

Save the date: 24 to 27 November!

The Great Southern BioBlitz is coming to Norfolk Island!



The Great Southern BioBlitz (GSB) began in 2020 during the global pandemic. The brainchild of a group of bioblitz enthusiasts in Australia, the first GSB saw 12 countries and more than 150 Local Government Areas (LGAs) participate, with more than 91,000 observations recorded throughout the Southern Hemisphere using the iNaturalist app and website.

What is a Bioblitz?

A BioBlitz is a snapshot study of a specific location (in our case, this will be Norfolk and Phillip Island and the waters surrounding the islands), where scientists and the community work together to survey and record as many species as possible of flora, fauna, fungi and aquatic life within a nominated time frame.

For the GSB, this takes place over a four-day weekend in late spring, from 24 to 27 November.

Why have a GSB?

The goal of the GSB is to encourage engagement in citizen science by adults and children across the Southern Hemisphere; and to get people involved with and engaging in their local environments to discover the biodiversity that is there, even if it is just at the bottom of the garden!

Through the online platform iNaturalist, we hope to increase biodiversity awareness and encourage citizens to contribute to the understanding of their local biodiversity.

Will my observation count?

You betcha!

Every observation you upload becomes a valuable data point representing an encounter with a species at a point in space and time. After your observations are identified, the data are piped into databases like the Atlas of Living Australia and the Global Biodiversity Facility where they can be used by scientists, schools and more for research.

Who can take part?

Everyone! All you need is access to a smartphone or a camera. Volunteers will be on hand to assist with how to take the best photos and how to upload them.

In the coming weeks, we will be bringing you more information about how you can get involved in the Bioblitz, what species to expect (almost everything is fair game that isn't a domestic animal

or a human!), how to install and use the iNaturalist app on your phone or computer, and – if you prefer – how you can join in or record your species independently.

If you would like to know more about the GSB, or if you'd like to offer to help (we always love a good volunteer! And we promise it won't be an onerous gig!), or if you would like to kick in a small prize for the most sightings, please contact us. We want to hear from you!

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Useful links:

Great Southern BioBlitz 2023: <https://www.greatsouthernbioblitz.org/about-1>

Facebook: @GSBioblitz and @groups/greatsouthernbioblitznorfolkisland

iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/>



iNaturalist Great Southern Bioblitz page
<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/great-southern-bioblitz-2023-norfolk-island> or scan the QR code.

The Norfolk Island Great Southern Bioblitz is proudly supported by Parks Australia and the Norfolk Island Regional Council.



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CITIZEN SCIENCE: YOUR OBSERVATIONS CAN BE POWERFUL

By Susan Prior

I am sure many of you will want to know why it is important that we do censuses of species, such as the upcoming Great Southern Bioblitz, so I thought I would give you one recent example of how important observations by ordinary people, on the ground, living here on Norfolk Island, can be.

In a recently released checklist of coastal fishes for Norfolk, Lord Howe and the Kermadec Islands, I was able to claim twelve of the fish species from a (very) long list that are the first recorded sightings here on Norfolk Island. I must stress, that doesn't mean that someone hasn't seen these species here before, just that up until now they have either evaded being recorded by researchers and anyone else keen on cataloguing our wildlife; or maybe the person who saw them didn't realise their significance; or maybe they weren't here in the first place and are new arrivals to the region.

