Land for Wildlife

Garden for Wildlife

Central Australia Newsletter V19.1 May 2023

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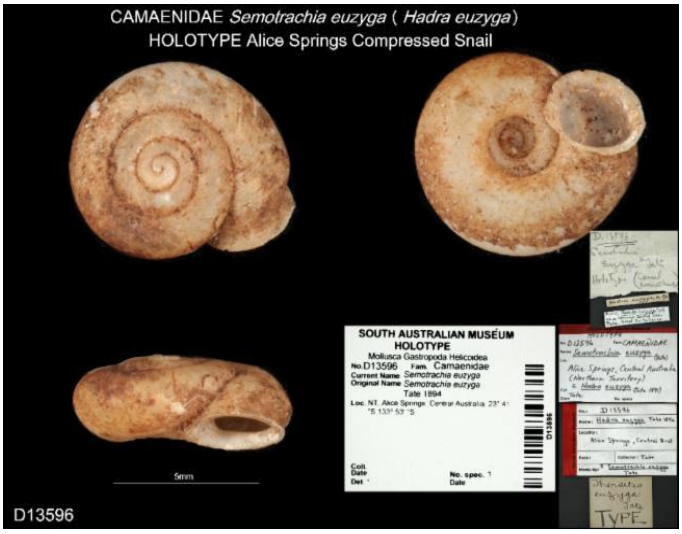
From the Land for Wildlife Team

G'day Wildlifers and welcome to our May 2023 Newsletter!

It's been a while since our last newsletter, so we hope this finds you and your Land/Garden for Wildlife thriving after the recent rains. My name's Charlotte and I'm temporarily working in the coordinator role for LFW/GFW. Unfortunately, due to a lack of permanent funding we have been unable to hire a fulltime Coordinator for the last couple of years. I am currently exploring funding options. If you have any suggestions, feel free to pass them on.

As the nights grow colder it certainly feels like Winter is upon us. While plenty of our regular animal visitors will be preparing to become dormant or migrate to warmer climates, there are still plenty of flora and fauna to be seen around. Mistletoes, Acacias, Swainsonas and Eremophilas, just to name a few, are flowering beautifully, adding splashes of colour to our quite green landscape. I hope you're enjoying what's flowering at the moment as much as I am.



With exotic plants now outnumbering native plants in Australia (State of the Environment Report 2021), our need for biodiversity and conservation projects such as LFW/GFW are even more important. The benefits of wildlife corridors are well established and are one way our members are positively promoting and increasing habitat for our one-of-a-kind native flora and fauna species. Loss of biodiversity disrupts the ecologies' ability to function holistically leading to an inability for these systems to support humankind. So, we thank you for your ongoing contributions to biodiversity and the health of our ecosystems. You don't need much land to contribute either, as 1/3rd of Australia's threatened species live in cities, urban dwellers can have an impact without owning large parcels of land. For example, in Alice Springs we have the endangered Alice Springs Squat Snail (*Semotrachia euzyga*) who live in and near the leaf litter of Desert Fig Trees (*Ficus brachypoda*) close to the Todd River.

THIS MONTHS
FAUNA IN FOCUS

Whistling Kite

Haliastur sphenurus

As a common bird in the area, you may have seen or heard the Whistling Kite on your property. It is a medium sized bird of prey with distinctive pale 'm' shaped underwing markings that assist with identifying the often shaggy looking bird from other raptors. Juveniles are ready to fly when they are 2 months old and have lighter brown plumage that darkens as they age. Its wingspan can be up to 145cms with the females being larger than the males. They are found throughout Australia (except Tasmania), New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea where they live in a variety of open habitats largely near water. Because of this they have taken full advantage of agricultural land with the large open spaces, water sources and carrion (dead animals) they provide.

While they prefer open country, they do require large, tall trees for nesting. During a recent drive through the Finke Gorge National Park, we found breeding pairs nesting in large Ghost Gums (*Corymbia aparrerinja*) at both permanent waterholes at Boggy Hole and Running Waters where they would soar along the water and surrounding cliffs all day in search of food. They breed from March to October in Northern and Central Australia and prefer the open woodland and plains as they do not enter dense forests. As the common name suggests, their characteristic whistling is another way to identify the bird as they are known to regularly whistle and chatter.

