

Cape Le Grand National Park

European heritage



Behind the names of Mount Le Grand, Thistle Cove, Lucky Bay, Rossiter Bay, Frenchmans Peak and Mississippi Hill, all in Cape Le Grand National Park, are tales of exploration, of whaling and of discovery.

by Libby Sandiford

Wild coastal scenery, rugged granite peaks and sweeping heathlands characterise Cape Le Grand National Park, a park of around 32,000 hectares about 30 kilometres south-east of Esperance.

The French were among the first Europeans to explore this coast, arriving in December 1792. An expedition, under the command of Admiral Bruny D'Entrecasteaux, had sailed east along the western south coast of what was known as 'New Holland'. Despite a brief to explore the land for its water supply and agricultural potential, and to report on its local inhabitants, the sailors did not venture ashore until they reached what is now Esperance, where they spent a few days.



However, the French were far from impressed by what they saw. The expedition's naturalist, Labillardiere, noted that:

'the interior country was interspersed with sandy downs which had the appearance of great sterility'.

The colours and forms of the sandplain heaths promised no agricultural prospects to European eyes accustomed to bright greens. But the wildflowers delighted the naturalist, and among Labillardiere's discoveries was creeping banksia (*Banksia repens*), whose ground hugging flowers rely on pollination by mammals such as the honey possum.

The French names of many features are a legacy from this period of exploration. Labillardiere described the events that led to the naming of the southern cape:

'*L'Espérance* was driving towards the land so rapidly that she was on the point of being stranded when Citizen Le Grand ... went to the masthead in the very midst of the tempest and almost immediately came down, explaining

with enthusiasm that the ship was out of danger! He then pointed out the anchoring place ... This discovery saved both the ships [*L'Espérance* and *La Recherche*] ... We gave [the cape] ... the name of Citizen Le Grand'.

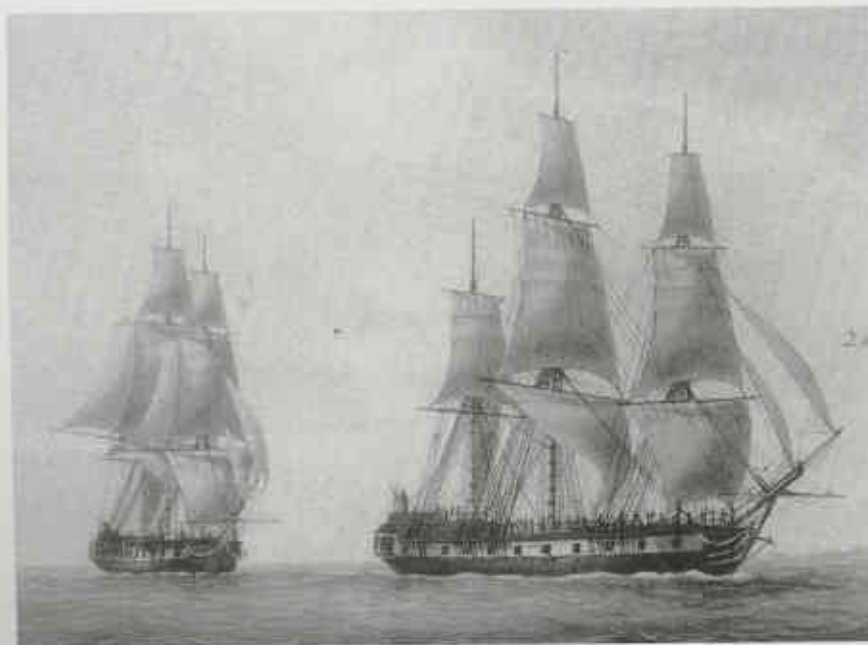
Flinders

The next mariner of note to arrive was Englishman Captain Matthew Flinders in 1802. He was determined to travel through the islands, which D'Entrecasteaux had named the Archipelago of the Recherche, but skirted in 1792. However, he encountered a fairly severe summer storm. With, according to Flinders:

'no prospect of shelter under any of the islands, I found myself under the necessity of adopting a hazardous measure ... we steered directly before the wind for the main coast, where the appearance of some beaches behind other islands, gave a hope of finding anchorage. At seven in the evening we entered a small sandy bay, and finding it sheltered everywhere except from south west ... the anchor was dropped. The critical circumstance under which this place was discovered induced me to give it the name of Lucky Bay.'

