editorial note: Mike Douglas is a mine of information about the human and natural history of north-eastern Tasmania. The NE Field Nats Club is very fortunate that people like Mike are prepared to give up their time to so generously share their vast knowledge with our members.

A STUDY OF THE MT VICTORIA ROCK SHELTERS

Words by Lou Brooker; photos by Lesley Nicklason

In May of this year the NE Field Nats activity was an exploration of the rock overhangs at Mt Victoria, near Blackboy Plain. Instead of a report on the walk, here is a fascinating article about the rock overhangs (which were used by Aborigines as shelters for many centuries) by Lou Brooker, with accompanying photos by Lesley Nicklason.

In a paper titled 'A Reconnaissance of Landforms/NE Tasmania' by Sharples, two features are listed for the area. There is the sandstone cliff and seepage cave complex on the Blackboy Plain, Dilgers Flats, and there is the separate listing for the Mt Victoria Rock Shelters. These two features are only a couple of kilometres apart, but it would appear that the former cover a greater area and are more scattered across the plain.

Leaving the Mt Albert Road, the track to the Mt Victoria Rock Shelters winds down through mixed forest dominated by eucalypts, with a rainforest understory. This forest is in a transitional stage to rainforest and should continue this transition unless interrupted by fire. The flora include myrtle, sassafras, native pepperberry, woolly tea tree, waratah and an occasional celery-top pine. Over the top of all these are the huge, over-mature *Eucalyptus delegatensis,* subsp. *tasmaniensis* (common name 'white top'). Amongst the smaller plants are the turquoise berry (*Drymophila cyanocarpa*), the heart berry (*Aristotelia pedunculata*) and the grey rice flower (*Pimelia cinerea*).

The Mt Victoria Rock Shelters are categorised as 'Constructional Karst'. They are large sandstone overhangs and caves ranging from 10 to 20 metres in height and extending for many hundreds of metres along both sides of a creek running across the Blackboy Plain.

They are almost continuously overhanging, and include caves up to 10 metres high and extending 10–15 metres into the cliff. Large boulders in front of some of the caves are the result of earlier collapses.

One of the caves has a small waterfall over its lip, and considerable seepage also percolates through the roof of the cave. Several clusters of speleothems (stalactites, stalagmites and columns) up to 200 mm in length have formed within this cave. These consist of hard, smooth, dark-brown material which has been shown by X-ray diffraction analysis to be almost entirely geothite [iron hydroxide, FeO(OH)] combined with a small amount of calcite (~2%).

Stalagmite (ascending) and stalactite undergoing formation

Geothite is a common insterstitial cement in Parmeener Supergroup sandstones in Tasmania, and is responsible for their characteristic brown colour. Ralph Bottrill (pers. comm. 1994) has noted similar large geothite stalactites over 200 mm long in old mine adits in north-eastern Tasmania. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these rock shelter speleothems are relatively young and have formed since Aboriginal occupation of the caves ceased, i.e. in the last hundred or so years. (*Continued on the next page.*)

A STUDY OF THE MT VICTORIA ROCK SHELTERS (*continued from previous page*)

Commencement of human occupation of the caves has been dated to approximately 1600 years BP.

Almost nothing is known about Aboriginal occupation in the Mt Victoria area prior to European settlement. During 1993, as part of a Community Sites Access Project run by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council, a group of Aboriginal people visited the area. Some said they felt a very strong connection with the site. As a result, it is considered to be highly significant and spiritually important.

The first scientific examination of the shelters was conducted by Ian Thomas between 1985 and 1989 as part of his PhD research.

Of the 17 shelters, 12 contained artefacts and five had no evidence of cultural material on the surface.

A survey of ten of the Blackboy Plain shelters conducted in 1990 revealed that four showed no evidence of human occupation, but six did show evidence of this, with stone tools present on the surface or revealed by excavation.

Pollen cores from the Mt Victoria area were studied and dated. The results indicated that establishment of the buttongrass plains in the area resulted from deliberate Aboriginal firing.

