

North Queensland Natural History Group Weekend at Talaroo

The NQNHG is a group of interested people passionate about the natural history of north Queensland. Participants range from leaders in their scientific field to interested naturalists just keen to learn. The group's aim is to improve the knowledge of flora and fauna of the region, by getting out into the field to identify animals and plants and sharing that knowledge with other participants and the wider community.

This idea of such a group is not new. In 1932 Dr Hugo Flecker formed the North Queensland Naturalist Club based in Cairns which lasted for 70 years, until 2002. His name is perpetuated in the Flecker Botanic Gardens and the scientific name of one of our most infamous animals the Box Jellyfish *Chironex fleckeri*. For many years the club had a yearly field trip to Georgetown (and many other places), and produced a journal, the North Queensland Naturalist.

In 2007 a similar group came together, organised by Northern Gulf Resource Management Group. This group, led by Val Speedie, held regular workshops & field trips to many locations in the Northern Gulf region, with the aim of producing a field guide to the flora and fauna of the area. After the tragic loss of Val the group fell by the wayside, however the process of resurrection, begun in 2013, has resulted in our first field camp, held in October 2014 at Talaroo.

A group of thirty traditional owners and naturalists got together for 3 days to participate in a fauna survey, a bird survey and general investigation of the property. Despite the hot, dry, dusty and sometimes windy conditions a great time was had by all and many observations made of the plants and animals, including some new records for the area.

A meeting was held on the Saturday once everyone had arrived, beginning with a welcome to country and a summary of what was happening at the station. The property no longer runs cattle and activities are now geared towards rehabilitation and conservation of the land, including introducing mosaic burning methods and weed control in the nature refuge. A management plan for the unique hot springs on the property is also being put together and the hope is to have these open to the public in the not too distant future.

We then heard from Noel Preece, environmental consultant with vast experience in the northern savannah, who outlined the history of mammal declines across the north of Australia. His message pulled no punches – there is a dire emergency happening with our small mammal species right now. Systematic fauna surveys have been carried out across the north for many years and the numbers of small mammals being trapped is **less than one percent** of the previous numbers. The reasons for this are not 100 percent clear but almost certainly due to a combination of factors related to our incursions into what was a relatively untouched ecosystem. The introduction of new weed species, increased burning, increased intensity of cattle grazing, roads, mining and continuing pressure of feral animals such as pigs and cats are all contributing to the decline of our natural values.

As has been the case on many of our fauna surveys in the Gulf and Cape York, no mammals were caught in mammal traps; however one small mammal fell into a pit trap, a tiny Delicate Mouse.

Kangaroos and wallabies were common – these species appear to be favoured by the changes we make to the environment in many cases. Antilopine Wallaroos, Common Wallaroos, Agile Wallabies and Grey Kangaroos were all observed.

Due to the windy conditions at night we didn't do much spotlighting, but a drive along the road produced a handsome Black-headed Python. We then spotlighted a granite ridge which produced Cogger's Velvet Geckos and a Burton's Legless Lizard. In a larger granite outcrop we found a family

of Hosmer's Spiny-tailed skinks. These lizards wedge themselves into crevices and the sharp backward-directed spines on their tail make them difficult to extract.

Another notable reptile record was of a lizard, the Southern Cape York Finesnout which is listed as near threatened, caught in a pit trap.

During the day, hundreds of bird observations were made, of over 100 species. Notable observations were Latham's Snipe, Australasian Painted Snipe and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters.

Sitting by a waterhole bird-watching might be considered a fairly safe and harmless activity, but one group was surprised to observe a large Mulga Snake come down to drink and then above a Common Tree Snake was seen waiting in ambush for unwary birds flying in for a drink.

On a previous day a Papuan Whip Snake was also seen at this waterhole, feeding on an unfortunate Bumpy Rocket Frog, the only frog observed.

Don Franklin kindly spent much of the weekend identifying plants, particularly the eucalypts and wattles on the property. There are at least 12 species of wattle including one very small species whose seed pods smell like curry when crushed, and approximately 16 species of eucalypt.

One of the highlights of the weekend was observing the incredible variety of insects coming to the light sheets set up by David Rentz who is now undertaking the painstaking work of identifying all these species and cataloguing the photographs.

Thank you to all who contributed to a great weekend.