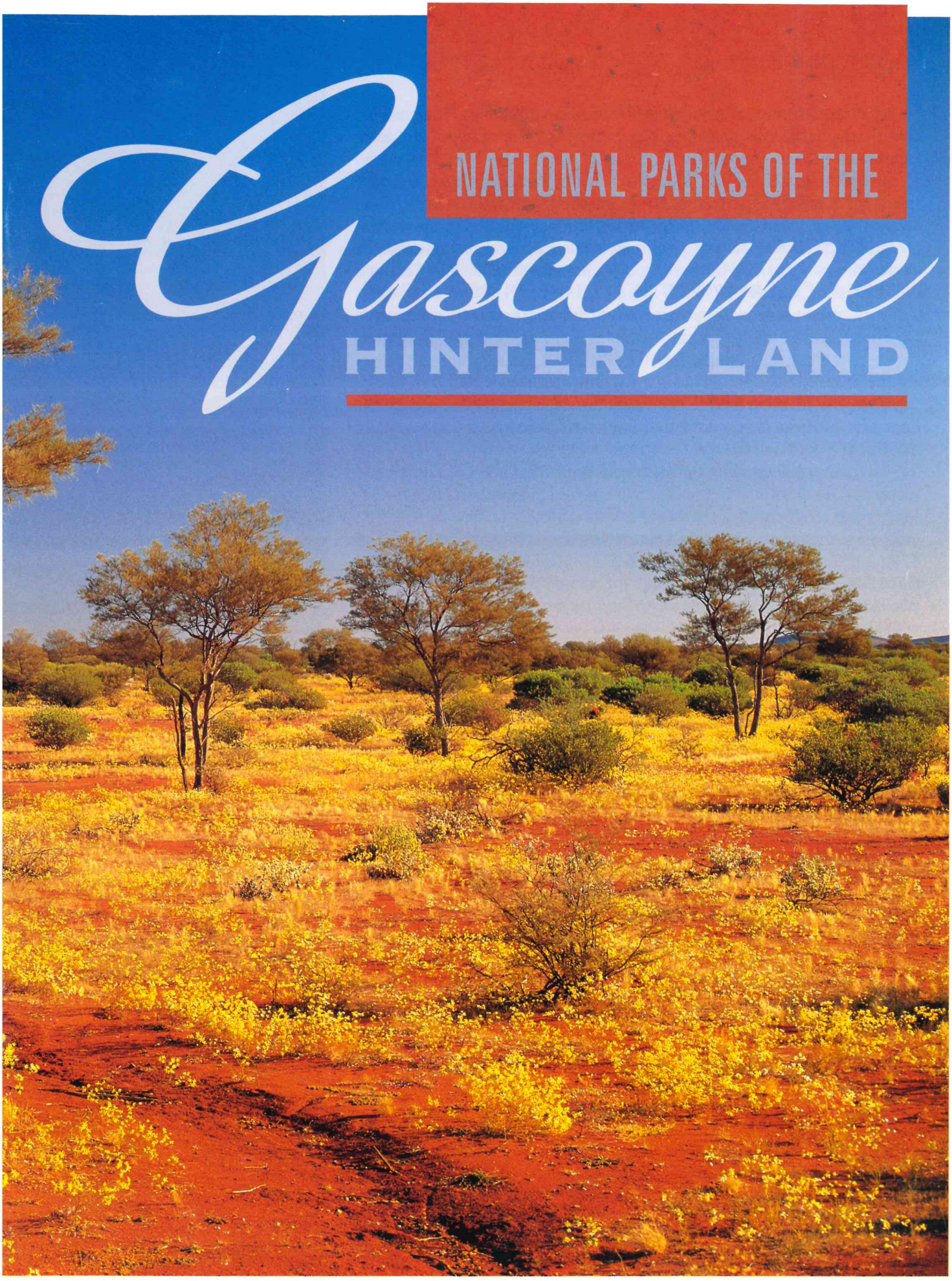
NATIONAL PARKS OF THE Gascoyne HINTERLAND



TOURIST INFORMATION

Roads are gravel, but suitable for conventional vehicles. They may be closed or substantially damaged after heavy rain. Seek advice from local Shires.

Mount Augustus is 430 kilometres from Carnarvon via Gascoyne Junction, and 360 kilometres from Meekatharra. No camping or open fires are permitted within the Mount Augustus National Park. Accommodation, powered caravan sites, camping facilities, meals, fuel and water are available at the Mount Augustus Outback Tourist Resort, ☎ (099) 430 527, and Cobra Station, ☎ (099) 430 565.

The Kennedy Range is approximately 50 kilometres north of Gascoyne Junction. Bush camping is permitted at the main visitor area at the base of the eastern escarpment in the Kennedy Range National Park. Bush toilets are the only facilities provided.

A range of 'Station Stay' accommodation is available throughout the Gascoyne hinterland. Contact the Carnarvon Tourist Bureau for more information on Station Stays.

For further information on these national parks and other scenic and recreational attractions in the Gascoyne hinterland, please contact:

CALM District Office,
67 Knight Terrace,
DENHAM
WA 6537
☎ (099) 48 1208

Carnarvon Tourist Bureau,
6 Robinson Street,
CARNARVON
WA 6701
☎ (099) 41 1146

Shire of Upper Gascoyne,
4 Scott Street,
GASCOYNE JUNCTION
WA 6701
☎ (099) 43 0988

CODE OF ETHICS FOR PASTORAL AREAS

Most roads in the Gascoyne pass through pastoral leases. In these areas, main roads are not normally fenced, so watch for stock straying onto or across roads. Travellers wishing to leave the main roads and enter pastoral leases should obtain permission from the station manager.

Pastoral properties are business operations with high operating and capital expenses. Carelessness or vandalism can be extremely expensive to the owner. If you intend to enter pastoral leases please:

- call at the homestead and inquire where you can and cannot go.
- leave all gates as they are found.
- refrain from shooting and do not take dogs onto the property unless authorised by the manager.
- do not light fires unless authorised by the manager.
- do not dump rubbish; plastics and tin cans can be fatal to livestock and native fauna, and food scraps encourage feral animals.
- do not interfere with livestock or their watering facilities.
- never swim, wash or use detergents in water tanks and do not camp within at least one kilometre of stock watering points.
- do not cut, remove or drive over fences.
- keep off station roads when wet.

Always carry enough fuel, water and supplies to get you to the next town, as these are not available at most stations.

Mt Augustus foxglove – Photo Bill Bachman

THE GASCOYNE HINTERLAND

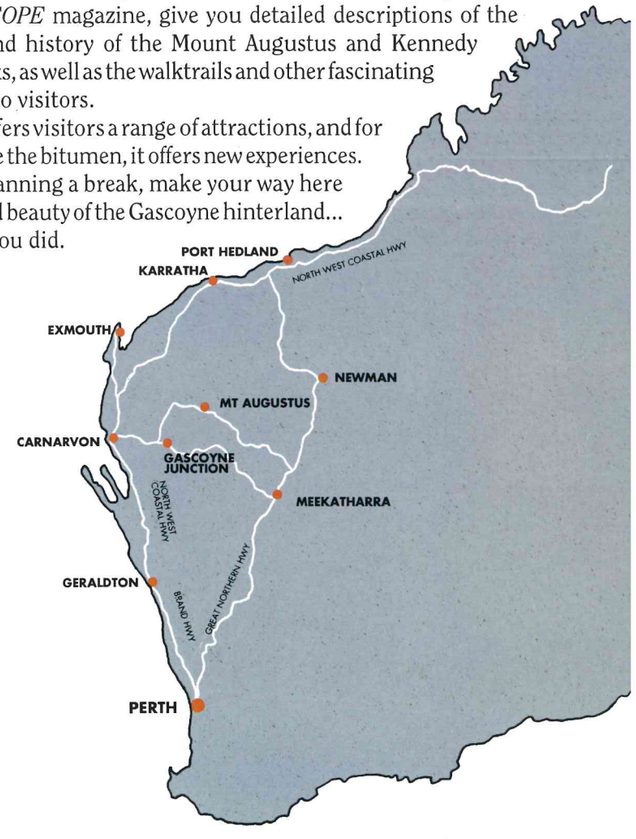
The arid but starkly beautiful Gascoyne region is well known for its attractive coastline. Now, visitors are beginning to discover its rugged hinterland as they venture inland to the Kennedy Range and Mount Augustus National Parks.

