



# STEP Inc. Newsletter

Community Based Environmental Conservation Since 1978 No 58 August 1992

## KOALAS AND WALLABIES Vs FOXES AND CATS

Readers will know that we have for some time been discussing the problems caused by feral and uncontrolled pet animals in bushland. In order to put a little science into the subject and to give you an opportunity to hear and question experts in the field we have organised two speakers for the 16th September. Dr Chris Dickman, Director of the Institute of Wildlife Research and Senior Lecturer in Biology at the University of Sydney will speak first followed by Dr Ashok Rathore of the National Parks and Wildlife Service who is an expert on cats.

7.30 pm Wednesday 16th September at St Andrews Hall, corner of Vernon and Chisholm Streets, Turramurra.

## TAKE CARE WITH THE WASHING UP

Looking at the blue green algal problem in the Darling it has been determined that some 50% of the phosphorous - the main cause of the problem - comes from sewage and that some 50% of that comes from detergents. In many European countries phosphorous is banned from detergents and doubtless it will be here soon.

In Sydney we have enormous buildups of phosphorous poisoning our bushland and detergents are one of the main sources.

Although you will not find references to phosphorous on packet labels we understand that the new Drive and OMO Micro are in fact phosphorous free. Buy them please and if you feel like doing a bit more write to the manufacturers

congratulating them and asking them to advertise phosphorous contents on all their detergents.

## THE WATER BOARD CLEANS UP

One of the best and most viable areas of bushland within the metropolitan area is the Lane Cove Valley. The river bed and banks have been disturbed, however, by the laying of a sewer and by nutrient laden urban runoff. In many areas the banks are a thicket of privet and creepers such as morning glory.

In March 1990 bush regeneration funded by the Special Environmental Levy began and is continuing. A total of six kilometres of the river has been treated and follow up work is being carried out. Walkers will notice that the woody weeds such as privet have been poisoned and left in place. This assists in keeping the banks stable as well as being the most economical method. Only time will tell how successful this work is in effecting a long term solution - obviously there will be a need for continuing maintenance, the question is how much?

The Water Board and the team of regenerators led by Judith Rawling are to be commended and congratulated. We shall keep you informed of progress.

## THE STEP MAP

The map of walking tracks in the Upper Lane Cove Valley is available. Great for bushwalks, great for gifts.

Send \$6 to PO Box 697 Turramurra or ring 4492843 and pick up for \$5.

## FERAL PROBLEM

*We couldn't improve on the following article from the Hornsby Conservation Society newsletter so we reproduce with thanks.*

Foxes, now estimated to number forty million in Australia, eat up to eight animals a day. Rabbits eat native seedlings, ring bark saplings and increase soil erosion through burrowing. In many places they have displaced small native animals like bettongs. Cats which cover the continent out compete native carnivores and threaten many birds, reptiles and mammals.

Pigs increase soil erosion, take native birds and animals and pose a tremendous risk to the livestock industry as potential reservoirs of introduced diseases like foot and mouth disease. Goats strip vegetation and displace wallabies from their habitat.

In recent years populations of these animals has boomed because of a decline in hunting pressure. This is often because opposition to the fur trade has made hunting uneconomic. Unfortunately this pressure has come from city based animal lovers who have not thought through the effect of protecting these animals. Our native wildlife has paid the price.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM will be held at 7.30 pm on Wednesday 16th September at St Andrews Hall, corner of Vernon and Chisholm Sts., Turramurra.

It will as usual be a short meeting followed by our speakers. See you there

## ON HEARING THE FIRST CUCKOO

*We are grateful to STEP member Dariel Larkins for another article in an irregular series on birds in Sydney*

On October 17 last year I was woken about 6am by a Channel-billed Cuckoo call and a fussing of Pied Currawongs in the front garden. I drifted back to sleep but about half an hour later there was such a racket going on outside that I went outside to investigate. Two Channel-bills were perched in my neighbour's eucalypts. The Cuckoos were slowly moving on a Pied Currawongs' nest at the top of a Red Mahogany in my front garden, and the local bird community including numerous Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Noisy Miners, had ganged up with the Currawongs to drive off the Cuckoos. What a commotion!

