JOHN FORREST NATIONAL PARK

A Place of Beauty

VISITORS TO AUSTRALIA OFTEN DON'T HAVE TIME TO TRAVEL TO THE MORE RUGGED AND REMOTE PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. SO HOW DO THEY GET A TASTE OF THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK?

MANY ARE REDISCOVERING THE NATIONAL PARKS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF OUR CAPITAL CITIES—AND FINDING THEM PLACES OF GREAT BEAUTY.

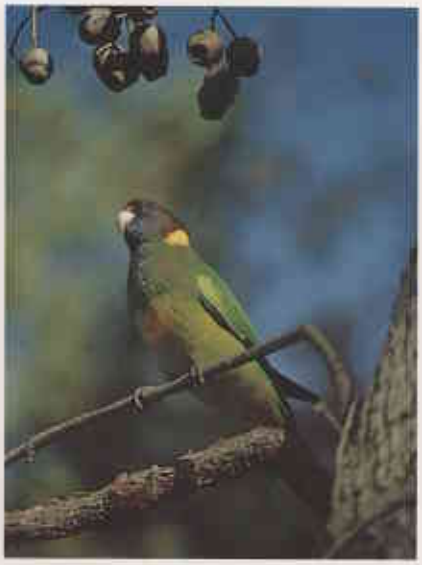
BY GEORGE DUXBURY

We are constantly exposed to magnificent photographs, television travel shows and inviting articles about the great Australian Outback. We know that many of our country's special features are in isolated places, so it comes as a surprise when we see a place of natural beauty right on the doorstep of a city. There are several such places in Australia—for instance, the Brisbane Forest Park, the Dandenongs near Melbourne, Royal National Park and Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park in the Sydney area, Mt Wellington in Hobart, and Belair Park in the Adelaide Hills—but we are inclined to overlook them.

One place of special beauty next door to a State capital is John Forrest National Park, just 25 kilometres from the Perth central business district.

NATURAL HISTORY

The Darling Range, upon which John Forrest National Park lies, extends from Hill River in the north to the Whicher Range near Busselton, in the south. It marks the western margin of the ancient plateau of the Australian continent, and some of the oldest rocks on Earth have been exposed by the erosion of the scarp over millions of years. The granite, gneisses and quartzites are more than 2 500 million years old.



At the western edge of the range, the Darling Scarp rises abruptly to about 400 metres above the coastal plain. More than 100 million years ago, the Darling Fault fractured and the eastern land block gradually lifted some 10 000 metres above the subsiding western land block. The western land block now lies beneath the sands of the coastal plain. Since that time, wind and water have eroded the Darling Scarp back three or four kilometres east of the original fault line.

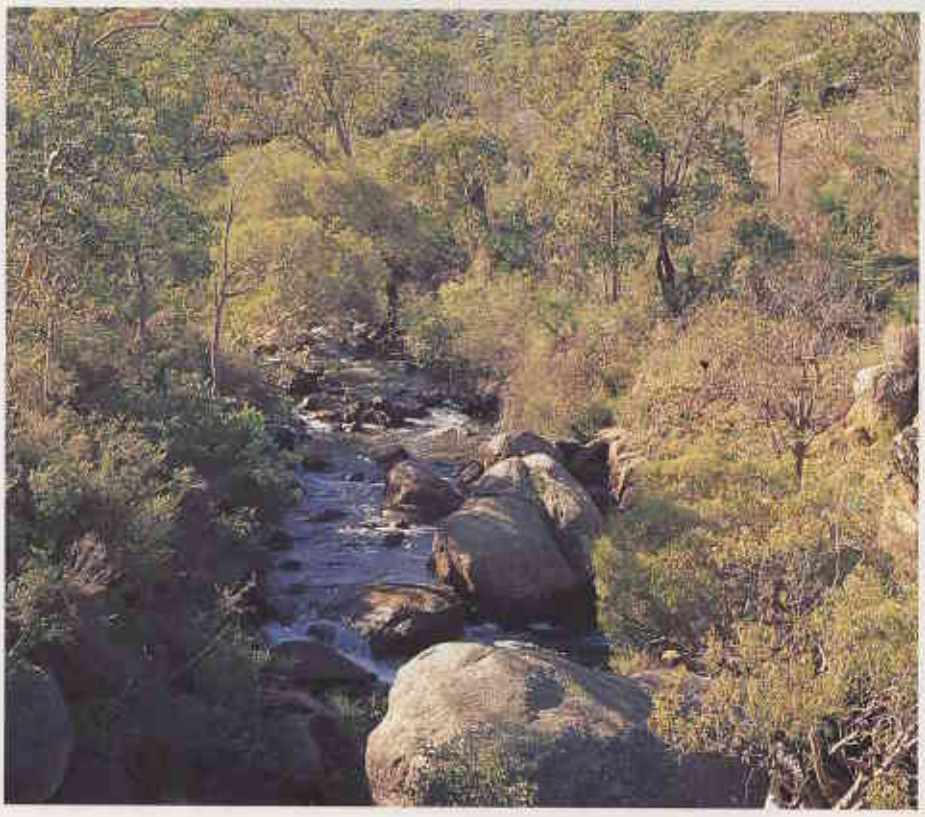
Today, the Darling Range provides a complex of habitats for a variety of wildlife. More than 500 plant species, dominated by the jarrah, marri and wandoo forests, are found in the ranges.