Sitting between the 26th Parallel and the Tropic of Capricorn, the Upper Gascoyne region is dominated by wide alluvial valleys—the drainage basins of the Wooramel, Gascoyne, Lyons, Minilya, Lyndon and Ashburton Rivers—vast alluvial plains and red dune belts, interspersed between low sedimentary ranges such as the Kennedy Range and the Collier Range, farther east.

Visitors travelling from Perth can enter the Gascoyne hinterland from the west via the North-West Coastal Highway or from the east via the Great Northern Highway (see map). If you have the time, and you'll need about a week, you can complete a round trip from Perth via Carnarvon, Gascoyne Junction and Meekatharra, and visit both national parks in the one trip.

These parks offer very different experiences. The Kennedy Range National Park offers a true wilderness experience, with few facilities and a bush camping area beneath the huge sandstone cliffs. Mount Augustus National Park has fully catered camping and caravanning facilities at two nearby stations, as well as signed walktrails and site information. Both parks feature outstanding scenic beauty, breathtaking views of the surrounding plains, a host of native plants and animals, Aboriginal engravings and, in the case of the Kennedy Range, fossils of ancient sea-dwelling creatures stranded high in the cliffs of an uplifted sea bed. The two articles, reprinted here from *LANDSCOPE* magazine, give you detailed descriptions of the geology, biology and history of the Mount Augustus and Kennedy Range National Parks, as well as the walktrails and other fascinating features they offer to visitors.

The Gascoyne offers visitors a range of attractions, and for those willing to leave the bitumen, it offers new experiences. Next time you're planning a break, make your way here and discover the arid beauty of the Gascoyne hinterland... and you'll be glad you did.



MOUNT AUGUSTUS NATIONAL PARK

ON 3 JUNE 1858, EXPLORER FRANCIS THOMAS GREGORY BECAME THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO ASCEND MOUNT AUGUSTUS, WHICH HE HAD FIRST SIGHTED SOME FOUR DAYS EARLIER. THIS ENORMOUS ROCK IS RICH IN ABORIGINAL ART, DATING BACK THOUSANDS OF YEARS, AND IS ITSELF ABOUT 1700 MILLION YEARS OLD. BUT IT IS NOT ONLY THREE TIMES OLDER THAN AYERS ROCK, IT IS ALSO TWICE ITS SIZE, MAKING MOUNT AUGUSTUS THE LARGEST ROCK IN THE WORLD.

BY DAVID GOUGH & TERRY BLOOMER

Mount Augustus, or *Burringurrah* as it is known by the local Wadjari Aboriginal people, is about 850 kilometres north of Perth and midway between the Great Northern and North West Coastal highways. One of the most spectacular solitary peaks in the world, it rises 717 metres above the surrounding plain (1 106 metres above sea level) and is clearly visible from the air for more than 160 kilometres. The rock, which culminates in a small peak on a plateau, is about eight kilometres long and covers an area of 4 795 hectares. At about twice the size of Uluru [Ayers Rock] it is the biggest rock in the world. However, because Mt Augustus is covered with vegetation, it looks less stark.

But that is not the only difference. Uluru is a monolith (a single block of stone of uniform quality and considerable

size), whereas Mt Augustus is a monocline—the result of sand accumulation that was eventually uplifted and folded. The granite beneath its surface is between 1 650 and 1 900 million years old, making it not only twice as big, but three times older than Uluru.

THE DREAMING

In Aboriginal mythology, mobs of people travelling across the country were often transmuted into the form of a range, and individuals became hills, peaks or other distinctive features of the landscape.

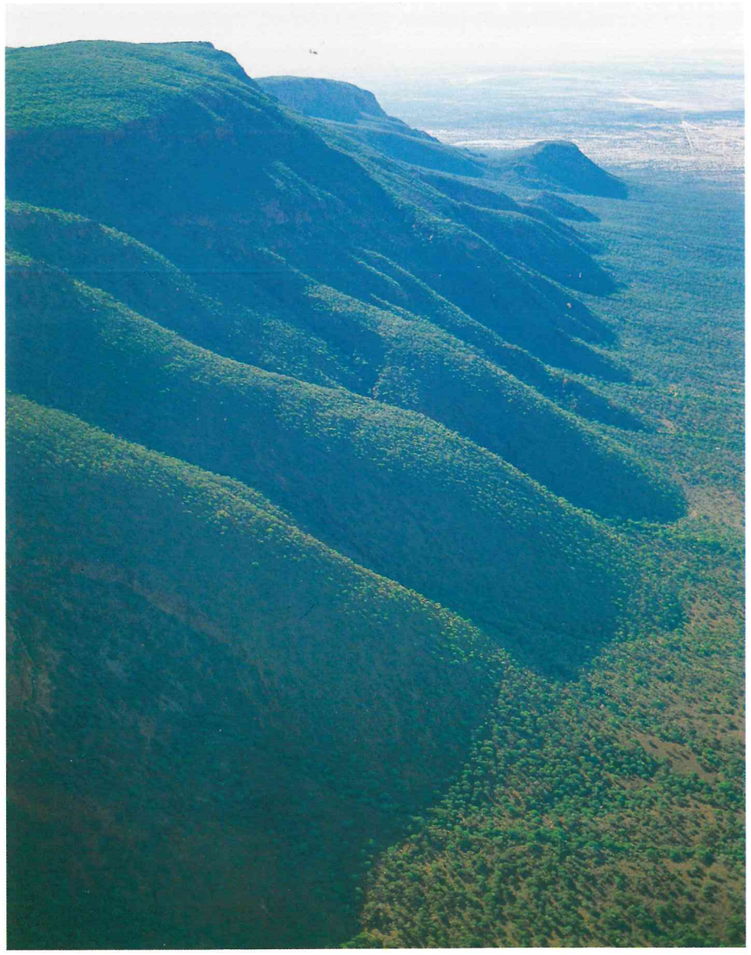
The formation of Mt Augustus in the Dreaming is recounted in three known stories.

In the first story, an old man is said to have broken away from the mob [now the Kennedy Range]. He transgressed Aboriginal law by revealing ceremonial events to people who were not entitled to see them. Because of this, he was tracked down and speared by the tribesmen, then beaten by the womenfolk. His dead body lay on the plain—its form becoming the shape of Mt Augustus.

The second story relates to a boy named Burringurrah, who was undergoing his initiation into manhood. The rigours of the process so distressed him that he ran away, thereby breaking Aboriginal law. Tribesmen pursued the boy, finally catching up with him and spearing him in the upper right leg as his punishment. He fell to the ground; the spearhead broke from its shaft and protruded from his leg. The boy tried to crawl away, but the women beat him with their *mulgurrahs* [fighting sticks]. He collapsed and died, lying on his belly with his left leg bent up beside his body.

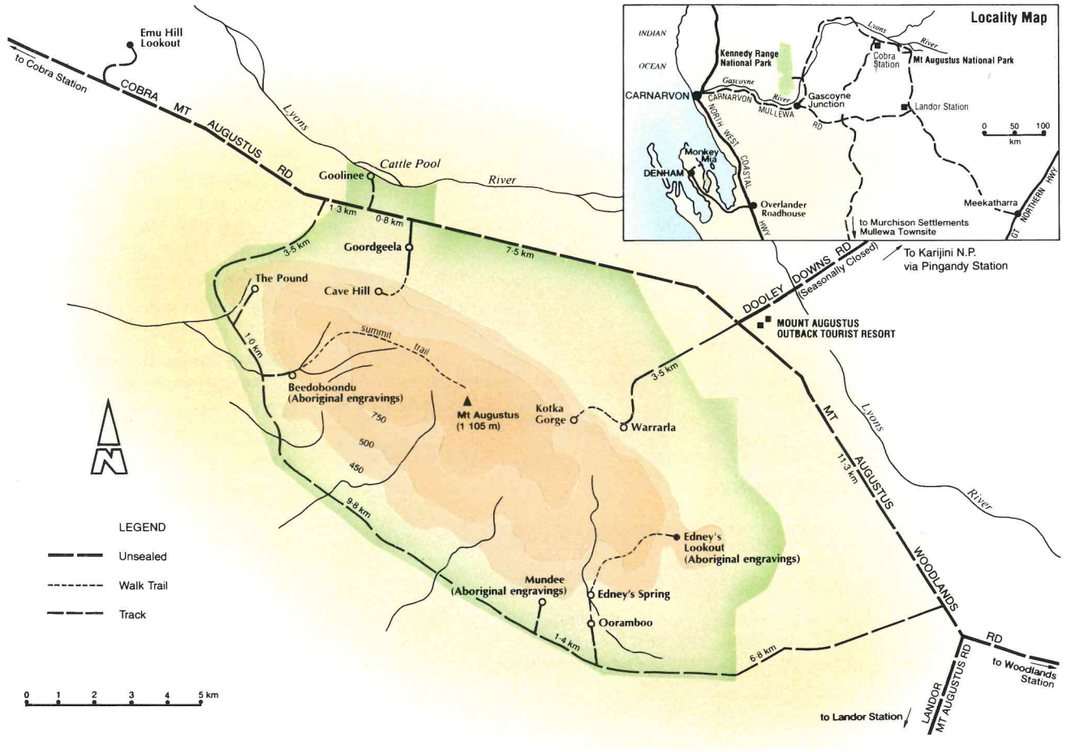
The third story relates to a big man—a stranger from the east, probably from the Carnarvon Range. He was old but powerful, and the people were scared. They caught him up, speared him in the leg, and knocked him down, then the women hit him with their *wanas* [digging sticks]. There he died, where the land was once flat.

