



*M*OUNT *A*UGUSTUS  
NATIONAL PARK

ON 3 JUNE 1858, EXPLORER FRANCIS THOMAS GREGORY BECAME THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO ASCEND MOUNT AUGUSTUS, WHICH HE HAD FIRST SIGHTED SOME FOUR DAYS EARLIER. THIS ENORMOUS ROCK IS RICH IN ABORIGINAL ART, DATING BACK THOUSANDS OF YEARS, AND IS ITSELF ABOUT 1700 MILLION YEARS OLD. BUT IT IS NOT ONLY THREE TIMES OLDER THAN AYERS ROCK, IT IS ALSO TWICE ITS SIZE, MAKING MOUNT AUGUSTUS THE LARGEST ROCK IN THE WORLD.

BY DAVID GOUGH & TERRY BLOOMER

**M**ount Augustus, or *Burringurrah* as it is known by the local Wadjari Aboriginal people, is about 850 kilometres north of Perth and midway between the Great Northern and North West Coastal highways. One of the most spectacular solitary peaks in the world, it rises 717 metres above the surrounding plain (1 106 metres above sea level) and is clearly visible from the air for more than 160 kilometres. The rock, which culminates in a small peak on a plateau, is about eight kilometres long and covers an area of 4 795 hectares. At about twice the size of Uluru [Ayers Rock] it is the biggest rock in the world. However, because Mt Augustus is covered with vegetation, it looks less stark.

But that is not the only difference. Uluru is a monolith (a single block of stone of uniform quality and considerable



size), whereas Mt Augustus is a monocline—the result of sand accumulation that was eventually uplifted and folded. The granite beneath its surface is between 1 650 and 1 900 million years old, making it not only twice as big, but three times older than Uluru.

### THE DREAMING

In Aboriginal mythology, mobs of people travelling across the country were

often transmuted into the form of a range, and individuals became hills, peaks or other distinctive features of the landscape.

The formation of Mt Augustus in the Dreaming is recounted in three known stories.

In the first story, an old man is said to have broken away from the mob [now the Kennedy Range]. He transgressed Aboriginal law by revealing ceremonial events to people who were not entitled to see them. Because of this, he was tracked down and speared by the tribesmen, then beaten by the womenfolk. His dead body lay on the plain—its form becoming the shape of Mt Augustus.

The second story relates to a boy named Burringurrah, who was undergoing his initiation into manhood. The rigours of the process so distressed him that he ran away, thereby breaking Aboriginal law. Tribesmen pursued the boy, finally catching up with him and spearing him in the upper right leg as his punishment. He fell to the ground; the spearhead broke from its shaft and protruded from his leg. The boy tried to crawl away, but the women beat him with their *mulgurrahs* [fighting sticks]. He collapsed and died, lying on his belly with his left leg bent up beside his body.

The third story relates to a big man—a stranger from the east, probably from the Carnarvon Range. He was old but powerful, and the people were scared. They caught him up, speared him in the leg, and knocked him down, then the women hit him with their *wanas* [digging sticks]. There he died, where the land was once flat.

As you look at Mt Augustus you can see the lying form of a body with the stump of the spear in the leg. The geological fracture lines at the western end of the mount indicate the wounds inflicted by the womenfolk.

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**Main:** The deep red of sunrise reflects off the surface of the rock.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

