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 Secretary: Ann had a pleasant interaction with Fiona Scott, who is the author of a fabulous book about Tasmanian seaweeds (see next page for photo of the front cover). Unfortunately, Fiona was not able to accept Ann's invitation to be the guest speaker at our AGM in August, but she donated a copy of her book in lieu of presenting.

Having studied marine algae and phytoplankton for many years, Fiona has collected specimens from tropical, temperate and Antarctic regions.

With text and exquisite photographs of more than 160 species, this book serves as an introduction to the marine seaweeds and seagrasses of Tasmania.

Contact Louise if you would like to borrow Fiona's book from the NE Field Nats library.

Photos of NE Tasmanian natural environments

Rock cave on Roydon Island – photo by John French

Jelly spot fungus (*Daccromyces stillatus*) – photo by Chris Forbes-Ewan

Program for March and April 2021

MARCH 13th: MT CAMERON RANGE – WHALE ROCK

Penny and Lloyd will lead this walk in the Mt Cameron Reserve to Whale Rock. The walk is a steady climb, on a marked track [thanks to Mike D] and isn't steep, apart from 50 metres at the end. The return distance is 5.7 km.

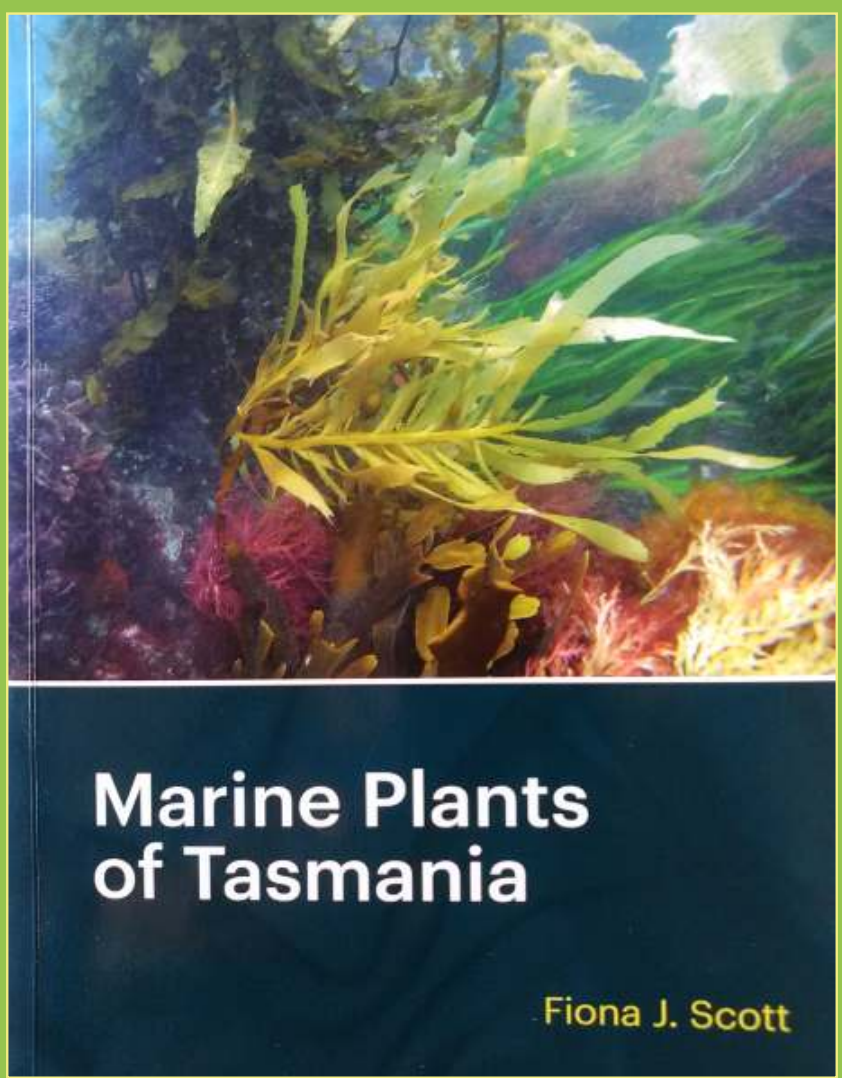
Meet at 10 am at the junction of the Waterhouse Road and the Old Port Road, which is now signposted, 10 km west of Gladstone.

If time permits, we may have afternoon tea at Shalamar Lagoon. This place is suitable for those who wish to camp the night.

APRIL 10th: A HUT ON PARADISE PLAINS

A gentle walk of maximum 4 km to a little-known hut on Paradise Plains near where we have explored before. Features include interesting sub-alpine vegetation, and views across the plains to Ben Nevis.

Meet at 10 am at the junction of Mathinna Plains Road [C423] and Ben Ridge Road.



Front cover of Fiona Scott's book, which is available for borrowing from the NE Field Nats library

Cancellation Process: If there is unpredictable and severe weather, or for any other reason, including if the leader considers the conditions to be unsafe, it may occasionally be necessary to cancel with short notice. Here is the process for cancellation: an activity 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 1900 (i.e. 7.00 pm) on the previous day, or by 0700 (7.00 am) on the day of the outing at the latest. A notice will also be posted on the website:

netasfieldnats.com.au

If you are unsure, contact Ann, Lou or the activity leader. Note that phone reception is not always available, so you may have to try alternative numbers.

