

Society for Growing Australian Plants Cairns Branch

NEWSLETTER

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Excursion report February 2019

Pressed to impress: Cairns SGAP visits the Australian Tropical Herbarium

Don Lawie

Our first meeting of the year of 2019 was one of the best attended in some time, as was the previous visit to the Australian Tropical Herbarium, a joint-venture research

organisation based at James Cook University's Cairns Campus. Our SGAP branch has a strong exposure here - Stuart is one of the staff members, and Mary has been volunteering for as long as the facility has existed. Doctor Bob's encyclopaedic knowledge is exercised by his also being a volunteer.

We lunched in the staff/visitor area and caught up with one another's activities then had a useful business meeting controlled by Chairman Tony. The star event of the day was a VIP exposition of the Herbarium - the way it works and what it does - by Stuart, who knows the place intimately and who has the ability to impart much information very easily.

All forms of paper are banned from the inner workings - paper may carry all sorts of organisms - and so my notes were taken in my failing brain and are thus a bit scrappy. Stuart took us through the whole process of accepting and dealing with a botanical specimen, from de-bugging, categorizing and mounting. It is important for collectors to present as many significant parts of a plant as possible, including leaves, stem, leaf and flower buds and flowers and fruit if present. Some of the Herbarium's specimens do not have all of these and so a specimen of even a locally common plant may be of interest. Many thousands of pressed specimens are stored in an easily accessible roller system. Bob showed how easy it was by accessing an *Elattostachys*

microcarpa specimen to compare with a mystery plant that Patsy had found at East Russell. Bob's I.D. was corroborated by the herbarium specimen and so we were treated to an example of the practicality of the place.

Some specimens are too big or too succulent to press. Stuart took us to the Spirit Room, redolent with alcoholic fumes. Here, in appropriate containers, are stored specimens of large fruits such as Cassowary Satinash *Syzygium graveolens*.

We were in for a botanical treat: with a theatrical flourish Stuart unveiled three original pressed specimens taken by Banks and Solander during James Cook's 1770 visit to our area. These items are akin to a holy grail to Australian botanists; to be able to look at pressed plant pieces that are as good as the day they were mounted, and compare them with the living thing, is truly wonderful. One of these specimens is a species of *Claoxylon*. We went for a walk through the cloisters later in the day and there was a *Claoxylon* tree, exactly the same as the 250 year pressed plant. Another is a little tree, *Timonius timon*; one of these planted itself in my back yard last year and it now has secure tenure to mark the Herbarium example's similarity.

Such a good start to the year augurs well for the months to follow. We'll discuss excursion ideas at our next meeting.



BEAUTIFUL PLANTS OF THE TROPICS

Don Lawie

Dendrobium fleckeri

The refurbished Cairns Museum is filled with treasures that recall the past of our part of the world. On a recent visit I was excited to find a treasure that made my heart beat faster and my tremors go into overdrive. There, on the first floor, in an unremarkable corner, was a dried and mounted specimen of a *Dendrobium* orchid. I found this fascinating since the expertly mounted specimen comprised the entire plant - leaves, rooted stem and inflorescences. I have long understood that such a mounted specimen is impractical due to the general features of a *Dendrobium* orchid. This specimen was collected on Mount Bartle Frere in 1947 and is still in good condition - good enough for an I.D.



Dendrobium fleckeri, Mt Bartle Frere. Image by Ing Toh.

Why does this specimen excite me? The collector was Babinda's Jack Wilkie. Jack was an indefatigable explorer of the mountains and rivers in the vicinity of Babinda; he found and named a number of orchid species previously unknown to Australia, and several were named in his honour (unfortunately, they had been previously described overseas and so the original name had to supercede the *wilkiei* name)

I knew Mr Wilkie when I was a boy and he was a loco driver for Babinda Mill. He used to give my brother and me a ride in the steam loco cab when he went down the spur line to our farm at Fig Tree Creek, letting us toss coal into the roaring maw of the fire box. Many years later Pauline and I had the

honour of being present when Orchidologist Bill Lavarack presented the Australian Orchid Foundation's Award of Honour to Jack Wilkie in acknowledgement of his immense contribution to the orchid world. And not many years later I was proud to be able to scatter some home-grown orchid flowers on his grave.

Dendrobium fleckeri occurs mostly on the higher mountains such as Bartle Frere, Bellenden Ker and Mount Lewis at altitudes above 900 metres. It prefers to grow on exposed rocks and can flower at any time of the year. The plant is small - the stems about 30 centimetres long - and the flowers are also small. Common name is Apricot Orchid and it is not found in cultivation since it will only grow in the weather conditions of our highest mountains. So, I will never see *D. fleckeri* alive, but thanks to Cairns Museum I have seen a lasting specimen collected and mounted by one of my heroes.