There is evidence of physical damage caused by recent visitors to the caves—litter and graffiti are present in some shelters, and trampling seems to be a major problem. There are several fireplaces, and at least one shelter was apparently used by trappers early in the 20th century, as evidenced by the stone walling.

JULY: SLIDE SHOWS AT THE SCOTTSDALE LINC

The activity for July consisted of presentations by two invited speakers, with Lou Brooker as Chair.

George Wilkinson—nephew of our Treasurer, Revel Munro—spoke first. George was visiting Revel from his home in the UK. He is a zoology student at Bristol University and has been a keen wildlife photographer for many years. George showed photos of the wildlife near his home (which is close to London, but looks anything but urban), and from his trips overseas, including to Indonesia, California and Mongolia.

The other invited speaker was Wolfgang Glowacki, who is a full-time professional nature photographer from Neika (south of Hobart). Wolfgang showed some of his wonderful photos of Tasmania.

As a bonus, Lou Brooker described her trip to Lake Augusta in February 2015, and showed some of her photos.

On the grounds that a picture is worth a thousand words, this report consists mostly of photos provided by George, Wolfgang and Lou. (Many thanks to all three for their generosity in sharing their artwork and vast knowledge.)

1. George Wilkinson

The Dartford Warbler (*Sylvia undata*) was close to extinction just a few decades ago with barely a dozen breeding pairs still alive, but is now off the endangered species list. Improved conservation measures have resulted in recovery to the extent that there are now several thousand breeding pairs. George took this photo on Thursley Common, Surrey.

The Hazel Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius)* typically weighs about 20 g, increasing to 30–40 g before hibernation. George took this photo of a hibernating Hazel Dormouse at Clandon, Surrey.

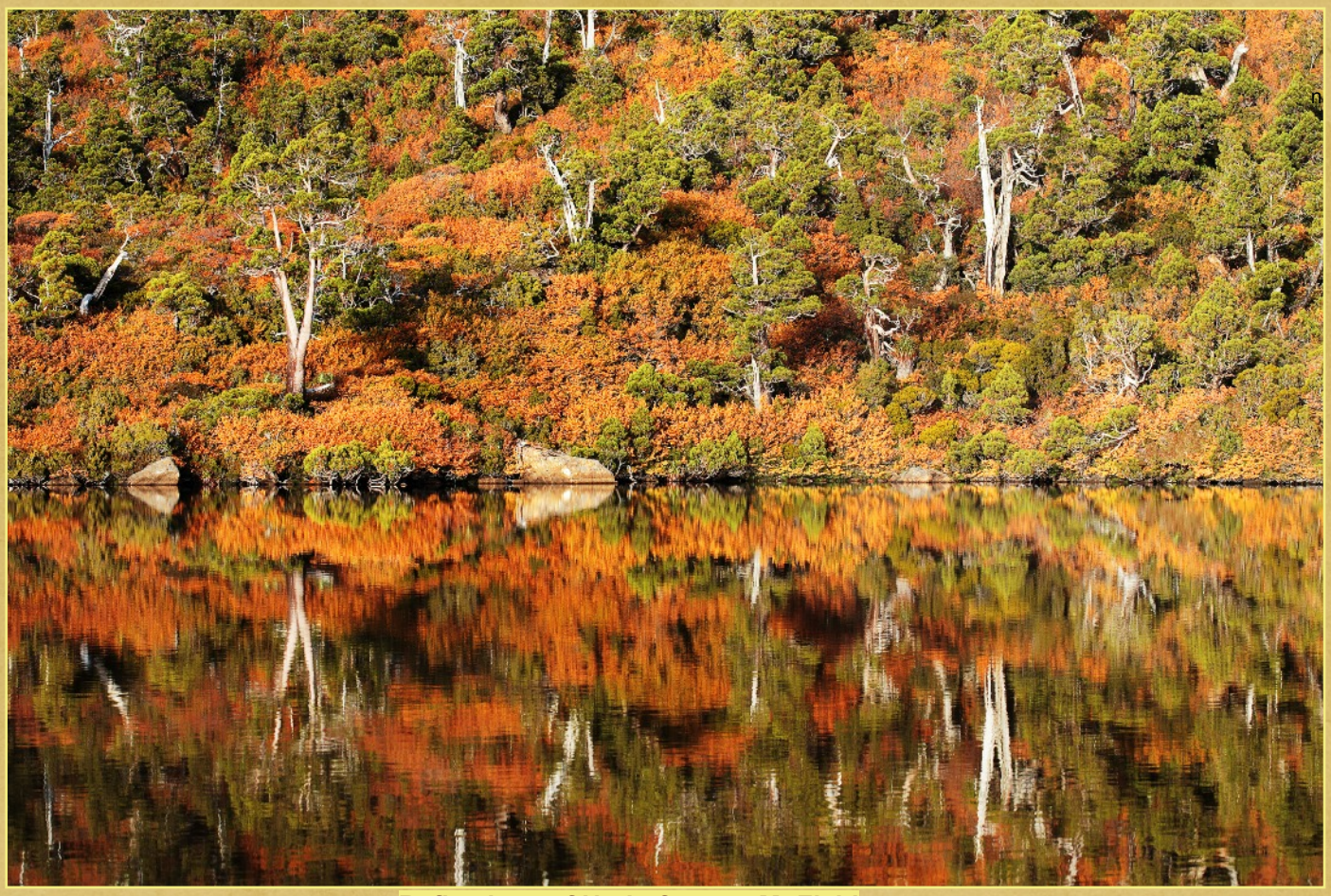
The Asian vine snake, genus *Ahaetulla* is a mildly venomous snake found in much of Asia. George took this photo in Buton, Sulawesi, Indonesia. All Asian vine snakes are ovoviviparous—that is, the egg hatches in the mother which then gives birth to live young.

