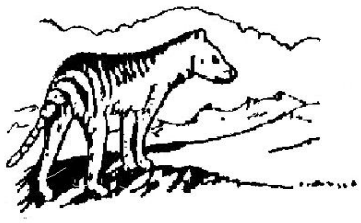


THE LAUNCESTON NATURALIST

Volume LVII No.6 August/September 2024

The aim of the Launceston Field Naturalists Club is to encourage the study of all aspects of natural history and to support the conservation of our natural heritage

Patron	**:**	**Prof. Nigel Forteath**
President	**:**	**Andrew Smith, 0402 893 378**
Hon. Secretary	**:**	**Noel Manning, 0458 030 767**
Hon. Treasurer	**:**	**Karen Manning**

Meetings 1st Tuesday of month, February-December (except Jul & Aug) at Scotch-Oakburn College, Senior Campus, Penquite Rd Newstead

Program:
October

Tuesday 1	**Annual General Meeting followed by General Meeting**
Thursday 3	**Monthly Short Walk – Old Mac's Farm – Wetlands and River Walk**
Sunday 13	**Field Trip – Invited by the Wilderness Society to attend covenanted north coast property**
Saturday 26	**Field Trip – Tom Gibson Reserve for wildflowers**

November

Tuesday 5	**General Meeting - Member speaker Jeff Campbell – Native Orchids**
Thursday 7	**Monthly Short Walk – APS Garden at Heritage Forest**
Saturday 9	**Field Trip – Powranna Nature Reserve – Native Orchids**
Saturday 23	**Excursion - 40th Anniversary at the Arboretum at Eugenana**
Saturday 30	**Social Meal – Club's 75th Anniversary Dinner at Olde Tudor Hotel**

For further program details visit https://www.lfnc.org.au/meetings.htm

Skemps Report, August/September 2024

Thanks to many volunteers putting in a very special effort, we worked hard at clearing the nature trails we hoped to use for our Bioblitz on 21 September. The chainsaw worked overtime with wild weather causing many more track blockages than usual. This was made much easier by the excellent chain sharpening done by Ian, a task I will leave to him in future.

The heavy rain had made it very wet inside and outside the Centre with Karen having to sweep the water from around the barbecue. To sort this out, I first dug the drain on the east side of the building and noticed that water poured over the gutters in heavy rain and decided to investigate. I discovered the cut out linking the gutter from the original building to the one on the extended outdoor area had not been properly removed and would overflow during heavy rains. Rob used his skill and tools to bend it out of the way and I hope it is enough when the next big rain event arrives.

Karen and Jeff located items on the assets list ready for the auditor, a difficult task with the large number of items and due to these being moved around as work needs dictate. Karen and I cleaned the flues and five of us went to the top pond to try and clear the cumbungi with no luck and I also dug the overflow channel out again. While the middle pond was silting up, I was surprised how deep the top pond remains.

Tamar NRM's Kirstin, Kate and Jonty attended the property early September in preparation for the Bioblitz, checking the facilities and sorting what was needed from an occupational health and safety perspective, and giving us instructions on what last minute things were needed. They also walked the Trails we hoped to use checking for safety issues.

On 17 September five members spent all day setting the Centre up for the Bioblitz, including arranging the tables, positioning screens for projectors and checking that all the equipment needed worked. On the following Tuesday the three in attendance spent the day cleaning the Centre and putting away all the items used for our successful event the previous Saturday. If we ever host such an event in the future, we should be able to set it up quite quickly.

On our way home each Tuesday, Karen and I stop on Targa Hill Road along the property boundary and clear weeds, mainly Spanish heath, which seems to be creeping up the hill on the Skemps side of the road, and foxglove.

If you can help on Tuesdays let me know and I will add your phone number to my text list.

Noel Manning

Thursday 8 August - Platypus House tour

Nineteen members met at Platypus House, Beauty Point for this field trip with our Patron, Professor Nigel Forteath.

The platypus experience:

In the first room Nigel gave us a detailed overview of the intriguing, semi aquatic platypus with its duck-like bill, webbed feet, beaver-like tail for storing fat and double layer of fur, one for warmth and the other providing a waterproof layer. The males have a spur on the hind foot that delivers an extremely painful venom with no known cure.

