



fotpin update #34 February 2021

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Upcoming events

In my last report in November, I remarked on the contrast between this Summer and last year's horror season, and that contrast continues to be stark. Our January rainfall was well above average and the total for February is already north of 100 mm after less than a week! After months of good rainfall, the reserve is looking lush and green, and now that the early profusion of Wild Oats has dried off, many of the native grasses are coming into their own, as are the native daisies.

Weed control has been an uphill struggle this year, with profuse germination of Verbascum, Saffron thistle and Mustard taking the place of the Paterson's Curse we saw in early Spring. Our weeding teams have put in a total of 272 hours over the last three months, which is well up on the same period last year, but the profusion of the different weed varieties has forced us to focus on the better-quality areas rather than try to blanket the entire reserve as we have in less challenging years. Even so, our efforts in previous years mean that we are suffering far less than some of our neighbours. Some of you may have heard Sarah Hnatiuk, the Convenor of the Friends of Mount Painter, talking to Adrienne Francis on the local radio the other morning, discussing the terrible infestations of saffron thistle on Mt Painter. By comparison, our thistle patches have been far less widespread and profuse, an outcome that owes much to our efforts to prevent seed-drop in previous years. It was also helped by comprehensive spraying of Saffron thistle rosettes last autumn, facilitated by their ready visibility as a result of the relative lack of ground cover after the dry summer.

Another outcome of the excellent season has been a profuse breeding season among the birds. It seems that almost everywhere I go on the reserve just recently, I see young birds being fed by their overworked parents. Some of the smaller birds have bred multiple times in response to the continued rainfall. One of the more significant breeding events was the first recorded instance of Gang Gang Cockatoos nesting at the Pinnacle (see below). Other unusual breeding species this year included Rufous Songlarks and White-throated Gerygones. It will be interesting to see which of these Summer visitors return to breed again next year.

Molonglo Watermain Revegetation

We held our final inspection of the pipeline corridor revegetation on December 4th last year, during which some decisions were made that will affect the future revegetation of the corridor and the involvement of the Friends of the Pinnacle in that work. The inspection was attended by myself and Warren from fotpin, Andrew Halley representing PCS, representatives from the primary contractor (Calibre) and the revegetation contractor (Ables), and Stuart Oxborrow, Senior Engineer representing the ACT Government's Infrastructure Delivery Partners (IDP) group in the Transport, Communications and City Services Directorate (TCCS).

It was decided that, for ongoing management purposes, the corridor will be divided into three sections: Top, Middle and Bottom; Top being the section from the Icon water tanks compound off Springvale Drive, including the compound itself, down to the junction west of the dam referred to as Four-ways; Middle being the section from Four-ways down to the reserve boundary fence; and Bottom being the remaining length of the corridor in the Bottom Pinnacle, from the reserve boundary south to William Hovell Drive.

Fotpin will be responsible for ongoing weed management along the Top section, and the Bottom section will be managed by PCS. Management of the Middle section will be jointly undertaken by PCS and IDP with the aim of restoring an acceptable level of native understorey and groundcover species survival consistent with the surrounding vegetation. To achieve this goal, they are consulting with Greening Australia, who have extensive experience in restoring native vegetation communities. They will also keep fotpin informed of the

progress of the restoration work so that we can coordinate our weed control efforts with the restoration work to best effect. It was also agreed that Ables would continue to keep the water up to the planted trees and shrubs along the entire pipeline corridor through to the end of February 2021.

Also discussed was the possibility of fotpin receiving funding to support our work both in managing weeds along the pipeline corridor and in maintaining a supply of native grass and forb seed to use in future revegetation work where appropriate and when seasonal conditions are right. This was discussed by the committee and, after consulting with outside experts on the topic, we concluded that the sum of \$12,000 would be sufficient for us to ensure that we have an adequate supply of native seed for this project and as well as the equipment needed to monitor our activities and apply the necessary weed control measures.

I received confirmation on January 15th that our request for funding had been accepted and that the funds would be forthcoming as soon as the details of the payment mechanism could be finalised.

The best use of this funding is still under discussion, but our current plans include using at least one of the fenced enclosures from the Native Grass Restoration project to establish plots where we can grow native grasses and forbs from seed. One possible option would be to then use the resulting seedlings and/or seed in our revegetation work along the top section of the pipeline corridor. We also have the option of broadcasting seed purchased from native seed suppliers directly onto suitable areas when the conditions are right. This is quite an exciting opportunity to significantly improve the ecological values of the areas concerned and to establish islands of native grasses and forbs that will, with a little care, have a positive ecological impact on the surrounding vegetation communities. I would be very interested in hearing from anyone interested in helping out with this project.

