

OBSERVATIONS, CHANGES AND THE CHANGING OF THE YEARS
MT ROGERS UPDATE DECEMBER 2010-JANUARY 2011

We've had an extraordinary spring with seemingly record rainfall stimulating lush growth of plants both Australian and introduced species. Summer is attempting to impose its conditions on Mt Rogers now with the soil damper than it's been for decades. For days, if not weeks, after the 'last' rain water has been moving downhill and emerging from 'secret' soaks and 'springs'.

The path shows, in several places, the layers of previous paths and the underlying rock. Let's hope the dampness and the need for rain-gear didn't deter families from taking lessons in erosion, the power of water and the probable drainage patterns of the ridge that is Mt Rogers. Water moving north could end up reaching Ginninderra Creek via the Gooromon ponds tributary and south-flowing water reaches Ginninderra Creek by flowing 'under' the suburb of Flynn. Several properties that I know of seem to 'leak' water when it rains with shrubs and a huge Photinia between us and our neighbours always seeming to flourish regardless of drought. I've assumed that their success and the 'leaks' are evidence that natural drainage patterns can't always be tamed by engineers' planning and obliterated by bulldozers when suburbs are created.

Most plants have responded to the rain with exceptional growth in our gardens, locally and regionally. Native plant species have emerged from drought-induced hesitation or dormancy, appearing in places that have seemed weedy or degraded for decades as well as in biodiverse habitats. It's fascinating to ponder how long corms, bulbs and tubers will 'wait' underground for the right conditions. Perhaps the seed banks of some species have been depleted by the mass germination. Will all 2010's seeds be fertile and survive being eaten by insects, birds and other animals? How many will find the right soil conditions and fungal partners and germinate in the future? If we were able to harvest & destroy all the weeds' seeds would we be able to rid our Landcare sites and gardens of these pests for ever!

We held a working-bee on 14th November with Ann and Sue helping to develop a technique of Flatweed and Cats-ear removal from the grassy woodland north-east of Rechner Place's playground. Whilst this might seem a trivial way to use volunteers' labour this area is relatively free of invasive species, hosting natives such as Blue grass lilies, Love creeper and Barbed wire grass in addition to numerous Early Nancy and common but attractive spring flowers. As we pulled the weeds from the soft ground, cutting-off and bagging the flower-heads we were hard-pressed not to step on Onion orchids. They have appeared in thousands in the region in recent months, even in quite degraded-seeming grassland. The trigger for suggesting this weeding was finding three native violet plants in the lee of large boulders. That's another 'new' species for our Mt Rogers list thanks to a shaft of sunlight which spotlighted their presence.

A photographic workshop with experts on hand with advice was organised by the Friends of Grasslands in the grasslands of Mulligans Flat. We were able to wander amongst Bluebells, Milkmaids, Buttercups, Lilies, Daisies and a range of native grasses seeking to capture the richness digitally. Hand-lenses had plenty of use also, seeking the often-exquisite detail of low-growing flowers. In the former sheep-paddocks to the west the land has been scoured, graded and reshaped into the suburb of Bonner. Will the new residents, mortgage-laden, have time to learn about the species next door next spring?

There are rich grasslands now surrounded by Dunlop's streets and Mt Rogers' open space probably remains because, at the time, it was uneconomical to build or pump water to houses on the highest ground. Mansions creep up the hillsides of Tuggeranong's valley and the ex-pine forest land and vistas beyond Weston Creek won't last much longer or contribute a breathing-space of open space beyond the Arboretum.

The incredible diversity of natural temperate grasslands has inspired and amazed many this spring. Grasslands and woody grasslands such as Mt Rogers are, to our region, what

rainforests are to those living further north. They're endangered because they were so easy to modify or 'improve' for grazing and farming and to develop for suburbs as cities expanded.

Although the patterns of birds' breeding vary from year to year the effects of the increased rainfall have fascinated local birdwatchers. Some species which have come to the ACT region for our style-of-summers seem to have stayed away or nested elsewhere.

Larger numbers of Superb parrots than usual remained to over-winter here. There were quite a few extra sightings and then a quiet period before now. Presumably the birds were nesting in or near Mulligans Flat and Gorooyaroo and the young are now strong enough to join their parents foraging further afield. Numbers around the northern and western edges of Mt Rogers have increased in the last 2-3 weeks. This may show that other groups have flown here from customary breeding areas deeper in NSW.

In mid-Flynn there seems to be a roosting area. The parrots' calls begin soon after the raucous, 5.30-daily fly-past of Sulphur crested cockatoos. The Superbs have been enjoying loquats and obviously remember where the trees are from year to year. Un-harvested fruit supplements their diet of Acacia pods and grass seeds.

Residents of Rechner Place could be forgiven for having automatic-windows which close when triggered by the noise of the roosting, preening and then departing cockatoos. Summer mornings are wonderful but not everyone has the luxury of wanting to be awake and observing nature at 5.30am. In the same area the signs warning of the errant-magpie's swooping are still visible. Is it safe to take them down so folk can enjoy the playground now, do you think? 'Our' Frogmouths have moved on and I've not even seen them in the Schwarz place trees which serve as an alternate roost. Maybe someone else has them roosting in their garden?

My time on Mt Rogers recently has been too sporadic to find nests but Peter has located Bronzewing pigeons nesting in a cluster of mistletoe. He also reported finding that an Owllet nightjar has taken over one of the nestboxes. This was wonderful news on two counts as it's a 'new' species for the bird list and this must be one of the best uses of a nestbox ACT-wide. The bird's very cute 'face' was at the entrance yesterday. The original aim of the boxes was to see which species would use them and then if Common Mynas took over their boxes. Apart from the boxes having mellowed with age there doesn't seem to have been much activity around most of them. Jude sent in a photo of one that's been taken-over by bees... a common occurrence it seems.

Margaret and Chris have put in many hours of Cotoneaster cut-and-dab in addition to working bees. They also have other claims to fame as an echidna visited their Fraser yard and a White throated tree-creeper was checking out their power-pole. 35-year-old poles are just as likely to have edible bugs under their timber layers as living trees. I've usually heard the tree creeper's repeated, piping-call and wonder if it has attracted a mate.

One of the true sounds of summer in woodlands is the deafening racket of Cicadas. Apart from heat they obviously need rainfall to trigger their emergence and calls. There are some 200 species in Australia. For many of them the life-cycle includes many years underground for the larvae. The noise is to show females where they are and is part of their short above-ground life.

Cotoneasters have been visited in large numbers by the myriad Common brown butterflies which have been visible for months. They seem to prefer white flowers but also spend time amongst grasses where the eggs are laid & where their larvae feed.

The Landcare group has bought pairs of sturdy gaiters thanks to a generous donation to Mt Rogers. This is a gift that will give lasting protection and benefit and several volunteers have tried out pairs... very useful in the long grass with unknown inhabitants.

Happy New Year to all in our Mt. R.
Community.

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