

INSiGHT #5 - Kimberley, Canoeing and Makuru

August 2012

Dear Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Chileans, English, Japanese, South Africans, Singaporeans and anyone else I've missed... wherever you are... **HULLO!!!**

Welcome to the next iNSiGHT newsletter for 2012. Thankyou to all the fabulous people I have met in the last few months who have registered interest in receiving these updates, and an extra special thankyou to all the 'long term listeners' who've been here since the start. I hope every is keep well (and warm if you're in Perth lately!).

If you are a new reader, you might like to know that all my original 'SUNZ' newsletters (Simmo's Update of New Zealand), which date back to the beginning of these emails (an era so long ago it has been dubbed the 'Landofthelongwhitecloudocene'), have been updated to the News section of my website. They tell the stories of my adventures after uni in Perth, when moved to New Zealand to study Wildlife Filmmaking at the start of 2009. If you're keen to trace my stories back that far (i.e. if you are RеееееLLY bored!), then here's the link: http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Archive.html - just scroll to the bottom of the page.

Where do we start!?! The months are flying by! The last time we spoke I was frantically packing for the rugged, remote north... now I'm well and truly back down south where I struggle to feel my fingers in the cold morning air! There's been fun, excitement, despair, exhaustion, education, delight, wonder and many other things happening over the last month. And the one consistency that threads through it all is the ever-inspiring natural wonders of Australia. Lots to talk about... but the best place to start is, well, at the beginning...

THE BEAUTIFUL KIMBERLEY



The recent Kimberley trip was fantastic. I was hard at work for 2 weeks volunteering to help film an Australian Geographic documentary about the 2012 Scientific Expedition. We carried cameras constantly as scientists and volunteers dived for elusive turtles, trapped and handled a huge variety of animals that crawled, slithered and scurried around the bush. There was lots of footage needed... the weather was hot and demanding at times... the gorges were sometimes difficult with kilos of camera gear. But overall the memories are fabulous and the experience was great.

We were based at El Questro Wilderness Park where the expedition supported valuable research into the impacts of the invading cane toad. Unfortunately the toads were there, and on the way down the Gibb River Road on day one it was sad to confirm their presence by seeing a number of road-killed toads. From the outset it is important to dispel the myth that has become public opinion in many places that "the toads will devastate everything" - this is a dramatic version of the truth. Certainly our Kimberley region is better off without them! But the environment is such a complex array of species' interactions, and as Tim Low says in 'The New Nature', there are winners and losers in every situation. If you are a Pig-nosed Turtle, a freshwater species researched by Chief Scientist Dr Sean Doody, you might find the incursion of toads very helpful, as their invasion in the Northern Territory has caused a decrease in the number of Yellow-spotted Monitors. Monitors dig up and eat turtle eggs, so more toads = less monitors = more turtles! But if you are the monitor itself, or a native King Brown snake, species

that both readily eat almost anything that moves in and around waterways, toads do spell disaster. There are such a range of responses to this South American trespasser, but this is exactly what the scientists aim to determine at El Questro - what species are most impacted, and how can we best manage the environment to help these species and maintain biodiversity. And being there to document changes before and after toad invasion is the only way to know!



Probably the most exciting part of the trip was 'discovering' an elusive species of native mammal on the Cockburn Range. The Scaly-tailed Possum has only been recorded in the East Kimberley once before in 1917, and even then that record was uncertain. In 2011 Sean Doody acquired photos of the species on motion-cameras set near Emma Gorge, and on this trip we were lucky enough to catch several individuals! The nearest current population of them is at the Mitchell Plateau, about 300km away. They are an amazing possum - similar size to the Common Brushtail but with shorter ears, and as their name suggests, a long, prehensile tail with scales at the end instead of bushy fur. We ventured deep into a rugged gorge one night to release a trapped animal, and watched it negotiate the rocky terrain with ease, scrambling over and clinging to boulders at great speed, and running up a vine, using its

tail as a fifth arm as easily as you and I use our hands to hold a cup of tea. You can see a picture I took of the possum above, between the moon and the Olive Python. More photographs of this BEAUTIful animal can be see in my photo gallery here:

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/Gallery/Pages/El_Questro_2012.html

Another huge moment of excitement (and one that gave me my 'eagle fix' also came about when an El Questro ranger rushed into tell me about a Wedge-tailed Eagle perched low in a tree, feeding on something. We rushed to the scene and I managed to get some nice shots of the PAIR of eagles we found close by. Click here to read about what one of them was eating:

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/5/9_Possum_Magic_2.html

This pair of wedgies belonged to the eagle nest I found last year, high up on a rocky ridge overlooking the Pentecost River (see the photo above). Unfortunately our 2011 trip ended before they started breeding, but this year Gav is keeping me posted on their behaviour. He was thrilled to let me know the other day that the nest now has 2 beautiful eaglets on!! This is my first breeding record of this species in the Kimberley, so it will be really exciting to hear the news from Gav about the birds' progress, and get more information on eagle diet in the region. An analysis of material collected from last year's breeding event showed the birds ate several macropods (probably Rock Wallabies and Euros) as well as Blue-winged Kookaburra, Corella and Red-tailed Black Cockatoo.