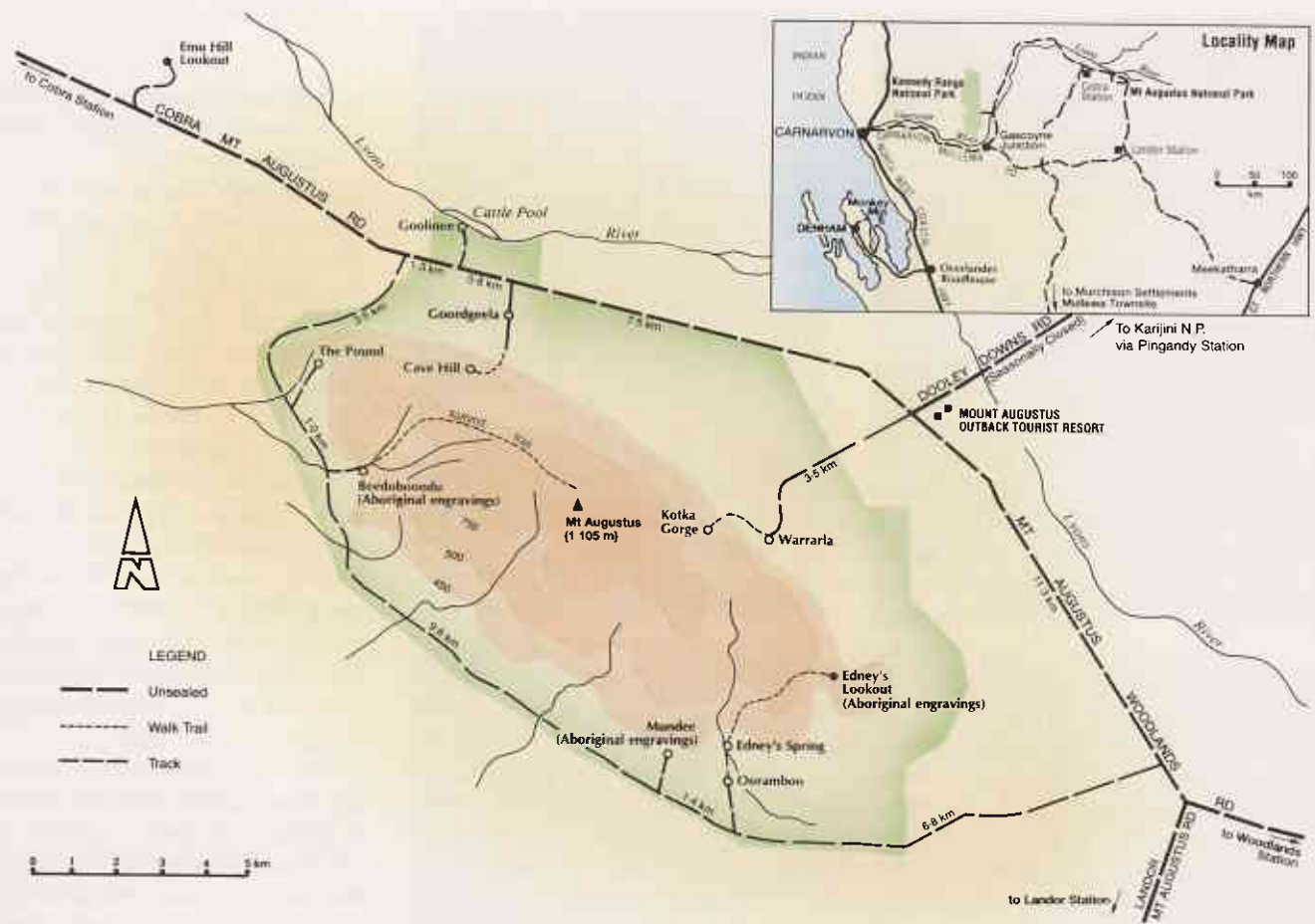
**Inset:** The polished surface of the rocks seen along the Gorge Trail.

Photo – David Gough

**Left:** In contrast to Uluru, Mt Augustus is covered in vegetation.

Photo – Jiri Lochman





## ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Several Aboriginal tribes inhabited areas in what is now known as the Upper Gascoyne region.

Tindale, in his book *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, suggests that Mt Augustus was a natural boundary between two tribal areas—the smaller area of the Ninanu tribe to the north and the much larger area of the Wadjari tribe to the south.

Wadjaris from the Burringurrah Community recall their grandfathers telling them of the times when their people camped beside Cattle Pool, a large permanent pool shaded by big white river gums on the Lyons River, north of Mt Augustus. It was one of only very few permanent pools in the inland Gascoyne that remained through the drought periods; and during such times, tribes wandered outside their normal territories in search of water. If they found water, there would almost certainly be a supply of food, as animals would also congregate near the pool.

## EXPLORERS AND PASTORALISTS

On 3 June 1858, explorer Francis Thomas Gregory became the first European to ascend Mount Augustus.

But he had first sighted the enormous monocline some four days earlier. He recounted the event in his journal:

“31st May.— . . . Leaving the party busily catching fish . . . I walked with Mr Nairne to the summit of a granite hill two miles northward, from which I had a number of cross-bearings to hills already observed from Mount Thompson. One of considerable elevation bearing north 121 degrees 30 minutes east, distance fifty miles, lay directly up the valley of the river, and was ultimately named Mount Augustus, after my brother, now conducting the expedition in quest of the remains of Dr. Leichhardt.”

After setting course for the mount and finding it to be further than expected, Gregory finally arrived at Cattle Pool on 2 June, and found evidence of an Aboriginal encampment. The following day, he took a party and climbed the rock.

