



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 final issue of the North-Eastern Naturalist for 2022, although there will be a Christmas supplement in a few weeks. The Christmas supplement will include articles that may not be directly related to our monthly activities, but may be of general interest to members.

This issue includes reports on our activities for August, October and November 2022.

In August, Debbie and Craig Searle gave a fascinating presentation about their time doing

volunteer care-taking on Deal Island, a remote island in the middle of Bass Strait.

In October we went on a successful 'fossil hunt' in two areas: Liffey and Poatina.

In November we re-visited one of our favourite locations, Cape Portland, an area we never tire of because of the wide variety of natural and human environments there.

Finally, I hope you have a happy, relaxing (and COVID-free) holiday period.



Tall mycena (*Mycena cystidiosa*)
– Louise Brooker



Tasmanian speedwell (*Veronica formosa*)
– Ross Coad



Male emperor dragonfly
(*Anax papuensis*) – Ruth
Timperon

Program for Dec 2022 and Early 2023

DECEMBER 10th: Bare Rock, Fingal Valley – Leader Roy Skabo.

Advice from Roy: Meet at the Fingal PO, Talbot St Fingal at 9.45 am for car pooling into 4WDs and then departure at 10 am sharp.

We will drive about 8 km up Mt Foster Rd which is an old track through a farm and forestry land. Quite rough but driveable with a Subaru Forester or similar 4WD, and assuming you are comfortable on rough tracks for about 3 to 4 km.

Spectacular view and interesting plants. Easy walking.

Please note: If there is heavy rain that affects the road during the week, check the website Friday night in case of cancellation or change of venue, in which case we will go to the Evercreech Reserve.

The program for 2023 is still being developed. Details will be sent later by email when they are finalised. Our first activity will be on February 11th in Bridport.

Two others are in the early planning stages—one will be in the Low Head area, the other is a walk up Mt Scott.

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: a global email will be sent by 1900 (i.e. 7.00 pm) on the previous day, or by 0700 (7.00 am) at the latest on the day of the outing. A notice will also be posted on the website:

netasfieldnats.com.au

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING OR LISTENING

ABC podcast from Big Ideas:

The carbon-fixing superpower of wetlands, salt marshes and sea meadows

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/blue-carbon-wetlands-biodiversity-and-climate-change/14041136>

Articles from The Conversation:

They might not have a spine, but invertebrates are the backbone of our ecosystems. Let's help them out

<https://theconversation.com/profiles/peter-contos-1223359/articles>

Thousands of Tasmanian devils are dying from cancer – but a new vaccine approach could help us save them

<https://theconversation.com/thousands-of-tasmanian-devils-are-dying-from-cancer-but-a-new-vaccine-approach-could-help-us-save-them-194536>

Australia has hundreds of mammal species. We want to find them all – before they're gone

<https://theconversation.com/australia-has-hundreds-of-mammal-species-we-want-to-find-them-all-before-theyre-gone-185495>

Magpies, curlews, peregrine falcons: how birds adapt to our cities, bringing wonder, joy and conflict

<https://theconversation.com/magpies-curlews-peregrine-falcons-how-birds-adapt-to-our-cities-bringing-wonder-joy-and-conflict-190647>

We conducted our 2022 AGM at the Scottsdale Library in August. This was followed by an excellent presentation by Craig and Debbie Searle, who spent two months (March and April) as caretakers on Deal Island in 2021.

Deal Island is a granite island in Bass Strait, approximately halfway between Flinders Island and Wilsons Promontory. With an area of about 1576 hectares (or nearly 16 square kilometres) it is the largest island in the Kent Group National Park, Tasmania's northern-most national park, which was gazetted in 2002.

The islands of the Kent Group are the remnants of a land bridge that linked Tasmania and the Australian mainland between about 10 000 and 14 000 years BP (before the present).

In addition to 200 years of European influence, the islands also have a rich Aboriginal cultural heritage. It has been estimated that humans first occupied this area from about 13 000 years BP, and left around 8000 years BP.