Afterword: During George's presentation, Lou Brooker asked if anyone knew how many endemic species of birds Tasmania has (i.e. are native only to Tasmania). None of the Tasmanians present could answer this question. After a polite pause—and to some slightly embarrassed laughter—George told us that are 12 endemic species of birds in Tasmania. This was just a few days into his first visit to Australia!

2. Wolfgang Glowacki

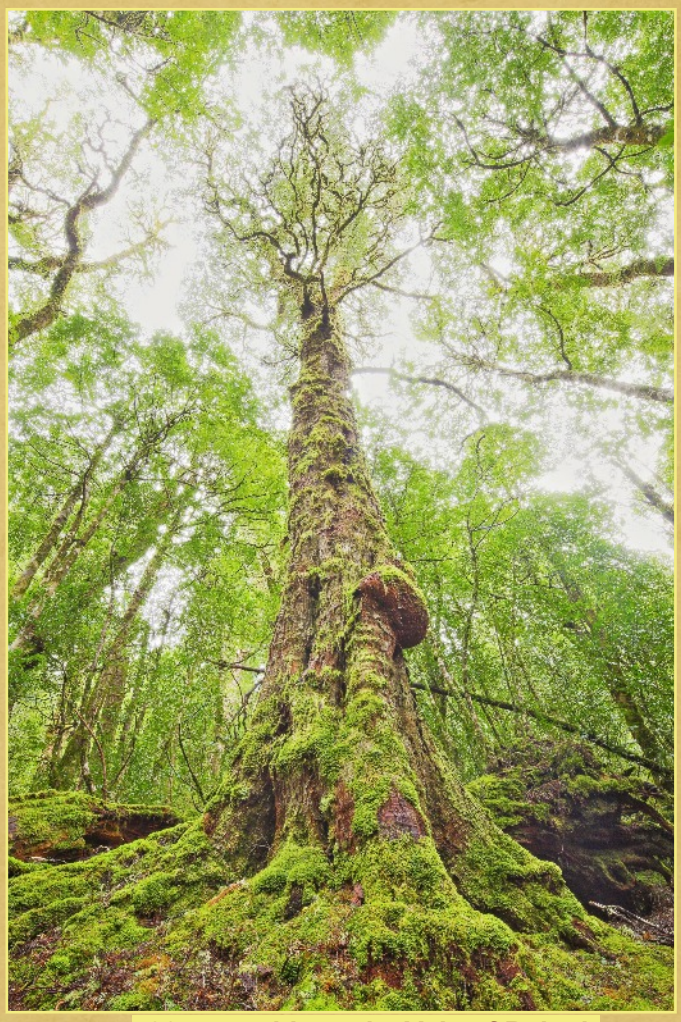
Wolfgang's wildlife photography has received numerous awards and his photographs have been published extensively in a large variety of media, ranging from calendars, books, advertising and the periodicals *Australian Geographic*, *Wild Magazine*, *40 Degree South* and many more. The photos shown on the next two pages illustrate not only the natural beauty of Tasmania, but also Wolfgang's ability to faithfully capture that beauty.