Vegwatch Monitoring Project

On a related topic, John Fitz Gerald and I have been conducting detailed vegetation surveys using the [Vegwatch methodology](#) at a plot in Kama Paddock since 2011, and we established a second Vegwatch vegetation monitoring plot in the pipeline corridor at the end of 2019. At that point, the new plot consisted almost entirely of the sterile grass sown to hold the soil together until other (native) grasses and forbs could get established. The 2020 survey of the same plot, conducted in early November, saw us fighting our way through dense head-high Wild Oats in search of other species that might have managed to out-compete the rampaging introduced grasses. The results of the survey were predictably disappointing – hardly any established native grasses or forbs from the mixture of seeds sown for revegetation. It will be interesting to see whether we can somehow encourage greater levels of success by native plants in the years to come, but at least we have the baseline information to measure changes. The original Vegwatch plot at the northern end of Kama paddock continues to gradually improve as our weeding efforts bear fruit, though there was a predictable spike in the numbers of saffron thistle and Paterson's Curse this year.

Pinnacle Extension

Under the watchful eye of Offsets Ranger Craig Wainwright, the Pinnacle Extension is slowly improving as the plantings take hold and the weed control efforts start to pay dividends. John Fitz Gerald and I met with Craig in the extension on February 3rd to discuss a couple of ecological burns that are planned for this year. The burns are now at the top of the action list for the Fire Management Unit and will happen as soon as conditions are right, which might be quite some time away if we continue to get the sort of rainfall we've seen so far this year. The purpose of the burns is to suppress weed growth, particularly the introduced grasses and the recent flush of Saffron Thistle, so that the struggling native grasses and forbs in those areas have a clear run to grow and set seed. We also discussed slashing some Saffron Thistle growing in the middle of a particularly nice patch of Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) and Craig (being Craig) got stuck in and slashed it the very next day.

We very much hope that the ecological burns get done soon, both for the benefits they will generate for the extension and for the opportunity to learn from the experience in the hope

that such burns can become a more widely used tool for managing ecological communities in our reserves.

Gang Gangs at the Pinnacle

You may be familiar with Gang Gang Cockatoos and their famous [“creaky-door” call](#), but thus far they’ve only been occasional visitors to the Pinnacle, despite being resident in Aranda bushland and on Black Mountain, which are pretty close as the cockatoo flies, after all.

During my monthly bird surveys at the end of December last year, I spotted a male Gang Gang Cockatoo sitting quietly on the branch of a dead tree in the middle of an open area in Weetangera paddock. It occurred to me then that he might be scouting the area for a nest site. Quite coincidentally, Tom Cochrane, who regularly works in that area with Len Taylor, emailed me a few days later to say that he and Len had been watching a pair of Gang Gangs regularly visiting a hollow in the same tree for a few weeks at least. At that point, long-time Pinnacle birder Barbara Allan and I started to take this seriously and contacted former Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) President Chris Davey, who has been closely watching Gang Gang behaviour in Canberra for many years and was Project Manager for COG’s Gang Gang Survey. He was very interested in our observations and promptly set up camp not far from the suspected nest tree.

Before long, it became clear that the adult pair were feeding at least one young bird in a nest built in a west-facing hollow in the dead tree. The youngster was subsequently identified as male and christened “Nigel”, and was watched carefully on an almost daily basis for several days. Eventually, Nigel emerged from the hollow and showed his face (see photo), but refused to take flight, despite the cajoling efforts of his parents.



Nigel at the nest hollow (photo by Barbara Allan)

A few days later, I watched with a sinking heart as the female spent several minutes trying to coax Nigel out of the hollow, without success. This was not a good sign, and sure enough, when Chris went to the nest site a few days later and used his mirror-on-a-stick contraption

to take a photograph of the inside of the hollow, the face peering up at him from its depths belonged to a possum, not a Gang Gang.

So, while we can't be sure, the most likely outcome is that Nigel is no more, as they say. However, again quite coincidentally, a few days later I spotted another Gang Gang family in Hawker paddock who appear to have a female youngster, already out of the nest and fending for herself, albeit closely watched by her adoring parents. So it seems that we did have at least one successful breeding pair of Gang Gang Cockatoos at the Pinnacle this year. Let's hope they return next year with even more success!

Events Program

Due to the ongoing COVID situation, Hawker Primary School have again cancelled their annual fete for this year, so we won't be holding our usual stall there. We can only hope that the situation is a little more rosy by next Spring in time for the Weetangera Primary School Fete.

In the meantime, there are a couple of fotpin events schedule for the coming Autumn:

- *Autumn Bird Walk – 9.00-11.30 am, Sunday April 18th*

We will meet as usual at the end of Dungowan St in Hawker. Dress for the weather and wear suitable footwear for going off-track occasionally. This is a season when the summer migrants are leaving as the winter migrants start to appear, so it's a good opportunity to see a good mix of the local residents as well as (hopefully) lots of visitors. Be sure to bring your binoculars and/or camera and some water.

- *Fotpin AGM – 2.00-4.00 pm, Sunday May 16th*

We've brought the AGM time forward to what should be a more pleasant time of year for this annual gathering of the membership. We will be meeting at Weetangera Primary School, as usual. By the time of this AGM, COVID-19 vaccinations should be rolling out into the community and we hope that this (and the offer of some home-baked treats!) will encourage fotpin members to attend. Naturally, we understand if some members prefer not to take any chances. We will circulate the agenda closer to the date, so feel free to raise any issues that you think the committee should be addressing.

John Brannan
Convenor

February 20th, 2021