



Wungong Regional Park

by Paul Burns



The national and regional parks of the Darling Range east of Perth are precious for their scenic beauty and provide valuable habitat for native wildlife. They are also ideal locations for recreational activities such as walking, picnicking, horseriding, abseiling and rock climbing. Wungong Regional Park—one of four regional parks in the area—is an outer-city haven for native animals and humans alike.

The Forest Management Plan 2004–2013 instigated the separation of the Darling Range Regional Park into four separate regional parks in Chidlow, Kalamunda, Kelmscott–Martin and Wungong. The four regional parks are currently named after their locality, but the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is in consultation with Aboriginal groups to rename the parks with Indigenous titles.

The regional park in Wungong is an area of 4,103 hectares, directly east

of the town of Byford. It is made up of a number of separate blocks, the biggest of which are the Wungong Valley, nearest to Byford, and Churchmans Brook, which is adjacent to the Canning River. These areas cover a variety of landscapes and accommodate a range of plants and animals.

Wungong Valley

Wungong Valley lies among the rugged hills at the edge of the Darling Scarp, where the terrain is rough and access is by a single dirt track. The red, rocky soil supports towering stands of

marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) and jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) trees. Under the canopy lies a thick carpet of low-lying heath and tangled undergrowth that provides perfect cover for the valley's native marsupials.

Over thousands of years, wind and rain have scrubbed away patches of topsoil from some of the valley's steep slopes, exposing the granite bedrock beneath. These bare outcrops form spectacular features against a backdrop of woodland greenery. Over time, further erosion has cut deep slices in the rock and polished some sections so that they gleam in the sun, creating an odd contrast of smooth and rough. Along the cracks and crevices in the rock, patches of native grass and the occasional sheoak (*Allocasuarina fraseriana*) retain a tenuous grip on the sheer hillside.

Throughout the Wungong Valley there are continual reminders of nature's life cycle. A solitary, long-dead jarrah tree sits atop a steep hill, bleached white by the sunlight and hollowed out by rot and decay. The tree has probably been dead for decades, but still provides habitat for native species such as possums and



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Main Forest understorey.

Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Insets from left Bushtail possum.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Firewood banksia.

Photo – Rob Olver

Scarlet robin.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left Western grey kangaroo.

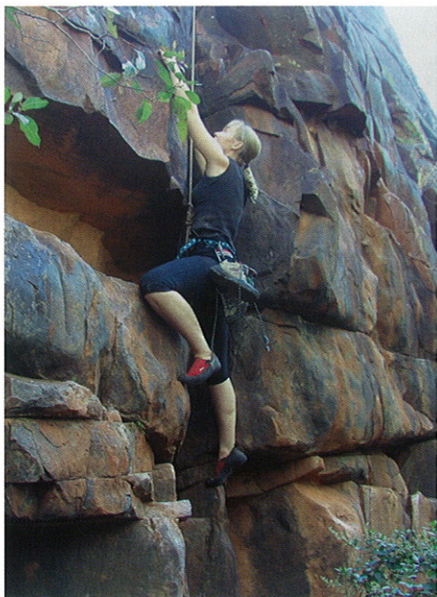
Photo – Jay Sarson/Lochman

Transparencies

Below Sweeping vistas in Wungong Regional Park.

Photo – Paul Burns/DEC





Above Rock climbing at Churchmans Brook.

Photo – Phillip Calais

Above right Tranquil scenes in Wungong Regional Park.