CANOEING THE ORD RIVER

My parents, Gill and I decided to go on an adventure to 'relax' after all our work with Australian Geographic. So what better way to wind down than to spend 3 days canoeing 58km down the Ord River?! It was an amazing experience and we overcame many challenges along the way, the most important being learning how to steer the boats! We soon got the hang of this during the 28km stretch of day one, where we saw dozens of Comb-crested

Jacanas walking on 'water', a colony of Fruit Bats, and a few Freshwater Crocodiles. The small, entangled creekline leading to Herbie's Hideaway drew us in to explore during the morning of day two, where we spent an hour swimming in a freshwater pool as a Merten's Water Monitor watched us closely. This was not long after I climbed to find 2 eggs inside a colossal White-bellied Sea Eagle nest, built high up in a giant boab tree overlooking a sparkling stretch of the Ord. Gill and I collected 38 Red-faced Turtle shells from below the nest - obviously an important prey animal for this pair of eagles! Day three took us along the final 15km stretch, where we battled strong winds that persistently grabbed the back end of our boat and dragged us sideways. The river was wide and lacking any real current, making most of this day hard work and needless to say we were relieved to reach the end. As you can see in the above picture, we battled, we survived, we saw incredible sights and WE DID IT!!



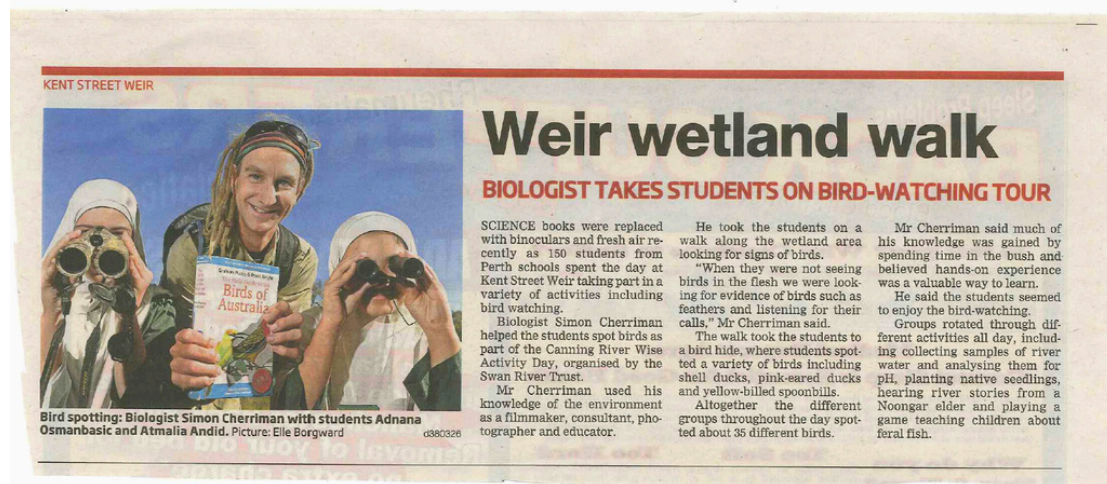
For more pictures of this adventure, click the link below:
http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/Gallery/Pages/Ord_River_Canoeing.html

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

After arriving back in Perth I dived back into environmental education work with the Canning River Activity Day at Kent Street Weir:

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/5/30_Canning_River_Activity_Day.html

This was a fabulous day where school children got out in the sun to learn about the local Aboriginal culture, water quality, birds, fish and much more in this beautiful bushland setting. I took a birdwatching activity and was very impressed by how many species the students, who were all around late Primary School age, were able to recognise. Between the five schools we recorded over 30 species, including some Pink-eared Ducks which was very exciting! We even ended up in the local paper!



I did another small workshop and birdwatching activity with the Swan River Trust shortly afterwards, where I spent a morning and Sci-tech talking many small groups of students through the 'wildlife forensics' work involved in researching raptor diet, showing them lots of bones and photographs. Then we had a healthy lunch at the Bell Tower (thanks Jos!) before bustling aboard a boat to explore the Swan River between the Narrow's Bridge and Fremantle. The 60 or so children were spotting birds left, right and centre and enjoying the games and activities prepared by Jos and the other fabulous girls from SRT.

Since then I've been involved in several other activities aimed to inspire others about the environment. A recent

highlight was 'Lord of the Sky', http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/14_Lord_of_the_Sky.html, which was a school holiday talk about Wedge-tailed Eagle ecology and research, complemented by a REAL EAGLE! 'Chips' was brought in by his fabulous carers David and Jenny Pettet and really captured peoples' attention with his size and splendour. You can read about some of the other activities on the News Section.

