

Wimmera Home Education Group

Sharing Living Things on our Farmlands

By Jeanie Clark

What interesting/exciting/amazing living things are around you? Wimmera Home Education Group (WHEG) families live in a rural area, with many on, or linked to, farms. In November, seven families and some 20 children met at Warracknabeal's Wheatlands Educational Resource Centre. We shared something special about living things on our farmlands as our Australian Year of the Farmer activity- 'raising the profile of farming amongst ourselves' and learning from each other.



Foals

Stories were told about two recently born foals: a Buckskin and an Arab. If a foal doesn't get up within an hour or so of being born, it won't be able to 'go to the milkbar' and get a drink of its mother's milk. What could you do to help a foal that is down too long? The solution is to massage the lower part of its back legs, and help it stand. What a relief when it does, and gets that first drink! Another important sign of health is its first 'poo' shortly after the first drink of milk.

Notice the raised tail in the photo on the left? How similar is any of this to human

children? Consider the time taken to learn to stand, the need for milk and the pooping!

Quails

One of the older children had been on a header - a machine which removes the heads of grain from crops. He had noticed many quail families hiding in the crops. Big and little quails would run ahead of the cutting cones when they were disturbed by its approach. After the header had passed by, they would disappear into the stubble (stalks that remain after the heads are cut off). Why do they stay there? The big machinery used to harvest the crop gets most, but not all, the grain. Some of the grain falls on the ground and this is enough for the quail family to live in and feed on. So, with cover and food in the stubble, there is no good reason to leave!

Bees

Bees had first been noticed by one family in the autumn - they had come into the garden in search of water. The children watched them and noticed which plants they preferred to feed from. They took photos of the bees and learnt about how important bees are for all the plants, including the crops.

Scotch Thistles, Ladybirds and Mudeyes

Wouldn't you think that a weed (Scotch Thistle*) that was declared 'noxious' way back in 1856 would have no redeeming features? Well, it does. For example, ponies seemed to like to eat the flowers.

Also, ladybirds were at home all over the Scotch Thistles. These insects are very important in a

garden as they eat insect pests. One family had found ladybird eggs in their backyard garden - a great sign that their veggie plot was healthy, and even more so as they didn't have the weed as well.

Back in September, there had been a couple of afternoons when lots of dragon flies had been flitting around the flower garden. Scotch Thistle had helped them, too. How? Dragon flies, with their big wings, come from mudeyes - their nymph body. The wings have to dry before they can fly. If they don't fly, they die without meeting a mate and laying eggs for the next generation. So the mudeyes need to have something very solid to cling onto while crawling out of the water before emerging into dragon flies. A Scotch Thistle is very strong and there were lots of mudeye skeletons still gripping the leaves of the thistles, as shown in this photo on the right.



Plants

One family created a model to show photosynthesis in a plant (described in *Otherways* no. 129, page 30, 2011). Their model (pictured below) shows water and carbon going through the plant, and the leaves taking carbon from the air and storing it as a solid that grows into different forms throughout the parts of the plant. Plants linked all we had seen and reminded us of their importance in our lives.

Is this only local learning? Sharing our farming stories was a very local, backyard activity, yet it fitted well under a global long-term challenge, that of the United Nations Decade of Biodiversity's targets: 1 (increasing knowledge of species), 13 (increasing knowledge of domestic animals), 9 (increasing knowledge of invasive alien species) and 19 (sharing our knowledge). 'Acting locally, thinking globally' can be easy if done together.

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* A 'challenge' activity to identify and learn more about this weed is found as a pdf called "What weed is this?" at <http://enviroed4all.com.au/biodiversity-on-our-farm/weeds>



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