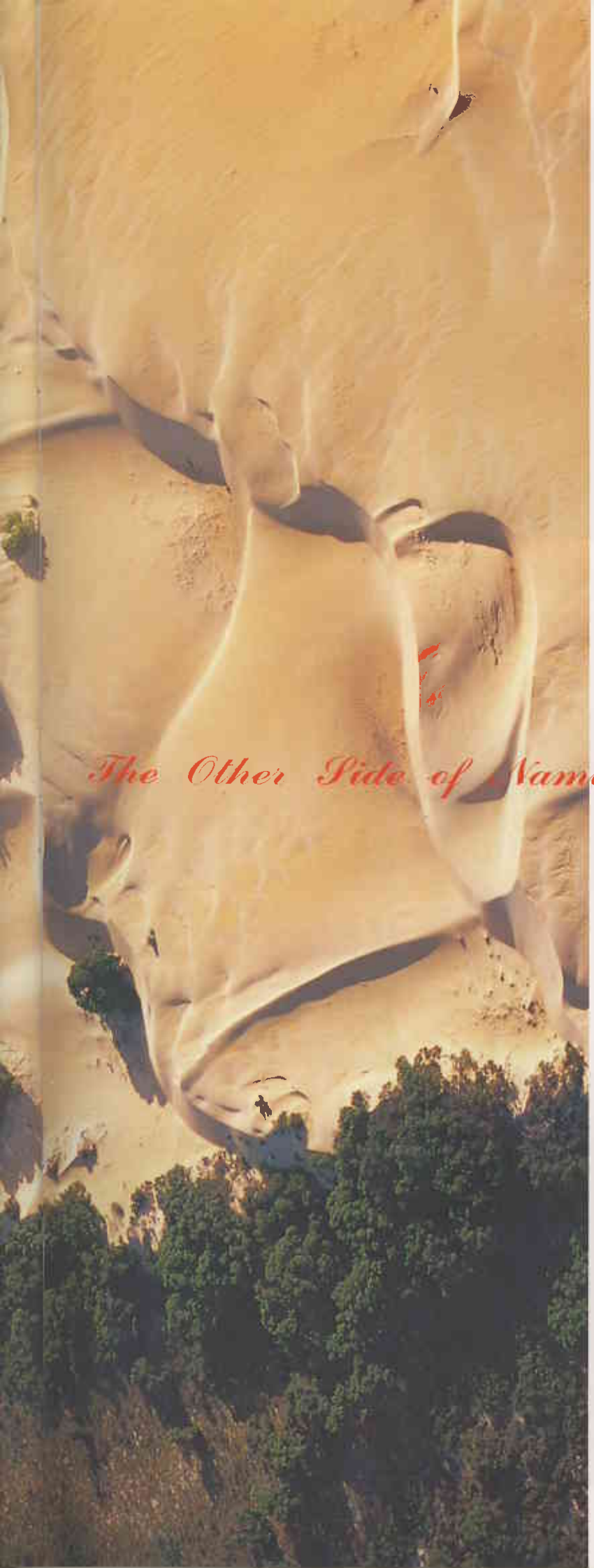


The Other Side of Nambung

To the rest of the world it is known as a place from another world . . . a moonscape.

To those who seek and explore new horizons in their national parks, it's far more than just a collection of weird stone pinnacles.

by John Hunter and Keith Hockey

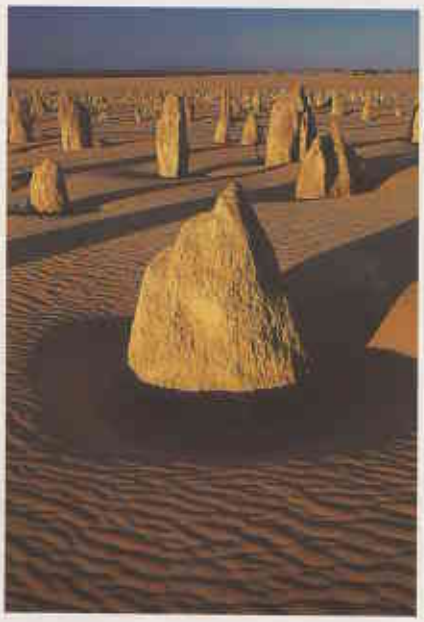
Nambung National Park is a special area of the rugged west coastal plain where extraordinary wildflowers, pristine ocean beaches, areas of bare sand and unique limestone formations abound.

Situated about 245 kilometres north of Perth, adjacent to the town of Cervantes, the park's landforms and vegetation are determined by an intricate system of sand dunes derived from lime-rich beach sands, which have been constantly shifted and shaped by the relentless south-west winds. The park covers an area of about 18 300 hectares.

