

The 'Denizens of the Ancient Skies' Expedition – Dark Skies, Bats and Indigenous Astronomy

The 'Denizens of the Ancient Skies' one night expedition was a fine example of a short Waterhouse Club Expedition, conducted relatively close to Adelaide and catering for all ages and capacities.

Prompted after a previous expedition to the area by Professor Steve Donnellan (Chief Research Scientist of the Evolutionary Biology Unit at the South Australian Museum), 'Denizens of the Ancient Skies' was organised and led by experienced leaders Gaye and Tim Fischer. The focus of the expedition was the Meldanda 40 hectare native bush garden near Cambrai comprising a butterfly garden, 'Bat Island', a frog pond, and a natural spring called 'Mermaid Lake'.

Meldanda is also located in a significant dark night sky area, projected to be a future major astronomical observatory site. In addition to Professor Donnellan, experts included Chris Tugwell, Chairman of the Dark Sky Reserve, Dr Philip Clarke (SA Museum's Consultant Anthropologist and Honorary Research Associate), an authority on Aboriginal ethno-astronomy, and Dr Kyle Armstrong (Bat Biologist at the South Australian Museum).

34 expeditioners arrived at their designated motels by 2 pm on Saturday 14 April where a chartered bus collected and delivered them to and from the Meldanda Bush Garden.

Afternoon tea was served on arrival after which members heard Chris Tugwell's talk on the proposed dark sky reserve, one of only 35 in the world. The reserve is far enough from the light pollution of Adelaide that on a clear, moonless night you can see 'into infinity', making it ideal for astronomy.

The expeditioners then explored the gardens with the aid of self-guide maps before Kyle Armstrong presented a fascinating talk on bats including those from areas of South East Asia where he has also studied bat populations. His astounding knowledge of bats amazed the audience.

Caterers Mark and Gloria Rozenzweig from Rozie's Roasts set up their freshly cooked roast chicken, lamb and vegetable dinner followed by a pear crumble dessert. The food was superb and attracted many favourable comments.

Then Phillip Clarke outlined the various interpretations of the night skies as seen by a number of indigenous tribes. The skies cleared for an hour to allow viewing of the night sky. Members were returned to their motels by 10 pm and after a sound sleep, breakfasted together at the Barossa Gateway Motel in Nuriootpa before leaving to return home, very well satisfied with their experience.