



Friends of Sturt Gorge

Newsletter

No 40 : April 2018

This edition: Birds, Tree Munchers, Plants, Koalas, Weather...

White-faced Heron

Andrew Goldie

I have considered myself lucky to be accompanied by one of these lovely birds during recent walks along the Sturt River.

On each occasion, heading east, I was concentrating on the trail, the river and the surroundings when I realised that a large grey bird was monitoring my progress from about 50 metres upstream.

As I got closer and tried (unsuccessfully) to take a good photo with my mobile phone the bird took off and glided away to a fresh vantage point on a tree branch.

This went on for well over a kilometre until the bird lost interest. Most intriguingly, this happened on three separate occasions over a period of about 8 weeks, so I'm confident it was the same bird.

My conclusion is that the heron considers the Gorge as its own patch and tolerates the people who wander through it.

The White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*) is found over the entire continent - wherever there's water.

According to the books it has a "heavy, slow flight" but from my observation the

adjectives "languorous" and "graceful" are more accurate.



White-faced Heron

Image sourced from the Birds in Backyards website which is operated by BirdLife Australia, ABN 75 149 124 774

Bird Lovers Website

Chris Walker

Bird lovers in the group should be interested in this site, developed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Simply click on a bird and it will sing for you!

http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/nature/birds/bird_songs_interactive.html

Olive Tree Muncher

Chris Walker

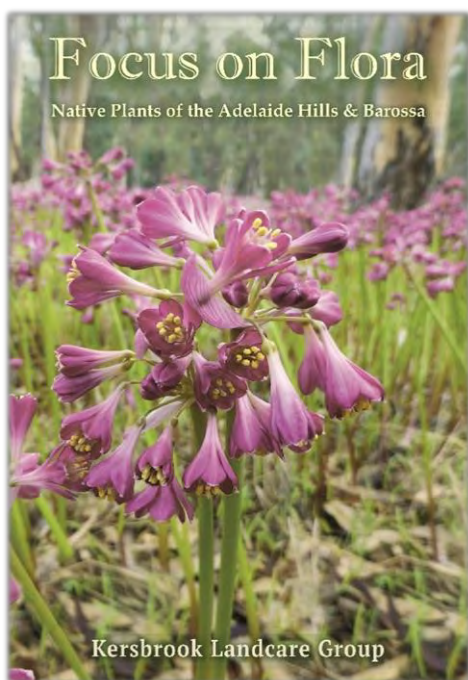
If only FOSG could get hold of one of these!

<https://www.chonday.com/Videos/excamuoich2>

Focus on Flora

Andrew Goldie

The sub-title of this recent publication from the Kersbrook Landcare Group is “Native plants of the Adelaide Hills and Barossa” and its editors note that although it “began its life as a Northern Hills guide ... during writing we realised that by adding only a few extra species we would cover ... the whole Adelaide Hills”.



'Focus on Flora' front cover

That's something of an understatement, because this has to be one of the most comprehensive but compact resources I've come across.

Unlike many other books of this type it doesn't include any weed/exotic species so if you can spot a plant in the wild using this book you'll know that it's friend not foe.

The photographs are outstanding: they actually show you the plant as you're likely to see it (when in flower) and it's a testament to the dedication of the Group members that they've clearly worked at getting the best quality images for publication.

The details provided for each plant entry are succinct, accurate and informative. The common names of plants are given, along with their botanical names, what these names tell us about the plants, and how the botanical names are pronounced – brilliant!

Plants are separated into various categories: ground-dwellers; creepers and twiners; small shrubs; medium shrubs; large shrubs; trees; water lovers and grasses.

The two appendices comprise: a list of another 100 plants native to the region but less commonly seen; and a summary of species by location in northern reserves. There's a brief but informative glossary and the index covers both common names and botanical names.

The book itself is compact, sturdily bound and has a protective cover, so it's easily put in a back-pack or shoulder bag

when you're walking or working in the bush. However, as an attractive volume in its own right, it's great for browsing when you get back home and need to test your memory for that purple-flowered, twining thing you forgot to take a photo of.

As a stand-alone resource for the average bush-walker / bush-carer this has to be the best product I've seen.

However, it's also an accessible way of getting to grips with the more technical content of such standard resources as 'It's blue with five petals', 'Plants of the Adelaide Plains and Hills', and 'Grasses of South Australia', all of which can be a bit daunting when first encountered by a non-specialist.

