



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 Editor: This is the supplement to the December issue of the North Eastern Naturalist. It consists of three articles and an addition to an article that appeared in the December issue.

The first piece, by Roger McLennan, describes the Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) recently acquired by Roger for the NE Field Nats.

The second article is a follow-up to the report on our visit to Springfield in September, where we saw a slender tree fern (*Cyathea cunninghamii*). Lou Brooker describes a grove of slender tree ferns she

recently and unexpectedly came across while travelling in South Gippsland.

The third article is my attempt to determine when the last fatal snake bite occurred in the bush in Tasmania. (There is controversy about this matter.)

The addition to the piece in the December issue includes a photo that Claudia Bohme sent me about the Boobyalla circuit walk, and which I inadvertently left out of the article.

Finally, I've added the URLs of some articles in The Conversation that may be of interest.

PERSONAL LOCATOR BEACON

By Roger McLennan

A Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) is an emergency beacon that has an internal GPS transmitter. When activated, a signal is transmitted to satellites orbiting the Earth. This signal is then relayed to emergency services. The signal provides both the geographic location and the registered ID of the sender. Depending on the situation, rescue will usually be via a ground crew or a helicopter.

The NE Field Nats recently acquired a new Personal Locator Beacon (PLB). NE Field Nats Secretary Lou Brooker has the PLB along with the first aid kit. The intention is to take it on every outing, with the activity

leader being responsible for carrying the PLB and for returning it to Lou.

Leaders are requested to note that the PLB is to be used only in 'a situation of grave and imminent danger', where emergency assistance is required. If phone contact is available, the PLB should not be used, unless this is requested by the emergency authorities.

The PLB and instructions for its use are shown in the photos below.

The PLB is not complicated to operate; it is small and light, and may save a life (or lives).

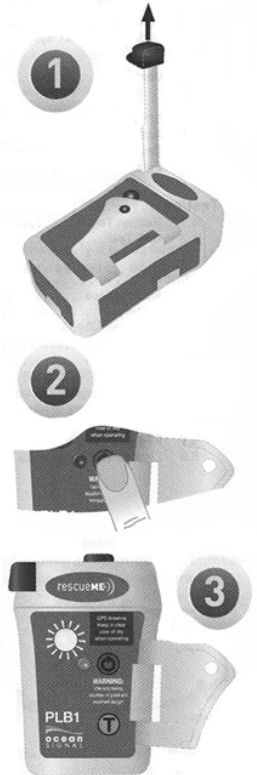


Personal Locator Beacon (above) and instructions for use (right)

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

⚠ WARNING: USE ONLY IN SITUATIONS OF GRAVE AND IMMINENT DANGER ⚠

- PULL THE ANTENNA OUT FROM THE BODY TO ITS FULLEST EXTENT USING THE BLACK TAB
- LIFT THE FLAP UP
- PRESS THE **Ⓞ** KEY FOR 1 SECOND TO ACTIVATE THE BEACON. THE GREEN LED WILL FLASH TO INDICATE ACTIVATION
- RELEASE THE **Ⓞ** KEY
- ENSURE THE ANTENNA IS HELD VERTICALLY WHILE OPERATING THE PLB
- THE STROBE LIGHT WILL START FLASHING TO INDICATE IT IS ACTIVATED



WHEN WAS THE LAST FATAL SNAKE BITE IN THE BUSH IN TASMANIA?

Article by Chris Forbes-Ewan; photo by Simon Fearn

Wikipedia defines epistemology as 'the branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. *Epistemology* studies the nature of knowledge, justification, and the rationality of belief.'

In plain English, epistemology is the study of how we might answer the following question: 'Is what we believe to be factual actually true?'

For many years, I 'knew' that the last person to die in the bush in Tasmania from a snake bite was a young woman, and that this occurred in the Cradle Mountain area in 1966. The story I heard (repeatedly, and from various sources) was that she was bitten on the bottom when she crouched in long grass to relieve herself and didn't notice a tiger snake hidden in the grass. All her walking companions were male,

and the practice in those days was to lance the part of the body that had been bitten and suck out the poisoned blood.

Naturally enough (so the story went) she was reluctant to reveal to her male companions what had happened, and she continued to walk. By the time it became obvious that the poison was taking effect, it was too late for treatment, and the young woman died.

The Parks and Wildlife Service apparently accepts that 1966 was the year in which the last fatal snake bite in the bush occurred in Tasmania (<http://dpiwwe.tas.gov.au/wildlife-management/living-with-wildlife/living-with-snakes>): 'Although several people are bitten each year the last person proven to be killed by a snake in Tasmania was a handler in 1977 and the last killed in the bush was in 1966!'

As an aside, the handler who died in 1977 had a history of bites as a snake showman and died from anaphylaxis after being bitten while displaying snakes at the Brighton Show. So according to Parks and Wildlife, the last death in the bush was in 1966.

However, Parks and Wildlife does not provide any documentary evidence in support of this claim.

A seed of doubt about the veracity of this story was planted in my mind when NE Field Nats stalwart Mike Douglas assured me early this year that the incident occurred in the 1940s, not the 1960s.



Tiger snake at Lake Sorrell - photo by Simon Fearn

The flames of doubt were fanned when I read an article in the Examiner newspaper of 10 October, 2017 in which Simon Fearn (Collection Officer at QVMAG and invited speaker at our 2014 AGM) was quoted as saying that the last fatal snake bite in Tasmania was in the 1940s.