ABORIGINAL HISTORY

While it is well known that there was a big population of Nyoongar Aboriginal people in the Midland to Guildford area (west of the park) before European settlement, there is little recorded evidence of the use of the Darling Scarp by the Nyoongars. Unfortunately, few, if any, direct descendants of the original inhabitants have any great knowledge of the park's Aboriginal history. Anecdotally, we know the area was used as a hunting place and that the Nyoongars used the Jane Brook valley to cross the scarp to the more open country farther east.

There are a number of registered Aboriginal sites within the park, and it is understood that most of these were sites used for ceremonial purposes. Jane Brook has particular significance as it is one of the main tributaries of the Swan River and therefore has a connection with the legendary *Waugal*. In the Aboriginal Dreaming, this large, snake-like being crawled across, and sometimes beneath, the land forming the streams and waterways as it slid along. The rocks in and along the streams are believed to be the droppings of this wondrous creature.

Apart from transitory use—particularly during the cooler winter and spring months when there is sure to be water in the streams—it is unlikely that there were ever any more permanent campsites in the park area, as the flat lands on the banks of the Swan River in the Guildford area were rich in food sources and provided a permanent water source all year round.



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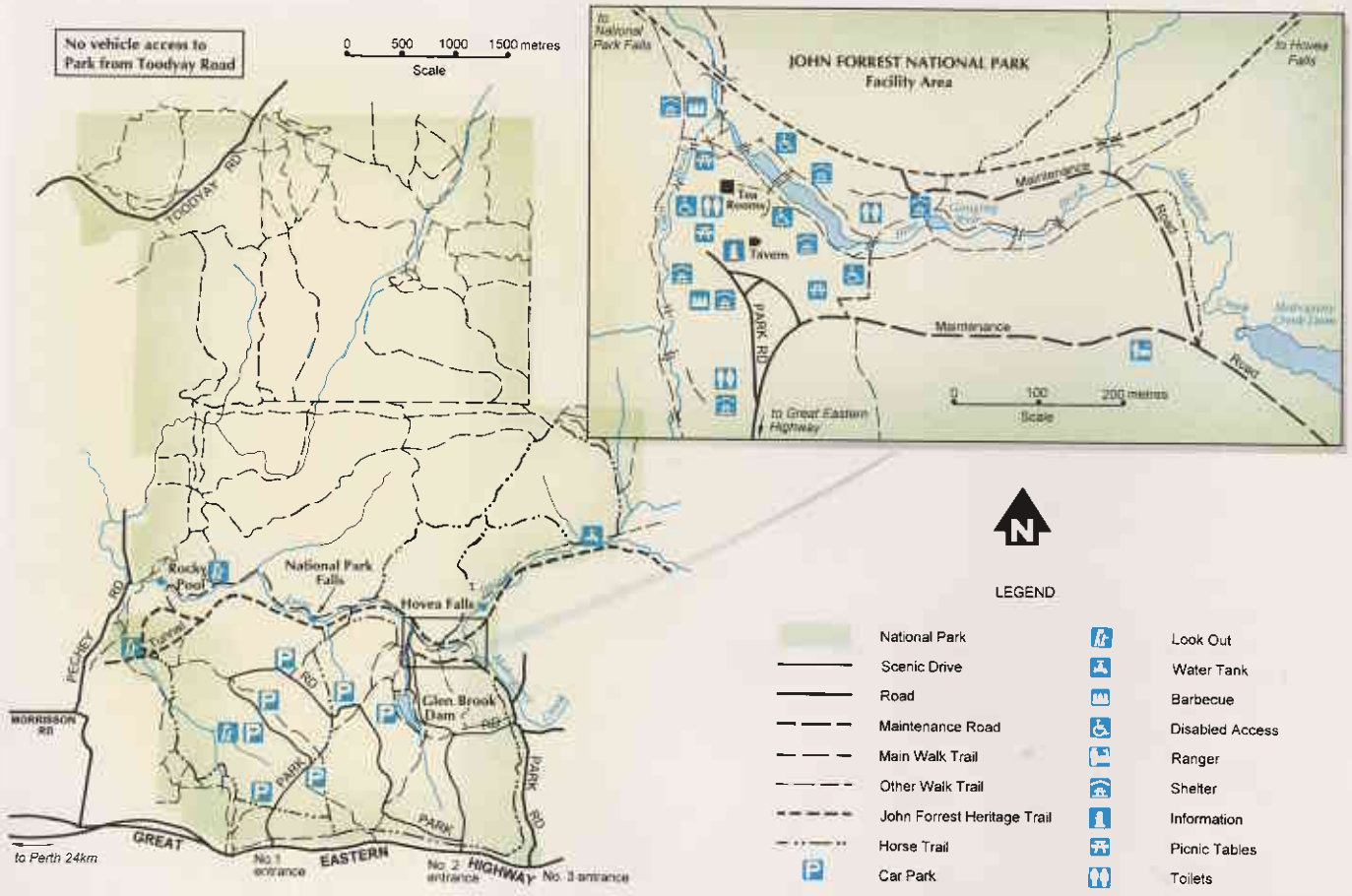
Main: Ancient granite boulders that are typical of the Darling Scarp.
Photo – Michael James
