

FAUNA

GRANITE outcrops are very valuable areas to wildlife, both plants and animals. One animal I am presently studying that uses granite outcrops is the yellow admiral butterfly, *Vanessa itea* (also known as the 'Australian admiral'). This highly mobile insect travels widely through the countryside, but may visit granite outcrops for two reasons.

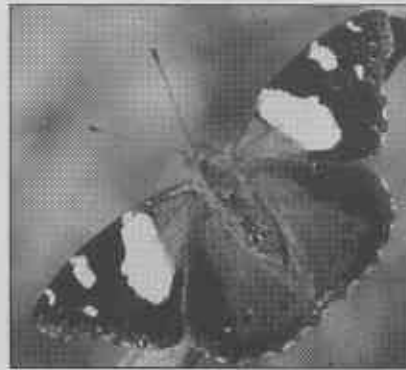
If a granite hill is the highest point in the district, admirals will use it as a meeting-place. Males fly to the tops of these hills in the late afternoon (after 3 pm in late winter, but not until about 5 pm in late spring). There they set up territories, by settling in favoured spots and darting out to investigate any object that flies past. At the same time of day virgin females ascend these hills to select a mate.

The other thing that may attract admirals to granite outcrops is a plant that sometimes grows at these sites: native pellitory (*Parietaria debilis*). This soft, delicate annual, up to 40 cm tall, is the only known native plant in southwestern Australia on which the admiral's larvae feed. Female admirals therefore visit this plant to lay their eggs.

Native pellitory occurs widely in southern Australia, but only where conditions suit it, particularly on the coast or in association with granite. Native pellitory may therefore occur, or have occurred, on your local granite outcrop. It might not still be there if the vegetation is weedy and disturbed as, like many native annuals, native pellitory is readily displaced by weeds. In weed-infested bushlands on Perth's coastal plain it has largely disappeared, however native pellitory still thrives in some spots where kangaroos are present; perhaps as a result of kangaroos grazing on the exotic grasses that compete with it so strongly. The same may be true of granite rocks where there may be more chance of finding pellitory if kangaroos are present.

THE USE OF GRANITE OUTCROPS BY THE YELLOW ADMIRAL

by Robert Powell



Yellow admiral (life size).



Yellow admiral laying an egg on native pellitory.

You may wonder how the yellow admiral is faring, given that the plant on which it breeds is now very scattered and declining. Surprisingly, it continues to do well. The admiral is one of the most mobile of butterflies, and is able to travel long distances to find places where it can breed. Moreover, it is able to breed also on an introduced relative of native pellitory that some people have on their farms: stinging-nettle (*Urtica urens*).

If you want to see admirals, hilltops are the best places to look, but make sure you pick the highest hill, and visit it during the late afternoon of a sunny day between autumn and spring. Go right to the

top, and look out for dark, fast-flying butterflies of medium size. When one lands and spreads its wings you will note its distinctive colour-pattern: the pale yellow, oval-shaped patches on the forewings, black round the wing borders and reddish brown towards the body. Several other species of butterfly, various dragonflies and other insects also congregate on hilltops, so these places are of interest for seeing other insects too.

If you wish to check whether native pellitory occurs on your outcrop, contact *Land for Wildlife* by phoning (08) 9334 0427, and ask for a description and botanical drawings of the plant. Look for the plant between July and November, in moist spots at the base of granite boulders, or on scree slopes, often in partly shaded places.

I would be very interested to know whether native pellitory still survives on granite outcrops on farms, so if you find native pellitory and are happy to pass on this information, please phone me on (08) 9334 0430, or write to: Robert Powell, C/-CALM Planning and Visitor Services Branch, Locked Bag 104, Bentley Delivery Centre 6983. If you are willing for seed to be collected from your plants, it may be possible to create a seed-bank for use by others who would like to re-establish this easily propagated plant on their granite outcrops.

Penny Hussey's excellent booklet *How to Manage Your Granite Outcrops* emphasizes the value of these areas to wildlife, both plants and animals. In a later edition of this newsletter there will be a more general article about the different species of butterfly you may see on your property, and what plants you might protect or grow to encourage them.

Robert Powell is a naturalist and member of the Western Australian Insect Study Society. He can be contacted by phone on (08) 9334 0430.