Australian Naturalists Network October 2014

In October The Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club hosted a major Australian get-together of naturalists from all parts of the continent. Several dozen naturalists from dozens of clubs attended, with outings covering the full range of south-eastern Tasmanian habitats. Huge thanks to the c. 35 Field Nats who played some role in putting the event together and especially to our steering committee of five - Annabel Carle, Anna McEldowney, Genevieve Gates, Margaret Warren and Geoff Carle. An enormous amount of work went into the success of this event and the feedback has been fantastic.

We arranged the following speakers:

- Keith Corbett - Geology
- Phil Collier - Adaptive reserve management
- Mark Wapstra - *Thismia*
- Mike Driessen - Tasmanian fauna
- Eric Woehler - Shorebirds
- Sarah Lloyd - Slime moulds – including book launch
- Lisa Cawthen - Bats
- Simon Grove - Intertidal life
- Kevin Bonham - Snails
- Lisa Gershwin - Jjellyfish blooms.
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There was also a night for naturalists from visiting clubs to prepare small talks.

Next ANN will be around Perth, WA in 2016.

We received enough reporting and photos from the outings from bus guides and others to fill a small book! This report is a condensed version, with a few selected photos, of the event. Thanks are due to each of the participants for their reports of excursions and events.

Kevin Bonham

Attendees at the ANN October 2014

Photo: Pam Ghiradi

Tasmanian Bushland Garden and Calverts Lagoon

At the 22 ha Bushland Garden, Keith outlined the history and philosophy of the project, which has been entirely built by volunteers to showcase the native flora of the region. Construction took ten years, with the official opening in 2010. The Display Gardens were very colourful, and Keith and Sib pointed out many of their favourite plants in the diverse collection covering many different communities. The old bluestone quarry, with its pond, waterfall and sculptures, was another highlight.

A small group of bird enthusiasts accompanied Denis Abbott down the White Gum Valley walk, which has a rich bird population, and was lucky enough to see the newly arrived pair of satin flycatchers.

A collection of donations was taken up to support the gardens as the group departed.

Visiting the Bushland Garden

Photo: John Abbott

The visit to Calverts Lagoon, on the South Arm Peninsula, was marked by light showers and some nice small wildflowers, including several orchids. The bird count was down, however, as the lagoon has nearly dried up in recent times as a consequence of climate change.

Keith and Sib Corbett

Barred-tail godwits seen at Marion Bay

Photo: Simon Grove

Styx Valley and Russell Falls

The drive along the quiet forestry roads, once busy with log-trucks, was an opportunity to talk geology, deadwoodology, World Heritage values, environmentalism and the starkly contrasting disturbance ecologies of rainforest and eucalypt forest.

As we parked the big buses near the start of the Big Trees Walk, it was noticed that Bus 1 had a flat front tyre. This meant a long day's work ahead for driver Alan, who had to do the hard yakka of extracting the spare, jacking up the bus (with a small jack), and replacing the tyre himself. Meanwhile, naturalists enjoyed the wonderful spectacle of the giant *Eucalyptus regnans* towering 85 m or more over the lush surrounding rainforest, with myrtle beech, sassafras, celery-top pines and *Dicksonia antarctica*. We considered how this phenomenon ('mixed forest') can only be a passing phase in the life of the forest, which will either revert to eucalypt regrowth following the next wildfire or will progress to pure rainforest in the absence of fire. The groups swapped over to also do the short walk into the Styx River, where the dark tannin-stained water rippled over gravel bars through the spreading rainforest.

A highlight for a small number of naturalists was spotting – and photographing – a pink robin that had been flitting through the undergrowth beside the river.

After lunch [the other bus] then headed out to Russell Falls. Though signposts billed this as a ten-minute walk, naturalists managed to fill a good hour-and-a-half investigating trackside logs, leaf-litter, bryophytes and orchids or marvelling at the stands of regrowth *Eucalyptus viminalis* (white-gums to Tasmanians, manna-gums to mainlanders). Despite low flows in the river, the falls themselves were as beautiful and impressive as ever.

The other group got to spend more time with the giant trees of the Styx (see John's note below) while Alan continued his Herculean efforts to fix the tyre.

Sadly, by the time this group arrived at the Mount Field visitor centre, there was insufficient time to walk the Russell Falls circuit given the tight deadline for that evening's dinner.

Nevertheless it was a great day out, experiencing some of our most impressive forests on the fringes of the rugged South-West.

