



# *IN THE LINE OF* **FIRE**

What started as a lightning strike on 30 January 2015 escalated into the largest fire in the south-west since the Dwellingup fires of 1961. Local and interstate crews battled tirelessly to bring the blaze under control, while two major fires were burning in other parts of the State. The situation demonstrated the resilience of Western Australian people and has become heralded as an example of a successful multi-agency firefighting effort.

by John Gillard

**A**t 9.55am on the morning of 30 January 2015, after two days of extreme lightning activity, Parks and Wildlife spotter pilot Jarrad Garrick looked out to the horizon in search of signs of fire. A shimmer of grey looked suspicious so the pilot altered course to investigate further. On approach, the situation became obvious – a fire was burning in Shannon National Park about one kilometre from the nearest track and about four kilometres from the nearest accessible road.

The pilot radioed in the fire location to the Parks and Wildlife Donnelly District office in Pemberton, estimating it had burnt through half a hectare of five-year-old fuel. The fire was given an ID name – Fire 19 ‘O’Sullivan – and crews sprang to action. Within five minutes of the report two fixed-wing water bombers, one bulldozer and two trucks had been deployed to the area. At 11.50am these resources were redeployed to another lightning-caused fire threatening Muir Highway and the adjoining farming communities in Tone State Forest, south-east of Manjimup, and more than a dozen other fires ignited by lightning across the Warren Region.

By 2.48pm the fire was estimated to have burnt through two hectares, by 5pm it had burnt through four hectares. By 11am the next day, after working into the night, fire crews had managed to track part of the fire. However, unfavourable winds, temperatures in the mid-30s and low humidity hampered efforts to contain it. By 2pm the fire had grown in size and intensity with flames up to three metres. By 7.45pm it was a whole different ball game – flames were up to 30m high and spot fires were occurring 200m ahead of the main fire. Fire management systems were elevated with Emergency Warnings being issued for Northcliffe and Windy Harbour as the fire behaviour escalated and the fire threatened the town sites.

For the next 10 days, staff from Parks and Wildlife worked closely with crews from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the Forest Products Commission, the State Emergency



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**Main** The fire had a perimeter of 295km.

