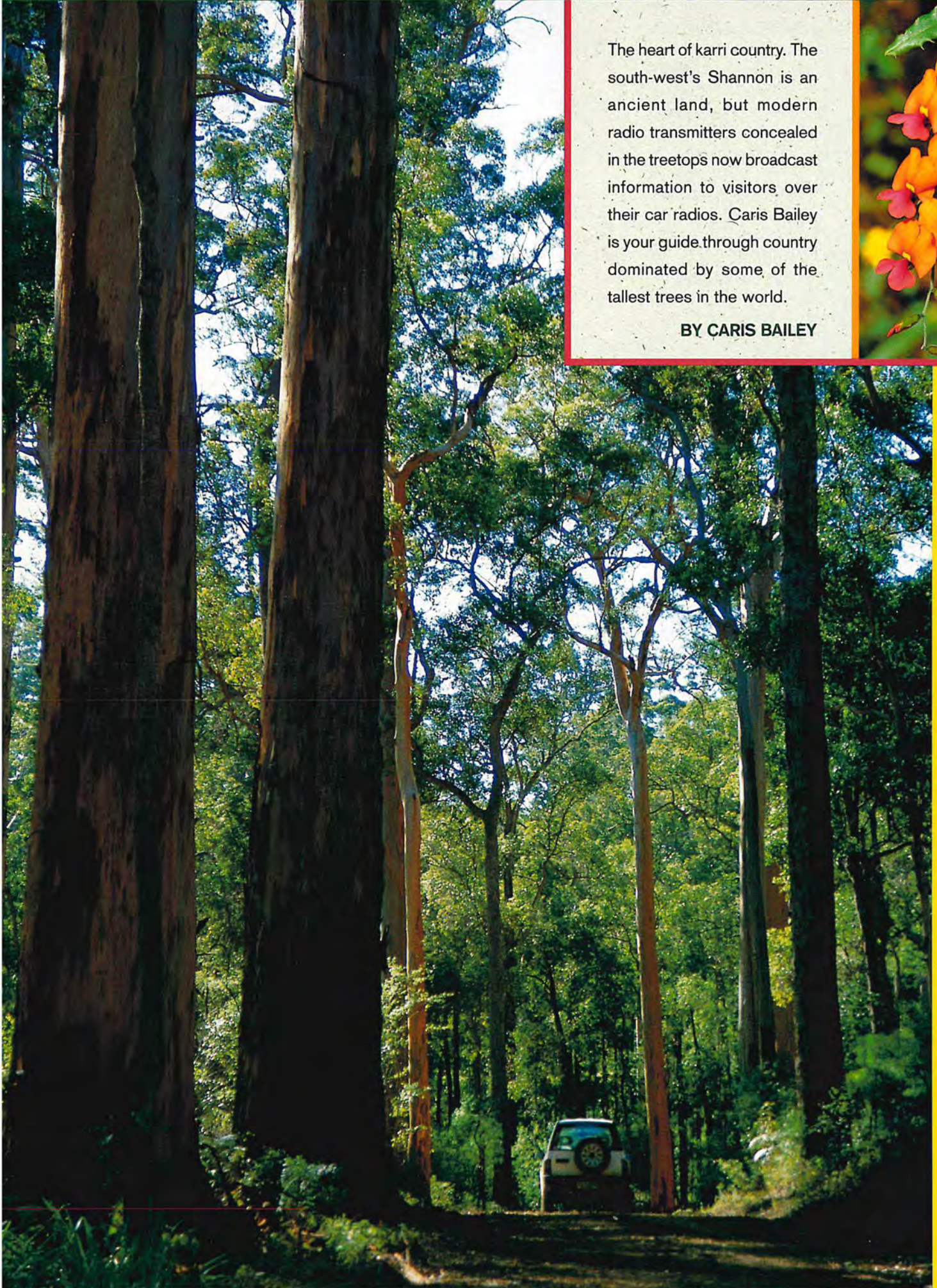


SHANNON NATIONAL PARK and the Great Forest Trees Drive

The heart of karri country. The south-west's Shannon is an ancient land, but modern radio transmitters concealed in the treetops now broadcast information to visitors over their car radios. Caris Bailey is your guide through country dominated by some of the tallest trees in the world.