Deal Island is quite picturesque, with 260-m granite cliffs on the southern side giving way to undulating ground immediately to the north, and then grasslands, which grow on the thin soil above limestone bedrock. There are also several attractive, white sandy beaches.

The management of Deal Island is overseen by the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS), which is part of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. In addition to the PWS as land managers, the island is also supported and cared for by a group of volunteers known as Friends of Deal Island.



Granite cliffs leading to rolling hills, and the compound (in the foreground)

Although Deal Island is remote from both Tasmania and the mainland, over the past two centuries Europeans have made their mark.

There is a compound (for keeping animals out) in which there are two houses—one built in the 1930s, and the other in the 1960s. Other buildings inside the compound include a generator shed, workshop, meteorological office and a museum, which began life in the 1840s as the Commandant's Cottage. The compound also protects an extensive vegetable garden.

A short distance from the compound there is a spectacular lighthouse, which is the most prominent structure on the island. Constructed in 1848, and finally deactivated in 1992, at 305 m altitude it is the highest lighthouse above sea level in the Southern Hemisphere. In fact, it may be too high—for much of the time it was in operation, the light from the lighthouse was obscured by low cloud.



One of several sandy beaches, with a jetty at the far end



Built in the 1840s, the Commandant's Cottage is now a museum



One of Craig and Debbie's jobs was keeping the vegetable garden in order

PWS runs the Deal Volunteer Caretaker Program under which Debbie and Craig spent their two months on the island. As volunteer caretakers, they were kept busy mowing the airstrip and compound, taking out weeds, conducting regular maintenance (such as cleaning the museum), keeping the vegetable garden growing, and welcoming visitors arriving from either Victoria or Tasmania by yacht or other sea-going vessel.



Window-cleaning time at the Deal island lighthouse, the highest lighthouse above sea level in the Southern Hemisphere

In addition, they cared for the cultural heritage of the island, including the lighthouse.

Deal Island has over 300 recorded plant species. Approximately half of the island has low, open eucalypt forest or tall shrubs. The rest is covered with she-oak woodland and tussock grasslands.

Three of the most significant native plant species that are present in limited numbers are:

- *Pratia irrigua* (also known as *P. Platycalyx*; no common name found)
- *Centrolepis pulvinata* (common name Scarce centrolepis), and
- *Ixiolaena supina* (common name Stalked *ixiolaena*).

The Scarce centrolepis is classified as 'rare, endemic'. (A plant or animal is *endemic* to a region if it occurs naturally only in that region.) The Scarce centrolepis is endemic to north-eastern Tasmania, the Furneaux Islands, and the Kent Group.

Unfortunately, human activity has introduced several prolific weeds, including sea spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*), ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), arum lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) and snow drop (species of the genus *Galanthus*).

Rabbits were introduced in the 19th century as a source of food for shipwrecked sailors, and are still present.

Native mammals include the rufous wallaby, aka the Tasmanian pademelon (*Thylogale billardierii*); Bennett's wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*), southern brown bandicoot (*Isodon obesulus*)—a threatened species; brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecular*); and fur seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*).



Bennett's wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*)



Little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*)

There is a rich variety of birds on Deal Island, with over 100 species having been observed. The main bird species are the Little Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*), Cape Barren Goose (*Cereopsis novaehollandiae*), Pacific Gull (*Larus pacificus*) and Sooty Oystercatcher (*Haematopus fuliginosus*). In addition, the Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) and Firetail Finch (*Stagonopleura bella*) are present, while the Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) is a common sight.

Reptiles present on Deal Island include the metallic skink (*Carinascincus metallicus*), Bougainville's skink (*Lerista bougainvillii*), White's skink (*Liopholis whitii*) and the white-lipped snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*).

Debbie and Craig are either gluttons for punishment, or they must enjoy cold, windy weather and minimal home comforts, because they are planning to return to Deal Island in the winter of 2023.



