



NEWSLETTER: MARCH 2015

Blairgowrie Back Beach 13th December 2014

Our final field trip for the year was to the southern Peninsula, on the ocean side, following part of the Coastal Walk around Bridgewater Bay – another section of the walk that we visited at Fingal Beach in June 2014.



Photo – Lee Denis

The walk sits atop high calcite cliffs, which look down on wide shore platforms where the swell of the Southern Ocean crashes onto the shore in long rollers .

The vegetation shows the impact of the salt laden winds off the sea, being stunted and 'pruned'.



Cliff-top vegetation.

Photo – Lee Denis

Sand dunes above the cliffs are dominated by Coast Tea-tree *Leptospermum laevigatum* and Coast Beard-heath

Leucopogon parviflorus, with patches of Moonah *Melaleuca lanceolata* and Coastal Wattle *Acacia longifolia*. Sea-box *Alyxia buxifolia*, Seaberry Saltbush *Rhagodia candolleana*, White Correa *Correa alba*, and Cushion Bush *Leucophyta brownii* are also found, with ground covers including *Senecio* sp., *Disphyma*, *Carpobrotus* and *Lepidospermas*.

Birds were relatively few, and included Singing Honeyeater, Superb Fairy-wren, Grey Fantail, and, somewhat surprisingly, Rock Dove. We are used to seeing these birds around towns, but here a pair lived up to their name.

We were intrigued to see several Burrowing Sand Wasps (*Bembix* sp) moving to and fro from their narrow burrows high in the dunes. These wasps appeared to be nesting individually. They capture flies on the wing to feed their young in the nest, although the adults may feed on nectar.



Bembix sp.

Photo: Lee Denis

This is a pleasant, not too arduous walk with some good viewpoints over the coast and some interesting vegetation and wildlife. We walked around the cliff-top, then returned via a parallel track higher up the dunes. It was noticeable that the vegetation along the higher track, closer to the houses, held many more invasive plant species, including Purple Polygala, Bridal Creeper, Boneseed and Cape Ivy.

After lunch we walked another section of the track near Koonyung Beach – apart from some Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters this walk was less interesting, giving no ocean views. - **Lee Denis**

**Jam Jerrup & Stockyard Point
18th January 2015**

Two of our members joined twenty or so members of the Ringwood Field Naturalists for a birdwatching trip to this wader site. The tide was high and the sun was out as we set out on the couple of kilometres walk from Jam Jerrup to Stockyard Point along partially mangrove-lined and partly sandy beaches. A dam on private property on the way held Shelducks, Magpie-larks, and soaring over it, a Swamp Harrier.

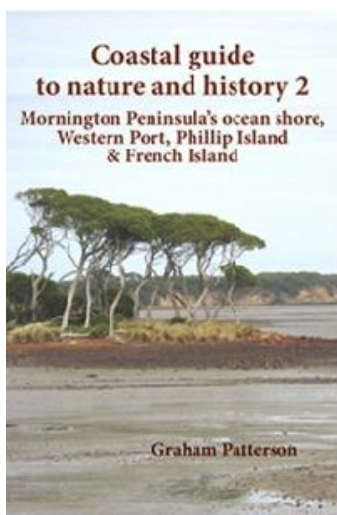
At Stockyard Point there were plenty of Red-necked Avocet, and the more you looked the more Banded Stilts

you noticed among them. Apart from a few Pied Oystercatchers and, further around the shore some Red-necked Stint, that was about the extent of the wading birds. Some Chestnut Teal and Pelicans were swimming just offshore.

Grey Fantails and White-fronted Chats were busy in the samphire, while some people reported Wedge-tailed Eagles far overhead. An Australian hobby visited at lunch time. -
Lee Denis



Red-necked Avocets, Banded Stilts, and Pied Oystercatchers at Stockyard Point – Photo: Lee Denis



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Heather Ducat: *Canada & Alaska* 11th February 2015

This was Heather's 13th presentation of her travels to us, a February tradition we look forward to. Heather and husband Robert travelled by camper van from Vancouver north into Alaska over several months May – July 2011.