As you look at Mt Augustus you can see the lying form of a body with the stump of the spear in the leg. The geological fracture lines at the western end of the mount indicate the wounds inflicted by the womenfolk.



Previous page
Main: The deep red of sunrise reflects off the surface of the rock.
Photo – Jiri Lochman
Inset: The polished surface of the rocks seen along the Gorge Trail.
Photo – David Gough

Left: In contrast to Uluru, Mt Augustus is covered in vegetation.
Photo – Jiri Lochman



ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Several Aboriginal tribes inhabited areas in what is now known as the Upper Gascoyne region.

Tindale, in his book *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, suggests that Mt Augustus was a natural boundary between two tribal areas—the smaller area of the Ninanu tribe to the north and the much larger area of the Wadjari tribe to the south.

Wadjaris from the Burringurrah Community recall their grandfathers telling them of the times when their people camped beside Cattle Pool, a large permanent pool shaded by big white river gums on the Lyons River, north of Mt Augustus. It was one of only very few permanent pools in the inland Gascoyne that remained through the drought periods; and during such times, tribes wandered outside their normal territories in search of water. If they found water, there would almost certainly be a supply of food, as animals would also congregate near the pool.

EXPLORERS AND PASTORALISTS

On 3 June 1858, explorer Francis Thomas Gregory became the first European to ascend Mount Augustus. But he had first sighted the enormous monocline some four days earlier. He recounted the event in his journal:

> "31st May.—. . . Leaving the party busily catching fish . . . I walked with Mr Nairne to the summit of a granite hill two miles northward, from which I had a number of cross-bearings to hills already observed from Mount Thompson. One of considerable elevation bearing north 121 degrees 30 minutes east, distance fifty miles, lay directly up the valley of the river, and was ultimately named Mount Augustus, after my brother, now conducting the expedition in quest of the remains of Dr. Leichhardt."

After setting course for the mount and finding it to be further than expected, Gregory finally arrived at Cattle Pool on 2 June, and found evidence of an Aboriginal encampment. The following day, he took a party and climbed the rock.

It took less than 20 years for settlers to follow Gregory into the Upper Gascoyne region, and sheep and cattle stations soon began to spring up along the Gascoyne and Lyons rivers.

Author Rhonda McDonald, who spent some of her childhood at Bangemall where her father ran the hotel and a gold mine, tells the stories of these early settlement days in her book *Winning the Gascoyne*.

> "In 1886 Samuel James Phillips and John Hugh Phillips explored that section of the Upper Gascoyne [around Mt Augustus] with the view of selecting and taking up grazing country."

Mt Augustus station was taken up a year later, and ownership passed down through the Phillips family over successive years.

After the first world war, the station was managed by Ernest Potts, who extended the homestead—formerly only three mud brick rooms—and gathered a good camp of natives and stockmen. About 17 000 head of cattle were eventually held on the station and some 1 500 bullocks were taken each year to Meekatharra. The Mt Augustus cattle were renowned for being of excellent quality and temperament.

Potts managed the station for 35 years before his death from heart attack in 1955. The property then passed through a number of owners and managers and today is owned and managed by Don and Dot Hammerquist.

West of Mt Augustus, on Cobra Station, is the historic Bangemall Hotel

and goldfield. In 1896, South Australian Percy Aycliffe decided to build a wayside inn, originally named Eurana, for thirsty prospectors. In 1910, Aycliffe sold the hotel and its name was changed to the Bangemall Hotel. Charlie Cornish, from the north-west, bought it in 1919 and held it until 1940, when it was purchased by the Fitzgeralds, who owned the nearby Cobra Station. The hotel was closed and converted into the Cobra homestead.

In 1979, Cobra Station was purchased for a tourist development by a business syndicate from Perth. After considerable delays, the hotel was classified by the National Trust. An historic inn licence was granted in 1983 and the old pub was reopened. Cobra Station was purchased in 1989 by Dennis and Alexa Lang, who restocked the station and now use the old hotel as the homestead.

Creation of a national park over the Mt Augustus area was first recommended in the mid 1970s in the Environmental Protection Authority's System 8 report. Ten years later, after being approached by the then Department of Lands and Surveys, the lessees of Cobra Station agreed to voluntarily surrender a portion of their lease over the rock. A few years later, negotiations between the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and the lessees of Mt Augustus Station resulted in the voluntary release of the remainder of the rock.

So on 22 September 1989, Mount Augustus and the land immediately surrounding it—a total area of 9 168 hectares—was declared a national park. Since then, walktrails have been marked, signs constructed and visitor facilities put in at various sites. Interpretation material, for information shelters at the Mt Augustus Tourist Resort and at the start of the Summit Trail, is due to be in place this year.

MANAGEMENT

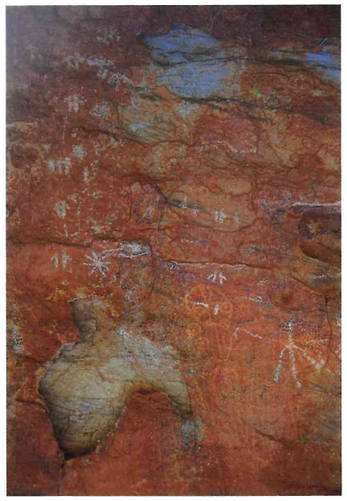
While no formal or draft management plan exists for Mt Augustus National Park, as yet, it is nevertheless an important nature-based tourism destination, and therefore needs to be managed carefully to retain and protect both its natural and cultural values. A ranger is stationed at the park during the main visitor season (April to October) and is available to provide guidance and information about the park's plants, animals and Aboriginal heritage.

Ranger Tony Tapper was stationed there during 1991 and was instrumental in planning the first walk trails. These and subsequent trails and facilities were provided over the following two years with the help of local Aborigines from the Burringurrah Community, and Tony's early contact with them helped provide much of the background information for naming the recreation sites.

Mt Augustus currently attracts around 4 000 visitors a year, and the day-use areas and walktrails are able to cope with those numbers without undue damage being caused. But with the inevitable increase in visitor numbers over the next few years, management strategies will need to be reviewed to ensure that serious damage does not occur.

Another problem in managing such a remote national park is the repair work needed after bad weather. Cyclone Bobby, which passed through the Gascoyne in late February 1995, deposited some 100 mm of rain in just 24 hours, with lesser, but still substantial, amounts in the following days. The runoff from the rock caused considerable erosion on the Drive Trail, some site access roads and parts of the Summit Trail, but work was soon under way to fix up the damage.

A wedge-tailed eagle swoops low over the surrounding plain in search of food.
Photo – Robert Garvey



Right: Aboriginal engravings at Mundee depict animal tracks.
Photo – David Gough

Far right: The rare Mt Augustus foxglove.
Photo – Robert Garvey

Below right: The rarely recorded Douglas' toadlet was recently collected at Mt Augustus.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Summit Trail, but work was soon under way to fix up the damage.

No formal plant or animal surveys have yet been conducted in the Mt Augustus National Park, but rangers stationed there over the past few years have observed and recorded some of the wildlife during their day-to-day work.

PLANTS

During winter and early spring, especially after good rains, areas of the plains around the rock are carpeted in everlastings. The trumpet-like flowers of turpentine bush are also very striking in winter. After rain, the rock takes on a green hue as new growth appears on the vegetation, and grasses sprout from dormant seeds.