The northern areas feature a vegetation mosaic of shrublands, thickets, heaths and stunted gums overlying an extensive system of surface capstone and subterranean caves, with associated karst features. In the east there is a river system with tree-lined gullies and intermittent swamps and lakes, and to the south is the high ground of heath-covered dune systems, multi-coloured deserts and famous limestone pinnacles.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

The worldwide reputation of the Pinnacles as a destination for commercial film makers began before most Western Australians knew of the place. It all started some 26 years ago when a professional photographer, a beautiful woman, an esky of fine wines and the Pinnacles 'Desert' background collectively portrayed a scene in a prestigious foreign magazine. Since then, the world's professional camera jockeys, models and superstars regularly fly in for sessions. The Pinnacles have featured on postage stamps, record covers, coffee mugs and in magazines and movies, and are now a famous international location.



For thousands of years, the local inland tribal groups of Nyoongar Aborigines visited the coastal sandplain for a time each summer. The lakes and swamps, occurring in lines through the interdunal valleys of the park, attracted Nyoongar people for their abundant freshwater tortoises, fish, waterfowl and freshwater shellfish. Throughout the general district, native wells and paths mark the once regular passage of Aboriginal people.

Recorded history of the park dates back to 1658 when the North and South Hummocks (peaked, vegetated dunes rising to about 120 metres above sea level) were marked on Dutch navigators' maps. The loss of the Dutch vessel, the *Gilt Dragon*, two years before and some 80 kilometres south, probably necessitated some navigational planning and extra awareness of the coastline and power of the south-westerlies. From the telescopes of ancient sailing ships, the inland stone pinnacles on the raised 'desert' plain must have looked like a city of native dwellings in an unknown land protected by a dangerous coastline.

In 1839, the explorer George Grey (later Governor of South Australia) was shipwrecked near Kalbarri. On his epic walk back to Perth, Grey and his crew discovered the dry bed of a river, which he later named the Frederick Smith, in honour of the 18-year-old member of his party who died two days later.

Previous page
Main: A clear aerial view of mobile sand dunes encroaching upon doomed vegetation.
Inset left: The shell of a marine mollusc on sea bed ripples at low tide.
Photos - Jiri and Marie Lochman
Inset right: Emu tracks on golden sand in the Pinnacles 'Desert' area.
Photo - Bill Bachman

Above: Afternoon shadows enhance the tops of the Pinnacles in a sea of quilted sand.
Photo - Bill Bachman

Below: A pristine beach and coastal dune where vegetation is very different from that of the park interior.
Photo - Bill Bachman

Although the river is now called the Nambung, Smith's name has been perpetuated on a tributary. Wyip and Warrap Pools, situated up-river, were named after two Aborigines in the party.

With the development of the new Perth colony, settlers and explorers pushed northwards. Explorer Augustus Charles Gregory passed through the area in 1848, and in 1854 Robert Brockman carved a large letter 'B' on a tuart tree as a reference point for his grazing lease. The mark is still visible on the scarred trunk of the old tuart.

In 1889 an official stock route from Dongara to Perth passed through the park, and in the early 1900s bat guano deposits were discovered in the caves of the area and mined by local farmers. After visiting the caves and being impressed by the cave formations and guano deposits, the then Minister of Agriculture, James Mitchell (later Governor of WA), recommended that 'the valley of the Namban River be reserved for caves and tourism'. Since this time, most caves on the State's south-west coast have been protected by law. Namban River was the name used at that time, but later enquiries with Aborigines in Moora determined that the Aboriginal word *nambung* meant crooked or winding, and so, in 1938, the new name of Nambung was accepted.

With the population increasing and more far-flung coastal farming and fishing communities springing up, the pristine bays and beaches of the mid-west coast began to change. Squatters built their ramshackle recreation and fishing shacks at random, spoiling the environment and damaging many natural features. To arrest this trend, land surrounding the Nambung River was set aside in 1956 for the preservation of caves and as national park. In 1968, adjacent lands to the south, containing the Pinnacles, were added and the whole area named Nambung National Park.

A SENSE OF ISOLATION

The expanse of rolling plain and uninterrupted skyline makes an impact on most visitors when they alight from the confines of their vehicles. The thoughts and visions of city fences, concrete high-rise, cosy sitting rooms and garden nooks are soon banished. The effect of isolation is true Nambung.

Above: Heath that will soon be ablaze with the many colours of more wildflowers.
Photo - Bill Bachman

Below: Map of Nambung National Park showing access roads and the 'desert' areas.

Above left: The immature spring flower cone of firewood banksia, found in low woodlands east of the park.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Above: The shining fanflower is found in the foredunes of Nambung National Park.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

In just a few moments the senses will pick up the smell of sandplain scrub and the overpowering sound of silence, punctuated perhaps by a faint tweeting of 'grundies' - strange little birds that fly at bumper level on bush tracks - or the soft sounds of the wind hissing through sheoaks and teatrees.