It took less than 20 years for settlers to follow Gregory into the Upper Gascoyne region, and sheep and cattle stations soon began to spring up along the Gascoyne and Lyons rivers.

Author Rhonda McDonald, who spent some of her childhood at Bangemall where her father ran the hotel and a gold mine,

tells the stories of these early settlement days in her book *Winning the Gascoyne*.

“In 1886 Samuel James Phillips and John Hugh Phillips explored that section of the Upper Gascoyne [around Mt Augustus] with the view of selecting and taking up grazing country.”

Mt Augustus station was taken up a year later, and ownership passed down through the Phillips family over successive years.

After the first world war, the station was managed by Ernest Potts, who extended the homestead—formerly only three mud brick rooms—and gathered a good camp of natives and stockmen. About 17 000 head of cattle were eventually held on the station and some 1 500 bullocks were taken each year to Meekatharra. The Mt Augustus cattle were renowned for being of excellent quality and temperament.

Potts managed the station for 35 years before his death from heart attack in 1955. The property then passed through a number of owners and managers and today is owned and managed by Don and Dot Hammerquist.

West of Mt Augustus, on Cobra Station, is the historic Bangemall Hotel

and goldfield. In 1896, South Australian Percy Aycliffe decided to build a wayside inn, originally named Eurana, for thirsty prospectors. In 1910, Aycliffe sold the hotel and its name was changed to the Bangemall Hotel. Charlie Cornish, from the north-west, bought it in 1919 and held it until 1940, when it was purchased by the Fitzgeralds, who owned the nearby Cobra Station. The hotel was closed and converted into the Cobra homestead.

In 1979, Cobra Station was purchased for a tourist development by a business syndicate from Perth. After considerable delays, the hotel was classified by the National Trust. An historic inn licence was granted in 1983 and the old pub was reopened. Cobra Station was purchased in 1989 by Dennis and Alexa Lang, who restocked the station and now use the old hotel as the homestead.

Creation of a national park over the Mt Augustus area was first recommended in the mid 1970s in the Environmental Protection Authority's System 8 report. Ten years later, after being approached by the then Department of Lands and Surveys, the lessees of Cobra Station agreed to voluntarily surrender a portion of their lease over the rock. A few years later, negotiations between the Department

of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and the lessees of Mt Augustus Station resulted in the voluntary release of the remainder of the rock.

So on 22 September 1989, Mount Augustus and the land immediately surrounding it—a total area of 9 168 hectares—was declared a national park. Since then, walktrails have been marked, signs constructed and visitor facilities put in at various sites. Interpretation material, for information shelters at the Mt Augustus Tourist Resort and at the start of the Summit Trail, is due to be in place this year.

## MANAGEMENT

While no formal or draft management plan exists for Mt Augustus National Park, as yet, it is nevertheless an important nature-based tourism destination, and therefore needs to be managed carefully to retain and protect both its natural and cultural values. A ranger is stationed at the park during the main visitor season (April to October) and is available to provide

**I** A wedge-tailed eagle swoops low over the surrounding plain in search of food.

Photo – Robert Garvey

guidance and information about the park's plants, animals and Aboriginal heritage.

Ranger Tony Tapper was stationed there during 1991 and was instrumental in planning the first walk trails. These and subsequent trails and facilities were provided over the following two years with the help of local Aborigines from the Burringurrah Community, and Tony's early contact with them helped provide much of the background information for naming the recreation sites.

Mt Augustus currently attracts around 4 000 visitors a year, and the day-use areas and walktrails are able to cope with those numbers without undue damage being caused. But with the inevitable increase in visitor numbers over the next few years, management strategies will need to be reviewed to ensure that serious damage does not occur.

Another problem in managing such a remote national park is the repair work needed after bad weather. Cyclone Bobby, which passed through the Gascoyne in late February 1995, deposited some 100 mm of rain in just 24 hours, with lesser, but still substantial, amounts in the following days. The runoff from the rock caused considerable erosion on the Drive Trail, some site access roads and parts of the



**Right:** Aboriginal engravings at Munde depict animal tracks.  
Photo – David Gough

**Far right:** The rare Mt Augustus foxglove.  
Photo – Robert Garvey

**Below right:** The rarely recorded Douglas' toadlet was recently collected at Mt Augustus.  
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Summit Trail, but work was soon under way to fix up the damage.

