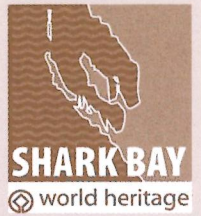


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Shark Bay World Heritage Notes



ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION DISTRICT OFFICE, DENHAM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

BIRRIDAS

One of Shark Bay's more visual terrestrial attractions are its clay or evaporative salt pans, known locally as birridas. More than 100 birridas can be found along the east coast of Peron Peninsula.

Most birridas were landlocked saline lakes when the sea levels were much higher than at present, and gypsum was deposited on the lake floors. In the past, some of these gypsum deposits were mined.

Birridas range in size from small, circular or oval depressions about 100m in diameter, to elongated or irregular depressions between the sand dunes that are several kilometres long.

They commonly consist of a central, raised platform ringed by a moat-like depression. The central section corresponds to the level of the water table during the late Pleistocene Period, about 10 000 years ago.

The moat was formed when fresh groundwater seeped from the surrounding dunes and dissolved the gypsum on the periphery of the central platform.

Today, during very high winter tides, when the groundwater level is raised, some moats fill with water to a shallow level.

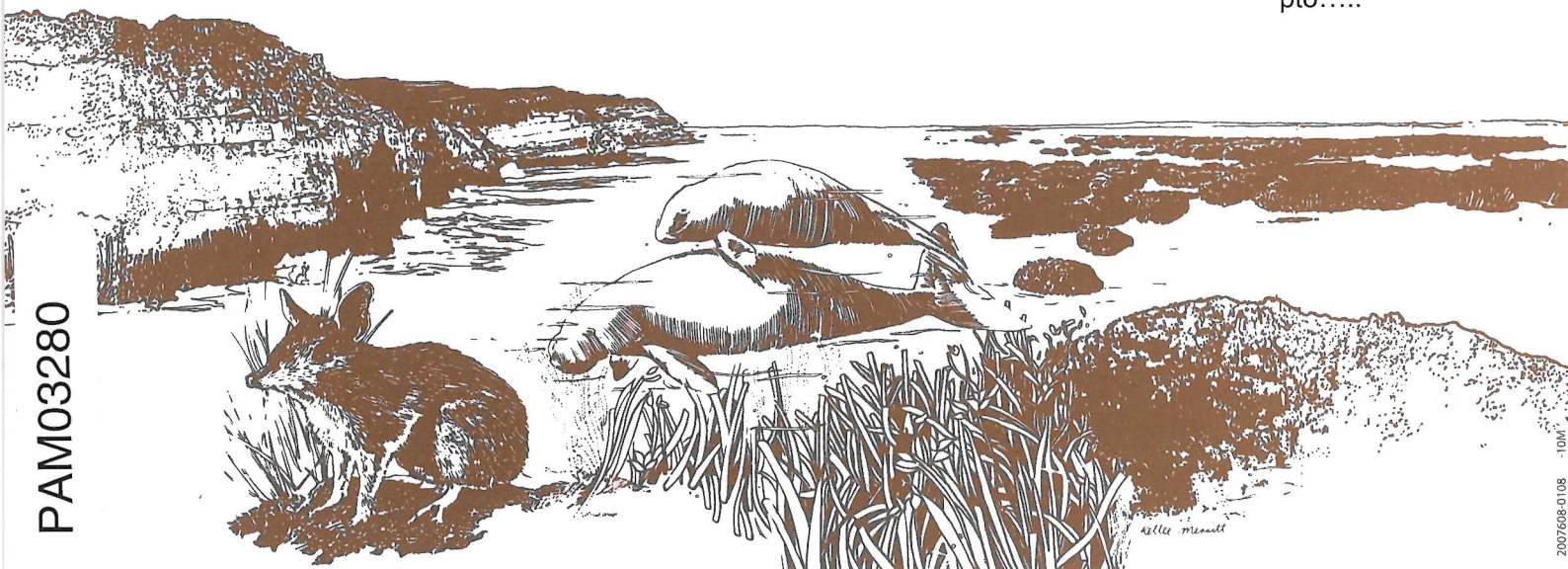
Most birridas retain water for several months following rain, after which dormant eggs hatch and the birridas teem with small invertebrates such as horse-shoe crabs and brine shrimp.

Wading birds such as ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) and Bar Tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) that have migrated to Shark Bay from as far away as Siberia, can be seen feeding on these crustaceans. This is best observed on the large birrida in the north of Francois Peron National Park.

Samphire (*Halosarcia sp.*) is the common plant found growing on the birrida islands and around the edge of the moat. Chenopods (salt tolerant plants) grow around the edge of the birrida, the most common being Frankenia and Silver Saltbush (*Atriplex bunburyana*), Sandalwood (*Santalum spicatum*) is locally dense on the slopes surrounding birridas.

On the birridas, the puffy raised sections of earth are formed by surface soil expanding. This occurs as the salt crystals are formed and the moisture below the surface layer evaporates.

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Some birridas are connected to the sea by channels and receive seawater.

Where this occurs in Francois Peron National Park, (for example in Big Lagoon), shallow bays have been created. These bays are important fish breeding and nursery areas, however, most birridas at Shark Bay are isolated.

Motorists should avoid driving on birridas where possible, as once the surface crust has been broken, bogging can easily occur and vehicles may need to be towed out.