The spectacular scenery consists of three mountain ranges (Coast, Alaska and Brooks) separated by narrow, swampy lowlands. The weather is extreme – 2 ½ metres of rain fall per year on the Coast Range, and 30 metres of snow on the mountains. There are thousands of glaciers on the Coast Range, which are advancing because volcanic activity is melting them from below ground. The average top daytime temperature during summer while they were there was 10o, and cooler but not freezing overnight.

The steep mountain ranges, swampy lowlands, and abundance of water make building roads difficult, and part of their journey north was via car ferry over two days through the Inside Passage, which is the regular highway. Many towns along the way had no road access, including Juneau, the capital. These towns lived off salmon fisheries, tourism and mining. Heather and Robert saw mobile floating salmon canneries, which up anchor and move to a new location when needed.

The Russians bought Alaska from the local people in the 1790s for the fur trading opportunities, and later sold it to the Americans for \$7.9million in 1867. The Klondyke gold rush of the 1890s was in Canada, but access was via Alaska, and prospectors trekked to it across the 1000m snowy mountain ranges with great difficulty.

The trees were spectacular too – forests of Western Red Cedar with curtains of lichen; “drunken forests” – black spruces growing on shallow islands – with such shallow

roots they leaned everywhere; balsam poplars, trembling aspen, cottonwood. Because of the short summers some of the wildflowers take 2 years to flower.

The wildlife were concentrated in the lowland corridors between the mountain ranges and there were photos of abundant moose, grizzly and black bears, caribou, mountain goats, bison, arctic squirrels, mountain sheep (four species), beaver, chipmunk and in the sea humpback whales, Stella's sea lions (which are golden brown) and sea otter. The birds were impressive too – bald eagles (fishing for salmon), trumpeter swans, horned puffin, murie and kittiwakes. One bird I had always thought of as a joke turned out to be real – the yellow bellied sapsucker. The local wood frogs have adapted to the severe conditions – they hibernate in leaf litter over winter and literally freeze solid, then defrost next spring without ill effects.

Their route took them to Valdez, site of the 1989 oil spill, and Anchorage, a city built on glacial sediment. The earthquake of 1964 liquefied and then re-set the ground, making it very unstable, a similar experience to Christchurch NZ.

Another famous site was a place called Turn Again, named for Captain Cook who went there looking for the North West Passage and had to turn back. The furthest north they got to was Mt McKinley, the highest peak in North America, and only 300k south of the Arctic Circle. It was completely obscured by cloud, as it usually is, so we have no idea what it looks like!

After the beautiful photos and interesting commentary, I had the urge to book my journey there immediately. - **Judy Smart**

Eastern Treatment Plant 22nd February 2015

Four members joined the regular bird count, courtesy of Mike Carter. Mike noted that bird numbers were relatively low – which suited us because progress was much faster than on previous occasions. We were unable to locate the Tree Sparrows which are known to frequent the site, despite Mike's best efforts, but the birdwatching was rewarding as always.

Highlights for us included over 900 Pink-eared Ducks, over 100 Australasian Shoveller, 50-odd Blue-billed Ducks, and a number of Great Crested Grebe. Waders were relatively few, with a few Reed-necked Stint, and only one each of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Curlew Sandpiper being recorded. There were numbers of Red-necked Avocet, Red-caped Plover and Black-fronted Dotterel. Cisticolas,

Grassbirds and Reed-warblers were recorded.

Bush birds included White-plumed Honeyeaters, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Red-browed Finch (one only recorded), a single Dusky Woodswallow, and seven Australian Pipits.

Raptors included Swamp Harrier, Black-shouldered Kite, Whistling Kite, Australian Hobby, and Collared Sparrowhawk.

A very pleasant day, not too long – we were finished by five pm – and some good bird sightings. Thanks to Mike, Dawn and Dave for allowing us to tag along with the count. **Lee Denis**



Golden-headed Cisticola



Whistling Kite

Photos: Tania Hattingh

Birding at Moorooduc Quarry 2nd March 2015

Peninsula Field Naturalists hosted Birdlife Melbourne members for a visit to Moorooduc Quarry. Diane Tweeddale posted the following report on the Birdlife Blog*.