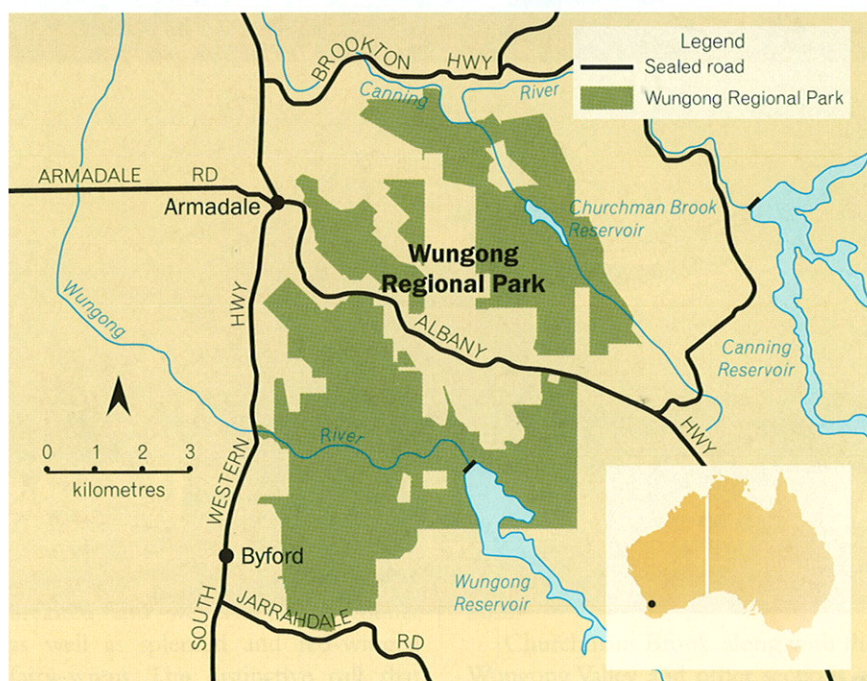
Photo – Paul Burns/DEC



parrots. Some trees and bushes still bear black scorch marks from the last bushfire. Fires can threaten animals, destroy plants and remove much of the ground cover that is used as habitat. However, it also plays an important role in regeneration and clears space for new shoots to push up through the soil without having to compete with larger plants for sunlight. The heat of a bushfire also enables the seed pods of the firewood banksia (*Banksia menziesii*) to open and, after a fire, kangaroos and quenda are provided with a feast of tender, green shoots.

Churchmans Brook

Churchmans Brook is a smaller section of the regional park that lies east of Armadale, overlooking Roleystone Valley. The vegetation of Churchmans Brook differs greatly from Wungong Valley. Water-loving paperbarks (*Melaleuca acacioides*) thrive along the banks of the Canning River, together with thick groves of flooded gums (*Eucalyptus rudis*). Because the area has been subjected to grazing, there is very little undergrowth. In its place, weeds like watsonia, blackberry and Paterson's curse have sprung up to choke out the scrub, seriously affecting the area's biodiversity. Fortunately, volunteer groups such as the Churchmans



Bushland Association have weeded broad areas along the Canning River and successfully revegetated the banks with indigenous bushes and reeds. Further from the river, there is evidence of the native bush fighting back, as a field of Paterson's curse succumbs to a grove of marri saplings. As the saplings grow and spread their branches, the prolific weeds are shaded out, enabling more marri trees to establish themselves. Over decades, generations of trees have crept down the field to form a cascading wave across the clearing.

A steep cliff face within Churchmans Brook is one of Perth's

most popular climbing locations and offers climbs with a range of difficulty levels that cater to the beginner to the 'hardman'. The breathtaking panorama from the top of the cliff, which enables you to see deep into the Roleystone Valley and along the Darling Scarp, is well worth the effort of making it to the top. A few metres up the cliff face lies a narrow alcove and although moisture permeates through the back wall of the cave, it is well protected from wind and rain. It is believed the infamous bushranger Moondyne Joe used the cave as one of his many hide outs along the Darling Range.



Left Short-beaked echidna.
Photo – Jiri Lochman



Below left Wungong was one of the first established farming districts in WA.
Photo – Courtesy Battye Library (012796d)

History

The Nyoongar Aboriginal people have inhabited the south-west of Western Australia for thousands of years, including the Perth hills where Wungong Valley is located.

However, it wasn't until the mid-1800s that Europeans began to settle in the area. History records hostile meetings between the Aboriginal people and the new European settlers. However, in other instances Aboriginal people are said to have helped their European counterparts with such tasks as finding water, and relatively friendly relations ensued.

Wungong was one of the first established farming districts in WA. Thomas Saw first bought into the area

near Admiral Road, downstream from what is now Wungong Dam, in 1865 with his brother-in-law, William Lacey Gibbs. Gibbs' share in the land was acquired by William Butcher senior the following year.

