



Central North Field Naturalists

CNFN

the

Natural News

Winter 2002

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Program and Events

May 6, Black Sugarloaf (Ron & Sarah's)
Meet at 10 am at the bottom of Ron and Sarah's track at 999 Denmans Rd., Birralee. Hopefully the fungi will be in full force by then after an autumn break. We were too early at Liffy, but it was a great day anyway.

June 2, Mt Careless exploration at Jo and Geoff Deans' Meet at Frankford shop on Frankford hwy at 9:30 am.

July 7, Weeena Meet at 10 am at Jim Nelson's at 66 Dynans Bridge Rd. We'll take a short walk weather permitting, followed by some slides and other indoor activities.

August 4, Brashy Lagoon & Reedy Marsh
10 am at junction of Bensmans and Priestleys Roads. Priestleys Rd can be reached from Westbury Rd at Birralee or off the Frankford Hwy.

INVERTEBRATA, Tasmania's invertebrate newsletter is now available from the website: www.qvmag.tas.gov.au/zoology/invertebrata.html

If you want to be on a notification list telling you about interesting items on the website, then email the editor, Bob Mesibov, and put "notify" in the subject line. mesibov@southcom.com.au

*** Memberships were due March 1, 2002. Once again we have held the rates at \$15 for individuals, \$20 for families and \$5 for independent young adults under 18 yrs. Send to Sarah Lloyd, 999 Denmans Rd Birralee, 7303

A Trip to King Island.

By Sarah Lloyd.

In October 2001, three members of the Central North Field Naturalists visited King Island. National Water Week was being celebrated during the first week of our stay and Jim Nelson was there to talk to various groups about frogs, as well as assist with the establishment of the Leapfrog site and to look for frogs and burrowing crayfish. (The Leapfrog project aims to rehabilitate wetland areas for the Green and Gold Frog *Litoria raniformis*. It is funded by the NHT and administered by the CNFN). Ron Nagorcka and I were there to conduct bird surveys.

In a sense we were following in the footsteps of the 26 Victorian field naturalists who had visited King Island in November 1887 to record the flora and fauna there. However, despite being exhausted after spending two weeks setting up transects and surveying birds, our trip was a holiday compared to theirs.

Unlike us, who had flown to the Island, driven in a hire car and stayed in luxury at the Naracoops Holiday flats, they had been lent a boat by the Victorian government, sailed to the west coast and landed just south of Yellow Rock beach. (Yellow Rock gets its name from the colour of the lichen growing on the granite rock) After heaving their considerable gear several kilometers to a suitable camping site, they had to pitch tents before the rain set in. They then spent the

next several weeks traversing the swamps and forests by foot and packhorse, while relying on shooters to supplement their rations.

In one way I envied them, as they had the opportunity to explore the island before 'development' was to change the nature of the place forever.

(But I didn't envy them their culinary experiences. A breakfast consisting of soup condensed from eighteen wallaby tails doesn't really appeal)

King Island lies half way between Victoria and Tasmania; its northerly most point is 50 miles from Cape Otway on the mainland of Victoria, its southerly point the same distance from Cape Grim in Tasmania. Between the Island and Tasmania are various rocks and small islands such as Reid, Black Pyramid, Hunter, Barren and Three Hummock Island.

The predominant vegetation is wet tea-tree scrub, consisting of both *Lepidospermum* and *Melaleuca* with *Banksia marginata* and broad-leaved "boobyalla" *Myoporum*. Eucalypt forest still occurs along the valleys of some rivulets, there is also some remaining coastal heath, lagoons and saltmarsh. Much of the areas that were formerly covered by eucalypt forest (mostly Tasmanian Bluegum *E. globulus*) have either been cleared for agriculture or been wiped out by wildfire.

The fact that the fauna of King Island is more closely akin to that of Tasmania suggests that it was attached to Tasmania at a later period than to the mainland.

Frogs

The Victorian Field Naturalists compiled extensive botanical and fauna lists during their 1887 expedition, and it is interesting to read some of their descriptions of the island fauna.

They identified three species of frog and state that "here (Porky Lagoon) as elsewhere on the island, the great green frog keeps up an incessant croaking in the water."

