A THORNY PROBLEM

Prickly acacia (*Acacia nilotica*) was introduced to Queensland in the 1890s as an ornamental tree. Since then, cattle have consumed the pods and spread the seed throughout Queensland and parts of the Northern Territory. It is now estimated that seven million hectares are covered in prickly thickets of this registered 'weed of national significance'. The cost to biodiversity has yet to be calculated, but primary industry losses are estimated at $4 million per year. The bad news is that prickly acacia is still spreading.

"This is why there was a stir when it was reported to be growing on the roadside in the east Kimberley near Halls Creek," said Tony Start, a Department of Conservation and Land Management principal research scientist.

"Fortunately, the one young tree was destroyed, but it highlighted the importance of people keeping a sharp eye out for it occurring anywhere else," he said.

While departmental officers are vigilant, people should watch out for prickly acacia—particularly on roadsides anywhere in the north of Western Australia. The seeds (which remain dormant for long periods) can grow to maturity after falling off an interstate vehicle.

What do you need to look for? Young plants are shrub-like and often form dense, prickly thickets, but mature trees have an umbrella shape, similar to the ones seen in pictures of the African savannah (even though the Australian variety came from Pakistan). Pairs of ridged thorns—up to five centimetres long—protect fine, feathery leaves and round yellow flowers, just like many Australian acacias. The 15 centimetre (or more) greyish pods, deeply constricted between each seed, look like pendulous strings of flattened beads.

"Young prickly acacia plants look similar to the mimosa bush (*Acacia farnesiana*). People must be careful not to confuse the two," says Tony.

"The mimosa bush is common in the Pilbara and Kimberley, where it is sometimes also called prickly acacia. The bark on the twigs of the mimosa bush is dark and rough, with tiny pale spots, whereas the prickly acacia's twigs are smooth and green. Mimosa bush pods are dark, not much more than six centimetres long and are shaped like slightly curved cigars."

People should remember that when visiting northern Australia, they can help protect our heritage and economy by taking a small sample of anything they suspect to be the prickly acacia weed to their nearest Department of Conservation and Land Management or Department of Agriculture office.

The prickly acacia's thorns are up to five centimetres long.
Photo – Colin Wilson

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

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME EIGHTEEN, NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 2003

Once thought to be extinct, Gilbert's potoroo has overcome many obstacles. What is being done to improve its chances of survival? See page 28.

Cane toads are poisonous, prolific breeders and are getting closer to the WA border. Hop to page 10.

Discover some of the prehistoric megafauna that once roamed the State in 'Walking with WA giants' on page 23.

The tuart once typified the coastal strip north and south of Perth. Why should we cherish this majestic tree? See page 16.

Lichens decorate Lake Muir, near Manjimup, with varying colours and shapes. Turn to page 43 to learn more about these fascinating life forms.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Royal hakea rises above the surrounding heath, straight and column-like. When sunlit from above or below, its unusual large variegated leaves appear to glow like lanterns, so the shrub is also known as the Chinese lantern bush. Among the birds that obtain nectar from its flowers (hidden at the base of the leaves) is the western spinebill.

Royal hakea grows almost exclusively in Fitzgerald River National Park, an area that was reserved on the recommendation of then Government Botanist Charles Gardner (see 'Botanic Guardian' on page 36).

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

Executive editor: Ron Kawalilak.
Editors: David Gough, Carolyn Thomson-Dans.
Bush Telegraph editor: Verna Costello.
Story editor: Rhianna Mooney.
Scientific/technical advice: Keith Morris, Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Alan Danks.
Design and production: Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Gooitzen van der Meer.
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography: Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498.
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.
Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital.
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print.

Please do not send unsolicited material to *LANDSCOPE*, but feel free to telephone the editors.
Visit NatureBase at www.naturebase.net
Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

DEPARTMENT OF Conservation AND LAND MANAGEMENT
Conserving the nature of WA