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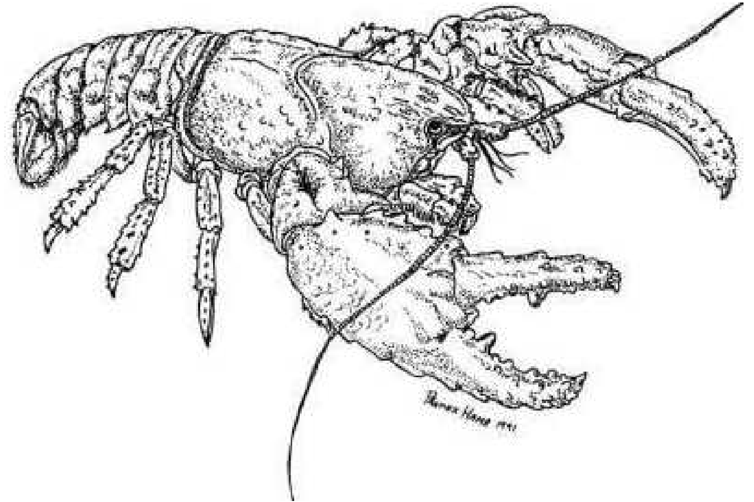

Keeping a Natural History Diary

by **Lisa Clarkson** - 21 September 2009

I have been prompted to write this article by the recent appearance of European Greenfinches (*Caduelis chloris*) outside my kitchen door. Although an introduced species to Tasmania, the Greenfinch (which looks very much like a greenish sparrow) is an uncommon visitor to my suburban garden. This recent observation prompted me to consult my natural history diary which I have kept (in earnest) for the last 5 years to ascertain my last sighting of these birds. I was quite certain that I had observed them about 5 years ago when they came to feed in my neighbour's cotoneaster bush (along with all the other exotic and native species that appear in autumn to relish the berries of these notorious weeds). Surprisingly, I had got it wrong – my first suburban encounter with the Greenfinch was 2005! Which leads me to the point of this article – the merits of keeping a written natural history diary. It is incredibly difficult to recall, from memory, all the details and timing of encounters or to unravel the natural (or not so natural) cycles of species especially now that ecosystems are subjected to such rapid environmental change. Of course, some may question the need for such detail, after all, does it really matter when I last saw Greenfinches in my neighbourhood? And yet from a personal viewpoint, I believe that those with an interest in natural history are uniquely positioned to provide the observations that can document environmental change in the local context and in far greater detail.

I first became interested in documenting my observations (of the natural kind) when a friend gave me a Gould League natural history diary for a christmas present about 16 years ago. This diary was very much in the style of a pictorial calendar and represented a year's worth of observation. For a couple of years (whilst my children were very young), I recorded small snippets about my own semi-rural garden, the weather and visitors (the faunal kind) to my property. I no longer have these lovely diaries and must have thrown them out at some stage when I became 'too busy' to fill them in. However, on joining the CNFN in 2002, I became inspired to start logging my observations again. My diaries (yes I have several different ones!) are now just simple spiral-bound note books but they have become more complex and detailed as I continue to broaden my sphere of interests and learn more about the natural world.

I have also found that a request from others for information has resulted in a further broadening of interest to include those endeavours in my own personal observations. For example, I began entering data on frog encounters to the WWF Frogs! programme in Tasmania in 2003, but have continued to document all observations in a frog diary ever since although the original programme has since disbanded in Tasmania. In addition, I have kept personal records for Robin species ever since Sarah Lloyd requested information in 2002. I have learnt a lot more about the seasonal behaviour and the cycles of these wonderful birds since I started documenting my sightings, however, as I look back upon these observations I note (with concern) that I simply do not encounter Dusky Robins (*Melanodryas vittata*) as frequently as I used to in my area. Is this a natural cycle or an ominous sign of decline of another woodland species?

Today, the value of these amateur observations is increasingly being recognised by many in scientific fields. Flannery (2005) claims that the 'jottings' of birdwatchers, fishermen and other nature watchers are one of the most powerful tools available to researchers wishing to document the response of nature to climate change. In Great Britain the long-established tradition of local enthusiasm for natural history is being tapped by the UK Phenology Network (phenology is the study of periodically recurring natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate). 24,000 amateur observers are contributing valuable information to track the shifting timing of natural events [in Steffen(ed), 2006]. A great example in Australia is the Fungimap project that uses data collected from around Australia by amateurs, many of whom had no previous experience in identifying fungi but are keen observers and quick learners!

Fortunately, amateurs can now use an array of technology such as GPS and digital photography to validate their observations and to provide evidence to support their records. These tools are increasingly important as 'collecting' becomes further prohibited (especially to the amateur). I recently regretted not using photography when I happened to stumble (literally) upon a rare fungus. I was not, at the time, aware of its rarity and did not validate my finding with a photograph but did log its location (but have subsequently been unable to find the fungus again despite a GPS reading). I therefore have no proof of this finding – and although I am sure of what I saw, because of its rarity, this observation cannot be formally accepted. I am sure there is a lesson in this!

If I haven't convinced you of the merits of keeping a natural history diary then consider its value as a legacy to future generations who just might be 'intrigued' by your encounters with species that have since become extinct. In writing this, I immediately think of my last encounter with wild Tasmanian Devils – confirmed by 3 words written in my diary, on the 26 March 2005, as 'devils heard squabbling'. Paradoxically, at no time in human history has the need for observers of the natural world been greater as radical environmental

change invokes havoc upon the natural cycles of many species and yet the world is time-poor and the art of observing is dying, considered a luxury that many cannot afford.

References

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- Flannery, T. (2005), *The Weather Makers – The History and Future Impact of Climate Change*, The Text Publishing Co., Melbourne.
- Steffen, A. (ed.), (2006), *World Changing: A Users Guide for the 21 st Century*, Abrams, New York.

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