BY CARIS BAILEY



Set in some of the most magnificent karri country in our southern forest, Shannon National Park still shows its links with Gondwana, the great continent that Australia once shared with Africa, Antarctica and South America. Some of the plant, insect, frog and fish species that inhabited this supercontinent continue to thrive as though nothing much has happened for millions of years.

Below ground, for example, the Shannon mud-minnow carries on in ancient Gondwanan style. In the dry season, when the water level drops, the mud-minnow burrows into the river bed and forms a water-filled chamber. It seals the lid and then waits until the rains bring back the good times, just as its ancestors did through the ages.

Rock structures occurring in parts of the park are another link with Gondwana. These are the granite outcrops, such as Mokare's Rock west of Shannon Dam, and others to the south of the main karri forest. Known as monadnocks, they are usually prominent and may have been islands when the sea level was higher than it is today. This would help to explain their distinctive plant life.



There is some evidence of early Aboriginal occupation of the area, including stone and bone artefacts, but little is known about their use of the forest. The dense growth was probably not as inviting as the open areas,

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Main: The Great Forest Trees Drive winds its way through 48 kilometres of some of the most spectacular karri forest in the south-west.

Inset: Holly flame pea, with its vivid clusters of red, yellow and orange flowers, is particularly abundant after a summer wildfire.

Photos - Cliff Winfield

Below: The southern loop of the Great Forest Trees Drive, heading towards the old Shannon townsite.

