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Park Notes

Cape Range National Park and Ningaloo Marine Park



SPINIFEX SECRETS

FEROCIOUS BUT FRAGILE

Spinifex is the prickly grass you see stretching from horizon to horizon and the one that sticks in your legs and socks. Whilst appearing very harsh, spinifex is quite fragile and is easily damaged.

Most spinifex plants grow in a hummock shape, providing shelter for a number of animals that harbour beneath their prickly leaves.

There are at least 7 species of *Triodia* or spinifex growing in the Pilbara. Most flourish after rain taking about three years to mature.

Some species like *Triodia basedowii* form concentric rings. As the plant grows, the leaves in its heart die off, creating a hollow. In older plants the centre dies completely, leaving a ring of live grass which continues to expand as the plant grows. In the heat of the day the outer leaves of the hummock reduce wind speed so that air in the centre is almost still. In this protected heart, evaporation and temperature is lower than outside and humidity is higher.

Dead leaves decay in the moist centre of the plant, attracting anything that feeds on rotting vegetable matter. A whole food chain of small creatures lives on this and ultimately supports larger predators.

SPINIFEX INHABITANTS

Many native rodents, marsupials, snakes and lizards depend on spinifex to keep cool, conserve body moisture and feed in this harsh environment.

Ants are often seen moving along well-defined trails from their nests to the spinifex clumps.

On the sharp, tough leaves of some spinifex species the ants are busy farming small sap-sucking insects, known as mealy-bugs.

These insects excrete the sticky resin of the spinifex, which is taken by the ants and used to glue together grains of sand to build their nests.

The spinifex pigeon is most common in stony spinifex country with permanent water. It is a plump erect pigeon with a rust-red crown, tall pointed crest and a bright red ring around its eye. It feeds on the seeds of grasses and legumes that grow between the hummocks of spinifex after rain.

The perentie, Australia's largest lizard stalks the spinifex grasslands in search of unsuspecting prey. It shelters in deep burrows or cavities beneath rocks and feeds upon reptiles, birds, mammals and carrion. It can grow to over 2 metres in length and is capable of reaching great speeds when pursued.

Spinifex termites are the engineers of the termite mounds scattered across the hummock grasslands. A series of underground galleries fan out from the mounds, some up to 50 metres in length. Under the protection of nightfall workers flanked by soldiers follow the galleries to the spinifex clumps where they harvest leaves for storage in chambers within the mound. Grass is cut in 1 - 2 cm lengths and returned to the mound before sunrise. The last termites to return, plug up the exits to keep out enemies.

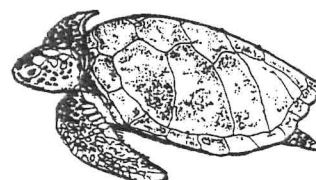
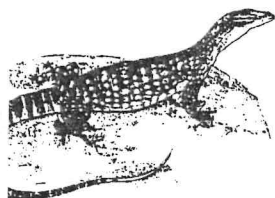
SPINIFEX - THE AGGRESSOR

Given good rains, spinifex regrows quickly after fire, but it may do so at the expense of other more fire sensitive plants, in some cases taking over almost completely from them. Mulga (*Acacia aneura*) is one of these plants, in parts of the Pilbara communities of mulga are gradually being replaced by spinifex grasslands.

PROTECTING THESE PRICKLY PLANTS

~~Recreation areas within the park like the Dales Recreation Area and Fortescue Campground have been designed to protect spinifex, by placing bollards and signs to direct vehicle and pedestrian traffic.~~

Driving or walking on spinifex kills plants, upsetting an important habitat. Please drive, walk and camp only on the hard pan surfaces sign posted for this purpose.



SAFE WALKING

Cape Range National Park offers a variety of trails both on the eastern and western sides of the range. They are classified according to their degree of difficulty and the level of fitness required. Please choose trails carefully and ask park staff for advice.

When walking in the park wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15+ and sturdy walking shoes, and take plenty of drinking water with you (4 litres per person per day) as there is no water available in the range. Dispose of your rubbish back at your campsite at the end of the walk.