The general vegetation is tall, open mulga scrubland with some red river gum and a variety of acacias, including gidgee and sandplain wattle. The miniritchie can easily be recognised by its unusual red curly bark.

Other plants include grasses such as silkyhead and limestone grass, the common stiffleaf sedge and annuals such as namana, wild carrot and the fringed lily *Thysanotus manglesianus*.

Several rare plant species have been found in the area. These include Wittwer's thryptomene (*Thryptomene wittweri*), known only from Mt Augustus and Mt Meharry; the Mt Augustus foxglove (*Pityrodia augustensis*), which is known to grow only in creeklines on and near the rock; and the snail orchid (*Pterostylis nana*), which is probably at its most northern limit.

ANIMALS

Mammals recorded at Mt Augustus by park rangers include the euro, dingo, red kangaroo, long-tailed dunnart, echidna, spinifex hopping mouse and common rock rat.

Reptile species are numerous and varied. They include the ringed brown snake, red-tailed skink (*Morethia ruficauda exquisita*), ring-tailed and western netted dragons, black-tailed monitor, marbled velvet gecko and pygmy python. The threatened Pilbara olive python (*Morelia olivacea barroni*) recorded at Mt Augustus is at the southern extent of its known range.

During a recent visit by CALM's Gascoyne District Manager Ron Shepherd, senior interpretation officer Gil Field and communications officer David Gough, the rarely recorded Douglas' toadlet (*Pseudophryne douglasi*) was collected in a gorge on the south side of the rock. The animal had previously been collected from only three isolated populations in the Pilbara.

In 1989, Alan Rose, then the ranger at Stirling Range National Park, visited Mt Augustus with his wife Sandy and recorded 30 bird species including the crested bellbird, white-winged triller, rainbow bee-eater and wedge-tailed eagle. By 1994, species recorded by rangers at Mt Augustus had increased to almost 100, including waterbirds such as the white-faced heron, magpie goose, and straw-necked ibis; birds of prey such as the collared sparrowhawk and peregrine falcon; and a variety of honeyeaters, parrots and fairy-wrens. Other birds include the yellow-throated miner, painted firetail, bush stone-curlew and the ubiquitous spinifex pigeon, found throughout northern parts of the State.

Left: A bungarra (*Varanus gouldii*), one of many species of lizard found at Mt Augustus.

Below: Mt Augustus rises more than 700 metres above a plain of open mulga scrubland.
Photos – Robert Garvey

TOURISM

The journey to Mount Augustus National Park is relatively easy for most vehicles. Travelling from Perth, you can make a round trip via Meekatharra and Landor Station, returning via Cobra Station, Gascoyne Junction, Carnarvon and Geraldton. However, the section along almost 1 000 kilometres of graded roads can still be hot and dusty, and you need to carry plenty of water and supplies.

A seasonal road from Mt Augustus via Dooley Downs and Pingandy stations leads to the Ashburton Downs–Mt Vernon Road and provides a shorter route if you want to continue north to Karijini National Park and the Pilbara. Contact the shire offices at either Gascoyne Junction or Meekatharra to check the condition of the roads before planning your trip. Packaged coached tours and tailor-made airtours are available from Perth. Details of these can be obtained from the WA Tourist Centre.

Camping is not permitted within the national park, and at present, most people base themselves either at the Mt Augustus Outback Tourist Resort or Cobra Station and spend a few days exploring and climbing the rock.

The Resort is on the north-east side of the rock and is run by Peter and Joylene Vogelsanger. Accommodation is available in comfortable units, or you can use the campsite and powered van sites. There is a public telephone and a shop where you can obtain fuel, food, souvenirs and park brochures. Peter has a good knowledge of the area and can provide additional tourist information.

Accommodation at Cobra Station, 37 kilometres west of Mt Augustus, includes units, station rooms and unpowered camping and caravan sites. Fuel and food can be obtained here, but the station is closed on Saturdays.

SITES & TRAILS

About 10 kilometres north of Cobra Station is Edithanna Pool. The pool attracts a wide range of birds, making it a good spot for keen ornithologists.

Just off the main road from Cobra Station, as you approach the boundary of the national park, is Emu Hill Lookout. This is a great place for photographers, who capture the changing colours of sunset on the rock's surface.

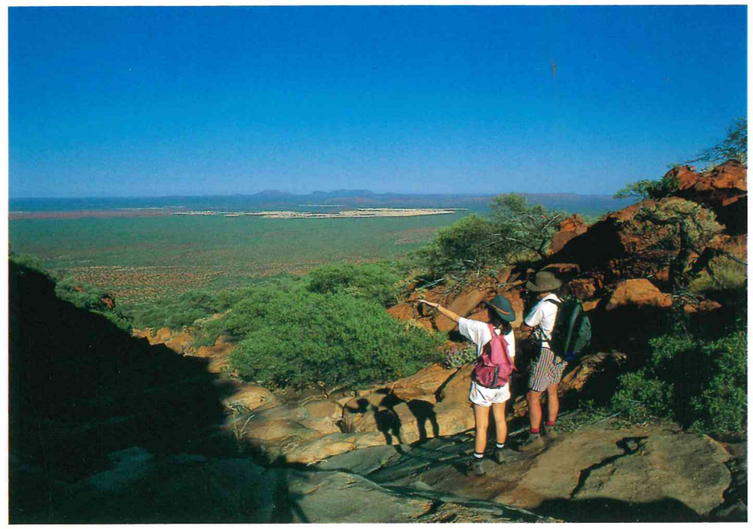
The 49-kilometre Burringurrah Drive Trail, which runs around Mt Augustus, provides views of the changing faces of the rock and access to its recreation sites and walktrails.

Starting at the end of the track opposite Mt Augustus Outback Tourist Resort you'll find *Warrarla*, a pleasant picnic site set among a grove of large river gums. From here you can take a short stroll into Kotke Gorge.

About eight kilometres west of here is *Goordgeela* and Cave Hill. A fairly steep, four-kilometre return trail runs up to the cave. The cave ceiling is unstable and rock falls occur from time to time, but from its mouth, there are good views of the Lyons River and of the Godfrey and Kenneth Ranges to the north.

Near the north-western end of the rock is *Goolinee* or Cattle Pool. This picturesque day-use picnic area is nestled beside a permanent pool on the Lyons River, which attracts numerous waterbirds, especially after rains. There is plenty of shade and the water looks very inviting on a hot day, but thick reed beds in the pool can make swimming hazardous.

Right: Walkers on the Summit Trail pause to enjoy the views of the plain and ranges to the south of the rock.
Photo – Robert Garvey



Not far away is The Pound, a natural basin used earlier this century for holding cattle before droving them to Meekatharra—a journey of about 10–12 days on the hoof. A short walk takes you up to the saddle, from where there are good views over the Lyons River. Facing back to The Pound, it's easy to imagine yourself watching over the herd of cattle as you sit and watch the reflections of the setting sun on the high eastern slopes of the canyon.

South of The Pound is *Beedoboondu* and the start of the Summit Trail. The return walk to the summit, a distance of some 12 kilometres, takes about six to eight hours, but it's worth it for the panoramic views north. It's an arduous walk and only recommended if you are fit; don't attempt it during summer or on hot days in spring and autumn. If you do attempt the walk, inform the ranger or resort staff of your plans, start early in the morning and take plenty of water. For the first three kilometres there is a choice of routes. The Ranger Trail is the easier of the two, while the more adventurous or sure-footed may prefer the Gully Trail; but be warned, the Gully Trail can be very slippery after rain. Whichever trail you choose, you can change over where they briefly meet at the 'elbow', about 1 500 metres from the start. The two trails finally join about three kilometres from the summit, so if you don't feel like going on, you can return to the carpark along a different route. On the way up, don't forget to turn around for great views of the plain and ranges to the south.

Aboriginal engravings, which depict animal tracks and hunters, can be seen by crawling under Flintstone Rock, a large slab of rock lying across the stream bed about 250 metres from the carpark. The other sites of Aboriginal engravings are at the south-east corner of Mt Augustus.

Mundee is found along an easy 300-metre return walk. The rock wall has engravings of kangaroo, emu and bustard tracks in three cave-like overhangs. Aboriginal mythology has it that in the beginning, when the rocks were still soft, a Dreaming spirit did these engravings with his finger.