It may be that our visit was too early (or too cold) for us to encounter the Green and Gold Frog. However, while some landowners reported seeing this species, anecdotal evidence from many residents suggests that it has declined considerably over the years. One landowner told us that tadpoles and frogs of any species were almost absent as his children were growing up, but that numbers are again increasing.

There is probably no single reason why this frog has declined on King Island. Populations of this and other frog species fluctuate according to seasonal conditions and can become dormant to survive dry periods. Draining of lagoons and wetlands, weed invasion, and the intensification of farming with a corresponding increase in the use of chemicals, an increase in birds that may feed on frogs and tadpoles and climatic changes are just some

of the possible causes.

Birds

The Victorian Field Naturalists identified 69 species of birds of which 53 are common to both Victoria and Tasmania, 14 are Tasmanian endemics, and two are Victorian species.

Since this 1887 expedition, additional species have been added to the list and several species have become extinct.

As early as 1903, A.G. Campbell states:

"The face of King Island has so altered during the last 15 years that it may not be long before some ferns are driven away or killed out, as a result of the opening up of the land for dairy farming or cattle rearing."

Unfortunately, this was to prove a prophetic statement.

The King Island Emu, a smaller and darker bird than the mainland form and more suited to inhabiting thick bush, seems to have been the first casualty as a direct result of human predation. Commercial sealers, who arrived on the island in 1802, used trained dogs to hunt the bird to supplement their diet. Further extinctions have been less direct.

Grey Goshawk, Glossy Black-Cockatoo, Gang-gang Cockatoo and Forty-spotted Pardalote have disappeared as a result of land clearing and fires.

Several other species are considered Critically endangered including Orange-bellied Parrot, Brown Thornbill and Scrubtit, and vulnerable species include Australasian Bittern, Green Rosella, Yellow Wattlebird and Black Currawong.

I had read several accounts of the bird fauna before this, my first trip to the island. None were encouraging and the sentence that I most remembered: "From a bird's point of view, it is now like an oasis in a desert of pasture." (A.G. Campbell, (1903) referring to an area around Pass River) seemed very pessimistic.

But my first impression was that the island was not as desuded of vegetation as I had feared.

Another encouraging sign was the enthusiasm and commitment of many landowners who in the past ten or so years had taken advantage of various initiatives to fence remnant vegetation.

The aim of my visit was to continue work initiated by Richard Donaghy while bushcare officer.

Funded by the Natural Heritage Trust, the "Biodiversity indicators for sustainable land management" project aims to identify and to prevent further loss of those species that are

particularly vulnerable to land clearing and to assist landowners in the management of their remnant bush.

This not only gave me the opportunity to look at bush remnants on private land not previously surveyed but also the chance to talk to landowners and others who had spent most of their lives on the island. Many of these people had not only witnessed changes in the bird fauna, but also had their own ideas as to why these changes had occurred.

It is always reasonably easy to get information about birds that have increased over the years. Most are conspicuous species that have benefited by the activation of people.

The Australian Magpie was introduced in 1901. It has since spread to become one of the island's most common birds. Likewise, Common Starlings have increased and are posing a real threat to hollow nesting birds such as the King Island subspecies of the Green Rosella.

In the report by Green and McGarvie (1971), Australian Wood Ducks didn't rate a mention and Australian Shelducks were 'rarely encountered on the island'. Both have benefited by the increase in pasture to become a common feature of the landscape. Wild Turkey, Common Pheasant and Purple Swamphens may have increased because more remnant bush is being fenced to exclude stock, thus providing some protection for them when breeding. Forest Ravens, that many locals told me used to be in very small numbers 30 years ago, have probably increased due to an abundance of roadkills.

It is always much more difficult to get anecdotal evidence of those birds that have decreased as these are invariably the smaller birds that are less familiar to most people. Brown Thornbills, Pink Robin and the endemic Scrubtit are now only seen occasionally, and the two extant pardalotes (the Forty-Spotted having already become extinct) were in very small numbers during the surveys. But there was some good news! The small but distinctive Eastern Spinebill, that was believed to be extinct on the island (Garnett 2000) has been seen by a number of reliable observers during the past year. And a further sighting was reported to me since my visit, - a bird was seen just south of Naracoopa on the 30/12/01.

