

The Murrumbidgee Naturalist



August 2013 - Issue #207

Journal of the Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists Inc.

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Objects of the Club

To facilitate and promote the knowledge of natural history, and to encourage the preservation and protection of the Australian natural environment, especially that of the Murrumbidgee River Valley

**Group at
Taleeban
Looking for
reptiles**
Rowena Whiting



Barking Gecko
*Underwoodisaurus
milii*
Eric Whiting

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CONTRIBUTIONS

For the next issue by
Wednesday 4 September

To Rowena Whiting

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**Art and Photo Display
is on the 10 August**

Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists Inc. Office Bearers and Annual Subscriptions

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MEETINGS ARE HELD ON THE SECOND THURSDAY EACH MONTH, EXCEPT JANUARY, AT THE Seminar Room 1, Block 34, Dept. Industry & Investment at 7.30 PM

FIELD TRIPS NORMALLY TAKE PLACE ON THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND.

INTENDING NEW MEMBERS, GUESTS AND VISITORS WELCOME.

Membership enquiries:

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Annual Subscriptions:	Family	\$45.00	Adult/Single	\$35.00	Journal only/Concession	\$25.00

Opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily represent the policies or views of the Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists Inc.

MFN Art and Photography Exhibition

is to be held at Yanco Agricultural Institute on Sat 10th August 2013 starting at 6.30pm.

The evening will also be a **farewell to Bill Moller** who has retired and is moving to the coast.

We invite you to display your work at the exhibition.

Again the exhibition is entitled "A focus on the natural environment".

This year people are encouraged to display their work as an individual item or around a theme or as a visual story around a theme e.g. a national park/s, MFN outing/s, wetlands, birds, plants, man's impact on the environment etc.

Over the years exhibitors have chosen a range of mediums including photography, painting, sketching and sculpture. You may even choose to exhibit works that are of more than one medium.

Please come and share the evening with us.

The evening will include a meal. The menu this year is

- Nibbles
- Soup
- Pasta
- Slices and Coffee

Please contribute something to the evening meal.

Please contact Penny or Nella with any questions you may have.

Regards Nella Smith and Penny Williams

Please RSVP by Wednesday 7 August 2013 if you are coming and/or exhibiting and give an indication of what food you are able to bring.

Nella Smith 02 6959 1210 or email tensmith@bigpond.com or

Penny Williams 02 6953 3525 or email merrigum2705@bigpond.com

Visit to Taleeban mallee

About 16 members and others visited Taleeban mallee on Sunday 28 July 2013. Taleeban mallee is 18km east of Rankins Springs, and 4 km south of the Mid-Western highway. The area is Reserve 1362 for mining purposes, about 575 ha, meaning it is a significant sample of mallee vegetation, being four times the area of Pulletop Nature Reserve.

The minerals of interest have been wolfram (to make tungsten) and tin, lying about 20m below the surface, associated with intrusions of granite. There are many old shafts, recently fenced for safety reasons, and a ground tank to catch water for simple ore processing. At the time of my first visit in October 1976, there were two men working the shafts, living in a caravan, and feeding a tame malleefowl that had a nest nearby.

After we arrived and parked near some shafts in the middle of the block, Bill led us on a walk towards the south, checking on 2 old malleefowl nests. In 1977 I surveyed about 124ha in a strip running through the reserve, finding 2 recent nests and 16 old nests, showing that the area had been good habitat for malleefowl. The last malleefowl seen by NPWS staff was in 1999, and last nesting known by Bill was probably a couple of years later.

The mallee birds were fairly quiet during our recent visit, with calls of White-fronted Honeyeater and Western Bellbird heard. The mallee is a typical association of Pointed Mallee, Congoo Mallee and Yorrell, the Yorrell

being in flower. The Taleeban mallee is distinctive for its



high diversity of shrubs, being towards the eastern end of the range for mallee on red sandy loam soils. We found Dwarf Greenhood orchids and the leaves of several other orchid species, suggesting that a visit in a month or two would be rewarding.

After lunch the group went north, checking another long-unused malleefowl nest. Bill tried playing the call of the Shy Heath-wren, and this threatened bird responded quickly, giving everyone good views. Because there were old huts near the shafts, there is now plenty of old corrugated iron to turn over, with 5 Barking Geckos under one sheet, and a shingleback under another. We even found another group of people, from Rankins Springs, out visiting the bush. Finally we found a few plants of Velvet Bush, another of the rare plants found in this eastern mallee.