Sunset from the lighthouse on Deal Island

OCTOBER: FOSSICKING FOR FOSSILS AT LIFFEY AND POATINA

Text by Chris Forbes-Ewan; photos by Chris (CFE), Jay Wilson (JW) and Sandra Forbes-Ewan (SFE)

Our October activity was a visit to two areas south-west of Launceston—Liffey and Poatina—to look for fossils in sedimentary rocks in both freshwater and marine conditions.

On a day that was mostly mild, sunny and still, 20 members and guests were taken on two fascinating walks, ably led by Phil Tattersall and his wife Roxy.

Phil—who put in a superb effort to organise these walks—sent the following pre-activity information:

The aim is to follow the early Permian marine through to a freshwater formation (Liffey sandstone, with evidence of plant remains) and then onto marine formations further up the track. The marine formations contain shell imprints. Overall, the site offers a good opportunity for understanding of context. We then go to Poatina ... There we will take some time to look at the Liffey sandstone. This formation can be found throughout Tasmania and represents a good 'marker' ... Fossil plant remains are abundant, but there is little if anything in the way of faunal fossils.

Our first port of call was the Liffey Falls State Reserve. This is in the foothills of the Great Western Tiers (Aboriginal name *kooparooka niara*), and is close to Drys Bluff (*taytitikithika*, also spelled *taytitikitheeker*). At 1340 m, Drys Bluff is the highest mountain in the Western Tiers.



Drys Bluff, at 1340 m, the highest mountain in the Western Tiers – photo downloaded under the 'fair use' policy from <https://tinyurl.com/2vze55nw>

Phil first took us along an old logging path beside the Liffey River (*tilapangka*, also spelled *tellerpangger*), below the Liffey Falls, and near Pages Creek (a tributary of the Liffey). Here we found fossilised remains of freshwater plants—apparently mainly leaves and stems, although the possibility has been raised that at least one is a winged seed—in the sandstone that makes up the Lower Permian Freshwater Formation.

Although positive identification of the fossils couldn't be made, the scientific literature mentions plant species of several genera, including *Glossopteris* and *Gangamopteris*.

Phil distributed 15 bound copies of notes he had put together at his own expense specifically for this activity. These were complete with colour photos of fossils, descriptions of the local geological timeline, and how Tasmania came to be formed. The notes are available in electronic form on our website (netasfieldnats.com.au). He also thoroughly briefed us on the planned walks, and what we should expect to see at each stage.



Fossilised leaf, or possibly winged-seed – CFE

Phil explained that these were from the Permian Period, which began about 300 million years BP (before the present) and ended approximately 250 million years BP. It was mind-boggling to think that the delicate objects we were looking at were more than a quarter of a billion years old!

(As an aside, taking into account the rather advanced age of most of our members, one NEFN member—who shall remain anonymous to protect the guilty—described the scene as “one group of fossils looking at another group of fossils!”)

Phil then took us further along the same path to a point where we saw marine fossils of shellfish in the Poatina Formation. Some of the fossilised shells looked to be in near mint condition, as though they may have been laid down a few decades ago, rather than hundreds of millions of years in the past.

We then returned to the car park, where we had lunch, before driving to Poatina, about 35 minutes away.

This was a very picturesque drive that involved passing the spectacular Drys Bluff; through the attractive town of Liffey; then beside pastures that were so neat, they looked as though they could have been manicured; and past huge fields of bright-yellow canola in full flower.



Fossilised marine shellfish from the Permian Period, approximately 280 million years ago – CFE

Just short of the turnoff to Poatina village we turned onto a dirt road which took us to the site known as the Lower Permian Poatina.

Here we found more fossils of plant parts and animals (marine shellfish). One particularly well-preserved shellfish fossil was tentatively identified as being in the genus *Martiniopsis*, which thrived in the sea that, in the late Permian, covered what is now Tasmania.

Phil pointed out the difficulties of identifying species based on finding only fragments of plants or animals.

He also noted that human activities can lead to erroneous conclusions about the original sites of fossils—for example, rocks containing fossils can be moved many kilometres from their place



Canola in flower near Poatina – SFE

of origin to be used as road fill.

