



North-Eastern Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club Inc.

The North Eastern Naturalist

Newsletter of the NE Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club

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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: Attended by 23 members and guests, the 2017 AGM was held at the home of Secretary Lou Brooker on 12 Aug 17. Many thanks to Lou for hosting the meeting (yet again). New office bearers are Vice-President Pam Bretz and Sue Wilson, who has replaced Revel Munro as Treasurer. I would like to thank Revel for his many years of service as Treasurer. The committee members are Jay Wilson, Mike Douglas and Lloyd Reeves.

Decisions of note include:

- Potential new members must let the coordinator know if they will be attending an activity (and

confirm that they have adequate fitness to take part);

- A pocket-sized EPIRB is to be purchased and kept with the first aid equipment;
- We will investigate the relevance of the current (inactive) website compared to establishing a Facebook profile for distribution of newsletters and other aspects of communication, such as cancellation of activities due to bad weather.

Short films from the Breath Of Fresh Air (BOFA) film festival, celebrating 100 years of Parks and Wildlife, were shown after the meeting.



Morel mushroom – by Ross Coad

Photos of Northern Tasmanian wildlife



Eastern rosella – by Mehrdad Abbasian



Grey goshawk – by Mehrdad Abbasian

Program for Sep-Dec 2017

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

SEPTEMBER 9TH: SPRINGFIELD – FINDING AN UNUSUAL TREE FERN

Jay Wilson and Owen Powell will lead this walk in the forest at Springfield. Meet 10.00 am at the junction of Whish-Wilson Road and Tasman Highway, Springfield. More details by separate email.

OCTOBER 14TH: EXPLORING ANSON'S BAY WITH JENNY BICANIC

With a focus on orchids, this day offers much, much more than a mere bush walk as we take advantage of Jenny's vast local knowledge of the area. Meet at her shack at 10.00 am.

Directions: turn right at the fork at the bottom of the hill entering 'The Bay'. At the next fork turn left into Melaleuca Place. Look for the gate on the left with the name 'Bicanic'.

Camping welcome. BYO everything.

NOVEMBER 11TH: BOOBYALLA RIVER CIRCUIT – MIKE DOUGLAS

An interesting 6-km forest walk on a marked route through a rarely visited area. Scrubby in places with river crossings on logs. Possibly wet underfoot in a few parts.

Meet 10.00 am as follows:

From the Waterhouse Road, 41 km from Bridport and 21 km from Gladstone, turn onto the Banca Road (C840). Drive south for 8 km, to the signposted junction with the Banca Number 6 Forestry Road. From Winnaleah, it is about 12 km to this junction. Contact Mike 6356 1243

DECEMBER 9TH: THE SECRETIVE BIRDS AT BIG WATERHOUSE LAKE – FOLLOWING UP ON THE PRESENTATION BY LIZ ZNIDERSIC AT THE 2016 AGM

Are there rails? Are there bitterns? Following the setting up of cameras at the Lake last summer and the subsequent retrieval of data from them, Liz will share the results with us. It's such a lovely site that we will have our end of year barbeque there. Details about timings and directions will be sent later by email.

Cancellation of Field Nats Outings

If 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.

Article by Penny Reeves; photos by Penny Reeves (PR), Claudia Bohme (CB) and Lou Brooker (LB)

The May activity was a walk to Ralph Falls, along the Cash's Gorge Circuit. Led by Mike Douglas, this was an easy, relaxed walk that involved viewing the 90-metre drop of Ralph Falls from the Norm Brown Lookout, then continuing through the temperate rainforest to Cash's Gorge and finally back to the car park on the moorland boardwalk.

Mike explained that the bush here is a form of temperate rainforest known as *callidendrous* (defined as consisting of tall trees with an open, park-like understorey).

The most prominent larger trees included myrtle (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*), mountain tea tree (*Leptospermum lanigerum*) and celery top pine (*Phyllocladus asplenifolius*).

On various stages of the walk we also saw many attractive smaller plants, including mountain pepper tree (*Tasmania lanceolata*), heart berry (*Aristotelia penduncularis*), native solomon's seal (*Dryophila cyanocarpa*), and waratah (*Telopea truncata*), with its attractive dried seed pods, loosely banana-shaped, even banana coloured (and much photographed).

Early in the walk numerous ferns were also noted, including the man fern (*Dicksonia antarctica* – known as 'tree fern' on the mainland), hard water fern (*Blechnum wattsi*), epiphytic kangaroo fern (*Microsorium diversifolium*) and the leathery shield fern (*Rumohra adiantiformis*) that grows on myrtles.



View from Norm's lookout, looking west along the Ringarooma valley (CB). Mike explained that the cliff face is the visible part of the Mathinna super group of metamorphic rocks formed from continental shelf sedimentary deposits of sandstone, mudstone and shales, laid down when Tasmania was north of the equator. The layers have been distorted vertically to give the dramatic drop cut by the waterfall.



