

Werrington Field Weekend

The fifth Field Weekend held by Northern Gulf Resource Management Group's Wildlife Management Project in conjunction with the North Queensland Natural History Group was held at the Werrington Cattle Station and Nature Refuge from 24-27th November.

Werrington is located approximately 290 kilometres west of Townsville and 330 km south-west of Cairns and is situated on the Great Dividing Range at altitudes ranging from about 700 metres up to almost 1000 metres. The nature refuge occupies the range located in the middle of the property and is home to a high diversity of mammals, including Greater Gliders and Spectacled Hare Wallabies as well as many other interesting plants & animals.

There were ten naturalists present for the weekend and we were joined by the station owner, Russell Lethbridge on Saturday, when he took us to some areas of interest on the property. We also visited Emu Swamp on neighbouring Blackbraes National Park.

The first task on arrival on the set-up day was to check the location of a recent sighting of a Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*). The owners of a nearby station had spotted one crossing the road one evening on a rainy night two weeks prior.

The location was in open woodland with Molloy Red Box (*Eucalyptus leptophleba*), White Poplar Gum (*Eucalyptus platyphylla*) and Clarkson's Bloodwood (*Corymbia clarksoniana*). The main shrub present was Gundabluely (*Acacia victoriae*) with Currant Bush (*Carissa spinarum*), on alluvial plain. The station owners had 3 further historical sightings of koalas on the property, which were noted.

A drive around the property that evening revealed a Rufous Bettong (*Aepyprymnus rufescens*) and two frog species, the Common Green Tree Frog (*Litoria caerulea*) and the Little Red Tree Frog (*Litoria rubella*). Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) were sighted and Cane Toads (*Rhinella marina*) heard calling.

Back at the campsite Southern Boobook Owls (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) were also heard calling.



Setting up base camp at Werrington. Photograph by Gary Wilson

The following morning a dam on the property was investigated for birds, with 14 species of bird recorded. A "mystery call" was heard which could not be identified, possibly it was a different call of the Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*).

After a late breakfast a walk to a rocky gorge near the camp revealed large numbers of yellow flowers on small trees growing in the gorge – the Marblewood (*Larsenaika ochreatea*). The flowers are cream when new but quickly turn yellow.



Marblewood (*Larsenaika ochreatea*). Photographs by Michael Anthony

The flatter areas of the property are dominated by Ironbarks (*Eucalyptus whitei*) but this changes as you approach the hills where the Lemon-scented Gum (*Corymbia citriodora*) is dominant. River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) grow along watercourses both along the larger streams and in the rocky gorge.

Climbing up the gorge the call of a Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) could be heard, along with the more regular daytime-active birds Pied Currawongs (*S. graculina*) Australian Magpies (*Cracticus tibicen*) and some far-off Red-tailed Black-cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*). Up on the steeper rocky ridge above the gorge an Allied Rock Wallaby (*Petrogale assimilis*) was seen, and soon after another smaller one. These animals were a rusty orange colour. Dollarbirds (*Eurystomus orientalis*) were sighted up at the rocky peak and were also common around the camp by a running creek. On the way back along the creek two Red-winged Parrots (*Aprosmictus erythropterus*) and a Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) were observed.

In the evening we walked from the camp out towards the base of the rocky gorge along a station track with calls of 3 species of nightbirds evident – the Southern Boobook (*N. novaeseelandiae*), Owlet Nightjar (*Aegotheles cristatus*) and more Tawny Frogmouths (*P. strigoides*). A small Box-patterned gecko (*Lucasium steindachneri*) was sighted on the ground at the edge of the track – closer inspection revealed that it was consuming a comparatively large spider.



Box-patterned Gecko (*Lucasium steindachneri*) eating a spider. Photograph by Michael Anthony

Also on the ground we found remains of a dead Giant Burrowing Cockroach, and further on the carcass of a Little Red Flying Fox (*Pteropus scapulatus*).

Three Common Green Tree Frogs (*L. caerulea*) were spotted by eye-shine in the trees and one on a large log.

Walking back we sighted a Brush-tailed Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) active on the ground – it walked for some distance before climbing a large Ironbark (*E. whitei*).

The following morning we again staked out the dam for birds, noting 28 species of bird and one butterfly, the Common Crow (*Euploea core*), recorded. This added 18 further species to yesterday's observations. This included a number of smaller bird species such as honeyeaters but no finches. Talking to the owners, finches have not been seen for many years.

On Friday afternoon the full group arrived, and we prepared to go out spotlighting that night. We chose to drive out on a track to the south of the homestead, where a number of notable species had been seen during previous field work, including two of the species that the group most wanted to see, one reptile and one mammal species.

Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) are common here and throughout the Einasleigh Uplands. They do not appear to dig burrows as much as would be expected from this species – they mostly utilise hollow logs. Other feral species sighted on the night are the ubiquitous Cane Toad (*R. marina*) and a feral cat (*Felis catus*).

A variety of mammals were encountered. First macropod for the night was group of Eastern Grey Kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus*). These large, slender, and elegant kangaroos are unmistakable and easy to distinguish from the other large macropod sighted, the Wallaroo (*Macropus robustus*)

which are solid, muscular animals. The diminutive Rufous Bettong (*A. rufescens*) are a common sight at this property and a large number were seen in open areas around the homestead as well as where there is thicker vegetation on the ground, which they require to shelter in.

A lot of attention was paid to the trees, in which we hoped to find Greater Gliders (*Petauroides volans*) or Koalas (*P. cinereus*). Our first arboreal mammal was a glider but this time a Squirrel Glider (*Petaurus norfolcensis*). These are difficult to distinguish from the very similar Sugar Glider (*P. brevipes*) – *P. norfolcensis* grow larger and have a thicker tail that tapers more gently from its base. It was some time before we had a good enough look at it to be satisfied with our identification.



