

One of Western Australia's most popular national parks is also the site of a complex network of caves. Some of these can be explored by visitors to the park, while others shelter critically endangered species and are the site of watering trials aimed at protecting the threatened ecological communities on which they depend.

by Christie Mahony and David Gough





# Yanchep National Park

a unique  
underground  
on Perth's  
doorstep



Nestled in tuart and banksia woodland, alongside the shimmering waters of Loch McNess, Yanchep National Park is home to an abundance of wildlife. Water and bush birds from swans, cormorants, egrets and kingfishers, to parrots, wrens and honeyeaters abound. Endangered Carnaby's black cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*) are a spectacular sight, screeching across the morning and evening skies. Western grey kangaroos (*Macropus fuliginosus*) are commonly seen along the walk trails or grazing on the picnic lawns, ovals and golf course.

The park environment provides a unique setting to experience environmental and cultural activities



that are informative and promote awareness about our natural areas. Every day, there is a range of activities for visitors of all ages, as well as a seasonal program of activities aimed at school and community groups.

One of the most interesting features of the park is the network of nearly 600 documented limestone caves that weaves its way beneath the surface—

making it one of the six major cave regions in the state. The caves at Yanchep were formed by underground streams, which flow westwards from the Gnangara Mound. Most of the caves in the park are relatively small in dimension and sit close to the surface. Several of the larger caves have been opened up for tourism during the past 70 years. These include Cabaret, Mambibby, Yanchep, Yonderup and Crystal caves, each as different as the next in its beauty and splendour.

### History and tourism

Yanchep National Park is located within the north-coastal corridor of the Swan Coastal Plain and lies 50 kilometres north of Perth's CBD. The biologically rich area has been used by Nyoongar people for many generations because of its abundance of food and fresh water. Aboriginal artefacts found in the Wanneroo and Yanchep region date back between 6,500 and 1,700 years.

More recently, the 2,800-hectare park was recognised by Europeans for its ecological value when, in 1905, the government of the time reserved the area for the 'Protection and Preservation of Caves and Flora for a health and pleasure resort'. Initially the area was vested in the Caves Board as a class 'A' reserve. However, because of the

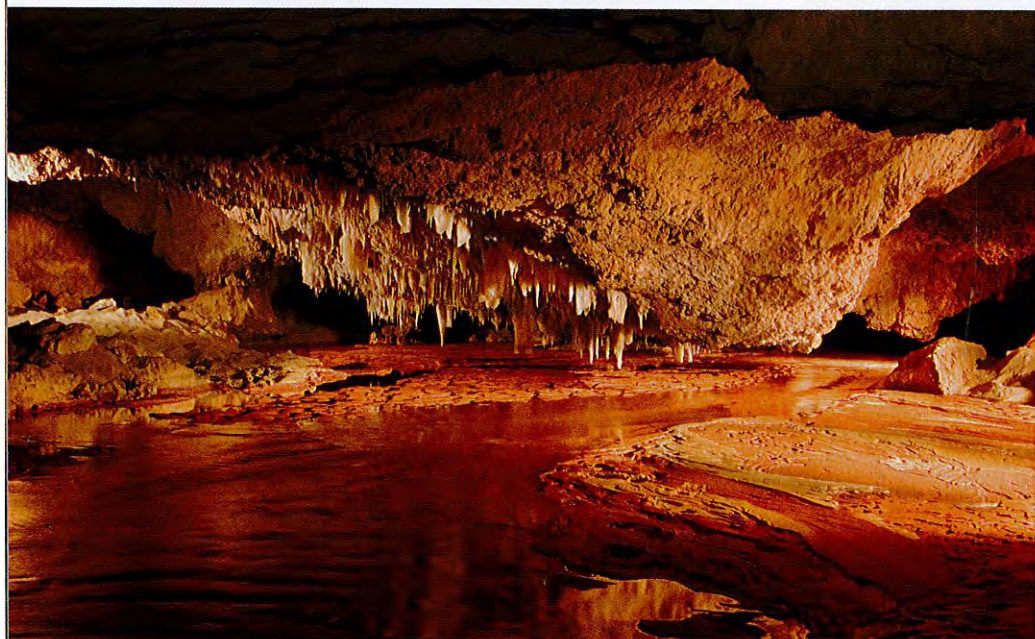


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Main Crystal Cave.

Above left Crystal Cave formations.  
Photos - Peter Nicholas/DEC

Left Jewel City, Crystal Cave.  
Photo - DEC

Below Cabaret Cave.  
Photo - Peter Nicholas/DEC







**Above** Loch McNess.  
*Photo – Peter Nicholas/DEC*

remote location of the park and sandy track conditions, the board's attempts to develop the park were unsuccessful. The ensuing years saw management of the area change hands several times until, in 1931, the State Gardens Board assumed control of the park.

During the early 1930s, a large amount of money was donated to the park and used to employ sustenance workers to undertake extensive development projects. It was during this time that Yanchep National Park was supplied with power and water, internal roads were built and a single-wire telephone was connected. Crystal Cave was modified with the development of pathways and lighting, and thousands of tons of limestone were removed from Silver Stocking Cave (now known as Cabaret Cave) to open up a pavilion to be used for dining and dancing. Other caves in the park were also explored in order to open them up for tours.