John Brickhill

Bitten by the Bittern bug

The Australasian Bittern is known to use rice crops, but just how important are they for this endangered waterbird? To answer this question and raise awareness of this poorly-known species, Matt Herring spent more than 40 days traipsing around the rice in the NSW Riverina during the 2012-2013 season. Together with the Rice Growers' Association of Australia, Birdlife Australia and other key organisations including the Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists, the Bitterns in Rice Project is developing bittern-friendly guidelines for rice farms.

As you will see, rice farmers can take the lead on bittern conservation, tailoring their rice growing techniques to suit bitterns, as well as creating habitat outside of the rice-growing season. A short film - Bitterns Boom in Rice - was recently launched. Matt Herring will be showing it at the August Meeting – see coming events.



**Deserted Malleefowl mound – Rowena Whiting
A patch of Dwarf Greenhoods - Rowena Whiting
Shy Heathwren, a rare glimpse - Phillip Williams**



Night Parrot Report

Ken Cross from Mapleton in Queensland attended the official meeting at the Queensland Museum by John Young when he showed photos and a short video of his recent discovery of the very rare Night Parrot.

Following are some of the notes Ken took of the meeting:

Habitat: South-west Queensland in the Lake Eyre Basin near gibber plains with remnant spinifex country. The spinifex is just under 2m in height and had recently seeded and had not been burnt. The area is on private land which is a grazing property, however, the land had little grazing pressure where the birds were found. It was also noted that few other bird or mammal species were recorded at the site.



Behaviour: There was a mixed reaction by the bird to playback – often not calling for weeks at a time. It was very sensitive to disturbance and remained silent even though other parrot species were heard flying about at night.

John managed after many weeks to record the call of a male bird and when he played it back with the recorder at ground level it caused a territorial reaction causing the bird to come into view. The bird walked between the spinifex clumps and puffed itself up and spread its wings to look intimidating with fast hopping jumps.

Call: The bird only called at night and it was immediately identifiable as a parrot. John likened the call to that of a Pied Honeyeater. The female had a different call from the male.

Male/Female differences: The male bird is slightly larger, brighter yellow further up the breast under the crop and also brighter in the under-tail area.

Other observations:

- Different behaviours observed on different nights of the male's reaction to his call playback. As well as the behaviour described above, the bird also reacted by banging its head on the ground, raking the ground with its feet, circling the spinifex clump with increasing excitement and maintaining a puffed-up posture - "like an echidna".
- The male bird had a variety of roosting positions in the day in different clumps of spinifex over different days it was observed. It was perched off the ground in the centre of the clump.
- The female was nesting deep within the clump. The nest was thick and made of broken spinifex and lined. It was off the ground and deep within the spinifex clump. John confirmed nesting success as he heard the sound of young in the nest.
- Possibly 2 pairs of birds over the 'greater area' of his observation. Sighting and sound recordings were made over several visits and photographic evidence was achieved on 24 May 2013.
- The birds are partly insectivorous with moth wings and grasshopper legs adjacent to roost sites. The droppings were very chalky/calcium filled with little evidence of herbage in diet - although some was noted. This suggests the birds are possibly opportunistic with regards to diet – a bit like small mammals in arid areas.
- Like small mammals, the bird gets its water from eating insects/invertebrate prey. Lack of water dependence making the previous searches for the birds around water holes at night unproductive.
- A small number of feathers were collected and sent to the WA Museum for DNA testing.

John's successful strategy which eventually paid off after years of intense searching was to follow fence lines looking for feathers, searching lined nests of other birds looking for Night Parrot feathers, searching caves and putting seed out at outback waterholes. But the most successful strategy was to spend long nights listening in suitable habitat and finally being able to record the call which led to the eventual successful photos of the bird.

Max O'Sullivan

Our visit to the Jurong Bird Park in Singapore, 14 April 2013

The Jurong Bird Park covers an area of about 20 ha and boasts over 380 bird species from all over the world. We arrived at the park at about 9.00am and it was open though very quiet. The park didn't seem to really start to receive most visitors until about 10.00am!

We were greeted at the front entrance by a wonderful display of orchids.

We headed to a night house where there were a number of owls including the Snowy Owl, Spotted Wood Owl and Buffy Fish Owl.



