



BRIMMING with birds:

Cape Arid National Park



Cape Arid National Park lies 120 kilometres east of Esperance. French navigator Bruny d'Entrecasteaux named its most prominent geographic feature 'Cap Aride' in 1792, and the name was anglicised by Matthew Flinders in 1802. However, when it comes to the park's avian inhabitants, it appears to be misnamed. As well as being home to birds typical of Western Australia's southern coast, this large and exceptionally scenic park harbours a number of restricted and threatened species, as well as some interesting inland birds.

by Allan Burbidge

With more than 160 bird species, Cape Arid National Park is an important park for the conservation of birds in Western Australia. It covers 279,832 hectares and lies at the eastern extremity of the South-Western Botanical Province, overlapping the boundary of the Eremaean Botanical Province (the arid zone). So, as well as including beaches and the Thomas River and estuary, it also includes south-western and more arid vegetation types. Near the coast, these include banksia woodlands, swamp yate (*Eucalyptus occidentalis*) woodlands, and heaths, some with emergent banksias or eucalypts, depending on the soil type. Further inland, there are extensive areas of mallee of various types and semi-arid eucalypt woodlands. There are also small areas of mixed woodlands and shrublands around granite rocks and the peaks of the Russell Range, including Mount Ragged.

Because of this broad range of habitats, the park includes a diverse array of bird species. Cape Arid National Park is the eastern limit of distribution in Western Australia for 10 species. These include the ground parrot, scarlet robin, western spinebill and red-eared firetail. Several species that prefer drier country are found in the northern part of the park, but not in the southern parts. These include the mulga parrot and pied butcherbird. Sixteen of the 18



Previous page: Gulls can often be seen at Yokinup Bay at the mouth of Thomas River.

Photo – Chris Garnett

Right: The threatened Western Australian Cape Barren goose occasionally visits Cape Arid National Park.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below: Recent searches have failed to find western ground parrots at Cape Arid National Park, but it is hoped that they still live there.

Illustration – Martin Thompson

species of honeyeater found in WA south of Dongara are known from the park—a good indication of the richness of species.

One endangered bird, the western ground parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus flaviventris*), lives in the park, and several other threatened species, including the Australasian bittern (vulnerable), Carnaby's black-cockatoo (endangered) and the Cape Barren goose (vulnerable), visit the park on occasions. Western Australian Cape Barren geese (*Cereopsis novae-hollandiae grisea*)



breed only in the Archipelago of the Recherche, and occasionally visit nearby parts of the mainland (see 'How Many Geese Are Enough?', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 1993). Total numbers are estimated to be only about 650 birds.

The western ground parrot has declined to very low numbers in the park due to extensive wildfires in the 1970s and 1980s. It is restricted to low heaths and needs long unburnt areas to persist, although it can forage in areas more recently burnt. In order to breed, it is believed that the bird needs vegetation that has remained unburnt for about 15 years. Annual rainfall in areas occupied by ground parrots in the park is only about 400 millimetres, and the heaths regenerate very slowly under these conditions.

At least two species have moved into the park in the last 40 years. The elegant parrot moved into the Esperance district in 1959, following clearing of vegetation for farms. This species and the crested pigeon, which arrived in about 1980, both like very open woodland or parkland situations. At Cape Arid, they are most likely to be seen along the boundary with farmland, particularly on Merivale Road.

WHERE TO FIND BIRDS

All the walks in the park are worth a look for birds. The campground at Thomas River is an excellent place to begin. The campsites are located in the





midst of banksia woodland, with a spectacular view over Yokinup Bay. Here, you can spot many common birds, including a good range of honeyeaters, if the banksias are in flower. The Thomas River estuary is also worth a look, particularly at the bar, where you may see various waterbirds or waders. Pied oystercatchers can be seen here, along with crested terns and silver gulls.

During summer, you might see some waders, including tiny red-necked stints or sanderlings. Weighing only about 25 to 60 grams, stints and sanderlings are annual migrants from their breeding grounds in far northern parts of Siberia and North America. One or two pairs of the rare hooded plover can often be found on the beach at Yokinup Bay, which extends east from the estuary. Hooded plovers nest on the edges of lakes and on ocean beaches in southern Australia. Nesting in such places makes them particularly vulnerable to disturbance and damage, especially by four-wheel-drive vehicles on beaches. Visitors to the park should

be careful not to disturb any hooded plovers during their breeding season, which lasts from August to March in coastal areas. If you are driving on beaches here or elsewhere, please drive slowly—hooded plovers sometimes shelter in wheel ruts, and don't always notice fast-moving vehicles soon enough to get out of the way.

