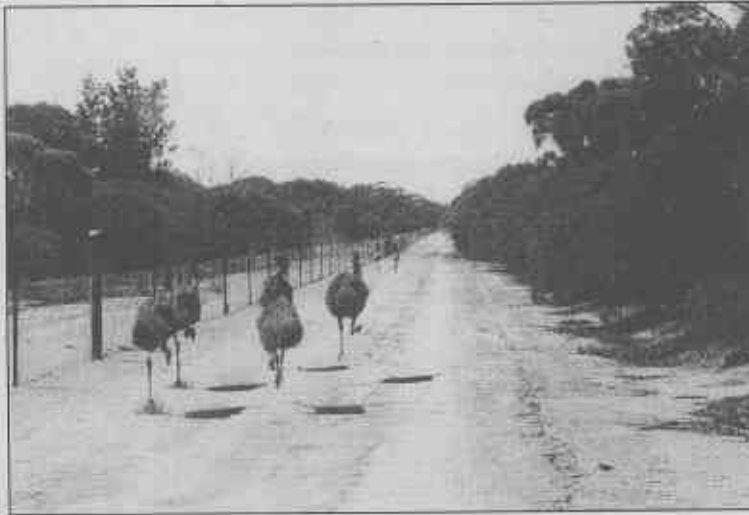


THE FAUNA AND FLORA OF THE STATE BARRIER FENCE

by Kathy Saunders

WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S State Barrier Fence, originally known as the Rabbit Proof Fence, turns 100 this year! Agriculture Western Australia (AGWEST) and the Agriculture Protection Board (APB) are co-ordinating the community celebration to be held at Burracoppin and Merredin on the 18 August 2001.



In late July 1901, A. W. Canning, an explorer and surveyor with the Lands and Surveys Department, was put in charge of a party to survey a line which commenced at Burracoppin. In December 1901 the work of erection began. R. J. Anketell, Superintendent of Rabbit Fence Construction, and his team constructed some 20 miles of fence per month. Gangs totalling up to 400 men were employed as day labour. Around 8000 tonnes of materials were carried by ship and railed to depots and then hauled overland by horse, camel or donkey teams.

Camels had to be muzzled on the northern section of the No. 1 fence from the 700 mile as poison bush covered this belt of country. Whilst Anketell had these plants eradicated for some distances on both sides of the fence the odd poisoning still occurred. By September 1903 there were 27 reserves along the fenceline, some 20,000 acres that comprised grazing areas, wells, soaks, gnamma holes and rock tanks. Posts were mostly wooden and were cut near to the fence line, using natural timber of white gum, jam, wodjil, pine, tea tree or mulga. Steel standards were used where timber was scarce.

Completed in 1907, the No. 1 Rabbit Proof Fence stretched from

THE WAY WE WERE ...

Starvation Boat Harbour, about 130 km west of Esperance on the south coast, to Cape Keraudren at the south end of the Eighty-Mile Beach, near Port Hedland. A distance of 1837 km (1139 miles), then being the longest fence in the world. Unfortunately, rabbits had by-passed the southern end of the fence before it was completed in 1903, and the northern by the end of 1907.

The Acting Chief Inspector of Rabbits, Alex Crawford, on return from a trip along a portion of the rabbit-proof fence to the north of Burracoppin where there were rabbits present, saw an illustration of the good the rabbit fence is doing. "On the outside of the No 1 fence there was not a blade of grass to be seen; on the inside there was any amount of grass from three to six inches high and any amount of old feed, while on the outside of the fence the old feed had been eaten down close to the ground, and there was not enough to feed even a bandicoot. A better illustration of the value of the fence it would be difficult to find."

Crawford also reported from a trip along the fence in 1904 that "Boodie rats are the greatest menace at the present time and I saw in three separate places they had scratched right underneath the fence, apparently within a few hours."

Gates were located every 20 miles apart, as were trap yards. "Up north they caught anything but rabbits – foxes, boodie rats, night cats, sometimes a bungarra. There were a lot of native cats those days – spotted ones – but the bungarra would eventually dig a hole under the trap fence until he got out." Where cats or iguanas are caught in the trap yards the boundary rider would release them, as they were the natural enemies of the rabbit.

Frank Broomhall, a boundary rider on the No. 1 fence, and later the author of 'The Longest Fence in the World' describes the colour and life of the fauna and flora along the fence. In October 1926 in the mulga country, he writes: "I noted here was colour – rich red soil, the mulga forest itself, cararra and bowgada bush, sugar burra and spinifex gum and in the spring miles of pink, yellow and white everlastings forming a carpet for the whole earth." Later in the year: "The wild flowers and crowsfoot and other natural feed are dying off now – quondongs with their bright green foliage and deep red fruit are a refreshing sight against the grey green of the mulga – a pity most of the fruit is grub-eaten", his note ran.

In late January 1927 near the 126 mile, Frank Broomhall came upon a dirt mound. "I came across a mallee hen's nest, a large mound of earth, leaves and rubbish about eight feet in diameter and two feet

high, the sides sloping a little and the top flat. A mallee fowl is not much bigger than a domestic fowl yet must be amazingly industrious for the nest contained easily three loads of dirt, practically half a day's work for one man with a shovel."

Kevin Davies' worked for the Murchison Regional Vermin Council and describes his experiences: "I have seen many mobs of emus several miles long and up to half a mile wide all heading south on both sides of the Fence and especially on the west side. In the early thirties, emus, forced to move by the near drought conditions in the station country, began to travel down the Fence towards the agricultural districts and became such a pest that the Road Boards offered a one shilling bonus for every emu beak brought in. This offer

resulted in payment for a total of 56,204 beaks that year."

Today the fence has been modified and realigned and now known as the State Barrier Fence. It stretches over 1,170 km from the Zuytdorp Cliffs north of Kalbarri, follows around the north and north-eastern farming areas and around the Yilgarn Shire. The fence then runs east of the Lakes district, and south-easterly to Jerdacuttup in the Ravensthorpe Shire. It is maintained today principally to protect agricultural areas from migrating emus. Good rainfall, feed and breeding conditions in pastoral areas, followed by a prolonged drought, may result in a large number of emus migrating in a southwesterly direction. On average these conditions occur about every ten years.

Such a population explosion happened during spring 1994, when 40,000 emus were counted on the eastern section and over 15,000 on the northern section of the fence. Whilst some had to be controlled, most gradually dispersed when rain occurred, without causing serious damage to crops.

The State Barrier Fence also provides a baiting corridor for wild dogs; a barrier and traffic facility for feral goats; a 20 metre fire break between pastoral and agricultural areas; and a barrier for feral and domestic animals should there be an exotic disease outbreak.

Kathy Saunders is Communications Officer at AGWEST, Northam. She can be contacted on 9690 2082 or email ksaunders@agric.wa.gov.au