Simon Grove, Keith & Sib Corbett

Note from John

We had extra time in bright sunshine on the banks of Styx River. The vegetation along the river is rainforest dominated by Myrtle Beech. Myrtle Orange Fungus *Cyttaria gunni* grows only on Myrtle Beech and is a traditional Aboriginal food. The endemic Tasmanian Thornbill was seen near the river.

John Gregurke

Myrtle Beech orange fungus

Photo: John Abbott

Bruny Island Excursion

Most of the group climbed the long flight of steps to the lookout where the clear calm conditions afforded a wonderful panoramic vista. Then on to Adventure Bay where we enjoyed a delicious picnic lunch before walking out to Grass Point. Unfortunately, apart from a couple of sun orchids, there was not much to see in the way of bird life or plants. Some green rosellas feeding nearby obligingly posed for photos which delighted many people in the group who had never seen this species before.

In all the trip was rather rushed due to the ferry timetable and some people were disappointed they didnt see any Forty Spotted Pardalotes, however, the warm sunny weather showed Bruny at its best and many of the participants intend returning at another time.

Margaret Warren

Field Nats at the Neck at Bruny

Photo: John Abbott

Tasman Peninsula

First taken to the Tasman Arch, most ANN participants after viewing the Arch chose to walk to Devils Kitchen and the scenic view point. Progress along the track was leisurely as a number of wild flowers were in peak bloom and time was required to compose and frame shots. A few naturalists however, on hearing that a regeneration burn had occurred seven months earlier further along the track decided to walk to Patersons Arch to see whether growth and flowering of orchids had been stimulated. However only epicormic bud break eucalypts were observed.

Bird sightings in the vicinity of Tasman Arch were notably few. A Grey Fantail, a single Fairy-wren, an unidentified Bronzewing pigeon and a solitary New Holland Honeyeater were spotted. Even a small flock of gannets normally resident in the area and generally sighted spearing into the sea close to the Devils Kitchen were absent. If it had not been for the pair of Grey Shrike-thrushes which entertained us by their flitting among the trees near Tasman Arch and calling to one another it would have been an exceptionally quiet morning for bird sightings.

Sue Smillie

Dinner time at The Lea

Photo: Geoff Carle

Tessellated Pavement Intertidal Exploration

The departure of the first bus from our lunch spot in the Community Hall on the Narrow Neck was delayed while participants watched a seal frolicking in the shallows of Eaglehawk Bay.

The 'star' feature that we hoped to find on the rock platform was the small yellow endangered live-bearing seastar, *Parvulastra vivipara.* This foreshore is the location of one of only four known populations in southern Tasmania (and the world).

Don Hird helped explain how to identify organisms to those people on the outer edge of the rock platform while Jane helped others on the inshore part of the platform. It didn't take us long to find the first small yellow seastar, to everyone's delight. Quite a good population was found in various crevices and pools high on the rock platform, leading to the comment that perhaps they were not threatened at all. However, there are so few populations that are now quite isolated from each other that any threat to any one population poses a danger to the survival of the species.

Live bearing seastar, Parvulastra vivipara

Photo: Jane Elek

Other intertidal species were found: a bubble anemone with blue-grey 'bubbles' on its column, *Phlyctenanthus australis*, swimming anemone, *Phlyctenanthus tuberculosa*, floating in a pool looking like a sack of baked beans, the more common red waratah, *Actinia tenebrosa*, and yellow-striped anemones, *Anthothoe albocincta.*

Some shallow pools contained siphon shells, *Siphonaria diemenensis* with their yellow egg spirals attached nearby.

A variety of other barnacles, snails and bivalves (mainly small mussels) were on the rocks inshore while out on the edge of the platform some interesting encrustations were seen, probably encrusting coralline alga.

The fossils in the Permian mudstone were also a popular subject matter. The time passed all too quickly before we had to reboard the buses and head for home.

Jane Elek

Hartz Mountains

Betty Brettingham-Moore performed a catering miracle and produced buns and plenty of hot water for coffee for morning tea which was much appreciated by everyone.

One group, led by Amanda, went out to Lake Esperance/ Ladies Tarn and a couple of people even made it to the Hartz Saddle before returning.

The more energetic also walked out to Lake Osborne and back down the road to visit Arve Falls. Others walked out to Lake Osborne with plenty of time to inspect the alpine vegetation, read the interpretation signs and photograph the scenery and the plants.