Editor's Note: The Australian Tropical Herbarium holds 82 specimens collected by Jack Wilkie between 1941 and 1970. They are mostly orchids, with co-collectors whose names ring amongst the greats of north Queensland orchidologists from two generations ago - Dockrill, Wadsworth and St Cloud. But they are not all orchids: amongst Wilkie's collections is the holotype of a delightful little shrub whose entire known distribution covers roughly two hectares on the boulderfields near the peak of Mt Bartle Frere. The species is outrageously rare, but its relatives are spread across the rainforests of the lands that once made up Gondwana - *Eucryphia cordifolia* in Chile, *Eucryphia lucida* in Tasmania and *Eucryphia moorei* in New South Wales. The name of this shrub? *Eucryphia wilkiei*.

Insect pest or beauty?

David Barrow recently photographed a rather large and colorful caterpillar munching on his *Dillenia alata* down at Mirriwinni. Garry Sankowsky was quickly able to identify the caterpillar as ***Gnathothlibus erotus***, the **white-brow hawkmoth**. They feed mostly on Vitaceae but sometimes on *Pentas* and *Psychotria* (and in this case, *Dillenia*). Garry notes the larva base colour is usually green but David's yellow version is quite attractive.



Caterpillar of *Gnathothlibus erotus*.



Adult white-brow hawkmoth (image supplied by G. Sankowsky).

A WALKING GUIDE TO THE TREES OF CATTANA WETLANDS.

Sharren Wong

Editor's Note: Cairns SGAP is thrilled to announce the publication of the beautifully illustrated "A walking guide to the trees of Cattana Wetlands" by Sharren Wong. Sharren is a member of our group and has been active in the rehabilitation and promotion of Cattana Wetlands for several years. Sharren presents her new book in the following article.

This book was written for any person who has an interest in knowing a bit more about the tropical trees they find in Cattana Wetlands and around the greater Cairns area. It includes a brief history of the area and how it has been developed into an amazing asset for the people of Cairns and visitors from all over.

There is a section on the difference types of environments to be found and information on how to enjoy the area. The body of the book is a pictorial display of the main features of the trees - flowers, fruit and leaves. These are the things that Wetland's explorers will find on the ground as the canopy of trees increase in height and grow out of reach and sight.

Included is some natural history about the trees: where they grow, their main features, how they have been used, and if they are a known food source for birds, bats and butterflies. A comprehensive table at the back of the book includes the family and botanical name, common name, flowering and fruiting times, if it is bird, bat or butterfly food and if it may be of interest in another way, for example as a medicine use or is known to be poisonous. The back page folds out to reveal a "mud map" of the area including lakes and tracks.

The trees planted in the Wetlands occurred naturally in this and surrounding areas before the land was cleared for cane growing. Restoring some of those species will hopefully lead to more birds and animals coming into these environments. There are several different environments represented. Natural dispersion of seeds from surrounding forested areas we hope will eventually increase the diversity of this pocket of developing wetlands and lowland tropical rainforest.

A major concern here is that there is no longer a corridor of vegetation connecting the mountains to the sea or even across the highway. So any movement by ground-based wildlife is severely restricted and Cattana Wetlands has become an island in a sea of development. Birds are coming in here in increasing numbers and feeding in the trees and in the water bodies. However the uncertainty of the impact to the western side of the wetlands, and in particular to Jacana Pool by the proposed Smithfield Bypass is a concern, and should be of great importance to road planning and future development near this plant, bird and wildlife oasis.

The future of an ancient sand dune, an area of original forest and a potential seed bank for this area is of concern. How will the development along the western boundary impact the dune. The area is protected under some State classifications but will this be enough and will we be able to protect and preserve this living oasis and help it spread its seeds so they are available for generations to come?



Images from Sharren Wong's new book, "A walking guide to trees of Cattana Wetlands"

Row 1: *Syzygium fibrosum*, *Sterculia quadrifida*, *Harpullia ramiflora*

Row 2: *Nauclea orientalis*, *Archontophoenix alexandrae*, *Harpullia frutescens*

Row 3: *Cerbera manghas*, *Pittosporum ferrugineum*, *Elaeocarpus grandis*

Row 4: *Elaeocarpus grandis*, *Sterculia quadrifida*, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*.

WHAT'S HAPPENING...

Cairns Branch

Sunday 17 March 2019

12 noon, Multi-purpose room,
Cairns Botanic Gardens Visitors
Centre, located on Collins
Avenue, Edge Hill. See map.

Annual General Meeting. Bring
lunch and ideas for excursions.

Also regional membership fees
are due around about now,
especially if you would like to put
your hand up for one of the
committee positions! Attached is

a membership form with details.

Contact: Sandy Perkins,
secretary@sgapcairns.org.au



The beautiful but incredibly rare Boea kinnearii, seen at Mt Lewis earlier this month.

Townsville Branch

Wednesday 13 March 2019

8 pm, Annandale Community
Centre. General Meeting.

Sunday 17 March 2019

9 am. Excursion to Alligator
Creek day use area for plant
identification.

Contact: John Elliott, jw-elliott@aapt.net.au

Tablelands Branch

Meetings on the 4th Wednesday
of the month. Excursion the
following Sunday.

Contact: Chris Jaminon on 4091
4565 or email

hjaminon@bigpond.com