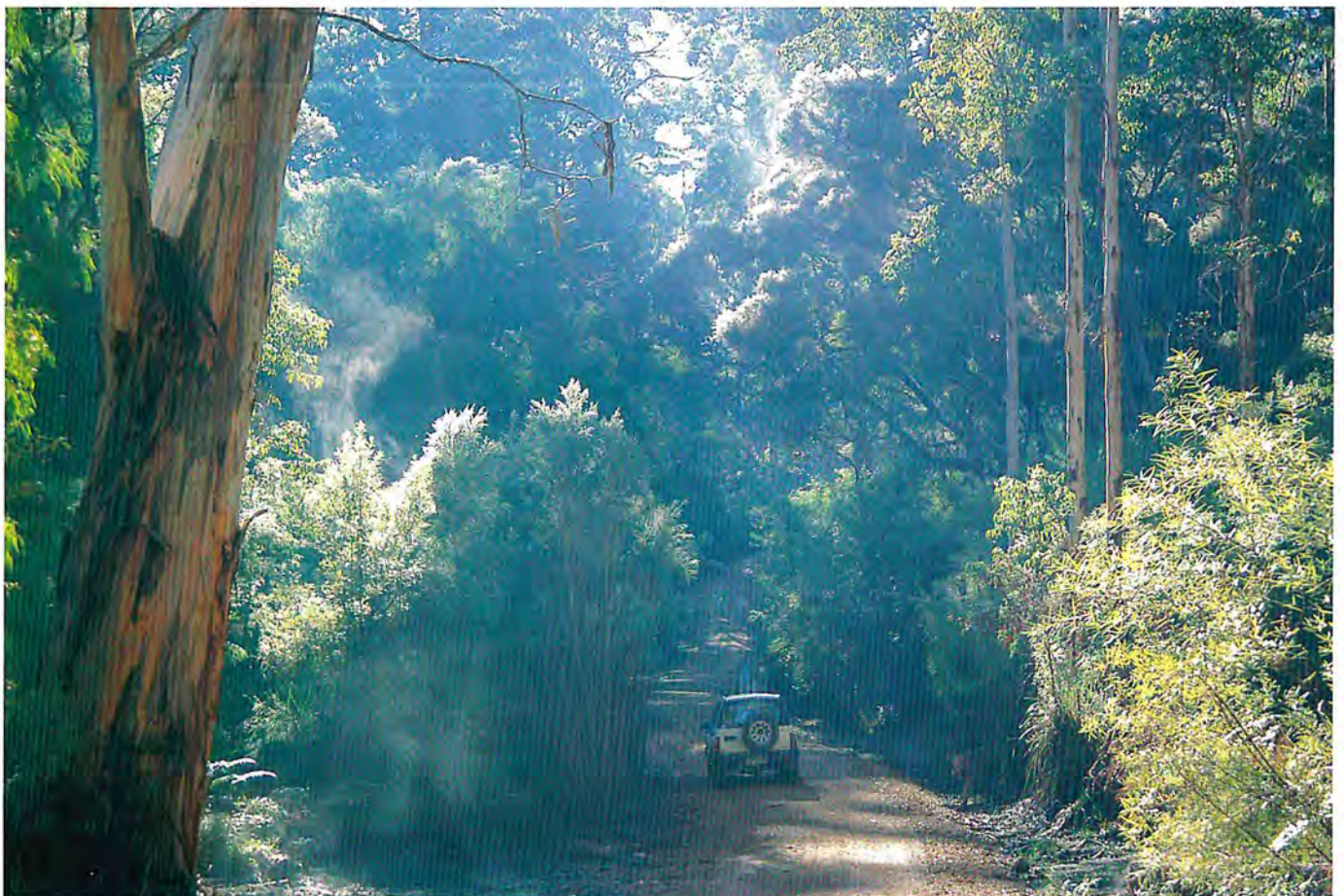
Photo - Cliff Winfield

especially the coastal fringe with its ready food supply. Hand stencils in Old Kurdardup Cave, near Augusta, are the only known examples of painted rock art in a limestone cave in south-west Western Australia.

While Shannon National Park is part of an ancient landscape, its name came from a much more modern event: a sea battle, fought only a few years before the Swan River Colony was founded in 1829. In an attempt to disrupt Napoleon's supply lines, Britain was stopping and searching ships bound from America to Europe. The Americans objected, and in 1813 Sir Philip Broke led HMS *Shannon* into battle with the American frigate *Chesapeake* off New England. The Royal Navy's victory was marked by the naming of the Shannon River, nearby Broke Inlet and Chesapeake Road.

WILDLIFE

There is plenty of wildlife in the forest, including the quokka, which many people suppose is found only on Rottnest Island, off Perth. The creatures have been associated with the island ever since explorer Willem de Vlamingh



