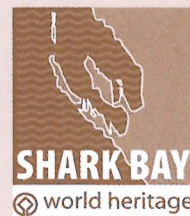


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# Shark Bay World Heritage Notes



ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION DISTRICT OFFICE, DENHAM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

## SHARK BAY'S FLORA

Its varied and beautiful, but you have to look for it!

Travelling along the main road to Denham, on Peron Peninsula, visitors to Shark Bay see only sand hills covered by wattle scrub, salt pans and spinifex grasslands. In spring, the contrast between this and the bright fields of everlasting along the north-west coastal highway, can give a false impression of the region's flora

In fact, detailed studies of Shark Bay's vegetation show a rich diversity, an unusual species composition and many endemic species.

While the peninsulas are characterised by low, wind-pruned and relatively uniform vegetation, the circular salt pans, know as birridas, seen from the main road have their own unique spring-flowering annuals. The saline creeks and estuaries are lined with mangroves, and there are brilliant contrasts along the beaches, where white sand meets red desert dunes, each soil type supporting its own 'heath suite'.

A unique tree heath grows on red sand between Peron and Edel Land peninsulas. Many endemic floral species and species at the ends of their range grow within it, and unlike other heaths, it has many tall shrubs and mallees.

### Shark Bay Plants are Special

Shark Bay lies at the Northern end of the vegetation of the temperate South West, and is a region of major botanical significance. Its diverse flora comes not from unusual geology, but from the meeting of two botanical 'provinces'. At Shark Bay the flora of the South West climatic zone and the desert meet at the base of Peron Peninsula and Edel Land and change abruptly. Here it is possible to stand in a tree heath surrounded by south-western banksias, grevilleas, melaleucas and eucalypts and see the start of the desert's spinifex plains.

The Shark Bay region has about 700 species of flowering plants. This alone is a high figure for an arid region, but of these species, 146 (more than 24%) are at the northern limit of their ranges. These include such flowers as the State emblem (red and green kangaroo paw), three species of coneflowers, a smokebush and two orchids.

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Outside the heath, the Shark Bay flora is essentially made up of desert elements. This is reflected in the major flora groups of the area: the grasses (52 species), samphires (51 species), myrtles (43 species) and daises (70 species). These four groups make up about a third of the region's plants.

### **Plants Exclusive to Shark Bay**

About 30 species of flowering plants are confined to the Shark Bay mainland and offshore islands. Most of these have close relatives in the South West. More than half of the species unique to the Bay are confined to the tree heath vegetation, which is also the end of the South West. These species are nearly all shrubs, with few bulbous herbs or annuals. One of the more spectacular is a one-sided bottlebrush (*Calothamnus formosus*).

Shark Bay's floral gems may be hidden from immediate view, but here first impressions don't count. It takes several visits, a detour from the beaten tracks and an enquiring eye to find out just what the Bay has to offer. But then, we always appreciate what is hardest to find ....

*Greg Keighery and Malcolm Trudgeon*