

URBAN ANTICS!

Oh Christmas Tree 🎄 Oh Christmas Tree

A weekend picnic to “the bush” as a kid was my first realisation that there was . . . another Christmas tree.

One day, from the front seat of our Austin tourer, my dad said casually, “that Christmas tree will be ablaze shortly”. My sisters and I scanned a blurred patch of boring grey-green scrub somewhere on the main road to Yanchep and saw nothing... just bush.

I pondered the statement quietly. How did he know? Was it going to be set alight by a bushfire or a few thousand fairy lights?

Then, one day while walking in Kings Park, I was told I was standing under a Western Australian Christmas tree, and then it twigged. For yonks, I’d been looking for a conical pine like those on Christmas cards, but here was this scraggly, less than ordinary imposter, that wouldn’t even keep my toffee apple dry if it rained. I was somewhat disenchanted, who was pulling my leg, Santa Claus or my dad?

Settlers from another time and place brought to this country the custom of decorated pine trees as objects of Christmas, but it would seem fitting that, in time, our local Christmas tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*)—one of the wonders of the plant world with enormous blossoms of brilliant golden-orange flowers around December—would be accepted as our very own champion “tree of Christmas”.

It is distributed between Kalbarri and Israelite Bay in almost all soil

types of the coastal plain, particularly those of low-lying areas, and in the rocky or damp places of the Darling Range, with an isolated occurrence near Kellerberrin in the Wheatbelt.

If you know what to look for, WA Christmas trees can be easily found in all suburbs. In the non-flowering seasons, their narrow blue-green lanceolate and succulent looking leaves tend to blend with the surrounding bush. But to a botanist, they are most conspicuous.

Known by Nyoongar Aborigines as “mudjar” or “munji”, the tree has perhaps more peculiarities than most other plants. It can be a shrub, a sucker or an eight metre high tree. It belongs to the mistletoe family and is one of only three ground-growing semi-parasites in the world, but is unique in this group for its size and abundance of flowers.

The first thing you notice about a mature tree is its bizarre growth habit. Its well-developed trunk and branches are uniformly thick, relative to the tree size, and often have an even downward curve. Small branchlets and bud stems are also at odd angles and peculiarly curved. Under the combined weight of terminal flowers, foliage and rain, major branches often break off, contributing further to its irregular outline.

The trunk has a powdery, grey-brown, finely fissured bark which overlays not true wood, but a fibrous

material. The internal structure is unlike other trees; in cross-section it resembles a beetroot that has become woody. Each concentric layer consists of water-conducting tissue (wood) and food-conducting tissue (bark), resulting in a very weak trunk or branch.

A semi-parasite without main roots, it has a system of thick, root-like underground stems which bear small roots with white organs (haustoria) shaped like cartyre inner-tubes. These organs penetrate the host roots and draw nutrients and moisture.

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Nyoongar Aborigines used the flowering of the WA Christmas tree as a clear indicator that it was time to begin their summer treks to the coast. They also used to dig up the underground stems and peel back the bark to eat the candy-like centres.*
- *By producing specific enzymes, the haustoria have been known to attack and cut into synthetic telephone cables, mistaking them for host roots!*
- *The mass of blossom produced by the WA Christmas tree attracts bees, wasps, ants, beetles, and nectar and insect eating birds.*
- *The tree grows well in paddocks, where it parasitises grass roots.*

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME TEN NO. 1 SPRING ISSUE 1994



Yellow-billed spoonbills have visited Star Swamp for the last three years. They sift small crustaceans from the shallow water. The story of this suburban wetland is told on page 45.



About a quarter of Stirling Range National Park has been closed to protect its unique flora from dieback disease. Turn to page 10 to discover these plants on the edge.



A marine park is proposed to adjoin the Prince Regent Nature Reserve. The Complex Coast (page 49) discusses the need for integrated management of land and sea around our coast.



Found all over Australia, short-beaked echidnas are one of two Australian egg-laying mammals. They still occur around Perth. See page 18.



The orange-bellied frog is part of the South West's fine-scale richness and variety. Find out more about these fascinating creatures on page 35.

FEATURES

PLANTS ON THE EDGE
GREG KEIGHERY & JOHN BEARD 10

MAMMALS IN THE GARDEN
ANDREW BURBIDGE & TONY START 18

CORAL FOR KEEPS: THE ROWLEY SHOALS
TERRY DONE, CHRIS DONE & CAROLYN THOMSON 28

FROGS: VALUE IN VARIETY
GRANT WARDELL-JOHNSON & DALE ROBERTS 35

RECOVERING LAKE TOOLIBIN
KATE HOOPER & KEN WALLACE 41

STAR SWAMP
JOHN HUNTER 45

THE COMPLEX COAST
HUGH CHEVIS 49

REGULARS

IN PERSPECTIVE 4

BUSH TELEGRAPH 5

ENDANGERED THE WOYLIE 25

URBAN ANTICS 54

SPECIALS

ARBOR DAY POSTER COMPETITION 26

COVER

The coral gardens in the sheltered lagoons of the Rowley Shoals contain dozens of different varieties of staghorn coral and are inhabited by a huge range of colourful reef fish. See 'Coral for Keeps' on page 28.

The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



Managing Editor: Ron Kawallak
Editor: David Gough
Contributing Editors: Verna Costello, Kate Hooper, Carolyn Thomson
Scientific and technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Tony Start
Design and production: Maria Duthie, Stacey Strickland
Finished art: Gooitzen van der Meer
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer
Cartography: Land Information Branch CALM, Promaco Geodraft
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 334 0296 Fax: 334 0489
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (09) 334 0481
Colour Separation by Prepress Services
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

© ISSN 0815-4465. All material copyright. No part of the contents of the publication may be reproduced without the consent of the publishers.



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