



Leschenault Peninsula Conservation Park

Leschenault Peninsula Conservation Park has a long and fascinating history. Now, thanks to improvements and upgrades, it will continue to be enjoyed and protected well into the future.

Leschenault Peninsula Conservation Park is an 11-kilometre-long, finger-shaped strip that is sandwiched between the Indian Ocean on one side and the Leschenault Estuary on the other, just north of Australind. This results in a stark contrast between the exposed, windswept ocean shoreline on the western side, and the

Above Coastal vegetation at Belvidere Beach on the Leschenault Peninsula.

Photo – Michael Willis/Alamy

Opposite page

Left Peppermint tree flowers.

Photo – Marie Lochman



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protected estuarine shoreline on the east. At its widest point the land is 1,600 metres wide, while at its most narrow it is just 600 metres.

This unique ecosystem is a haven for waterbirds and it supports as many as 60 estuarine species, including the black-winged stilt, greenshank, Pacific black duck and grey teal. The area also boasts 200 species of native plants, including tuart and peppermint trees, and coastal heath, samphire marsh and mangrove communities. These support a range of animals including the yellow admiral butterfly, which depends on the host plant native pellitory, and ringtail and brushtail possums, which are most commonly seen at night. Carpet pythons and bobtail skinks may also be found sunning themselves on rocks or spotted in bushes, while grey kangaroos are commonly seen on grasslands and beneath tuart forest.

ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

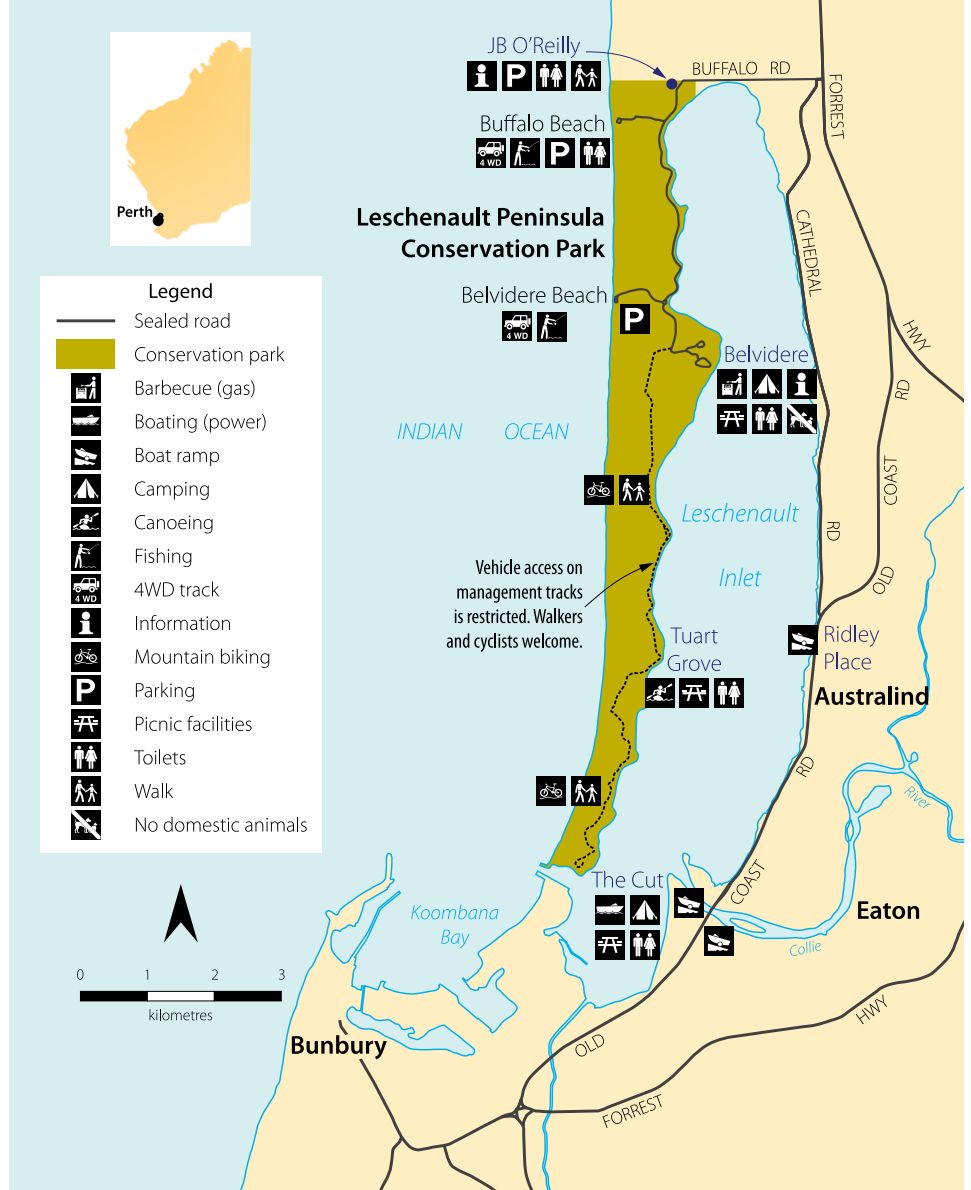
The area's richness in animal diversity probably contributed to it being used by

Nyoongar people for up to 35,000 years, especially during the warmer months when they moved from the hills. In 1836, Lt. Henry William St Pierre Bunbury wrote:

"... It gave me great pleasure to find myself on the Port Leschenault estuary, the numerous and well-beaten paths near the back of the estuary indicated the constant presence of considerable numbers (of Nyoongars). Indeed nowhere had I hitherto seen ... such distinct paths as here or so many deserted huts ...

