

endangered

by Jill Pryde



Pilbara native grasslands

One of the Pilbara region's significant natural features is the diversity of its grassland communities. Many of these are widely spread, while others are naturally restricted. Pilbara grasslands are typically dominated by perennial spinifex (*Triodia*), hummock grasses and ephemeral tussock grasses growing as clumps or tufts. The tussock grasses mostly occur on alluvial plains (soils deposited by flowing water) on cracking clay soils which are often referred to as 'crab holes' or self-mulching clay flats.

There are 10 Pilbara grasslands listed as 'priority' and in need of further study, and one listed as a threatened ecological community. Although once very extensive, many types of grasslands have historically been subject to grazing and areas in good condition are now rare.

In addition, many grassland areas are now threatened by clearing for infrastructure.

One of the rare grassland communities is the 'Themeda grasslands on cracking clays' which occurs on Hamersley Station, west of Karijini National Park. This threatened ecological community is particularly special because it is one of the very few that is dominated by the undescribed perennial Pilbara kangaroo grass (*Themeda* sp. 'Hamersley Station'). The community also contains many annual herbs, grasses and sometimes small perennial shrubs.

Another grassland type, known as the '*Triodia* sp. 'Robe River' assemblages of mesas of the west Pilbara', is a restricted grassland community that only occurs on flat-topped mesas and similar landforms. This priority community contains a 'soft' spinifex (*Triodia* sp. 'Robe River') and two wattle

species that are generally found only in creek lines. The occurrence of these species together indicates the mesa surfaces were once probably low-lying wetlands, and the soils around them have since eroded to form the upland mesa surfaces we see today.

The Department of Environment and Conservation is seeking to conserve areas of these grasslands, particularly those in good condition. This will be possible by first gaining a better understanding of their distribution, through surveys conducted with the help of land managers such as mining companies and their environmental consultants. Protection of some areas of these grasslands will increase in future by acquiring pastoral leases for conservation, and excluding grazing and infrastructure development.

Photos by Jeremy Naaykens

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A naturally occurring moth larva wreaks destruction on the southern jarrah forest.
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Work is well underway on projects to conserve this enormous area of biological richness.

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