

STEP NEWSLETTER DECEMBER 2023



Leptospermum myrtifolium Swamp Teatree photo Andy Russell 1 December 2023

From the President

What a productive year it has been down in Forest 20! Our working bees have been well attended all year and the result is a tidy stretch of colourful gardens and shady woodland walks. After two years of damaging rains and excess weed cover, 2023 has provided an opportunity for volunteers to prepare beds and replant specimens that were lost. The photo below shows some the STEP team planting up the grasslands area between section H and the boundary road. Our use of mulch, slow-release poultry manure and well-prepared planting holes should ensure these young plants' survival.



Our volunteers at work replanting

It has been gratifying to see so many insect pollinators buzzing and flitting around the gardens this spring. Forest 20 has become a haven for many species of birds, mammals, frogs, reptiles and insects. We all benefit from the discussions that occur over morning tea when we compare photos and try to identify both fauna and flora.

I thank all the volunteers for the many hours of hard work this year and acknowledge the support of the Horticulture team from the National Arboretum Canberra. Even though many STEPPers may take well-

earned holidays over the summer months, we will make sure there is always a watering crew available each week to look after the hundreds of young plants.

Finally, I wish everyone a safe and enjoyable festive season. Perhaps if people have friends and family who have never visited the Southern Tablelands Ecosystems Park (Forest 20), then a picnic and a stroll beneath the wattles and eucalypts might be the perfect way to show off one of the hidden gems of our National Capital!

Regards Jane Cottee

STEP President

Our AGM news

At our AGM held at 10 o'clock on Thursday 23rd November at The Shed Forest 20, the following positions were appointed:

President- Jane Cottee

Vice President- David Shorthouse

Secretary -Elizabeth Minchin

Treasurer- Ross Dalton

Membership & Publications- Andy Russell

Public Officer- Chris Ikin

General Committee Members - Terry Murphy, Bill Handke, Digby Gascoine, Jennie Widdowson, Judy Smith, and Hugh Milloy

Visiting "MOTH"s

On Thursday 16th November we were pleased to have a visit from Jenny and Robin Horsfield who work with a group of volunteers Minders of Tuggeranong Homestead (MOTH).

Jenny spoke of their work restoring the ephemeral wetlands at the property and the Yellow Box Woodland much degraded by clearing.

Jenny is also currently working on a book called "Our Grassy Landscapes and People Who Look After Them", due to be launched late October next year. Keep an eye out for the launch date. It sounds like this will be a very interesting read.

NAC turns 10.

On 13 November, some STEPpers, other volunteers and staff of National Arboretum Canberra gathered at the Margaret Whitlam Pavilion for a breakfast birthday party. NAC has turned 10! Scott Saddler welcomed us all, served our breakfast and then below out the candles on the celebratory cake. Over the 10 years, NAC has been hosting to over 7 million visitors - a very impressive number.

Lainie Shorthouse



Elliot & Pete (NAC Staff) and David with

Lainie & Mike at the ten-year NAC celebration.

Bird Watchers

The dam near STEP has become a Mecca for avid bird watchers. For some 3 weeks now, many birders have set themselves up above the dam armed with binoculars and spectacular cameras to catch a glimpse of this rare and elusive bird.

The Australian Painted Snipe is a cryptic and rarely seen waterbird. And it has another unusual distinction: the female is the more colourful than the male and is larger as well. Its rarity and shyness mean that bird watchers get quite excited with reports of sightings. And so, it has been with the report of a female at the STEP dam - bringing this couple down from Sydney to see it. Alas, though spending two days

here, they went back to Sydney disappointed. It is most unusual for an Australian Painted Snipe to be in Canberra as the nearest "hotspot" - such as it is - are wetlands along the River Murray between Eucha and Kerang. So a very rare treat - but did any STEPers see it?

Judy Smith Text and photos.

Photographers turning their camera lenses onto the dam near Forest 20





Australian Painted Snipe Rostratula australis. Female left, male on the right Photo open source.



Male Australian Wood Duck Chenonetta jubata



Common Bronze Phaps chalcoptera



Australian Painted Snipe somewhat disguised. Three photos at the dam near Forest 20.

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The STEP Newsletter is produced quarterly in March, June, September, and December. Contributions are welcomed. This newsletter has been edited by Andy Russell.

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STEP – Becoming A Wildlife Haven

STEP is becoming a haven for wildlife – and a drawcard for birdos. The Australian Painted Snipe that Judy mentions is just one of the birds that are making the general area their home – and delighting us and visitors as well.

The Buff-banded Rail – an uncommon summer-breeding waterbird, previously seen in STEP some years ago - is back at the dam and has occasionally been wandering through the STEP gardens. This small colourful bird (the size of a bantam chicken) has made the small patch of reeds at the dam edge its home. It has been seen on a number of occasions recently walking past STEPpers as we work, seemingly unafraid and not at all wary, as it is reputed to be. A few weeks ago it inspected Cathy and Chris Ikin's weeding and most recently that of Mardi Naulty. Lets hope this delightful bird stays around for quite some time for more of us to see.



20.

Perhaps STEP has foxes nearby as well as a plump hare.

But at least the large family group of Choughs is still intact – adding to our pleasure as well as our workload from their scattering of mulch over the paths and the near uprooting of our new plantings. They had a prominent mud nest near the eastern main path last year, raising three chicks, but that nest has disappeared – hopefully now with the fresh rain, they are building a new one within STEP. That is, if they can take out time from de-scarab grubbing the place.

The list of birds now seen in STEP over the years has now reached over 60.

Our wildlife haven includes 5 species of frogs in the Wetlands area. With the recent rain they were all extremely noisy at last Thursday's working bee.

And then there are our two snakes: the Eastern Brown and the Red-bellied Black, and the many interesting insects.

STEP – the Arboretum's wildlife haven.



Willing Helpers

On Thursday 7 December we were fortunate to have four extra helpers at our regular working bee at Forest 20. Ambarish Natu and his daughters Arushi and Avni, plus their school friend Maria helped the STEP volunteers put in 43 new plants, they then joined us for morning tea. The girls had raised funds by taking old cans and bottle to cash in at a local recycling facility and generously donated \$500 to STEP to provide for the purchase of plants. They worked very hard and were involved in preparing the soil, placing fertilizer in the plant holes, watering the seedlings and spreading mulch around the areas. Their assistance was greatly appreciated and they will visit Forest 20 regularly to see how their plants are going. We were fortunate that the soil was moist from the recent rains and our volunteers will keep checking on the new specimens over the hot summer months.

The species were:

Xanthorrhoea glauca Grass Trees

Veronica derwentiana Derwent Speedwell

Stylidium graminifolium Trigger Plant

Grevillea australis Southern Grevillea

Lomatia myricoides Long-leaf Lomatia

Rutidosis leptorrhynchoides Button Wrinklewort



Ambarish, his daughters and a friend at work planting with Jane Cottee, and (right) after the job is done.

Recent photos not used in last photo sheet.



Wahlenbergia stricta Tall Bluebell



Cassinia longifolia Cauliflower Bush



Callistemon sieberi River Bottlebrush



Solanum linearifolium Mountain Kangaroo Apple.



Lassioglossum (Chilalictus) lanarium Halictid Bee



Westringia eremicola Slender Westringia



Bullbine glauca Rock Lily



Calotis glandulosa Mauve Burr-daisy



The STEP ephemeral wetland rather wet



Leptorhynchos squamtis Scaly Buttons and
Austrotephritis poenia Australian Fruit Fly



Rutidosis leptorrhynchoides Button Wrinkelwort



Pelargonium austral Native Pelargonium