The platypus has a burrow above the water line hidden by vegetation and feeds on water critters, including insect larvae, freshwater shrimp, worms and yabbies. They use electroreceptors in their beak to detect prey, closing their ears, eyes and nose when hunting.

Both males and females have a cloaca, for reproduction and waste removal. Females lay between one and three near round, leathery eggs with the males taking no part in raising the puggle, the name of the platypus when first born. The puggle is vulnerable as it is blind and hairless relying on the mother's milk, secreted through pores in the skin.

Other facts given to us; The tail is prehensile, being used for carrying, including nesting material, the animals hibernate for part of the winter, the mating season is in August, and they spend up to 12 hours a day foraging for food.

There are about 40 platypuses on King Island, however the DNA indicates these are more closely related to mainland animals.

We viewed the various tanks holding the animals and before moving on we watched an impressive video on platypus by David Perrin. (Images KM)

The echidna experience:

We were surprised to find echidnas wandering about in their room and we carefully moved about to avoid treading on these cute animals. Near the end of Nigel's informative talk he fed the echidnas, careful to restrict access to the food for some to keep their calory intake at the appropriate level.

These solitary animals have large, overlapping foraging ranges and apparently the Hoo Hoo Hut at Trevallyn has the largest population of echidna. Tasmania has only one of the four echidnas of Australia and New Guinea, the Short-beaked Echidna, which is also the largest.

When faced with danger the animal will bury itself leaving the spines exposed, that are modified hairs made of keratin. Like the platypus, echidnas have a small number of electro sensors on the tip of the snout to help with foraging for the ants, beetles, earth worms, insects, moths and the burrowing prey of its diet.

We thanked Nigel for this wonderful experience before most moved on to either The River Café or Chef's Catch for lunch. Karen and Noel Manning

Saturday August 31 & Saturday September 15 - Track clearing on the property

Seven members attended Skemps on the last day of winter and four attended in the middle of September for a major effort to clear the tracks ready for our Bioblitz.

Andrew, Ian and I went along the Tyre Track in August, then Ian and me in September. Using the chainsaw, I hoped to clear the many falls as this was one of the destinations for the plant section of the Bioblitz. With the number of falls and the wet conditions, we did not get as far as I had hoped, and with the dozen or so falls to be cleared on these two days some were only partially done.

Andrew tried to walk all the trails we hoped to use to GPS these to overlay onto maps for those attending our event. He ran out of time for the Bedfordia Trail and this ended up on the map as a guesstimation from the original map, the trail had recently been cleared and markers replace by Brian and Karen.

There was much cleaning done by Karen, Tina and Tom on Saturday, our Skemps Day for August, and our pressure washer was given a serious workout on the barbecue and picnic sets for outside seating. Noel Manning

Tuesday 3 September - Dr Scott Bell - A trip to the Southern Ocean – and some consequences

Andrew introduced Dr Scott Bell and his talk about his three months aboard the MY (motor yacht) Steve Irwin. He started his talk by saying that school taught him a healthy disrespect for inappropriate authority. He then gave the following definition of civil disobedience; The active and professed refusal of a citizen to obey certain laws or commands of government or any other authority and then congratulated us on our act of civil disobedience for disregarding Andrew as he tried to pull us into line to start the talk.

Scott retired from general practice in 2006 and after spending time in the Western Desert he returned to Tasmania and purchased a mixed vegetation bush block in the northeast. The block, over 600 acres, combines undamaged bushland, wetlands, button grass plains, dry sclerophyll and coastal heathlands. He spends a lot of time there looking after the bush, building walking trails, monitoring wildlife and working on his house as an owner builder.

The work on his land led to an interest in conservation issues and that is why he volunteered for a Southern Ocean trip on the MY Steve Irwin for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, the main subject of his talk. He then whets our interest in conservation by noting that as field naturalists we would be interested in conservation, biodiversity and know of the remarkable animals of this country and be aware that Australia, including Tasmania, has the unenviable record of the greatest number of species extinctions in the world. We have already lost the Thylacine, and the devil is under threat, and we may not be aware that if we lose the devil, we also lose the devil specific parasitic tape worm.