In addition to finding more fossils than you could poke a stick at (to use a quintessential Australian idiom), we also noted some interesting flora, and many birds. Among the flora were a fruticose (or trumpet) lichen (genus *Cladonia*), and a small bird orchid (*Chiliglottis grammata*).



Fruticose (or trumpet) lichen (genus *Cladonia*) – JW



Small bird orchid (*Chiliglottis grammata*) – JW

The list shown below (compiled by Ann Witherden) shows the birds observed on the day.

BIRDS SEEN AND/OR HEARD AT LIFFEY AND/OR POATINA

Liffey: Green Rosella (*Platycercus caledonicus*); Grey Shrike-Thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*); Flame Robin – Male & Female (*Petroica phoenicea*); Grey Fantail (*Rhipidura albiscapa*); Superb Fairy Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*); Golden Whistler – Heard (*Pachycephala pectoralis*); Striated Pardalote – Heard (*Pardalotus striatus*); Shining Bronze Cuckoo – Heard (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*); Fan-tailed Cuckoo – Heard (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*); Crescent Honeyeater – Heard (*Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus*); Silver Eye (*Zosterops lateralis*); Olive Whistler (*Pachycephala olivacea*); Forty Spotted Pardalote – Heard (*Pardalotus quadragintus*); Brown Thornbill (*Acanthiza pusilla*).

Poatina: Grey Butcher Bird (*Cracticus torquatus*); Pallid Cuckoo (*Cacomantis pallidus*); Black Currawong (*Strepera fuliginosa*); Green Rosella (*Platycercus caledonicus*); Superb Fairy Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*); Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*).

Following our second successful attempt at finding fossils, some members adjourned to Poatina Village for a very pleasant afternoon tea.

Poatina is an attractive town with an interesting history. It was constructed in the 1960s to house the work force of the Poatina Power Station, which was commissioned in 1964. In 1995, Fusion—a Christian community and youth organisation devoted to helping homeless people and the unemployed—bought most of the village.

The village is a thriving community. Amenities include a three-star motel, restaurant, gift shop, tea room and art gallery.

Before we left Poatina, Phil generously donated some of his private collection of fossils to our club. These will be added to our library and museum items.

The North-Eastern Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club is very grateful to Phil and Roxy Tattersall for the huge effort they put into organising and leading a very interesting and successful fossil hunt.

NOVEMBER: CAPE PORTLAND

Text by Chris Forbes-Ewan; photos by Chris Forbes-Ewan (CFE) and Jay Wilson (JW)

In November we re-visited one of our favourite locations—the Musselroe Wind Farm at Cape Portland (Aboriginal name *tebrakunna*) in the far north-east of Tasmania. This has been the location for several of our outings in recent years, but there never seems to be a lack of new and interesting environments to see.

Led by Dig Probert and Claudia Bohme (both of whom have jobs at the wind farm, so they had been able to arrange approval for us to be on the private property), twelve members and guests took part in the guided walk of about five kilometres.

As usual for this part of the world, the weather was cool and very windy. This was not surprising—the almost continuous strong wind is the reason it was chosen as the site of Tasmania's largest wind farm so far, consisting of 56 turbines with a generating capacity of 168 MW.

The western side of the wind farm is a designated wildlife sanctuary that includes several lagoons, the largest of which is the Tregaron Lagoon.

Our main aim on this walk was to observe and record the fauna and flora near Tregaron Lagoon.

As we approached the lagoon we saw a huge mob of Forester kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus tasmaniensis*). The Forester is a sub-species of *Macropus giganteus*, the Eastern Grey kangaroo found on the eastern part of the Australian mainland. This was the largest mob of kangaroos most of us had ever seen.



Part of Tregaron lagoon, with samphire (*Sarcocornia quinqueflora*), golden dodder (*Cuscuta tasmanica*) and bower spinach (*Tetragonia implexicoma*) in the foreground – CFE

The Tregaron Lagoon is located at one end of a piece of terrain that was so flat, it looked as though it may have been levelled with laser guidance.