Tasmanian waratah – *Telopia truncata* (CB)



Mountain tea tree – *Leptospermum lanigerum* (CB)

Some very attractive fungi were also observed, including the bracket fungus *Fomes hemitephrus* (which, in Tasmania, is found only on dead myrtles), the orange club fungus (*Clavulinopsis sulcata*), and the delightfully-named pixies parasols (*Mycena interrupta*). Pixies parasols have a Gondwanan distribution, i.e. they are found in several of the landmasses (in this case Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia and South America) that belonged to the southern supercontinent Gondwana until it broke up over a period of about 100 million years to about 50 million years ago. As such, the genus *Mycena* joins *Nothofagus* (which also has a Gondwanan distribution) as evidence supporting the theory of continental drift.



Bracket fungus – *Fomes hemitephrus* (CB)



Orange club fungus – *Clavulinopsis sulcata* (PR)



Pixies parasols – *Mycena interrupta* (CB)

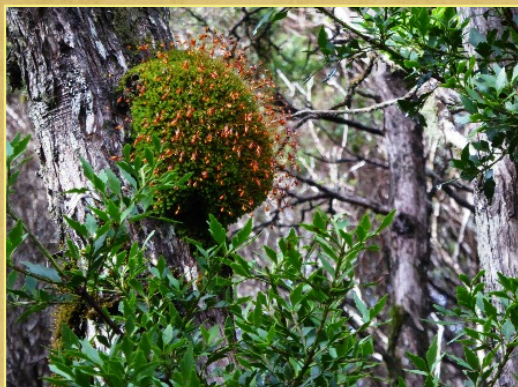
We had lunch in the stunted windswept vegetation, looking back to Norm's lookout and along the valley.



A well-deserved break for lunch (LB)

Between the lookout and Cash's Gorge the open understorey displayed lichens, mosses and ferns. The heights of the trees decreased as the altitude increased, typical of callidendrous rainforests.

We were intrigued by the ball of vivid green moss bristling with a fuzz of bright-orange spore capsules growing on a mountain tea tree, about 5 m above ground level. This was identified as *Leptospermum inclinans* (which apparently does not have a common name).



Leptospermum inclinans displaying its bright-orange spore capsules (PR)



Close-up shot of a spore capsule of *Leptospermum inclinans* (LB)



Returning to the car park on the moorland boardwalk (PR)

We returned to the car park on the boardwalk that crosses a buttongrass moorland, with the predominant species being *Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus*. Buttongrass is low vegetation dominated by grass-like plants in the sedge family (Cyperaceae) and heaths (genus *Epacrus*).

Buttongrass moorlands grow in areas that are very nutrient poor, and are among the most fire-adapted ecosystems to have evolved.

JUNE 2017: NATURAL SCIENCES COLLECTION AT THE QVMAG

Article and photos by Chris Forbes-Ewan

The June activity was a guided tour of the Natural Sciences collection of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. This collection is in the 'old' campus of the QVMAG (in Wellington St) and is not normally available for public viewing.

Our guides were the Natural Sciences Curator David Maynard, and Collection Officers Simon Fearn and Tammy Gordon. Although this tour was conducted on a weekday rather than the usual Saturday, attendance was good, with 14 enthusiastic members and guests taking part.

David started by telling us that 'there are \$145 million dollars worth of dead animals in this collection'. That is, the insured value of the Natural Sciences collection is \$145 million. (It was later clarified that this is the insurance value for the total collection—i.e. zoology, botany and geology.) This value is based on replacement of the entire collection and is therefore somewhat nominal.



Part of the butterfly collection at the QVMAG



Young thylacine (aka Tasmanian Tiger)

The collection exists to document the biodiversity of northern Tasmania, and to track distributions of plants and animals through time. This is achieved through the collection and curation of voucher specimens which anchor a species in time and place, and provide an unequivocal physical specimen that can be used for future reference. As such, it acts as a resource for research, with researchers coming from around the world to study specimens that are available only at the QVMAG.

It also allows tracking of 'invasive species', such as the rainbow lorikeet and galah—mainland parrots that are not native to Tasmania but have become common here in recent years.

Each specimen is registered with a unique identification number onto the QVMAG data base. Twice a year, the QVMAG feeds all relevant new registrations to the Atlas of Living Australia (<http://www.ala.org.au/>). The QVMAG has 80 000 records on line, and in the last 12 months scientists have downloaded a total of 24 million QVMAG records.

Until a few decades ago birds and mammals could be collected by shooting—a member of staff would take a gun or rifle into the field and return with specimens of interest. Now, of course, only animals that were dead at the time of discovery are collected. Many of these are donated by members of the public and include road kills, animals killed by electrocution or other accidental causes of death.