Birds at the Park include a number of Australian species including Parrots, Pelicans, Cassowaries, Cockatoos, Emus and Night Herons. One area that attracted a lot of people of all ages was where they sold bird seed to allow people to hand feed rainbow lorikeets.

A close up of one of the orchids, Snowy Owl (above), "Cock-of-the-Rock" (below). Photos: Penny Williams
Rhinoceros Hornbill: photo Phillip Williams

It was also interesting to see birds closely related to our own e.g. those from the Kingfisher family such as the Blue-breasted Kingfisher and the Ruddy Kingfisher. The Scarlet Ibis were certainly

more colourful than our more familiar local species.



Breeding programs were in place for some of the bird species in the park for example the Royal Ramblers. We saw eggs in their nests and there seemed to be a large number of them in the enclosure.

Many of the birds attracted our attention because of their colour. One bird came up to Phil's camera and pecked at the lens. We can only think that he saw his reflection in the glass. The aptly named "Andean Cock-of-the-Rock" posed for us as well.

Whilst many people love



to see the flamingos at the zoo the highlight for me was the toucans and hornbills. I had never seen such birds before. These birds were colourful and had very oddly shaped beaks. Phil enjoyed the Macaws as they were brightly coloured birds which seemed to have plenty of personality.

It was certainly worth the visit and we spent the whole day there wandering around and came away with a few photos!!

Penny Williams

Those people at the June meeting were able to see many of the lovely photos Penny and Phillip took during their visit to the bird park as well as some great night shots of the city. It was amazing how colourful the birds are; though those in cages made photographing them a challenge. Many thanks to them both for their presentation including an interesting commentary from Penny. I think many of us will be planning a stopover in Singapore on our next overseas trip. Rowena.

Citizen Scientist

Did you know that you could be a Citizen Scientist – many members are as they contribute to the various recording

One conservationist is promoting 2013 as 'the year of citizen science' and has picked his personal favourites from around the world. Here is one:

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count

<http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>

If you thought citizen science is new then think again. The Christmas Bird Count is in its 113th year and weighs in as the longest-running citizen science project in the world. Every winter tens of thousands of Americans brave all manner of conditions armed with binoculars and checklists, completing surveys right across the USA.

With more than a century of data now available, this has offered researchers and conservationists an unparalleled insight into the long-term health of bird populations in North America. Its success has spawned other programmes abroad, as well as more specific surveys focusing on breeding birds or rare species.

Wildflower Count

www.plantlife.org.uk/things_to_do/wildflowers_count

Every year Plantlife runs a huge, nationwide count in the UK. It is good fun and helps keep track of common and rare species alike. Plantlife works hard to make this accessible to anyone who wants to get involved, and does a great job.

Participants are allocated a 1km grid square close to their home and sent an ID guide with 99 of the UK's wild flowers and a simple recording form. Particularly keen folk can revisit their site throughout summer and include extra species if they wish. All the data eventually goes into the National Biodiversity Network database, which is freely available for all to access.

Source: The Biologist

Contributed by Eric Whiting

Closer to home there is an article in the current issue of Nature NSW, journal of National Parks Association of NSW (of which MFN is a member) about a survey done by a group of Citizen Scientists who have set up infra-red cameras to monitor what animals are on their properties. A large number of foxes were recorded which surprised the landowners as they had not noticed this activity; steps are being taken to eliminate them.

Visit www.npansw.org.au/data for more information about Citizen Scientists or ask Penny for the journal.

Unidentified Membership payment

The Treasurer, Phil Tenison would like to know who paid \$35 into the Bank account on the 11 June

How it came to be

Have you ever looked at a landscape and wondered how it came to be?

When I first started travelling up and down the minor roads for my plant surveys in the early 1990's, I was intrigued by the way Frying Pan Creek – that's the small creek draining the area between the Narrandera Ranges and the granite rise running north from Grong Grong – takes a sudden bend westward into Mejum Swamp thence to Lake Coolah. Why didn't it continue southwards east of the Bogolong Hills to join the Murrumbidgee River?

Recently I have been looking at the topography of the area again. Frying Pan Creek does not have a large catchment. From the map most creek lines come from the Walleroobie Ranges through a shallow gap north of the Grong Grong Granite into a broad almost flat area. All of the creek lines on the map have breaks along their courses and on the ground there is little indication of any creeks at all. Most of the area has scattered Boree that presumably used to be a Boree woodland indicating deep alluvial soils.