Just south of *Mundee* is Edney's Trail, and about 150 metres from the start of the trail are more Aboriginal engravings of animal tracks at a place called *Ooramboo*. Edney Spring is 100 metres farther on. The six-kilometre return walk to Edney's Lookout takes about two-and-a-half hours. It's ideal if you feel unsure about tackling the more strenuous Summit Trail, or have limited time. The elevated 360-degree views from the lookout are spectacular and it's worth spending some time there relaxing and looking at the many distant mountain ranges before making your way back down.

There are many things to do and see at Mt Augustus National Park. But whatever your interest, be it bushwalking, birdwatching or photography, the biggest attraction is the rock itself. During dawn and dusk, its colour changes almost minute by minute from deep indigo to bright pink, orange or red, and occasionally green—reflecting the mood of the rock and the spirits living there. Just as Uluru attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, increasing numbers of people will come to Mt Augustus to try to capture those moods in photographs or simply to enjoy the experience.

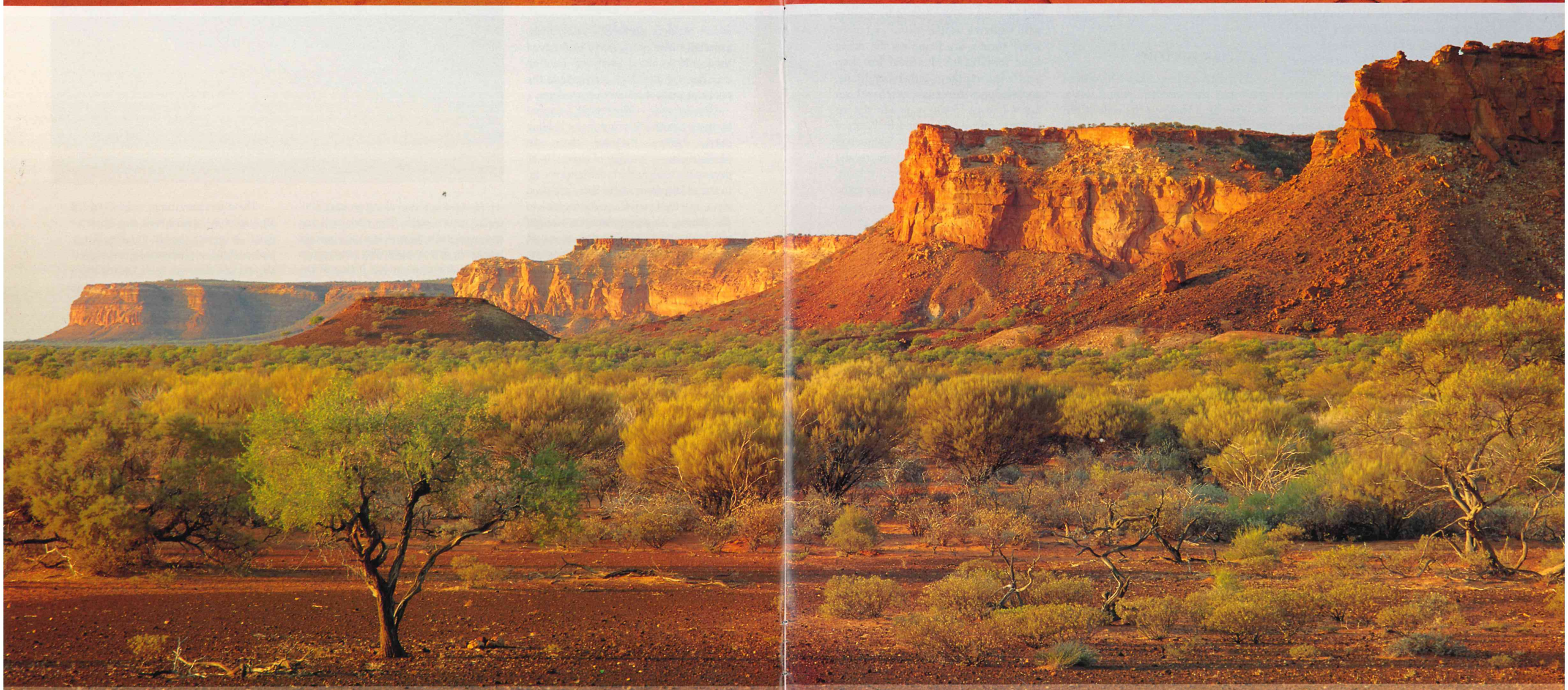
Although not so well known as Uluru, Mt Augustus offers tourists a rich Aboriginal heritage, abundant wildlife, stunning scenery and spectacular views from its summit. The biggest rock in the world is one of the natural wonders of the world. But if you never go, you'll never know.

David Gough is Editor of *LANDSCOPE* and a communications officer with CALM's Corporate Relations Division. He can be contacted on (09) 389 8644.

Terry Bloomer is currently the ranger at Mt Augustus National Park and is based at the Mt Augustus Tourist Resort. He is always pleased to provide information to help make your visit more enjoyable.

The authors acknowledge the valuable assistance of CALM mobile ranger Tony Tapper, CALM Gascoyne District Manager Ron Shepherd, staff at CALM's Science and Information Division (Wildlife Research Centre, Woodvale), Peter Bindon of the WA Museum, staff at the Aboriginal Affairs Department, Peter Bridge of Hesperian Press and author Rhonda McDonald, in researching and preparing this article.

Kennedy Range National Park

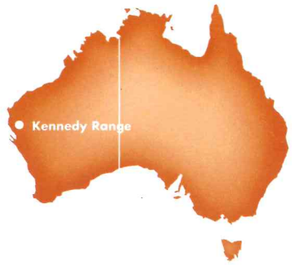


Just north of Gascoyne Junction, in the harsh and unforgiving interior of the State's north-west, lie the spectacular sandstone battlements of the Kennedy Range. This huge mesa, pushed up from an ancient seabed, has dominated the surrounding plains for millions of years. Its complex geology makes it one of the most scenic attractions of the region, and since it was made a national park, more people have been finding out what it has to offer.

by David Gough and Ron Shepherd

The Kennedy Range is an eroded plateau situated about 800 kilometres north of Perth and 150 kilometres east of Carnarvon on the rim of the Gascoyne River catchment. It is between 10 and 25 kilometres wide and extends for roughly 195 kilometres in a northerly direction from near Gascoyne Junction. The Kennedy Range National Park, which covers an area of 141 660 hectares, was gazetted on 8 January 1993 and is in one of the fastest growing tourist areas in the Gascoyne. It offers spectacular scenery of gorges and precipitous faces, with a vast plateau of ancient dunefields on top of the range. The area still retains a wilderness feeling, and camping beneath the stark sandstone cliffs is an experience not to be missed.

The general area is classified as hot arid desert, with warm winters and hot summers. The average annual rainfall recorded at nearby Lyons River Station is 210 mm, with the highest monthly average of 34 mm in February and the lowest in September. January is the hottest month, with an average maximum temperature of 40.6°C recorded at Gascoyne Junction, so the area is best visited between April and November.



NATURAL HISTORY

In Permian times, some 250 million years ago, the Gascoyne region was a shallow ocean basin off the edge of the ancient Australian continent. It filled with sediment, which later became compressed to form layers of sandstone and shale. Movements in the Earth's crust brought these layers above the sea level, where erosion has stripped away much of the rock. Today, marine fossils can be found in the range's sandstone strata.