Inset: The bright colours of the cowslip orchid brighten the forest in springtime.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Top: A 'twenty-eight' parrot. These beautiful birds regularly greet visitors to the park's picnic areas.
Photo – George Duxbury

Left: Jane Brook tumbles over many small rapids and down the face of the scarp through the heart of John Forrest National Park.
Photo – Jiri Lochman



EUROPEAN HISTORY

In the early days of the Swan River Colony, a coach road was built over the section of the Darling Scarp called Greenmount. This road was to provide access to the burgeoning towns in the Avon Valley at York, Northam and Toodyay. Land to the south of this road was taken up by settlers, but the area to the north of it was considered too rough and rocky for settlement. Little, if anything, was done with this land and it was even considered unsuitable for grazing due to the large number of the poisonous pea plants (*Gastrolobium* spp.) throughout the area.

In 1895, before the area was set aside as a national park, the Western Australian Government Railways built a new railway line over the Darling Range. An alignment to the south, which had been built only 11 years earlier in 1884, was found to be too steep, and the new alignment, which crosses John Forrest National Park from west to east, was built at a lesser gradient. The alignment was surveyed, engineered and constructed under the direction of the State's Chief Engineer, Charles Yelverton O'Connor, who was later to achieve fame and a place in Western Australia's history as the designer and construction engineer of Fremantle Harbour and the Eastern Goldfields Water Supply, which begins at Mundaring Weir in the Darling Range, a few kilometres south of John Forest National Park.

