

# **THE FIELD NATURALIST**

NEWSLETTER NO. 139: AUTUMN, 2020

ALBURY-WODONGA FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB INC.  
Reg. No. A0023416K



**Royal Spoonbill,  
Wonga Wetlands  
(J Shepherd)**



**Acacia Horned Treehoppers,  
Wangaratta Wetlands (D Andrews)**



**Striped Greenhoods,  
Chiltern Mt Pilot NP  
(P Spencer)**



**Yellow-bellied Water Skink,  
Wangaratta Wetlands (P Seely)**

## **Autumn 'Lockdown' Issue, 2020:**

	Page
Wangaratta Wetlands	2
Casemoths	4
Biological control of cacti	4
Staying at Home!	6
Member Observations	7
Magazine Track Mushrooms	9
Chiltern Mt Pilot NP	10
'Winter Visitors'	12

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[As restrictions ease, stay tuned for possible updates to the schedule. Meanwhile maintain ongoing COVID-19 controls & stay safe - perhaps our environment will have even benefited from a rest period? My thanks to members for their assistance with this edition ☺]

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**WANGARATTA WETLANDS**

**8<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

9 members attended this outing in Wangaratta in pleasant autumn weather. The morning was spent at Mullinmur wetlands beside the Ovens River at the northern end of Phillipson Street. These wetlands have undergone major works and revegetation and are the site of ongoing work including scientific studies. We were greeted by an outbreak of Radar Beetles (*Rhipicerca femorata*) which are truly spectacular on close-up and the birdlife was plentiful with Azure Kingfishers and Brown Treecreepers amongst the notables.



Azure Kingfisher (P Seely)



Radar Beetle in flight (P Spencer)

The wetlands are a River Red-gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) floodplain with an understorey of Silver Wattle (*Acacia dealbata*) with the revegetation program re-introducing many shrubs including Blackwood (*A. melanoxylon*), Golden Wattle (*A. pycnantha*), Rough-barked Honey-Myrtle (*Melaleuca parvistaminea*), River Teatree (*Callistemon sieberi*) and Sweet Bursaria (*Bursaria spinosa subsp. spinosa*). No mammals were sighted but reptiles such as a long-necked river turtle and a Yellow-bellied Water Skink were seen and, in the insect group, along with the above beetles, Acacia-horned Treehoppers (*Sextilius virescens*) 5mm long were found on a Silver Wattle.

Fungi seen included the Horse-dung Fungus (*Pisolithus arhizus*) and Earthball Fungi (*Scleroderm sp*). There was also the Purple Loose-strife, a yellow Dragonfly (probably a Yellow-winged Darter) and a Dainty Swallow-tail butterfly passed by. Amongst a variety of nestboxes we found the bat nestboxes of interest.

Acacia-horned Treehoppers\* (R Andrews)

\* Note the white patches which are surplus sugar secretions providing food for ants (also present). The ants in turn protect the membracids from predators.





Water Strider, alias Pond Skimmer (P Spencer)



Yellow-winged Darter? (R Andrews)

The afternoon was spent at Kaluna Park, a formerly heavy grazed River Red-gum floodplain alongside the King River. We entered via the Oxley Flats Rd just over the King River bridge. The site has many wonderful, 'old growth' River Red-gums, with hollows and burls a feature.

There were some Apple Box trees but the understory was sparse and the groundcover dominated with weeds. A highlight was watching a casemoth larva climbing a tree trunk but the insect life was still very quiet, as was the bird life with a Rufous Whistler, White-browed Scrubwren and a White-throated Gerygone amongst those seen.



Rufous Whistler (P Seely)



White-browed Scrubwren (P Spencer)

It was nice to walk on green grass following recent heavy rain and hopefully we are seeing the autumn break and end of the 2 year drought.

**Birdlist Wangaratta Wetlands (P Seely)**

Azure Kingfisher	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Black Duck	Superb Fairy-wren
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	Weebill
Brown Treecreeper	Western Gerygone
Great Cormorant	White Ibis
Grey Fantail	White-browed Scrubwren
Grey Shrike-thrush	White-plumed Honeyeater
Kookaburra	White-throated Gerygone
Little-pied Cormorant	White-throated Treecreeper
Magpie	Willie Wagtail
Magpie Lark	Wood Duck
Red-browed Finch	Yellow Rosella
Rufous Whistler	
<b>Total = 25</b>	

**Dick Andrews and N Blair**

## CASEMOTHS (Psychidae)

The sighting of a Saunders Casemoth at Kaluna Park inspired Phillip to source some details on this interesting insect group. The following is a combined summary from Dr D. F. Waterhouse's contribution to Australia's Wildlife Heritage series (Paul Hamlyn) and *Insects of South-Eastern Australia* (Roger Farrow, 2016).