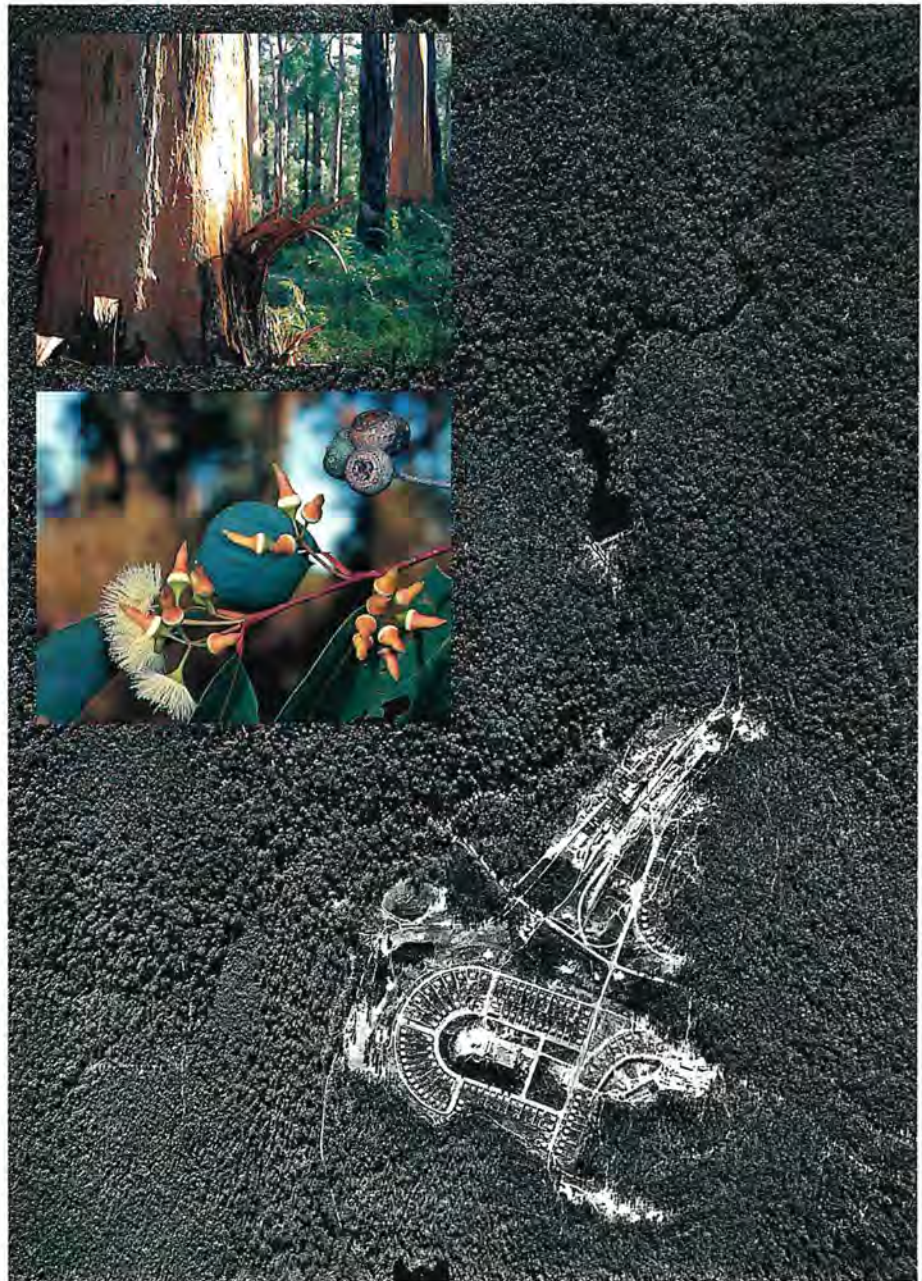
mistook them for a kind of rat in 1696 and named the island *Rottenest* (meaning 'rat's nest' in his native Dutch). These small wallabies were once common across the State's south-west before European settlement, but clearing of habitats and the arrival of the fox led to their decline. Mainland quokkas are now found only in isolated pockets, mainly in densely vegetated areas around swamps and streams, which makes them hard to spot. They have been recorded around the Shannon, as have other rare species such as the mardo (a small carnivorous marsupial between the size of a mouse and a rat), peregrine falcon and Mueller's snake. In addition, there are the familiar western grey kangaroo, quenda (southern brown bandicoot) and the grey-bellied dunnart.

Birds abound throughout the area, ranging from the splendid fairy-wren and rufous tree-creeper to the wedge-tail eagle, Baudin's black cockatoo and Australia's biggest bird, the emu. Compared with other forest ecosystems, karri forest is not especially rich in birdlife. Nevertheless, more than 80 bird species have been identified in the diverse forest, woodland, shrubland and swamp habitats of Shannon National Park.

TREES AND TIMBER

The predominant forest tree of Shannon National Park is karri, one of more than 700 eucalyptus or gum tree species unique to Australia. It grows only in the wettest corner of Western Australia, reaching a maximum height of about 90 metres, making it one of the tallest trees in the world. Of the 175 000 hectares of karri growing on State-owned land, nearly half is in national parks and reserves managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and will not be logged.

Because of its inaccessibility, Shannon was one of the last areas in the south-west opened up for logging. It remained untouched until the opening of the timber mill in the 1940s and a small town for the workers. In winter, water for the settlement came from the Shannon River, but in the dry spell only the mud-minnow could be sure of a supply—the water it had trapped beneath the riverbed. The town preferred a less dramatic solution, a dam built upstream.



