

WATCHERS OF THE SKIES

The ingenuity of Western Australian bushies has long been a feature of the conservation of our native forests. For example, the network of fire lookouts using platforms among tree crowns throughout the karri forest (see story, right) was unique and served the State admirably until the early 1970s when spotter aircraft were introduced.

Now, WA ingenuity is again being used to take the State's conservation effort into the 21st Century. This time it is WA aviation technology.

The Henderson-based company, Eagle Aircraft, has been awarded a \$312 000 contract to supply six Eagle X-TS planes to the Department of Conservation and Land Management over the next two years to replace CALM's ageing fleet of Piper Super Cubs. The contract also combined aviation technology with a bushfire detection system that ranked among the world's best.

The first aircraft used for forest fire protection was a Cessna 150 back in 1972. This was trialled in the Pemberton district and its success led to a second plane the following year. By 1975 the spotter "squadron" had grown to nine and in 1979-80, Piper Super Cubs replaced the Cessna 150s. The Cubs and

the Cessna's together have notched up 135 000 hours of flying without serious mishap since 1972. This represents about 60 000 take-offs and landings.

The selection of the Eagle X-TS as the future aircraft for CALM was made on the basis that it is extremely easy to handle in the air, provides a very good viewing platform for fire detection, is 30 per cent faster than the Super Cub, and is a low maintenance aircraft incorporating the latest technology. This technology includes high-strength composite material; a light, powerful engine; high tech instrumentation and a satellite GPS.

The planes have a top speed of 130 knots and a take off distance of less than 500 metres. Wing span is 7.16 metres and the overall length is just 6.54 metres.

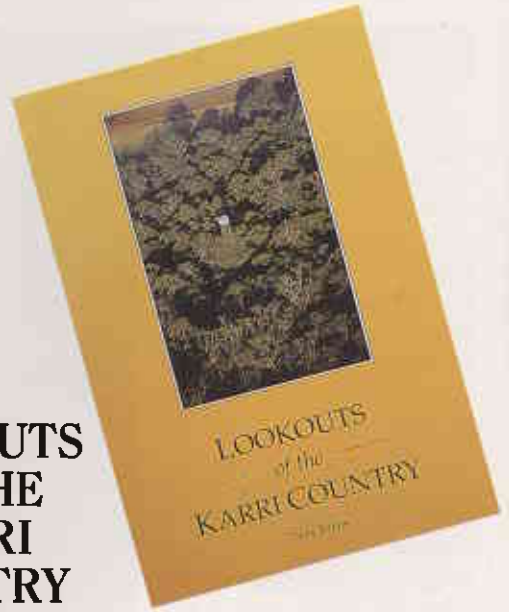
Aerial surveillance allows fire fighters to attack fires rapidly when they are small. For example, more than 95 per cent of fires attended by CALM fire fighters are contained before they spread across 20 hectares.

The planes also will enable CALM to continue aerial photography, surveys and search and rescue operations.

The Eagle X-TS aircraft sporting the CALM logo.



LOOKOUTS OF THE KARRI COUNTRY



The Gloucester Tree on the outskirts of Pemberton is one of the karri forest's most famous landmarks. But it is only one of several trees that for 40 years played a vital role in protecting the karri forest from the devastation of wildfire.

The story of the karri tree lookouts is told in a new book published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM).

Lookouts of the Karri Country is written by former long-time Warren district identity Dave Evans.

The book covers the evolution of tree lookouts and is sprinkled with anecdotes that give an insight into the skill - and sheer courage - of the men who climbed 60 metres above the ground to lop the tree crowns. Men like foresters Don Stewart, John Watson and George Reynolds; expert axeman and bushman Dick Sproge and the bush carpenters, such as Laurie Jones, who built the tiny cabins among the lopped branches.

Using files from the former Forests Department and his own contacts, Dave Evans has produced a readable tale that intertwines official policy, ingenuity, skill, and bushmen's humour.

The book also covers the communications between forest gangs, district headquarters and the tower men and women. In the days before two-way radio, or mobile phones, single telephone wires strung between the trees in the forest were the links to contact fire fighting crews. These wires are in stark contrast to the two-way radio network CALM now uses throughout the South West.

The fire lookout towers today have mostly given way to aircraft and aerial spotting. But from the mid-1930s through to the 1970s, the tree-top towers, and the people who watched the forests from them for 12 to 14 hours a day, were the silent sentinels.

As Dave Evans writes: "Without doubt the lookout towers and trees of the karri country ... are unique; they involve the magnificence of our South West forests and they are to a large degree symbolic of the achievement of people involved in a toilsome and hazardous industry."

Lookouts of the Karri Country by Dave Evans. Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management. RRP \$14.95.

LANDSCOPE

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The galah is just one of the many bird species that visit our urban and suburban gardens. 'Birds in the Garden' shows us how we can attract more.



In spring, the Wongan Hills are ablaze with wildflowers, but this 'island' sanctuary is also a home to a wide variety of animals. See page 21.



Yanchep National Park is having a facelift. Our story on page 28 examines the history and rebirth of one of Perth's closest and most visited national parks.



Banksia gardneri var. brevidentata is one of a number of plants named in honour of Charles Gardner. See 'Gardner's World' on page 41.



The Pinnacles is one of several destinations for licensed tours operating in WA's national parks. See 'Travel Companions'.

FEATURES

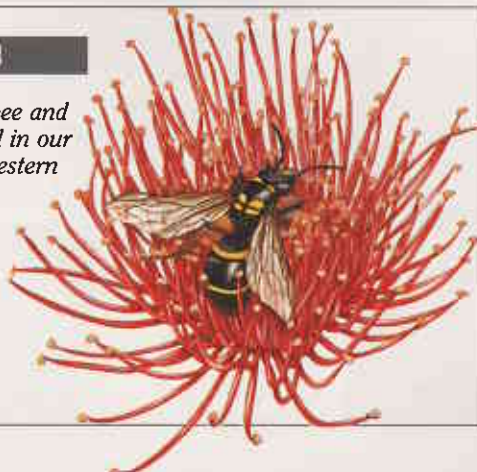
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COVER

Hyleoides zonalis is a solitary bee and one of the native bees described in our story about the 'real' bees of Western Australia on page 17. The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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