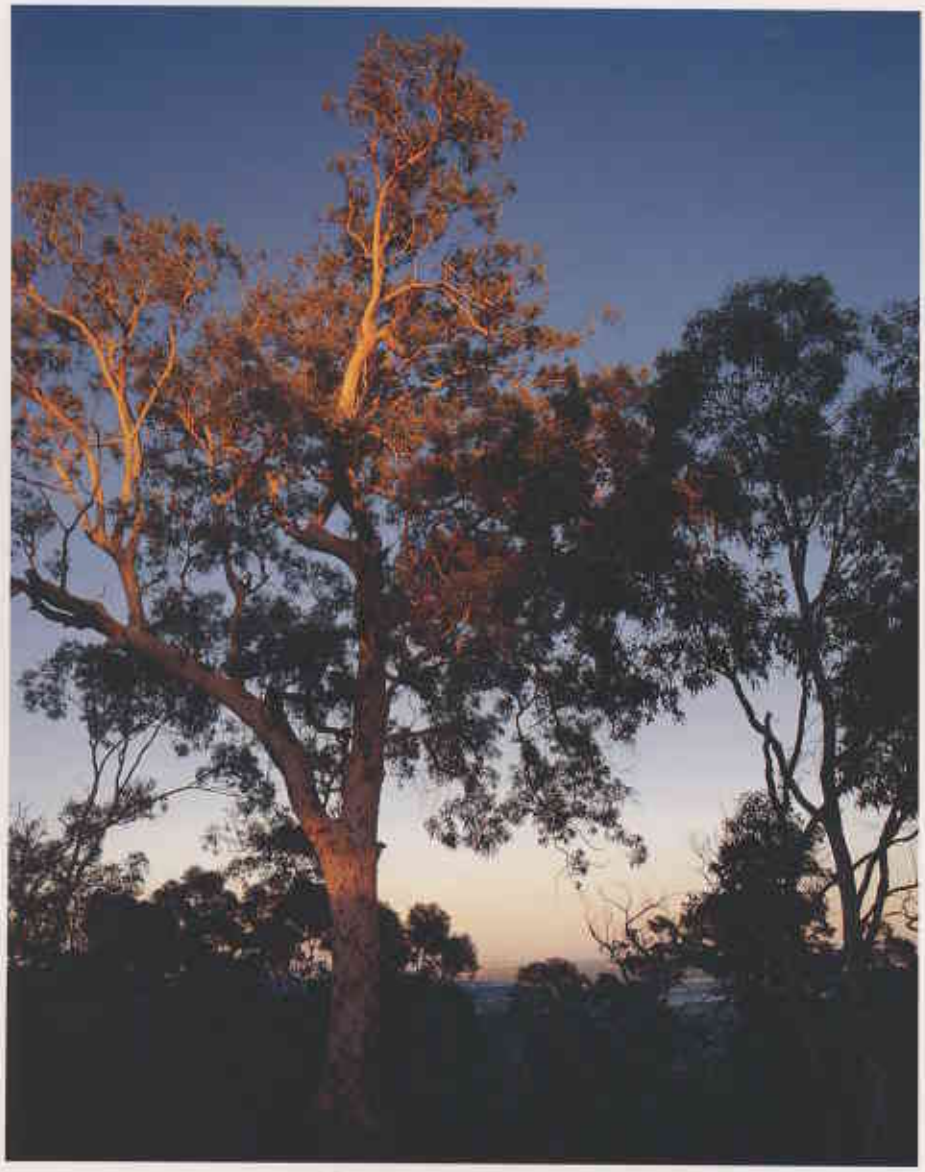
The railway was used by all east-west rail traffic until 1966 when the dual gauge line was opened through the Avon Valley farther north again. Although the trains are now long gone, the old alignment remains and, with its 1 in 49 slope, is a popular heritage walktrail. This line was also unique in having the only rail tunnel ever to be built in Western Australia. The tunnel still exists today and is an attractive feature of the heritage trail with visitors walking right through it.

PARK HISTORY

John Forrest National Park has the distinction of being the oldest national park in Western Australia and is a major feature of The Hills Forest—an eco-tourism concept centred on the forests of the Darling Range. The area was set aside for conservation in 1898, on the recommendation of the Surveyor General of the time, Mr H.F. Johnston. It was elevated to the status of Class 'A' reserve at the same time as it was officially proclaimed a national park, on 30 November 1900. Originally named Greenmount National Park, after the section of the scarp on which it lies, its name was later changed to Forrest National Park and, in 1947, changed again to John Forrest National Park, after Lord John Forrest, renowned explorer and Western Australia's first premier.

The park originally covered some 1 508 hectares, part of which was bequeathed from the estate of explorer Alexander Forrest, brother of John Forrest. He had at one time intended to build a home near Pechey Road, on the western side of the park, where he owned about 100 hectares. In 1992, a further 1 168 hectares, mainly to the north of the original park, were added to it, giving a current area of 2 676 hectares. The park now stretches between Great Eastern Highway in the south and Toodyay Road in the north. Vehicle access is restricted to the southern end of the park. This means that much of the park is free of traffic, making it ideal for passive recreation and the protection of the native animals.

