

Annual NT trek with a twist

Right from the very beginning of the planning stage, it was evident that our annual hunting trip to the Northern Territory was going to be bigger than *Ben-Hur* this year.

Not only had interest grown proportionately with the amount of southerners keen to tag along, but there was international interest as well, and anything that involves the modern-day Christopher Columbus of waterfowling – hunter, forester, and wildlife biologist Ramsey Russell – seems to grow quickly.

By the time accommodation, flights and land transport were arranged, the trip included three South Australians, nine Victorians, two Northern Territorians and four North American VIPs, for a total of 18 people, four vehicles, two houses and a cabin – and a logistical nightmare of epic proportions.

Ramsey was bringing a couple of world-leading scientists and a videographer with him, and before we knew it the necessary permits were being sought that

would enable scientific sampling and the collection of waterfowl specimens that were destined to be museum exhibits in the United States.

Was it worth the effort? Was it a successful trip? Did we enjoy every minute of it? Absolutely!

The four days prior to heading to the NT were spent in Victoria, filming, podcasting, and taking samples from frozen Victorian birds that had been generously donated by Field & Game Australia volunteers, board members and staff.

The new FGA national office at Connewarre Wetland Centre was a hive of activity and was the perfect place at which to undertake the task at hand.

Eventually, the Victorians made it to the NT and joined the others late on a Monday

evening, and everyone was aghast that our first meal together was KFC and not something from the great outdoor pantry! But it was late, and there had been no chance to shop for food or prepare it if we had – and anyway, turns out this was our last non-game meat meal for a week. Spanish mackerel, magpie goose and duck were on the menu for the remainder of our trip, presented in almost every way you could imagine. Curry, laksa, dim sims, dumplings, stir-fried, roasted, barbecued, slow cooked, deep fried southern style, tomahawk steaks, schnitzels, poppers – and it was all presented as if we were sitting in a posh restaurant.

The hunting was outstanding. Full limits were achieved on almost every outing, and on the few occasions an individual didn't achieve a limit in the morning, they went back in the evening to finish off.



The weather was kind, the locals were welcoming, the crocodiles didn't manage to eat anybody and even the insects focused on only one member of the hunting party – and he gets eaten alive every year, so he's used to it!

Ramsey Russell of Getducks.com along with Justin Meuller Photography have created a short film that highlights the hunting opportunities in one of Australia's wildest outback regions. The landscapes, experiences and wild food opportunities are world-class and should be experienced by all waterfowlers at least once in a lifetime. You can view the video on YouTube at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5gVx28IPzM&t=21s>.

When it comes to the scientific portion of the trip, we were graced by the presence of Andrew Engilis Jr, curator from the

Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology at the University of California's Department of Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology in Davis, California, and Dr Philip Lavretsky of the University of Texas, El Paso.

Andrew spent the majority of his time skinning magpie geese – which are endemic to northern Australia – and ducks that had been donated by Australian hunters to help fill the gaps in the museum's holdings. During the course of 10 days, Australian hunters donated more than 80 birds representing 10 species of endemic Australian waterfowl.

"Adding these specimens will help us fulfil our goal of housing most of the world's diversity of waterfowl, some 140 species," a museum spokesperson said.

"These specimens will be instrumental in

teaching in our labs, museum and courses taught in WFBC.

"We could not have been successful without our friends and hunters from Field & Game Australia, particularly Glenn Falla who worked closely with the MWFB during the planning phases and during our visit."

Andrew's work was supported by Phil Lavretsky, Associate Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP). Dr Lavretsky's research program is interdisciplinary and transcends landscape, evolutionary, and conservation genomics to study speciation, evolution, adaptation, and the role of gene flow. Overall, the objectives of his research are to determine the distribution of genetic diversity across species' ranges to understand (1) the extent to which adaptive and non-adaptive genetic diversity shapes population structure, >>

>>

including (2) what genes are responsible for geographic adaption versus alternative selective pressures (e.g., sexual selection), (3) how contemporary pressures influence a species' adaptive landscape, and (4) how best to use this information to establish better management and conservation practices.

To answer these questions, Dr Lavretsky employs next-generation techniques to generate genome-wide markers for various taxa and to link genetic variation to species or population traits of interest.

To aid other studies while we were in the Northern Territory, Field & Game Australia's vice-chairman Trent Leen, board member Paul Sharp and I collected blood clots from ducks and geese for the Western Australia Department of Health – notably samples for flavivirus (Japanese encephalitis virus, Kunjin, and Murray Valley encephalitis virus) research.

