Friends of Urrbrae Wetland

View from the Chair

This is my last "View from the Chair" as my time is up and I hand over to the next president/chair.

Finally, by the time you read this:

1. The bird hide will be up and running with its supporting set of educational work-sheets. The official opening is in October.
2. The signs for the walking tracks will be in place. I anticipate that the creek track will be completed. Also we should have made progress with the individual track's information sheets providing the story and significant features of each track environment.
3. We should be on the way to building the native bird bee hotel, if all goes to plan.
4. Negotiations with another group of volunteers will have resulted in us getting assistance from some young people to install our 16 bird breeding boxes.

Need I mention that all this takes place while the normal ongoing planting, maintenance and weed control continue and are still the priority core of our activities. And of course, none of this would be achievable without our generous and hardworking volunteers.

Open Day
20 October 1-4.30pm

Our next Open Day will be Sunday, October 20 and we hope to see you all there to enjoy spring at the Wetland.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank our editor, Robyn, for providing me with these opportunities in her very interesting and highly professional newsletters.

Jim, signing off.

Our visit to Salisbury Wetland was fascinating, and inspirational community wetland management. The bird hide (pictured) gave us ideas for our design.

Fungi flourish at the Wetland

As an addition to our winter tasks of weeding, planting, and assisting with flood mitigation, we have found some surprises at the Urrbrae Wetland.

A small number of volunteers have been recording the rich array of fungi growing through our winters. It's been amazing the different species we have found, and are trying to identify. There are of course a few introduced species, but a remarkable number of the finds are local indigenous fungi.

The names are fun too: we think we have Slippery Jack, Puffballs, and Weeping Bolete, to name a few.

The first person to take a serious look at SA fungi was John Cleland, whose records were published in 1934, and current knowledge has refined his initial work of collecting 16000 specimens.

Fungus is an interesting plant as the caps we see are only the tip of the iceberg as the Hypogean (underground) part of the plant is extensive, and probably links all the caps in a given area, sometimes in a 'fairy ring' that expands in diameter each year under the right conditions.

Wen-Ai has made a wonderful compendium of photos, some of which we have identified, and some of which remain a mystery.

Here are some examples. If you know what they are, or would like an electronic copy of the booklet for your information, please contact us.

BTW there is no scientific difference between a mushroom and a toadstool. However in common usage the latter name is often used for poisonous or inedible fungi, probably because of the connection to toads, which can be poisonous to other animals.

Our research continues…

Photos L-R: unknown, ,unknown, unknown, Coral Fungus (Ramaria Australiana), Scarlet Bracket (Pyconoperus coccineus)

Bird of prey

The Collared sparrowhawk (*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*) is identified by its size and style of flight while on the move. A regular but uncommon visitor to the Wetland. Smaller and finer than the goshawk, it has a faster, flicking and more flexible flight when taking prey (up to the size of Rosella and Teal). Hence it is much feared by our Wetland bird populations, and the cause of noisy and panicked behaviour by birds when it's around! It is also recognised by its short and square cut tail in flight.

This bird of prey feeds mostly on smaller birds, small mammals and reptiles. It breeds from August to December, with a shallow platform nest of small sticks lined with eucalyptus leaves with 2 to 4 eggs, 10m - 30m high in a living tree, or occasionally in an old crow's nest. The female is considerably larger and more powerful than the male.

It is widespread in Australia and Tasmania but uncommon. It is usually seen singly or in pairs. We see them rarely as they survey the area for possible prey.

Ants in our pants!

"All ants belong to extended families, and carry their prey home to share. Unselfishness is the rule. Everything they do is for their colony's good."

Bill Mason, *Little Creatures Who Run the World*

Gotta love 'em

How many times have we seen one of our members jumping around wildly trying to get ants out of their protective gear, or rushing to our new toilet block to strip off and free the little pests? There are numerous nests across the Wetland, which is great, as it means our ecosystem is healthy, but not so good for our comfort as we weed, plant and tend to the flora. In fact some members are allergic to the 'inch ant' (*Myrmecia forficata*) bite, so we take their presence seriously.

