



Wattles: an Australian icon

Wattles feature prominently in Australian heritage but even today we are discovering new species, many in the wattle-rich Pilbara.

by Samille Mitchell and Bruce Maslin
Photos by Bruce Maslin

Perhaps no other plant is as quintessentially Australian as the wattle. Wattles form the Australian floral emblem, they adorn the Australian Coat of Arms and they are the insignia for the Order of Australia medals. Australia's official colours are those of the wattle—green and gold—and towns like Hyden and Dalwallinu use local wattle species as their town floral emblems. A day has even been set aside in their honour—1 September is Wattle Day.

Wattles (*Acacia*) make up the biggest group of woody plants in Australia and the Pilbara is one of the most species-rich areas for their occurrence. More

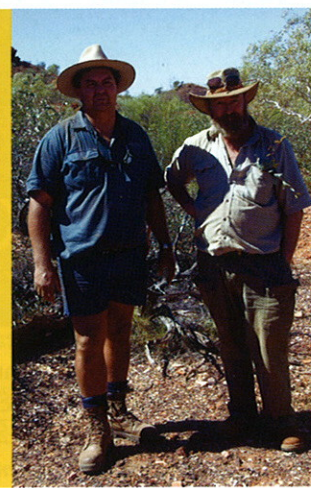
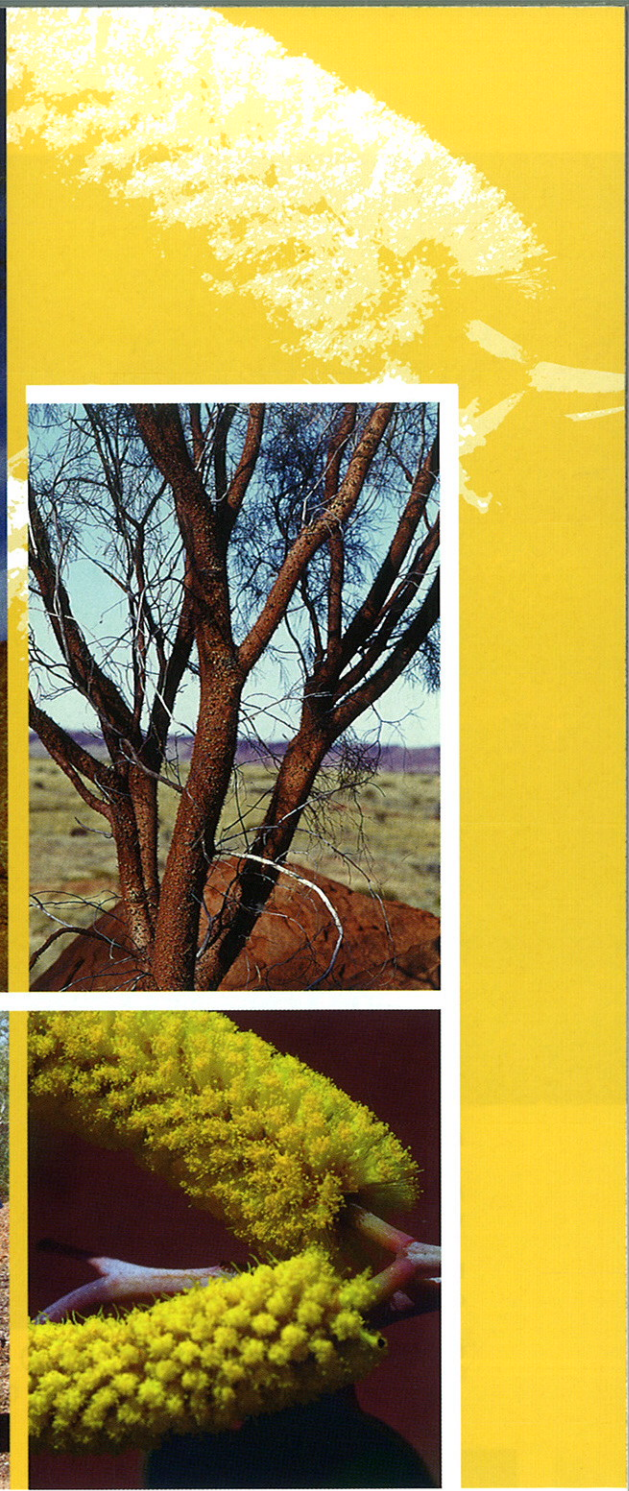
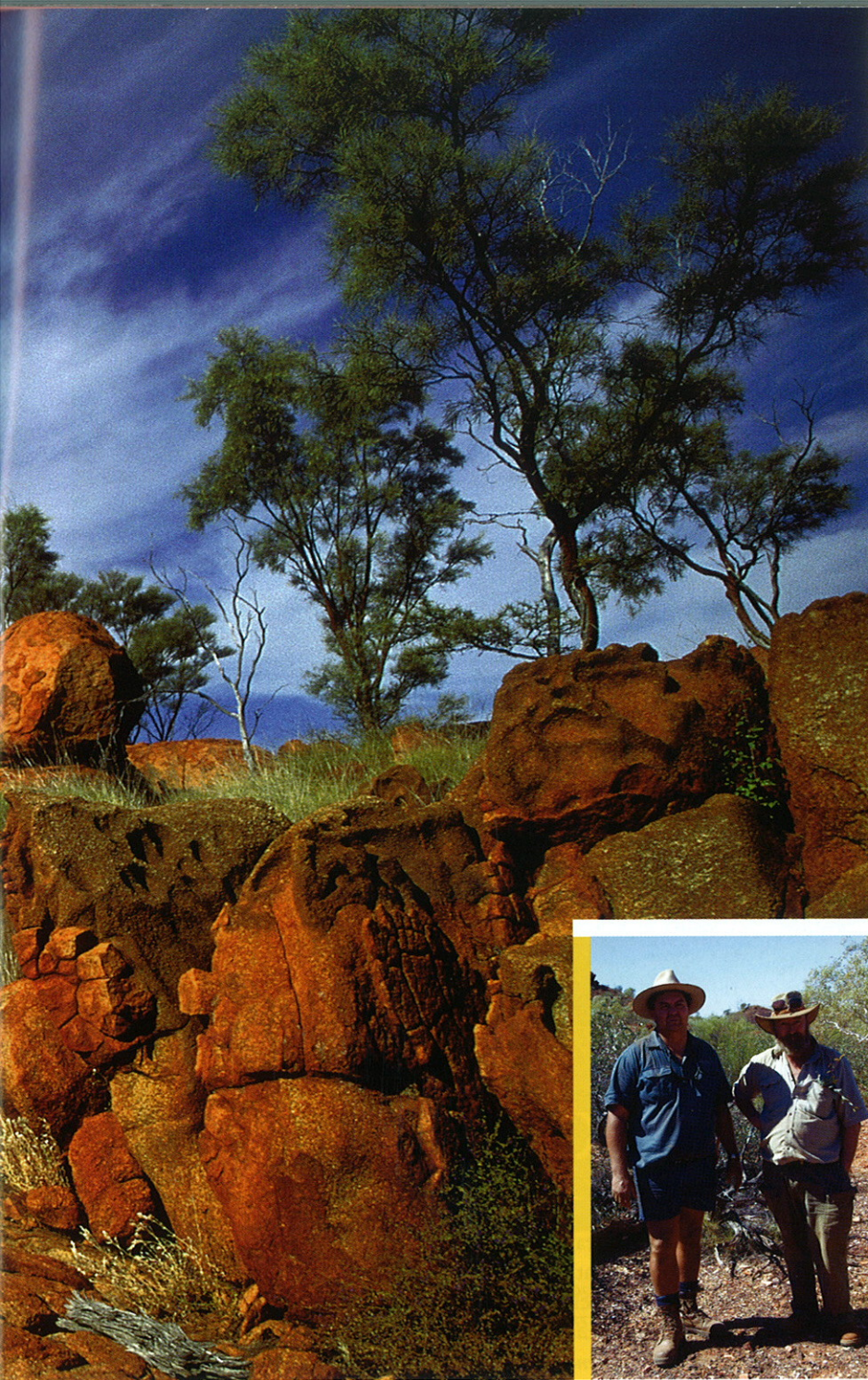
than 80 species occur in the Pilbara, including 10 new species which have been described in the past few months. Of the Pilbara wattles, 15 species and five subspecies are found nowhere else. Apart from being important in nature conservation and in mine site and other land rehabilitation programs, some wattles provide a source of fodder for the pastoral industry, especially during drought times, while others have ethno-botanical and cultural significance to the Pilbara's Aboriginal people.

New Pilbara wattles

The numbers of species known to occur in the Pilbara (excluding

hybrids and taxa of uncertain status) has increased by about 50 per cent during the past 25 years—in 1982 there were just 54 recorded for the region compared with more than 80 species today. Many of the newly discovered and named species bear the names of the people who have worked so hard to document them.

The new Leeuwen's wattle (*Acacia leeuweniana*), is named after the leader of the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) Biogeography Survey Program, Stephen van Leeuwen. Stephen has worked in the Pilbara for 25 years and, as well as documenting and collecting plants of the region, he



has also facilitated the work of many other people through his technical and scientific advice and guidance.