Nambung has one thing in common with all national parks in that access tracks and roads are kept to a minimum. This is designed to protect the very environment and atmosphere that make it a national park. While some 30 kilometres of road make easy access to the Pinnacles and beaches, walking is the only way to discover all those other, seldom visited places.

Unfortunately, most visitors from Perth arrive in the heat of the day and usually only have time to see the famous 'tombstones' and coloured 'desert', where nest holes of white-backed swallows abound. But there is much more.

THE OTHER SIDE OF NAMBUNG

For photography and wildlife observation, Nambung National Park is at its best in the mornings and evenings. The gold of silica and sandstone, combined with deep shadows and slanted light, provide a magical setting, even for owners of fairly simple cameras. Each morning a multitude of animal tracks create fascinating patterns on any exposed sand, and stimulate thoughts of what might prevail in a session of night walking and spotlighting.

Contrary to popular belief, the park is well vegetated and not a desert area in the true sense. However, there are some large and spectacular sand drifts and blowouts. One such feature, just a couple of kilometres in from the park's entrance, is only 100 metres from the road and can be reached easily. After a short, sharp scramble up a 10-metre incline of soft white sand, you can find yourself in another place and time, trudging the barren crests and swales.

At about seven kilometres from the park entrance, the road becomes formed gravel, which after bad weather or heavy use can be very rough! But by slowing down you have time to observe the surrounding plants and animals. The road further down the coast changes again to the original base material of marl (a hardened mixture of coastal lime-clay, shell grit and sand). At times this is smooth, but in some places surface capstone and large shallow potholes appear.

By leaving your vehicle at any of the coastal spots and heading east on foot, you can observe a wide variety of plants. But don't stray too far and lose sight of your vehicle or the ocean, and remember to take plenty of water with you. You should also wear appropriate clothing, like long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, because this is 'tick country', and no human, marsupial, bird or reptile is immune. These arachnids lie in the shrubs and attach themselves as you brush past. They seek out any part of the body where they can pierce the skin, bury their heads and consume blood. The spider-like creatures will cause nasty sores and infection if they are not detached as soon as possible. Even though you may be wearing the ultimate in bush gear, a body-search at the end of the day is essential.

The plants of Nambung National Park are related to an intricate system of sand dunes, derived from lime-rich windblown beach sands, that runs more or less parallel to the coast. The dunes increase with age the further they are from the sea, and each of the four systems has a distinct shape, which is determined by the varying amounts of exposure to wind, salt spray and the degree of soil leaching.

The beach sand hills, or foredune system, can be seen at Kangaroo Point, Hangover Bay and several other stop-offs along the coastal road. On the beach, you can find the beach daisy (*Arctotheca* sp.), with its rosettes of grey leaves. Just behind the beach, the foredunes support a dense scrub that includes a blue flowering shrub known as the thick-leaved fanflower (*Scaevola crassifolia*), a succulent groundcover commonly called pigface (*Carpobrotus virescens*), and two species of spinifex grass.

The Quindalup system, just beyond the foredunes, consists of lime-rich white sands forming steep dunes that are being added to by fresh sands from the beach and foredunes. On the windward side of the dunes, the grey foliage of coastal daisy bush is dotted among the different

Above: A black-shouldered kite hovers motionless into the wind before plummeting onto unsuspecting prey.
Photo - Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Below: A new wall of wind-sculptured sand prepares to re-engulf previously exposed pinnacles.
Photo - Marie Lochman

greens of other species. The leeward side and valleys support taller thickets of various wattles, frequently covered by a tangled mass of the fine olive-coloured stems of dodder laurel (*Cassytha* spp.).

Further inland, the yellow or brownish sands of the older Spearwood dune system lie over limestone, occasionally seen as exposed pinnacle spires. The Pinnacles are the eroded remnants of what was once a thick bed of limestone beneath these sands. As bush fires denuded the higher areas, south-westerly winds carried away the loose quartz sands and left these limestone pillars standing. Some are only centimetres high and as thin as a pencil, others are glistening monoliths up to five metres high. Over time, the spires will be covered again by other sand drifts and the cycle repeated, creating weird and wonderful shapes.

The most outstanding vegetation in the Spearwood system is the low tuart woodland. Here, near their most northerly limit, the trees are smaller than those from further south. Some have immense boles and are several hundred years old. There are also heathlands and low banksia and sheoak woodlands. Saw-toothed banksia (*Banksia prionotes*), with its brilliant orange flower spikes, blooms between February and August.

On the eastern side of the park, the Bassendean dune system forms an undulating landscape of white silica-rich sand, the lime having been leached out. Here, a low open woodland of firewood banksia (*B. menziesii*) and candle banksia (*B. attenuata*) grows over an undergrowth of woody shrubs.