Like D'Entrecasteaux, Flinders was unimpressed with the appearance of the land, though astonished at the variety of wildflowers:

'The vegetation indeed consisted of an abundant variety of shrubs and small plants and yielded a delightful harvest to the botanists, but to the herdsman and cultivator promised nothing, not a blade of grass, nor a square yard of soil from which the seed delivered to it could be expected back, was perceivable to the eye in its course over these arid plains.'



Previous page

Main Thistle Cove in Cape Le Grand National Park.

Photo – Col Roberts/Lochman Transparencies

Insets from top Illustrations of Captain Matthew Flinders and Admiral Bruny D'Entrecasteaux.

Above left Captain Matthew Flinders. *Image* – Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

Left Detail of *La Recherche* and *L'Espérance*, taken from a painting by Frédéric Roux, now in the Musée de La Marine, Paris.



However, Flinders thought Thistle Cove 'a small but useful find' and named it after Mr Thistle, the crew member who discovered it. With both wood and water here, Flinders thought it superior to Lucky Bay.

During the visit, Flinder's gardener Peter Good became one of the first Europeans to scale Frenchmans Peak. He wrote that:

'on ascending near the summit and arriving at the entrance we had supposed a cavern—we were astonished to find it a natural arch—entirely through the mountain ... on the summit we could count the country set on fire in 9 different places by the natives ... but what we saw is barren, no luxuriant vegetation to be seen'.

The fires were used by Aboriginal people to flush out animals and promote new growth to attract game.

Good also described their attempts to sample the local bush tucker, in this case the fruit of the zamia:

'In this day's excursion we met with a species of cycad with plenty of green fruit—on cutting it open and tasting, the seeds were very palatable and full of juice. As water was scarce we ate heartily then made a fire and roasted them and ate it in that form—but very soon after [were] taken with a pain in the stomach, a headache and repeated retching which continued all day'.

The seeds of this plant were a staple food of the Aboriginal people, but they first removed the toxins and carcinogens

by a complex and lengthy method involving leaching, burial and roasting.

Sealers and whalers

The next wave of visitors was the sealers, many of whom were fur hunters from Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). The skins of New Zealand fur seals were particularly valuable.

Above Lucky Bay, Cape Le Grand National Park.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below left This small unnamed bay between Lucky Bay and Thistle Cove can be seen whilst walking the Cape Le Grand Coastal Trail.

Photo – Maria Lochman

Below Other crew members became extremely ill, after sampling the seeds of the zamia (*Macrozamia reidii*).

Photo – Jiri Lochman





fetching 15 shillings at King George Sound and more than two pounds in London. However, by the 1840s, Western Australia's first industry had collapsed with the decimation of the seal populations. Today, though, both Australian sea lions and New Zealand fur seals are occasionally seen resting on the shores of these bays.

Like sealers, whalers were among the first non-Aboriginal people to benefit from the 'discovery' of this coastline. As the name implies, the preferred target, in the days of open-

boat whaling with hand harpoons, was the southern right whale. This is because it was slow swimming, floated when dead and yielded large amounts of valuable products, particularly oil for illumination and lubrication, and baleen (horny plates that hang from the whale's upper jaw, used to filter food). Fortunately, these whales have now increased in numbers from near extinction in the late 1800s and, in winter and spring, right whales are frequently sighted along this coastline when females come close to shore to

give birth. A v-shaped blow, the lack of a dorsal fin and squarish flippers distinguish the right whale from others. These mammals also have horny light-coloured growths called callosities around their heads, and the pattern of these is unique to each animal.

Eyre overland

In 1841, while attempting to become the first European to cross from South Australia to Albany by land, Edward John Eyre and his Aboriginal guide Wylie approached Cape Le Grand from the east. Exhausted and suffering from the rigours of crossing the Nullarbor, they were heading for Thistle Cove where Flinders had previously recorded fresh water and where Eyre hoped to find food:

'we commenced our journey without breakfast. Being near Thistle Cove, where I intended to halt some time ... I was



Above Looking over granite tors and Thistle Lake to Frenchmans Peak.
Photo - Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

Left Southern right whale.
Photo - Steve Sadler

Right Hellfire Bay
Photo – Steve Sadler

Below right Rossiter Bay.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman
Transparencies



anxious to husband our little stock of flour in the hope that at the little fresh water lake described by Flinders ... we should find abundance of flag reed for our support'.