The park has had a somewhat chequered history in its use, care and management. In the 1930s and 1950s, logging and grazing were carried out with scant respect for its status as a



Early morning sunlight hits the top of a powder-bark wandoo tree at the crest of the Darling Scarp. The towering buildings of Perth CBD can be seen in the distance. Photo – Michael James

national park. While we can lament over the loss of the mature and original jarrah trees to the fallers' saws, the logging operation left behind a much worse legacy. Dieback, a disease caused by the organism *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, was introduced and spread, and is still a menace to many of the park's plant species.

As well, large areas of the park next to the Great Eastern Highway were mined for gravel for road building. While these areas are now largely revegetated, there are still big scars to be seen.

Fire has also played a big part in the history of the park. Before the arrival of Europeans, fires would burn large areas along the Darling Scarp during the hot dry summers. These would mostly have been lit by lightning during summer storms. Fires would also have been lit by the Nyoongar people to promote new plant growth, which encouraged native animals into the area and provided an additional food source for the Nyoongars.

Once the railway was built through the hills, fires were often lit by sparks thrown from trains. In more recent times, fire has been much better managed. Large parts of the central area of the park are protected by mild fuel-reduction burns, carried out in a mosaic pattern around the perimeter of the park.

During the depression years of the 1930s, work began to develop the park for recreational use. For some two years, up to 400 sustenance workers were employed for three days each week, and built much of the present-day picnic area. They built pathways, rock walls, steps and garden beds. They also built a small dam on Mahogany Creek, about 400 metres upstream of the developed area, to provide water for the gardens. The vision at the time was for the area to become a vast botanical garden for the people of Western Australia. Many non-local trees and plant species were planted and some of these can still be seen today.

Small, unique picnic shelters were built in the style of small cottages. Some of these still exist, although the original thatched roofs have been replaced with corrugated iron to lessen the fire risk. A wall was built across Jane Brook to form a swimming pool and the first road access was established into the area.

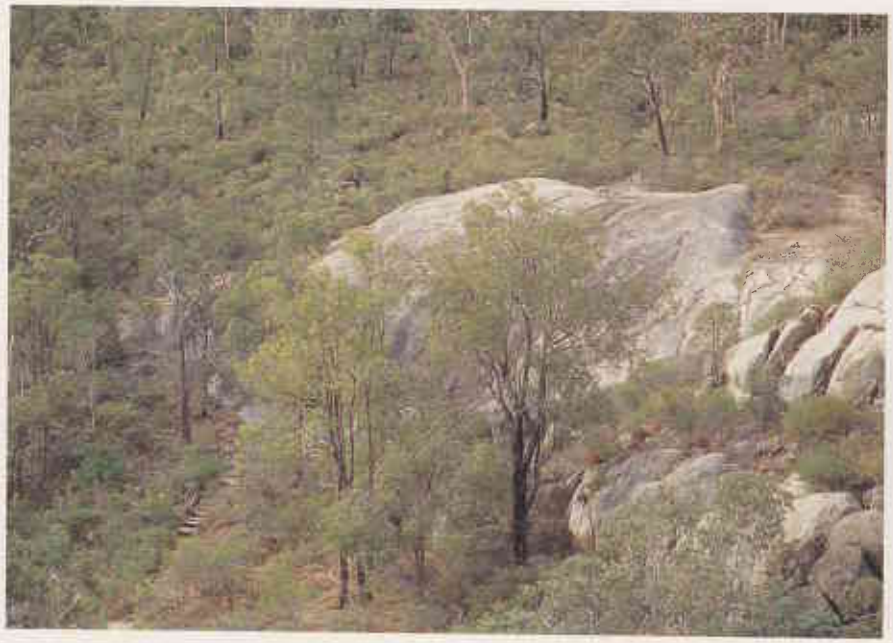
After the facilities were built, it became popular to catch a train from Perth to the park. The train stopped at Hovea Station, on the eastern edge of the park, and picnickers would walk back down the line for two kilometres to the main facilities. The more daring took to jumping off the train as it passed by the picnic area rather than face the walk back. In 1936, the Western Australian Government Railways decided it was prudent to build a station especially for the national park. It became so popular that special picnic trains ran to the park each weekend to cater for the demand.