Walking beside the lagoon, we saw extensive areas of samphire (*Sarcocornia quinqueflora*), golden dodder (*Cuscuta tasmanica*) and bower spinach (*Tetragonia implexicoma*).

In the distance, we saw Wedge-Tailed Eagles (*Aquila audax fleayi*) catching thermals and then diving onto prey.

Dig told us about a nearby feeding station that is used to attract Wedge-Tailed



Forester kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus tasmaniensis*) – JW

Eagles so their health can be monitored.

Some of the eagles are fitted with sat nav tracking devices, so their movements can also be traced as part of the valuable conservation work conducted by the owners of the wind farm.

We noticed that, at irregular intervals, some of the wind turbines would cease working for short periods. It was explained that a company is contracted by the wind farm to watch for eagles that may be flying too close for comfort (or more appropriately, too close for safety) to the rapidly-revolving turbine blades. Four spotters are employed to ensure that there is one available at all times from dawn until dusk, seven days a week. When an eagle is seen flying near a turbine, that turbine, and any others nearby, are closed down until the eagle is a safe distance away.



Home Beach, where we stopped for lunch – CFE

This beach also looked a little like a highway for small birds, dozens of which were scurrying along the sand, flying short distances out to sea and then back again, or just generally standing and enjoying watching the animals (humans in this case) wander past. (The full list—compiled by Ann Witherden—of birds seen on the day is at the end of this article.)

The direction to the old homestead was clearly indicated by the impressive reproductive stalks of several introduced (i.e. non-native) cactuses of the species *Agave americana*, commonly known as the “century plant”. These stalks can reach 8 m in height, and are produced when the plant is nearing the end of its life.

Built in the mid-19th century by John Foster, the homestead is now just a series of dilapidated rock walls, but is of historical interest.

After lunch, which we had on the attractive Home Beach, we started walking along the sand towards the ruins of an old homestead. As we walked, we picked up rubbish that had been left by uncaring visitors, or had washed ashore from passing boats. Some members had brought large plastic bags for this purpose.

On the way to the homestead we passed another beach that had rocks covered with the beautiful orange lichen that north-eastern Tasmanian beaches are so famous for.



Orange lichens growing on rocks near Home Beach – CFE



Hooded Plovers (*Thinornis rubricollis*) and Red-Capped Plover (*Charadrius ruficapillus*) – JW



Reproductive stalks of the cactus *Agave americana* near the old homestead – CFE

As applies to all our walks where snakes may be encountered, strong advice had been given to wear rubber boots or sturdy boots and gaiters. This proved to be good advice—while walking through grassland on the way to the homestead, one member nearly stepped on a large snake, which Dig identified as a copperhead (*Austrelaps superbis*). Fortunately, the member saw the snake and managed to give it a wide berth. However, as applies generally to Tasmanian snakes, this one showed little or no interest in us, and continued basking contentedly in the sun as we warily walked around it.



Copperhead snake (*Austrelaps superbis*) – J W

Then it was time to return to where the cars were parked. To cap off a very enjoyable day, most people stayed to take part in a pleasant barbecue.

North-Eastern Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club pays its respects to the traditional owners of the land; thanks Chris Simms and Bob Barbour from the wind farm for allowing us to conduct this activity; and also thanks Dig Probert and Claudia Bohme for leading another wonderful walk in the Cape Portland area.

Birds observed (list compiled by Ann Witherden)	
Black Swan (with cygnets)	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>
Silver Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae</i>
Red-Capped Plover	<i>Charadrius ruficapillus</i>
Pacific Gull	<i>Larus pacificus</i>
Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>
Wedge-Tailed Eagle	<i>Aquila audax fleayi</i>
Pelican	<i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i>
White-Fronted Chat	<i>Epthianura albifrons</i>
Hooded plover	<i>Thinornis rubricollis</i>
Grey Butcher Bird	<i>Cracticus torquatus</i>
Swamp Harrier	<i>Circus approximans</i>
Cape Barren Goose	<i>Cereopsis novaehollandiae</i>
Banded Lapwing	<i>Vanellus tricolor</i>