

Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve, a special eastern Wheatbelt nature reserve dotted with granite outcrops, tall eucalypt woodlands and wildflowers, and ringing with the echoes of a fascinating history, is providing a safe haven for rare plants and animals, and a number of opportunities for exploring.

Home of the Holland Track and numbats

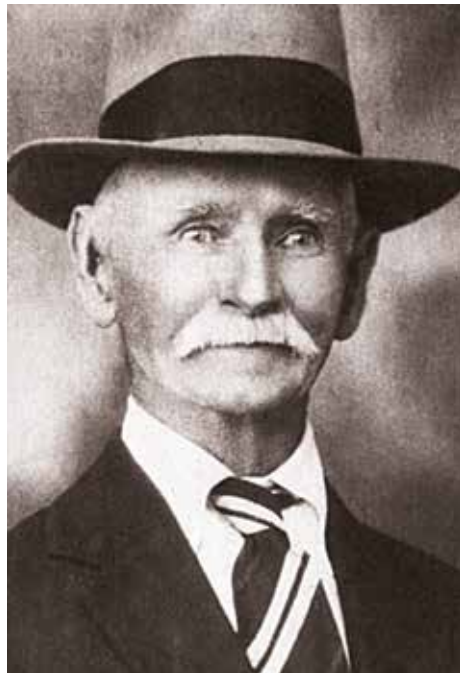
by Tony Friend

For a few years during the 1890s the peace and serenity of a low granite rock in today's eastern Wheatbelt, long known to the local Nyaki-Nyaki people, was disturbed. During this time, the landscape carried the sounds of creaking horse carts and wheelbarrows, as hopeful souls trudged along the Holland Track (also known as Holland's Track), towards Coolgardie. Some of these prospectors would have camped on the grassy meadow beside the rock, while others would have just passed through as part of their two-week journey to the Goldfields. Either way, they called this area 'Dragon Rock', not after mythical fire-breathing creatures, but after the abundant small native lizards known as ornate dragons (*Ctenophorus ornatus*) that scurry across warm rock surfaces in the sunshine.

A NEW ROUTE

In the months after Arthur Bayley and William Ford discovered gold in Coolgardie in 1892, access to the town was by a long trek east from the railway towns of York and Northam. To overcome this, John Holland and his three companions cut the Holland Track in 1893, in just over two months. The track ran from Broomehill to Coolgardie, and provided an alternative route to the Goldfields, particularly for would-be gold miners arriving by ship from the eastern states and disembarking in Albany, the major Western Australian port at that time. They would take the train to Broomehill before starting their two-week slog along the 500km track. Holland picked a fairly straight route linking rock outcrops, soaks and claypans where water could be found, and the new track was quickly taken up, with welcome benefit to the burgeoning community of Broomehill.

The bustle of traffic along the Holland Track came to an abrupt end just three years later when a new railway line was pushed through from Northam to Coolgardie. After 1896, peace descended on Dragon Rock once more. This was to continue until the years following WWI, when the Western Australian Government released land for agriculture



in the region and clearing for cereal crops began. The nearby settlements of Lake Grace, Newdegate and Hyden were established at that time. Bushland was cleared to within 1.5km of Dragon Rock, but the land surrounding the rock and a large swathe extending another 25km north, perhaps not so attractive for agriculture, remained as unallocated Crown land. Future release of this land may have been anticipated, as a wheat collection facility was built adjacent to the reserve on Holt Rock Road.

A NATURAL HISTORY

In 1966, Richard Lane, who owned property adjoining the western edge of this land, approached the then Department of Fisheries and Fauna, a predecessor of Parks and Wildlife, requesting that the large area of uncleared land to the north of Dragon Rock (now known as Dragon Rocks) be gazetted as a flora and fauna reserve. Before any further action could be taken, a soil survey was required and the boundaries, roads and tracks had to be surveyed by the Department of Lands and Surveys. These were carried out by August 1972, the same month that the first detailed wildlife survey of the Dragon Rocks area was carried out by Fisheries and Fauna scientists.

The wildlife survey revealed the area to be rich in plants and animals



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Main Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve.

