

WINTINNA EXPEDITION
SAM Biennial Survey
Website report
Friday 8 to Sunday 17 October 2021

Pygmy Goannas, a rare fresh water sponge, Copper-backed Quail Thrushes, eighty species of native bees, ghost wasps and mites that live on the wings of bats were just some of the wonders discovered on Wintinna Station, the location of the 2021 Museum biennial survey.

Hosted by leaseholders Jake Fennell and Francesca Lumb, 39 people camped in the mulga forest on the east side of Stuart Highway about 200km north of Coober Pedy.

The expedition was part of a long term project to conduct biennial biological surveys across South Australia, each one in a different location, with the aim to produce a State-wide picture of the distribution of fauna.

Led by esteemed mammologist Dr Catherine Kemper, the scientific team comprised Graham Carpenter plant ecologist and ornithologist, Helen Owens herpetologist, and invertebrate scientists Dr Remko Leijds, Dr Matt Shaw and Dr Ben Parslow.

After a night in Coober Pedy staying at the excellent 'Mud Hut' the expeditioners convoyed north via the ancient Kanku-Breakaways Conservation Park to the campsite 40km east of the Stuart Highway.

Legendary bush caterers and honorary Club members Mal and Val Hansen, assisted by the tireless Brett and Sonja Arnott, had already set up the kitchen, toilets and the rest of the infrastructure. This was to be Mal and Val's last bush camp – a significant moment in the history of these surveys.

After a wet and stormy first night where only the efforts of Brett and Sonja prevented the campsite from being blown over the horizon, we enjoyed mild to warm, occasionally windy weather for the rest of the week.

At typical daily routine

Out of bed at 6.30ish to the sound of movement around the kitchen and the smell of bacon and eggs as Mal labours over the hotplate. Kettles sing on the gas rings. Expeditioners crowd around the breakfast cereal. Sonja makes coffee and toast while Val coordinates the catering and sets out lunch makings for those who are going out for the day.

The morning birding group with Graham Carpenter departs at 7, and by 8.30 Cath's and Helen's trapline teams are rolling out the camp. Matt and Ben's groups follow shortly while Remko's group has the luxury of leaving at about 10am, as bees like to sleep in.

At lunchtime most of the groups return and the expeditioners enter the fly-proof gazebo to make the lunch from the makings that Val has laid out. There is a bit of a lull in proceedings except for Val and her team who are straight away preparing the evening meal for 39 people plus guests.

The expeditioners use this time to relax in their camps or to take a short walk in the vicinity, but for the scientists there is no such luxury. Specimens need to be recorded, preserved and displayed and then carefully packed for transport.

Later in the afternoon a second round of activity as teams depart to check their traps or resume their netting and searching for small creatures. Graham instituted a third daily birding experience where expeditioners could wait at the shallow pond near Relief Bore, take

a drink and a chair and wait for the birds to come to them, and after dinner Cath would be watching her bat nets and was always grateful for some company. Some nights Helen would take a small group looking for nocturnal reptiles, with excellent results.

The dining area is the heart of the campsite where expeditioners hang out, 'borrow' snacks from the kitchen, look at their photographs, think about which team they hope to join in the morning, and in the evening sit down to the nightly miracle – copious, delicious and varied meals that Val and the team produce, accompanied by plenty of red and white wine.

The expedition leaders and lead scientist make announcements before the first course and between the courses one of the scientists will make a presentation about something that they have found during the day. This is a nightly feature and enjoyed by presenter and audience alike. Then, at about 10pm, exhausted by a long day's carrying, digging, walking and driving, the kitchen/dining area is suddenly empty as people wander happily back to their tents and vans.

Highlights

- The collections. It is always good for camp morale if the scientists are being rewarded for their hard work. This expedition was exceptional for native bees and reptiles – somewhat surprising as the wet, mild conditions with low flower cover were not considered ideal for either.
- Our hosts. From the outset Francesca and Jake were enthusiastic supporters of the expedition, and we developed a strong bond with them, their family and staff. They are wanting to diversify the income from the property, including from ecotourism, and the survey results will provide them with an evidence base for grant applications, as well as broadening their knowledge of what is actually on the property.
- Camaraderie. Biennial surveys are known for their fun and friendship, and this one was no exception. The enthusiasm of the scientists rubbed off on us all, and everyone went above and beyond to help out, to assist other campers with their equipment, and to transport wine and other essentials.

We were grateful that Covid did not prevent the expedition from going ahead, although sadly six on the original list were not able to make it through the SA border.

You have not been forgotten, and we hope to see you at the next survey expedition in 2023.

Rose and Alastair Dow
Expedition Leaders