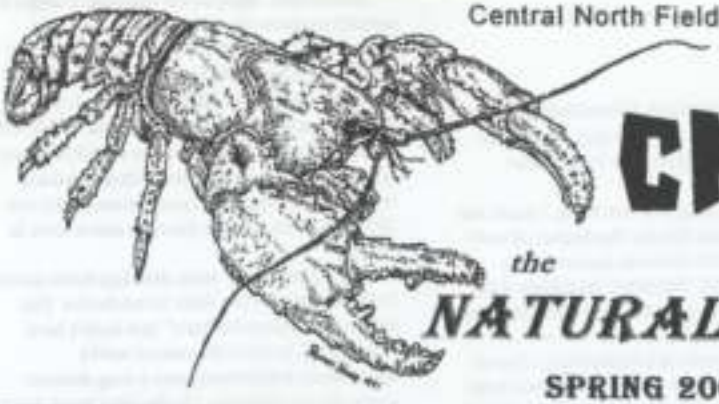
Central North Field Naturalists Inc



CNFN

the NATURAL NEWS

SPRING 2005 ISSUE

Contacts

Rod McQueen, President
35 Adelaide St
Westbury, 7303
ph 6393 2121 email: rod.mcqueen@bigpond.com
Jim Nelson, Secretary & Editor
68 Dynans Bridge Rd
Weegena, 7304
ph. 6368 1213 email: nlester@tassie.net.au
Sarah Lloyd, Treasurer (Memberships)
999 Denmans Rd
Birralee
ph. 6396 1360 email: sarahlloyd@primus.com.au

Program and Events

Note change to November walk to 2nd weekend to allow people to attend a fabulous Federation weekend as described opposite!

November 13. Meet at 10am at Miena T junction to travel on together to Iris Farm. Peter and John have invited us for a return visit to this mountain paradise. We will probably walk to the water race and the picnic waterfall. Don't miss this one!

November 27 **BBQ and AGM at Weegena Hall. Meeting at 4:30 followed by a BBQ and social evening.** Meat provided, but salads etc. welcome.

December 4. **Mt Roland** Meet at 10 am at the Gowrie Park Mt Roland walking track (O'Neils Rd.). A slow meander up the mountain looking at flora and fauna along the way. The heathland on top should be in its glory. A walk over to the head of the Minnow Falls for those who wish.

January 8. **A look at a new private forest reserve near Westbury** Meet at 10 am. at the Meander River bridge (B72 off the Bass Highway) on the road from the pub at Westbury to Birralee/ Frankford/Exeter. We'll drive on and then park along the wide verge of the road about 7 km from Westbury in case you are running late.

Federation Weekend - Koonya

Friday 4th-Sunday 6th November 2005, Koonya Field Station Tasman Peninsula

Hosted by Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club, Inc

Note: The Field Station will be open for three nights (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) so that members wishing to attend the Sunday outing and stay Sunday night before driving home can do so. This is to take advantage of Monday Nov 7 being a public holiday in the north of the state.

Program of Events

Friday 4th Arrive from 5pm onwards. Spotlighting at night

Saturday 5th 9 am Two outings will be held, members will have choice of Lime Bay (orchids, coastal woodland or Clark Cliffs (wet forest)

After lunch Pond life and lab sessions with John Gooderham

5 pm Business meeting for delegates

6:30 pm Dinner - BBQ. Two courses plus drinks. $14/head Vegetarian options available.

8 pm John Gooderham (co-author of prizewinning "Waterbug Book") on pond and stream life.

Sunday 6th 9 am Remarkable Cave/Mt Brown/ Crescent Bay circuit near Port Arthur. Excellent for orchids, heath flowers, and spectacular coastal scenery.

Bring own pillow, sheets, blankets, teatowels and towels. Cooking utensils, stoves etc provided. Adults $16/night, children $8/night inside, $5/night/ tent if camping. Please book early as there is a limit on bed space inside.

