

Bookings



Wanna know
a secret?



On the very northern edge of the Gascoyne lies a wonderfully kept secret. Where flat, barren landscape is the norm, this secret is an oasis of life. Stunning ranges sweep through its boundaries, rivers and creeklines meander throughout and giant gums line waterways harbouring a spectacular profusion of bird life.

by **Samille Mitchell and Brett Fitzgerald**



A picturesque area that was previously part of Wanna Station is hidden in the remote landscape of the Gascoyne region. Using Commonwealth government Natural Heritage Trust funding, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) bought 288,808 hectares of the station in June 2003 as part of its Rangelands Pastoral Land Acquisition Program aimed at better preserving natural habitats in the Gascoyne and Murchison regions. The remainder of Wanna Station has been amalgamated with the adjoining Gifford Creek Station and the resultant property has retained the name Wanna.

To avoid confusion, the section of Wanna purchased by CALM will

require a distinctive name, worthy of the remarkable country it contains. It is hoped that an appropriate name will be determined during the management planning process for this area.

Before the inception of the land acquisition program, just 1.4 million hectares—representing about 2.4 per cent of the Gascoyne and Murchison

regions—were protected in conservation reserves. Following the purchase of 3,914,691 hectares of land under the program, that figure has leapt to 5.4 million hectares—nine per cent of the region.

Wildflowers

Situated at the northern end of the Gascoyne region boundary, the area includes a diverse range of habitats, ranging from mulga and snakewood shrublands to low woodlands and spinifex hummock grasslands.

The Irregully, Muntharra and Wandarray creeks run through the property before joining the Ashburton River and flowing into the Indian Ocean at Onslow. Draining in a southerly direction is the Frederick River, which joins the Lyons River and then the Gascoyne River to finally discharge into the waters of Shark Bay at Carnarvon. Thus, run-off from the same rainfall event on this property could eventually discharge into the Indian Ocean at two locations 400 kilometres apart.

Though it has not been comprehensively surveyed, the property contains examples of both Gascoyne and Pilbara flora. Of the six vegetation types known to occur on Wanna, five are considered to be inadequately represented in existing conservation reserves. One vegetation type—lobed spinifex (*Triodia basedowii*) hummock grassland—was virtually unrepresented in any conservation reserve, and only poorly represented in other land managed by CALM. The acquisition of this area has added an



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Main Early morning at Strama Pool on Irregully Creek.

Photo – Iain Copp

Insets from left Little corellas; Rothschild's rock-wallaby; zebra finch.

Photos – Lochman Transparencies

Textures and colours from Wanna.

Photos – Samille Mitchell

Left Crimson peaflowers (*Sphaerolobium*) at Wanna.

Photo – Iain Copp



additional 500 hectares of this vegetation type to the conservation reserve system.

Another two vegetation types—mulga (*Acacia aneura*) and snakewood (*Acacia eremaea*) shrubland, and low woodland of *Acacia victoriae* and snakewood—had less than five per cent of their original ranges within conservation reserves. One of these systems, mulga and snakewood shrubland, comprises most of the area. With the purchase of this property, the area of this vegetation system in reserves has increased from four per cent to 15.5 per cent, and it is now considered adequately represented.

Thanks in part to the relatively inaccessible nature of the area, and to conservative practices of previous pastoral managers, the vegetation has been maintained in good condition.

Wildlife

The area is also home to a range of native animals. While no comprehensive wildlife surveys have yet been conducted, initial property inspections indicated that animals found there are predominantly species typical of the Pilbara.

CALM staff have reported sightings of the uncommon Rothschild's rock-wallaby and have been told of sightings of the northern quoll. The threatened

Pilbara olive python has been found there too, confirming pastoralists' reports that this magnificent python species—the largest snake in WA, with lengths of up to 4.5 metres (see 'Giant pythons of the Pilbara', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2003)—was frequently encountered while working across the property. In fact, the land remains in such good condition, compared to its heavily-grazed surrounds, that CALM staff hope monitoring will reveal a relatively unspoiled array of native mammals and reptiles.