No formal plant or animal surveys have yet been conducted in the Mt Augustus National Park, but rangers stationed there over the past few years have observed and recorded some of the wildlife during their day-to-day work.

## PLANTS

During winter and early spring, especially after good rains, areas of the plains around the rock are carpeted in everlasting. The trumpet-like flowers of turpentine bush are also very striking in winter. After rain, the rock takes on a green hue as new growth appears on the vegetation, and grasses sprout from dormant seeds.

The general vegetation is tall, open mulga scrubland with some red river gum and a variety of acacias, including gidgee and sandplain wattle. The miniritchie can easily be recognised by its unusual red curly bark.

Other plants include grasses such as silkyhead and limestone grass, the common stiffleaf sedge and annuals such as namana, wild carrot and the fringed lily *Thysanotus manglesianus*.

Several rare plant species have been found in the area. These include Wittwer's thryptomene (*Thryptomene wittweri*), known only from Mt Augustus and Mt Meharry; the Mt Augustus foxglove (*Pityrodia augustensis*), which is known to grow only in creeklines on and near the rock; and the snail orchid (*Pterostylis nana*), which is probably at its most northern limit.

## ANIMALS

Mammals recorded at Mt Augustus by park rangers include the euro, dingo, red kangaroo, long-tailed dunnart, echidna, spinifex hopping mouse and common rock rat.

Reptile species are numerous and



varied. They include the ringed brown snake, red-tailed skink (*Morethia ruficauda exquisita*), ring-tailed and western netted dragons, black-tailed monitor, marbled velvet gecko and pygmy python. The threatened Pilbara olive python (*Morelia olivacea barroni*) recorded at Mt Augustus is at the southern extent of its known range.

During a recent visit by CALM's Gascoyne District Manager Ron Shepherd, senior interpretation officer Gil Field and communications officer David Gough, the rarely recorded Douglas' toadlet (*Pseudophryne douglasi*) was collected in a gorge on the south side of the rock. The animal had previously been collected from only three isolated populations in the Pilbara.

In 1989, Alan Rose, then the ranger at Stirling Range National Park, visited Mt Augustus with his wife Sandy and recorded 30 bird species including the crested bellbird, white-winged triller, rainbow bee-eater and wedge-tailed eagle. By 1994, species recorded by rangers at Mt Augustus had increased to almost 100, including waterbirds such as the white-faced heron, magpie goose, and straw-necked ibis; birds of prey such as the collared sparrowhawk and peregrine falcon; and a variety of honeyeaters, parrots and fairy-wrens. Other birds include the yellow-throated miner, painted firetail, bush stone-curlew and the ubiquitous spinifex pigeon, found throughout northern parts of the State.



**Left:** A bungarra (*Varanus gouldii*), one of many species of lizard found at Mt Augustus.

**Below:** Mt Augustus rises more than 700 metres above a plain of open mulga scrubland.

Photos – Robert Garvey

## TOURISM

The journey to Mount Augustus National Park is relatively easy for most vehicles. Travelling from Perth, you can make a round trip via Meekatharra and Landor Station, returning via Cobra Station, Gascoyne Junction, Carnarvon and Geraldton. However, the section along almost 1 000 kilometres of graded roads can still be hot and dusty, and you need to carry plenty of water and supplies.

A seasonal road from Mt Augustus via Dooley Downs and Pingandy stations leads to the Ashburton Downs–Mt Vernon Road and provides a shorter route if you want to continue north to Karijini National Park and the Pilbara. Contact the shire offices at either Gascoyne Junction or Meekatharra to check the condition of the roads before planning your trip. Packaged coached tours and tailor-made airtours are available from Perth. Details of these can be obtained from the WA Tourist Centre.

Camping is not permitted within the national park, and at present, most people base themselves either at the Mt Augustus Outback Tourist Resort or Cobra Station and spend a few days exploring and climbing the rock.

The Resort is on the north-east side of the rock and is run by Peter and Joylene Vogelsanger. Accommodation is available in comfortable units, or you can use the campsite and powered van sites. There is a public telephone and a shop where you can obtain fuel, food, souvenirs and park brochures. Peter has a good knowledge of the area and can provide additional tourist information.

Accommodation at Cobra Station, 37 kilometres west of Mt Augustus, includes units, station rooms and unpowered camping and caravan sites. Fuel and food can be obtained here, but the station is closed on Saturdays.

## SITES & TRAILS

About 10 kilometres north of Cobra Station is Edithanna Pool. The pool attracts a wide range of birds, making it a good spot for keen ornithologists.

