

RISING FROM THE ASHES: REBUILDING OUR TRAILS

In February 2015, several large, intense fires burnt in the State's south-west. After the flames had been extinguished and the mopping up completed, the long recovery phase began to rebuild two of WA's most iconic trails.

by Kerstin Stender



Inset top The historic Long Gully Bridge that once extended over the Murray River was destroyed by fire.

Inset above Numerous signs and markers were damaged by the fires and a number of camp sites were lost.

Photos – DBCA

In early February 2015 a low-pressure system and its associated thunderstorm activity passed through the State's south-west sparking numerous fires. The fires stretched the resources and capacities of both the former departments of Parks and Wildlife and Fire and Emergency Services and, at the peak of the firefighting efforts, firefighters from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland were flown in to assist our exhausted crews. Three of the fires – the Helena National Park fire east of Armadale, the Lower Hotham fire in Lane Poole Reserve and State forest between Dwellingup and

Collie, and the O'Sullivan fire between Northcliffe and Walpole – caused significant damage to visitor facilities on the Bibbulmun Track and the Munda Biddi Trail. The O'Sullivan fire alone burnt through more than 98,000 hectares of national park, State forest and private property, including almost 40 kilometres of the Bibbulmun Track and 70 kilometres of the Munda Biddi Trail.

SURVEYING THE DAMAGE

For several weeks fire crews worked to contain the fires and mop up the boundaries to ensure the fires did not



Above The historic Long Gully Bridge (also known as Asquith Bridge) was built between 1949 and 1952.

Photo – Rail Heritage WA

Top far right The remains of Brookton camp site after the fire.

Photos – DBCA

re-ignite or escape containment lines. Once the fires had been put out, work shifted to the recovery phase when the magnitude of the damage could be assessed. Department staff inspected the damage, including the impacts on the two trails, once the roads and access tracks had been checked and cleared of fallen trees and other dangers.

It was obvious from the outset that large sections of the two trails would be closed for an extended period, due to the damaged infrastructure and the risks of trees falling or limbs dropping. So work began immediately to put in temporary diversions around the large fire grounds and re-connect the affected sections.

As the smallest fire, the Helena National Park fire was the first fire ground to be inspected. This revealed that the Brookton camp site – located 2.5 kilometres from the Brookton Highway – on the Bibbulmun Track had been completely destroyed.

The initial inspection of the Lower Hotham fire was completed in early March. This confirmed the loss of the Bibbulmun Track shelter at Possum Springs camp site. And, unfortunately, revealed that the fire had also consumed the

beautiful and historic Long Gully Bridge, which extended over the Murray River.

The Northcliffe fire was both the largest and most difficult to assess, with access severely restricted due to safety concerns and damaged highways, roads and bridges. Initial reports from the air had indicated that the Dog Pool camp site on the Bibbulmun Track was still standing. But ground crews found no walls under the steel roof that was visible from the air. While the Gardner and Dog Pool camp sites on the Bibbulmun Track were lost, the Yirra Kartta camp site on the Munda Biddi Trail had repairable, albeit substantial, damage. Several bridges were affected, including the bridge across the Shannon River, with some requiring replacement and others only minor repairs. Countless trail markers were burned beyond recognition, which necessitated an extensive remarking of all of the burned sections.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

As well as carrying out the initial inspections, coordinating insurance claims and site visits with the assessors, department staff began progressing the rebuilding program, so works could start as soon as funds became available.

The fires highlighted the resilience of the steel shelters on the Munda Biddi Trail, which sustained only damage, compared to the total loss of so many timber shelters on the Bibbulmun Track. As such, a new fire-resistant shelter design was developed for the Bibbulmun Track based on the design of the track's southern Nornalup camp sites. This saw the timber frame and walls replaced with

more fire-resistant rammed earth and all flammable materials replaced with non-flammable, with the exception of the plywood bunk bases, which were retained to preserve sleeping comfort. Work on these shelters began in January 2016 and was undertaken by contractors with support from department staff and volunteers.