"Soon after dark I was attracted by the numerous lights, gleaming and flashing in various directions along the border of the inlet ... for the purpose of attracting the fish, which are speared by this means in great numbers both in the shoal water and on the banks of the river ... cobblers especially are taken in great quantities as well as larger fish such as jewfish, tailor and black snappers."

In 1840, Irishman Thomas Little established a horse venture at Belvidere



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where he ran English cattle, Bengali cattle (water buffalos) and horses on behalf of Charles Prinsep. Prinsep’s son Henry relocated from London to Belvidere in 1866 when he fell in love and married Josephine Bussell. In the following decades, Henry exported timber and, as a painter, poet, reader and photographer, is credited for bringing art to the bush. In 1877, after almost 40 years of family ownership, Henry was forced to sell the estate.

During this time, the area was also known for the escape of famous Irish

political prisoner John Boyle O’Reilly, who was responsible for recruiting Irishmen into the Fenian military ranks and was sentenced to 20 years of penal servitude. He arrived in WA in 1867 when he was transferred to Bunbury to work on a road gang. In 1869, he colluded with James Maguire – a local settler from Dardanup – to plan their escape by rowing out of the Leschenault Estuary into the Indian Ocean north along the coast to their freedom. In the following years he also developed as a writer, poet, orator and humanitarian as well as the editor of the *Boston Post*.

YESTERYEAR

Nearly 100 years later, Belvidere became a commune for hundreds of people from all over the world. Those who lived there shared their diverse skills, and were motivated to live there for a range of reasons. Some were seeking an opportunity to spend time doing art, while some were escaping a former life; others sought self-sufficiency, or were attracted to living close to nature. Residents banded together to work the land, grow fruit and vegetables, farm livestock, fish and operate a co-op. Houses were built, mostly from recycled materials, firewood



was gathered and water was pumped from the wells and soaks. The only rules: no dogs, drugs or dole. According to one resident, Diane, who lived at Belvidere between 1977–80, it was an idyllic lifestyle:

“The lack of electricity and running water did not impose a hardship, but allowed a slower pace of life, more connected to the elements. We made our own music and enjoyed the soft light of kerosene lamps and candles.”

Greg Quicke, who lived there from 1980–81, said:

“Belvidere was to me a haven from the outside world; a refuge where you could take time out instead of having to find your own slot in mainstream society. “It was not a place for bludgers. The bludgers soon left when they could not take the load.”

By 1982–83 the philosophies and attitudes of those who lived there had changed and the Shire of Harvey began a process that would eventually see the commune closed.

MODERN DAY

In 1990 Leschenault Peninsula became a conservation park and has been managed to protect its significant natural and cultural heritage values. Visitors can explore the park on foot, from experiencing the walk at JB O’Reilly Memorial as you enter the park, to trekking the walk/cycle trail that tracks south from Belvidere to the most

southern tip of the park, known as The Cut. Or you may experience the Belvidere interpretation trail around the day-use area.

If you are a keen fisherman, four-wheel-drive access is available along the beach (follow the ‘Code of the Coast’ principles), which provides opportunities during the seasons to catch local fish species, with the most common being tailor, mulloway, herring, whiting and salmon.

Recent upgrades to the park have seen the capacity of Belvidere campground double with it now boasting 28 sites, accommodating tents and vans. Upgrades have been made to Buffalo Beach with a new boardwalk and seating, which provide facilities so visitors can sit and relax, enjoy the views across the ocean to Bunbury or take in the sunset.

In addition, the park’s fascinating history and modern-day values are showcased as part of an extensive interpretation display upgrade, which delights and informs visitors about this special area that, while relatively small in size, is rich in history and natural values.

Above left Camping in the upgraded campsite within the conservation park.

Top Four-wheel driving on the beach.
Photos – Cliff Winfield

Above Cormorants.
Photo – Marc Russo

Do it yourself

Where is it? 20 kilometres north of Bunbury

Total area: 1,071 hectares

Facilities: Information, toilets, picnic tables, gas barbecues, campgrounds, walk trails, bike trails, 4WD access, boat ramps, boat and canoe access at The Cut and beach fishing.

What to do: Nature appreciation, walking, bike riding, fishing, swimming, canoeing, camping, photography.

Nearest Parks and Wildlife office: Wellington District headquarters, 147 Wittenoorn Street, Collie, phone: (08) 9735 1988.