### **Cabaret Cave**

The first European to discover Cabaret Cave—initially known as Milligan's Cave, later renamed Ballroom Cave then Silver Stocking Cave—was Henry White in 1902. The cave consists of two chambers, which were developed as a supper room and ballroom, and was opened in 1932. A ball was held in the cave in honour of the Duke of Gloucester during his visit in 1934. It was also used extensively as a venue for dances, debutante balls and

**Right** An endemic species of amphipod lives in underground pools at Yanchep.  
*Photo – DEC*



as a tourist cave until it was closed in the early 1970s due to floor erosion.

Cabaret Cave was repaired during 1983–84 and reopened with a reception to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Duke of Gloucester's visit hosted by the City of Wanneroo. The guest of honour was the then State Governor Sir Gordon Reid. In 2006, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) spent more than \$260,000 on the Cabaret Cave precinct. The cave was closed for six months while a 52-bay coach and car park was constructed, an additional water supply and power were provided to run the ovens that had been installed in the second chamber of the cave, and lighting was installed. A new powder room and toilet facilities were built near the cave entry.

Cave tourism continues today with adventure caving on offer for people looking for something new and exciting. Groups are matched to a cave depending on the group size, experience and age of participants. The three main caves used for adventure caving are Yonderup, Yanchep and Mambibby, all of which have sections in which participants are required to climb and crawl through tight passages into open caverns with unique and wonderful cave flora and fauna. The

caves on offer are unlit and relatively untouched; exploring with your hardhat and torch you can delight in breathtaking cave formations.

### **Caves under threat**

Although caves are enjoyed the world over by tourists and recreational cavers, it's important not to overlook their ecological significance. Caves provide important habitat for unique species of flora and fauna, as well as being sites of archaeological and scientific importance.

Extensive research has been carried out within the Yanchep caves. Researchers from universities and caving groups have conducted surveys on the stygofauna existing throughout Yanchep National Park and the surrounding area. Studies have also focused on climatology and groundwater levels, which are also monitored by staff from the Department of Water.

The largest issue currently facing the park's cave systems is that of rapidly declining groundwater levels. This is believed to be related to a combination





**Above** Exploring Yonderup Cave.  
Photo – Heather Beswick/DEC

**Above left** Monitoring water quality.

**Below** A tour group in Crystal Cave.  
Photos – Peter Nicholas/DEC

of the large expanses of pine trees located to the east of the park, the increasing number of Perth residents relying on water supplies from the Gnangara Mound, and Perth's recent decline in annual rainfall. This decline in the watertable is having a drastic effect on stygofauna such as amphipods, which need water for their survival.

### Crystal Cave

Crystal Cave is home to an endemic species of amphipod that lives in pools of underground water and relies on tuart tree rootlets for shelter and food. As the underground pools have been slowly drying up, these small creatures have become critically endangered. In an attempt to save this small species of crustacean and the threatened ecological communities associated with it, a joint project between the Water and Rivers Commission and one of

DEC's predecessors, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, was established in 2000.

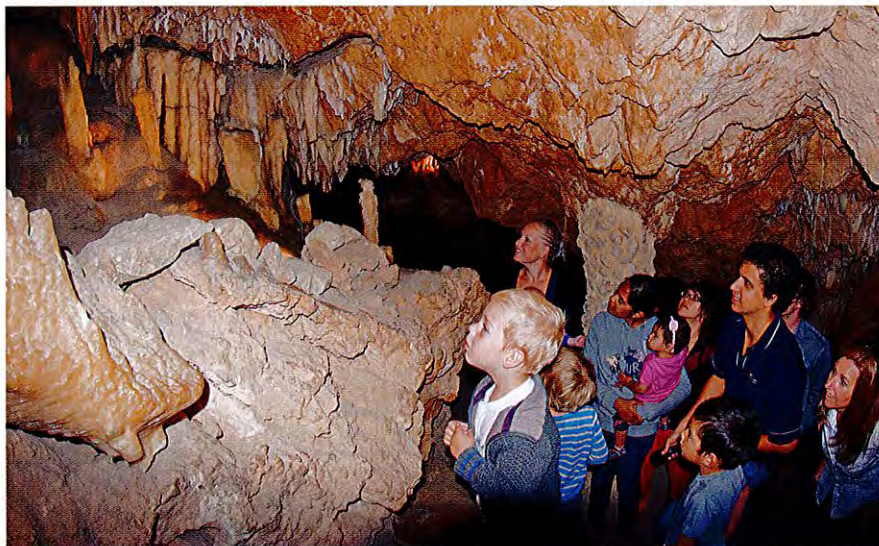
In consultation with a number of experts, a world-first caves re-watering trial has been established in which filtered groundwater is pumped back into Crystal Cave initially and then other nearby caves to re-establish the original underground pools of water and hence secure the future of the threatened ecological communities relying on these pools. This project is believed to be the first of its kind in the world and, while there have been a number of obstacles faced throughout the project, if successful it may offer some solutions to similar issues being faced in cave systems elsewhere.

### Looking to the future

The caves of Yanchep National Park now provide an important educational

tool whereby visitors can directly see the effects of a drying climate on our environment. During cave tours, visitors are encouraged to think about the way in which they use water and how they can conserve water around their home.

The drying of the Yanchep caves reiterates what an incredibly important commodity water is, and how a lack of it can have a dramatic effect on the world in which we live. By thinking about this in our everyday lives, there is hope that we will all have a brighter future.



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*Yanchep National Park attracts more than 240,000 local, interstate and international visitors each year. Visit the park visitor centre or call the park office on (08) 9405 0759 for more information.*



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