

# TWO PEOPLES BAY

*A Haven for the Lost and Found*



Two Peoples Bay is one of the jewels of the south coast of Western Australia. With a long history of Aboriginal and European use, it has been managed as a nature reserve for most of the last thirty years. Today, it is a vital area for threatened species conservation, but is also a place where people can relax in the shady picnic area, explore the beach and headland and, if lucky, observe animals and birds that were once thought extinct.

BY ALAN DANKS



**L**ying between the granite massifs of Mt Gardner and Mt Manypeaks near Albany, Two Peoples Bay faces due east. The high rocky hills around Mt Gardner form a headland on the south side of the bay, protecting it from the heavy Southern Ocean swells. From the sea, the headland presents a wild and formidable aspect where pale granite walls, streaked with dark water-stains, rise steeply from the cold blue ocean.

Here and there, among the rock outcrops where soil has accumulated, patches of thick, scrubby vegetation punctuate the landscape. In places, deeply incised gullies run down to the sea from the bare rock exposures and boulder-strewn hilltops. Within these tree-filled gullies is a secret world of small streams, waterfalls and moss-covered boulders. Some very rare and elusive animals have been isolated, yet protected, here by the fortunate combination of bare rock, moist gullies and almost impenetrable vegetation. Without this protection, some of these species may well have become extinct. Their rediscovery and recovery are part of the remarkable history of Two Peoples Bay.



The sheltered blue and turquoise waters within the bay are fringed by a crescent of white sand and sage-green scrub of the coastal dunes, which rise to a range of rounded hills. Midshipman Ransonnet would have appreciated the contrast with the rugged open sea around the headland when, in 1803, he brought his exploration party into the quiet waters behind the point. They had left Captain Baudin's ship *Géographe* at Frenchman's Bay, and sailed east to explore the then uncharted area. To their surprise, they found Captain Pendleton in the United States brig *Union*, already there. The *Union* had come from New York in search of seals. Allies in their respective national struggles, the French and American meeting on the far side of the world was commemorated in the name *Baie de*

*Deux Peuples*—meaning 'Bay of Two Nations'—which was later translated as Two Peoples Bay.

In later years, others came to exploit the newly discovered marine life on the south coast of Western Australia. In the 1840s, up to twelve ships anchored in Two Peoples Bay during the whaling season, when humpback and southern right whales were hunted in the bay and surrounding waters. Whale blubber was rendered on the ships and on shore. Today, winter storms sometimes expose whale bones along the beach—bleached reminders of a grisly, dangerous trade and of the people of many nations who carried it out so far from home.

**Previous page**

Little Beach, the most popular area in the reserve, where you can enjoy the vistas, swim in crystal waters or relax on a quiet pristine beach.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

**Below:** Here, at Waterfall Beach, where vegetated slopes carry to the water's edge, management protection keeps fragile habitat from being damaged.

Photo – Michael James





## THE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD

A small brown bird was first brought to the attention of science through John Gould's lavishly illustrated *Birds of Australia*, published in England in 1845. John Gilbert, Gould's indefatigable collector in Western Australia, had supplied the specimens. Gould originally named this new species the noisy brush-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*, the 'loud bird without bristles') and considered it one of Australia's most interesting birds. With its small rounded wings, strong muscular body and very loud voice (Gilbert reckoned it to be the loudest of all the songbirds he knew, and the most difficult to obtain as a specimen), it certainly was unusual. And, unlike all other song birds, it had no wishbone. Its relationships with other birds were a mystery, and the lack of much evidence through observation or specimens left the field open for speculation.

Gould had predicted that a study of the noisyscrub-bird—as he renamed it—would yield 'highly interesting information respecting the economy and history of this curious form'. He also predicted that it would rarely 'meet the gaze of civilised man'. Indeed, the opportunity for scientific study receded rapidly. During the fifty years following the publication of Gould's book, only two more specimens arrived in Europe and only a handful more were taken for Australian museums. The bird became increasingly difficult to find in its native haunts. After the turn of the century, searches were made throughout the south-west by many ornithologists. Unfortunately, these searches were all fruitless, and scientists began to fear the bird was extinct.