In a wetter climate – the Murrumbidgee River is believed to carry four to five times its present flow in parts of the Tertiary Period – the creek could have wound its way through the hills possibly out towards Corbie Hill Road way looking at the contours.

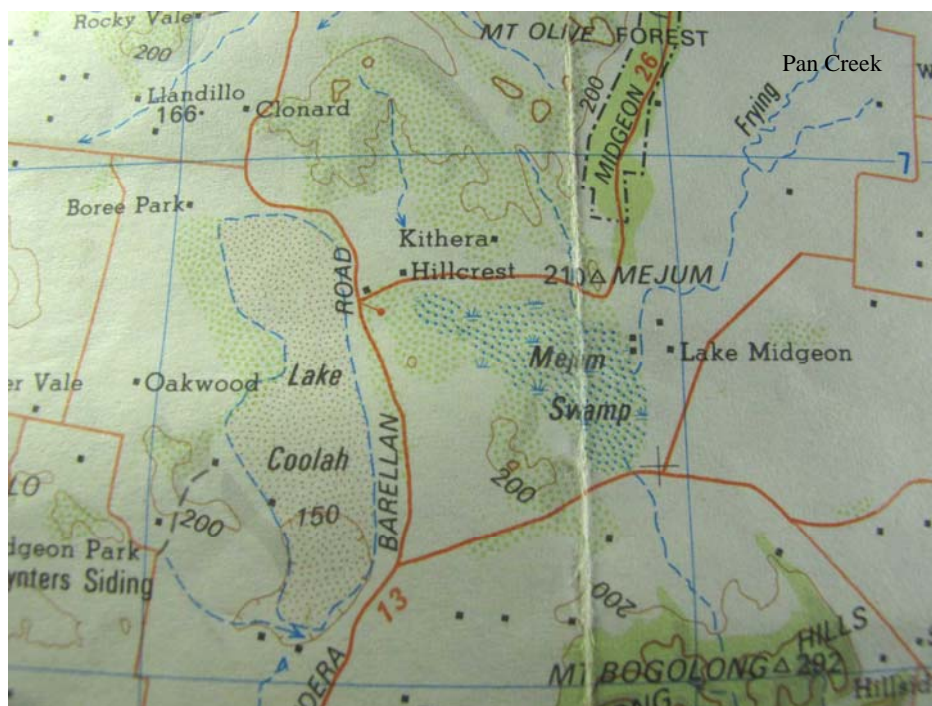
On the eastern side of Mejum Swamp there is a distinct raised crescent partly attached to the slight rise separating Mejum from Thompsons Swamp. (The contours on the map are partly obscured by the words 'Closed Road' and the lines of a track.) Thompsons Swamp is also fed by Frying Pan Creek. The crescent shape is typical of a lunette, the sandhill blown up from terminal lake. Koonadan is a good example. But why a terminal lake? Why didn't Frying Pan maintain a simple flow line?

I believe the reason is that the Narrandera Ranges had a period of rising. They may still be! The Cadell Fault between Deniliquin and Moama caused a ridge some 25,000 years ago and is still active. Like the Great Dividing Range the Cadell Fault's the result of sideways pressure coming from the Pacific Tectonic Plate being subducted under the Australian Plate. During the last Ice Age the climate in Australia was much drier. An early Frying Pan Creek would not have enough flow to cut down through the rising hills. The Murrumbidgee River on the other hand was still big enough to keep a channel open, although the gap at Narrandera must have been a choke causing a sluggish river of very little descent between Wagga and Narrandera as evidenced by the numerous anabranch creeks (Old Man Creek, Poison Water Holes, etc.).

Is there any other evidence of the Ranges rising? At this stage I don't know of any. I have been looking at the three or four terrace levels in Store Creek in the Cocoparras and wondered if they are not the result of the land rising. A terrace is left when a river is rejuvenated by steepening its course.

We may think we live in a very stable geological landscape, but just how stable is it?

Eric Whiting



MEMBERS' SIGHTINGS

These sightings are from members' observations. Please check with the relevant person before quoting any record.