Over the years there have been various changes to the picnic area, yet much of its original charm has been retained. The old wood-burning barbecues have been replaced by gas and electric models, as they are more efficient and reduce the risk of wildfires during the summer. They have also reduced the environmental damage caused by removing firewood from the forest floor.

In the mid-sixties, a large dam was built on Glen Brook to supply water to the park and to maintain a fresh water flow through the old swimming pool during dry summers. While the pool is still there, swimming in it is no longer recommended as the water is untreated. However, there are still people prepared to take the risk and enjoy the pool on a hot day.

WALKS AND WATERWAYS

John Forrest National Park offers many and varied opportunities for visitors. It is a very popular picnic destination for the nearby urban dwellers, particularly on Sundays and public holidays. People enjoy the chance to walk in the bush, and good walktrails throughout the park encourage visitors to wander through the bushland where they can admire the scenery of the scarp



Above: The National Park Falls are enjoyed by thousands of sightseers each year during the winter months.
Photo – George Duxbury

Above left: The many large granite outcrops amid the taller forest in the park support their own micro ecosystems of mosses and heaths.
Photo – Chris Garnett

and valleys. Some of the large exposed granite tors have been eroded over the centuries into quite fantastic shapes, and add to the diversity of the scenery. Winter and spring bring out a wonderful display of wildflowers, of which some are endemic to the Darling Scarp.

Jane Brook, the largest of the many small winter streams in the area, is a tributary of the Swan River and flows almost due west through the heart of the park. It joins the Swan some distance to the north-west and usually flows only in the winter except, perhaps, after heavy summer storms. Along the brook, within the park, are two waterfalls. Hovea Falls is about 500 metres east of the main picnic area. It is a wide cascade down a large granite sheet. About a kilometre west of the picnic area is National Park Falls. Here, the water drops sharply over a spectacular 20-metre fall. The brook travels down the scarp and has many tumbling rapids linked by rocky pools. A walktrail runs along the northern bank of the brook to the western boundary and emerges near the area known as Rocky Pool. After crossing a small footbridge, it leads back up a gentle slope to the old railway alignment (now the John Forrest Heritage Trail), completing a circular walk of about seven kilometres. While this is a good walk all year round, it is best when the streams are running and, of course, when the wildflowers are blooming.

PLANTS AND ANIMALS

The plants of John Forrest National Park are typical of the northern jarrah forests, with the predominant trees being jarrah, marri and wandoo. The most prolific flowering period for the wildflowers is during late winter and spring, but you will usually find something in flower most times of the year.

Following the winter rains, the flowers begin their annual mass blooming, providing a delightful variety of shape and colour throughout the forest. The rich violet hoveas are some of the first to appear, in contrast to the bright yellow of the wattles. These are followed by the isopogons, dryandras, kennedias, lechenaultias and the many other species that make the northern jarrah forest so special at this time of year. The most delicate of the forest flowers are the orchids, which appear during the winter and spring. The superb white spider orchid (*Caladenia longicauda* subsp. *longicauda*), the lovely donkey orchids

The Swanview tunnel, WA's only railway tunnel, was built in 1895 and is a popular part of the heritage trail.
Photo – Michael James

Left: One of the old-style picnic shelters, built in the 1930s.
Photo – Chris Garnett

Below left: The John Forrest Heritage Trail, along the old railway alignment, is popular with cyclists as well as walkers.
Photo – George Duxbury

(*Diuris* spp.), and the stately blue lady orchid (*Thelymitra crinita*), can readily be seen with the many other exquisite orchids that inhabit the forest floor.

During summer, marri provides a mosaic of white blossom in the canopy of the forest, while the woody creeper, *Billardiera floribunda*, adds spots of colour to the vegetation at ground level, together with the fuchsia grevillea (*G. bipinnatifida*), which flowers all year round. In the damper areas, thickets of bottlebrushes and stands of banksias contribute their rich display to alleviate the drabness of summer. Throughout the forest, the stately balgas (grasstrees) present a contrast of colour and form, with their spiky green tops, long skirts of dry brown rushes, tall flower spikes and charred black trunks.

Some 490 species of plants in 85 families have been recorded in the park, representing almost half the total recorded species for the Perth region.