Squirrel Glider (*Petaurus norfolcensis*)

Our second arboreal mammals for the night were a pair of Brush-tailed Possums (*T. vulpecula*) perched on a transverse limb.

Two more glider sightings – both Sugar Gliders (*P. brevipes*).

We reached a dam and went for a walk around to spot for frogs. Bumpy Rocket Frogs (*Litoria inermis*) and Little Red Tree Frogs (*L. rubella*) were calling and we also observed Eastern Snapping Frogs (*Cyclorana novaehollandiae*), Ornate Burrowing Frogs (*Platyplectrum ornatum*) and more Common Green Tree Frogs (*L. caerulea*).

Masked Lapwings (*Vanellus miles*) and an Australian Wood Duck (*Chenonetta jubata*) were observed active at the edges of the dam.

Spotlighting at close range in the trees revealed numerous small geckoes – Dubious Dtellas (*Gehyra dubia*) were spotted and a Brown Tree Snake or Night Tiger (*Boiga irregularis*) was observed climbing a large tree trunk by the dam.

We started back, spotting a Tawny Frogmouth (*P. strigoides*) before the bright reflections of two eyes high in a tree were detected. They turned out to be those of a Greater Glider (*P. volans*), finally!

These gliders have an extremely long, dark, bushy tail and large ears and the aforementioned bright eye-shine.

Soon after we encountered a Pale-headed Snake (*Hoplocephalus bitorquatus*) on a fallen Ironbark by the side of the track – as most of the group were keen herpetologists, this was definitely the highlight for the night. They are an inhabitant of dry forest inland of the Great Dividing Range from northern NSW to north-east Queensland. *H. bitorquatus* is one of three species of a genus that are predominantly arboreal elapid snakes, something which is rare in that family of snakes. Their relatives include one species that is mostly found in rainforest and another which is confined to the Sydney sandstone.



An arboreal elapid snake, the Pale-headed Snake (*Hoplocephalus bitorquatus*) is also often found on the ground. Photograph by Michael Anthony

The following morning we once again walked to the rocky gorge, adding further bird species to that location and identifying plants. The two previous walks in this area had revealed numerous diggings presumed to that of Echidnas (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*) and on this walk, with many eyes observing, we managed to confirm the identification with the sighting of two live individuals.

In the afternoon Russell took us out to a rock-hole on the property with permanent water, the only natural water in the area, with a large rock wall beside it, frequented by rock wallabies.



Allied Rock Wallaby (*Petrogale assimilis*). Photograph by Michael Anthony

On the way we passed through a range of different country including alluvial plains and spinifex-covered rocky hills, where we found a Storr's Spiny-tailed Monitor (*Varanus storri*), a saxicoline (rock-dwelling) small goanna who uses its spiny tail to wedge itself in between rocks.

We also stopped at a point on the refuge to identify a number of unusual plants including the Umbellatum Wattle (*Acacia umbellatum*), that grows as a low spreading shrub, and the Brown Bloodwood (*Corymbia trachyphloia*) a small, gnarled (here at least) tree with rusty yellow bark. Also growing here is the Wallflower (Heart-leaf) Poison Pea (*Gompholobium grandiflorum*) poisonous to stock and one of the reasons the area was fenced off and made a nature refuge.

The evening's spotlighting was back towards the rock-hole. We sighted good number of greater and sugar gliders, brush-tailed possums and many green tree frogs, especially near the waterhole.

On Sunday morning we took the track towards Blackbraes, driving slowly looking for reptiles. We left the vehicles to have a look around at a section of woodland with a lot of fallen timber to look for lizards and were rewarded with an Eastern Bearded Dragon (*Pogona barbata*), a gravid female sitting on a log. Also active around the timber were Metallic Snake-eyed Skinks (*Cryptoblepharus metallicus*) and on the ground Shaded-litter Rainbow Skinks (*Carlia munda*).



Bearded Dragon (*Pogona barbata*) is commonly found in south-eastern Australia but is rarely found this far north. Photograph by Michael Anthony

On the way back, a couple of unfamiliar eucalypts were identified – the Reid River Box (*Eucalyptus brownii*) with a very pale trunk and shiny leaves, and the Mountain Coolabah (*Eucalyptus orgadophila*) with pale box bark at the base but changing to thin bark in strips before reaching the smooth branches.



Three Eucalypt barks from left to right Lemon-scented Gum (*Corymbia citriodora*), Moreton Bay Ash (*Corymbia tessellaris*) and Mountain Coolabah (*Eucalyptus orgadophila*). Photographs by Michael Anthony & Lyndal Scobell

After lunch we followed the track to the south of the property that climbed up into some of the higher altitude woodland, dominated by *C. citriodora*.

One of the first sightings was a Frilled Lizard (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*) on a tree trunk. We passed a dam, adding White-faced Herons (*Egretta novaehollandiae*), Pacific Black Ducks (*Anas superciliosa*) and Plumed Whistle Ducks (*Dendrocygnus eytoni*) to our list. The track climbed to about 940 metres however we observed little difference to what we had already seen; the track followed rocky hills with open woodland similar to the nature refuge closer to camp. We looked around at a tank in a valley by a creek, finding a Zigzag Gecko (*Amalosia rhombifer*) and Bynoe's Geckoes (*Heteronotia binoei*) before making our way back.



Young herpetologists photographing a reptile. Photograph by Lyndal Scobell

The final night was utilised in spotlighting in the rocky gorge but little activity was evident around the rocks, possibly due to the cooler & windy conditions.