CALM intends to begin fauna monitoring in the near future. Information gleaned from the monitoring will serve as a benchmark from which the station's biological diversity can be judged in the future. And, of course, there's always the hope of discovering species outside their known range. The area's topography has made it difficult to develop and this means the land is still in good shape. Because of this, finding rare or uncommon animals is a distinct possibility.

Containing the headwaters of the spectacular Irregully and Muntharra creek systems, the area is rarely without numerous river pools, which provide important refuges for a variety of wildlife species through times of drought. The presence of permanent water in river pools and springs on the

Above Part of the land formerly in Wanna Station, that has been acquired for conservation.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

station means that it harbours birds by the thousand. Representatives from Birds Australia have been invited to visit next year to start developing a database of the station's spectacular feathered inhabitants.

Walk along a riverbank and you'll see the trees and an explosion of colour and sound, as zebra finches and diamond doves erupt from the branches. The chitter-chatter of budgerigars is also commonplace, along with the raucous calls of galahs and little corellas. Visitors will also be sure to spot the exquisite spinifex pigeon and the Australian bustard. Even pelicans, so far from their coastal homes, soar the thermals in stark contrast to their rust red surrounds.

Wanna-ful landscape

The Wanna countryside is renowned as some of the most spectacular in the region, with giant ranges sweeping through the property. The Godfrey Range forms the southern boundary of the CALM-managed area. This spectacular range is broken in only three places along the



32-kilometre boundary. Vehicle access is possible through only one of these gaps.

The magnificent entrance to the CALM-managed portion of the station is itself enough to grace a postcard. Called Coodardo's Gap, the entrance is framed by two battlements of the Godfrey Range plunging abruptly down to a magnificent creek system lined with river gums.

The river meanders towards two waterholes—Faithful Pool and Pretty Pool. As the name suggests, Pretty Pool is particularly scenic. The slate rock that dominates so much of the landscape forms building blocks on a cliff face overlooking the pool. Reflected in the pool's waters, the cliff face's regular square blocks look particularly striking.

But it is Gregory's Gap that most impresses with its magnificence. The gap is part of the Godfrey Ranges—a virtually impregnable landscape of sheer cliff faces, tabletop hills and rugged red rock. The gap itself is heralded by two giant rounded hills. Clamber to the top of them and the river that runs at their feet diminishes in size and the ethereal form of Mount Augustus shimmers on the distant horizon.

When viewed from this vantage point, the comprehensiveness of the

Top Folded beds of sandstone and siltstone of the Minnierra Range.

Centre left Spring time in the Minnierra Range.

Photos – Iain Copp

Left Pretty Pool.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

properties acquired through the Gascoyne Murchison Strategy is brought into perspective. Behind the viewer, the 288,808-hectare expanse acquired from Wanna stretches north towards the Ashburton River. In front of the viewer, the iconic Mount Augustus within the Mount Augustus National Park looms on the horizon. To the west of Mount Augustus, the Centipede Range on the CALM-acquired Cobra Station snakes across the landscape.

Aboriginal history

All of these landmarks were significant to the area's original inhabitants, and Wanna itself was important because of the permanent water sources. A rock painting of a giant olive python is testimony to Aboriginal use of the area and their intimate knowledge of the area's biodiversity.

Even the station's name arose from the Aboriginal-named Wanna Hill. Several explanations for the name exist. One theory is that the name arose from the Payungu word 'wana mulu', meaning 'shag' or 'cormorant'. Another says it comes from the Yingarrda word for 'little black cormorant'. And yet another explanation says it comes from 'wangana'—the Jiwardi word for 'grey duck'. Or perhaps the name arose from the word 'wanna', meaning womens' digging stick. Aboriginal legend had it that any Aboriginal person to go through the gap or walk in the shadow of its walls would die.

Ingarda elder Ron Crowe is chairman of the Gnulli Native Title claim over the area and says the area has been highly important to Aboriginal people. He points to the carvings, art and shield trees as evidence of early Aboriginal occupation. Ron was born in the region and spent many years mustering at Wanna Station in the 1960s and 1970s. He believes there is something extra special about the area's landscape—it becomes a part of you, he says. And he confirms that the area harbours rare and uncommon wildlife like Rothschild's rock-wallabies, olive pythons and quolls. Ron is glad to see the area protected under CALM management. He says it's vital to preserve such a special piece of bush and the animals it shelters.



