



UNDER FIRE

by Tanya Maxted

Unseasonal rains have given the park a green tinge as native grasses resprout and new shoots appear on charred blackboys.

Some 152 600 hectares were burnt by the fires, which were lit by lightning storms in late December.

In similar conditions to those which caused the Ash Wednesday disaster in the Eastern States, firefighters from CALM and the Ravensthorpe and Jerramungup bush fire brigades fought almost continuously for two weeks to contain the fires.

A further two weeks was spent "mopping up" after the fires, and aircraft patrolled the park until mid-January.

Fitzgerald River National Park is turning green again - just a few months after almost half of the remote South Coast heathland was burnt by wildfires.



During the height of the fire, fronts moved as fast as 8 km/h and in just eight hours on the first day more than 100 000 hectares was burnt.

Difficult terrain, high winds (up to 56 km/h) and high temperatures (up to 40 degrees) worked against firefighters, but they were able to keep the fire from the fauna-rich northern part of the park.

Images taken from satellites during and after the fires will complement existing maps of past fires in the park and allow accurate mapping of the extent of the fire.

They will also allow planners to determine the ages of unburnt sections of the park that will carry fire and

determine the effectiveness of five-year-old vegetation to stop or slow down a wildfire. This will involve measuring how far the recent wildfires travelled into a central section of the area burnt by wildfire in 1985.

Satellite imagery may also be useful in determining if coastal erosion (such as mobile dunes) is occurring within the park. To record this, planners will compare the mobile dune area on pre-fire images with images taken post-fire on an annual basis.

CALM planners and scientists are moulding Fitzgerald's future as rehabilitation of the park begins. Parts of the park's management plan are being rewritten, in consultation with the local community.

Volunteers from both the country and the city have begun helping to rebuild park facilities, collect seed from endemic plants and stabilise sensitive coastal areas to protect them from windblow.

The park's rare flora and fauna are being surveyed and monitored by researchers to gauge species' response to the fire, using monitoring sites already established in the park.

Of Fitzgerald's 1748 plant species, 250 are rare or geographically restricted. The park's high floral diversity gives it



A new beginning: the fires were hot enough to cause widespread seed germination.

Photo - Lachlan McCaw▲

Some of the park's unique flora that was burnt in the fire. All plants are expected to recover.

Photo - Jiri Lochman▼

the status of one of only two International Biosphere Reserves in WA.

Plant species that haven't been seen in the park for a number of years are expected to rise from the ashes, along with orchids and other flowering plants that respond well to fire.

The park is also rich in fauna, with 184 bird species (four rare and one in need of special protection), 22 native

mammals (six declared rare), 12 frog species and 41 reptiles (one in need of special protection).

The park is a sanctuary for the Ground Parrot and dibbler; it is the only conservation reserve in WA that is home to the heath rat and is the largest reserve with tamar, red-tailed wambenger, woylie, western mouse, Western Bristlebird and Western Whipbird present.

Most of the areas that were known habitats of rare fauna in the park's northern section were kept free of fire. Some of these species appear to require habitat that hasn't been burnt for at least 20 years.

To achieve this, fire controllers deliberately focussed firefighting efforts on containing the fire in the middle of the park rather than backburning from boundaries.

This autumn, CALM, with assistance from the local brigades, will burn narrow strips to protect the remaining unburnt areas within the park.

Future editions of *Landscape* will feature articles on the park's rehabilitation and associated research, flora regeneration and the return and behaviour of fauna.□

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LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FIVE NO 3 AUTUMN EDITION 1980



Rock-wallabies threw down the gauntlet to scientists trying to trap them for research. Who ended up winning the catch-me-if-you-can contest? See page 35.



Scientists will use modern technology to restore two rare and endangered mammals to an area in the Gibson Desert from which they have become extinct. See page 10.



Shells, tiny crabs and sundry other creatures are sure to please the curious naturalist who invades the intertidal zone at low tide. Explore the place where the shore meets the sea on page 23.



Waterbirds flock to the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands in their tens of thousands, some travelling over 10 000 kilometres from summer breedings grounds in northern China and Siberia. Turn to page 17.



It's the burning question! Is prescribed burning in spring or autumn better for the jarrah forest? Or is there another alternative? See page 28.

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COVER

The designs of desert artist Benny Tjapaltjarri show events associated with the Pakuru or golden bandicoot dreaming in the Gibson Desert. The three central roundels depict rockholes and the others represent hills. The background dots show the vegetation of the area.



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Designers: Louise Burch/Robyn Mundy

Production: Karen Addison

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Illustrations: 'Swamped With Birds' - Ian Dickinson

'Seasoned With Fire' - Yeon Hee Kim

Colour Separation by Prepress

Printed in Western Australia by Kaleidoscope

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Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
Department of Conservation and Land Management,
50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152.