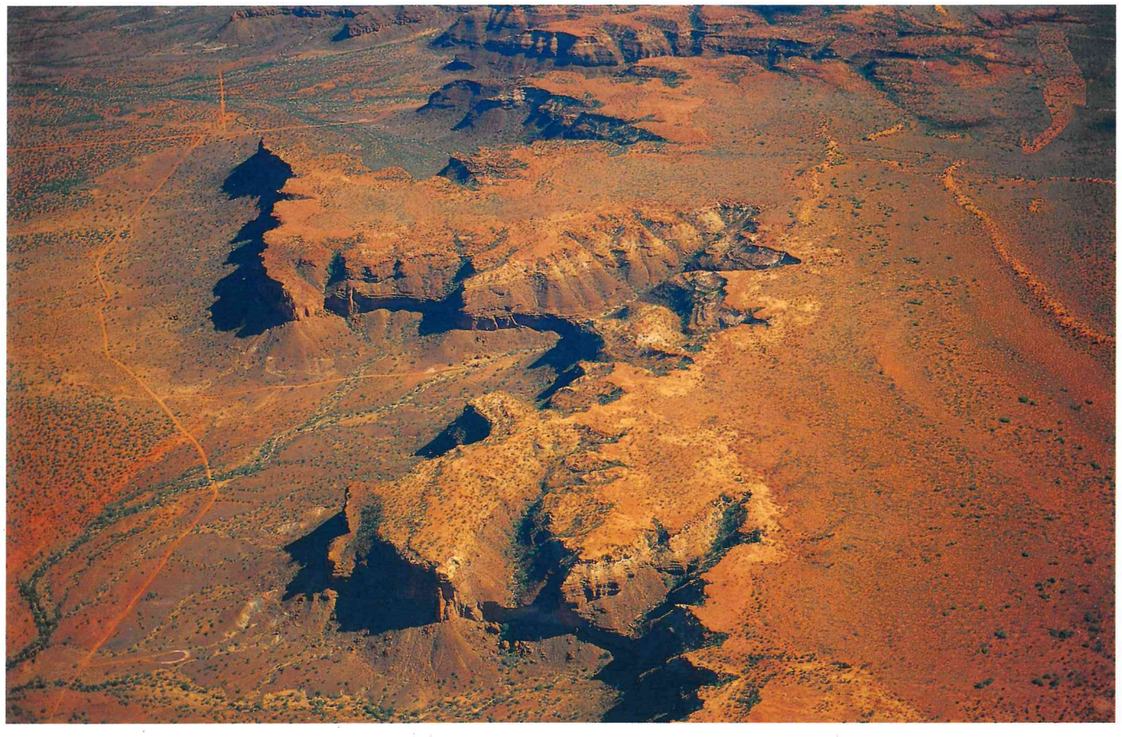
The Kennedy Range is a remnant of the land surface that elsewhere has been worn away, but here forms a huge mesa. The southern and eastern sides of the range have eroded to form spectacular cliffs rising up 100 metres or so above the Lyons River valley. The cliffs are dissected by a maze of steep-sided canyons, which have running streams after rain. A few small pools remain for several months after rain, and the deepest may be permanent. Along the western side of the range is a strong fault system, and springs are common here along the base of the range.

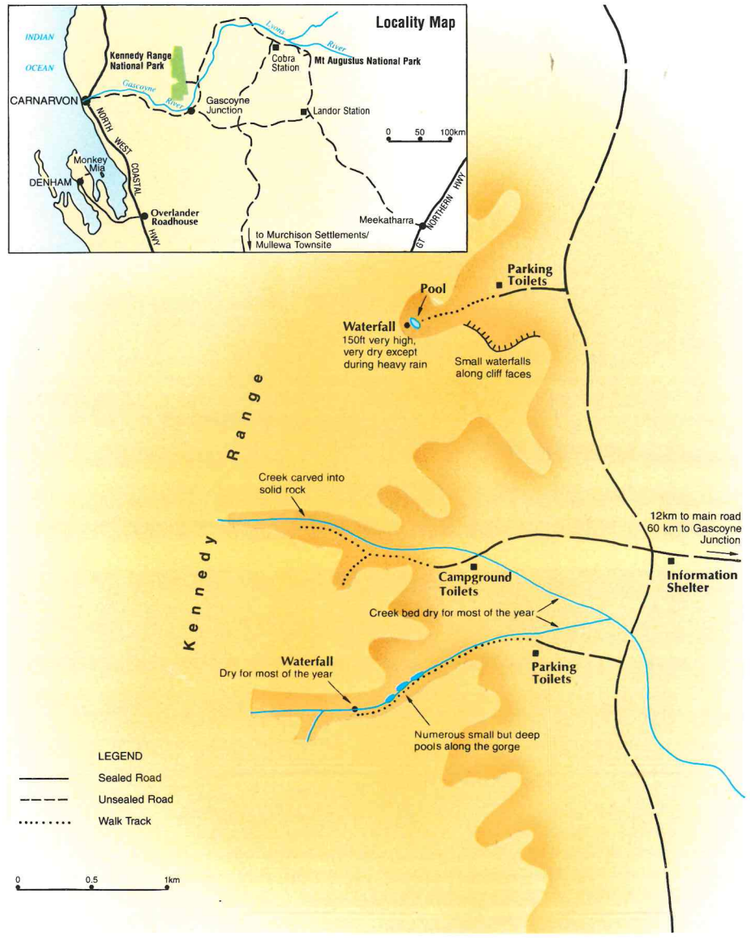
Seemingly endless rows of waterless red sand dunes, dominated by spinifex with scattered wattle, mallee and other small shrubs, are found on the mesa. Sand forming the dunefield has been weathered from the underlying sandstone, and the dunes themselves may have been formed about 15 000 years ago, during the last major arid period in Western Australia. Swales are 100 to 500 metres wide, occasionally up to a kilometre, and are stabilised by the vegetation. In places, the dunes rise up to 18 metres above the swale and have slopes up to 20 degrees. Most of the upper parts of the dunes are unstabilised, but sand movement by wind appears to be confined to swirling around perennial woody shrubs.

This huge mesa remains much the same today as it would have been when Aborigines first crossed it, thousands of years ago.

Previous page
Main: The eastern scarp of the Kennedy Range rises majestically from the mulga plain.
Inset: Sandstone.
Photos – Bill Bachman

Below: Aerial view of the range showing the gorges and access roads to the visitor sites.
Photo – Marie Lochman





ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Like Mount Augustus (see *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1995), the Kennedy Range appeared to separate the traditional lands of two Aboriginal tribes. According to Tindale (*Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, 1965, 1974), the range formed the boundary between the Maia tribe to the west of the range and the Malgaru tribe to the east.

The Maia people occupied an area of about 12 000 square kilometres from just north of Carnarvon to the western slopes of the Kennedy Range. The freshwater springs on this side of the range support abundant wildlife and would have been a source of food and water for the Maia people.

The Malgaru's tribal lands covered a similarly large area, stretching from the eastern escarpment of the range, across the Lyons River (known to Aborigines as *Mithering*) and east to the boundary with the Wadjari tribe—near the Gascoyne River, around Mooloo Downs and Yinnetharra.

The Aboriginal history of the range itself is largely unrecorded, but occupation sites exist around and within the range. Outcrops of chert found in the area are ideal for stone tool making, and a large number of artefact scatters near the freshwater springs on the western side provide additional evidence of occupation by Aboriginal people in the 20 000 or so years before European settlement.

The Aboriginal Affairs Department has recorded almost 100 sites on and around the range. Most are archaeological sites, but a number of them are of ceremonial or mythological importance.

Such sites include a march fly *talu* site—a site where special ceremonies are conducted to increase the numbers of a particular species—and a mythological site in a most inaccessible part of the dunefield in the centre of the range. Engravings in the southernmost gorge of the visitor area are heavily weathered, and it is difficult to decipher them.

STATION HISTORY

The freshwater springs and permanent pools that were so important to the local Aboriginal tribes also attracted pastoralists in the late 1800s.

In 1858, an expedition into the Gascoyne Region, led by Francis Thomas Gregory, reached the Kennedy Range on 12 May. The range was subsequently named in honour of the then Governor of Western Australia, Arthur Edward Kennedy, and the Lyons River, which runs along much of the eastern side of the range, presumably in honour of the British admiral and diplomat Lord Edmond Lyons. Gregory's expedition continued to Mt Augustus before returning to Perth via Mt Gould, the Murchison and Irwin rivers, Dandaragan and Toodyay.

In his report of the expedition to the Surveyor General, Gregory stated:

> "With regard to the quantity and distribution of the available lands, it will only be necessary to observe that, with the exception of 30,000 or 40,000 acres at the mouth of the Gascoyne, there is no land worth occupying for many years to come west of the Lyons River; the amount of land on this river has already been estimated at nearly 300 square miles, while on the Upper Gascoyne and its tributaries there is probably double that quantity; this, with the lands on the Murchison near Mount Hale, would make a total of about a million acres.
>
> "A very important circumstance in connection with this district is the total absence, so far as we were able to observe, of any of the varieties of *Gastrolobium* or *Euphorbia*, which constitute the poisonous plants so fatal to cattle and sheep in other parts of the colony."

Perhaps it was this last point, rather than his earlier comments, that led to the fact that within 20 years of Gregory's expedition, pastoral leases were taken up along both the Gascoyne and Lyons rivers, and the region rapidly developed into a prosperous wool-producing area.

Gregory also suggested in his report that another expedition be mounted to the area at a different time of year, but this was not immediately undertaken. Author Rhonda McDonald, in her book *Winning the Gascoyne*, takes up this point:

> "In 1872 Charles Brockman had just returned from an exploratory trip to the Mount Magnet area, when he met Mr J. B. Ridley. Mr Ridley expressed surprise that no one had followed up Gregory's report of the Gascoyne River."