Previously it has been believed that herons and egrets formed the primary natural reservoir for JEV, however this might be an ingrained misconception. Experimental studies have implicated that birds of other taxa could also be part of the reservoir community, with chickens and domestic ducks developing viremia when infected with JEV. Recently, the first-ever natural JEV-viraemia in wild bird species in Australia was detected using molecular investigation methods in two Pacific black ducks and one Pacific black duck hybrid.

But enough of the serious matters and groundbreaking activities; I'm sure you want to know about the hunting, the socialising and the wild food! In the 10 days of our American friends' visit, a mountain of activities were slotted into the schedule. Victorian restaurants benefited from our visitors trying the local favourites, Australian food traditions were shared with Vegemite and Tim Tams being high on the 'must-try' list, and the Howard Springs Tavern in Darwin earned a dollar or two from our visit.

Coolalinga Guns and Ammunition staff were left smiling all the way to the bank, and the company, camaraderie and banter was tremendous.

The waterfowling, as mentioned previously, was outstanding and probably some of the best we've experienced. Jason Farrugia of Magnets Outback Adventures was part of the support crew, and a group of the lads did a half-day fishing charter with Jason to show their appreciation. That too was an adventure, with the crew enduring a fairly significant storm offshore just prior to daylight. At one stage the vessel was facing completely the wrong direction despite the best efforts of the captain, but eventually the weather cleared and a nice feed of fish was gathered. >>



Dr Philip Lavretsky, of the University of Texas, expertly skins a waterbird.



Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology curator Andrew Engilis Jr., at work during the trip.



Tissue sampling helps inform a number of different scientific studies.

The local knowledge that Jason has gathered since moving north was invaluable in putting us "on the X", and some new areas were explored. Small sharks and seasickness aside, it was just another piece of a wonderful puzzle that was the tour of 2023.

Dwayne Devanny arranged leave from his job on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria to be a part of the adventures – and as always he stepped into the role of general dogbody and performed tasks such as retrieving birds with a fishing rod from shallow water, setting decoys in areas that looked too croc-infested for all but the most brave, and taking our American friends on the Adelaide River Jumping Croc Tour where they even received T-shirts to remember Darwin and the NT thanks to Dwayne's generosity.

Additionally, Dwayne provided fresh fish, his culinary skills and a whole lot of entertainment and knowledge. I seem to recall the Americans referring to him as the Crocodile Dundee of the group, as he appeared never happier than when he was up to his neck in muddy croc-infested waters performing some essential task.

Unfortunately, there was an element of danger involved in our journey, and a brief overview of that week and the days following reveals a minor modification to the length of a left thumb (alcohol and kitchen knives late in the evening are not a good combination), and a mixture of mysterious illnesses that led eventually to several members of the party contracting COVID-19. The worst-hit needed to be air-lifted to hospital and admitted to intensive care after returning to their home state, and as serious as the matter was – and believe me, it was extremely serious for a while there – we can safely look back now and question the fortitude of some, with a half-glass of concrete having been mentioned as a possible requirement once or twice.

To the Bendigo, Geelong, Keith (South Australia) and NT FGA members involved in supporting the "US Tour of 2023", thank you!

To the Northern Territory FGA branch who welcomed us to their shoot on our last day in town (an annual tradition), loaned us equipment and assisted with storage and export of scientific samples, we cannot thank you enough. Your branch members are the epitome of what FGA represents, and some of us were even treated to the best magpie goose laksa this side of the black stump! Thank you Coxy and the committee for your ongoing support.

And finally, to all our valued members and volunteers who gave up trophy birds that had been set for future taxidermy and instead donated them in the name of science, the extent of your generosity makes us very proud and we extend our heartfelt appreciation.



Specimen data is painstakingly documented to aid in waterbird research.

Dr Lauretsky takes a tissue sample from a magpie goose.



NOTE: Field & Game Australia staff and board members who participated in this adventure and its associated research activities did so in their own time and at their own expense.
#australiasmostsurprisingconservationists

KEYS FOR ACCESS TO HUNT AT HEART MORASS DURING VICTORIAN DUCK SEASON AVAILABLE NOW

CONSERVATION • HUNTING • CLAY TARGET

field & game

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE
Issue 33 March – May 2024 \$9.95

NEW DAWN FOR DUCK HUNTING IN VICTORIA

HUNTING: SEASONS ANNOUNCED
IN SOUTHERN STATES

CONSERVATION: APP TRACKS
HENHOUSE ACTIVITY

CLAY TARGET: SNAPSHOT
OF PORT PHILLIP

ISSN 2206-0707



9 772206 070002 >

 field &
game
AUSTRALIA INC.