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Park of the Month - February 1999

Cape Arid National Park

 Cape Arid National Park

Cape Arid National Park is a large (279 832 hectares) and exceptionally scenic park. With more than 160 bird species, it is an important park for the conservation of birds in Western Australia, and harbours a number of restricted and threatened species, as well as some interesting inland birds.

The park lies at the eastern extremity of the South-Western botanical province and overlaps the boundary of the Eremaean botanical province (the arid zone). Therefore, as well as including beaches and the Thomas River and estuary, it also includes south-western and more arid vegetation types, providing a broad array of bird habitats.

Near the coast, these include banksia woodlands, swamp yate (*Eucalyptus occidentalis*) woodlands, and heaths, some with emergent banksias or eucalypts, depending on the soil type.

Further inland, there are extensive areas of mallee of various types and semi-arid eucalypt woodlands. There are also small areas of mixed woodlands and shrublands around granite rocks and the peaks of the Russell Range, including Mount Ragged.

Cape Arid National Park, therefore, includes a diverse array of bird species. It is the eastern limit of distribution in Western Australia for ten species, including the ground parrot, scarlet robin, western spinebill and red-eared firetail. Several species that prefer drier country are found in the northern part of the park, but not in the southern parts. These include the mulga parrot and pied

 heathland flora

butcherbird. Sixteen of the 18 species of honeyeater found in Western Australia south of Dongara are known from the park, a good indication of the richness of species.

One endangered bird, the western ground parrot, lives in the park, and several rare species, including the Australasian bittern, Carnaby's black-cockatoo and Cape Barren goose, visit the park on occasions. Western Australian Cape Barren geese breed only in the Recherche Archipelago and occasionally visit nearby parts of the mainland. Total numbers are estimated to be only about 650 birds. The western ground parrot has declined to very low numbers in the park due to extensive wildfires in the 1970s and 1980s. It is restricted to low heaths and needs long unburnt areas to persist, although it can forage in areas more recently burnt. In order to breed, it is believed that it needs vegetation that has remained unburnt for about 15 years. Annual rainfall in areas occupied by ground parrots in the park is only about 400 millimetres, and the heaths only regenerate very slowly under these conditions.

At least two species have moved into the park in the last 40 years. The elegant parrot moved into the Esperance district in 1959, following clearing of vegetation for farms. This species and the crested pigeon, which arrived in about 1980, both like very open woodland or parkland situations. At Cape Arid, they are most likely to be seen along the boundary with the farmland, particularly on Merivale Road.

Where to find birds

All of the walktrails in the park are worth a look for birds. The campground at Thomas River is an excellent place to begin. The campsites are located in the midst of banksia woodland, with a

spectacular view over Yokinup Bay. Here you can spot many common birds, including a good range of honeyeaters if the banksias are in flower. The Thomas River estuary is worth a look, particularly at the bar, where you may see various waterbirds or waders. Pied oystercatchers can be seen here, along with crested terns and silver gulls.



Australian
bustard

Australian bustard



Carnaby's
cockatoo

Carnaby's cockatoo



brown falcon

brown falcon

During summer, you might see some waders, including tiny red-necked stints or sanderlings. Weighing only about 25 to 60 grams, stints and sanderlings are annual migrants from their breeding grounds in far northern parts of Siberia and North America. One or two pairs of the rare hooded plover can often be found on the beach at Yokinup Bay, which extends east from the estuary. Hooded plovers nest on the edges of lakes and on ocean beaches in southern Australia. Nesting in such places makes them particularly vulnerable to disturbance and damage, especially by four-wheel-drive vehicles on beaches. Visitors to the park should therefore be careful not to disturb any hooded plovers during their breeding season, which lasts from March to October.

West of the ranger's residence, off Tagon Road, is the Boolenup walktrail. This pleasant walk meanders down through heath, banksia woodland, yate woodland and a paperbark swamp, finally reaching the picturesque Boolenup Lake. Small numbers of waterbirds such as black swans, musk ducks and little black cormorants can sometimes be seen here. Red-eared firetails and white-browed scrubwrens can be seen in and around the paperbark swamp. Both species like dense cover, and are more likely to be heard than seen. The red-eared firetail is unique to Western Australia. It is restricted to moist areas, usually with dense vegetation, from near Perth to Cape Arid.