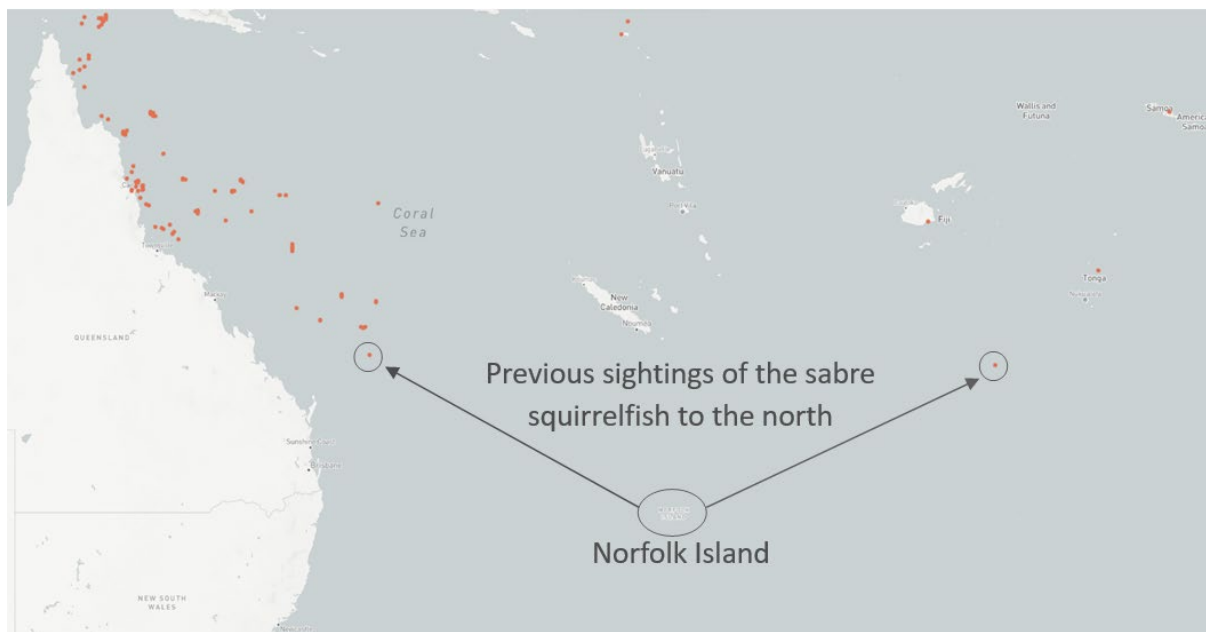
It is such a buzz to find something different. Every time I go for a snorkel I wonder if I will see something new. Which is exactly what I did recently; this time the sighting was of a sabre squirrelfish (*Sargocentron spiniferum*).

Why is it important to record these sightings?

It matters not just from the perspective of establishing an ecosystem's biodiversity, but also because, over time and studied as a dataset, these observations can pick up trends, as I will explain.

I sent the details of my sabre squirrelfish observation to Dr Malcolm Francis, Principal Scientist at the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research. He confirmed the fish's identity and replied: 'It is an interesting record – quite a bit further south than it usually is. From memory I've seen it in New Caledonia and Fiji.'

In the map of its distribution (taken from the Australian Museum's website page for this fish) you can see the most southerly distribution previously recorded is about 750 km (give or take) further north than Norfolk Island.



The red dots show the previous sightings of the sabre squirrelfish. Norfolk Island is almost in the centre, near the bottom of the map.

Thanks to these kinds of observations – often made by people just like you and me – RedMap (which stands for ‘Range Extension Database and Mapping Project’) has been able to produce a poster called ‘What’s on the Move Around Australia’. This poster records ten years of sightings from 2012 to 2022, and graphically demonstrates that fish are responding to climate change by shifting their ranges further south.

I have copies of the poster to give to the school, but you can see it for yourself at this link:

https://www.redmap.org.au/media/uploads/2022/08/22/redmap_au-report-poster_Q3rp3Ee.pdf

We can’t be sure if our Norfolk Island sabre squirrelfish has simply been missed in previous fish censuses (not that there have been many formal comprehensive ones here) – which is quite possible because they are nocturnal, and quite shy, hiding under coral ledges during the day; or if this species has shifted its range southwards because of warming oceans. But for now, at least, we know it is here.

It only takes your observation of one little fish, or bird, or plant, recorded outside its previously understood range to add to a body of evidence that may prove, or disprove, scientific theories, which may in turn then be used to inform government policies on a range of things, including how to build resilience in the face of climate change, how best to preserve and conserve the environment, and much more.

That is citizen science at work. And it can be powerful and fulfilling.