



# JABIRU

NEWSLETTER OF THE MAREEBA WETLAND FOUNDATION  
ISSUE 29

Wet Season 2005

*President: Tim Nevard; Vice President: Trevor Adil; Secretary: Peter Apel*

## *Wet, wet, wet...*

Almost immediately after our Christmas Eve Wet Season closure, on the 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004 the heavens opened and the Reserve was cut off from the outside world by bank-full creeks and flooded roads! The lagoons all overflowed and the dry season came to an end within minutes. We are often asked why we close at the end of December, when it can sometimes remain dry in January. You now know the answer!



*Pickford Road or Pickford Lagoon? - 27<sup>th</sup> December 2004*

As a result of the wet weather and the delay in completing our safari camp, we will be **opening Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2005**. Please keep this date in your diary and keep an eye on the website for any updates.

### *Wet Season Activities.*

The wet season heralds a very different set of activities than those with which most members would be familiar for the other 9 months of the year. Staff at the Reserve go everywhere with an obligatory shovel and we practice a very different sort of water management, based around temporary 'whoa boys' and ramming in clay plugs to stop our roads from washing away and the dams from breaching!

Our prime wet season daily activity is therefore diverting water *away* from the lagoons and our other infrastructure, instead of trying to gather every drop we can, as we do at the height of the dry season.

As many of you will know, unstable Hodgkinson Formation derived soils cover most of the Reserve and are extremely erosion prone, especially in storm events. We have therefore learned to disturb the soil as little as possible!

Apart from shovelling, which makes for good biceps, general maintenance is the order of the day, as well as completing those smaller construction projects always needed to make the Reserve easier to maintain. One of the latter is the new vehicle lean-to at the southern end of the Visitor Centre. Our warden, Craig Mills, with a small team of volunteers, including Tony Falvo, Peter Apel, Peter Sonntag, and Tim Nevard, worked through the hottest weekend of the year so now our vehicles can be stored out of the worst of the weather.



*Men at Work –the vehicles are now in the shade!*

Monitoring is generally a lower priority than in the dry season, as wildlife and wetland birds in particular disperse across the tropical north of Australia. However, we still do our counts and Bronwyn Hookey from JCU is in the midst of her Black-throated Finch monitoring, visiting whenever the floods allow!

The wet season floods have created next season's fires – so to avoid being 'rooned' (said Hanrahan) we are seeking funding to provide us with essential fire management equipment, including a new tractor. And speaking of poetry....

### ***Bush Words***

The previous section's link to this one heralds a completely new initiative for the Foundation. We are hosting the inaugural Far North Bush Poetry Festival this year. So those of you who can quote "...*Said Hanrahan*" in your sleep should start your creative juices flowing and head on down to 'Clancy's Lagoon' between July 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. As this is the first festival of its type to be held in the Far North we hope our members will support it and spread the 'Bush Words' to friends and colleagues. You never know who might be harbouring a secret yen to be a modern day Banjo Patterson!

The emphasis of the festival is on celebrating the Australian bush, its people and its wildlife in verse, with plenty of lighthearted entertainment and fun! The Festival kicks off on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> with workshops at local schools. On **Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> July** there will be a bush poets workshop at the Visitor Centre run by seasoned bush poets Chris and The Grey; cost is a gold coin donation, but numbers will be limited by space, so if you are interested please contact Gwyneth Nevard or Merv 'The Grey' to reserve a place. This will be followed by a bush barbeque and a light hearted evening of entertainment round the camp fire.

On **Sunday 31<sup>st</sup>** the day will commence at 8.30am with a 'walk up' bush poets breakfast. This is an informal event - anyone willing to recite can stand up and join in, or those more reluctant may just sit back and enjoy a bush breakfast and the spontaneous poetry recitals. The competition proper will follow, commencing 11am. There are two main sections to the competition:

- *Clancy of the Overflow written bush poetry competition*, which must be the entrants own work and submitted and adjudicated in advance, prizewinners to be announced on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> July. The closing date for entries is the 20<sup>th</sup> June.
- *Performance poetry competition* – where the poets perform their own work, or perform a traditional bush poem.

There are several age categories in each section including juniors and locals, with prizes and trophies being awarded on the day.

Details are on our web site, or phone or email Gwyneth (0408 932303 [info@mareebawetlands.com](mailto:info@mareebawetlands.com) or Merv (4159 1868 [thegrey@tpg.com.au](mailto:thegrey@tpg.com.au) ) for more details and an entry form.

### ***Staff News***

At the end of the year we said farewell to Julie, who has taken up a job in Townsville and Craig will be

leaving shortly. In April we will be joined by Tim Gale and Lisa Collins, who have just finished a stint at the Birds Australia Broome Bird Observatory as Assistant Wardens, and who will work as an on site warden team and assist with the overnight accommodation.



*Tim and Lisa on Cable Beach*

### ***Wildlife Report***

High evaporation during November and December meant water levels dropped significantly on Clancy's Lagoon, bringing in waterbirds such as Royal and Yellow-billed Spoonbills and Glossy Ibis, seen feeding around the shallow edges. Rajah Shelducks (Burdekin Ducks) also made a brief appearance recently, the offspring of a breeding pair on a neighbouring property, themselves the result of our early re-introductions in 1997 and 1998 made in conjunction with the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service!