Four years later, Brockman set off for the West Gascoyne with Mr Charles Fane. In 1877, he established Boolathana Station, just north of the mouth of the Gascoyne River. Jimba Jimba Station, at the junction of the Gascoyne and Lyons Rivers south of the Kennedy Range, was taken up in 1878 and from then on, as people ventured further inland, stations sprang up throughout the area along the Lyons River.

Lyons River Station was first taken up in the 1880s by George Hammersley and Thomas Simms, but little development was done. However, when William Hatch purchased the lease in 1906, he and his family began developing the property and obtained additional land. During the intervening years, the station experienced good times with sheep numbers increasing, and by 1911 it had a new shearing shed with the most up-to-date machinery available. The owners continued to lead the technological revolution in the area when they purchased a motor vehicle in 1916 and had the region's first telephone line installed in 1919. But communication was often severed for many weeks during the rainy season, when the Lyons and Gascoyne rivers swelled and swept away the line and poles in many places.

The only other station on the eastern edge of the range is Mt Sandiman. This is currently being run as a tourist venture offering a range of station-stay accommodation and tours. It is owned and by the Fraser family, who also own Minnie Creek Station farther north.

Above left: Calytrix brevifolia is one of the shrubland plants found on the dune ridges.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left: A little red kaluta pauses as it feeds on nectar from an Ashby's banksia flower.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

High numbers of sheep grazed the area around the Kennedy Range until the late 1930s, when drought, depression and overgrazing caused many businesses to crash. Even now, much of the land surrounding the range has not recovered from some of the worst degradation in the State to be caused by early pastoral activity. Fortunately, because the top of the range is virtually waterless, it was only lightly grazed and, even though there has been mineral exploration, it remains relatively unscathed.

MINERAL EXPLORATION

The Kennedy Range was explored for its mineral potential as early as 1861 by an expedition led by Augustus Charles Gregory, brother of Francis Thomas Gregory. Subsequent expeditions, in 1883 by W H Huddleston and 1901 by A G Maitland, also looked at the area's potential for mining.

Interest in the hydrocarbon potential of the Carnarvon Basin began in the 1920s, but exploratory drilling for oil and oil shale since the 1960s has been unsuccessful. West Australian Petroleum (WAPET) drilled five holes in the Kennedy Range in the 1950s, and two shallow wells were drilled outside what is now the park's north-east boundary by Hartogen Exploration in 1972. In the early 1980s, Esso took out tenements over the range and conducted limited seismic exploration, which included the drilling of two exploration wells.

Since the mid 1960s, the area has been explored for uranium, diamonds, coal and base metals. But in 1992 a geological report, prepared for the then Department of Minerals and Energy, indicated the mineral potential of the Kennedy Range National Park was low.

But despite this history of exploration, little was known about the vegetation, plants and animals that inhabit the range until fairly recently. A few surveys of selected areas were conducted in 1975, 1987 and 1991, but a full-scale survey had not been carried out until early this year,

Above right: The endemic sand-swimming lizard *Lerista kennedyensis* has only been recorded in the Kennedy Range.
Photo – Ron Johnstone

Right: Sand dunes on top of range are reminiscent of those on the Cape Range near Exmouth.
Photo – Marie Lochman

when zoologists and botanists from the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and the WA Museum conducted the Carnarvon Basin Survey.

ANIMALS

Twenty-six species of reptile, nine species of mammal and around 70 bird species were recorded on the dunes and swales of the mesa during the recent survey. These ranged from the endemic sand-swimming skink *Lerista kennedyensis* to the death adder (*Acanthophis pyrrhus*), and included the mulgara (*Dasycercus cristicauda*), the little red kaluta (*Dasykaluta rosamondae*, formerly *Antechinus rosamondae*) and the northern mastiff bat (*Chaerephon jobensis*).

The scree-slopes of the range yielded seven species of reptile and 10 native mammals, including the euro (*Macropus robustus erubescens*), the common rock-rat (*Zyzomys argurus*), Finlayson's cave-bat, the skink *Ctenotus uber* and the long-tailed dunnart (*Sminthopsis longicaudata*).

The outwash plains and water-courses below the range support quite a different fauna. Seven species of lizard and eight mammals were recorded in these mulga-dominated communities. They included the dragon lizard *Ctenophorus reticulatus* and the perentie (*Varanus giganteus*), and

Above: Mooka Springs: one of several springs on the west of the range.
Photo – Greg Keighery

Right: The rufous-crowned emu-wren was recorded in the range during a recent biological survey.
Photo – M & I Morcombe

native mammals such as the yellow-bellied sheath-tailed bat and stripe-faced dunnart (*Sminthopsis macroura*).

Of the birds, the most significant find was the rufous-crowned emu-wren (*Stipiturus ruficeps*) in the spinifex dunes on top of the range—the only recorded site in the Gascoyne. This bird is often found on the Cape Range in the Pilbara, a habitat almost identical to that on the top of the Kennedy Range. Small flocks of painted finches were recorded close to their southern limit, and western gerygone and grey fantails were also present as migrants from south-west of the State.

As would be expected, the regular suites of birds found in mulga country and spinifex plains are to be found on and around the range. Common bronzewings and spinifex pigeons are common around water holes on the west side, and wedge-tailed eagles are known to breed in the range and nest in the high cliffs on the eastern side.

FOSSILS & PLANTS

The Merlinleigh Sandstone of the range is of the Eocene period and contains many fossils of marine animals as well as fossil plants. In the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologists collected a small number of fossilised plant specimens, two of which were fruiting bodies of the family Proteaceae that turned out to be banksias. In 1979, palaeontologist Ken McNamara of the WA Museum collected two further fossilised specimens of *Banksia* in the range. From these collections, two new species were described, but only one—*Banksia archaeocarpa*—has been formally named. The existence of these fossils in the range represents the earliest known occurrence of *Banksia* in Australia.

Of the 295 other plant species recorded on the range, about 82 are annual wildflowers, with the remaining being the small, medium and large shrubs.

The outwash plains support open woodlands of mulga (*Acacia aneura*) over shrubs including dandjin (*Hakea preissii*), poverty bushes (*Eremophila* spp.), and cassias (*Senna* spp.). They are particularly rich in bunch grasses such as wanderrie (*Eriachne* and *Eragrostis* spp.) and spear grass (*Stipa* spp.). After rain, mulla mullas, everlastings and rich herbfields of native cornflower (*Brunonia australis*) appear. Creeklines flowing out of the range are lined with coolibah (*Eucalyptus coolabah* var. *rhodoclada*) and the wattle *Acacia citrinoviridis*.

The scree slopes of the range have open low wattle woodlands of snakewood (*A. xiphophylla*) and bramble wattle (*A. victoriae*), with scattered kopi mallees (*Eucalyptus striaticalyx*) over a species-rich but sparse layer of woody shrubs and herbs, including an undescribed species of native lily (*Wurmbea* sp.). Exposed pavements along the top edge of the mesa support low shrublands of native cassias.

The dune ridges on top of the range support a shrubland of prickly plume grevillea (*G. annulifera*), Ashby's banksia (*B. ashbyi*), *Calytrix brevifolia*, and an undescribed, endemic single-sided bottlebrush (*Calothamnus* aff. *borealis*). The interdune plains have hummock grasslands of lobed spinifex (*Triodia basedowii*) and soft spinifex (*Plectrachne schinzii*), with scattered clumps of the narrow-leaved bloodwood (*E. lenziana*), each standing on its own mound of trapped sand.

Springs under the cliffs on the western side of the range support a diversity of tropical aquatic plants including Indian sundew (*Drosera indica*), sedges and bulrushes.