The bird collection includes Invasive species such as rainbow lorikeets (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*)

David requested that we promote donation of potentially interesting animals by members of the public. When doing so, the date and location of the find should be noted, together with the name and contact details of the donor. It was stressed that specimens without collection data are scientifically useless. The specimen should be frozen until it can be taken to the QVMAG, with prior notification that it is arriving.

Among the hundreds of specimens we saw was a bone of *Zygomaturus*, a gigantic (about 500 kg) wombat-like marsupial that became extinct in Tasmania about 40 000 years BP (before the present). The bone Tammy showed us has been dated at 41 000 years BP.



QVMAG staff member Tammy Gordon with a bone of *Zygomaturus*



Part of the extensive insect collection at the QVMAG

There is evidence that *Homo sapiens* arrived in Tasmania at least 43 000 years BP. This suggests that human occupation and the existence of *Zygomaturus* probably overlapped.

This led to a discussion of what caused the extinction of *Zygomaturus* (and all the other Australian megafauna—i.e. very large animals—that existed here for millions of years, but then became extinct around the time humans arrived in Australia). Was it over-hunting by humans, climate change, a combination of both, or some other factor?

Research is continuing into the reasons for the extinctions of megafauna, not only in Australia, but also in other continents. Although there appears to be a connection in time between the arrival of humans and many of these extinctions, this only constitutes an association, and there is no clear answer at present.

Discussion then turned to the idea that some extinct species may be revived (sometimes referred to as *de-extinction* of species). In particular, some researchers believe that de-extinction of the thylacine may be feasible in the near future.

Our guides saw this as being something of a 'pipe dream'—that is, not only will it never happen, it shouldn't even be attempted. A recent article in *The Conversation* addresses the arguments for and against de-extinction:

<https://theconversation.com/maybe-we-can-but-should-we-deciding-whether-to-bring-back-extinct-species-77469>



A small part of the vertebrate collection at the QVMAG



Crusader bug – *Mictis profana*

Simon showed us the extensive insect collection, including the crusader bug *Mictis profana*, which, until recently, was thought to exist only on the mainland.

As described in the June issue of the *North Eastern Naturalist*, Simon found a population of these bugs at Beechford and then led the March outing on a search for the bug in the Bellingham area.

Tammy showed us several bones of the Tasmanian emu, which became extinct in the 1860s. Unfortunately, very little is known about this emu, including such basic information as its average size.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that it was smaller than the mainland emu, but there are not enough remains to confirm this.

The opportunity to see the botany collection was a highlight for club members Ian Cameron and his sister Ann Witherden, whose mother (Mary Cameron) had collected, dried and notated many of the specimens. Mary was a Life Member of both our club and the Launceston Field Nats Club, and was a highly respected botanist in her time. As youngsters, Ian and Ann often visited the QVMAG while their mother was working there, and were familiar with all the collectors and curators as a result.



QVMAG staff member Simon Fearn and Sandra Forbes-Ewan with a collection of six-legged friends



Tasmanian funnelweb spider *Hadronyche venenata*

In conclusion, we were very fortunate to have such knowledgeable guides, who freely gave their time to share their expertise with us. After a quiet start the discussion increased almost exponentially as the tour progressed. By the time we were due to leave, David, Simon and Tammy were fielding questions that were coming thick and fast, but they handled every question with aplomb. The NE Field Nats Club is very grateful to David and his team at the QVMAG for conducting such a fascinating tour.

JULY: SLIDE SHOWS AT THE SCOTTSDALE LINC 1. WESTERN ARTHURS

Article by Chris Forbes-Ewan; photos by Patrick Wilson

The July activity consisted of two presentations at the Scottsdale LINC. Patrick Wilson told us about his recent walk through the Western Arthurs—a superb wilderness area of south-western Tasmania—and Debbie Searle presented on attempts being made to save the orange-bellied parrot from extinction (see article beginning on page 10).

Patrick completed the Western Arthurs walk in April of this year, with approach and departure being along the Port Davey track.

Although the range is only about 15 km long it has 22 major peaks, and because of its meandering nature it involves completing a circuit of approximately 70 km.



Lake Fortuna – one of five major lakes in the Western Arthurs region

Patrick told us that the Western Arthurs walk has the reputation of being the most difficult hike on a prepared surface in Tasmania. Although there is a marked track, it is narrow, winding, often muddy, and involves extremely steep ascents (and perhaps even more challenging, just as many steep descents), often on loose rocks. Average walking speeds of about one km per hour are common, so the 70-km walk can take seven days, even when walking takes place for up to ten hours per day.