DECEMBER 2020: CAPE PORTLAND

Text and photos by Lou Brooker (LB) and Chris Forbes-Ewan (CFE)

The December activity of the NE Field Naturalists Club was a trip to Cape Portland, in the far north-east of Tasmania.

Led very capably by Dig Probert (who took us through other parts of Cape Portland in September 2019—for details, see the article in the Dec 19 issue of The North Eastern Naturalist), our aims were to explore the northern coastal section of the wind farm, watch for migratory shore birds, and generally follow-up from the earlier visit.

We were warned that we should 'wear strong shoes with gaiters or wear gumboots'. The reason for this was that we were likely to see snakes because it had been a wet year.

A snake—probably a tiger snake (*Notechis scutatus*)—that greeted us on returning from one of our walks – CFE

This turned out to be an accurate prediction—following one walk, a snake, which was probably a tiger snake, of about 1.5 m was found to be lurking under one of the parked cars.

However, as applies generally to Tasmanian snakes he (or possibly she) didn't have the slightest interest in us—after all, humans are far too big to kill and swallow—and the snake unhurriedly slithered away into longer grass.

As an aside, in the same location, we saw a hole that appeared to be nearly perfectly round, and about 2 cm in diameter. There was much conjecture about the origin of this hole—was it where a round tent pole had been inserted in the ground, was it a spider's home, or was there some other explanation?

All speculation ceased when a twig was poked into the hole and a large, rather angry-looking spider emerged, apparently upset about someone invading his (or her) territory. The spider was identified by John Douglas (a spider expert at the QVMAG) from the photo shown to the right as a wolf spider, species *Tasmanicosa godeffroyi.*

Wolf spider (*Tasmanicosa godeffroyi*) – CFE

As described in the Dec 19 issue of this newsletter, Cape Portland is home to one of Tasmania's largest wind farms. One problem the wind farm has is the tendency of wedge-tailed eagles to fly near the massive blades of the wind turbines, thereby endangering their lives. In a technology-driven attempt to reduce the risk of

injury to eagles, a radar device has been installed to keep track of eagles flying in the vicinity of the turbines.

Dig showed us the radar and explained that if an eagle is detected near a turbine, that turbine and others nearby will be automatically switched off until the eagle has moved to a safer location. Dig also said that the radar is currently 'learning' how to detect eagles, especially how to distinguish them from birds of similar size, such as pelicans.

Dig then showed us a historic 19th century cemetery, which included the grave of a man who was born in the 18th century. Indicative of the high standard of stonemasonry at the time this cemetery was established, some of the gravestones were in excellent condition—including that of Samuel Bowen who died in 1883—despite having been exposed to the elements for well over a century.

Investigating the historic cemetery at Cape Portland – LB

Grave of Samuel Bowen, who died in 1883 – CFE

As previously mentioned, one of the main aims of our visit was to observe and identify shore birds. Appendix 1, compiled by Lloyd Reeves, shows the birds observed at Cape Portland. An article Lou wrote for the BridReport is shown as Appendix 2. Appendix 3 is a summary of the information compiled by DPIPWE during the 1998–99 shorebird survey.

NE Field Nats doing a spot of birdwatching – LB

Appendix 1: Birds observed at Cape Portland

Common Name	Species Name
Pied oystercatcher	*Haematopus longirostris*
Sooty oystercatcher	*Haematopus fuliginosus*
Pacific gull	*Larus pacificus*
Silver gull	*Larus novaehollandiae*
Australian pelican	*Pelecanus conspicillatus*
Golden plover	*Pluvialis fulva*
Hooded plover	*Thinornis rubricollis*
Ruddy turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*
Red-necked stint	*Calidris ruficollis*

Appendix 2: Article by Lou Brooker published in the BridReport

Cape Portland is a remote part of the North East. It's northern most beaches are protected by many small rocky islands. These beaches are flat, with patches of seagrass interspersed with mudflats rich with life.

There is a resident population of shore birds there year round; birds we know like the sooty oyster catcher, the pied oyster catcher, the silver gull, the pacific gull and the black swan.

For part of the year though, there are interesting visitors to these beaches, birds which since leaving here in March have flown thousands of kilometres to places like Siberia and Alaska to mate and rear their young. In spring they come back to Tasmania's rich feeding grounds. They do this on what is termed the East Australasian Flyway. No-one is certain why this migration takes place.

Cape Portland is one of Tasmania's top spots for these migratory birds, and for forty years two well-known bird watchers, Peter Duckworth and Ralph Cooper, have been visiting the area and gathering data about them.

In the 1990s there were large numbers of birds like the Eastern Curlew, the Bar-Tailed Godwit and the Curlew Sandpiper. But over time, sightings have decreased dramatically. The number of Curlew Sandpipers for example has decreased by 80%. Likewise the Eastern Curlew, whose population has decreased by 50%. In 2007 alone, up to 150 000 shorebirds went missing as a result of the destruction of a single habitat in the Yellow Sea in China.