Blue skies, not too hot and little breeze – how could there be better bird-watching weather? Eighteen assembled and six Peninsula Field Naturalists Club (PFNC) members showed a piece of their own turf to 12 from BirdLife Melbourne. Bett Mitchell led and we ascended the steps listening for bird calls. Not many initially but as our ears and eyes attuned to the hillside our lists grew. Calls from Eastern Yellow Robin were confirmed by views and Brown Thornbill, White-eared Honeyeater and Grey Fantail were seen repeatedly

The area had been burnt many years previously and bare snags rose above the lower bush but they were only occasionally occupied by perching birds, you had to be quick or lucky. Superb Fairy-wrens called from the heavy groundcover and Laughing Kookaburras were loud but seldom seen.

We were told there were over 200 steps up the hillside but our enthusiasm did not run to an exhaustive count. There were certainly a lot of steps but the climbing was easy. The extensive views from the lookout were rewarding and early arrivals counted Black Swan, Great Egret and Little Pied Cormorant on a distant dam. What goes up must come down but the birding was equally good on the descent and two Brown Goshawks, or was it only one, generated lots of interest.

We eventually reached the quarry lake, checking out the sandstone strata and admiring the (feral) waterlilies.

Peregrines had been reported here and there were a couple of encouraging areas of whitewash on the cliffs but initially no raptors. Then an eagle-eyed birder called an adult Peregrine Falcon perching on a cliff. Definitely a contender for bird of the day.



Photo – Diane Peters

Back to the cars for lunch, pausing to photograph the remains of some small animal on a step. (It may have been a young rat but was probably too large to have been an owl pellet.)

Noisy Miners were added to the Grey Butcherbirds and

Australian Magpies of the morning. Golden Whistlers had been vocal but now we finally saw a male in fresh plumage.

On to the picnic ground where we got a quick boost to waterbird numbers. Purple Swamphen, Dusky Moorhen, Magpie-lark and Masked Lapwing were there, plus young Pacific Black Ducks which seemed to be under the control of 'Jemima Puddleduck' who was white and definitely not native.

Walking back we encountered a strange black mottled insect with extravagant antennae, subsequently identified as a Botany Bay Beetle, among the first species named by Joseph Banks.

The final species count was 35; not bad for a quarry site, and we thanked Bett and the PFNC for introducing us to part of their area. - **Diane Tweeddale, coordinator**
BirdLife Melbourne Weekdays Outings

* Thanks to Diane for allowing us to reprint her report.

Diane's original blog can be found at <http://wp.me/p45OKN-leX>. Other blogs can be found at <https://birdlifemelbourne.wordpress.com/>



Photo – Lee Denis

**Jeff Yugovic: Do Ecosystems Need Top Predators?
A Review of Native Predator-Prey Imbalances in SE Australia with reference to tree
decline on the Mornington Peninsula
11th March 2015**

Jeff is an ecologist, Mt Eliza resident, and regular speaker to our Club, most recently on Mud Islands and Salt Marsh Vegetation.

Jeff started with an overview of predator ecology – predators were not always recognized as vital components of ecosystems, but the publication of Stolzenburg's "Where the Wild Things Were: Life, Death and Ecological Wreckage in a Land of Vanishing Predators" has changed this.

In South East Australia the top predators were originally humans, dingoes, Thylacine (replaced by dingoes), Wedge-tailed Eagles, Peregrine Falcon, Powerful Owls and Lace Monitors. Mesopredators were Spot-tailed and Eastern Quoll and Tasmanian Devils. Locally, quolls were exterminated by chicken farmers as recently as the 1920's. The only remaining native predators are the birds of prey, and the rest have been replaced by foxes and cats, which are ground dwelling and do not control possum numbers. It is thought that Tasmanian Devils control foxes in Tasmania by eating fox cubs.

One example of predator imbalance is in North America, where bird populations are crashing because without wolves raccoon numbers are building up. Another unintended consequence of fox control in Western Australia is leading to greater feral cat numbers, threatening small native species.

Native herbivores – koalas, brush tail and ringtail possums, wallabies and kangaroos, without predators to control them, can build up their numbers, over-graze their food supply, and then starve. This scenario has happened on the Great Ocean Rd this month, with starving koalas having to be culled. Koala numbers have to be controlled by contraception in other areas of Victoria, including French Island.