Stephen's technician Bob Bromilow is also recognised in the newly named Bromilow's wattle (*A. bromilowiana*), in recognition of his 17 years of field and laboratory work in the Pilbara.

A new species, Robe wattle (*A. robeorum*), acknowledges Robe River Iron Associates, who provided financial support for a five-year study into Pilbara wattles, while Thoma's wattle (*A. thoma*) is named for Rio Tinto Iron Ore botanical advisor Emil Thoma, who has worked in the Pilbara for 30 years.

Trudgen's wattle (*A. trudgeniana*) is named after botanist Malcolm Trudgen, who has collected extensively throughout the Pilbara conducting vegetation and flora surveys during the past 30 years. And Walker's wattle (*A. walkeri*) is named after Ken Walker, who has collected more than 600 plants from the Pilbara during the past 30 years while working in the landcare and rehabilitation industries.

Plant of many uses

While science may still be discovering new species, Aboriginal people of the Pilbara have relied on

Main Leeuwen's wattle (*Acacia leeuweniana*) in the Pilbara.

Insets (clockwise from top) Leeuwen's wattle stems, Bromilow's wattle (*A. bromilowiana*) flowers close-up.

Stephen van Leeuwen and Bob Bromilow have collectively notched up 42 years of working in the Pilbara.

wattles species in many different ways over the millennia. Many species were highly regarded for their medicinal properties, while others formed the basis for bush foods. For example, the bark of salt wattle (*A. ampliceps*) was boiled to make a wash for skin sores while Fitzroy wattle (*A. ancistrocarpa*) was used as an antiseptic and analgesic

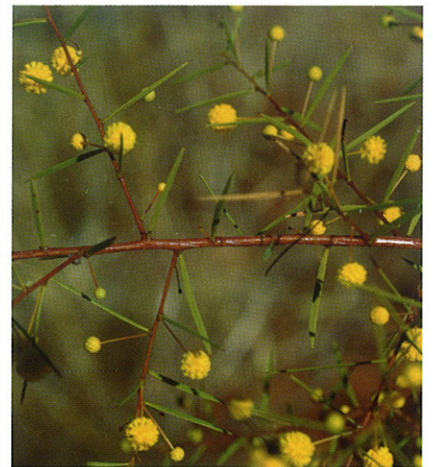


Above Robe wattle (*A. robeorum*) habitat.

Above right Flowering branch of Walker's wattle (*A. walkerii*).

Middle right Biological survey team, east of Newman.

Right Pods of Thoma's wattle (*A. thoma*).



and its seeds were ground to make flour. The gum from ranji bush (*A. pyriformis*) and snakewood (*A. xiphophylla*) was eaten, while the seeds of many species were an important source of food.

The hard wood of mulga (*A. aneura*) was used to fashion spears, fighting sticks and spear throwers, as well as walking sticks and tapping sticks. And Aboriginal people looked to Atkins' wattle (*A. atkinsiana*)—named after DEC Species and Communities Branch Manager Ken Atkins—to find bardi grubs which live in the roots of this species.

The modern day Australian bush tucker industry also looks to wattles—elegant wattle (*A. victoriae*) is one of

the most commonly used species in the industry, while Cole's wattle (*A. coleii*) is planted in tropical dry-zones of West Africa (e.g. Senegal and Niger) as a source of food for its residents.

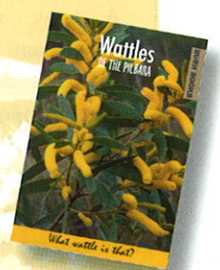
These days, some Pilbara wattles have also become important species for land rehabilitation. Species such as Fitzroy wattle (*A. ancistrocarpa*) and two-veined wattle (*A. bivenosa*) are extensively used because of their easy establishment and rapid growth rates.

Wattles also serve as fodder for the pastoral industry. But not all wattles are farmers' friends. Bardi bush (*A. synchronicia*), for example, is regarded by some Pilbara pastoralists as a troublesome woody weed hindering mustering operations and shading out palatable grasses.

And, of course, wattles are important to a whole suite of insects and birds which rely on them for habitat and sustenance. Just one example is karara (*A. tetragonophylla*), which provides excellent shelter and protection for small mammals and birds, particularly zebra finches, because of its prickly, brambly growth form.

Samille Mitchell is a Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) publications officer and *LANDSCOPE* editor. Bruce Maslin is a DEC senior principal research scientist.

DEC has recently released a new title in its Bush Book series—*Wattles of the Pilbara*. The book is available for \$6.50 from bookshops and tourist outlets, by phoning WA Naturally Publications on (08) 9334 0437, or by ordering online at www.dec.wa.gov.au.



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