The impact of these fires, and the devastation they caused to the two trails, created significant community interest. Offers of assistance were received and the department, the Bibbulmun Track Foundation and the Munda Biddi Trail Foundation engaged the community in the process of rebuilding the two damaged trails, including harnessing donations for the works not covered by insurance. The fires and extensive trail closures resulted in loss of visitors to the fire-affected areas so visitor information was put together to identify and promote the open sections of the trails.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Recovery and rebuilding after the fires took up a good part of 2015, with several bridges reopened and camp sites rebuilt and repaired. Many of these projects were still underway when, in January 2016, fires again impacted the trails across several locations. A devastating fire burnt through more than 70,000 hectares, claimed two lives, decimated the town of Yarloop and destroyed more than 160 houses. The fire had a perimeter of 400 kilometres and it also damaged the Murray camp site on the Bibbulmun Track and the Munda Biddi Trail's Bidjar Ngoulin camp site. Several



Above Volunteers from the Bibbulmun Track Foundation helped rebuild the Brookton camp site.

Above right Volunteer Ross Simpson places a marker on the new alignment of the Bibbulmun Track near the Bilya Djena Bidi. Photos – Kerstin Stender/DBCA



To assist with the prevention of fires and to stay safe during the bushfire season:

- Plan your visits for cooler periods of the year, avoiding the hot summer months.
- Check the Fire Danger Rating at www.emergency.wa.gov.au and do not go on the trails if the forecast is Very High or above.
- Do not do extended multi-day trips as it is not possible to keep up with the changing conditions as there is extremely limited mobile phone coverage and it is difficult to self-evacuate from the trail at short notice.
- Avoid remote sections of the trail where there is limited vehicle access.
- Abide by all trail closure signage, and any instructions from Parks and Wildlife Service and other emergency services staff and volunteers.

major bridges on the Munda Biddi and Waterous trails were also destroyed.

A smaller fire a bit further north, in Ashendon, also destroyed a major boardwalk on the Bibbulmun Track. However, amazingly, the Canning camp site survived the fire, which destroyed the adjacent tent site signs only metres away.

After the flames had been extinguished, department staff got back to work doing post-fire infrastructure assessments, insurance claims and rebuilding camp sites, bridges and steps. Again, more than 100 kilometres of trail had to be checked and remarked.

Most of the infrastructure losses were covered by insurance, but the most expensive, the historic Long Gully (Asquith) Bridge was excluded. The Long Gully Bridge, which stretched over the Murray River, was a key connection for the Bibbulmun Track in Lane Pool Reserve. The 128-metre-long timber trestle bridge was built between 1949 and 1952 as a railway extension to service the harvesting operation of the Asquith Timber Companies. It was eventually closed to rail and vehicles and became part of the Bibbulmun Track in 1997–98.

BUILDING A BRIDGE

It was quickly apparent that the historic Long Gully Bridge would not be repaired, so plans began to replace it with

a new state-of-the-art suspension bridge. The location for the new bridge was selected several kilometres downstream of the Long Gully Bridge site and plans were developed. With an overall length of 92 metres, or 82 metres between the towers, the design included two 12-metre towers that hold the bridge deck six metres above the summer river level. Weathering, a form of rusting steel, was used for the main part of the structures, including the towers and hangers to help it to blend in with the environment. The Gnaala Karla Booja traditional owners named the bridge Bilya Djena Bidi (pronounced beel-ya jenabidi), which means (swinging) river foot bridge.

The historic value of the Long Gully Bridge, and its role in guiding walkers on the Bibbulmun Track, helped generate community support for its replacement, which was provided in the form of donations and volunteer contributions during the fire clean-up and rebuilding phase. The Bibbulmun Track Foundation, through its members and friends, was able to fundraise a substantial contribution

towards the new bridge, while the Peel Development Commission and Alcoa Australia also provided financial assistance. All of the bridge contractors – BG&E Pty Ltd, Duratec Australia and Bocol Constructions – provided in-kind donations of their work.

The new bridge was opened to hikers in the beginning of July 2017, just before the winter river water level rose, which would have made the Bibbulmun Track impassable at the diversion crossing point.

While the 2015 and 2016 fire seasons were unprecedented in their severity and destruction, fire is an inevitable part of our landscape. It is hoped that the new infrastructure will be more resilient to fires and will enhance the experiences of the walkers and riders on these two great trails for years to come.

Kerstin Stender is the DBCA tracks and trails coordinator. She can be contacted on (08) 9219 8382 or by email (kerstin.stender@dbca.wa.gov.au).