While they can be annoying, they are a critical part of our semi-arid environment. As they forage from their ground or tree nests they leave a pheromone trail for others in the colony to follow. There is normally one queen, but there could be more than 1000 infertile workers keeping the colony functioning.

Ants in Australia currently include 1300 species and subspecies (there are about 15000 worldwide, but it seems that only 1 in 5 species is described as yet). The most dangerous ant in the world, which uses both sting and jaws, is the bulldog ant (*Myrmecia pyriformis* see photo) found in coastal Australia. There have been three documented fatalities since 1936. A common genus, *Camponotus* studied by the eminent South Australian researcher Archie McArthur, is an interesting place to start, having 1443 species. Certain species of this genus are famous as Honey-Pot ants (*Myrmecocystus*), as yet unsighted at the Wetland, who's 'repletes' are used as living store rooms of food against hard times - and are tasty! These are of culinary, spiritual and artistic significance to Aboriginal Australians.

For an enthusiast the entrance to the nest can be a good guide to identification. At the Wetland sandy nests tend not to disturb the lay of the land, and present a 'field' of tiny access holes (see photo). *Camponotus gasseri* are living in our planted Red Gums, a favourite home on the Adelaide Plains.

We can easily find nests in an open area, and a firetrack or driveway are excellent locations. They can cover an area of several square metres, and of course the nest can extend metres underground.

Can ants predict rain?

This question remains unanswered, although there are plenty who claim to use their movements reliably. But they have evolved some astonishing ways of dealing with flooding, which happens regularly in the ephemeral ponds of the Wetland. Apart from clever architecture, and moving larvae and valuable adults around, they can hold their breath!

When completely submerged in cool (5-7°C) water, it was found that workers of four coastal ant species were able to survive for an astonishing 8-9 days.

Australian mangrove ants (*Polyrhachis sokolova*), subject to daily flooding, build bell-shaped water tight chambers that trap bubbles of air, and some others use their heads to block holes.

Sweet Appleberry

Billardiera cymosa will adorn the western wall of our new toilet block. We are hoping that this sunny trellised position with suit it well. This plant already features on the Urrbrae Wetland indigenous Plant Trail. http://www.urrbraewetlandlc.org/uploads/9/8/6/1/9861225/sweet_apple_berry.pdf

The Sweet apple berry acts as a light climber, or will twirl on itself to make a small shrub if trained a little. Flowering in summer with cream to purple flowers, it is particularly adaptable to the suburban garden. The fruits are edible, and have a mild aniseed taste. It will attract seed-eating birds and lizards.

Focus on Volunteers

On the Committee

Most members take a turn at some added responsibility from time to time.

At our recent AGM, the committee composition changed a little. We thank Chair Jim Hirsch for his marvellous 5 years of leadership and support, good humour and constant flexibility. Under his care many projects have been achieved. Liz Morrell has our thanks for her sterling job as Treasurer for the last 5 years, with a no-fuss and efficient approach.

New members

Welcome to David Gooley, our new Chairperson, and Vivienne Neilssen, our new Treasurer. Chris Adams will continue as our very able and hard working Secretary.

Other elected committee members are Ian Budge, Kevin Handley and Jim Hirsch.

Want to know more?

Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urrbrae_Wetland search 'Urrbrae Wetland'

Contact: Jim Hirsch, previous Chair, for information: jimfran@adam.com.au

Urrbrae Wetland Learning Centre: www.urrbraewetlandlc.org/

Site visits: Wetland Manager, Vanessa Greenslade, 8272 6010

New volunteers are welcome. Drop by any Tuesday morning between 9.00-11.00 to make contact.

The recently built lean-to (right) has added some valuable storage space, particularly for planting materials.

Open Days at the Wetland

Not only did we have our own Open Day earlier in the year, but we assisted with the School's Open Day during Science Week - a new initiative. There was a good deal of cross-fertilisation, and a great chance for volunteers and students to work together. The bark-painting student station was included this year with great success.