Continued from previous page: Photos by Wolfgang Glowacki



Reflections of Nothofagus – Mt Field

Sunrise on Water



400-year-old myrtle–Vale of Belvoir

Continued from previous page: Photos by Wolfgang Glowacki

Sunrise over the Styx

Cosy Corner – Bay of Fires

Vale of Belvoir

3. Lou Brooker

The two photos shown below were taken by Lou during her trip to Lake Augusta in February this year. The 'Stinkhorn' fungus (*Aseroe rubra*) is so-named because it exudes an odour (which might be more appropriately described as a foul stench) that attracts insects which then spread the fungal spores. It is widely distributed in Australia, and also found in New Zealand and on some Pacific Islands.

The Miena Jewel Beetle (*Castiarina insculpta*) is endemic to Tasmania and is found only in the Great Lake/Lake Augusta region.

Stinkhorn fungus

Miena Jewel Beetle

FURTHER READING — ARTICLES OF GENERAL INTEREST

Some of the following recent articles in *The Conversation* may be interest to NE Field Nats members.

NB If the URLs shown below aren't accessible from the PDF file of this newsletter, go to:

http://theconversation.com/au *and in the Search field, type the first few words of the name of the article you would like to read.*

The Banality of Ethics in the Anthropocene, Parts 1 and 2:

https://theconversation.com/the-banality-of-ethics-in-the-anthropocene-part-1-44568

https://theconversation.com/the-banality-of-ethics-in-the-anthropocene-part-2-44647

Loving emails show there's more to trees than ecosystem services:

https://theconversation.com/loving-emails-show-theres-more-to-trees-than-ecosystem-services-37983

The climate 'hiatus' doesn't take the heat off global warming:

https://theconversation.com/the-climate-hiatus-doesnt-take-the-heat-off-global-warming-40686

Can Tassie devils control feral cats? The devil is in the detail:

https://theconversation.com/can-tassie-devils-control-feral-cats-the-devil-is-in-the-detail-37151

You don't have to be barking to think trees are like us:

https://theconversation.com/you-dont-have-to-be-barking-to-think-trees-are-like-us-38232

UPDATE ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BLUE TIER

Words and photos by Lesley Nicklason

The Blue Tier Project, funded through a community crowd-funding campaign, wrapped up last week with the building of picnic tables in the clearing on the Big Tree Track.

The beautiful blackwood picnic table and seats are accompanied by a kids table with mushroom-shaped seats!

The wonderful, skilled Lisa Searle and Erik Hayward milled the timber on site from fallen trees and worked through rain, hail and mud to complete the job.

This week a Green Army Team have been doing some impressive upgrades to the Halls Falls Track, overseen by esteemed track builder, John 'Snapper' Hughes and his wonderful team, Beth, Ursula and Dan. Improvements have been made to the track with a steep section re-routed, while stone retaining walls and stone steps have been put in place.

The Sassafras is in flower and the forest is looking gorgeous—now is the ideal time to take a picnic to the Blue Tier and enjoy the great walking tracks.

Picnic area on Big Tree Track

Halls Falls Track Work