We currently have just 2 copies remaining (thanks to one of our members, Chris Magarey) which are going for the discounted Friends price of \$30 each (as opposed to the retail price of \$39.95). If you want a copy you'd better be quick!

Down Under in Zurich Zoo

Albert Kuster

(source swissinfo.ch)

The new stars at Zurich Zoo have button eyes, fluffy fur and rate highly on the 'cute-o-meter'. The two koalas, Milo and Mikey, can now be seen

in the Australia exhibit, which opened on in early April.



*Milo the Koala in Zurich Zoo
(Image courtesy Keystone)*

The two half-brothers are clearly indifferent to the buzz surrounding the opening. When not sleeping or yawning, they spend almost all their time chewing on eucalyptus leaves – moving only in emergencies.

They came from a reptile park in Australia and have recently moved to Zurich Zoo, the only animal park in Switzerland with koalas. The Australia exhibit is also home to perenties (large monitor lizards), emus and wallabies.

Although visitors can walk through the outdoor enclosure among the emus and wallabies, it is not a petting zoo. Stroking and feeding the animals is forbidden.

The koalas also have access to fresh air, trees and a place to sit has been provided so they can keep an eye on everything as they eat.

(Editor Note : as most FOSG members would acknowledge, we don't have to travel to Zurich to see a Milo or Mikey. Koalas are quite numerous in the Sturt Gorge – just need to keep your eyes open!)

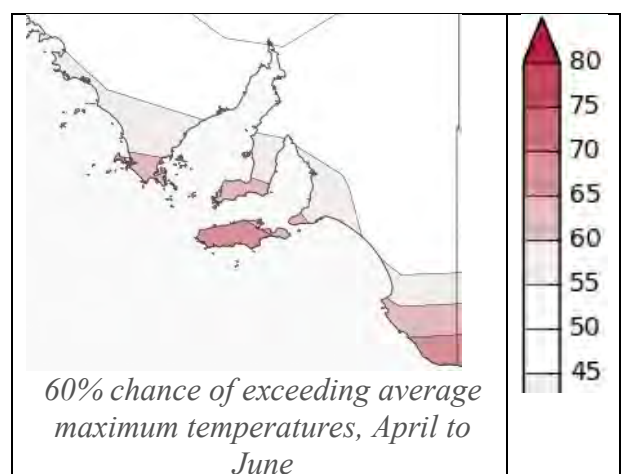
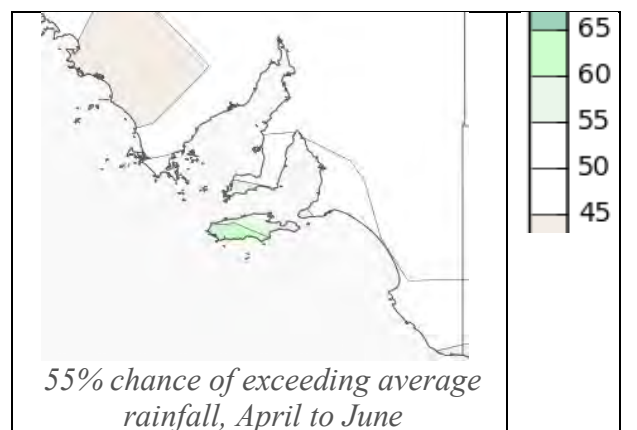
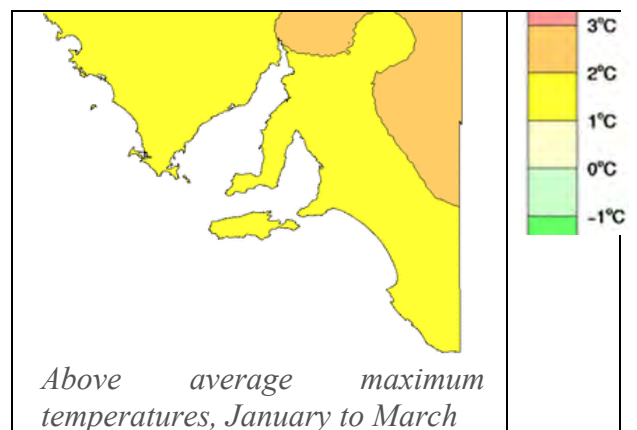
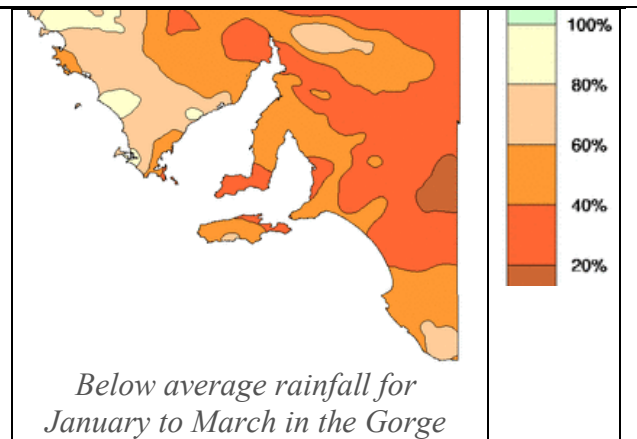
Weather in the Gorge