## REDISCOVERED

Certainly, the bird had disappeared from most of its former range. It could no longer be found in the Augusta-Margaret River area, in the hills near Waroona, where Gilbert had first seen it, nor around Albany, where several specimens had been obtained during the last century. But it was not extinct. The bird's wariness and cryptic brown plumage make it virtually invisible in the dark, impenetrable scrub. Almost flightless, it keeps to the densest vegetation, moving like a small, fleeting shadow through the undergrowth. Fortunately, the resonant, musical song



of the territorial male gives his location away. It was this song that had led John Gilbert to discover the noisy scrub-bird in 1842, and it was the same song that drew Harley Webster, Albany school teacher and amateur ornithologist, into the scrub at Two Peoples Bay late in 1961. There, at the foot of a mountain, he saw a bird that, despite years of bird-watching in the south-west, he had never set eyes on before. Shortly afterwards, in February 1962, a small remnant population was found inhabiting the gullies of Mt Gardner. In all the world there remained only about 100 individuals, confined to this one small area on the edge of the Southern Ocean.

With this rediscovery came a chance to turn back the tide that appeared to be washing the noisy scrub-bird inexorably

**Top:** The noisy scrub-bird, a near flightless bird that lives, eats and breeds under the canopy of thick scrub in the gullies of the reserve.

Photo – Ray Smith

**Above:** Alan Danks and Otto Meuller set free a pair of noisy scrub-birds from a special transport case in a test release area near Walpole.

Photo – Alan Danks

towards extinction. Many local, national and international conservationists worked hard in those early years to stop the town site developments planned for the area, and in its place, create a nature reserve that would assist efforts to protect the bird's habitat. Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve was formally gazetted in 1967. Its 4 700 hectares encompass the entire headland, adjacent islands and the short isthmus





connecting to a wetland system of lakes, streams and swamps—remnants of a Pleistocene estuary. All the known noisy scrub-bird habitat was included, giving the reserve a diverse array of vegetation types suitable for many other species.

Research into the ecological requirements of the noisy scrub-bird during the early 1970s showed the bird was sensitive to fire and needed dense, long-unburnt scrub with a well-developed leaf-litter fauna to survive. In fact, it was probably the change in fire regimes, grazing and clearance of habitat following European colonisation that had brought the noisy scrub-bird so close to extinction. These were human-induced changes, and the birds were not simply fading away through some inherent weakness. Based on this understanding, the exclusion of fire became the principal direction for management of the reserve. This was successfully applied from the early 1970s, and in response, scrub-bird numbers began to increase.

## POPULATIONS AND TRANSLOCATIONS

By the end of the 1970s, the population had grown sufficiently for it to be feasible to contemplate removing some birds to create other populations outside Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. The importance of this step should not be underestimated. If confined to a single population, there could never be much of a future for the noisy scrub-bird. The amount of habitat available to the bird within the reserve is limited, and the population would always be vulnerable

to wildfires. Colonising new areas outside the nature reserve would be a slow process for the near flightless bird, as it needs corridors of continuous scrub connecting its breeding areas to vacant habitat in order to spread. It also needs many breeding seasons to produce a supply of dispersing birds.

Since 1983, translocations of noisy scrub-birds from Two Peoples Bay have resulted in new populations in several places east of Albany. The most successful translocation was to Mt Manypeaks, where steep gullies running north and south of the main ridge provide habitat similar to Mt Gardner. Ten years after the first birds were released there, the new population was increasing rapidly, and Mt Manypeaks now has more noisy scrub-birds than the parent population. Overall, the total number of noisy scrub-birds has increased tenfold since its rediscovery, and the population is spread along almost 50 kilometres of the coast around Two Peoples Bay.

For its size, the area of the reserve is unusually rich in birds. A total of 188 species have been recorded at Two Peoples Bay. Some of these are seabirds, like the great-winged petrels (*Pterodroma macroptera*), flesh-footed shearwaters (*Puffinus carneipes*) and little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*), which breed on Coffin Island. Others are transequatorial migratory waders or nomadic species of honeyeaters, lorikeets and pardalotes, which appear in response to seasonal blossom. The majority, however, are residents that breed within the reserve.