The Northern Mornington Peninsula, in particular Mt Eliza and surrounds, has an epidemic of eucalypt tree death, particularly local species Swamp Gum and Peppermint. A recent study by Ecology Australia concluded that ringtail possum browsing is responsible for much tree death. How to tell whether ringtail possums are responsible for tree decline? Brushtail possums eat mature leaves, but ringtails eat new shoots, and do not eat from lower or hanging branches, so affected trees will have healthy lower branches, and bare upper branches.

Three factors are needed for tree decline – susceptible Eucalypt species such as Swamp Gum; biomass build up, which favours ringtails, as it provides shelter and they do not need to travel on the ground; and low predator pressure. In Baden Powell Reserve pittosporums were removed and the Eucalypts' health improved.

Management approaches suggested by Jeff:

- Biomass reduction (this would also benefit ground flora diversity)
- Protect native predators such as birds of prey

- Re-introduction of native predators such as dingoes is impractical
- Protective banding of affected trees is having good results, as long as trees are protected before near-death. It is necessary to remove connecting trees and shrubs (as these provide a possum highway), and band with clear plastic sheeting, joined with self-tapping screws. The Shire of Mornington and private

landowners are both banding trees, as the tree decline is alarming residents.

Some MEAFEC (Mt Eliza Association for Environmental Care) members concerned about tree decline attended the meeting to hear Jeff's presentation. An extended version of Jeff's talk is published in the Victorian Naturalist February 2015 edition. - **Judy Smart**

French Island Excursion 14th March 2015

There had been a debate about where to go on French Island – Tortoise Head was considered, but thought to be too difficult, so instead we walked towards Fairhaven Camp along the west coast of French Island. We were pleased to have four newer members with us – Trevor and daughter Elisa, and Angus and Ruth Mitchell, who live in Albury most of the time.



Photo – Diane Peters

We walked up the track between the Coast Rd and the beach, then along the beach until our lunch stop. It turned out to be the wrong tide – low instead of high – so the birds were a bit ordinary, but we did see red-capped plovers and red-necked stints. See list attached for full list.

We walked back to the ferry on the track on the other side of the Coast Rd, hoping to see koalas, but no luck. On the other hand, there were no mosquitoes either! It was pretty warm so we were glad to call into the refurbished Eco Inn for a cool drink.

We met a walking group who spent the day going to Tortoise Head, and they reported back that it took them 1 ½ hours each way, the views were panoramic, and they only saw one large snake. So maybe next time we will try our luck there, but not in Spring time. - **Judy Smart**



Photo – Diane Peters

Bird List for French Island 14 March 2015	
Black Swan	Pacific Gull
Pacific Black Duck	Silver Gull
Little Pied Cormorant	Common Bronzewing
Australian Pelican	Brown Thornbill
White-faced Heron	New Holland Honeyeater
Great Egret	Eastern Spinebill
Australian White Ibis	Eastern Yellow Robin
Purple Swamphen	Grey Fantail
Red-necked Stint	Australian Magpie
Red-capped Plover	Welcome Swallow
Masked Lapwing	

**Beautiful Cockroach (*Austral ellipsoidion*)
A contribution from Roger Standen**

A small insect on a lemon tree in my backyard drew my attention on September 22, 2014 but I was ignorant of what it was. Taking a photo gave me a record to compare in my search for an identification. The tree had flowers at this time.



By the 26th October the same (or one of the original's siblings) was now larger and the fruit had set. By this time I had an ID that this was an instar of the Beautiful Cockroach.

I finally could get a positive identification when I saw the adult on November 26. Both when an adult and while the instars were present the insect was active during the day, running away rapidly whenever it saw me unless I approached or remained very still.



Photos show the medium and larger instars plus the adult.

(All photos by Roger Standen)

Peninsula Field Naturalists Club Inc

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month with a field trip the following Saturday. Further information and current Programme of Activities can be found at our website.

President:
Mrs Pat Gomm
9789 8121

Treasurer:
Ms Linda Edwards
95846790

All correspondence to
Secretary
Mrs Judy Smart
51 Wimborne Ave
Mt Eliza 3930
mandjsmart@gmail.com

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Newsletter edited by Lee Denis

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