*Photo – Parks and Wildlife*

1 The intensity of the fire was among the worst that seasoned firefighters had experienced.

2 The fire started in Shannon National Park.

*Photos – Department of Fire and Emergency Services*

3 The fire reached the coast in the early hours of 4 February.

*Photo – Ben Hennessy/Channel 9*

4 A near-miss for firefighters highlighted risks to crews.

*Photo – Tom Sawyer/Forest Products Commission*



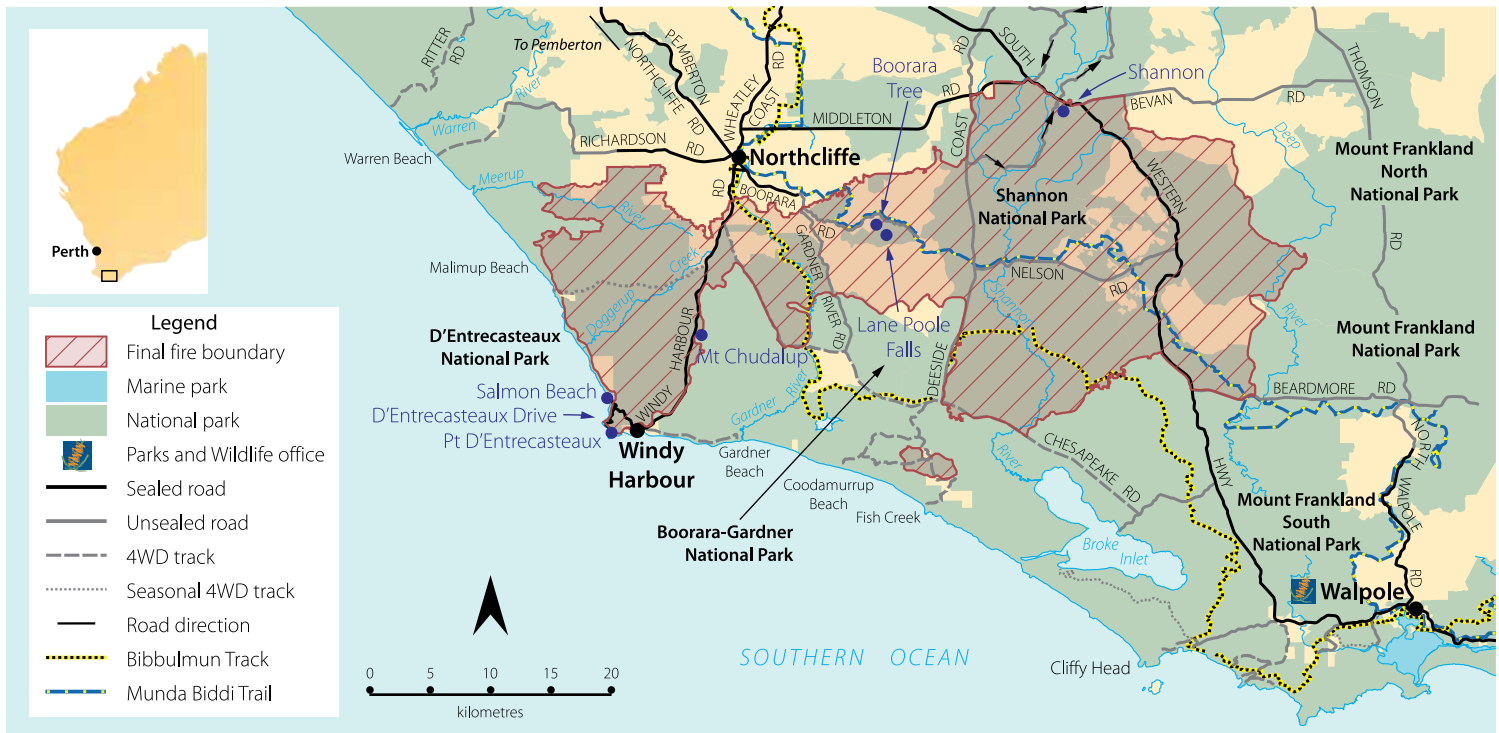
Services, local volunteer bushfire brigades, local government authorities, WA Police, Western Power, Main Roads WA, the Salvation Army, Australian Defence Force, St Johns Ambulance, departments of Health, Agriculture, Child Protection and Family Services and Education, the Water Corporation, Telstra and private contractors. Local teams were also supported by 264 interstate firefighters who formed three separate deployments from Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and the Northern Territory. They worked side-by-side on the frontline and behind the

scenes to battle this mammoth blaze that threatened lives, properties and townships while crews elsewhere were battling blazes in other parts of the state, including another major fire incident in Boddington.

Firefighters with more than 30 years’ experience described the fire as the most intense they could recall. At its most extreme, the fire travelled at a rate of 2.5km per hour. For several days fire managers planned for the worst.

Thankfully, some favourable weather conditions on 4 February – four days after the fire started – gave the fire crews the break they were looking for and





they managed to gain some traction in containing the fire. It was contained on 10 February but the mop-up process went on until the end of March. Work on repairing trails, bridges and other infrastructure is expected to take up to two years.

By the time it was extinguished, the fire had burnt through 98,700ha and the fire zone had a perimeter of 295km, making it the largest fire in the south-west since the devastating Dwellingup fires in 1961. Battling it required a staggering contingent of resources, including 1670 people, 164 fire appliances, seven fixed-wing aircraft, three helicopters (including

one air crane) and two large aerial tankers. But what cannot be measured on a shift log or asset inventory, but was just as important, was the role community spirit and good working partnerships played in the operations. Crews received invaluable support from local community members and businesses in the form of offers of help, donations of food and products, and wishes of support. The notes of support and signs carrying messages of encouragement were elixirs to tiring fires. The work carried out by the Shire of Manjimup during and after the fire was outstanding.

The fire impacted forest resources, particularly regrowth stands of karri, which are important to future wood supply for the native forest timber industry. Mercifully, however, the losses to infrastructure were small considering the severity of this bushfire, which had the potential to cause extreme devastation. The outcome is a credit to the expertise of senior fire managers and strategists and the teamwork of the countless people involved across a number of agencies in a variety of capacities. This is the story of the fire in pictures ...