He also told us the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society was started by Paul Watson after he left Green Peace, a man he described as a colourful character, who, at the time of the talk, has been detained in Greenland. The talk then moved to the MY Steve Irwin, which he joined in 2007, telling us it was mainly involved in marine conservation with a focus on whaling, including preventing the Japanese from killing them. While the Japanese claim to

be doing research they do not seem to publish any findings and there is a strong cultural element to their whale hunting. The ship is registered as a recreational vessel to reduce red tape involved in its use.

The ship was part of a small fleet originally designed for UK fisheries and the rough ocean around Scotland, though not for the Arctic or Antarctic waters. The talk would give us an idea of what a day in the life of those onboard was like during his three-month journey.

The ship, powered by twin diesel motors, was designed for a crew of about 20 while they put to sea with a crew of about 40 and even with extra bunks built into the cabins some still slept on couches. Sea Shepherd is a vegan organisation, which some of the crew struggled with, and Scott admitted to having cans of sardines to help him get by. There is a small cohort of permanent staff, including captain, first mate, navigator, engineer and helicopter pilot with the bulk of the crew being volunteers, from a variety of walks of life and mostly Australian.

The first activity image was of the ship heading into Bass Straight with the three Zodiacs on the fore deck. He said the vessel had been painted black, to give it a sinister pirate look, to match the ethos of the organisation. Sea Shepherd is funded by wealthy donors who like being associated with the organisation and Paul Watson. Despite this there was still a lot of work getting donations of consumables and Scott needed to obtain medical supplies. Once in the Southern Ocean they would be alone as the helicopter could only fly for about 70 kilometres. He was able to get intravenous and pain medication, syringes and bandages and equipment to deal with immersions in the cold waters encountered. He told us the reality was his only option for a serious fracture or serious head, or abdominal injury would be pain relief.

The slide show featured many pictures of various aspects of ship life, including the shared mess and the bridge. The bridge was described as accessible to all, offering a great view and an opportunity to discuss and learn about the running of the ship. With few first-aid capable people on board Scott conducted training sessions in the mess, especially in dealing with immersions. We saw his cabin, which he described as cold, and some of his personal gear, including items to grab if the ship went down. The reality was that in such cold conditions he would not last very long, though he felt he should have these items.

He described the conditions as cold and rough and the helicopter pilot as very skillful as the ship was often rolling when he was returning after a reconnaissance trip looking for the Japanese. An image showed the helicopter tied down and ship heeled over by what I estimated to be about 20 degrees. Many, including Scott himself, were seasick and the only option was to be on deck and watch the horizon.

For one active mission the ship hid behind an iceberg making it invisible to the whaling ships radar before sending out the Zodiacs. Two volunteers climbed aboard the harpoon vessel to deliver a letter to the captain. They were immediately captured and locked up, kept aboard the Japanese ship for a week, before diplomatic efforts saw them returned. They were threatened with jail back in Japan. They also tried dragging a cable under the harpoon vessel hoping to foul the propeller and although this was tried a few times it was unsuccessful. The other method to disrupt the whaling was to throw glass containers of butyric acid onto the work area of the mothership hoping to leave a foul smell on the harpooned whales.

Scott described launching the inflatables from the stationary ship using a winch. Another method was to lower the Zodiacs while still moving and on one occasion things went horribly wrong. The crew steadied the small vessel with stern and bow ropes as it was being

lowered, then should have released both ropes when it hit the water. Unfortunately, an inexperienced volunteer failed to release the bow rope, and the Zodiac capsized putting the three occupants into the cold water, including the camera woman from an American film crew working on board the ship. She lost thousands of dollars of camera equipment. It took a while to reverse back to their position and rescue them.

Another excursion to disrupt the whaling went wrong as well when a Zodiac did not return before dark. The crew failed to make contact using the satellite phones provided, though after two or three hours of searching the missing crew were found.

The presentation was accompanied by an impressive slide show featuring the crew, helicopter, icebergs, Scotts cabin, his sparce medical equipment, activities aboard including the launching of the Zodiacs and food and its preparation. Scott described the food as excellent and varied although it became bland near the end of the trip as supplies ran low.