I asked Simon if he could provide a reference to help resolve this discrepancy. Simon referred me to the TROVE website. There I found a newspaper report in the Mercury of January 12, 1948 (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/26445033>). According to the Mercury:

BEFORE a rescue party could reach her, Dorothy Vera Townson (39), unmarried, of Murwillumbah (N.S.W.), died in Pelion hut on the Cradle Mountain-Lake St. Clair track early on Thursday from snakebite ... she had been bitten twice on the lower right leg by a snake, believed to be a tiger snake...and Miss Townson died at 4.30 am on Thursday.

Simon believes that the idea of a fatal bite in 1966 in embarrassing circumstances is essentially an urban myth, albeit an enduring one.

So unless documentary evidence to the contrary emerges, I now 'know' that the last fatal snake bite in the bush occurred in Tasmania in 1948, not 1966. If anyone can provide evidence to the contrary, please send it to my email address (forbes-ewan@tassie.net.au) and I'll publish a suitably revised article about this in the following issue of the North Eastern Naturalist.

Finally, with respect to the dangers posed to bushwalkers or other people who may encounter Tasmanian snakes, the Parks and Wildlife Service (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=3198>) makes the following pertinent points:

Whilst snakes deserve our healthy respect, many people have an overly fearful attitude towards them. Snakes rely on their venom in order to capture prey - they are loathe to use it on such a wasteful exercise as biting a person.

Most snake bites occur on the extremities. In the case of hands and lower arms, this is usually a consequence of trying to catch the snake by hand - not a wise act.

Bites on the lower legs or feet can be the result of stepping on a snake. This can occur when stepping over a log where a snake is basking on the sunlit side. Walkers should wear good walking boots and be aware of where they place their feet.

There have been no recorded deaths in Tasmania from snakebites for several decades. Far more people die from ant bites, peanuts or lightning strikes than snakes – a point well worth contemplating next time you head out into the Tasmanian bush!

SLENDER TREE FERNS IN SOUTH GIPPSLAND

Article and photos by Lou Brooker

I'd like to relate an experience I had while travelling in Victoria recently. I left to travel a few days after our outing to Owen Powell's farm with thoughts fresh in my mind about the lonely slender tree fern (*Cyathea cunninghamii*) amongst the other trees on the river bank. Not for one moment did I suspect that there were

big populations of them anywhere else in Australia.

I was exploring South Gippsland. I had a day or two up my sleeve and noticed a little National Park north of Yarram in the Strzelecki Ranges called Tarra-Bulga National Park. It is reserved for the stands of remnant old growth *Eucalyptus regnans* (known as mountain ash on the mainland, stringy gum in northern Tasmania).

The really steep slopes in the park form enclosed gullies which are dark and damp, and support many temperate rainforest species.

In a chance encounter with another amateur botanist I became aware that here, along with forty other fern species, was *C. cunninghamii*.

Driving through the gullies I saw them in their hundreds, dwarfed by the mountain ash, yet in their own right, majestic and tall, with some reaching 20 metres. In fact, the closest example I tried to photograph from the road wouldn't fit in the viewfinder of the camera!

Because this gully contains only a tiny remnant of the type of forest that once covered eastern



Slender tree fern (*Cyathea cunninghamii*) bathed in sunlight

Victoria, I assume that *C. cunninghamii* was a companion species of *E. regnans*, and was previously far more prevalent than today. Like Tasmania, Victoria has a history of clear felling and wood-chipping and is down to a mere 3% of its original old growth forest.

Even though *C. cunninghamii* is protected and is in fairly healthy numbers here, it is still classified nationally as *endangered* under the Threatened Species Protection Act 1995.

It has a tendency to grow near streams and rivers, and when I drove down the valley away from the shady gullies I saw it growing in more open situations, but never far from the river.

It was a nice coincidence to see the slender tree fern here, so soon after we'd seen it on the Sideling.



Slender tree ferns (*Cyathea cunninghamii*) in the middle and background surrounded by mountain ash

BOOBYALLA RIVER CIRCUIT REVISITED

Article by Chris Forbes-Ewan; photo by Claudia Bohme

The December issue of the North Eastern Naturalist included an article by Mike Douglas about our November activity—the walk around the Boobyalla River circuit.

Mention was made in the article of the 'Truganini tree', named after one of the Bruny Island Aborigines who accompanied George Augustus Robinson through the area in 1831.

At that time, the tree was a sapling. One hundred and eighty six years later, it is a massive tree, with a

burned and hollowed trunk, as shown at left.

Truganini had a tragic life, but her problems did not end with her death, which occurred in 1876. Wikipedia states that shortly before her death, she pleaded with the authorities to cremate her body and scatter her ashes in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel.

Despite this request, her body was put on display by the Royal Tasmanian Society shortly after her death. It was only in 1976, one hundred years after she died, that her body was cremated and her ashes scattered, as she had requested.



The Truganini tree as it appears now – photo by Claudia Bohme

FURTHER READING — ARTICLES OF POSSIBLE INTEREST IN THE CONVERSATION

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

Oldest known orange-bellied parrot surprises researchers with return home

<http://thenewdaily.com.au/news/good-news/2017/10/03/oldest-known-orange-bellied-parrot-surprises-researchers-return-home/>

For whom the bell tolls: cats kill more than a million Australian birds every day

<https://theconversation.com/for-whom-the-bell-tolls-cats-kill-more-than-a-million-australian-birds-every-day-85084>

Swift parrots need protection from sugar gliders, but that's not enough

<https://theconversation.com/swift-parrots-need-protection-from-sugar-gliders-but-thats-not-enough-85906>