Above Lee Steere Pool.
Photo – Samille Mitchell

Station history

The first European to venture into the area was Francis T Gregory. In 1858, Gregory explored extensive areas of the Gascoyne region, travelling from near the present-day site of Kalbarri, along the Murchison, Gascoyne and Lyons rivers. During this expedition, he climbed and named the nearby Mount Augustus and visited the area at the mouth of the Gascoyne River where the town of Carnarvon is now located.

Three years later, in 1861, Gregory sailed to Nickol Bay and, over the course of the next six months, explored extensive areas of the Pilbara. During June 1861, Gregory explored the Wanna area. On 25 June, Gregory sighted Mount Augustus from the Kenneth Range and, later that day, passed through the gorge now named Gregorys Gap, in the Godfrey Range. Gregory's journal recorded:

'from the summit of this pass the course of the stream could be traced across the fertile flats of the Lyons until it was lost in the numerous channels of the river and I was able to obtain bearings to many well

remembered objects noticed on my former visit to this part of the country'.

On 26 June, Gregory blazed several large trees on the northern side of the gorge. Some of these trees are still standing with the axe marks clearly visible.

Within 60 years, pastoralists began taking up leases in the area. A team of three men—Donald Ryan, Alexander Grant and David Grant—established Wanna, calling it Elliot Creek Station. In 1923, Ernest Lee Steere and Henry Percy Sprigg took on the property and introduced cattle there. They employed Angus Paterson to manage the station, and he and his wife Josephine set about better establishing the property and its homestead.

It must have been a trying life for this pioneering young couple and their eldest two daughters in this rugged, remote stretch of countryside.



Above Looking out towards Muntharra Tabletop rising above Irregully Creek.
Photo – Iain Copp



Far left Remnants of an old cattle yard on the part of the property now managed for conservation.



Left Trees blazed by F T Gregory in 1861 still have clearly visible axe marks.
Photos – Samille Mitchell

Communication with the outside world was difficult, as there was no telephone line, but they could rely on a pedal radio to reach the Royal Flying Doctor base in Meekatharra. Times became even tougher in the mid-1930s when drought began to grip the land. By 1938, the couple had left. The station was then managed by a string of others, before Ernest Lee Steere returned from the war to take on the property once more.

In the early 1960s, the Adams family purchased the lease and changed the station's name to Wanna. They too eventually moved on and Rudy and Shirley Van Dogen assumed management of the property in 1984. By 1989, Bill and Nina Radford began managing the property.

It was Bill and Nina who encouraged the owners to negotiate with CALM in a bid to preserve the land. Bill says Wanna's northern end remains a pristine piece of country, worthy of preservation. He applauds the efforts of CALM rangelands conservation coordinator Tony Brandis

for his work on the land acquisition program. Today, Bill's son Bruce continues to manage the section of Wanna not purchased by CALM, and helps CALM with necessary operations on the acquired area.

Wanna's future

CALM has started a management planning process for the area. An important part of the planning process will be liaison with all stakeholders to determine necessary and appropriate management actions needed to preserve the area's unique features. An important component of the management plan will be consideration of the area's suitability as a wilderness area. Remoteness, lack of infrastructure and low levels of impact by feral animals all contribute to the wilderness quality of the area. After suitable assessment, some areas of the old Wanna lease may be declared wilderness areas.

To preserve the wilderness values, and because of concerns about visitor safety, visitation is currently discouraged. Steep gorges mean a

single serious rainfall event could cut all access north of the Godfrey Range, with serious consequences for anyone stranded in the area.

The need to establish biological baseline data for the area makes it an excellent location to conduct a *LANDSCOPE* Expedition, and plans for such a survey are being made for 2006. Flora and fauna surveys conducted by expedition members would help CALM management planning for the area. *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions would also allow participants to experience this rare and relatively pristine area of WA's outback. With uncommon and rare wildlife present on Wanna, participants may be involved in the discovery of some very special animal and plant species. Why not join us!



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