

YANCHER

THE REBIRTH OF A NATIONAL PARK



A curious contradiction of extensive recreation developments, heritage buildings, stunning limestone caves, pristine wetlands and banksia woodlands has made Yanchep National Park one of Perth's most treasured parks for nearly a century. Now, a new management and development plan has given the Park a new lease of life, which will see it continue to be a major recreation area well into the next century. **By Rod Annear and David Gough**



Reserved in 1905 for 'the protection and preservation of caves and flora and for a health and recreation pleasure resort', Yanchep National Park reflects the changes in attitude and approach to the management of natural areas over the years. The tended garden beds, golf course, extensive shaded and manicured lawns, grand Tudor-style buildings and wide range of exotic trees found in the recreation area reflect an attitude which prevailed before World War II. Today, they leave us with a wonderful legacy on which to build a new future for the park, and one which reflects modern interest in wildlife and nature conservation as well as recreation in our national parks.

Historically, Yanchep and its wetlands were important to Aboriginal people as a source of food and fresh water during the summer months they spent on the coastal plain. Aboriginal groups from as far north as Moore River and south to the Swan River would sometimes meet to share the abundance of food the area had to offer. One of these foods is the bulrush (*Typha domingensis*), whose Aboriginal name, *yanjet*, is the word from which the name Yanchep was later derived.

Visitors from the Swan River Colony began to come to Yanchep shortly after the first settler in the area, Henry White, arrived at the turn of the century. These first visitors came to explore the caves, which had been noted by explorers to the area as early as 1838. Henry became the honorary caretaker and guide, and would meet visitors at an old stone hut named Caves House, which was built near the lake. The building had earlier been used by cattlemen who summered their cattle on the coast from as early as the 1880s.

Henry would meet these adventurers

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The black swan, once hunted on Loch McNess by Aborigines, is now a protected species and the State's bird emblem.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Above right: Gloucester Lodge once provided exclusive accommodation and meals. It is now a museum of local history.

Photo - CALM

Right: Ex-Perth trams were converted to provide accommodation overlooking Boomerang Gorge.

Photo - CALM

and guide them through the caves using a magnesium flare; crawling along muddy streams to reach the best and most spectacular chambers. By 1905, most of the major caves in the park had been discovered.

Although the area was popular, poor roads made travelling there difficult for all but the most adventurous. Between 1905 and 1930, access was improved, but only limited development took place as management shifted between the Caves Board, Immigration Tourist and General Information Department, the State Hotels Department and finally, in 1931, the State Gardens Board.

THE BOOM YEARS

In 1931 a grant of £11 660 was made by philanthropist Sir Charles McNess to alleviate the distress of the depression. Over the following 10 years, under the guidance of Gardens Board Head L. E. Shapcott, the park that we know today began to take shape. Roads and walking

tracks were laid down, the main buildings were constructed, areas were cleared for picnicking and sports ovals, and paths, lighting and stairways were installed in several caves, including Cabaret Cave, which was converted to a ballroom.

By 1936 the park boasted four levels of accommodation: McNess Hostel, which incorporated parts of the original Caves House; the Lodge; the Yanchep Inn and eight ex-Perth trams, which were refitted and set up overlooking Boomerang Gorge. Perth's 'silvertails' would flock to the park on weekends for rest, relaxation and, of course, to dance the nights away at Cabaret Cave. A high point of these years was the visit by the Duke of Gloucester in 1934, which culminated in a gala dinner dance in Cabaret Cave and the changing of name of the Lodge to Gloucester Lodge.

Development continued until war broke out in 1939. In 1942 the park was taken over by the RAAF who established a radar station there. Yanchep Inn



became an out-station of the Shenton Park Rehabilitation Hospital and McNess House was used to accommodate nurses.

The park remained popular through the 1940s and '50s and '60s, and a bus service was established, departing regularly from the tourist bureau in Perth. This brought visitors to see the park's attractions, which by then included launch tours, rowing boats, a golf course, extensive bird aviaries and the State's only captive koala colony.