The question I'm most often asked by landowners after a survey is "did you find anything unusual?" And while finding something unusual is always a thrill for those of us with a passion for the

natural world, what I find most satisfying is seeing those species that should still be there, as increasingly they are not.

After all, we should be able to operate in this world without wiping out those species with which we coexist.

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The Magpie and the Frog

by Jim Nelson

As Sarah mentioned in her article, the Australian Magpie was introduced to King Island and is now flourishing. Locals say that in the last few years the Magpie population has increased dramatically. At the same time, *Litoria raniformis* (Green and Gold Frog) seems to be in severe decline for unknown reasons. It occurs to me that the increase in Magpies could well be related to the decline of the frog, given that Magpies are scouring every paddock, and the frog is day active and likes nothing better than basking in the

sun in open areas near dams. Maggies are certainly known to eat frogs, and the decline of the frog may not be such a mystery on King Island.

The Green and Gold frog has disappeared from the entire NW of Tasmania from unknown causes, and as a result has been listed as a vulnerable species. Since the NW with all its dairy farm dams and high rainfall should represent frog heaven for this frog, about the only logical explanation for such a dramatic total disappearance is a disease process. But why would a disease only take out one species of frog? Why did no one notice dead frogs everywhere? Why would a disease be confined to the NW only? There is probably useful anecdotal evidence out there that has not yet been collected, because it seems unlikely that our most prominent frog could entirely disappear from a region without anyone noticing anything.

I understand a recent population of Green and Gold frogs has been found at Woolnorth. Also, the frog is beginning to appear again around Smithton. These sightings could very possibly be related to the large number of frogs travelling to Smithton along with vegetables for processing. Some of these make it to the factory floor alive and are lucky enough not to contribute to the green in frozen green beans. Workers have often released these frogs locally, and this may have effectively created re-introductions.

It could be a very interesting project for a student or a keen herpetology enthusiast to monitor these populations to see if the frog is able to persist and perhaps flourish once again in the NW.

The mystery of the disappearance of the Green and Gold Frog from the entire NW should be considered a worry. Also, the apparent decline on King Island should be ringing alarm bells—it will be a lot easier to understand the decline while it is happening rather than after they disappear. If this were a small cuddly mammal, it would be more likely that we would be worried, but possibly not all that much more likely these days. If we continue to ignore the canary dying in the coalmine we will pay the price of continuing to lose species, and possibly the ultimate price concerning the survival of our own species.



Book Review *Tadpoles of South-Eastern Australia* by Marion Anstis, New Holland pp281, hardback \$60

With just 11 frogs in Tasmania, an amateur enthusiast can soon learn to identify them all by sight and by call. For assistance with this and for life history information, it is hard to go past the CNFN's audio tape (soon to be available in CD) FROGS TASMANIA.

However, when it comes to identifying tadpoles, it can get a bit confusing and some further assistance



would be welcome. This book promises that assistance, and documents 84 of the 89 frogs and tadpoles living in Tasmanian, Victoria and New South Wales. You may not want the information on all those mainland frogs, so you may only want to access this book as a resource through the library. Or you may be a fanatic as frog people often are, and if so you will want to add this book to your own library.

It is interesting that Marion Anstis is a teacher of music in Sydney, and that she has carried out her work on frogs as an amateur enthusiast over many years. Such enthusiasts are consistent contributors to herpetological knowledge in Australia, and anyone with an interest can get out into the environment and make unique observations.

One of our long standing members, Paul Swiatkowski provided Marion with his observations, particularly to do with our endemic tree frog, *Litoria burrowsae*. Several CNFN members have great memories of accompanying Paul to Birchs Inlet in the SW where he virtually re-wrote what was then known about *L. burrowsae*.

Paul and others in the group are still out there looking at frogs and contributing to life history information. For years this activity has gone under the name of the sub-group the Van Dieman's Herpetological Study Group of the CNFN Inc. It is more of a network than a group, but if you are interested in frogs and reptiles, then there is a chance to get out there and get involved with other enthusiasts.