I have written an account of what followed for publication in a journal dealing with bird behaviour, and as this material is still in press prefer not to repeat the story here. However it was of great assistance to me that on mentioning this episode to the bird department of the Australian Museum, the names of several people who had phoned in with observations of Channel-bills were passed on to me. I was also fortunate in hearing from Annette Bowling who observed Channel-bills in the neighbourhood of her home from October to December, and who generously passed her records to me. Combined with an observation from Ian McAllan, all this material was incorporated into the account for publication.

Channel-billed Cuckoos are breeding migrants to north and eastern Australia, arriving noisily in spring and departing quietly from Sydney in late summer for New Guinea or parts of Indonesia. They are a very large grey bird with a most conspicuous curved bill and a truly raucous voice. Pied Currawongs

are one of the favourite hosts, and gardens with tall eucalypts, or those edging on forested reserves, may be attractive to Channel-bills if Currawongs are nesting. Very little is known about the habits of this interesting but unattractive Cuckoo.

There may not be fairies at the bottom of your garden, but if by chance a Channel-billed Cuckoo comes by in spring (you will be alerted by the alarm calls of many other birds), observations of the birds' behaviour may add to our present knowledge.

Of interest is what the raider does with the hosts' eggs or nestlings and whether the raider deposits its own egg in the hosts' nest.

As Currawongs choose a high nest site, you may acquire a sore neck in seeking out this information, but I would very much appreciate any observations of Channel-billed Cuckoo behaviour that are suitable for publication, and naturally all contributions would be fully acknowledged. My contact number is 44-5478.

Dariel Larkins

## KU-RING-GAI COUNCIL

The current Council went into office with our high hopes riding on them. While it has certainly been environmentally sound there is no doubt that it is racked by factionalism and pettiness.

The aldermen seem more fascinated by politicking and point scoring than in developing sound long term policies to preserve the character of Ku-ring-gai. Perhaps things will settle down after the mayoral elections in September.

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## POSITIONS VACANT

If you would like to be a little more active in environmental matters please think about joining the STEP committee. Anyone with enthusiasm is welcome.

We would particularly like someone actively involved in bush regeneration work, either through a job or Bushcare. For more information please ring any of the committee listed on the back page.

## WINNING BACK THE CITIES

A new book called *Winning Back the Cities* has just been published. It is by Peter Newman and Jeff Kenworthy and deals with traffic congestion, smog and urban sprawl. Of course overseas countries have encountered these problems and lessons from them are integrated with the Australian experience to produce a very readable and thought provoking book.

We must of course begin to take responsibility for our own urban environment - it is obvious that the politicians and their planning advisers aren't capable. This book will allow you to think differently about our problems and solutions to them.

Concepts explored include urban villages, light rail, traffic calming, how car use defines a city and an integrated approach to planning can solve urban problems. Streets used to be friendly, community places where people met. The car has changed all that by making them a source of danger noise and pollution. It is possible to reclaim the streets and win back the cities - we recommend that you find out about this approach and spread the word. This a very important book.

**For a copy mailed send \$11 to STEP or buy one at the AGM for \$10.**

# THE LAST BLEAT OF THE BLEATING TREE FROG

By Hal Cogger

One of the outstanding features of Ku-ring-gai is the incredible variety of native birds. Other native wildlife tends to be much less conspicuous.

Seldom seen but often heard, frogs represent a surprisingly rich element of Sydney's wildlife. About 200 different kinds of frogs are known from Australia, and more than 20 of these have been recorded from Ku-ring-gai.

When I first moved to the area 30 years ago, on most wet spring or summer nights I could stand on our back deck and hear at least ten species of frog calling from various parts of the Lane Cove Valley. Even from our garden pond at least five species would be calling - the little eastern froglet, the striped marsh frog, the bleating tree frog, Verreaux' tree frog and Peron's tree frog. About ten or fifteen years ago, however, the numbers and variety started to decline, and today only the first two remain common. Yet a couple of years ago I started to hear some of the old voices. What has changed? Will we see the return of the long-gone frogs of our area?

## A Global Decline

The omens aren't good. In the middle of the 1980s anecdotal observations began to accumulate from scattered parts of the world about declines in frog populations. Because frogs can occur in vast numbers and most of them are highly vocal their decline or disappearance can be fairly obvious.