For some years after World War Two, while building materials were in severe shortage, Shannon was the biggest timber mill in the State. Timber harvesting continued there until 1983, though the mill itself had closed in 1968, after which the houses were sold and hauled away. Some railway lines may be traced along the Shannon Dam walk trail, and the foundations of some buildings and fruit trees from their gardens still survive in the cleared areas of the camping ground. Otherwise, little remains of the mill town's past.

In 1988, the area was declared a national park, covering 53 000 hectares, and together with the adjoining coastal D'Entrecasteaux National Park, it affords protection for the entire catchment area of the Shannon River.

Above

Main: Shannon townsite and dam, as they were in 1962.

Photo - Reproduced by permission of the Department of Land Administration, Perth, WA, under DOLA licence no. 502/96

Inset top: Karri sheds its smooth, pale grey bark every autumn, revealing the new orange bark underneath.

Photo - Cliff Winfield

Inset above: Jarrah, shown here with flowers and seed capsules, is the most widespread forest tree in the south-west.

Photo - Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

FOREST AND FIRE

One of the biggest threats to the karri forest is fire, and the great height of the karri provided early foresters with one of their first problems. They were keen to extend the system of fire lookout towers built on high ground in the jarrah



forest, but it was hard to find vantage points from which they could see over the tall karri.

The solution was to build fire lookouts in the tops of the trees. In the 1930s, forester Jack Watson scaled 40 potential trees, using climbing gear of his own design. Once a suitable tree was chosen the rungs of a ladder were hammered into the trunk in holes drilled by hand by a man sitting on the rung below, a difficult and laborious process. The top of the tree was then lopped by an axeman about 40 metres above the ground to give the lookout cabin a clear view. Timbers were hauled up by rope and pulley to make the cabin in which someone would sit, swaying in the wind and lightning, to give early warning of forest fires.

CALM has opened three lookout trees to the public: Gloucester Tree, three kilometres from Pemberton; Dave Evans Bicentennial Tree, eight kilometres south of Pemberton; and Diamond Tree, on South Western Highway between Pemberton and Manjimup. The Gloucester and Diamond lookouts are both about 60 metres above the ground, and Bicentennial, which is a few metres taller, is the highest treetop lookout in the world.

Fire spotter planes do most of the modern early detection work, but some fire lookouts are still used when wind conditions are unsuitable for aircraft.

PEOPLE, PARK, WALK, DRIVE

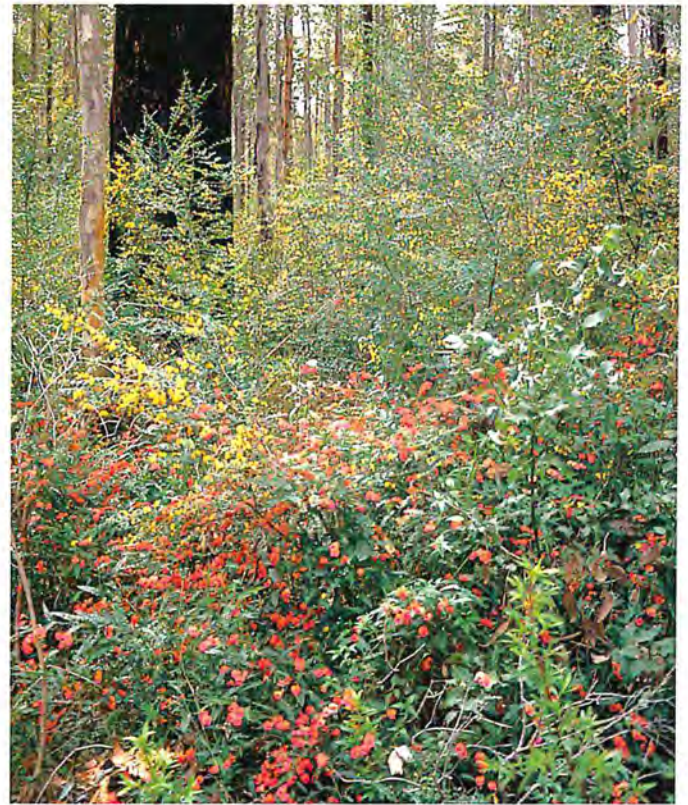
Shannon National Park offers many facilities and attractions. Its camping area has 23 sites, with volunteer hosts based there during popular visitor times. The nearby Shannon Lodge can sleep up to ten people. You can fish for trout and marron in Shannon River and there is superb shore fishing available around Broke Inlet and from the beaches of D'Entrecasteaux.