Just off the main road from Cobra Station, as you approach the boundary of the national park, is Emu Hill Lookout. This is a great place for photographers, who capture the changing colours of sunset on the rock's surface.

The 49-kilometre Burringurrah Drive Trail, which runs around Mt Augustus, provides views of the changing faces of the rock and access to its recreation sites and walktrails.

Starting at the end of the track opposite Mt Augustus Outback Tourist Resort you'll find *Warrarla*, a pleasant picnic site set among a grove of large river gums. From here you can take a short stroll into Kotke Gorge.

About eight kilometres west of here is *Goordgeela* and Cave Hill. A fairly steep, four-kilometre return trail runs up to the cave. The cave ceiling is unstable and rock falls occur from time to time, but from its mouth, there are good views of the Lyons River and of the Godfrey and Kenneth Ranges to the north.

Near the north-western end of the rock is *Goolmee* or Cattle Pool. This picturesque day-use picnic area is nestled beside a permanent pool on the Lyons River,



**Right:** Walkers on the Summit Trail pause to enjoy the views of the plain and ranges to the south of the rock. Photo – Robert Garvey

which attracts numerous waterbirds, especially after rains. There is plenty of shade and the water looks very inviting on a hot day, but thick reed beds in the pool can make swimming hazardous.

Not far away is The Pound, a natural basin used earlier this century for holding cattle before droving them to Meekatharra—a journey of about 10–12 days on the hoof. A short walk takes you up to the saddle, from where there are good views over the Lyons River. Facing back to The Pound, it's easy to imagine yourself watching over the herd of cattle as you sit and watch the reflections of the setting sun on the high eastern slopes of the canyon.

South of The Pound is *Beedoboonda* and the start of the Summit Trail. The return walk to the summit, a distance of some 12 kilometres, takes about six to eight hours, but it's worth it for the panoramic views north. It's an arduous walk and only recommended if you are fit; don't attempt it during summer or on hot days in spring and autumn. If you do attempt the walk, inform the ranger or resort staff of your plans, start early in the morning and take plenty of water. For the first three kilometres there is a choice of routes. The Ranger Trail is the easier of the two, while the more adventurous or sure-footed may prefer the Gully Trail; but be warned, the Gully Trail can be very slippery after rain. Whichever trail you choose, you can change over where they briefly meet at the 'elbow', about 1 500 metres from the start. The two trails finally join about three kilometres from the summit, so if you don't feel like going on, you can return to the carpark along a different route. On the way up, don't forget to turn around for great views of the plain and ranges to the south.

Aboriginal engravings, which depict animal tracks and hunters, can be seen by crawling under Flintstone Rock, a large slab of rock lying across the stream bed about 250 metres from the carpark. The other sites of Aboriginal engravings are at the south-east corner of Mt Augustus.



*Mundee* is found along an easy 300-metre return walk. The rock wall has engravings of kangaroo, emu and bustard tracks in three cave-like overhangs. Aboriginal mythology has it that in the beginning, when the rocks were still soft, a Dreaming spirit did these engravings with his finger.

Just south of *Mundee* is Edney's Trail, and about 150 metres from the start of the trail are more Aboriginal engravings of animal tracks at a place called *Ooramboo*. Edney Spring is 100 metres farther on. The six-kilometre return walk to Edney's Lookout takes about two-and-a-half hours. It's ideal if you feel unsure about tackling the more strenuous Summit Trail, or have limited time. The elevated 360-degree views from the lookout are spectacular and it's worth spending some time there relaxing and looking at the many distant mountain ranges before making your way back down.

There are many things to do and see at Mt Augustus National Park. But whatever your interest, be it bushwalking, birdwatching or photography, the biggest attraction is the rock itself. During dawn and dusk, its colour changes almost minute by minute from deep indigo to bright pink, orange or red, and occasionally green—reflecting the mood of the rock and the spirits living there. Just as Uluru attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, increasing numbers of people will come to Mt Augustus to try to capture those moods in photographs or simply to enjoy the experience.

Although not so well known as Uluru, Mt Augustus offers tourists a rich Aboriginal heritage, abundant wildlife, stunning scenery and spectacular views from its summit. The biggest rock in the world is one of the natural wonders of the world. But if you never go, you'll never know.

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Terry Bloomer is currently the ranger at Mt Augustus National Park and is based at the Mt Augustus Tourist Resort. He is always pleased to provide information to help make your visit more enjoyable.

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