Euphrasia gibbsiae

Photo: Annabel Carle

The waratah (*Telopea truncata*) was in bud but the flowering *Euphrasia* beside the track excited the photographers. For some it was their first glimpse of one of our larger endemic alpine plants. The guides were kept on their toes trying to identify the alpine plants!

Truganinia bauerae

Photo: Geoff Carle

A wedge-tail eagle was seen by some near Lake Osborne and unidentified frogs were calling. Kevin found a Lake Osborne semi slug which had been the unsuccessful object of a previous TFN trip to the area and Geoff photographed a bauera grasshopper which has only been recorded a couple of times before.

On the return trip one bus had a detour to see the Big Tree. The track was closed but we still managed to find a lookout with an impressive view into a deep gully with huge eucalypts, manferns, a stand of sassafras and a wonderful eye-level view of *Clematis aristata*. On the trip back a couple of platypus were sighted in the river at Geeveston and one of our visitors reported seeing a sea eagle drop down into the Huon River and emerge with a fish in its claws.

Anna McEldowney

Lake Osborne semi-slug

Photo: Simon Grove

Our visitors enjoyed the brief stopover at Geeveston where they explored the Forest and Heritage Centre. Those of us who went to Ladies Tarn and Lake Esperance enjoyed the vistas from the gain in height looking towards Hartz Peak and Mt Snowy, then back at the Devils Backbone. Plant communities quite different from Lake Osborne include Alpine sedgeland, Heath and Bolster Heath. Mosaic cushion plants and the tiny, carnivorous *Drosera arcturi,* intrigued members of the group. *Dracophyllum minimum* and *Donatia novae-zelandiae* are the predominant cushion plants found around these lakes, unfortunately not in flower till December/January.

Amanda Thomson

Lunch at Lake Osborne

Photo: Geoff Carle

Dr Lisa Cawthen: 'Unlocking the secret world of Tasmanian Bats'

Lisa entertained us with a wealth of information on one of our most overlooked and under-appreciated groups of mammals - the microbats. She spoke about their peculiarities, ecosystem functions, threats and declines, and her research. Fossil records of bats go back 50 million years. Tasmanian bats are mainly insectivorous (but also carnivorous and sagivorous).

Lisa also demonstrated nicely the typical size of a microbat by presenting us with a mummified native little

forest bat. After the talk, Lisa took us for a tour to find bats using bat detectors. The Echo-Meter Touch is about the size of a large USB stick and plugs into a USB-port of an ipad or iphone. It records and visually graphs simultaneously the sonogram of the recorded bat and can do that for multiple species at a time.

Unfortunately, due the cool night, we heard and saw only one bat, a southern forest bat. However Lisa had recently recorded bats elsewhere with her Echo-meter and was able to demonstrate to us the calls and sonograms of some other Tasmanian species.

Anke Frank

Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary

At Bonorong Sanctuary we were greeted by the manager Greg Irons. After giving us a quick introduction to this unique wildlife rescue/ rearing and devil breeding (and 'retiring') sanctuary, we enjoyed a presentation by a recently graduated honours student from UTas who told us all about her work on devils and quolls in north western Tasmania. This included stories about the challenges of conducting fieldwork in remote country and sharing her funniest and most amazing remote wildlife camera pictures.

After that we were taken on a tour by a guide who introduced us to almost 1 year old wombat 'Tina Turner' (named due to a head injury when she arrived which caused her to run in circles).

Next we were introduced to several devils who showed us their appetite for and appreciation to chunks of chicken. We learned fascinating facts of devils and got lots of question time. The morning group also met and patted Louise the Koala while the afternoon group fed the Tasmanian subspecies of Eastern Grey Kangaroos.

Further highlights included active echidnas, a wild Tawny frogmouth perfectly mimicking a branch of a tree right in front of our lunch spot – and for some guests also the souvenirs at the Bonorong Shop.

Anke Frank

An evening talk at ANN

Photo: Geoff Carle

Mawson's Hut and Islands to Ice Exhibition

Mawson's Hut on the Hobart waterfront includes a replica of the original Antarctic lodgings of Sir Douglas Mawson's team, with an outer section in which we could watch videos and read full biographies of the men who worked in these harsh conditions. I was impressed by the dedication shown in bringing not just the main actors of the Mawson drama but also other Antarctic pioneers to life. The TMAG Islands to Ice exhibition encompasses the natural and human history of both sub-Antarctic islands and the Antarctic.