With such a diversity of plants in the John Forrest National Park, it follows that there is a good variety of animal life, too. Eleven mammal species have been recorded in the park, from the tiny honey possum and elusive brush wallaby to the ubiquitous western grey kangaroo. Echidnas and kangaroos are frequently sighted, while the rest of the mammal population is generally shy and nocturnal, and not easily seen by park visitors. But, reptiles can often be seen during the warmer months. The most obvious and frequently seen is probably the bobtail skink (*Tiliqua rugosa*).

The plants also attract a large population of birds to the park. Ninety-one species of birds have been recorded, including the brilliant splendid fairy-wren, a number of different honeyeaters, several parrots, magpies and ravens, with an occasional wedge-tailed eagle circling in the skies above the park. Visitors are often entertained by the parrots, which join them as they picnic in the park. Ducks, too, visit picnickers, and during breeding season, they will often bring their ducklings to meet and mix with people, much to the delight of everyone.

BIKES AND HORSES

The park's peaceful surroundings also offers recreation opportunities such as bike riding and horse riding.

The growing number of mountain bike enthusiasts find that the park and its steep topography provide good challenges. Riders can enjoy their own company for many hours without leaving the tracks provided, and if they keep to a few simple guidelines they will do no damage to the environment. Competition riding is actively discouraged, however, as national parks are better suited to passive recreation.

The same is true of horse riding. Riders need to obtain a permit, either on a daily or annual basis, and can then take their horses into the park. Horse trails are specially marked, which helps to avoid conflict between riders and other park users and keeps the horses on landforms that can sustain this sort of activity.

The scenic drive into the heart of the park affords panoramic views over the city of Perth and the Swan Coastal Plain. The Swan Valley vineyards at the foot of the scarp to the north provide a contrasting patchwork of colours throughout the year. As you make your way along the scenic drive, the view changes from the far-flung urban and city views to one of bush-shrouded hills and valleys within the park. The John Forrest National Park gives interstate and overseas visitors easy access to a place of beauty and tranquillity, and it boasts an attractive representation of Western Australia's forests and wildflowers. Yet this area of natural peace and scenery is within 30 kilometres of Perth. We don't have to go to the outback to enjoy WA's natural wonders: in John Forrest National Park there is a place of beauty close by.

George Duxbury is the Senior Ranger for CALM's Mundaring District and operates out of John Forrest National Park, where he has been based for eight years. George has a particular interest in the park's natural and cultural history, and has collected and researched a number of anecdotes, articles and photographs. He can be contacted on (09) 298 8344.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME ELEVEN NO. 4 WINTER ISSUE 1996

The Perth Observatory celebrates its centenary this year, and during its 100 years' life it has played some major roles in the world of astronomy. Find out more on page 10.

John Forrest National Park has long been a popular picnicking spot for Perth residents, but this place of beauty has much more to offer. See page 16.

The Cape Range, in north-west WA, is known for its harsh environment. But if you look a little closer you'll discover the vast 'Range of Flowers' that live there. See page 28.

In 1961, the noisy scrub-bird was rediscovered at Two Peoples Bay. In 1994, the Gilbert's potoroo turned up unexpectedly. Find out more about this haven for the lost and found on page 35.

If all goes to plan, the Ord River area, will soon be known as a prime farming area for rare tropical timbers. Find out why on page 23.

FEATURES

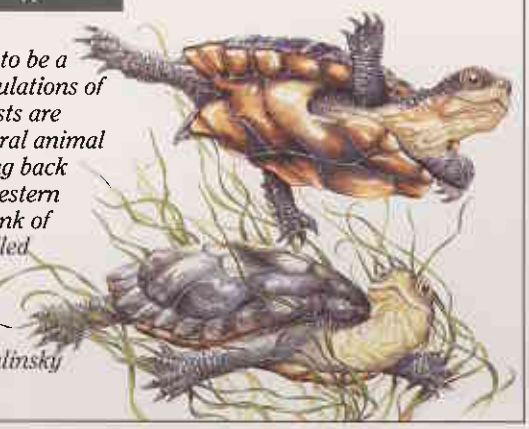
REGULARS

COVER

Fox-baiting has been shown to be a major tool in rebuilding populations of native animals. Now, scientists are embarking on a Statewide feral animal control program to help bring back native species, such as the western swamp tortoise, from the brink of extinction. The project is called 'Western Shield'.

The story is on page 41.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



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