

Gilberton Station Field Weekend

Text by Michael Anthony

Photographs by Michael Anthony and Keith & Lindsay Fisher

Gilberton Station is about 100 kilometres south-east of Georgetown and embraces numerous land types including sandstone ridges, scarps and ledges, various eucalypt woodlands, Lancewood *Acacia shirleyi* & spinifex *Triodia sp.*, and the upper Gilbert River and tributaries. The property has two Nature Refuges on it and one of these, along Granite Creek, is undergoing rubber vine control through a project funded through NGRMG and the National Landcare Programme.

A field weekend involving the North Queensland Natural History Group was organised for the Queen's Birthday weekend in June 2015 to investigate the flora and fauna of the property. Data collected would add to previous surveys undertaken on the property in 2008, 2011 and 2014.

Six of the group arrived early to carry out a survey to monitor bird populations along Granite Creek in response to the weed treatment. Spotlighting for nocturnal fauna and diurnal active searches were also undertaken at the six sites and the woody plant species assessed for each location.

The rest of the crew began to arrive on the Friday evening and Saturday morning bringing the attendance for the weekend up to eighteen. We split up into groups reflecting individual expertise and interest and also allow people to learn by going out with experts in different fields.

Eric Vanderduys from CSIRO attended the weekend, setting up some pit traps at some of his many study sites in the area. These yielded a number of interesting small skink and gecko species, even one small goanna Storr's Monitor *Varanus storri*. Three young herpetologists attending the weekend were particularly keen on this activity!

Groups of bird enthusiasts also investigated the avifauna at a number of sites around the property, including the two Nature Refuges, along the Gilbert River and at a nearby lake.

During a bird survey earlier in the week a Koala *Phascolarctos cinereus* was sighted in a River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* along Granite Creek so it was decided to make an effort to locate more individuals. Despite a concerted effort, no further koalas were sighted but many bird observations were made along the river where there were numerous paperbark trees *Melaleuca fluviatilis* in flower. Species sighted feeding on these flowers included numerous honeyeater species rarely seen in the region - the Singing *Lichenostomus virescens*, Grey-fronted *L. plumulus*, Spiny-cheeked *Acanthogenys rufogularis*, Striped *Plectorhyncha lanceolata* and Black *Sugomel niger*.



Koala *Phascolarctos cinereus* up a gum tree along Granite Creek. Photo by Michael Anthony

Lyn French of Gilberton station kindly took some naturalists on a tour of the aboriginal rock art located near a spring at the top of the sandstone escarpment. The escarpment country hosts some interesting and spectacular eucalypts: a woolly butt *Eucalyptus chartaboma*, the smooth-barked Gilbert River Ghost Gum *Corymbia gilbertensis* and the Newcastle Range Bloodwood *Corymbia serendipita* with bloodwood bark on the trunk and smooth, white upper branches.

Another spring in the sandstone country was investigated both by day and by night. The first sortie, in the afternoon, revealed a Mt Cooper Striped Lerista *Lerista vittata*, along with some other faster-moving skinks that evaded capture. The pandanus-lined spring and surrounding vine-thicket vegetation gave way to some spectacular sandstone formations, with thick spinifex in between that we vowed to return to after dark.

Walking up toward the spring after dinner, the first animal sighted was a small ground gecko, tentatively identified as a Stone Gecko *Diplodactylus vittatus*. Two frogs were observed sitting on damp substrate next to the pools within the spring complex. The first was an Ornate Burrowing Frog *Platyplectrum ornatum*, more commonly seen after rain, and a Bumpy Rocket Frog *Litoria inermis*,

one of the more dry-adapted of our frogs that can be seen well into the dry season near remnants of waterbodies.

A third amphibian, the Common Green Tree Frog *Litoria caerulea* was observed on a sandstone rock face further up on the ridge, then a large gecko, tentatively identified as the Marbled Velvet Gecko *Oedura marmorata* on another rock face. This area lies on the eastern limit of this species range, and the western limit of another similar species, Cogger's Velvet Gecko *O. coggeri*. Also found on this evening was the Northern Velvet Gecko *O. castelnaui*, an arboreal species found active on a tree-trunk in woodland below the escarpment.

The previous two night's spotlighting were spent assisting Eric in pursuit of another gecko, the tiny White-striped or Spinifex Striped Gecko *Diplodactylus taeniatus*. This involved a large group walking in different directions around the spinifex covered ridges staring intently into hundreds of individual clumps of spinifex with headlamps. It appeared that despite the concerted effort over two nights the gecko would elude us – particularly as the conditions were less than perfect for reptiles, being quite cool and windy. We decided late on the second evening to check out one last location in the foothills of the escarpment, and close to an hour was spent searching. Just as many of us had started to surrender to the seeming inevitable an excited shout was heard from an area of spinifex close to a large sandstone boulder and the group converged toward the light of the headlamps. On the way to this spot another shout was heard closer by and on arrival one of the tiny geckos was visible in the outer part of a clump amongst the sharp projections of spinifex. This turned out to be the second of these geckos sighted within a minute after many hours searching, and possibly minutes before we called off the search!



White-striped gecko (*Strophurus taeniatus*) from the spinifex country. Photo by Michael Anthony

One afternoon we took a trip over the hills behind the homestead, observing numbers of Antilopine Wallaroos *Macropus antilopinus* as well as even more Common Wallaroos *M. robustus* which are more common in the rocky hills near the river.

On the last full day we located a stand of the Silver-leaved Ironbark *Eucalyptus shirleyi* and stopped to investigate it prior to arrival at Lake Fred. This lake is a haven for waterbirds and many other species during this very dry period. On arrival we were greeted by Fairy *Petrochelidon ariel* and Tree Martins *P. nigricans* flying rapidly above the surface of the water. Closer observation of the waterbody revealed Australasian Grebes *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*, a Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, Black Swans *Cygnus atratus* and Pelicans *Pelecanus conspicillatus* cruising on the lakes surface along with numerous groups of ducks and pygmy-geese both on the surface and lake edges. Yellow-billed Spoonbills *Platalea flavipes*, Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis moluccus*, Australasian Darters *Anhinga novaehollandiae* and a number of cormorant species adorned the dead trees in the lake while many smaller birds utilised the lakeside vegetation.

Over the weekend and the survey during preceding days, one-hundred and forty-three vertebrate species were observed, as well as 12 butterfly species, 2 dragonflies plus over 50 species of woody plants identified.

Many thanks to the owners of Gilberton Station, Robert & Lyn and Ashley & Camilla French



Botanical discussion. Photo by Michael Anthony.



The Common Wallaroo *Macropus robustus* is everywhere on Gilberton. Photo by Keith & Lindsay Fisher



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Ornate soil-crevice skink *Notoscincus ornatus* from near the airstrip. Photo by Michael Anthony



Breakfast at Gilberton. Photo by Keith & Lindsay Fisher.



Action stations - a fast moving tree snake eluded us. Photo by Keith & Lindsay Fisher