After around eight minutes of questions and answers, Geoff gave thanks for this impressive talk and led the acclamation. Noel Manning

Thursday September 5 - Punchbowl and Queechy Lake Reserves

Six members and visiting field naturalist Margot from Victoria, met in a car park close to the Punchbowl Reserve to start our short walk. Due to recent windstorms, parking in the reserve was unavailable due to tree falls. Walking in along the creek into the lower area of the Reserve we were met by many of the local bird residents, presumably hoping for some food.

The creek was flowing very strongly, and most members walked up to view the waterfall at the bridge. The river had flooded, and the banks of the creek were covered by washed down debris which included large quantities of Styrofoam **(pictured below KM).** Margot helped me to collect as much of the foam as possible and then told me that she was involved with clean-ups on Victorian beaches with her group.

During our walk we saw Native hen, Muscovy duck, Mallards, Forest raven, Golden whistler and a Wallaby and Noel spotted a large ghost fungi near the bridge.

We travelled over to the Queechy Reserve and walked around the lake, seeing Little Pied Cormorant, Purple peahen, Eurasian coots and a raptor which flew off before we got a good look. There were quite a few trees down near the lake and the area was very slippery in places.

From here we went for coffee and talked some more with Margot about her group. A very enjoyable morning. Karen Manning

Saturday 21 September -The Great Southern BIOBLITZ, Skemps experience

A small group went to Skemps on the Friday before the Bioblitz and stayed overnight to finish setting up and get an early start on the Saturday. Having gone to bed way too early, against Jeff's advice, we were all up and yawning by 6:30am on this fine though windy Saturday morning. At a committee meeting when I suggested Simon would need a warm, still and moonless night to stay over for an insect hunt, Andrew chimed in with 'I will see what I can do'. He came through with at least a fine day, the weather being our only concern for what would prove to be a large and successful event.

The Bioblitz was the culmination of much work by a dedicated crew of enthusiastic members. High winds and heavy rain had made a mess of areas we wished to visit with the Tyre Trail being a case in point. Karen, Ian, Andrew and I spent many hours over four days clearing this trail only to realise most of it past the steps was a winter creek and not suitable for group walks. Rob removed a major fall over the road to the Federation Corridor and three on the Mini Forest Trail, while Jon and I tackled a dozen falls on the Forest, Water Gate and Zig Zag trails, one on the dam wall of the top pond and another on Old Skemps Road.

Then came the building with the last Tuesday working bee spent setting up. With two screens, two slide shows could be run simultaneously or one set up with the other still running. A compromise arrangement of tables allowed cables to be safely away and not a trip hazard, yet still allow access to all rooms and provide plenty of seating for eating inside if the weather did not cooperate. On the day the two inside bathrooms were assigned to the women with the outside one for men and suitable signs made and laminated for this day and for future use.

On the Friday the six volunteers worked on signs using 10 pieces of core flute glued together to make five stronger signs for the windy conditions. These had been glued together and brought there by Jon and he provided some very large Textas for writing on them, screws and large washers to attach them to star pickets and witches hats to help with parking. Karen's steady hand did the artwork for the 'PARKING' and 'EMERGENCY MEETING POINT' signs as well as 'BIOBLITZ' written on thin strips of core flute to cover 'OPEN DAY' already on our signs.

Saturday morning the signs went up around the Centre and Jeff and I went out to place more at Myrtle Park, the junction of the highway and Targa Hill Road and others near our boom gate. This produced the highlight of the event for me as just before the St. Patricks River Bridge I stopped having seen two birds I considered to be raptors. With the bird people already active on the road up to Skemps, Ian had already spotted them and, unfortunately for us, he rightly claimed sighting rights for what turned out to be a pair of brown falcons.

A van with Isabell, Jonty and Kate from Tamar NRM arrived and they were soon busy setting up, including a marquee for registration, and putting out lunch consumables ready for the sausage sizzle with salad and bread rolls

With the car park full and most attendees having arrived Andrew gave the welcome and told us some house-keeping rules before the groups set off on a search to identify what nature had to offer at Skemps. There were 33 people at the welcome though I know more turned up afterwards.