Top left: A boardwalk takes visitors around some of the giant karris at Big Tree Grove.

Centre left: The view through the trees across the valley at Snake Gully Lookout is a good opportunity to observe birds.

Left: CALM runs a *Go Bush!* activity program for visitors staying at Shannon camping area at Easter.

Photos - Cliff Winfield



Flowers abound. Some are in bloom throughout the year, but it is in springtime that the forest is transformed by a blaze of brightly coloured blossoms. More than 1 500 native species of flowering plants have been recorded in karri country and 99 of them grow nowhere else in the world.

It can be wet at Shannon, which has one of the highest annual rainfalls in the State. The southern area of the park is drenched by 1 400 millimetres a year, most of it between April and October. The mud-minnow can revel in the winter abundance, knowing that it will be months before it needs to dig a hole in the river bed and pull down the lid.

Improving the park for the benefit of visitors without disturbing its natural beauty is a constant process. The Bibbulmun Track, part of which runs through the park, is Western Australia's only true long-distance walking trail. Currently it stretches 650 kilometres from Kalamunda in the Perth hills, to Walpole, on the south coast; and soon it will run a further 190 kilometres along the coast to Albany. CALM is upgrading and realigning the track to make it safer and more enjoyable for walkers.

Those seeking a slightly less active tour should take the 48-kilometre Great Forest Trees Drive, which takes you through some of the most spectacular old-growth karri forest in the south-west.

It includes six picnic and information stops and two walks. The drive begins north of South Western Highway and loops through the park on good roads back to the highway. A commentary is provided by eight separate radio transmitters at specific points along the route. With the car parked at each stop, you can listen to information about your surroundings through your car radio. The transmitters are hidden in the tree canopies and powered by solar panels which are fixed up to 27 metres above the ground.

Technology is not new to Shannon—examples include the steam-driven timber mill in recent history and the ancient stone enclosures in Broke Inlet, thought to have been built as fish traps by Aboriginal people. The technological

Above left: One of the shelters at Shannon camping area. The area also boasts hot water showers, perfect for winter camping.

Above: Springtime at Shannon brings a blaze of brightly coloured wildflowers. Photos - Cliff Winfield

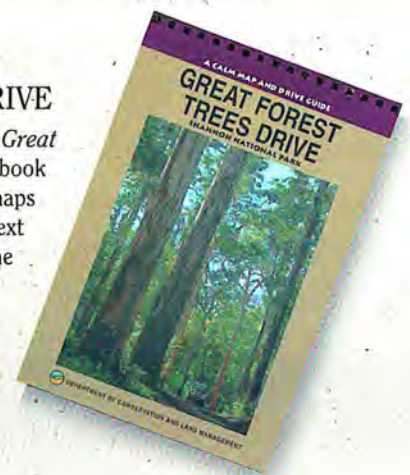
changes reflect different people's attempts to gain something from the forest. In the past that something has been food and shelter - today it's a better understanding of the karri forest and its many features.

Caris Bailey is a Project Officer with CALM and can be contacted on (09) 442 0306.

THE GREAT FOREST TREES DRIVE

You can learn more about the area from *The Great Forest Trees Drive*, a new map and guide book published by CALM. It contains 22 colour maps showing the drive in sections, together with text giving details of the main features along the drive and the location of visitor facilities.

The Great Forest Trees Drive map and guide book is available from CALM offices, bookshops, RAC shops and local tourist bureaus for \$12.95.





DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT
©1997. Reprint from LANDSCOPE magazine (Summer 1996/1997),
published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management.
Managing Editor: Ron Kawalilak. Editor: David Gough. Designer: Maria Duthie