Although it had been managed by the National Parks Board from 1956, it was not until 1969 that the area was given national park status. People still flocked to the park throughout the 1970s and '80s, but by then the facilities and infrastructure had begun to look tired. When a park management plan was written in 1989, it was recognised that much work would be needed to upgrade the park and provide for the needs of visitors during the 1990s and beyond.

Public attitude and use of the park were shifting too. Where once most visitors came primarily for a picnic, a survey in 1992 revealed that the park's natural features, its geology, fauna and flora, were the main attractions.

THE GEOLOGY

Yanchep National Park lies east to west across the Bassendean, Spearwood and Quindalup dune systems, all of which are less than one million years old. The present day geomorphology and vegetation patterns reflect these three systems.

It is in the Spearwood system that the extensive labyrinth of limestone caves, for which the park is famous, has been formed. There are currently more than 300 recorded caves in the park and

Top left: The name Yanchep was derived from the Aboriginal word for the bulrush (*Typha domingensis*). The roots of these plants were harvested by Aboriginal people who inhabited the area. Photo - John & Val Butler/Lochman Transparencies

Top right: Just like humans, kangaroos are attracted to the lush watered lawns of the park. Photo - Jiri Lochman

Above right: Crystal Cave's subterranean delights have been a popular attraction for decades. Photo - CALM



there could be as many as 1 000. Within the caves the slow movement of water through the limestone and soil has redeposited calcium carbonate to form the stunning cave decorations or speleothems that are synonymous with limestone caves. Few organisms can survive in limestone caves. However, studies by The University of Western Australia's Department of Zoology have led to the discovery of a unique underground ecosystem that survives, with no light and little food, on the root mats of tuart trees in the shallow underground cave streams. As many as 36 species have been discovered so far, many of which are new to science.

Fossil deposits in the caves give us an insight into the fauna of Yanchep's past. Bones of tammar and brush wallabies, dalgyte, quokka, chuditch, Tasmanian devil, thylacine (or Tasmanian tiger) and koala have been found. Evidence has also been found of long-extinct Pleistocene mammals, such as the enormous two-and-a-half-metre kangaroo *Sthenurus*.

Today, the park is still a refuge for a range of faunas that, elsewhere on the Swan Coastal Plain, have had their habitats and numbers significantly diminished due to the clearing of wetlands and woodlands.

MAMMALS

Twenty-one mammal species have been recorded in the park, of which six are introduced. Some native species have not been sighted in the park for many years, possibly because of predation by introduced foxes and/or cats, and are now considered locally rare or extinct. Among these is the chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*), which has not been sighted since 1972, and the quenda or southern brown bandicoot (*Isooden obesulus*).

Other mammals are relatively common. The honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*) is found in the banksia woodlands and low heathlands in the park, where it feasts on the huge variety of flowering trees and shrubs. Honey possums rely solely on nectar and pollen for their food and need to be able to

access flowering plants all year round. Western grey kangaroos are prolific. They are frequently found in the developed recreation areas of the park, where they can be seen grazing on the lawns, and at the golf course, where golfers often need to dodge them on the greens.

Southern bush rats (*Rattus fuscipes*) are also common, especially around the wetlands. Another wetland inhabitant is the water rat (*Hydromys chrysogaster*), which feeds on the gilgies and marron in the lakes. Bats, particularly the lesser long eared bat (*Nyctophilus geoffroyi*), can be seen and heard stalking their prey of insects around the park. Unfortunately, introduced animals, such as rabbits, foxes and cats, are common in the park and probably account for the low numbers or absence of some of the medium-sized native mammals.

REPTILES

The area supports a variety of reptiles. Venomous tiger snakes (*Notechis scutatus occidentalis*) can be found around the wetlands, where they feast on a variety of frogs. Other venomous snakes, such as the dugite (*Pseudonaja affinis affinis*) and bardick (*Brachyaspis curta*), are also common and visitors need to be alert when walking in the park, especially in spring and summer. If you are lucky, you may see the rare and patchwork-camouflaged carpet python (*Morelia spilota imbricata*), which is non-venomous.