Bookings: Genevieve Gates, 9 Winmarleigh Ave, Taroona. Phone 6227 8638

Email: ggates @postoffice.utas.edu.au

More fun with Victorian millipedes

by Bob Mesibov

In last summer's Natural News I described wanderings in southern Victorian forests. My wife and I were after fresh specimens of flatback millipedes in the genus *Australopeltis*.

A lot's happened since then. For one thing, I made one of those executive decisions that are the despair of non-taxonomists, and put the 10 Victorian species in the genus *Lissodesmus* instead. The paper describing those species, plus the 18 known *Lissodesmus* from Tasmania, will be published in late 2005.

Another bit of natural news is a rediscovery. One of the Victorian *Lissodesmus* was previously known from only a single male specimen in Museum Victoria. It had been collected in August 1890 "near Trafalgar", which is a little farming town in the Latrobe Valley between Warragul and Moe.

I couldn't resist looking for more specimens. During the week leading up to Anzac Day I hunted very hard for the Trafalgar beast in small bush remnants on private property, which is pretty much all the bush that's left in that part of Victoria. To my delight, I found a population of the 1890 species in the Uralla Nature Reserve at Trafalgar. This small Reserve is owned by Trust for Nature and is in suprisingly good condition. I found a second population about 5 km away in a small bush remnant owned by conservation-minded retirees.

Now the plot thickens. I had previously (2004) found what I thought might be a variant of the Trafalgar millipede near Mt Worth, west of Trafalgar. I found both *Lissodesmus* forms living together in that tiny private remnant. Different species, for sure.

A second 6-day field trip in August confirmed the April results. I found a few more localities for the Mt Worth species, but none for the Trafalgar millipede.

Plotting the two species on a map, the Mt Worth species seems to have a remaining range of about 25 sq km., of which maybe half is reasonable habitat. The Trafalgar species seems to be down to its last 100 ha or less. The two ranges abut like tiles in a mosaic, which is the typical biogeographical pattern for flatback millipedes.

The Trafalgar rediscovery made the local Gippsland weeklies and I got interviewed twice by ABC Radio in Gippsland. I was grateful for the publicity because it helped when I knocked on doors and asked, "Do you mind if I look for millipedes in that bit of bush you've got there?" "Ah", says the landowner, "you're that bloke I heard on the radio. Yes, go ahead."

Interestingly, many of the remnants I sampled weren't remnants at all. In other words, they weren't little bits of the original Great Forest of Gippsland. That forest had been almost entirely cleared in my study area before 1900. Local historians showed me photos from the 1930s with virtually treeless landscapes. By the 1950s some farmers had become conservation-minded and were allowing natural tree regeneration. By the 1970s landowners were planting native trees in gullies.

This explains why some stunning forest patches I visited had very few litter invertebrates. The patches were actually "new" and hadn't been recolonised, because the nearest native invertebrate populations were a long distance away, across paddocks. On the other hand, some daggy, logged, cattle-trampled remnants were zoologically rich. These had never been thoroughly cleared.

In Gippsland as elsewhere in Victoria, you can't pick good millipede habitat by looking at the veg. You need to know the human history first!

Bumblebees now firmly established in northern Tasmanian native vegetation.

A survey of the distribution of feral bumblebees *Bombus terrestris* in native vegetation up to early 2001 found that they were common in southern and central western Tasmania, but found little evidence of them in northern Tasmania. Observations of more than ten bumblebees in one day were restricted to areas south of Zeehan on the west coast and south of Orford on the east coast, although single bumblebees were seen in the Upper Mersey, at Waterhouse and Four-mile Creek.

A survey between September 2004 and May 2005 indicates that bumblebees are now common in northern Tasmanian native vegetation. More than ten bumblebees were seen in one day at numerous locations on the Central Plateau, in The Walls of Jerusalem National Park, in Cradle Mountain – Lake St Clair National Park, and in the central north between Penguin and Guildford in the west and Nunamara in the east. They are also present in lower densities in other parts of the north, with observations of more than ten bumblebees in the far northwest being restricted to Circular Head and Trowutta and those in the far

northeast restricted to Mt William National Park, Pyengana,and south of St Marys.