red-eared
firetales



ground parrot

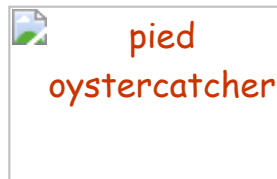
Western ground parrot



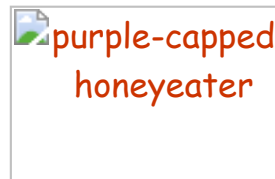
musk duck

Pardalotes can often be heard in the yate woodlands, and if you look carefully you should be able to see some of these colourful little gems. Many other birds can also be found in these woodlands, including scarlet robins, white-naped honeyeaters, red and little wattlebirds and grey currawongs. In summer or autumn, square-tailed kites can occasionally be seen soaring over heath or nearby woodland, with wings upswept, in search of prey.

The heaths along Poison Creek Road, north and east of Cape Arid, are home to Australian bustards, brown falcons, fieldwrens and southern emu-wrens. Bustards, sometimes called bush turkeys because they are similar in size to domestic turkeys, can occasionally be seen stalking through the heath in search of grasshoppers and other small animals. If disturbed, they first freeze, then move slowly away in a stately walk with head held high. Ground parrots probably once inhabited most of the heaths in this part of the park, but are now restricted to within, or near, long-unburnt heath. When the heath is in flower, honeyeaters, especially the tawny-crowned and white-cheeked species, can be seen flying from flowering shrub to flowering shrub, often stopping to call from a favourite perch.



pied oystercatcher



purple-gaped honeyeater

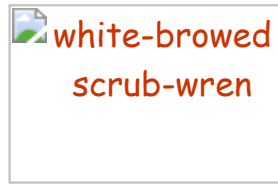


scarlet robin

The best time to see birds in the heath is very early in the morning, as heathland birds tend to be much quieter in the middle of the day.

If you have a four-wheel-drive and the available time, the Mount Ragged area is interesting for birds (but make sure you first consult the ranger about track conditions - the track is sometimes impassable). It is in the mallee scrubs and woodlands in this northern part of the park where you can find birds more typical of the drier country. These include the malleefowl, mulga parrot, chestnut quail-thrush, shy heathwren, purple-gaped honeyeater, yellow-plumed honeyeater and crested bellbird. Bellbirds are usually heard rather than seen, and their call, one of the more

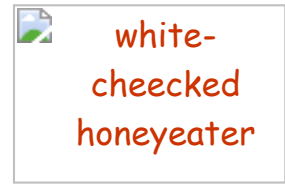
attractive sounds of the bush, has aptly been described as having a "fugitive, ventriloquial quality".



white-browed scrub-wren



red-necked stint



white-cheeked honeyeater

In autumn, when certain mallees (*Eucalyptus* species) in this area are in flower, there can be many flocks of purple-crowned lorikeets noisily foraging for nectar and pollen, or flying swiftly from one feeding site to another. The honeyeaters mentioned above can also be found at Mount Ragged itself, as well as others including the brown-headed honeyeater. If you are lucky, you may also see a wedge-tailed eagle soaring around the mountain top.

The Park's Importance

In terms of numbers of species, the 160 bird species of Cape Arid compare well with other large national parks. There are about 140 species in the Stirling Range National Park, and about 170 to 180 in Kalbarri and Fitzgerald River national parks. Kalbarri National Park is also at the boundary of the south-western and drier areas, and Fitzgerald River National Park is slightly larger than Cape Arid National Park and includes more of the wetter zone species. Most importantly, Cape Arid National Park includes suitable habitat for the critically endangered western ground parrot, and good populations of south-western and arid zone species.

History

French Admiral D'Entrecasteaux named the cape "Cap Arride" in 1792, and the name was anglicised by Matthew Flinders in 1892. The park was subsequently named after this feature.

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

Where is it?

120 km east of Esperance

Travelling time:

1 hour 30 minutes from Esperance.

What to do:

Bushwalking, camping, birdwatching, whalewatching, picnicking, photography, four-wheel-driving, fishing.



Little Targon Bay

Must see sites:

Yokinup Bay, Little Targon Bay.

Facilities:

Campgrounds, bush toilets, gas barbecues.

NOTE: No Drinking Water Available.



Campground near Seal
Creek

Best seasons:

Spring and Autumn

Nearest CALM office:

[CALM District Office Esperance.](#)

A ranger is based in the park all year round. Telephone (08) 9075 0055.

Ground parrot photo © Allan Burbidge

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