The long-necked tortoise (*Chelodina oblonga*) can be found in the wetlands on the edge of Loch McNess, where they are often seen just below the surface scavenging for crumbs missed by the ducks and coots. They are abundant near the boat ramp. The wetlands also contain a huge number of frogs, such as the moaning frog (*Heleioporus eyrei*), which lives in deep burrows from where it makes its long low moaning call. In the heathlands, especially after rain showers, you can find the curious turtle frog (*Myobatrachus gouldii*).

BIRDS

Birds are plentiful in Yanchep National Park. Forty-nine species of wetland birds and 92 species of land birds are recorded there. Around the wetlands black ducks, wood ducks, black swans, mountain ducks, pelicans, coots, cormorants and darters are common. At the edge of the lake you may see the shy musk duck (*Biziura lobata*), which at

Yanchep is unusually forward. In the picnic areas surrounding the Loch McNess wetland you will find grazing maned ducks (*Chenonetta jubata*) and the awkward looking, but beautifully coloured purple swamp hen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). Some elusive, but equally interesting birds to watch for are the buff-banded rail (*Rallus philippensis*), blue-billed duck (*Oxyura australis*) and rainbow bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*).

One bird synonymous with the park is Carnaby's cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*), which flocks in large numbers especially during the summer. These birds feed in the pine plantations to the east and north of the park. They come into the park for water and to roost at night in the large tuart trees surrounding the wetlands. At some times of the year their raucous calls can be deafening.

Birds of prey are also common. The collared sparrow hawk (*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*) nests close to the lake. Patrolling overhead you can often find the marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), little eagle (*Hieraetus morphnoides*) and brown falcon (*Falco berigora*).

FISH AND CRUSTACEANS

There are three fish species recorded from Loch McNess: the native nightfish

Above: The call of the moaning frog (*Heleioporus eyrei*) is unmistakable.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Left: Dugites are common in wetter parts of the park, especially during warmer months.
Photo - Jiri Lochman



(*Bostockia porosa*) and two introduced species, the mosquito fish (*Gambusia affinis*) and golden carp (*Carassius auratus*). The latter was originally introduced to provide sport fishing for visitors to the park.

Many crustaceans, including gilgies and marron, occur and freshwater mussels are common, particularly at the boat ramp.

TREES AND WILDFLOWERS

The flora of Yanchep National Park is typical of large areas of the coastal plain north of Perth. The principal trees are tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*), jarrah (*E. marginata*) and marri (*E. calophylla*), which together with a characteristic set of shrubs and smaller trees, including coast honey-myrtle (*Melaleuca acerosa*), occupy a large part of the western portion of the park.

There are also extensive heathlands in the northern and eastern sections, that are composed largely of banksia woodland with scattered stands of sheoak (*Allōcasuarina* spp.), prickly bark (*E. todtiana*), blackboys (*Xanthorrhoea* spp.), grasstree (*Kingia australis*), and zamia (*Macrozamia riedlei*). Bull banksia (*Banksia grandis*) is common near the swamps, whereas firewood banksia (*B. menziesii*) and candle banksia (*B.*

attenuata) occur widely elsewhere.

These woodland and heathland areas also support shrubs and ground covers of yellow flowered native buttercups (*Hibbertia hypericoides*), prickly Moses (*Acacia pulchella*) and other wattles. Trails of native wisteria (*Hardenbergia comptoniana*) and old man's beard (*Clematis microphylla*) twine among the yellow-flowered wattles, providing a colourful display each spring. The purple hoveas (*Hovea* spp.), smooth heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*), lilac hibiscus (*Alyogyne huegelii*) and red trailing coral vine (*Kennedia coccinea*) are other springtime favourites.

The large red and green kangaroo paw (*Anigosanthos manglesii*), the floral emblem of Western Australia, grows in profusion in the park, often with the smaller catspaw (*A. humilis*). The creamy yellow-flowered parrot bush (*Dryandra sessilis*), one sided bottlebrush (*Colothamnus quadrifidus*) and red

Above: Firewood banksia (*Banksia menziesii*) flowers prolifically during early spring.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Right: Parrot bush (*Dryandra sessilis*) is a favoured food of many birds and the honey possum.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

peapod-shaped flowers of the templetonia or cockies' tongues (*Templetonia retusa*) form dense thickets on the coastal dunes and limestone ridges, and provide nectar for flower-seeking birds.

