THE GECKO

Edition 14
January 2017

Welcome to the January 2017 edition of The Gecko.

We hope you had a wonderful break over the Christmas and New Year period and are looking forward to getting your hands dirty during 2017.

As demonstrated already (see page 2), the warm, dry weather of summer brings the danger of fires. Stay alert and report any signs of smoke straight away. Better to be safe than sorry.

October to December 2016

30 October 2016
The morning was very warm for the eight members who met to weed around and water this year's seedlings. The seedlings are looking good and we have our fingers crossed for them surviving through their first summer.


Weeding around the seedlings. Photograph courtesy of Kade.

There was interest in the Banksia ilicifolia growing in the bushland. This Banksia has the common name of holly-leaved banksia owing to the shape of its leaves – being like holly.

Unlike most banksias, the holly-leaved banksia has flowers throughout the year, with a peak in early summer. This makes it valuable to nectar-feeding wildlife as it is a guaranteed food source year-round.

The seeds capsules are different to most banksias, too, as they are not held in a cone but seem to stick out from the end of the branch.

These features make it a distinctive and easily identified plant in our bushland.


Banksia ilicifolia has distinctive leaves and seed capsules. Photograph courtesy of Kade.

27 November 2016
Again, the morning was very warm so we decided to confine our weeding to an area of shade under a tree. Unfortunately, there was plenty of weeding to keep the six volunteers busy under this one tree.


Weeding around some more seedlings.

We were heartened to find that a number of our seedlings had survived under the blanket of weeds, but also concerned that we had now exposed them

to the elements. To help reduce the shock the plants were all given a drink before we stopped work.

12 December 2016

A wet day cleared to a fine evening just in time for our night stalk. Seventeen members and guests enjoyed an evening walking through the bushland discovering the critters that come out after dark.

We saw two species of frogs, a spiny-tailed gecko, many pie-dish beetles, several native cockroaches, katydids and spiders. A few of us had fleeting glimpses of bats silhouetted against the fading light. Two trapdoor spiders were coaxed from their homes by gently wriggling a fine grass stem down their burrows. Almost like a jack-in-the-box, the spiders would rush out to catch the potential prey only to be disappointed by our trickery.

Night stalkers investigating the water's edge.

A big THANK YOU goes to Amy, Andrew, Ash, Barbara M, Bev, Eileen, Eric, Florian, Frank, George, Jan, Kade, Mark, Megan, Omar, Pam, Riu, Ronnie, Rosemary, Ruth, Ry, Sara, Shelley, Shirley, Sian, Sophia, Stephanie, Ubaydah and Zaid for helping out in the bushland and with these activities.

Upcoming events

January – Seed collecting
February – Annual general meeting
March – To be decided

Details of some activities are yet to be finalised but will be distributed by email and advertised on our website.

Also this quarter

A deliberately lit fire occurred in the bushland near the intersection of Luyer Ave and Gerard St, East Cannington, on 23 November. Many thanks go to the fire and emergency services personnel who were quickly at the scene and confined it to an area approximately 20 metres in diameter.

The fire is extinguished.

While this is not something we want to happen often, or with ferocity, fires do bring opportunities for some of the wildlife. Several species of insects require recently burnt trees to reproduce. They lay their eggs in the charred and split wood so that their larvae can feed on the weakened timber. Some species are so attuned to fire that they can follow the scent of smoke for tens of kilometres.

Within hours of the fire being extinguished, insects were seen we had not previously recorded in the bushland. It is not known if it was a case of these insects being specifically attracted to the fire, or if the cleared area and intense scrutiny by observers made them more apparent. Either way, it has increased the number of species recorded visiting our bushland.

A PhD student, Kit Prendergast, has started studying native bees in our bushland. Kit is looking at what factors promote or impede native bee diversity, abundance and the pollination services they perform. Also being investigated is whether the introduced honeybee has a negative effect on native bees by competing with them for resources.

Kit has set up a study area and placed a number of bee hotels in trees. Bee hotels are blocks of wood with holes drilled in them of different diameters. Lots of our native bees build their brood cells inside the disused tunnels of other species and the bee hotels mimic this habitat.


Bee hotel with 3 completed brood cells.

These bee hotels, however, have a cardboard collar placed inside each hole which allows Kit to remove the brood cells and raise them in the lab. This way the bees can be positively identified and the rate of parasitism can be determined.