West of the ranger's residence, off Tagon Road, is the Boolenup Walk. This pleasant walk meanders down through heath, banksia woodland, yate woodland and a paperbark swamp,

finally reaching the picturesque Boolenup Lake. Small numbers of waterbirds, such as black swans, musk ducks, great crested grebes and little black cormorants, can sometimes be seen here. Red-eared firetails and white-browed scrubwrens can be seen in and around the paperbark swamp. Both species like dense cover, and are more likely to be heard than seen. The red-eared firetail is unique to WA. It is restricted to moist areas, usually with dense vegetation, from near Perth to Cape Arid.

Above: The rocky hills, coastal heaths and beaches of Cape Arid offer a range of habitats for birds.

Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

Right: The red-eared firetail is restricted to moist areas, usually with dense vegetation.

Photo – Babs & Bert Wells/CALM





Left: Jorndee Creek in Cape Arid National Park.

Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

Below far left: The endangered Carnaby's black-cockatoo is known to visit Cape Arid National Park.

Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

Below left: The mulga parrot is an arid-zone bird found in the north of the Park.

Photo – Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

Bottom left: The park is the eastern limit of distribution of the western spinebill.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



Pardalotes can often be heard in the yate woodlands, and if you look carefully, you should be able to see some of these colourful little gems. Many other birds can also be found in these woodlands, including scarlet robins, white-naped honeyeaters, red and little wattlebirds and grey currawongs. Swamp harriers can often be seen and, in summer or autumn, square-tailed kites can occasionally be seen soaring with wings upswept, over heath or nearby woodland, in search of prey.

The heaths along Poison Creek Road, north and east of Cape Arid, are home to Australian bustards, brown falcons, rufous fieldwrens and southern emu-wrens. Bustards, sometimes called bush turkeys because they are similar in size to domestic turkeys, can occasionally be seen stalking through the heath in search of grasshoppers and other small animals. If disturbed, they first freeze, then move slowly away in a stately walk with head held high. Ground parrots probably once inhabited most of the heaths in this part of the park, but their current distribution is poorly known. Recent searches, by Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) staff, Birds Australia members or volunteers, have failed to find the local population, but the area to be searched is huge and we hope to find them again soon. When the heath is in flower, honeyeaters, especially the tawny-crowned and white-cheeked species, can be seen flying from flowering shrub to flowering shrub, often stopping to call from a favourite

perch. The best time to see birds in the heath is very early in the morning, as heathland birds tend to be much quieter in the middle of the day.

If you have a four-wheel-drive vehicle and time available, the Mount Ragged area is an interesting spot for birds (but make sure you first consult the ranger about track conditions—the track is sometimes impassable). It is in the mallee scrubs and woodlands in this northern part of the park where you can find birds more typical of the drier country. These include the malleefowl, mulga parrot, chestnut quail-thrush, shy heathwren, purple-gaped honeyeater, yellow-plumed honeyeater and crested bellbird. Bellbirds are usually heard rather than seen, and their call, one of the more attractive sounds of the bush, has aptly been described as having a ‘fugitive, ventriloquial quality’. In autumn, when certain mallees in this area are in flower, there can be many flocks of purple-crowned lorikeets noisily foraging for nectar and pollen, or flying swiftly from one feeding site to another. The purple-gaped and yellow-plumed honeyeaters can also be found at Mount Ragged itself, along with others such as the brown-headed honeyeater. If you are lucky, you may also see a wedge-tailed eagle soaring around the mountaintop.



THE PARK'S IMPORTANCE

In terms of numbers of species, the 160 bird species of Cape Arid compare well with other large national parks in south-western Australia. There are about 140 species in the Stirling Range National Park, and about 170 to 180 in Kalbarri and Fitzgerald River national parks. Kalbarri National Park is also at the boundary of the south-western and drier areas, while Fitzgerald River National Park is slightly larger than Cape Arid National Park and includes more of the wetter zone species.

Most importantly, Cape Arid National Park includes suitable habitat for the endangered western ground parrot, and good populations of south-western and arid zone species.

Above: New Holland honeyeaters inhabit the areas of heath.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below: A view of the coast towards Mount Arid.
Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman
Transparencies

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Botanists rediscover a presumed extinct grass perched on the mountain tops of the Stirling Range National Park. See page 43.



Discover Perth's eight regional parks and their special features and attractions on page 28.



How can we preserve the Leeuwin-Naturaliste caves while catering for increasing visitation? See page 16.



Salinity Strategy surveys are revealing that salinity threatens more than 850 Wheatbelt plant species. How can managers intervene? See page 36.



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COVER

More than 160 different bird species use Cape Arid National Park, which lies on the South Coast about 120 kilometres east of Esperance. The red-eared firetail is one of them. This exotic-looking finch is confined to south-western Australia. It is found in areas of dense heath and undergrowth in thick forest, never too far inland. Cape Arid National Park is the eastern limit of its distribution.



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