The casemoth begins to use silk from the time it hatches and ultimately constructs the durable silk bag home for which it is named. The type of case is diagnostic for the species and the wingless female of many species will never emerge from this 'case'.

As the caterpillar grows it builds on its shelter and eventually climbs off the ground so that its shelter can be extended into a bag that is able to hang down while the caterpillar holds on with its front teeth. Most species cover the bag with a variety of natural materials for reinforcement, camouflage and protection from predators. The attachment of sticks is an ingenious operation generally carried out at night. First the stick needs to be cut to size and temporarily attached near the bag opening. From inside, the caterpillar cuts a hole, protrudes its head out and binds the stick to the desired new location while simultaneously sealing the hole. For the Saunders casemoth (the largest and most common in Australia) this process takes about 2 hours.

The casemoth chrysalis stage can last up to 8 months and both sexes pupate head downward. The moth, which may have a life-span of a few years, is free-flying for only days or weeks. If the female emerges, mating occurs soon after. In species where she does not emerge, mating takes place within the case without either of the pair seeing each other. (Hence the family name Psychidae, after the Greek goddess Psyche who Cupid was forbidden to visit except at night, unseen and unrecognized.)

Both sexes die shortly after mating. After hatching, the tiny caterpillars spin a fine silk thread and lower themselves to the ground.

### Gail Steed (with thanks to Phillip Seely)



Saunders Casemoth making its way up a tree at Kaluna Park (Richard Andrews)

## BIOLOGICAL CONTROL OF AN INVASIVE CACTUS IN CHILTERN MT PILOT NATIONAL PARK

Two species of cacti are found in Chiltern Mt Pilot National Park, both natives of central and South America. Common Prickly Pear (*Opuntia stricta*) has been established for many years especially in the rocky granite soils along the Woolshed Valley and around Eldorado. It is identified by its more or less oval cladodes (the fleshy 'leaves' with spines), is usually less than 1 metre high, and is reasonably well controlled by cochineal beetles chewing away from the inside. Some hill-slopes which were smothered in Prickly Pear 30 years ago have very few today - although new plants are always popping up in areas we haven't seen them before.

However a new problem plant appearing more and more in the Park is Wheel Cactus (*Opuntia robusta*), which can be identified by its large round cladodes, viciously long spines, and larger size - up to 3 metres high. Recently we have identified a number of examples of Wheel Cactus off the far-western end of Old Coach Road, north of Eldorado - in late 2019 we removed as many flowers from these plants as we could find, which will at least stop those plants spreading seeds this year.

Luckily we have another weapon in our arsenal against this new pest. In early 2019 our Park Ranger Hannah Clemen received a shipment of cochineal beetles through Rae Kwong at Rutherglen Research Station – these beetles specialize in eating Wheel Cactus rather than Prickly Pear (the beetles are very picky in their taste) – these were cosseted in a warm location over last winter feeding on Wheel Cactus cladodes at Park headquarters in Beechworth. In February 2020 a group of us pinned these segments to some of the large plants we had found in the Park, hoping the beetles would crawl out and start chomping on our plants.

To our delight, on visiting plants in the last month, there has been an excellent take-up of beetles from pinned segments to living plants. This gives us lots of hope that this strain of cochineal beetle will be able to establish control over this new pest. We have GPSed all the plants we have found, so hopefully we can visit them and pin infected cladodes to them in the next few months. We are hopeful that this will be a powerful means of at least controlling, if not eliminating this pest plant!

If anyone is interested in assisting in this program they can contact Mick Webster ([websterm@netc.net.au](mailto:websterm@netc.net.au)) or keep an eye on the Friends Facebook page.



