

# CYCLONE DELAYS DESERT BURNING

**HEAVY** cyclonic rains in the North-Eastern Goldfields and adjacent parts of the Gibson Desert prevented the first aerial prescribed burning experiments getting underway in May in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve.

The semi-trailer carrying fuel from Wiluna for the Department's "Islander" aircraft and vehicles became bogged up to the tray at Wongawol Station 350km short of its destination.

Further rain a few days later made matters worse, leading to the postponement of the project until September.

The Department has set up a task force to carry out the experimental burning and associated research.

Andrew Burbidge and Phil Fuller (Woodvale) arrived at the reserve first (before the rain) to set up quadrats and count birds before the burning commenced.

Next to arrive was David Pearson from Kalgoorlie Research, who will study vegetation regeneration, closely followed by Ian Kealley, Mike Tagliaferri, Dave McMillan and Andrew Chapman from Goldfields Region.

They upgraded two old airstrips in the area; both had been constructed by oil exploration companies several years ago.

The Kalgoorlie contingent had to travel via the Laverton-Warburton road and an old track northwards past Alexander Spring to avoid closed roads around Wiluna.

Neil Burrows and Karan Maisey (Woodvale), Per Christensen, Graeme Liddellow, Bruce Ward and Alex Robinson (Manjimup Research) drove via Meekatharra and Wiluna and arrived with red-brown vehicles instead of the original white ones.

Neil, Karan, Bruce and Alex are studying fire behaviour and fuel dynamics in desert spinifex grasslands, while Per and Graeme are working on vertebrate animals.

All was now ready for the plane crew of Sue Folks (pilot), Gerard van Didden and Bob Selkirk to arrive — all, that is, except the fuel.

Notwithstanding the delay, the researchers were able to collect some valuable data.

One piece of good news is

that dalgates (or Rabbit-eared Bandicoots) still occur in the nature reserve.

Phil Fuller and Andrew Burbidge found burrows and diggings on one of their bird quadrats and Per and Graeme set traps, which caught a female dalgate with pouch young.

This was the highlight of the trip.

The animal's distribution, like many other medium

sized marsupials has declined drastically since colonisation and it is now restricted to a few relict populations in the arid interior.

The dalgate, which we named Leanne, was captured in a box trap set inside a fresh burrow.

Leanne was fitted with a radio transmitter and released amid a barrage of flashlight and cameras on Saturday night.

On future trips it is hoped to capture and radio track further animals to study the effect of fire on their movements and behaviour.

Phil and Andrew collected useful pre fire bird data for proposed burn sites as well as control quadrats that will not be burnt.

They found a number of species breeding following good rains that fell a month

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## SEMINAR LOOKS AT TIMBER STRATEGY

**MORE** than 80 CALM staff attended a two-day seminar at Bunbury on March 31 and June 1 to familiarise themselves with the Timber Strategy.

The three forest regions and their districts were represented as was Crawley, specialist branches from Como and the Wheatbelt and South Coast regions.

The seminar was organised and run by John Clarke and Des Donnelly of the Forest Resources Branch under the direction of Divisional Manager Don Keene.

The seminar was opened by the Executive Director, Dr Shea, who stressed that the Regional Management Plans and Timber Strategy were a first attempt to revitalise the timber industry and to improve the public's knowledge of this important industry.

Dr Shea said CALM had received a positive reaction to its plans from the timber industry, evident in the more than \$1 billion investment plans proposed for the south-west.

He said the positive reaction was also reflected in the signing of new contracts with sawmillers.

The Forest Resources Branch had finalised at least one new timber supply con-

tract every week this year.

The seminar was broken into four sessions over the two days, the first dealing with the overall timber situation including supply, demand, inventory and silviculture.

The main speakers for this session were George Malajczuk from the Economics Branch, Hugh Campbell (Inventory) and Jack Bradshaw (Silviculture).

The second session dealt with resource allocation to industry.

The speakers were Don Keene, Regional Managers

Alan Walker, Don Spriggins and George Peet, and Principal Research Scientist Graeme Siemon.

The third and fourth sessions held on the second day covered the implementation of the Management Plans and Timber Strategy at Regional and District levels and included such areas as staff demands and Regional, Branch and Forest Resource Branch responsibilities.

The main speakers on these topics were Don Keene, John Sclater, John Clarke, Jon Murch, Jim Adams, John Smart and Allan Hill.

### ... on a lighter note

Seminars usually produce their lighter moments, and this one was no exception.

John Clarke's presentation seemed to have more relevance to the implementation of CALM's EEO and sexual harassment strategy than the timber strategy.

Regional Manager Alan Walker adopted the guise of small sawmiller "Jack Sleeper" to make some pointed comments from an outside organisation.

Regional Manager Don Spriggins presented a CALM structural model based on what looked like a flagon of wine, a funnel filter and an empty vessel.

On a final note, at the formal dinner the restaurant announced there would be no bread because it was all eaten at lunch time. On hearing this, Roger Underwood criticised the foresters present for breaking their fundamental principle: they had, he said, exceeded the lunch time permissible intake which had led to a collapse of the restaurant's sustainable yield strategy.



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or so before the trip.

Of particular interest was the location of a Rufous-crowned Emu-wren nest with two chicks.

A visit to Lake Cohen resulted in a sighting of seven Plumed Egrets, a bird rarely seen south of the Kimberley.

Also on Lake Cohen were Black Swans, White-faced and Pacific Herons, Red-necked Stints in full breeding plumage, Red-capped Plovers, Pink-eared Ducks and Grey Teal.

# DESERT BURN DELAY

However, a visit to the much larger Lake Gruszka was disappointing — it was completely dry, showing how patchy rainfall in the desert can be.

The green spinifex was reluctant to burn under the wet conditions, so the fire behaviour team conducted a vegetation survey along Gory Highway (which runs through the Reserve) in an attempt to classify and

describe the various fuel complexes on the basis of landform and species association.

In conjunction with David Pearson's work with thematic mapping using remote sensing, we will be able to produce reliable fuel (and vegetation) maps for the Reserve.

It is also possible that we will be able to determine fuel moisture content (hence flammability and map fire

patterns using remote sensing techniques.

These are vital aids to fire management in remote and poorly accessible reserves.

The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve project is the Department's first significant habitat management undertaking outside the south west.

Earlier research has shown that the disappearance of almost all the critical weight range (35g to

5500g mean adult body weight) mammals from the deserts is due to a significant degree to changed fire regimes after the Aborigines left the country for European settlements.

As this trip shows, working in remote areas has its problems.

However, it also has its rewards. Only time will tell how rewarding this project will be.

**\* This article was prepared by Andrew Burbidge and Neil Burrows.**