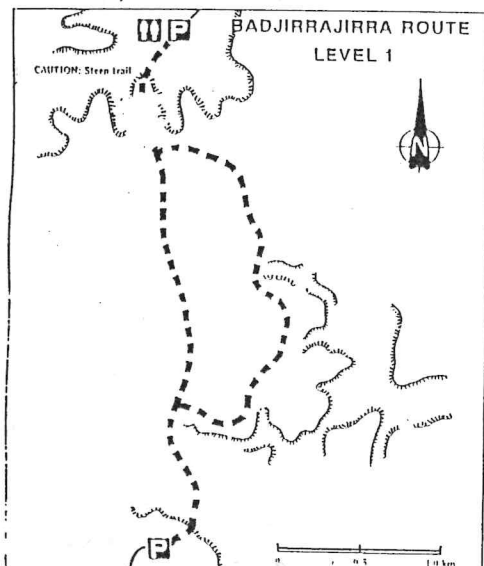
Temperatures may be deceptively high, especially in the canyons. We advise you not to undertake the walks in summer.

It is dangerous to walk along cliff edges. Undercutting by erosion can lead to weak sections which may give way under your weight. Stand well back from edges and don't throw stones. People may be walking below.

Take care if you stop to examine sink holes; many are deep with vertical walls. Please do not enter sink holes.

For your own safety, please remain on existing tracks.

Please remember that collecting fossils in national parks is not permitted.



BADJIRRAJIRRA ROUTE LEVEL 1

8 kilometres - 5 hours return

This circular route starts and finishes at the Thomas Carter Lookout carpark. The lookout is 311 metres above sea level and one of the highest points on the cape. It was named after a pioneer pastoralist and noted ornithologist.

The trail is marked with white posts and cairns, and runs from the lookout to the lip of the canyon. Vantage points along the trail offer spectacular views of Exmouth Gulf. As you walk, you will notice how the vegetation alters with the landform patterns. On the top of the range, trees are small and often stunted. Growing conditions are severe, with erratic low rainfall, shallow lime-rich soils that drain rapidly through the limestone, and high summer temperatures. The vegetation consists of spinifex with scattered shrubs of acacias and sennas. Where the spinifex has been damaged by fire or animals, it is slow to regrow, and other more vigorous colonisers take over. Eucalypts are common in the creek lines, where soils are deeper and moisture is more readily retained. Fire-sensitive trees, such as the kurrajong and native fig, can often be seen clinging tentatively to cliff edges. One of the interesting features of the area is the transition of plant species. Some are at their northern-most distribution, while others, from arid areas, are at their southern-most distribution. There are also several species found nowhere else but on the cape.

At the end of the trail you can either return along the same route to the Thomas Carter Lookout, or exit via Shothole Canyon Route Level 1.

How to get there: Access is from Charles Knife Road, 23 km south of Exmouth along the Minilya-Learmonth Road.



SHOTHOLE CANYON ROUTE LEVEL 1

250 metres - 1 hour return

WARNING: This trail is extremely steep and very narrow in some places. The gravelly surface can be very slippery underfoot.

PROCEED WITH EXTREME CAUTION

The trail takes you from the Shothole Canyon carpark to the lip of the canyon, returning along the same route. The trail up the side of the canyon is steep, climbing 120 metres along the ridge. From vantage points along the trail and from the lip of the canyon, you can see how erosion has shaped the gorges. Although the climate is now very dry, torrential downpours continue the process. Wind erosion also plays a part, eating into the soft layers of the canyon walls, undercutting hard layers above and eventually causing large blocks of material to break off and tumble to the bottom.

How to get there: Access is from the Shothole Canyon Road, 17 km south of Exmouth along the Minilya-Learmonth Road.



TRAIL GRADES

WALKS are short, easy and well formed. They are suitable for people of all ages and fitness levels. Some improvements have been made to the terrain.

TRACKS are suitable for people with a moderate level of fitness. They have some short, uneven stretches that may be loose or slippery underfoot.

ROUTES (LEVEL 1) are for experienced, fit walkers. Trails may be unmarked and go over steep, slippery and unstable surfaces. Few, if any, improvements have been made.