The lakes and swamps, which stretch in a chain from the north to the south of the park, support their own suite of vegetation. Freshwater paperbarks (*Melaleuca raphiophylla*) are found in low-lying swampy areas, along the lake's edge or in the water itself. Bulrushes and sedges are also common in these areas.

There are many areas of the park, particularly in the southern section, that still contain relatively undisturbed examples of most of the vegetation types found on the coastal plain near Perth, and this is one of the factors that makes Yanchep National Park an important natural asset and a popular destination for visitors.

But the park has always been a special place to visit and the changes taking place now will continue make it popular for a new generation of visitors without disturbing the natural values it has to offer.

THE FUTURE

Work has been under way since 1990 to revitalise Yanchep National Park. A master plan, which separates vehicles and walkers and makes the lakefront area a pedestrian only zone, was prepared for the main recreation area. The plan also provides for new walktrails, picnic



and barbecue areas, rest areas and courtyards, an upgraded koala exhibit and new car and bus parking areas. The planners studied historic photos of the park and have based some of their plans on the original 1930s design.

The renovation of McNess House, the park's new Visitor Centre, recaptures the charm and style of the 1930s era. Here, visitors can find out about the park's special features, get information about what to see and do and how to get around, or watch an audio-visual presentation about the park. The first floor is used as a classroom for school and adult education programs.

CALM has linked with the private sector to achieve many of the changes

needed to meet modern visitors' needs at Yanchep National Park. A lease was recently signed for a private company to operate the Yanchep Inn, caves, rowing boats, and golf course, and to maintain the picnic areas. Under this agreement, Yanchep Inn will be renovated and extended to include more accommodation, a winter lounge and upstairs function centre. New tea rooms, which will overlook the lake, are due to be opened in early 1994.

As well as the physical changes to the park, more subtle changes have taken place. Relieved of many of the routine maintenance tasks of the past, the National Park Rangers have been able to turn their attention to providing activities

and information. Visitors to the park can now join a wide range of activities, including bush tucker trails, adventure caving, instruction in survival bushcrafts, bird watching and much more.

Yanchep National Park remains unique for the range of recreation opportunities it offers and its conservation values. The park contains vast areas of banksia woodland, with patches of tuart forest and attractive heathlands, both of which are declining in the face of the urban sprawl elsewhere near Perth. In all, seven vegetation communities have been recognised within the park and these provide important habitats for a wide range of animals. The draining, reclaiming and clearing of most of Perth's wetlands has left us with little of the vast system of lakes and swamps that were once widespread on the Swan Coastal Plain. Loch McNess is one of the most pristine wetland remaining north of the Swan River. As a window into the groundwater table of the Gnangara mound, it reflects the health of this vital resource.

The park development plans recognise the importance of the natural values of the area and will help ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy the beauty and diversity of plants and animals that were once so common through the entire coastal plain. The rebirth of Yanchep National Park is an exciting time and in many ways reflects the changes in community attitudes and needs.



Above left: Originally introduced in 1938, captive koalas continue to be a popular attraction in the park.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Left: McNess House, once a guest house, has been renovated to become the Park Visitor Centre.
Photo - Rod Annear

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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'.

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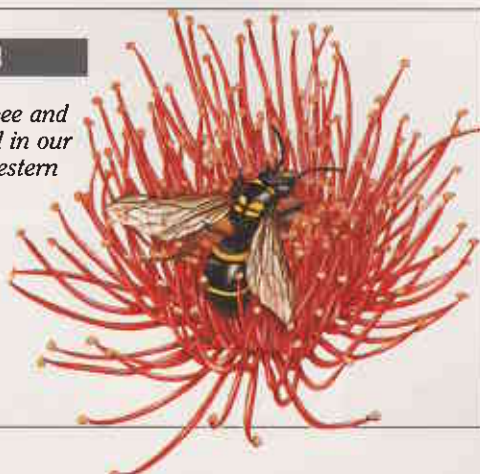
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Hyleoides zonalis is a solitary bee and one of the native bees described in our story about the 'real' bees of Western Australia on page 17. The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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