Several species of insect, such as wasps and flies, parasitise the nests of native bees. The parasite species will wait until the native bee has stocked her own nest full of food for her own young. While the native bee is off collecting materials to seal the brood cell, the parasite will lay its egg on the fully stocked larder. The parasite's egg will hatch first and the parasite young will eat all of the food, and often the young bee, before emerging as a fully grown insect and start the cycle again.

As well as native bees in the bushland, Kit is also studying native bees in suburban gardens. We can all help the study by photographing native bees, whether it is in our own gardens or in bushland, and sending them to Kit. Every bee seen adds to the study and will give a more complete picture of how they're doing in an altered landscape.

Kit has a public facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/groups/1041684025880609/ where you can post your sightings, link to documents fully explaining the study and Kit's contact details.


A native bee investigates the bee hotel.

Be on the lookout for European wasps. Summer is the time of year that European wasps are active and more easily located. They are about the size of a honeybee, have black and yellow markings and black antennae.

They have a very direct flight – rather than the aimless weaving around of other wasps. When flying, they hold their legs up close to their body.

Their nest is usually in the ground, but can be in tree hollows or building cavities. They are often found along freight routes, but have also been found in suburban gardens. The photo below was taken in our bushland last summer.


European wasps at their nest entrance.

Report possible sightings to the Department of Agriculture and Food WA on 1800 084 881.

Tuesday group
You are welcome to join the Tuesday group on a casual basis or as a regular commitment. This group is currently meeting at 8am every Tuesday. This quarter the Tuesday group has been busy weeding and removing rubbish.


Rubbish removed by the Tuesday group.

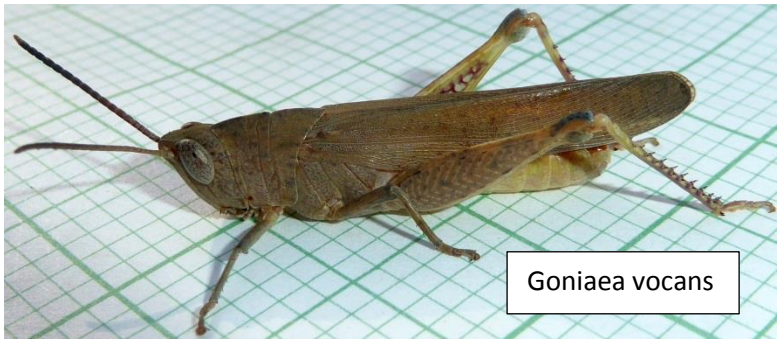
Watering group
We have a newly formed watering group. This group takes bottles of water into the bush and hand waters our seedlings every two weeks (the City of Canning waters on the alternate week).

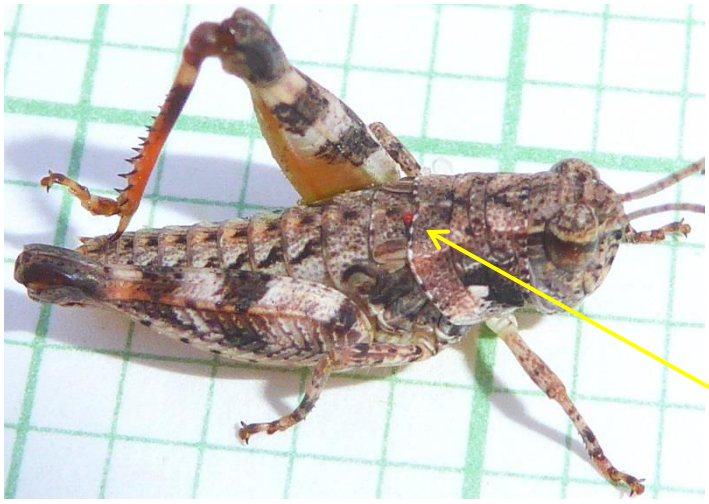
The watering group is currently meeting on Tuesday mornings at 9am and Wednesday evenings at 6pm. Days and times may change as the plants' needs change and as the sun sets earlier.

Contact Sian at fqpbushland@gmail.com to find out where and when to meet for either of these groups.

Grasshoppers

Grasshoppers seem to be everywhere at this time of year. We have many species of grasshopper living in the bushland but they all look pretty much the same – until you get up close. The following photographs show a few of the grasshoppers we found in 45 minutes on 12 December. To give you an idea of the size of the grasshoppers, the grid lines are 2mm apart. We're happy to receive suggested identifications and corrections.





This grasshopper (left) has a tiny, red mite attached to its back. Mites, relatives of ticks and spiders, suck the blood of other animals in order to grow and reproduce. They are thought to reduce the number of young that develop from the thousands of eggs each female grasshopper lays.