



Day 7 - Fact Sheet 18
Tales of the Todd read all about it!
Getting to know Salt Lakes

Source: Alice Springs Desert Park

Water (and soil) that is high in mineral salts is an environment that favours a limited number of plants and animals. Those that do live there however are well adapted to the conditions.

Salt tolerant (loving?) plants

Members of the chenopod family (saltbush and bluebush) are dominant salt lake plants. They tend to take up the salt and store it in special cells near the surface of the leaf. When full these cells burst open leaving a salty waxy mix on the surface of the leaf. The covering then helps protect the leaf from the sun.

The salt lake animal web

Insects tend to form the mainstay of the food web in many habitats but there are few that will live in or near salt lakes. The ones that do best are those able to live on the bacteria and algae which will grow in even the smallest amount of salty water. Mosquitos, midges and gnats, caddis fly and a variety of water beetles make up the bulk of this population. They also have clever ways of getting air such as capturing bubbles of oxygen from algae or having long breathing tubes. Other invertebrates, such as brine shrimps and fairy shrimps, and also snails will make a living in these conditions.

The lakes that dry out or are dependant on seasonal flooding make life hard for even these animals because they need to be able to disperse to other damp locations during dry times or produce eggs that survive the drying. The lakes that are continually fed by underground water have a more permanent animal population.

Some fish will live in salty water, and water birds are especially attracted to these areas when the water levels are high and populations of their food source are likely to be large.

Some birds and also small reptiles have the ability to drink salt water or live on the plants and animals that have high salt levels in their systems, and have mechanisms to remove the salt either through their pores or through their respiratory system.

Value of salt lakes

When in flood, salt lakes attract large numbers of waterbirds which take the opportunity to feed and breed in the favourable conditions. This makes these areas particularly important for the conservation of waterbirds.