A video theatre where 3D recreations of historic photos and early videos of Antarctic bases and penguins could be viewed and was a good place for naturalists to sit down and relax. An excellent exhibition.

Kevin Bonham

Marion Bay

The group split into two main parties, with one heading first to the exposed sandy beach and foredunes while the other walked along the sheltered muddy lagoon shoreline to Porpoise Hole.

Those in the group led by Simon focused particularly on the molluscs and other invertebrate denizens of the seashore. The sandy beach at Marion Bay is always very hit-and-miss for seashells, and the day of our visit was more miss than hit. Interstate visitors were nevertheless impressed with the sheer abundance of one particular species, until they learnt, from its name – New Zealand screw-shell – that it was a feral impostor.

The lagoon shoreline proved more productive, with – for those prepared to get down on their hands and knees among the beached seagrass – drifts of creepers and other species small enough to almost count as micromolluscs, as well as the moulted exoskeletons of numerous crabs.

Meanwhile, Vern shared his extensive local knowledge of birds and other wildlife with the other group. While most birds kept their distance and were best viewed through binoculars, a number of characteristic coastal species were eventually tallied, including Pacific and kelp gulls, pied and sooty oystercatchers, red-necked stints, white-faced chats, swans, pelicans, crested and Caspian terns.

A highlight of the beach-walk for both groups was a party of bar-tailed godwits avidly probing the wet sand along the strandline, no doubt newly arrived from their Arctic summering grounds and seemingly oblivious of our presence.

An intrepid few naturalists ventured out towards the sandy point at the mouth of Blackman Bay and were rewarded with sightings of some of Marion Bay's hooded plovers. Others spotted a dead echidna on a sand-bar not far from the water's edge.

Amanda Thomson and Simon Grove

Mount Wellington

We convinced everyone that conditions on 'the mountain' [misty rain] would be atmospheric and the wet bark of the snow gums would be stunning and so equipped with their wet weather gear they set off with Don and Anke as guides to meet Mark Hovenden from the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Tasmania at The Springs on Mount Wellington.

The more energetic ones walked up from Fern Tree to The Springs while everyone else divided into two groups to either walk out to Sphinx Rock and admire the beautiful ferns and lichens on the scree slopes (but not the view this day) or drive to the summit with Mark, a plant ecologist, to explore the specialised vegetation and admire those snow gums (*Eucalyptus coccifera*) and the *Ozothamnus ledifolius* which thrives on the mountain.

Mark discussed the effect of high light levels and low temperatures on the alpine vegetation, and how the increased levels of red pigment in these plants creates protection from the harsh conditions.

A walk in misty weather on Mt Wellington

Photo: John Abbott

At the Chalet Hut creek below the summit everyone was interested to find *Anaspides tasmaniae,* a small freshwater mountain shrimp which has remained more or less unchanged for 250 million years.

Many thanks to Mark for coming out to help show our visitors why Hobart's Mount Wellington is so special.

Anna McEldowney

I am not sure about the biggest highlight here: the spectacular flowering with cheese and mountain berries bearing fruit and flowers simultaneously, *Richea dracophylla*, Needle Bush (*Hakea lissosperma*) and Daisy Bush (*Olearia* sp.) reflecting the white lichens on the boulders, the yellow flowers of the peas and Rigid Candlebushes (*Richea sprengeloides*), the eucalypt stems shining in vivid greens, reds and yellows from the rain, the tiny orchid that some trained naturalists' eyes spotted at our feet (that I sadly missed) ... or the fire that our dear O'Driscoll's coach driver had prepared for us in the hut at the Springs for our return so we had somewhere not only dry but warm for our lunch. It certainly was not the missing views from Sphinx Rock or the rock climbers we heard climbing underneath the ledge causing some of the trees at the edge of the rock to swing precariously at times.

On the summit we were exposed to typical "Macquarie Island weather" (i.e. as mimicked in the Macquarie Island glasshouse in the Botanic Gardens) at a steady, blowy, heavy drizzle at 4 degrees. Nevertheless, Antarctica-experienced Mark gave a fantastic, cheerful and fascinating tour. He explained why the Australian Alpine Flora is different from other alpine environments lacking alpine meadows, and how plants survive in this extreme environment without being covered in snow for extensive periods.

On the way back to the Springs, Mark explained his research on fire effects on vegetation which he has been monitoring for over a decade on Mount Wellington.

Anke Frank

Helena Gum Moth, common at The Lea

Returning from an excursion

Both Photos: Geoff Carle