In the north-eastern area of the park is the Nambung River catchment. The Nambung River and its tributaries are seasonal waterways. In summer, there may only be deep and wooded gullies with a dry river bed and occasional thickets of teatree (*Leptospermum* spp.). Usually, vigorous afternoon sea breezes whip sand from southern dune areas and the atmosphere is ghostly grey with grit.

The area also features surface capstone and subterranean caverns. During flood times, midstream whirlpools form within the river as water gushes into the underwater caves, only to spout through solution pipes in other areas of the park. The most amazing event is when the river backs up to a huge white sand drift and appears to stop

dead. However, as the water level rises it drains into a cave system along the river bank beside the dune. The water is then transported 10 kilometres underground to surface solution pipes in the reefs, just off the beach, that are exposed at low tide. Local people say you can sometimes scoop up a cupful of fresh water, thought to be from the underwater caves, straight from the salty ocean!

While some caves in the park (where owls and bats have lived for eons) contain skeletal remains of small animals, others have limestone formations of great beauty. The entrances of most caves have been gated for safety. Some are viciously guarded by the hives and swarms of feral bees.

THE ANIMALS

During a casual drive down the coastal road you may see western grey kangaroos, emus and, if you're lucky, an osprey or a wedge-tailed eagle. Smaller birds of prey can be seen hovering over the sandhills and heaths in search of insects, small rodents and lizards.

Beneath the scrub and heathlands are gwardar and dugite snakes, bobtail skinks, goannas and sand dragons. Toward the eastern areas of wetland, woodland and limestone outcrops, an occasional python might haunt the gullies, inhabited by brush wallabies, honey possums and other small mammals. Here, only 25 years ago, dingoes used to bring up their litters in the safety of the park, only to be hounded and poisoned into extinction by government doggers.

During the winter and spring, while inland water is plentiful, black swans and many species of waterfowl inhabit the area's lakes, swamps and river system. On the coast, winter winds still trap unwary mariners in the form of storm-wrecked petrels and albatrosses.

In the summer, however, it is utter bliss in the early mornings to walk the undisturbed beaches, bluffs, cliffs and headlands. The only thing to disturb your solitude is the lapping of the sea, the shrill sounds of waders as they rise *en masse* to the sky, and the grunt of a lone cormorant as it detects intruders in its private domain.

THE FUTURE

Nambung National Park is a high profile example of Western Australia's national park system. It has a very high number of overseas visitors who are willing to pay to see and film its unusual geological formations. There is also increasing use of the area by local people, general tourists and commercial four-wheel-drive tours.

It is proposed that the future management of Nambung National Park and the surrounding nature reserves be formalised in a management plan. If you are familiar with the area or planning a visit, have your say by passing on your comments or reviewing the draft management plan, when it is released towards the end of this year.

Above: A startled emu 'takes off' across the heath, next to the coastal road.
Photo - Wade Hughes/Lochman Transparencies

Left: The ultimate atmosphere, a 'moonscape' on Earth in a dusky moonlight.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

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LANDSCOPE

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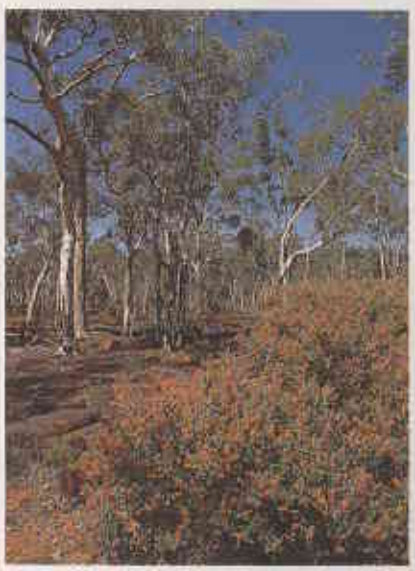
The hidden caves and tunnels of Cape Range National Park harbour several animals found nowhere else. Turn to page 22 to find out about these bizarre cave dwellers.



The characteristics that made WA inhospitable to the first Europeans are now helping us create new industries that can also repair the environment. See page 47.

The Pinnacles, in Nambung National Park, is one of the most photographed landscapes in the world. But there is another side to Nambung. See page 41.

Perth has at least 70 species of skinks, geckoes and other reptiles. Find out how to attract these fascinating creatures to your garden on page 28.

Devastation caused by the recent NSW bushfires has fuelled debate on the practice of prescribed burning. How do managers fight fire with fire? See page 35.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The bobtail (*Tiliqua rugosa*) is sometimes incorrectly called the 'bobtail goanna' but is actually a very large skink. They are common around Perth and often seen in gardens. During hot weather they can be seen basking on footpaths, verges or roadways. See our story 'Reptiles in the Garden' on Page 30.
The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.

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