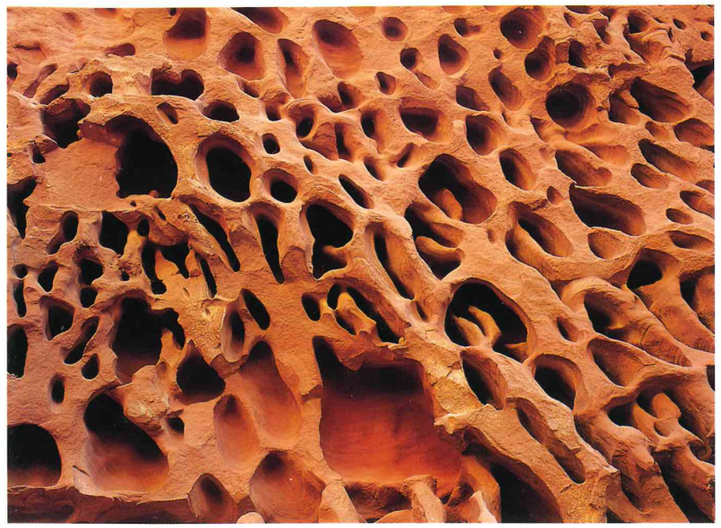
TOURISM

One of the best times to visit the range is in the months following winter rain, when the usually dusty red landscape changes to rich verdant hues and wildflowers flourish and carpet large areas of the surrounding plains.

Kennedy Range National Park is a semi-developed park attracting the more adventurous visitor seeking a wilderness-style of experience. But being within an hour's drive of Gascoyne Junction, it is also attracting those visitors who want to sample the outback experience, but still feel a little unsure about leaving 'civilisation'.

Most visitors travel by road from Carnarvon—a distance of about 210 kilometres. However, you might choose to combine your visit to the Kennedy Range with a visit to Mount Augustus. This can be done as a round trip from Perth to Carnarvon, then inland to Gascoyne Junction, Kennedy Range and Mount Augustus, returning to Perth via Meekatharra, or vice versa. Either way, you should carry ample fuel, food and water. Remember, this is the outback.

Other options include flights and safari tours from Carnarvon and Denham, and coach tours and packaged



Above: The trails from the southern visitor site runs part-way up the side of the gorge to a seasonal waterfall.
Photo – David Gough

Left: Weird, honeycomb-like rock formations carved out of sandstone by wind and water.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

charter flights from Perth. Details of accommodation and tours can be obtained from the Shire of Upper Gascoyne or from the WA Tourist Centre in Perth.

Although unsurfaced, the roads are easily negotiable by the average family car, but may be closed or hazardous after heavy rain (telephone the local Shires for up-to-date information). An access road off the Lyons River Road runs into the park to the main visitor sites. Vehicle access to other parts of the park is not recommended, as tracks are extremely hazardous and it is easy to become lost.

An information shelter on the access road into the park gives details of the campgrounds and walktrails, and describes the mulga country surrounding the range. Bush camping is permitted at the base of the eastern escarpment. The sites are undeveloped and have no facilities other than a bush toilet.

WALKTRAILS

Walktrails run from each site into the nearby gorges and, although the trails are largely unmarked, they are easy to follow.

The trail from the northern visitor site runs into the gorge a short distance before encountering a sheer wall of honeycomb-like rock formations. You can sit below the wall and examine the strange shapes carved out of the sandstone by the combined action of wind and water or look for animal tracks beside the semi-permanent pool at the base of this usually dry waterfall.

From the middle site, a track runs along a creek bed for a few hundred metres before dividing beneath an enormous block of sandstone. The left fork of the creek follows a narrow winding gorge, where occasional pools provide sanctuary for frogs. The right fork continues much farther and you can see where rushing waters have scoured out the creekbed and lower slopes of the gorge.

The trail from the southern site runs part-way up the side of the gorge to a waterfall, which flows after rain. Looking back there are good views east across the mulga plain. From the waterfall, it is possible to scramble down to the creekbed for a different perspective. Look for a large boulder that has tumbled down into the creek bed. On its flat rock face are very old and faint Aboriginal petroglyphs (rock engravings), the meanings of which have long since been lost.

MANAGEMENT

Management guidelines have been prepared for the park in consultation with pastoralists and Aboriginal people.

Long-term management for the Kennedy Range National Park includes the conservation of its biological, physical, cultural and landscape values; the provision of visitor recreational opportunities and facilities that will not compromise the natural values of the range; and the promotion of a better understanding of these and the cultural values through interpretation panels, park brochures and other information.

From a recreational perspective, the visitor sites on the eastern side of the escarpment are being developed to provide a quality wilderness experience for park visitors.

Though the Kennedy Range National Park is still in its infancy, it is becoming well known for its wilderness value. And as you stand at the foot of its sandstone battlements, the Kennedy Range beckons you to explore and discover its natural attractions.

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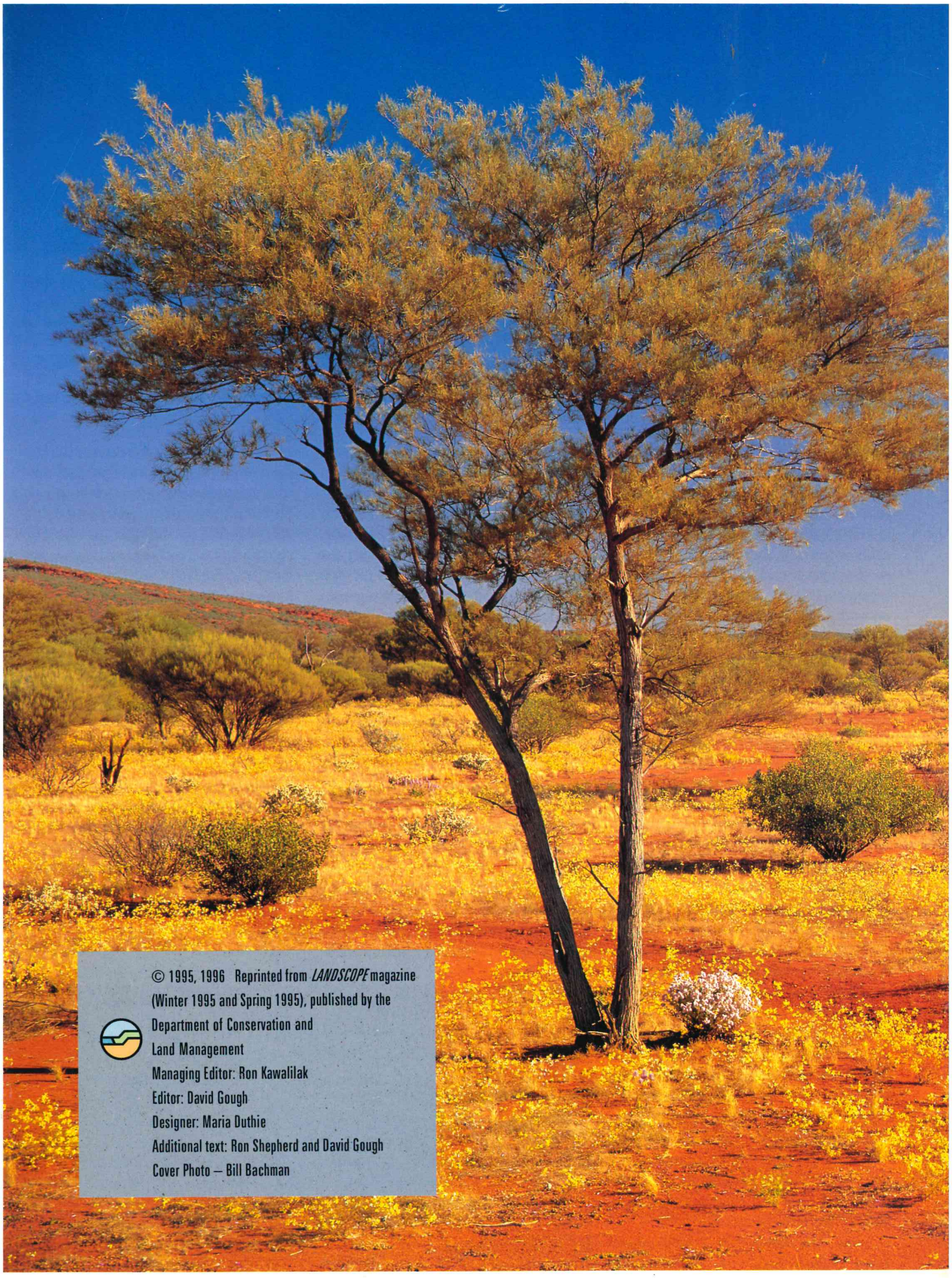
The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Gil Field of CALM's Planning and Visitor Services Branch; Norm McKenzie, Greg Keighery and staff at CALM's Wildlife Research Centre in Woodvale; Ron Johnstone, Laurie Smith, Peter Bindon and Ken McNamara of the WA Museum; staff at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs; author Rhonda McDonald; and Peter Bridge of Heperian Press, in preparing and researching this article.



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Cover Photo – Bill Bachman