Pied Currawong [35]	Main Dam Yanco Ag. Institute	04/07/13	Bill Moller
Tawny Frogmouth [2]	Canal bank nr pumphouse Narrandera	05/07/13	Betty Bradney
Red Wattlebird	Petersham Rd Leeton	08/07/13	Phillip Williams
See Phillip's picture below.			
Double-barred Finch	Fivebough Wetlands	13/07/13	Penny Williams
Aka: Double-barrelled Finch according to Penny!!			
Brolga [3]	McCracken Rd water storage dam	14/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Ground Cuckoo-Shrike [2]	Koonadan Rd, Leeton	14/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Peregrine Falcon	Cantrill Rd. Leeton	14/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Red-necked Stint	Fivebough Wetlands	12/07/13	Keith Hutton
Nankeen Night Heron [2]	Yanco Park Lake	16/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Pink-eared Duck [4]	Yanco Park Lake	16/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Olive-backed Oriole [4]	'The Winery', Binya	16/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Great Crested Grebe [1]	South Wyangan Lake , Griffith	16/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Glossy Ibis [1]	Fivebough Wetlands	21/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Unexpected at this time of year.			
Australian Reed Warbler [1]	Fivebough Wetlands	21/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
Overwintering bird and not calling.			
Restless Flycatcher [1]	Fivebough Wetlands	21/07/13	Max O'Sullivan
This single bird has been recorded regularly over the past 4 months.			
Superb Parrot [10]	Mackellar Road near the Yanco Feedlot	25/07/13	Nella Smith
The parrots were feeding beside the road and Nella said they were all male birds.			
Plumed Whistling-duck [2,000+]	Ponds at the Yanco Feedlot	22/07/13	Ben Kschenka
Magpie Goose [22]	Ponds at the Yanco Feedlot	22/07/13	Ben Kschenka
Ben also reported, along with photos, of a pair of Superb Parrots dead on the road where Nella saw them on the Saturday before -victims of roadkill.			
Shy Heathwren	Taleeban outing	28/07/13	Group
Ground Cuckoo-Shrike [4]	Near Tuckerbil in a paddock	30/07/13	Keith Hutton
White-winged Wren	Tuckerbil area – several groups seen	01/08/13	Max O'Sullivan
Brown Songlark [4 males]	Tuckerbil area	01/08/13	
Blue-winged Parrot – no birds were found after an intensive search of the area around Koonadan/Tuckerbil.			
Keith Hutton has reported the return of Fairy Martins for the Spring as well as a Wood Sandpiper . Both species were seen on 28 July.			

The following are some interesting reports from Keith for his quarterly surveys of Fivebough and Tuckerbil.

Fivebough counts of interest:

Freckled Duck [35]	Fivebough Wetlands	28/07/13	Keith Hutton
There was an interesting report on Birding-aus on 30/07/13 of 1345 Freckled Ducks at the Broome Sewerage Works in Western Australia – so many rare birds for so far north.			
Pink-eared Duck [2,500] – There were 3,000 recorded for the same survey period last year.			
Black Swan [270] – Keith found no evidence of any nesting swans.			
Australian Shoveller [84] – larger numbers than have been recorded in the past three years.			
Grey Teal [5,000] -certainly the largest number for years plus another 5,500 at Tuckerbil.			
Hoary-headed Grebe [25] – No Australasian Grebe were recorded on 30/07 on the survey.			
Straw-necked Ibis [131] - again very large numbers compared with previous counts.			
Brolga [5] – it seems the 30 odd birds that were present a month ago have moved on.			
Purple Swamphen [230] – lower numbers than on the April count.			
Red-kneed Dotterel [1] – compared with 221 in April - where have they all gone to?			

Black-fronted Dotterel [25] – this species seems to return for the winter whilst the Red-kneed move away.
Red-necked Stint [1]
Wood Sandpiper [1]
Double-banded Plover [3]
Red-necked Avocet [90] – compared with only 3 this time last year.

Tuckerbil counts of interest:

Black Swan [32]
Grey Teal [5,500] – most were in the Basin Dam - the same count in 2012 yielded 1,560.
Black Duck [332] – in the count in July 2012 there were 417 recorded.
Brolga [5] – there were none seen on 01/08/13 by Allan Richards and myself.
Black-winged Stilt [208] – with 337 recorded at the same time last year.