Like the noisy scrub-bird, some also face problems of low numbers and

reduced ranges. The western bristlebird (*Dasyornis longirostris*) is found in the dense heaths on the sandy slopes of Mt Gardner, and is currently designated an endangered species. So is the western whipbird (*Psophiodes nigrogularis nigrogularis*—Two Peoples Bay subspecies), an inhabitant of the scrubby thickets. Both birds had ranged as far north as the Perth area, where the unfailing John Gilbert was the first to record them during the last century. Indeed, he thought of these and the noisy scrub-bird as forming a trio of 'allied' species, because of their similar habits and the fact that he sometimes found them inhabiting the same areas. By the middle of this century, their ranges had contracted to the Two Peoples Bay area, and their numbers around the time the nature reserve was created were very low.

## PLANTS AND FUNGI

Among the 660 plant species at Two Peoples Bay are some threatened species that are dependent on the protection of the nature reserve. The moss *Pleurophascum occidentale* was discovered here by an American researcher in 1984. It is a relatively large-leaved moss with Gondwanan connections. The only other member of this genus is found in Tasmania and New Zealand. The granite banksia (*Banksia verticillata*) also occurs on Mt Gardner, although it has been reduced to a single plant by aerial canker disease. Fortunately the species is also found in reasonable numbers elsewhere in the district. A critically endangered unnamed *Andersonia* with tiny blue and



**Far left:** The rare western bristlebird also depends on special habitat and fire management in the Two Peoples Bay area.

Photo – Ray Smith

**Left:** False Island, a remote part of the Mt Gardner headland, becomes a spectacular island of granite at high tides.

Photo – Alan Danks

**Right:** Gilbert's potoroo, thought extinct for more than a hundred years, was rediscovered in 1994 after fox-baiting helped to increase its numbers.

**Below:** The thick, protective coastal heath habitat of Gilbert's potoroo on the slopes of Mt Gardiner.

Photos – Jiri Lochman



white flowers is also found on the outskirts of the Reserve.

The fungi are well represented. A survey in 1991 and 1992 found over 400 varieties in the reserve—most of them undescribed and many that had never been collected before. Fungi are ecologically very important. They promote vegetation health by their mycorrhizal associations with some plants and maintain nutrient cycles through the decomposition of dead plant material.

All these are important factors in maintaining the types of habitats required by some of the local animal species.

## MAMMALS

The reserve's mammals includes the diminutive honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), the grey-bellied dunnart (*Sminthopsis griseoventer*) and the mardo (*Antechinus flavipes*)—a small, active marsupial predator of invertebrates and small vertebrates, commonly found in the

taller scrubs, low forest and swamp vegetation. The diggings of quenda (*Isoodon obesulus*) are common and, at times, areas particularly favoured by these marsupial omnivores resemble newly dug-over vegetable gardens. The animal itself is often seen during the day crossing roads and tracks within the reserve, and is preyed upon by raptors like the little eagle. Western ringtail possums (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*) are occasionally seen in the low forest trees on







Honey possums are found here despite the prevalence of dieback disease, which has removed many of their flowering food plants.

Photo – Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

Mt Gardner, where their dreys (basketball-sized nests made of sticks) are common.

For many years, the population of quokkas (*Setonix brachyurus*) on Mt Gardner was one of the few known on the mainland (see 'Where Have all the Quokkas Gone?', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1995–96). These small mammals make tunnel-like runs through thick vegetation and, when present in numbers, leave their distinctive droppings in latrine areas along the runs. Seldom seen in the thick cover, the runs and droppings are often the only sign of the animals' presence. In the early 1970s, the remains of many quokkas were found—testimony to predation by the fox.

In 1988, a regular fox baiting program was started around the lakes area, the boundaries of the reserve and some adjoining land. There had been a decline in the numbers of noisy scrub-birds in the area, and it was thought the large number of foxes then present in the reserve may have been responsible. Reducing the number of foxes was also seen to be a positive management strategy for small mammals in the area, and the program was continued, even after it was evident that predation by the fox was not responsible for the decline in scrub-bird numbers. An extended baiting program covering the entire reserve has been maintained ever since, making it one of CALM's longest running fox baiting programs.