If anyone would like to add any other locations to this list, please contact me.

Andrew Hingston
Ph. 6223 1223
Email: hingston@utas.edu.au

Vanessa on the nettles

by Sarah Lloyd

Like most Land for Wildlife properties, our 130 acres of bush at Birralee has a variety of vegetation types that change over quite short distances. Within walking distance of the house a slow moving stream trickles though a swamp with magnificent large old paperbarks, mostly *Melaleuca ericifolia*, but also some of the largest *M. squarrosa* I've ever seen. Just uphill from the house, black peppermint *(Eucalyptus amygdalina)* with a diverse understorey dominates; the gully downslope is dominated by blackwood *(Acacia melanoxylon)* with a tangled understorey of treeferns and various other ferns and, in another gully to our southeast tall blackwood and eucalypts tower over a mid layer of dogwood *(Pomaderris apetala)*, which excludes light and prevents the growth of understorey vegetation.

We christened this gully "the cathedral", because the dogwood forms an archway, creating a dark, quiet and mystical place. I go there often and almost every time I visit some new surprise awaits me. Last November I found many Fairy Lanterns (*Thismia rodwayi*) extending the known distribution of this rarely seen plant. After the tremendous storms that lashed northern Tasmania in February, I found hundreds of ladybirds massing on a fallen dead tree blown over by the gale force winds. Last summer, I made another wonderful discovery.

Over the years, the light excluding dogwood archway has collapsed and a lush growth of native stinging nettles (*Urtica incisa*) has spread across the ground. Last month I noticed an almost complete defoliation of the nettles, and after close inspection, eventually spotted the culprits. A couple of black, hairy caterpillars moved slowly along the naked nettle branches. Their hairs were long and bifurcating and looked as mean as the urticating hairs on the nettles. I tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid touching both. But a few hairy caterpillars could hardly have eaten that much foliage, so I had a closer look. There, to my delight, were numerous pupal cases hanging from the branches by a deceptively flimsy thread. But they were not "brown" as the book describes, but jewel-like, iridescent and studded with gold.

As I carefully picked a path home through the painfully stinging plants to consult the natural history books and ascertain the species, a shaking branch caused by a vigorously swinging chrysalis attracted my attention. In eager anticipation to witness an emergence I sat and watched with wonder at the dance. But my gaze was soon diverted by a dark thing moving. A butterfly had just emerged from another chrysalis and its folded wings were intricately patterned to so resemble a suspended leaf that it was almost invisible as it sat upon the branch. As I watched, the butterfly inhaled some air, pumped its wings and then it voided the waste of metamorphosis, depositing meconium on the nettle branch below. Gradually it dried and spread its wings to absorb the summer warmth and for the first time ever the stunning beauty of this individual was revealed. With velutinous rusty brown on its lower wings and black blotched with yellow on the upper sat *Vanessa* on the nettles. And sitting on a nettle branch, watching the excitement was a small brown tree frog (*Litoria ewingi*), apparently oblivious to the urticating hairs. I returned to the gully the next day. The chrysalis was motionless and still intact and the small brown tree frog was still watching. This time, however, it showed a little more sense than me and was sitting on a leaf

suspended in the nettles, while I again sat on the log, my skin still tinging from the previous day's encounter.

The Australian Admiral (*Vanessa itea*) is one of our largest and most easily recognisable butterflies. Like many insects, it is a specialist feeder, the larva feed only on members of the nettle (URTICACEAE) family, which in Tasmania includes *Urtica incisa* and the introduced *Urtica urens*.