Ben Kschenka from Narrandera sent the following observation:

You remember on 17th August last year I wrote this:

"Magpies and Apostlebirds:

A group of apostlebirds discovered the feeders about 6 weeks ago. Aside from the entertainment provided by their complex (and often hilarious) social structure, they're worth mentioning because they almost never arrive without at least one magpie. The magpie's "role" seems to be to shepherd them back into the tree. Every time the apostlebirds come down to the ground to get the dropped seed the magpie will swoop in and semi-aggressively hop around them until they're all back in the tree. The magpie(s) will then withdraw to the fence line and wait for them to "stray" again. Fascinating! I can only assume that because the magpies like to forage in the leaf litter under the tree, they think they are preserving their food source by chasing away the competitor."

Well, they came back today, with the exact same behaviour described above. There were two Magpies playing shepherd today. Interesting that the "6 weeks ago" mentioned above coincides with about this time last year. It seems to be becoming an annual event. There doesn't seem to be much written about the relationship between Magpies and Apostlebirds. Might be worth me properly documenting it, especially if it reoccurs predictably. Better dust off the video camera!

Recently Griffith City Council Tidy Towns & Sustainable Community Sub-committee awarded Enid Atkinson (our only Life Member) and Bill Moller a certificate of appreciation for Commitment to improving the Griffith Natural Environment.

Enid received hers for Participation in Clean-up events, Active member of MFN, Keystone member of Urban Rural Links Landcare group, revegetation works at Scenic Hill and Community Gardens, Guest Speaker at schools talking about Flora & Fauna and Native Seed Collection.

Bill received a similar award for being a founding member of MFN, Organisation of Griffith Biodiversity Survey, Improvement works at Campbell's, Nericon and Fivebough Swamps, Native Seed Collection, and for participation in Clean up events.

He also received a Highly Commended award for the Ron Inglis Memorial Tidy towns Award.

Congratulations Bill and Enid we are all very proud of your achievements



Red Wattlebird in our garden 25 June 2013. I have only seen these a couple of times and both times were in the same week. Phillip Williams



**** COMING EVENTS ****

A reminder that subscriptions are due as at June 30. Details of amounts and how to pay were in July's issue of the newsletter. Contact Phil Tenison on 6951 2209 (Wk) 6953 4869 (Hme)

- 8 August Thursday** **Yanco Meeting** at 7:30pm in the Seminar Room 1, Block 34 at Industry & Investment NSW, Yanco Ag Institute.
Guest Speaker: Matt Herring
Topic: 'Bitterns in rice: opportunities for marrying food production and nature conservation in the Riverina'
Contact: Nella Smith 6959 1210
- 10 August Saturday** **Art and Photographic Exhibition**
Will be held at the Yanco Agricultural Institute at 6:30pm with a soup and pasta meal. (Bring food to share). **See page 2 for full details.**
Please note the organisers would like the exhibits to be submitted prior to the night. There will be a small charge to cover costs.
Contacts: Penny Williams 02 6953 3524 or Nella Smith 02 6959 1210
- 24 August Saturday** **Bushwalk: South West Woodland Nature Reserve "Stackpoole" Precinct**
Note change of day to Saturday
Meet at the Griffith Tourist Info Centre at 8.30am
Bring Morning Tea & Lunch
For further info contact Nella Smith 69 591210
- 25 - 31 August** **EnviroWeek**
- 4 September Wednesday** **Copy for the September newsletter is due.** Please send to Rowena – Email: ericwhiting4@bigpond.com. Phone: 6953 2612.
- 2 - 8 September** **Landcare Week**
- 7 September Saturday** **National Threatened Species Day**
- 12 September Thursday** **Yanco Meeting** at 7:30pm in the Seminar Room 1, Block 34 at Industry & Investment NSW, Yanco Ag Institute.
Topic: TBA
- 26 – 27 October** **NSW and ACT Twitchathon 2013**

Dates of other events you may be interested in

- 22-23 August** **Murrumbidgee Landcare forum** at Junee, Phillip Toyne is the keynote speaker.
- 11 – 14 October** **Spring Camp of the South East Australian Naturalists' Association (SEANA)** at Nurmurkah, Vic.
Hosted by the Broken Creek Field Naturalist's Club. Outings to the River Red Gum forests and wetlands of the River Murray, Cadell Fault, remnant Grey Box Woodlands, time with the Yorta Yorta people, cruise on the Murray, a full day birding excursion will be on offer.
Eric and Rowena Whiting 6953 2612 have the contact details.