As soon as the rains arrived, most of our waterbirds departed from the lagoons. Many visitors ask the question, "Why don't the birds stay all year round?" Most birds usually disappear inland in a west-northwest direction to take advantage of ephemeral wetlands and waterholes filling up. Ephemeral wetlands are, biologically, among the most productive and most diverse. Grasses and other terrestrial plants will colonise a wetland area as it dries, but when water returns in the wet season, most plants drown. Dead grasses, aquatic plants, fish and invertebrates all perish during the dry season, which forms a rich organic layer and leads to a population explosion of invertebrates that feed on this nutritious detritus. This ready food source encourages many waterbirds to breed. By the time most chicks hatch, adult midges and other insects emerge to form dancing clouds on the water surface, which provides an easy meal for young birds. Birds generally return to bigger wetlands

such as these here on the Reserve, when other ephemeral wetlands dry out again.

A few migratory waders arrived back from their southward migration to utilise feeding grounds in the muddy shallow areas on Pandanus Lagoon. We had a juvenile Black-tailed Godwit, the first record of this species seen at the Mareeba Wetlands and not surprisingly, was first noticed by a member of the Queensland Wader Study Group! Marsh Sandpipers, a Greenshank, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels, and Black-winged Stilts were also seen regularly towards the end of the year. A few Pink-eared Ducks have been seen on Pandanus lagoon but nowhere near the numbers previously seen. Most of the Brolgas and Sarus Cranes have departed with only a few remaining over the Wet Season.

The early wet season is a particularly stressful time for many granivorous (seed-eating) birds, particularly finches, quail, doves and pigeons. Seed resources are scarce, as most grass seeds germinate with the early rain, making it difficult for birds to find seed. Many juveniles die at this time of year if they have not developed strategies for finding new food sources. Most birds rely on insects such as flying termites and ants, which is also an important source of protein for young birds.

Forest Kingfishers are also nesting and nest holes can be seen in arboreal termite mounds attached to sides of a tree trunks or limbs. The nests are usually high and the tunnel may extend 10-25cm to the nest chamber where the eggs are laid on a bare termite earth floor. Two Kingfisher pairs have been seen feeding young, with one nest having at least two chicks visible through binoculars.



*A frillie trying to attack Craig's camera!*

Frilled Necked Lizards are now regularly seen with the weather warming up and appear to have a taste for camera lens! Did you know that they spend most

of the cool winter months in the tree tops, only coming to ground when the weather warms up?

Craig nearly ran over an interesting small mammal at dusk at the start of the Wet Season, a Tuan or Brush-tailed Phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*). They are nocturnal and extremely acrobatic climbers that rip loss bark off with needle sharp teeth while searching for their main food of arthropods such as spiders, scorpions, centipedes and insects but occasionally take small vertebrates (Yes nesting Gouldian's are potential Tuan tucker too); they also have a sweet tooth - so will eat nectar, manna, honey and fruit if available.

Like many *Dasyurids*, the males are short-lived with a hectic love life. They wear themselves out at mating time and succumb to stress-related diseases soon afterwards, so that the females and young have less competition for food resources during the critical weaning period.



*Cockatoo Grass at QDPI, Walkamin.*

### ***Rehabilitation of Native Grasses***

Work continues on our WWF funded project to find practical solutions to establishing native grasses that are important food sources for granivorous bird species such as the Gouldian and Black-throated finches. Currently some trial plots have been prepared and planting out of Cockatoo Grass (*Alloteropsis semialata*) is taking place this month. The seed has been grown for us on a trial at the DPI in Walkamin. We will continue to monitor our plots during the coming year, and hopefully sow more seed once the DPI's seed production is ready.

### ***Gouldian Finches***

Already the first chicks of 2005 have fledged and the aviaries are abuzz with anticipation of more! Birds are bobbing up and down enthusiastically, and flying around with nesting material. With nearly 80 adult birds in the two aviaries this year, and close to 100

eggs laid so far, we are looking forward to a potentially huge breeding season and a big release later in 2005. Anyone interested in assisting with monitoring the birds before and after their release should get in touch.

### **Members News**

Two events were held in December, the Christmas BBQ for our volunteers, and the members' Christmas picnic. There will be more members' events in 2005, including the Bush Poetry Festival in July, but not until we open after the Wet.

A new benefit for members this year will be the opportunity to stay in the safari tents at a discounted members' rate, and really enjoy a weekend in the great outdoors. For more information and bookings, please contact Gwyneth on 0408 932303.

**All memberships fell due at the beginning of 2005**, so please help us by completing the enclosed renewal form as soon as possible, so we can mail out your

Membership card in good time before opening. As last year, members who renew before the **end of April** will also receive a Gift Voucher to bring along a friend. Information about our opening date is subject to weather and road conditions, but will be advertised as widely as possible, or phone for information.



*Members Picnic- champagne at the Lookout!*



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