

RESEARCH

WAS BARON VON MUELLER THE LAST PERSON TO SEE THE NATIVE VEGETATION AT GREENOUGH FLATS?

by Sheila Hamilton-Brown



The perched wetlands at Morilla Swamp showing extensive stands of living river gums across the lake floor. Photo: Val English

Diminution of river gums at Morilla Swamp due to waterlogging. Photo: Val English

You've heard of rare and threatened plants and animals, well, what about the ecological communities that are also threatened?

BARON Ferdinand von Mueller travelled from Geraldton to Shark Bay in 1877, and was probably the last botanist to see the native plant community occurring on Greenough Flats - a flood plain between the coast south of Geraldton and the Greenough River.

In its heyday, the clayey loam soils of Greenough Flats probably supported an open woodland of river gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), with stands of summer-scented wattle (*Acacia rostellifera*), and numerous wetland herbs such as swamp sundews (*Drosera* spp.), Long-flowered Nancies (*Wurmbea tubulosa*) and clumps of wallaby grass, sedges and other native grass. Have you seen this community? You may have it on your property. You may even remember when the plain was last flooded. A patch of land near the Greenough River church is an example of what we believe Greenough Flats looked like.

Morilla Swamp (west of Morawa) is a unique wetland in that it contains populations of river gum on the lake floor where other wetlands in the area are dominated by York gum (*E. loxophleba*) and paperbarks (*Melaleuca* spp.). Now the wetland is practically always waterlogged, and the consequence is the diminution of these last stands of river gum. Morilla Swamp is being currently proposed as a possible **threatened community**, and if successful, plans to preserve it will get underway. Do you know of any other stands of river gum in your area such as Morilla swamp?

An ecological community is simply defined as a group of plants, animals or other organisms that live in a particular habitat. Threats to a community may be clearing, grazing, waterlogging, fire or anything that may reduce the size or change the make-up of the community. In the Wheatbelt, the clearing of the land for agriculture and related activities has reduced the biological diversity of the area. As the Wheatbelt continues to degrade, there is an urgent need to preserve what remains of our natural vegetation.

CALM's Threatened Species and Communities Unit (WATSCU) at Woodvale and the Division of Science at Murdoch University are undertaking a project to identify and promote the preservation of biological diversity in the Wheatbelt areas. This is to be done with the help of LCDCs, landowners, naturalists, other interested people and with funds from Environment Australia. If you live in the Wheatbelt and you think that there is a threatened ecological community in your area, like the two described here, then please let WATSCU know and we may be able to help you. Or you may be able to help us by identifying communities we believe no longer exist.

If you have any suggestions, inquiries or would like further information on the above or have any suggestions, then please ring me on (08) 9405 5168 or e-mail me at sheilah@wood.calm.wa.gov.au

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