

ON DRUMMOND'S TRAIL

In the late 1940s, Government Botanist Charles Gardner and forester Dick Perry went looking for a plant previously collected by the famous botanist James Drummond in the 1840s. Dick describes how their mission led them to Mount Lesueur, now one of the most famous botanical reserves in the country.

In the decade after World War II, as part of my work as a forester with the WA Forests Department, I was deeply involved in the establishment of *Pinus pinaster* plantations on the coastal plain south and north of Perth. During this time I became very familiar with the whole region between Busselton and Yanchep. Before long the vast stretch of country beyond Yanchep and extending up to Dongara began to arouse my curiosity.

Another person with a special interest in this area was my great friend Charles Gardner. He was the Forests Department's botanical collector and had set up a wonderful herbarium, later transferred to the Department of Agriculture. The collection became the basis for the present Western Australian Herbarium.

Charlie had been able to make several quick journeys into the heathlands and sandplains north of Hill River

during the War, with the help of the Army, but felt frustrated because the area was a botanical wonderland, and he could never get to spend enough time there.

He had a second reason for his interest. James Drummond had travelled through the same area 100 years earlier, using stock routes for access, and he had made a comprehensive plant collection of the region. Unfortunately there were many blanks in Drummond's diaries and the exact locations of particular collections were not always accurately noted. One of Charlie's special interests was reconstructing Drummond's work by retracing of his expeditions using Drummond's diaries, letters and plant collections to guide him. He became expert at tracking Drummond by following the plants he had collected. There were also many species collected by Drummond which had never been seen since, and Charlie was keen to fill in all the gaps.

Charlie Gardner had largely finished this work by about 1950, but a number of plants still eluded him. One of these was the elusive *Urocarpus phebaloides* (now known as *Asterolasia drummondii*), which Drummond had collected on the eastern slopes of Mount Lesueur. Charlie had made two



previous attempts to get into the area to search for the plant, but without success. Talking this over one day, we realised we shared a common interest in the area. So we decided to pool our resources and spend a whole fortnight, exploring and collecting in the Mount

Lesueur region.

I had an ex-army 2 x 4 'Blitz' wagon I had bought from Army Disposals for just this sort of expedition, and plenty of camping gear. In late August, 1949, having arranged for a fortnight's leave, we were on our way.

We decided to make our base at Cockleshell Gully, the Grigson family property, as it was central to the area we planned to explore. In all this vast area, literally hundreds of square miles, from Dandaragan in the south to Dongara in the north and bounded on the west by the coast and the east by the Midland Railway line, there were only two permanently occupied properties at that time: the Grigsons at Cockleshell and

Top: Dick Perry's ex-army 'Blitz' wagon was an excellent vehicle for traversing the Mt Lesueur wilderness in the 1940s and 1950s.

Above: Collecting plant specimens in the Mount Lesueur area.

*Left: Members of the 1951 expedition to Mt Lesueur in search of the elusive *Asterolasia drummondii*. Charles Gardner is on the far right.*
Photos - Dick Perry

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the Kings on the east side of Lake Logue further north. The map we carried was of little use - there was practically nothing on it! Over a century of agricultural development had by-passed this area almost completely. And once I became familiar with it, the reasons were obvious: the soils were sandy and infertile, with outcropping limestone caprock all along the coast, and massive ironstone and gravel hills inland. And yet it was a botanical treasure trove, and I consider it a tragedy that this area was eventually thrown open, and then largely cleared and developed into farms when new agricultural technology became available in the 1950s.

It took us three days to traverse the track from the tiny settlement at Dandaragan through to Cockleshell Gully. There were numerous sandy

stretches where we had to let the tyres down to get through and every creek crossing or ford had been washed out in winter and had to be repaired as we came to it before we could cross. We stopped often to make botanical collections - the plains were ablaze from horizon to horizon with spring wildflowers.

Very few visitors made it to Cockleshell Gully in those days. The Grigsons were delighted to see us and made us very welcome. They were especially pleased when we delivered their mail. They hadn't been to town to collect it for over a year and there was a wheatsack-full of it.

The next day, with Frank Grigson and his young sons Noel and John as willing field assistants, we set off in the Blitz for Mount Lesueur, several miles to the east, to search for Charlie's "lost" *Asterolasia*.

Our hunt began on the eastern slope of the mountain, as this was where Drummond's notes suggested he had made the collection, but we found nothing. So we decided to search each gully from its source up on the mountain right down to its confluence with the main creek in the valley below.

The first gully we followed drew a blank, so we worked our way up to the summit and began down a second. Well into it we hit the jackpot! All of a sudden we walked into a patch of white-flowering plants, and Charlie began dancing about with excitement. It was the *Asterolasia* we had been seeking. At that moment we realised that we were standing on the very spot where Drummond had stood, and where he had made his collection of this same species, 100 years before. It was a

thrilling moment.

The patch covered less than an acre, and we confirmed over the next few days that it was the only one, when we systematically searched all the other gullies in the area and failed to locate a single further *Asterolasia drummondii* plant.

The remainder of our expedition took us north to investigate the underground river from Green Lake to the ocean, then to Lake Logue and on to the Arrowsmith River and then east to the main highway and 'civilisation' at Three Springs.

Forty years or so later, I remember almost every detail of the trip and, looking back, I consider myself to have been very fortunate to have seen this fascinating region of WA when it was still in its pristine state.

BY DICK PERRY

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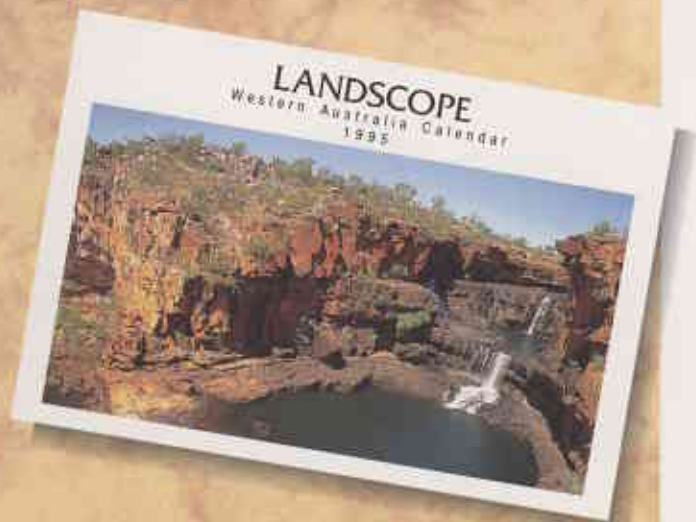
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Hand in hand with nature. This brushtail possum is just one of the animals studied during fauna surveys of the Batalling Forest. See page 16.



Lush vegetation and a welcoming smile greet you as you arrive at Mt Hart Homestead, the 'Oasis in the Leopolds'. See page 48.



'Fire, Wind and Water', on page 42, tells of recent research into the rehabilitation of exploration tracks in the Rudall River area of the Little Sandy Desert.



Deep beneath the Southern Ocean lies the wreck of the Sanko Harvest. This rotting hull is now an artificial reef attracting marine life and divers alike. See page 23.



Plantations of brown mallet in the early 1900's began a chain of events that resulted in the 'Woodland Wonderland' of Dryandra. See page 28.

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COVER

Woylies prefer clumped, relatively open vegetation with sandy soils that are easy to dig. They are found, among other places, at Batalling Forest and the Dryandra Woodland. See stories on pages 16 and 28.

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