By 1989 it had become obvious that frogs were disappearing not only from urban and agricultural areas, and in those parts of the world beset by pollution and acid rain, but even from remote, pristine areas of rainforest in Australia, South America and Asia. A global network of volunteers was established to establish to monitor just what was happening to frogs. We

fear that if the phenomenon is global in scope that the causes may also be global.

About a dozen or more of Australia's frogs are now so rare, or have not been seen for so long, that a number may already have become extinct. They include species confined to rainforest and national parks in Queensland and New South Wales, as well as those from highly modified urban and agricultural areas.

## Pollution and Ferals

All of this suggests that frogs are disappearing for a number of reasons - from subtle changes in global climate to pollution from pesticides and agricultural runoff, introduced competitors and predators, loss of habitat and "urban blight". In our area, many of our wildlife species - especially those that spend time on the ground - have steadily declined, the victims mostly of non native predators such as cats dogs and foxes.

Only male frogs croak or call. Usually they congregate around a suitable body of water where their calls attract the females for mating and egg laying. While most frogs breed and call in spring and summer, usually during or after rain, a few species call in winter or throughout the year. The best known of these is the Eastern Froglet (*Crinia signifera*), whose call has been described as a "crick.....crick.....crick....", and which breeds in and calls from, any temporary still or slow moving water in gutters and seepages. I hear it often while boarding the train at Turramurra railway station, and it doesn't cut out until about North Sydney! A well-known winter caller is Verreaux's Tree Frog, which usually calls from well-vegetated garden ponds and larger streams. It was once common in my area of Turramurra but virtually disappeared about ten years ago. However last year I

heard some calling from neighbour's gardens so perhaps it is recovering locally.

A species which is becoming scarce on the North Shore is the giant burrowing frog (*Heleioporus australiacus*) which has an owl-like call and lives in burrows in gull and valley floors. It is about the size of a human fist and is the largest frog in the area.

Most frogs, however, range from about 2-5 cm in length. Some are tree frogs with sticky pads on their fingers and toes for climbing, while others are ground dwellers which hide under stones and logs. They come in a great variety of colours and patterns, from leafy-green tree frogs to the dull grey Redcrowned Toadlet with a bright orange or red triangle between its eyes.

## Easy to Identify

Frogs were recently gazetted as protected fauna in NSW, so it's now illegal to catch them or otherwise interfere with them. But it's easy to identify them from their calls, and one can soon build up a list of local species by making recordings of any frogs calling from garden ponds, creeks or gutters. Even Walkman quality is good enough for identification purposes. Just send or bring a tape to the Australian Museum, 6 College St, Sydney and we'll try to identify the frogs that are calling.

Our district is now one of the most important refuges for the native frogs of the Sydney district because it is well watered, and has large areas of bushland. A number of frogs which were once common throughout the suburban areas of Sydney are now mostly restricted to the Hornsby - Ku-ring-gai area. This gives us a special opportunity, as well as a special responsibility, for monitoring and conserving this ecologically important component of our native wildlife.

Hal Cogger, a member of the STEP committee, is the Deputy Director of the Australian Museum.

## URBAN CONSOLIDATION - TIME TO BITE THE BULLET

STEP has appreciated for some time that the way in which Sydney is being planned and developed is causing many problems. The pollution of the rivers, the traffic jams, the air pollution in the western suburbs and so on. The whole process represents a horrific environmental problem which will get worse as our population increases.

Our planners don't want to face up to the issue of population and instead are hiding behind urban consolidation. Of course consolidation is a palliative rather than a cure but they are trying to convince us that it provides the solution to many of our problems. They try to make us feel guilty if we question its wisdom. Opponents are called selfish and accused of NIMBYism.

The STEP committee has decided to issue a policy statement on urban consolidation and we hope to publish it in the next newsletter. If any members have comments please let us know.

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**CATS and FOXES** are decimating our native fauna!

On Wednesday September 16 at 7.30 pm at St Andrews Hall (cnr Vernon and Chisholm streets S. Turrumurra) we will have two experts —

**Dr. CHRIS DICKMAN** of Sydney University, and  
**Dr. ASHOK RATHORE** of The National Parks and Wildlife Service to speak on this topic.

*Do not miss this opportunity to learn more about this devastating and growing threat to Australia's wildlife.*