The native and introduced nettle are superficially similar, but there are several differences: *U. incisa* is a perennial herb and is glabrous (without hairs) between the stinging hairs. Its male and female flowers are in separate clusters. According to Curtis (1967) it is "widespread and frequent in fern gullies and other moist shady places" although I should say it is a plant that I rarely encounter. As in most plants, the leaves vary greatly in form and are not a good feature for identification.

The introduced stinging nettle is a weed of cultivated ground. The young stems and the lower surface of young leaves have both simple and stinging hairs. Male and female floral parts are in the same inflorescence.

The late Miriam Rothschild called butterflies "flying flowers" and they are truly amazing insects. The chrysalis encapsulates one of the marvels of nature, the transformation from a hungry hairy caterpillar to a scaly butterfly, the blue print for the colours and the patterns of the butterfly lie within the larval grub preceding the transition.

One of the things that has always fascinated me about butterflies is that the markings on the underwings have evolved independently and for different purposes than those on the upperwings. When they land, butterflies usually have their underwings exposed and this surface is often finely patterned in earthy colours that render the insect well camouflaged when it settles on the ground or amongst leaf litter. The upper surfaces, by contrast, are often brightly coloured for sexual signalling, the regulation of body temperature and for deterring possible predators. Eyespots, which often adorn butterflies' wings, may have evolved to deter birds and reptiles that feed during the day when butterflies are active. They are usually located on the edges of the wings to attract predators away from the most vulnerable part of the insect.

During the first warm, sunny days of early spring I noticed Australian Admirals flitting around the vegetable garden. I visited the gully and was pleased to see that lush new shoots have resprouted from the defoliated branches, no doubt providing the newly arrived butterflys with a safe place to lay their eggs.

References:

Braby, Michael (2004) ***The Complete Field Guide to Butterflies of Australia.*** **CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.**

Curtis, W.M. (1967) ***The Student's Flora of Tasmania, Part 3 ANGIOSPERMAE: Plumbaginaceae to Salicaceae.*** **Winifred M. Curtis, Hobart.**

Nijhout, H.F. (1991) ***The development and evolution of butterfly wing patterns.*** **Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.**

Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club Inc. (1994) ***Butterflies of Tasmania.*** **Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club Inc, Hobart.**

Vale Dennis Morris 1924-2005

Our Patron, Dennis Morris, died 27 July in Hobart. Dennis agreed to be our Patron when we first decided to form ourselves into something resembling an organised group around 1990. We didn't even quite know what the role of a Patron was other than to set a standard of excellence. Dennis certainly set such a standard, and over the years his kind encouragement and generous assistance in matters botanical were greatly appreciated. We couldn't have chosen better as a mentor, a methodical scientist or a human being.

Dennis was born near Tunbridge Wells, England, and educated there at The Worshipful Company of Skinners School. He immigrated to Australia in 1950. In 1961 he became the Weed Officer for the Tasmanian Dept. of Agriculture where he produced excellent, illustrated information on weeds.

In 1960 he met Dr. Winifred Curtis, and their shared interests in plants developed into both a close friendship and a productive collaboration. Together they produced The Student's Flora of Tasmania which became the definitive reference for our flowering plants and conifers. Through his passion for the flora of Tasmania, Dennis became a highly skilled taxonomist. His eye for detail and accuracy can be seen in his splendid illustrations.

In 1985 he was appointed Honorary Botanist at the Tasmanian Herbarium. In 1994 he completed Part 4B of The Student's Flora of Tasmania with Winifred Curtis. His work up until his death was concentrated on the huge task of updating the Student Flora.

Examples of Dennis' illustrations are on display at the Tasmanian Herbarium. His skill as an illustrator, along with his love of plants, and the heart of an artist all combined to bring his drawings to life.

I remember once sitting in the Herbarium listening to Dennis and Winifred carry on a lively conversation about how they had perhaps lived through the best of times. That may well be, but it is certainly true that they enriched their times and many lives.

As Andrew Hingston commented, "The world is now a poorer place" (without Dennis Morris).