In the Centre there was a slide show of Jeff's orchids on the big screen, and I had another from our wildlife camera showing the natives and non-natives captured on Kodak over the years before the camera was stolen. In the ante room Simon had display boxes of beetles from the QVMAG collection.

At 11:30 I decided to start the barbecue and Steve joined in eventually doing most of the cooking, including mounds of onion cut up by Jon. Then salad and bread rolls appeared on a table quickly set up by Andrew and it was lunchtime. Afterwards, with the children distracted outside, a good crowd milled around inside for an interesting talk and slide show by Sarah Lloyd on slime moulds.

Thankfully the day finished early, and Jon and I went out to retrieve the signs to be put away for future events. We learnt a lot working on this project so that future large events at Skemps should be much easier to organise.

Thank you to all who participated and made it such a success and a big thank you to those whose work and ideas made the event so easy to set up.

And a big thank you to the following experts who attended on the day

Insects: Simon Fearn and Alfonsina Arriaga Jimenez (QVMAG)
Vascular plants: Roy Skabo (LFNC)
Orchids: Elaine Upton and Trevor Yaxley
Fungi and slime moulds: Sarah Lloyd (Central North FN)
Water invertebrates: Professor Nigel Forteath
Birds: Megan Byrd and Geoff Shannon (Bird Life Tasmania)

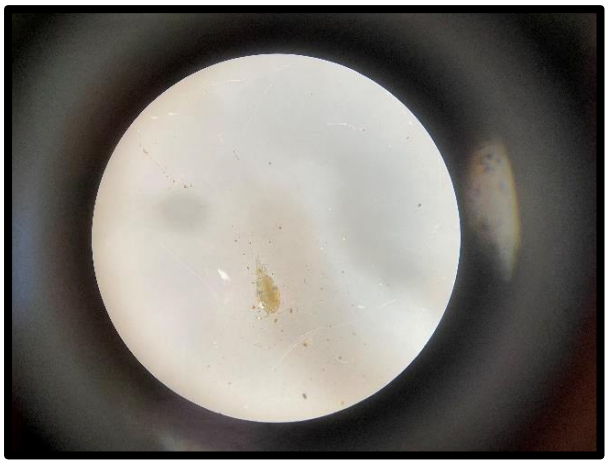
Noel Manning

Saturday September 21 - Great Southern BioBlitz – Water Monitoring

Due to the BioBlitz, it was decided that the Club would conduct its usual October water-monitoring at this event. Noel and I visited the riffle on Skemps Creek early in the morning and as usual in the Spring water monitoring, the bed of the creek had changed during heavy rains and flood events. The higher creek level meant the overhangs were in water allowing easy access. On returning to the Centre, the water sample was poured into three containers and left to settle for an hour or two before looking for the water critters within.

Claire and I sorted through the sample and were assisted firstly by Judith from QVMAG's grandchildren, followed by other interested people who placed the bugs they found in the ice-cube

containers supplied. Later Professor Forteath came over and gave a name to one of the critters Claire found which we had not seen before.



After sorting through the containers and taking a few photos, we noted the following:- Acarina, water mite; Amphipoda, seed shrimps; Cyclopoid copepod - this female is carrying 2 bundles of eggs, can you see them either side of the tail; **(pictured left CM)** Coleoptera, beetle larva; Diptera, fly larvae pupa **(pictured right CM)** ; Ephemeroptera, *Cloeon tasmaniae*, mayfly larva (ID'd by Prof Forteath); Gastropoda, snails **(pictured page 8 CM);** Hirudinea, freshwater leech; Megaporus sp., diving beetle – black and brown stripes; Odonata, damselfly larvae; Plectoptera, stonefly; Oligochaeta, segmented worm; Trichoptera, caddisfly.

Our catch today included 12 Taxa, which gave a Signal 2 score of 8, indicating a Healthy Habitat and the water quality as Excellent. Considering the amount of rain that the area had had in past days and water going through our creek, the outcome was not unexpected.