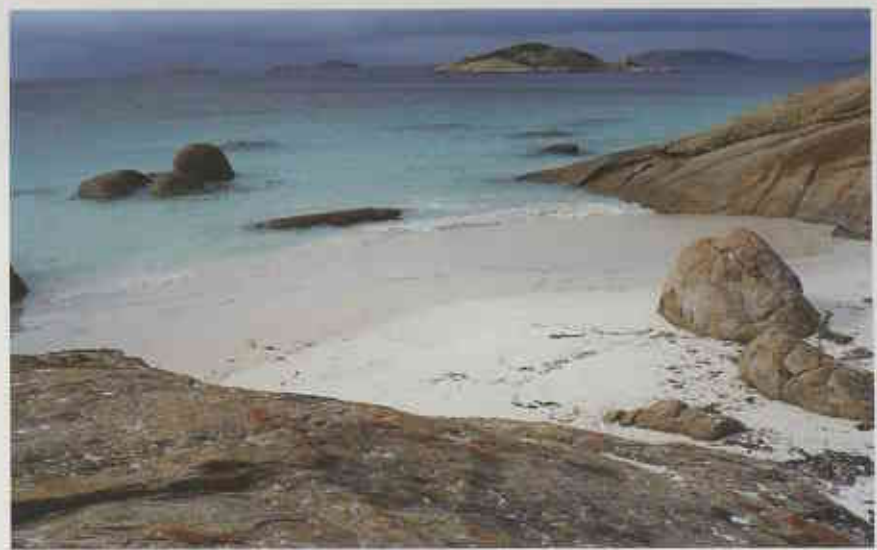
This reed was a native bulrush (*Typha angustifolia*), which Eyre thought:

'[an] excellent and nutritious food ... of agreeable flavour and wholesome and satisfying to the appetite'.

On reaching Rossiters Bay, Eyre recorded that:

'upon looking towards the sea I thought I had discovered a boat sailing in the bay. Having hastily made a fire ... we fired shots, shouted, waved handkerchiefs and made every signal we could to attract attention, but in vain ... we stood silently and sullenly gazing after the boats as they gradually receded from our view. Whilst ... brooding over our disappointment we were surprised to see both boats suddenly lower their sails ... Poor Wylie's joy knew no bounds and he leapt and skippered about with delight ... I was no less pleased ... [soon] we were domiciled on board the hospitable *Mississippi*—a change of circumstance so great, so sudden, so unexpected that it seemed more like a dream than reality.'

The Captain of the *Mississippi*, a whaling boat, was Mr Rossiter, after whom Eyre named the bay. Nearby Mississippi Hill, visible from Lucky Bay, was named after the ship. The *Mississippi* had arrived a few weeks earlier for the whale season. One chase was made while Eyre was on board, but was abandoned when they realised the whale was a humpback. Eyre noted that the whaling life was 'one of regularity but considerable hardship'. Once they had recuperated and had been provided with stores, Eyre and Wylie continued their journey and reached Albany a month later. Like those before him, Eyre considered the whole south coast



'arid and barren in the extreme', which no doubt delayed further interest in this coastline. However, he noted the Cape Le Grand area:

'Altogether seemed a favourable place and had we not met with the vessel it would have held out to us the prospect of obtaining an abundant supply of food for ourselves'.

A party led by explorer and prominent colonist John Forrest also passed through the area in 1870, in search of good country for pasture. During this expedition, Frenchmans Peak was named by his brother, surveyor Alexander Forrest, because its shape was said to resemble a man wearing a Frenchman's cap. The Aboriginal name for the peak is Mandoorbureup.

Today, the wild coastal scenery,

wide beaches set in sheltered bays, rugged granite peaks and sweeping heathlands continue to attract visitors to Cape Le Grand National Park. However, they are also encouraged to reflect on the park's early history. A two-kilometre return heritage trail enables visitors to retrace the footsteps of these early explorers.

Libby Sandford worked on the South Coast Heritage Trails Project for the Department of Conservation and Land Management in 1987-88. She lives in Albany, where she is a consultant botanist, and can be contacted on (08) 9644 4860.

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Publishing credits

Executive editor Ron Kawalilak

Editors David Gough,
Carolyn Thomson-Dans.

Contributing editors Verna Costello,
Rhianna Mooney.

Scientific/technical advice

Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Chris Simpson, Keith Morris

Design and production Tiffany Aberin,
Maria Duthie, Natalie Jolakoski,
Gooitzen van der Meer.

Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.

Cartography Promaco Geodraft.

Marketing Estelle de San Miguel

Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0498.

Subscription enquiries

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