Photo – Andrew McInnes

Insets left to right Numbats are long-term residents of the reserve.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Verticordia brightens the landscape when in bloom.

Photo – Tony Friend/Parks and Wildlife

Ornate dragons lend their name to the reserve.

Photo – Matt Swan/Parks and Wildlife

Above left John Holland at age 92.

Photo – Courtesy of Broomehill Historical Society

and in extremely good condition.

Among the rare and interesting mammal species found were the red-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale calura*), western mouse (*Pseudomys occidentalis*), kultarr (*Antechinomys laniger*) – a small carnivorous marsupial, chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*) and numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*), which had been recently sighted in the area by Mr Lane. Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) were common and 58 other bird species were recorded during the survey, as well as 19 reptiles and four species of frogs. The scientists' report on the area was glowing, stating: "The diversity and quality of the flora and fauna of the Dragon Rocks



Above Trekking Holland Track.
Photo – Ann Storrie



“In 2003 the reserve was listed on Australia’s Register of the National Estate as an area significant for rare species of plants and animals.”

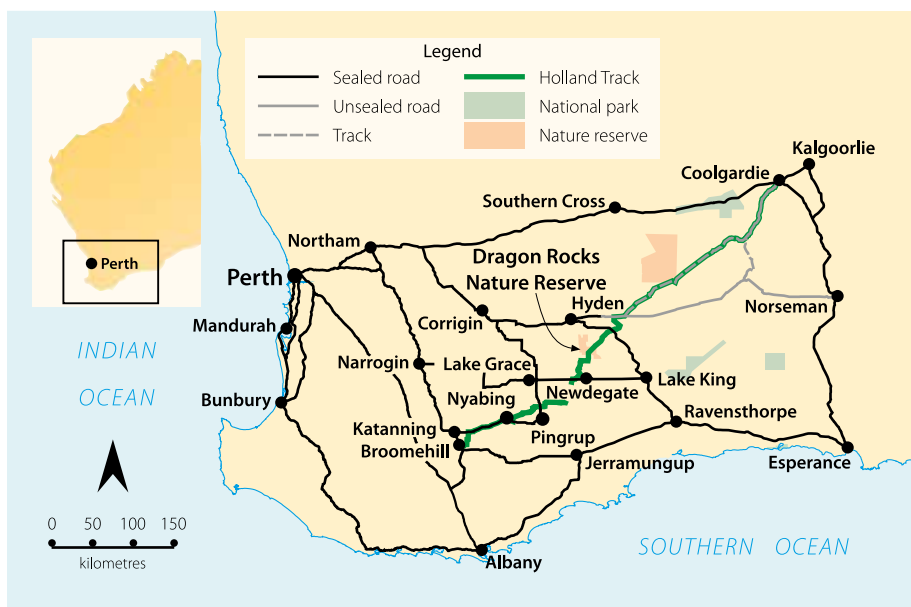
Above right Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve is dotted with granite outcrops.
Photo – Andrew McInnes

area make it potentially one of the most valuable wildlife sanctuaries in Australia”.

An area of 32,203ha was gazetted in 1973 as Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve and given ‘A’ class status in recognition of its high importance as a wildlife sanctuary. Subsequent surveys of the plants in the reserve have shown that many rare species are also protected here. With her report and detailed vegetation map produced in 1992, consultant Anne Coates listed 28 vegetation associations with a total of 576 plant species, including a number of declared rare flora. In 2003 the reserve was listed on Australia’s Register of the National Estate as an area significant for rare species of plants and animals.

AN ATTRACTION

Following the opening of the Northam to Coolgardie rail line, parts of the cart track were maintained and can still be traced in the road network



today. However, much of the route beyond the Rabbit Proof Fence quickly became overgrown. In 1992, Graeme Newbey, who was brought up on a farm near the departure point of the track at Broomehill, worked with other enthusiasts to push a new track through from the Hyden-Norseman Road, following the northern part of Holland’s original route as closely as possible. Today, the Holland Track provides a scenic and interesting four-wheel-drive experience for many

off-roaders and is fast becoming one of Australia’s great outback adventures.