Flowering Wheel Cactus (Nov 2019)



Prickly Pear with Cochineal Beetles inside (white fluff)



Wheel Cactus segments with beetles inside.  
(pinned to living plants, Feb 2020)



Wheel cactus invaded by beetles April 2020

**Mick Webster**, for Friends of Chiltern Mt Pilot National Park.

Staying at home [in Albury] may have some drawbacks but activity around the garden with a camera can be rewarding. A variety of butterflies and moths were found on the Lantana and Centranthus flowers during March and April.

The most common butterflies were Caper White, Australian Painted Lady, Cabbage White, Meadow Argus, Common Blue and Greenish Grass- Dart. Less common were Dainty Swallowtail, White Migrant and Lemon Migrant.

Day-flying Mistletoe Moths and Grapevine Moths were seen with Blue-banded Bees, Honey Bees and flies also observed.

[And Phillip managed to photograph and identify them...]



Caper White (*Belenois java*)



Australian Painted Lady (*Vanessa kershawi*)



Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*)



Meadow Argus (*Junonia orithya*)



Common Grass-blue (*Zizina labridus*)



Greenish Grass-dart (*Ocybadistes walkeri*)



Dainty Swallowtail (*Papilio anactus*)



Lemon Migrant (*Catopsilia pomona*)



Mistletoe Moth (*Comocrus behrii*)



Grapevine Day Moth (*Phalaenoides glyciniae*)

### Phillip Seely

#### MORE MEMBER OBSERVATIONS...

Our wonderful autumn weather plus the time to look has triggered much member activity. Thank you to everyone for these photos & information.



Wedge-Tailed Eagle and its nest with Table Top in the background. The nest has been added to incrementally, building upwards over many years – an amazing structure (J Shepherd)



Caper White Butterfly and close up of newly laid eggs (P Spencer).  
[Perhaps not clear here but the eggs can be seen as fluted in the original photo]



A series showing the eggs being deposited (P Spencer)  
[The plant is a Washington Navel Orange tree]



Meadow Argus sipping nectar (P Spencer)



'Disturbed' Eastern Banjo Frog (P Spencer)  
[so not all fauna has had a quieter life in Lockdown?]



Mantid visitor (D Bird)



Unidentified Polydesmid Millipede - Mt Granya NP (G Steed)

**MAGAZINE TRACK (MT GRANYA NP) MUSHROOMS AND MORE....**

The easing of restrictions saw me (like many others) shooting out of the house into the bush. I wanted to catch some mushrooms before they finished for the season, so headed to the reliable Magazine Track area (Mt Granya NP) with a cut lunch and flask. It was drier than at our previous visits - probably a good thing for me and my car, given how deeply rutted the track was. However, once in the bush, many of the usual specimens could be found. Definitely less on display but plenty to see & a couple of new sightings for me. The day was still & perfect but birds were noticeably quiet. A lunch break found me joined by the only birds I recall - a Scarlet Robin, Grey Fantail & Scrubwren, but perhaps I had my head too far down to notice. Fungi seen included Spectacular Rustgill, Scarlet Bracket Fungus, Rosette fungus, Rooting Shank, Earth Star, Parasol Mushroom, Honey Fungus, Russula sp., Clitocybe sp., Amanita spp., and Psilocybe sp. as seen last year. I saw very few Mycena sp. and no Boletes or Cortinarius sp. this time. I have included photos of 'new' (for me) and unidentified mushrooms in the hope someone may have some suggestions....



*Agaricus sp (austrovinaceus?)*



Mazegills (*Hexagonia vesparia*) – a woody, pore-forming fungus saprophytic on dead & dying Eucalypts



Unidentified, very small gilled mushroom (*Mycena sp?*).



After that excitement I went to visit to Mt Pilot, unexpectedly coming across a pretty, small yellow mushroom in a damp mossy area along the path to Mt Pilot summit. It was actually a creamy, buttery colour - brighter than the photos appear. (*Cystoderma* sp perhaps?)

A night outing followed to see the luminescent *Omphalotus nidiformis* before the rain ended their display.



Daytime appearance of *Omphalotus nidiformis* (D Bird).

At night they appear as eerie, white-glowing 'blobs' in the darkness – hence the name Ghost Fungus. The luminescence is due to a chemical reaction between oxygen and fungal enzymes (principally those that catalyze biosynthesis of luciferin and the luciferase).

I am now happily ready for Winter!