They're certainly not picky eaters and are known to eat a wide variety of prey including fish, mammals, reptiles, crustaceans and insects. They have been observed stealing food from other raptors, harassing water birds to regurgitate their last meal and hanging around fishermen for fish guts. Keep your eyes peeled for these beautiful birds!

THIS MONTHS

FLORA IN FOCUS

Desert Petunia

Dipteracanthus australasicus ssp. australasius.
Acanthaceae.

A small spreading shrub that grows to 50cms rarely up to 1.5m. It produces pretty purple, rarely white, flowers most of the year depending on rainfall. Found along watercourses, sand dunes, rocky areas and floodplains in the NT, WA, SA, QLD and NSW. There are 4 subspecies of the Desert Petunia with *ssp.corynothecus* being threatened in NSW.

This species is listed on the recommended plant list by the Alice Springs Town Council and can be seen planted in the visitor center courtyard, the visitor car park and around the service area of the Alice Springs Desert Park. While not a true Petunia they are a beautiful addition to your LFW/GFW as they are frost tolerant, drought tolerant, grows great in pots and best of all, are locally native to our area.

Buffel Grass - Will it be declared a weed?

The Northern Territory Government could be one step closer to declaring Buffel Grass a weed. The economic, cultural and environmental costs of the grass are well established across Central Australia. As a result, the Government has created a working group of experts to assess whether it should be declared a weed as it is in South Australia. Some concerns regarding the potential declaration, however, include the potential costs associated with management, the likelihood of being able to stop it spreading and whether there are already management plans in place that could assist in mitigating the negative effects of the exotic species. The working group is expected to provide their findings at the end of the year.

Bilby numbers are increasing!

Yep, you read that right. At the Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary NW of Alice Springs cameras have confirmed that a small population of Greater Bilby's (*Macrotis lagotis*) reintroduced to the Park in 2022 have been breeding. A young Bilby was seen following its mum late last year and is being heralded as a promising sign that the population is establishing in the area. Australian Wildlife Conservation sanctuaries reported a doubling of Bilby numbers from 2022 to 2023 and ecologists found 17 out of 25 females captured in Pilliga National Park in NSW were carrying infants in their pouch. Bilby's have been extinct in NSW for years, however, the success of reintroduction programs gives hope that the once common and widespread species may return outside of sanctuary zones in the state. The increasing number of Bilby populations in wildlife sanctuaries across central Australia demonstrates the positive effect that feral animal eradication projects and First nation's led practices are having on protecting and increasing this threatened species. With the Federal Government announcing another $1.6 million for reducing threats to Greater Bilby's, one can only expect these numbers to keep climbing.

Birds and regeneration

Birds are often used as an indicator species of the health and biodiversity of the land. They provide many important functions within an ecosystem as they assist in plant pollination, spreading seeds that help regenerate forests, control pests, and carve, burrow and build homes for numerous other organisms.

A higher diversity of flora species provides the necessary habitat and food sources that support a greater diversity of wildlife. For example, the presence of small birds, such as Zebra Finch's and Fairy Wrens, requires appropriate habitat such as shrubs

and dense bushes and plenty of seeds and insects. Larger birds and birds of prey require large trees that they can perch on and nest in. Hollows provide habitat for Owls, Galahs and Cockatoos just to name a few. Honeyeaters and other nectar feeding birds require a variety of nectar producing flowers that are available throughout the year. An increase in bird species in turn leads to a decrease in diseases and pests. Birds of prey feed on dead animal carcasses, preventing disease from spreading and feed on pests such as house mice and rats. Small birds keep insect population at healthy levels, minimising defoliation of plants and woodboring insects that in large numbers kill trees.

A CSIRO study found that areas containing high levels of Buffel Grass and thus a low biodiversity of plants, led to a decrease in the number of species, number of individual birds and the amount of time birds spent in the area. The removal of Buffel Grass was associated with a dramatic increase in biodiversity, as plants started regenerating, wildlife populations also quickly bounced back.

Over the last 50 years that Bill Low has been living at his property in Connellsan he has noticed a significant increase in the number of bird species and populations. What was once a horse agistment, with low biodiversity and essentially bare earth is now a bustling ecosystem filled with locally native flora and fauna thanks to regeneration. Magpies and Black-Faced Cuckoo-Shrikes were once some of the only birds that frequented his property as they favour sparsely vegetated areas, but with a diverse range of flora comes a diverse range of fauna. For example, a flock of Zebra Finches is now established on the property, where they were once seldom seen.

