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Brief Notes on the Fitzgerald Reserve

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Scientific Interest of the Reserve

Because of the southwest-northeast trend of the coast in this region, the reserve lies in a rain-shadow and is generally drier than the country to the southwest (Albany district) and to the east (Esperance district). Rainfall however is locally increased by the moderately high coastal ranges. Consequently we have here an interesting intermingling of dry and wet-country fauna and flora. Certain dry-country birds like the Mallee Hen, Bustard, Ground Cuckoo-shrike, Southern Scrub-Robin, Crested Bellbird, Brownheaded Honeyeater and White-eared Honeyeater extend down the relatively dry valley of the Fitzgerald almost to the sea. Close by, but usually on higher ground, we find such wet-country birds as the Painted Quail, King Parrot, Fantailed Cuckoo, Golden Bronze Cuckoo, Scarlet Robin, Spotted Pardalote, Whitenaped Honeyeater and Red-eared Firetail. Some of the latter birds, e.g. the Painted Quail and Spotted Pardalote find their eastern limits on the relatively damp slopes of the Middle Mt Barren Range.

Value of the Reserve for Conservation

The inland parts of the Reserve are especially valuable in that they contain large tracts of mallee, morn and sandplain vegetation of the kind formerly occurring in the southern Wheat-Belt. They thus constitute the only effective refuge for rapidly disappearing birds like the Purple-gaped Honeyeater and Western Whipbird whose former habitat, centred on the country between Gnowangerup and Lake Grace, has now been largely cleared for wheat-growing.

Apart from their great scenic beauty the mountain ranges are the only known habitat of a recently discovered species of legless lizard and a land mollusc.

Management of the Reserve

Until now the main hazard to the flora and fauna has been the frequency of fires sweeping in from the agricultural country to the north and west of the Reserve. Firebreaks are urgently required for restricting the spread of these and other fires.

Another but only locally important hazard to the fauna is the laying down of poison baits.

A potentially great hazard to the flora and fauna is the proposed mining on the Reserve. Open-cut mining of the lignite of the middle Fitzgerald would inevitably destroy for an incalculable period the vegetation of the area and the fauna dependent on it. The movement of overburden could

have deleterious effects downstream, such as rendering uninhabitable the fine pool at Jonacoonack now tenanted by bream and tortoises, and the estuarine water behind the bar at the mouth of the river which provides a home for a flock of that beautiful but rare duck, the Chestnut Teal.

Quarrying of the coastal ranges could exterminate the species of plants and animals that are restricted to these ancient and isolated mountains.

23 July 1970