The reserve also displays some outstanding scenic features. Granite rocks abound, although more spectacular examples exist in the region, like Graham Rock, Bushfire Rock and the better-known Wave Rock and Hippos Yawn. While the topography at Dragon Rocks is gentle, the reserve is studded with spectacular natural washouts, or breakaways. One of these is easily accessible from the northern



Above A numbat.

Above right Buckley's Breakaway is close to Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve.
 Photos – Jiri Lochman

Right Malleefowls are also found in the reserve.
 Photo – Simon Cherriman



boundary of the reserve, but visitors should also go to Buckley's Breakaway Nature Reserve, off the Kulin-Holt Rocks Road west of Dragon Rocks, where an information shelter and walk trail display and explain the origins of this remarkable natural feature.

Wildflowers abound in spring, but Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve is at its most spectacular in November, with the rich display of *Verticordia* species. The heathlands are also transformed by small shrubs covered in flowers.

A HISTORY OF CONSERVATION

Late in 1995 the silence at Dragon Rock was disturbed again, this time by the sound of a light aircraft flying at low altitude up and down the length of the reserve. The plane was dropping meat baits laced with 1080 poison in order to reduce the numbers of introduced foxes there. An unsuccessful search for the

distinctive diggings of the numbat in the reserve had been carried out the year before and a plan to reintroduce numbats to Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve had been approved. Fox control carried out since the early 1980s at Dryandra Woodland, near Narrogin in the Great Southern, led to a dramatic increase in the numbat population there, which enabled the woodland to be used as a source of numbats for translocation to reserves where they had become extinct.

In December 1995, the first consignment of numbats arrived from Dryandra, all fitted with radio collars so

their fates could be monitored closely. Twenty numbats made the journey in 1995, followed by another 17 in December 1996. Survival rates of the released animals were very high, and breeding followed, with 10 site-bred young captured in 1996 and another 27 in 1997. A third release, planned for 1997, was cancelled because it was deemed unnecessary. This was the most successful reintroduction of numbats to date in WA under the recovery program.

Protection of the Dragon Rocks numbat population by fox control through distribution of baits both by aircraft and by



Above Mitchell's hopping mouse.
 Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above right Southern scrub-robin.
 Photo – Rob Drummond/Lochman
 Transparencies

Below right Radio collared numbats.
 Photo – Tony Friend/Parks and Wildlife



“... cameras revealed how rich the mammal fauna of the reserve remains, and also that numbats still exist there!”

vehicle along firebreaks continues today, under Parks and Wildlife's *Western Shield* program. By the early 2000s, however, staff carrying out the ground baiting began to report sightings of feral cats during their baiting runs. Radio collars had been removed from the numbats, so the only means of detecting them was by occasional opportunistic sightings, and by searching for diggings. A few sightings were reported and occasional diggings surveys confirmed the presence of numbats in the reserve, but these signs were less numerous.

The most recent diggings survey was carried out over three days in December 2012, without success. Were numbats still present? Research on feral cats and their interactions with foxes began in 2013, and sensor cameras were set throughout the reserve, some well away from tracks, to detect these predators. As well as foxes and cats, which were much more common on tracks than in the bush, a wide range of native animals were photographed. Although it was not the aim of the exercise, the cameras revealed how rich the mammal fauna of the reserve remains, and also that numbats still exist there! Chuditch were often photographed, as well as malleefowl, red-tailed phascogales, brush wallabies (*Macropus irma*), and Mitchell's hopping mice (*Notomys mitchellii*). More common species appearing frequently in the images include western grey kangaroos (*Macropus fuliginosus*), echidnas (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*), common brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) and emus (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*). The cameras also recorded the presence of the southern scrub-robin (*Drymodes brunneopygia*), a bird not previously recorded in Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve, although widely distributed in the Wheatbelt of WA.

Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve is undoubtedly important in preserving eastern Wheatbelt vegetation

communities, rare plants and natural landscapes, as well as its rare animals. The sensor camera images show that the reserve continues to support most if not all of the rich wildlife noted by long-standing local residents of the area and the early survey workers. It is well worth the effort to refine and enhance control of foxes and feral cats so that this large and important site continues to contribute to the conservation of some of our more endangered animals.



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