The Butcher family was to have a significant influence on the future of the area, their impact extending from Armadale–Kelmescott through to Serpentine–Jarrahdale. William Butcher senior was said to have arrived in Perth at the age of 12. The boy had a note pinned to his coat asking for “a good Christian family to take him in and care for him”. He worked around the Gingin area for some years, before marrying Marian Horton in 1853. They moved to the Kelmescott district, where

William began carting sandalwood along the road from Fremantle to Albany. It was through this business that he discovered the potential of the Wungong Valley.

After buying Gibbs' land, Butcher built a cottage close to the brook—the first of four dwellings built in the area by the Butcher family. The cottage no longer exists and all that remains of the Butcher homestead is a cement slab and a couple of gnarled mulberry trees. Further up the Wungong River lie the remnants of a water mill, which was adapted to churn butter, cut timber and grind wheat. In 1900, the Butcher family's presence in the area was consolidated, when Saw sold some of his land to Robert Batt, who had married Sarah Ann Butcher in 1886.

Churchmans Brook derives its name from Captain Charles Blissett Churchman, who arrived at the Swan River Colony in 1830 with an ambition to farm the land, and by 1831 was assigned 5,666 acres in the district now known as Roleystone. Churchman arrived at a difficult time in the Swan River Colony's history. Money and labour were in short supply, and food was scarce to the point of starvation. Like many other settlers unaccustomed to their new surroundings, Churchman struggled against the unyielding land and harsh climate, without success. The strain eventually took its toll and in 1833, at the age of 43 years, he died of ‘apoplexy or paralysis’.

Churchman died without leaving a will, and many years passed before his estate was reallocated. His land was left to return to its natural state, undisturbed until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Managing the park

DEC faces a number of challenges in managing the regional park in

Right Wungong Regional Park is popular for bushwalking through jarrah forest.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Below right Bushranger Moondyne Joe is believed to have used a cave in Wungong Regional Park as a hideout.
Photo – Paul Burns/DEC

Wungong. Because most of the land had been used for agriculture, weeds pose a major problem to the maintenance of biodiversity and the provision of habitat for native wildlife. It requires ongoing effort to manage existing weed infestations and control new ones. The area is also at high risk of bushfires. The steep hills make access for firefighting vehicles difficult, while also increasing the volatility of a spreading fire. The fire risk makes the creation and maintenance of firebreaks essential. However, choosing a good alignment is important, as the tracks are susceptible to erosion from rain washing down the hilly slopes of the valley. Introduced animals such as foxes, rabbits and pigs do significant damage to native species through habitat destruction, competition for green feed and preying on native mammals. Apart from being environmentally destructive, feral pigs can pose a serious danger to people, so DEC runs a seasonal trapping program to keep pig numbers in check.

The Wungong Valley provides habitat for a number of native mammals, including western grey kangaroos (*Macropus fuliginosus*), western brush wallabies (*M. irma*), brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) and echidnas (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*). The quenda or southern brown bandicoot (*Isodon obesulus*) is making something of a comeback in the area, as the low scrub provides the small marsupial with shelter and a place to hide from its main threat, the fox. However, despite its recent recovery, the quenda's future in Wungong remains uncertain, due to the pressure of feral animals and nearby development.

The valley is also home to an array of bird species, and is a popular site for birdwatchers. A variety of honeyeaters occupy the regional park, such as the



New Holland, brown and white-naped honeyeaters. The area features white-breasted and western yellow robins, as well as splendid and red-winged fairy-wrens. The distinctive call that gives the golden whistler its name can be heard throughout the valley, as well as the rising chirps of grey fantails. A number of colourful parrot species also occupy the area, including western rosellas, red-capped parrots and elegant parrots. In recent times the valley has become home to a family of wedge-

tailed eagles, and the occasional emu has been spotted roaming through the bush.

Churchmans Brook, along with the Wungong Valley and other sections of the regional park, have been allowed to re-vegetate and recover. Many of the marks of human occupation have been erased as the native bush reclaims cleared land. Now people can enjoy and use the land in a way that doesn't adversely affect the natural surroundings.

Paul Burns was a final-year, creative writing student at Curtin University when he undertook a work experience placement with *LANDSCOPE* and wrote this article.

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