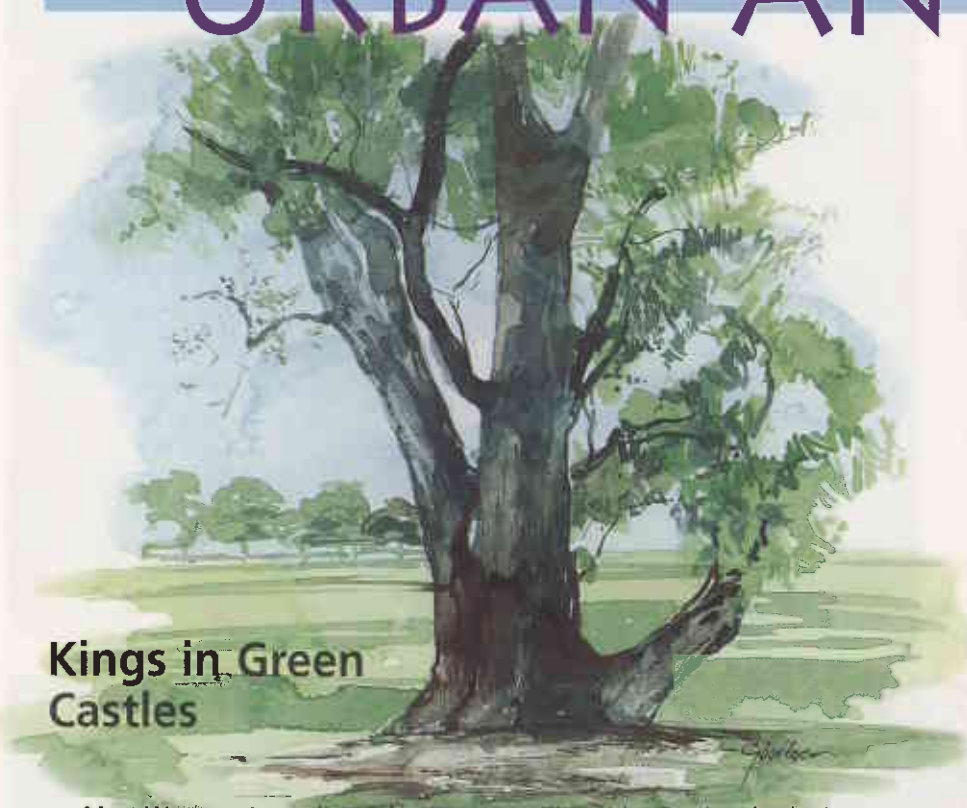
URBAN ANTICS



Kings in Green Castles

Most Western Australian urbanites live along our western seaboard about 200 kilometres north and south of our capital city Perth.

Another life form, the tuart tree (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) also occurs naturally in this same area and since the coming of Europeans with their modern urban intrusion, there have been close encounters of many kinds.

The tuart tree, whose common name is derived from the Nyoongar Aboriginal name tooart, is a member of the eucalypt family. To me, it is simply that giant local gum tree with the grey/white, rough bark and dense, dark foliage that dominates the dune valleys from Yanchep to Busselton. The tree grows mostly on brown or light coloured coastal soils over limestone up to about 10km inland, but is occasionally found farther east along the Swan, Canning and Murray rivers.

At Wonnerup and Ludlow, near the outer suburbs of Busselton, huge specimens are found in the magnificent Tuart National Park. Here, the grace and grandeur of gigantic trunks, flowing branches and heavy foliage, frame the clear vistas of the understory grassland. Rare western ringtail and common brush-tail possums can be seen here along special constructed night-trails.

The older Perth suburbs between White Gum Valley and North Beach, that have been lucky to escape the ruthless development by wholesale clearing and leveling, are today still endowed with these icons which endure cool garden forest pockets across backyards and parklands.

Those of us who were bought up and still live under the protective canopy of tuart forest will always remember unique sights, sounds, smells and antics familiar to that environment.

In the crazy days of the 50s at Scarborough Primary School, with bare feet and short pants (only rich kids had shoes and 'longuns'), running home from school through the bush meant sheltering from winter showers under giant limbs and cavernous fire damaged trunks of favourite tuarts. Here a sense of camaraderie and togetherness helped to bond young kids in their frontier neighborhood.

Tuart tree cubbies and foliage stockades provided sanctuary where wide-eyed twelve year-olds discussed the coming of rock-n-roll and lads whispered sweet nothings into the delicious blushing ears of new girls to the street.

The relentless chore of chopping tuart wood chips from a back lane stump that you couldn't see over invariably resulted in the dense, fibrous wood throwing your tomahawk back in your face. Later, an extremely hot, open grate fire in the lounge was just reward for your agonies, and in the morning all that remained of the steel-like tuart chunks, was fine white ash.

Today, the tuarts are still my entertainment. Dead staghorns caused by burrowing grubs are festooned each morning with bickering crows, magpies, galahs and 28s, while pardelotes search the shedding, rough, white bark of trunks and branches for insects. During the heat of day, bees spew from cracks in hollow branches to search for local pollen bearing flowers, while kestrals and black shouldered kites rest at their days end, like sentinels on the very tips of the highest staghorns.

The tuart is a wonderful asset to our urban environment. Those of us who experienced and remember our associations feel like we were kings in green castles.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *White-tailed black-cockatoos can hear invading grubs tunneling in branchlets. They then chew through the branches with strong beaks to extract the morsels . . . watch out below.*
- *Right now exceptionally large areas of tuarts have been attacked by wood boring beetles. Some trees will die, but it is a natural phenomenon and most will recover.*
- *Tuart wood is so tough it was used in the past to make wagon wheels, tool handles, decking for railway carriages and journals for propeller shafts.*

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FIFTEEN NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 2000

One of the best selling books from CALM has recently been fully revised. See 'The Best of the South-West' on page 10.

A new weapon against the scourge of feral cats was recently tested on Hermite Island. See 'Isle of Cats' on page 18.

Satelite imagery is helping us to fight maritime polution. See 'Looking Through the Surface' on page 41.

In the far north of WA, there is evidence of not one, but two cosmic impacts. See 'Cosmic Impacts in the Kimberley' on page 28.

A unique network links volunteer groups and regional herbaria with the CALM flora database. See 'Name That Plant' on page 35.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Western Australia is aptly described as the Wildflower State. Some 12,500 different species are known from the wild, with a huge range of colours, shapes and characters. But many species once found are lost again, and it's always an event when a species thought to be extinct is rediscovered. See 'Lost Jewels in the Bush' on page 23.

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