## CHILTERN MT PILOT NP

30<sup>th</sup> May 2020

This unscheduled Autumn outing was arranged for us at short notice by Veronica – I think she even chose the weather. The morning was spent around Honeyeater Picnic Ground. A few gilled fungi were seen but they were mainly on their way out or had been pulled out of the ground. Some orchids such as the Inland Red-tip Greenhood (*Pterostylis rubescens*) were finished (or eaten) but we spotted good specimens of the Large Autumn Greenhood (*Pterostylis* sp aff *revoluta*), Striped Greenhoods (*P. striata*) – see cover photo by P Spencer - and some Large Mosquito Orchids (*Acianthus exsertus*).



Fairy Stool mushroom (*Coltricia cinnamomea*) Growing on underground wood & showing the radial surface hairs



Large Mosquito Orchid (*P. Spencer*), with close-up of heart-shaped leaf and purplish underside

Birds were heard but not too many showed themselves for photographs. However the very handsome Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters (*Lichenostomus melanops*) seemed to be everywhere.

After an early lunch, Jan & Jenny took us to the Andersons Track/ Depot Rd area which was new to many of us and an excellent spot; a highlight was a sighting of Turquoise Parrots, then from here we headed home.



View towards Andersons Track from Depot Rd

Bitter Cryptandra (buds)

I decided to head back down Riley's Rd to photograph the budding Bitter Cryptandra (*C. amara*). En-route I was lucky enough to be watching a small group of White-browed Babblers (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*) cavorting about, when a Yellow-footed Antichinus (*A. flavipes*) appeared on the stump behind them; a lovely end to an enjoyable day - thank you Veronica.

## A mushroom-hunters birdlist (G Steed)

Honeyeater Picnic Ground area & Andersons Track; Fine still & warm. (30/05/20)	
Brown Treecreeper	Turquoise Parrot
Flame Robin (male & female)	Yellow-tufted Honeyeater
Fuscous Honeyeater	White-naped Honeyeater
Pied Currawong	White-plumed Honeyeater
Mistletoe Bird	White-winged Chough
Striated Pardalote	Willy Wag-tail
<b>Total = 12</b>	

### G Steed

#### **WINTER VISITORS** by *May Pagenstecher\**

[\*May passed away in 2013 and had been an active and passionate field naturalist & observer. Some of her other work has been previously published in this newsletter, with permission kindly provided by her niece Stephanie Hanckel . ....this article seemed timely]

Some years ago during my stay at a country home, I would put out crumbs to feed the birds that lived in the garden. The Grey Thrush would come in response to my imitation of its whistle. One morning when the ground was white with frost, I was pleasantly surprised by a pair of Blue Wrens and a Scrub Wren which accompanied the Thrush for a share of the feast. Later, a pair of White-throated Treecreepers came regularly in response to my imitation of their high-pitched call, to where a sprinkle of breadcrumbs awaited them on a sunny verandah.

One morning, instead of leaving after putting out the crumbs and giving them the signal, I sat down on a chair nearby. The pair came directly toward me, alighting on the edge of the raised board floor. The female almost brushed against my foot as she crept toward the food, her bright dark eye meeting mine trustfully. The male, not as tame as its mate, detoured widely around and flew away after a few hurried pecks.

On numerous occasions I surprised the female inside the house, clinging to a curtain, motionless until I had left the room. At times the little brown bird could be seen at the far end of a long passage, pecking at the carpet making short work of any tiny insects lurking there. Frequently I was unaware of her presence inside the house until she had flown out of the back door into the gauzed-in verandah, uttering her staccato call which was the signal for me to prop open a door enabling her to rejoin the male in the garden. One morning the puzzle of how she obtained entry was solved. I saw her fly to a window to alight on the sill and climb through a hole in the window-screen.

At dusk the pair toured the upper walls of the old brick house, particularly a chimney warmed by an oil fire in the room beneath it, and where small black ants had their highways.

When darkness fell, the female crept under the verandah to sleep in a corner above the front door. A sheet of newspaper took care of cleanliness. It became a routine, those winter nights, for me to switch on the verandah light, open the door and bid "Good night" to the little feathered form, not one whit disturbed, head tucked beneath a wing, resembling a brown autumn leaf.

**Upcoming Outings – STAY TUNED!! (the schedule will return 😊)**