## NEW SURPRISES

Habitat protection within the reserve and surrounding areas has also protected all other species that live in or make up that habitat. The numbers of western bristlebirds and western whipbirds at Two Peoples Bay have increased during the last two decades, and their populations are now also spread north and east of Two Peoples Bay. The numbers of quenda, ringtail possum and quokka, judging by sightings, tracks and droppings, also appear to be increasing as the fox control program takes effect.

The most exciting and probably least expected of the spin-offs from the conservation of the noisy scrub-bird came in late 1994, when a small, rabbit-sized marsupial called Gilbert's potoroo (*Potorous gilbertii*) was found on the slopes of Mt Gardner (see *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1995). This animal—also originally brought to the world's attention by John Gilbert—had not been reliably

reported anywhere in the south-west for more than 100 years, and had been officially proclaimed extinct. It appeared to belong to Australia's unfortunately long list of extinct native mammals.

Like the noisy scrub-bird, however, it was not extinct. Potoroos specialise in eating underground fungi, and this nocturnal, soft-furred and very appealing little animal had been quietly going about its truffle-hunting business beneath the Mt Gardner scrub, unseen for many years. But it must have come very close to extinction. Despite intensive efforts, only fifteen individuals were captured in the first year after rediscovery. The search is continuing.

Gilbert's potoroo is the fourth of John Gilbert's discoveries to have disappeared from view and then to be found again at Two Peoples Bay. Like the bristlebird and whipbird, it must have benefited from the habitat protection that came with the formation and management of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve.

An estimated 35 000 people visit Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve each year. Most visitors come to enjoy the safe swimming, attractive beaches and the picnic and BBQ facilities. Many are drawn by the magnificent coastal scenery. For international visitors with a special interest in birds, Two Peoples Bay has become a 'Mecca'. Most want to try their luck at sighting one of the area's famous rarities. A visitor information centre, planned for the near future, will enrich the experience of all visitors to Two Peoples Bay and provide them with a better understanding of the area's unique history and special conservation values.

Alan Danks is CALM's reserve management officer at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. He can be contacted on (098) 46 4276.

A management plan for the reserve was due to be released on 7th June 1996.

The plan proposes to change the classification of the reserve from Nature Reserve to National Park. This upgrading of the status of Two Peoples Bay accommodates the use of the existing grassed picnic area and other visitor facilities, while ensuring the conservation purpose of the reserve is monitored by stringent zoning of high conservation areas.



# LANDSCOPE

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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.



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.



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.



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

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF STARGAZING**  
JAMES BIGGS ..... 10

**JOHN FORREST NATIONAL PARK: A PLACE OF BEAUTY**  
GEORGE DUXBURY ..... 16

**TROPICAL TREE FARMING**  
ANDREW RADOMILJAC & MANDY CLEWS ..... 23

**A RANGE OF FLOWERS**  
GREG KEIGHERY & NEIL GIBSON ..... 28

**TWO PEOPLES BAY: A HAVEN FOR THE LOST AND FOUND**  
ALAN DANKS ..... 35

**WESTERN SHIELD**  
CARIS BAILEY ..... 41

**BANKING FOR THE FUTURE**  
ANNE COCHRAN, ANNE KELLY & DAVID COATES ..... 49

## REGULARS

**IN PERSPECTIVE** ..... 4

**BUSH TELEGRAPH** ..... 6

**ENDANGERED MARSUPIAL-MOLES** ..... 34

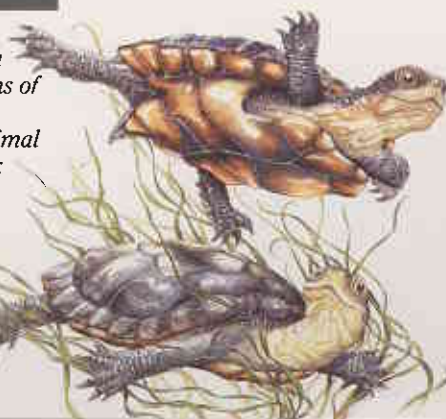
**URBAN ANTICS** ..... 54

## 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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