Woolnorth Renewables enabled our visit to Cape Portland to make our own observations. The migratory shore birds were 'sure' hard to see in the vast expanse of open mudflats there, but with patience and good binoculars we were able to identify four species which had returned from their migration. The smallest and most difficult of these to see was the Red-Necked Stint, a mere 14 cm long. At 23 cm, the Ruddy Turnstone was a little easier to see. Both these species have returned from nesting in the Siberian tundra. The Double-Banded Plover was also seen, but it is unusual in that it migrates east/west and flies to and from New Zealand.

Appendix 3: Summary of Information Compiled During The 1998–1999 Shorebird Survey—DPIPWE

Tasmania's top spots are Orielton Lagoon, Pittwater, Logans Lagoon, Flinders Island, Cape Portland.

Very high species diversity—priority site for resident species, stronghold for Double-Banded Plover, Sooty Oystercatcher, Little Tern, long term monitoring site.

Peter Duckworth and Ralph Cooper have carried out observations here for 45 years.

Cape Portland is the most species-diverse, with 22 species of shorebirds.

Stronghold for Double-Banded Plover [which breeds in NZ], Sooty Oystercatcher, Little Tern, Red-Capped Plover, Pacific Golden Plover.

East Australasian Flyway—birds fly to Arctic Circle, Siberia, Alaska and Russia to breed. Birds double their weight for the trip. Destruction of habitat means there's been an 80% decline in numbers.

Birds Australia [whom NE Field Nats supports] conducts annual shorebird counts so that trends can be monitored.

Each shorebird has a niche in terms of feeding—some peck on the surface, some turn over seaweed, some have long bills for going deep for crabs and worms.

FEBRUARY 2021: ASCENT OF BEN NEVIS

Text by Mike Douglas; photos by Ross Coad (RC) and Chris Forbes-Ewan (CFE)

Ben Nevis, altitude 1368 metres, situated within state forest, is one of the tall, dolerite-capped mountains of the northeast highlands. It forms the watershed between the North and South Esk Rivers.

The name may be due to the surveyor and explorer John Helder Wedge, who followed the South Esk River from Fingal to near the source in 1825.

In February, under the leadership of Mike Douglas, a group of eight members and guests ascended the mountain via the steep track up the north face. Three others explored around the base of the mountain.

Ben Nevis from the start of the walking track – CFE

The walk commenced from Schuloffs Road in a dense regrowth forest of gum-topped stringybark (*Eucalyptus delegatensis*).

Leeches were abundant on the lower part of the track due to wet conditions, and indeed, parts of Schuloffs Road were under water.

Higher, on rocky terrain, the route passed through a belt of alpine cider gum (*E. archeri*). This tree is endemic to Tasmania, and is closely related to the cider gum, *E. gunnii*. Both species are adapted to some of the coldest conditions experienced by any eucalypt.

The Tasmanian snow gum, *E. coccifera*, which survives at an even higher elevation, does not occur on the northeast highlands.

Dwarf myrtle (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), needlebush (*Hakea liscosperma*), mountain pepper (*Tasmannia lanceolata*) and woolly tea-tree (*Leptospermum lanigerum*) are common components of the dense understorey.

Above 1200 metres there are no trees, and the rough track traverses low alpine vegetation. Species still flowering in February included the beautiful Tasmanian snow gentian (*Gentianella diemensis*, subsp. d*iemensis*); golden everlasting (*Xerochrysum subundulatum*), trigger plant (*Stylidium graminifolium*) and violet mountain daisy (*Erigeron pappocrumus*).

Others displayed colourful fruits, e.g. mountain rocket (*Bellendena montana*), pink mountain berry (*Leptecophylla juniperina*), mountain currant (*Coprosma nitida*), purple cheeseberry (*Cyathodes glauca*), and silver-mat heath (*Cyathodes dealbata*).

Tasmanian snow gentian (*Gentianella diemensis*, subsp. *diemensis*) – RC

Pink mountain berry *Leptecophylla juniperina*) – CFE

The mountain tea-tree (*Leptospermum rupestre*) and the alpine native cherry (*Exocarpus humifusus*) were common, as were the prickly *Richea scoparia* and *Richea sprengeloides*.

The grand vista from the summit took in Mt Maurice, Mt Victoria, Mt Albert, Mt Saddleback and, out towards the coast, Mt Horror and Mt Cameron.

To the south loomed the great bulk of the Ben Lomond massif.

Looking to the west, we peered down into the spectacular Northallerton Valley, which contains the upper reaches of the North Esk River. This valley was once the location of the grazing property Ben Nevis, established by Fred Phillips and later purchased by Forestry Tasmania for eucalypt plantations.

Although more strenuous than the usual field naturalists outings, this walk was well worth the effort.

Field nats at the summit of Ben Nevis – RC

Trigger plant (*Stylidium graminifolium*) – RC

Mt Victoria and Mt Albert from Ben Nevis – RC