



COOLEMAN RIDGE PARK CARE GROUP

Newsletter July 2014

Previous Meeting, Sunday 15 June, Group Area South (Mt Arawang).

Three musketeers, Rob, Rohan and Doug, started on the assorted weeds at the base of Arawang just up from the south-pointing wooden footbridge. For two it was hand to hand combat with a particularly resilient blackberry patch. This patch has been dug up and poisoned but still presents a challenge each time we visit. The third musketeer ranged over a broader field with an eye to eliminating phalaris and wild sage, neither of which give up without a fight.

Malcolm appeared having walked from his place at the other end of the Ridge. On the way he'd noted evidence of an expanding wombat population as well as sighting a possible wallaroo grazing with the Eastern Greys.

Next Meeting: Sunday 20 July
Where: Nature Trail plus Pauline's Patch on Fencepost Hill
Time: 13.30 – 16.00 hours
Meet: Kathner Street entrance to the Ridge
Activity: Tidy up the track that is the end of the Nature Trail plus check out Pauline's Patch on Fencepost Hill. People may also wish to stroll over the back to see Greening Australia's recent plantings.

Friday Friends on Fencepost Hill - by Jenny Horsfield

We're quite a multicultural mob up on the hill. Erika is from Germany, Tatiana from Siberia, Gosta from Sweden and Reet is from Estonia. Roger, Mike and I are plain Anglo-Saxons.

Fencepost Hill is one of the loveliest areas on the ridge, with its views across the hill to the west, and the gully sloping down to the dam. You all know how badly the area was affected in the 2003 fires, but we rejoice to see its steady regeneration, which a carefully organized controlled burn two years ago actually promoted.

We have been working for a number of years at eradicating Phalaris in the main gully and are pleased to see how much native vegetation is emerging in its place.

Tatiana shares with us her knowledge about medicinal uses of St Johns Wort and tells us about life in Siberia, with its amazing plant life that flourishes during the short summer season. Last year Tatiana completed a study of the plants growing on the eastern side of Fencepost Hill, as part of a diploma in environmental management.

Erika's patch is around the dam, where she enjoys watching the antics of birdlife that are attracted to the water. During our unusually warm autumn, Erika noted evidence of local birds starting to breed in the mistaken belief that it was spring!

Gosta's patch on Fencepost Hill shows the results of many years of regular weeding and is a pleasure to wander through. He also keeps an eye on Pauline's Patch, which contains so many special memories for us of the work Pauline did there over the years.

Reet has recently moved from her Weston house over to the north side and has reluctantly given back her working tools. But she does visit, given the Ridge was such an important part of her life: her rocky patch above the fire trail, that she cultivated for many years, is one of the 'jewels in the crown' and we always make a point of showing it off to visitors.

Roger, Mike and I hack away at clumps of Phalaris and Paspalum and just enjoy the day. What better place could you be on a winter's morning than Cooleman Ridge?

Kangaroo Count

Our colleagues on Mt Taylor recently counted 638 roos on their patch. That's up from 505 last year.

What's around

Termites - by Arminel Ryan

Termites get a bad press. Many Canberra residents have found how destructive they can be – and how expensive the ensuing structural repairs to their residence! But in a hot dry land, their role in recycling nutrients is vital. Indeed, the 350 plus termite species occurring in Australia are “ecosystem engineers”, significantly modifying their environment. CSIRO has established that fertility and water retention in soils in Northern Australia are adversely affected when termites have been removed.

Our scientists have much to learn about these humble creatures. Although we refer to them as “white ants”, ants are amongst their many foes, and not closely related. Termites are detritus feeders – the cellulose clean-up squad, the sweeper caste of the insect world – as are their quite close relatives, the much despised cockroaches. Both cockroaches and termites harbour special micro-organisms in their gut to help break down cellulose into digestible components.

Unlike cockroaches, termites are social insects, living in colonies and comprising “castes”. “Workers” do the work. “Soldiers” protect the colony. The King and Queen (aka “primary reproductives”) produce the progeny.

The flying creatures that swarm on warm, humid summer evenings are the termite alates – winged juvenile reproductive individuals. Their aim is to pair up on the ground away from the nest, and start a new colony. Only a very few succeed. Most provide a nutritious, protein-rich feed to other insects, birds and mammals hastening to eat, mate and reproduce while the pickings are easy.

For the most part, termite colonies work in the dark. They are sensitive to sunlight, and need a humid environment with a steady temperature. Some build mounds to provide the right climate for themselves. (The huge mounds found in Northern Australia are amongst the biggest in the world.) Others live out of sight within a log or under the ground, insulated from seasonal and diurnal variation.

Predators and opportunists sometimes take advantage of the termites' dwellings. Ants, birds, reptiles and mammals may use a nest for shelter even while the termites are still active within it. In fire, the mounds can provide refuge from smoke and flame.

Humans, too, have found uses for termite mounds and for the “carton” that lines the burrows and chambers of nests. White settlers in Australia constructed fire-places, hearths, hut floors and even tennis courts from “ant-bed”. Australian aborigines and Asians too, still use earth from some termite mounds medicinally, to treat diarrhoea (rather like Western use of kaolin). Topical application or ingestion to relieve all manner of minor ailments was also common. When burnt, or used in an earth oven, the carton provided an aromatic smoke for ceremonial purposes, cleansing rituals, or fragrant steam for flavouring food.

I got this information from a small Barker Souvenirs booklet called Termites of Northern Australia by Alan Andersen, Peter Jacklyn, Tracy Dawes-Gromadzki and Ian Morris (Copyright CSIRO and Tropical Savannas CRC 2005; ISBN 0957723091). Of course, I don't know much about termites on Cooleman Ridge, but it would be most interesting to find out more.

What was around

For this month's splash of colour, the picture below was taken on Mt Arawang in April/May. The plant species depicted is *Einadia nutans* (Climbing Saltbush) which is a prostrate or twining native perennial herb. It was in abundance on the slopes of Mt Arawang. The hand belongs to David Hughes.