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**Fact file**

**The Northcliffe fire burnt through 98,700 hectares:**

- 4470 hectares of private land
- 1000 hectares of other Crown land including road reserves
- 93,230 hectares of lands vested with the Conservation Commission

**1670 people were involved, including:**

- 326 Parks and Wildlife staff
- 250 staff from other government agencies
- 264 firefighters from the eastern states (380 firefighters travelled to WA to assist at the Northcliffe and other fires burning simultaneously)
- 600 volunteers
- 230 contractors

**Machinery used:**

- 164 fire appliances
- Seven fixed-wing aeroplanes
- Two helitacs
- One air crane
- Two large aerial tankers
- 86 pieces of machinery.

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*Opposite page*

**5** Bull-dozers were used to create fire breaks ahead of the main fire.

*Photo – Andrew McDonald/Parks and Wildlife*

**6** Western Australia's air crane was deployed to attack the fire from above.

*Photo – Parks and Wildlife*

**7** Fighting the fire required a massive inter-agency effort.

*Photo – Steve Bradford/Parks and Wildlife*

**8** The local community rallied behind firefighters with messages of support.

**9** Community meetings were held to brief residents.

*This page*

**10** Fighting the fire required the efforts of 1670 people.

**11** Volunteer firefighters played a crucial role in supporting crews from Parks and Wildlife and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services.

**12** Logistical support of food and accommodation was conducted on a scale never before seen in Western Australia.

**13** Crews clock in and out to ensure everyone is accounted for at all times.

*Photos – Jennifer Elliot/Swan River Trust*





14 The fire burnt through parts of Shannon National Park and the adjoining D'Entrecasteaux National Park.

*Photo – Cliff Winfield*

15 Smoke across the road made driving conditions difficult.

*Photo – Rod Annear/Parks and Wildlife*

16 Volunteers helped with post-fire recovery, including repairing fences.

*Photo – Cliff Winfield*

17 Roads provided important firebreaks.

*Photo – Michael Pez/Parks and Wildlife*



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18 Despite the intensity of the fire, some green remained.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/Parks and Wildlife

19 The historic Long Gully Bridge.

20 Where the Long Gully Bridge once stood.

Photos – The Bibbulmun Track Foundation



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## ***Rising from the ashes***

by *Stuart Harrison, Parks and Wildlife Recreation and Trails Unit Coordinator*

While three fires burnt simultaneously in February 2015 at Northcliffe, Helena Valley National Park and in Lane Poole Reserve, the cost to the Munda Biddi Trail and the Bibbulmun Track mounted. By the time the fires had been contained and mopped up, they had collectively burnt about 70km each of the Munda Biddi Trail and the Bibbulmun Track. Tragically, the historic 66-year-old, 128m Long Gully Bridge that crossed the Murray River between Dwellingup and Collie on the Bibbulmun Track was completely destroyed. Other losses included four shelters destroyed on the Bibbulmun Track and one shelter badly damaged on the Munda Biddi Trail.



As soon as the areas were deemed safe, Parks and Wildlife staff and insurance assessors began to visit and gauge the losses. Volunteer firefighters from Queensland worked alongside volunteers from the Bibbulmun Track Foundation to clean up and recover what little remained of the Long Gully Bridge. Meanwhile, plans were being developed for a temporary crossing over the Murray River until a more permanent solution can be built.

Planning is well underway for rebuilding the four Bibbulmun Track shelters at Brookton, Possum Springs, Gardner and Dog Pool, with rammed earth versions of the much-loved timber shelters. It is hoped both trails will be repaired and reopened within 12 to 18 months, through a combined effort from staff, contractors, community and foundation volunteers.

What has emerged from the situation is the overwhelming sense of community ownership of both trails. In the weeks and months after the fires, Parks and Wildlife and the Bibbulmun Track and Munda Biddi foundations received offers of assistance from businesses, private contractors and community organisations to assist in rebuilding and restoring the trails and their infrastructure. Many individuals have also come forward with their messages of hope that the trails will be restored so that users can continue to enjoy them long into the future.

