



Western Wildlife



NEWSLETTER OF THE LAND FOR WILDLIFE SCHEME

Registered by Australia Post Print Post: 606811/00007

MEMORIES OF ROADSIDES

by Rica Erickson

Roadsides have been my lifelong interest. I was born at Boulder in 1908 where as a small child I marvelled at the sudden appearance after rains of plants growing wild outside our front gate. Within days the strip of red earth that flanked the narrow asphalt footpath would be covered with capeweed, jackjack grass and doublegees. In springtime in later years, when my sisters and I were trusted to explore the road southwards towards Mt Robinson, we found ferns growing on its southern flanks, while the flats beside the road were covered with everlastings, bluebells, buttercups, wattles and silky pears. One crisp autumn morning on the dry red earth we found our first 'early nancy', a tiny plant with a flower as bright as a star. Accustomed to nurturing our garden with a daily watering we were puzzled by the magnificence of the bush plants that flourished without care.

During World War 1 our family lived awhile at Albany and Cuballing. The road from Albany to Middleton Beach was a sandy track bordered by a showy spread of different wildflowers. At Cuballing where the road out of town was



bordered by prickly poison plants we hastened on to a grove of whispering sheoaks where we found gentler wildflowers called blue lilies. After the War, Dad came back with a 'gammy leg', but despite this handicap he settled on a small block of orchard land at Kendenup. There we found new and exciting roads, plotted for an embryo townsite, through virgin bush where orchids, triggerplants and sundews were abundant.

By then, Emily Pelloe's books on orchids and wildflowers were published. Pictures of wildflowers appeared weekly in the 'Western Mail', while Leach's book on Australian Nature Studies was opening a new field of knowledge. Because of my love of the bush I chose to be a country school teacher and during the next ten years kept a Nature Study Diary in which I sketched everything that came my

way: ferns, fungi, beetles, bees and butterflies as well as wildflowers. This became a treasured record of a variety of roads beside which I walked to school, from those that flanked the ditches lining the swamps at Young's Siding to those that criss-crossed wide areas of farmland as far north as Bolgart. It was there that I met the farmer who

was to become my husband.

By then I had a collection of botanical paintings worthy of publication. But there were gaps to be filled, so for many years we planned our holidays and business trips to cover as many different routes as possible. Whenever I saw an unusual patch of bush I would yell 'Stop!' - and was never disappointed. My husband declared that the plants whistled to me. He and our children joined happily in the hunt for plants and would wait patiently as I sat by the roadside to make the important preliminary sketches.

After World War 2, roadsides began to change. Road making on a grand scale was undertaken, both nationally and locally. Winding tracks were straightened and widened, with the loss of verges. In some areas the verges were burnt

continued on page 2

annually in the mistaken belief that bushfires would be prevented. In other areas where new roads were being made through bushland, the road reserves were three chains wide instead of the customary one. These plans for keeping wider nature strips were frustrated by farmers who encroached upon the reserves by ploughing firebreaks outside their fences. Botanists who are concerned about rare and endangered species ask for the exact locations of plants I have collected. I can only answer 'At a certain mile post on a certain road, but as the road has since been widened it may no longer be there.'

The network of national highways constructed by the Main Roads Department was also a source of concern to many. Their road graders relentlessly demolished nature strips for hundreds of miles, at the same time carrying noxious weeds for farming areas to previously unaffected bushland. Onion weed was spread within a year or two from Northampton to the Far North, while in the south there was a growing realisation of the devastating effect of bridal creeper in our forests. This noxious weed is still sold to city dwellers as a desirable garden plant. A more

insidious invasion by an alien plant is that of pine seedlings from plantations. They flourish on verges where some native plants are fighting for survival. Are these isolated escapees the vanguard of a steadily advancing army of pines capable of replacing eucalypts and banksias?

Discerning travellers noted these gradual changes with dismay. Some decades ago Shirley de la Hunty chaired a committee devoted to the preservation of flora on roadsides. The Main Roads Department now has a policy of spray-seeding and revegetation by native species. Also many Shires are now replanting their roadsides with native trees and shrubs. This will be a continuing exercise for future generations unless an effective method of weed control is used. Is it possible to eliminate the rank grasses now flourishing where giant drosera used to grow, or along the wet sheoak flats of Gingin where the green kangaroo paw is no longer seen?

There is need to guard the remnants of bushland that still survive, to eradicate invading pines and check the growth of weeds on recently affected verges. Already roadsides are covered with grass that has to be mowed annually. The

fragile understorey of small shrubs and native animals are slowly being choked by weeds. Within a few decades to come when the trees die also, of old age, there will be no bushland left to gladden travellers' (and tourists') eyes. So it is encouraging to find so many people in various societies who are engaged in investigating methods of weed control along our roadside verges.

Rica Erickson is a naturalist, historian and artist whose influence on nature conservation in WA has been profound. As well as publishing, she was instrumental in having several areas in Victoria Plains Shire made into Nature Reserves and, through the Country Women's Association in 1961, she helped to persuade the then Premier, Sir David Brand, to increase the width of road reserves in new land releases to be places where, in Sir David's own words: 'Wildflowers can grow and flourish in perpetuity'.

Some of Rica's publications include: 'Orchids of the West' 1951 (second edition 1965); 'Triggerplants' 1958; 'Plants of Prey' 1968, 'Flowers and Plants of Western Australia' 1973 Erickson, George, Marchant & Morcombe pub. Reed (now into its third edition); and various historical books such as 'The Drummonds of Hawthornden' 1969; etc.