Gill and I have also been taking more bookings for later in the year for our Schools Nestbox Program, which we are looking forward to. We had a busy week preparing for our last workshop which we ran in conjunction with DEC's Nearer to Nature program in the second week of school holidays

(http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/17_Nest_Boxes_Nearer_to_Nature.html). It took a few days to get 16 nest-box kits ready for our lovely group of children, who had lots of fun making their own box (which they got to take home). Our thanks must go Wendy, the DEC volunteer whose help during the activity was invaluable, and we couldn't have done it without her!

WILDLIFE

The fabulous season of Makuru (winter) had arrived in the Perth hills on our return from the Kimberley, and June brought a good start to the region with soaking rains falling for a few weeks. This was just music to my ears, and I spent many a day doing office work inside, watching the rain fall on the gorgeous remnant bush in our front yard. These conditions prompted several of our tiny animal friends to become active, especially two groups that are well known water-lovers - frogs and ducks! Consequently I spent many a night outside, crawling around in swamps with my head torch and macro lens, like a pig in the proverbial, utterly ABSORBED and enjoying the living lives of frogs. The creeks and dams around the hills echoed with calls of smaller frog species (Crinias), while beneath the surface, tadpoles of burrowing frogs (that start calling and breed in Autumn) were swimming freely in the new, fresh water. One of the

photographs I took came in very handy for a frog story I wrote for school children. This year I've begun writing short pieces for the West Australian Newspaper's 'Ed!' section, a liftout used by school children across the state for education. These nature stories appear in Ed! every 6 weeks or so, and are designed to educate kids and inspire them to get outdoors and discover, as I did when I was at school (and as I can proudly say I still do as often as possible!). You can read a copy of the first story, about the frogs I just mentioned (as well as some extra waffle and more photographs that they couldn't fit in the paper!) here:

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/6/12_Frog_Blog!.html

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/6/27_Swimming_Burrowers.html

DUCKS are also known to love water, and the rainfall has prompted the two most common species in the Perth region to begin breeding. I've currently got both Pacific Black Ducks and Australian Wood Ducks nesting in some of my nest boxes, which is very exciting! I've also been placing a motion-sensing camera near the boxes to record behaviour at the boxes. After a week 'filming' the ducks with the sensor camera, I discovered some interesting competition going on at the box. Click the first link below to read about this, and the other links to see photos of both species' eggs.

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/1_Ducking_Around.html

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/8_Black_Duck_Clutch.html

http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/28_Wood_Ducks.html

News on the hatching and photographs of baby ducklings from these duck nests will have to be saved for the next newsletter!

SNAKES... are not usually associated with rain or colder weather, but during a couple of bushwalking adventures lately I've been lucky enough to photograph a few different BEAUTIFUL species. I've deliberately thrown this paragraph in because a common reaction to the word 'snake' is a cringe, shiver, squeal, or all of the above! But

I like to fly the flag for our poor old scaly friends and reinforce the fact that they deserve much more credit and respect than they get. Like all wildlife, snakes have a place in the environment, and the most important thing to remember (and what most people get wrong with their crude generalisation) is that MOST SNAKES ARE HARMLESS! Australia is home to about 160 species of land snake, and of these, about 70% are considered harmless. I think it's wise to learn which species are best avoided, and then take an interest in looking for the others! Many are easily found, stunning to look at, and even more exciting to photograph, just as much as other reptiles, frogs and birds we see every day. You can read about some of the curious and cryptic creatures I found in the following News posts:
http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/7/3_Harmless_Snake.html
http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/News/Entries/2012/6/8_Harmless_Snake_2.html

OFF OUT THE BACK

I mentioned in the last INSiGHT newsletter that I had begun some research on Wedge-tailed Eagles at Lorna Glen Conservation Reserve in the middle of WA. This project is ticking along slowly and I've been busy moving forward with the various approval processes - permits, etc - and writing up the findings from last year's field trip. This week I'm excited to be heading back to Lorna Glen to spend about 10 days conducting further surveys for breeding eagles. It's the perfect time of year to head into the Australian outback when all the wildlife is breeding and the scenery is (hopefully!) lush with new plant growth and wildflowers. Unfortunately the aerial nest surveys won't be happening due to a reschedule in the light aircraft availability, but we will still be able to find wedge nests from the ground.

If you're keen to see some of the pictures of my trip last October, and learn about some of the fascinating and beautiful creatures which dwell in this part of the desert, you can look at the photo album on my website here:
http://www.simoncherriman.com/Simon_Cherriman/Gallery/Pages/Lorna_Glen_2011.html

Well, that's about all I can fit in for this episode! (As if you haven't waffled enough already, I hear you saying!). Thankyou to you all for your interest in these newsletters. I hope this instalment has given you enlightenment and inspiration about the natural world around you, wherever you may be.

Take care and best wishes,

Simon

 **Save a tree, please don't print this e-mail unless necessary**

Simon Cherriman B.Sc. Hons (Env. Biol), MSciComm (Nat. Hist. Film.)
Wedge-tailed Eagle Specialist

iNSiGHT Ornithology
Bird Photography, Research and Education
Qualified Tree Climbing

www.simoncherriman.com

www.simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au

www.wedge-tailedeagletracking.blogspot.com.au

Mob: 0422 916 747