Lake Oberon

Although the sun rarely shone during Patrick's walk, the stunning photos he showed during his presentation make it obvious why many people fall in love with Tasmania's wilderness, and are prepared to spend days or even weeks hiking through often difficult (but usually exquisite) terrain. Patrick's presentation also reinforced

the importance of ensuring the conservation of Tasmania's unique and spectacular wilderness areas for future generations.

After the presentation, Mike Douglas mentioned that he had walked in the Western Arthurs nearly 50 years ago, well before the track had been established and before navigational aids such as GPS existed.



Sunset at Promontory Lake in the Western Arthurs

JULY: SLIDE SHOWS AT THE SCOTTSDALE LINC 2. SAVING THE ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT

Article by Chris Forbes-Ewan and Debbie Searle; photos by Debbie and Craig Searle

Debbie told us that the orange-bellied parrot (OBP), which has a life span of only four or five years, was once plentiful across south-eastern Australia, from the Coorong to Sydney. Numbers have dropped precipitously in recent years, and it is now one of the most endangered animal species in Australia, with only a few dozen individuals still in the wild.



Adult orange-bellied parrot – photo by Craig Searle

Among other aspects of this program, scientists have banded many birds as nestlings, so their migratory success (to and from the mainland) can be recorded on an annual basis.

Other adults have been captured and taken to breeding centres at Taroona and on the mainland as an insurance population.

In addition, five chicks ('foster chicks') have been placed in a nest of OBPs at Melaleuca. So far, only one foster chick, named Matilda, is known to have survived. Matilda even managed to complete the migration to the mainland—she was identified at Werribee (near Melbourne) the following winter.

One adult male was sent from Tasmania and released at Werribee, near the location where Matilda was identified. Ten captive-bred males have been released there too. It is hoped that these males will return to Melaleuca with OBPs who had previously made the migration across Bass Strait, thereby increasing the population size and enhancing the likelihood of successful breeding in the wild. A captive breeding program has also been commenced in Victoria, with some adults already having been being released at Werribee. The hope is that these adults will also learn appropriate migratory habits from experienced OBPs.

The few remaining birds divide their time between south-west Tasmania (within about 20 km of a tiny hamlet called Melaleuca, which is near Port Davey on Bathurst Harbour) and the mainland. In spring and summer they are busy feeding and breeding in the Melaleuca region; then in autumn they fly across Bass Strait to overwinter in Victoria and South Australia, where food is more plentiful during the coldest months. They then fly back to Tasmania the following spring.

With so few birds still in existence in the wild, a program was begun 15 years ago to try to bring the OBP back from the brink of extinction. This includes conservation of breeding and nesting habitat in the Melaleuca region. Towards this end, Debbie and many other volunteers have spent countless hours observing and tracking OBPs.



Matilda as a nestling

The importance of this conservation work is clearly understood by many Australians—a crowd-funding program that was set up last year by the Australian National University with the aim of raising \$60 000 dollars actually realised \$140 000.

The big question now is what to do about the critically endangered OBP. Options might include releasing the captive birds (which now number about 300) and ‘hoping for the best’; giving breeding pairs of wild birds to breeders to build the population of captive OBPs; or capturing as many wild birds as possible, to allow a large captive population to be bred. Each of these would be controversial, but a decision is probably needed while there is still a wild population to conserve.

Debbie also talked about the enthusiasm shown by ‘twitchers’ (people who are prepared to travel long distances to see rare birds) for the birdlife around Melaleuca. Twitchers come from around the world to see not only the OBP, but also rare species such as the ground parrot, emu wren, striated field wren, and olive whistler.

Debbie finished by asking audience members to consider volunteering to take part in the conservation work at Melaleuca aimed at saving the OBP. Anyone interested in hearing more about this can contact Debbie at: debbieswirling@outlook.com



Matilda semi-grown

VALE DENYS WALTER — LIFE MEMBER OF NE FIELD NATS CLUB

By Lou Brooker

We recently heard that our old friend and leader Denys Walter had passed on.

I knew Denys from the very first Field Nats outing I went on. His first outing as leader was to Piccaninny Point in 1988, and thereafter he organised many outings and camps for our club to places like Maria Island, Flinders Island and to the West Coast. He was made a Life Member in 2004.

When I was newsletter editor I would receive handwritten letters from Denys about all sorts of things natural that he found interesting. I still have some of those pieces and treasure them.

He was seriously involved in community activities too—driving the community bus, attending bird-counting days, and helping during the early times of the St Helens History Room.

He was passionate about the Blue Tier. At the age of 83 he was arrested, along with three other people, for trespassing on Gunns’ land during a sit-in at a logging coupe on the Tier.

Denys was a true gentleman and was passionate about life and learning. In his later years he was lovingly cared for by his wife Joy, and their family in their home at St. Helens.



Denys Walter on the Big Tree Track on his 90th birthday