It was an enjoyable day, with the sun shining and little wind, it was wonderful seeing the people milling around joining in the activities. Karen Manning

Sunday 13 October - Private North Coast Property with the Wilderness Society

On a pleasant, cool, mid spring day twenty people found their way to Scott's NE property to see what he has done to restore it after various uses and a major fire in 2008. We parked just inside the gate in an old quarry covered with a regrowth of native plants. Our group was made up of Launceston Field Naturalists (LFNC) and Wilderness Society (WS) members.

Helena (WS) gave the Acknowledgement and our host Scott a brief overview assisted by Anna (Tasmanian Land Conservancy) who explained some environmental ideas used in the restoration of large bare areas such as encountered on this property. Also joining us was Michael, an environmental scientist, who had managed the restoration work.

We sorted a ride in a small number of cars to be driven further onto the property, with our first stop being the site of another quarry. While there were extensive areas of bare soil, there was also regrowth and several ponds, the main one featuring two islands. Three species of native galaxias and eel species had been found occupying the ponds. Frogs were

heard in all the ponds we visited hinting at a healthy ecosystem. Is it a Tasmanian thing for people living on an island to add islands to their dams, is it from an aesthetic viewpoint or is it some innate, primitive need for the sanctuary and privacy provided?

While here it was pointed out that when clearing land for reshaping you should push aside and save the topsoil and use it to recover the reclaimed land, giving a better outcome by promoting native plants and suppressing weeds. During one walk we overlooked the devil enclosure while standing on bare soil near a small pond. Scott pointed out that this pond, with frogs and apparently healthy, was the only one with a quite noticeable brown alga. An excavator had become bogged here and it was dug out and the water table was reached, hence the pond.

Anna and Scott pointed out another environmental concern when digging deep into some areas and we were standing on one. If the sub strata feature dead plant matter, in an anaerobic environment, exposing it to air and water will produce sulphuric acid with devastating results for the immediate area and possibly the water table or nearby water courses.

Our next stop was for a bush walk where, as typical of Tasmania, we found that small plants, including orchids, were of the greatest interest. Our last place visited before lunch was a small deck over an ephemeral pond featuring four blue balls on post sticking out of the water. These were one of the many eclectic art instalments adding a whimsical touch to the property. There were many decorative items spread about made of wood, metal or stone and some were monumental in scale. Lunch was back at the house, a work in progress, with a wonderful view over Bass Straight and, I think, Water House Island.

Next, we visited the devil enclosure, with an inner sheet metal fence and an outer wire fence, about two kilometres long, both with an underground element to discourage digging. This was to keep the healthy devils in and the diseased ones out. Scott has allowed this 24-hectare área of land as a designated bio-secure breeding enclosure for Tasmanian devils

We thanked our host and his special guests, with Helen being quietly acknowledged for suggesting and arranging this visit. We then headed back to our car and the gate asking where we might find the rare Tasmanian endemic *Xanthorrhoea bracteata*. We were told to head further along the road and struggled until we realised just how much smaller it was compared to the very common *X. australis*. Once we found our first, we soon saw many more, sometimes in small clusters seemingly growing as one.

Thanks to Helen, Scott and friends, this was an impressive day. Noel Manning

Additional Information

Club Outings:

- Are held during a weekend following the General Meeting. Until further notice, members should make their own travel arrangement to participate, contact the Program Coordinator if you require further details or wish to share a lift.

- Provide your own food and drinks for the outing and wear/take clothing/footwear suitable for all weather types.

- The program is subject to alternation at short notice. Notification of changes to field trips will be given at the General Meeting prior to the event. Please contact the Program Coordinator to confirm details if you are unable to attend the meeting.

Name Tags: Please wear your name tags to meetings and on outings.

Tea/Coffee: A levy of 50c is currently charged for supper provided at meetings.

Field Centre: All members have access to the John Skemp Field Centre but should contact secretary@lfnc.org.au regarding availability and keys.

Field Centre Phone Number: (03) 6399 3361

Postal Address: 23 Skemps Road, Myrtle Bank

Internet site: https://www.lfnc.org.au

Facebook site: https://www.facebook.com/groups/527797787360157/

Emails: president@lfnc.org.au secretary@lfnc.org.au

program@lfnc.org.au newsletter@lfnc.org.au

treasurer@lfnc.org.au

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