Andrew Watson

Weather conditions in the Sturt Gorge over the past 3 months have been much drier and warmer than normal. The Craighburn Farm rain gauge recorded only 26 millimetres of rain over the January to March period, which is only about 30% of the average of 83 millimetres. Less than 10 mm fell in both February and March, and only 12 in January.

Coupled with the dry conditions temperatures were appreciably higher than normal, with all three months above average. January was hotter by more than 3°C, with the other months more than 1°C higher than normal. In contrast, wind speed overall was close to normal, with February being the month of lightest winds.

The low rainfall has meant that soil moisture in the Gorge is now much lower than normal for this time of year. It also correlates with the current very low flows in the Sturt River. The soil dryness doesn't auger particularly well for vegetation health either. It's clear from inspecting the vegetation in the Gorge that much of it is stressed and in need of a good 'drink'. With so much dead vegetation and the green vegetation carrying much less moisture than normal a heightened risk of fire will persist, at least until a heavy rain event occurs.



One of the side benefits of the dry for people who live near the Gorge and with ‘bird baths’ in their garden (like the Editor) is seeing many more birds than normal. With so little surface water in the Gorge the birds are seeking out any water they can find. Early mornings and evenings are a treat, watching the lorikeets, rosellas, noisy miners, wattle birds, magpies, crows, pigeons and others compete for their share of water.

A positive note is the suggestion that the next three months will see the weather pattern return to something more akin to normal. Whilst a significant rainfall event in the short term looks unlikely, the signal is that the high pressure systems that have been persistent will become less dominant as we move into late autumn and early winter. Cold fronts and low pressure systems should become more active and passage the Gorge more frequently. With these being the features which generate most rainfall, as they move through more regularly, rainfall should return to closer to normal. That should be re-assuring for those concerned about the health of the flora and fauna and the flows in the creeks and rivers.

The temperature outlook also suggests a return to near average, with the warm anomaly we’ve seen recently likely to wane. The seasonal trend toward cooler temperatures will of course continue as we move toward the winter solstice and the sun angle continues to lower. The expected change in synoptic pattern should lead to a higher frequency of cooler airstreams from the west to south

and consequently more days of cloud and rain. That will lead to more frequent ‘wintry’ feeling days in the Gorge, so warmer clothing and wet weather gear might have to come out of the wardrobe soon!

The table below shows that over the past three months of 2018, Sturt Gorge has received only about 30% of normal rainfall. Every month has been well below average, with February the driest. It has also been hotter than normal, with January being exceptional, having an anomaly of more than 3⁰C. February and March were also both above normal, with the overall three month departure close to 2⁰C. It was marginally windier than normal, with March being the windiest month.

January to March Weather Summary

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Rainfall (mm)	11.6	6.8	7.8	26.2
Average	26.7	23.0	32.9	82.6
Max Temp (°C)	32.6	30.6	27.7	30.3
Average	29.5	29.5	26.5	28.5
Wind Spd (km/h)	23	21	24	22.7
Average	23	22	21	22.0

Rainfall data from Craighburn Farm, temperatures from Kent Town, wind (3pm) from Adelaide Airport

An Interesting Weather Event

A rare but spectacular thunderstorm moved through the Hills in the early hours of the 22nd January. Instability in the upper atmosphere lead to rapid development of storm activity just west of Adelaide, with lines of storm cells producing thousands of lightning bolts in just a couple of hours. A combination of light winds and a high cloud base meant many of the lightning bolts were long and carrying a lot of electrical charge, resulting in very loud and prolonged claps of thunder as the storms traversed the Hills. Many people were abruptly woken by the thunder around midnight. A few of the storm cells produced short bursts of rain, but unfortunately the Gorge rain gauge recorded only 5 mm!



Strong lightning bolts approaching the Hills in the early hours of 22nd January as seen from Flagstaff Hill

Courtesy Karen Smith and 'The Advertiser'