Have you noticed a change in the number and species of birds visiting your property since engaging in regeneration practices such as pest or weed control and planting local flora?

The new weapon in our fight against Feral Cats

Feral cat numbers in Australia fluctuate with rainfall. In dry conditions it is estimated that there are 1.4 million feral cats roaming our bush, while in wet conditions there is an estimated 5.6 million, with some of the highest densities per km2 in the arid centre. Along with the pet cat population of just under 5 million, they kill nearly 3 million mammals A DAY! Feral animal control can be incredibly difficult, especially feral cat eradication but as Artificial Intelligence has become more widely accessible it is not surprising that it is now being used in successful feral animal trapping. Numerous trials across Australia have been undertaken over the last couple of years using AI to correctly identify cats as they walk past a 'Felixer' Trap. Once a cat is confirmed the Felixer shoots a small gel pellet containing 1080 onto the pest's fur. Due to their fastidious grooming habits they consume the gel. These trials have successfully only targeted cats, with dingoes and other species able to walk past the traps without setting them off. These trials have included areas such as the APY lands and the Arid Recovery nature reserve in South Australia. The traps are solar powered, photograph all animals not just cats, and were developed in part with the Australian Government and NGOs including Land for Wildlife Kangaroo Island. An indicative price for 3 Felixer's for a 30 month rental is $80,000. For more information https://thylation.com/

'Now, a new wave of mammal extinctions is looming across northern Australia, as intense fires and overgrazing by feral cattle, pigs and buffaloes remove shelter and make it easier for feral cats to hunt. … Often travelling long distances (up to 30km), cats target recently burnt areas for intensive hunting. An influx of cats can decimate the survivors of fire.'
– Andy Sheppard (CSIRO) & Andreas Glanznig (CISS)

Our recommendations this May

The Northern Australia Climate Program has a free online course aimed at educating the public about weather forecasts and climate systems that impact Northern Australia. https://nacp.org.au/outreach/training/launchpad

An interesting article outlining the connections between human health and loss of biodiversity https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2023/218/8/why-losing-australias-biodiversity-matters-human-health-insights-latest-state

Have you been watching Australia's season of Alone on SBS? A fascinating insight into surviving in the Tasmanian wilderness and the relationships humans can have with nature. https://theconversation.com/how-alone-australia-can-help-us-understand-and-appreciate-our-place-in-nature-205115

A great way to identify and keep track of species on your property is iNaturalist. You can also view other people's observations, upload photos, crowdsource identifications and contribute to citizen science projects.
https://www.inaturalist.org/

Do you have any stories or images to share? Get in touch! We are always looking for members to share their experiences via our social media and newsletter. Email us with your suggestions of articles or topics that you wish to hear more about.

I hope you have enjoyed this month's newsletter!
All the best,
Charlotte

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Photo Sources

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Image 3: 'Whistling Kite' Animalia https://animalia.bio/whistling-kite
Image 4: 'Whistling kite' eBird https://ebird.org/species/whikit1?siteLanguage=en_AU
Image 5: '*Dipteracanthus australasicus*' Fagg, M. Australian Plant Image Index https://www.anbg.gov.au/photo/apii/id/dig/44491
Image 6: '*Dipteracanthus australasicus ssp. australasicus*' Plantnet https://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=in&name=Dipteracanthus~australasicus~subsp.+australasicus
Image 7: 'Buffel Grass' https://nt.gov.au/environment/weeds/weeds-in-the-nt/A-Z-list-of-weeds-in-the-NT/buffel-grass
Image 8: 'Greater Bilby' Wikipedia https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greater_Bilby_(Macrotis_lagotis)_(9996143106).jpg
Image 9: 'Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater' eBird https://ebird.org/species/spchon1?siteLanguage=en_AU
Image 10: 'Red-tailed Black Cockatoo' S. Buckle Australian Museum https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/red-tailed-black-cockatoo-calyptorhynchus-banksii/
Image 11: 'Zebra Finch' Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zebra_finch#/media/File:Australian_zebra_finch_Chestnut-eared_Finch_(Taeniopygia_castanotis)_pair.jpg
Image 12: 'Felixer Trap' by Thylation https://thylation.com
Image 13: Ghost Gum at Palm Valley, Charlotte Taunton