FLORA

THE GREAT GREVILLEA HUNT

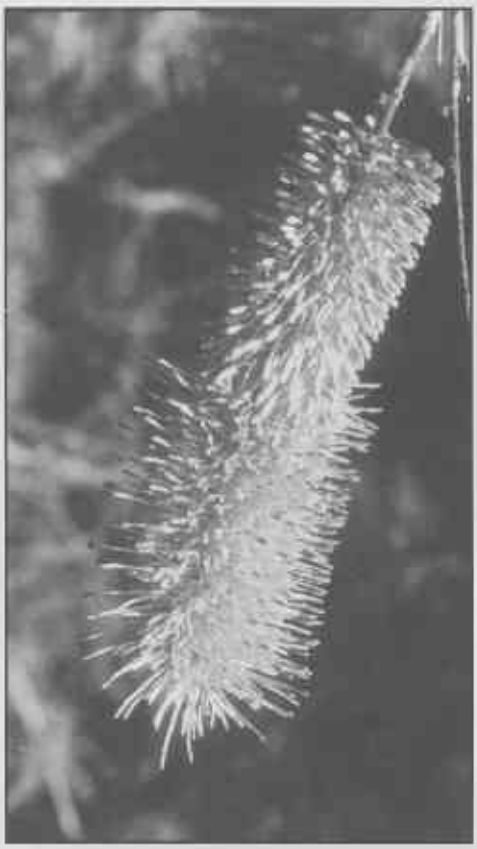
Neil R Marriott

HAVING had the fortune to study, in the wild, nearly every Australian Grevillea for the production of our three Grevillea Books, co-author Peter Olde and myself realised that there was still much research required into the genus. Close liaison with the Perth Herbarium confirmed this. As a result Peter and I make an annual pilgrimage to the West, spending weeks in the field tracking down new or unusual species, as well as those requiring further study. Last year's trip must rate as one of the most memorable we have ever undertaken.

The wonderful Mary Squires from Mukinbudin has an indigenous nursery growing thousands of the local plants. While showing Peter around the district the week before I arrived, Mary noticed a lovely red flowered Grevillea growing along a backroad. Examination revealed it to be a new species, never before collected!!

With this in mind we decided that we had better get back into this most easterly part of the central wheatbelt to have a closer look and to collect herbarium specimens. Heading out east we travelled through the tragically degraded heart of Western Australia's wheat bowl. Practically all the native vegetation was swamped by exotic annual grasses! In addition, salinity has already destroyed all the low-lying areas and is spreading rapidly.

Fortunately the further east we went, the better the natural environment became. Just to the southeast of Mukinbudin, in an area where granite comes to the surface, we found the rare *Grevillea minutiflora* and the even rarer *Acacia denticulosa*, a beautiful plant with huge golden rods and "leaves" like sandpaper. Not surprising that they are rare when you look around



Grevillea magnifica.

and see what has been cleared!

We took a quick look around Mary's magnificent natural wildflower garden. The block had previously been rolled for cropping - not once but twice!! Still it has come back with massed displays of the region's flora. Dominant in many areas was the spectacular large rich cream Woolly Flower Grevillea *G. eriobotrya*. This is a rare Priority 1 species, but is abundant here. Other Grevilleas we found included free flowering specimens of Flame Grevillea *G. excelsior* with its fiery orange flowers, *G. eremophila, G. didymobotrya, G. apiciloba, G. huegelii, G. shuttleworthiana, G. eryngioides* and on occasional granite rises *G. magnifica* and *G. levis*. As well there was a wealth of other spectacular sandplain flora - *Boronia adamsiana* with showy pink flowers, Hakeas, Banksias, Isopogon, Persoonia, pink Thryptomenes and many more. It is a credit to Mary and her husband that they have set aside this area for the environment.

From the Squire's bush block we headed off to survey the new species discovered by Mary the week before. As it turned out it was just one of the many new species and subspecies we would find on this amazing trip! Mary's new Grevillea has quite long pendulous burgundy red flowers, set amongst deeply divided, slightly prickly grey-green leaves. It grows to around 1m x 1m and sadly is confined to a small population along ONE roadside. Had the adjoining farmer or the Shire decided to "tidy" the roadside, we would never know that this new species ever existed! Just how many plants have been lost like this in the west we will never know!

From Mukinbudin we headed south to Karalee, a pumping station town on the Perth-Kalgoorlie pipeline. We were looking for another rare Grevillea, without luck, but we did find several unusual new red flowered grevilleas. "Another new species" we thought at first, however closer examination showed them to be beautiful natural hybrids between *G. oncogyne* and *G. huegelii* that were both growing nearby.

Heading on to Yellowdine on the Great Eastern Highway, we turned due south of the town on the Mt Palmer Rd. We had not gone far before we came upon a lovely area of flat outcropping granite. Here we found the typical "echidna like" prickly low plants of *G. tetrapleura* as well as *G. acacioides, G. levis,* and a beautiful low pale yellow flowered Verticordia with long styles.

continued on page 5

continued from page 4

Continuing south we came upon an area of woodland with *G. oncogyne* plants growing to several metres in height – this is a hardy and attractive species, and one specimen we found was a spectacular display of bright red flowers. West of Mt Palmer the vegetation opened out to sandplain or kwongan. There was a massed display of heathland plants including the most beautiful *G. ceratocarpa* specimens Peter and I had ever seen. These were silver-grey soft foliaged shrubs to 2m, with showy erect spikes of white flowers twice the length of any we have seen previously. It most likely warrants recognition as a new subspecies.

This region is one vast botanic paradise – only the inroads of the mining industry mar the beauty of an area where rare and unusual plants abound in a land that remains the same as it was before white man arrived. We headed down to the Parker Range, where we found the distinct "Parker Range form" of *G. obliquistigma.* It forms a showy green shrub to 1m with massed spikes of cream flowers that turn a most attractive pinky red on maturity. Nearby the rare and beautiful *Hakea pendans* with its weeping pink and white flowers also occurs. Here we also found a wonderful new subspecies of Huegell's Grevillea *G. huegelii* that formed glaucous blue-grey mats of thorny foliage beset with bright yellow flowerheads. In the sparsely vegetated woodland they stood out in spectacular fashion on the red-brown stony soil.

Just south of Mt Parker we re-located *G. lissopleura.* This must surely be one of the most elusive Grevilleas in the west. It took Peter and I at least four trips to the area in the 1980s before we "discovered" it. This is its only known location, recorded in the early 1970s by the late Ken Newbey, and only noted because it was in full flower as he drove past!! On a small ridge stand a handful of mounded green shrubs. It makes you wonder about the complexities of evolution when you see plants with such limited natural distribution.

FLORA

We then headed on to Mt Holland, to try and relocate *G. marriottii* where I had originally discovered it while searching for *G. lissopleura* a decade earlier. At the type location for *G. marriottii* most plants found were old and half dead. Rather disturbing, for this is also a rare species. However on the southern slopes of Mt Holland we found a wonderfully healthy colony growing in a gravel pit. Many of the plants at this site had quite attractive broad leaves and massed flower buds.

At a place called "Digger Rocks" (where are the rocks??) we found the rare *G. lullfitzii* growing in coarse laterite. This plant, like so many in the region, has never been recorded at any other location. Also here we found specimens of the beautiful holly leaf *G. insignis* ssp. *elliotii* with pure white flowers that aged to a rose pink (their normal colour is red). Unfortunately cuttings from this unusual form failed to strike. In the dense scrub at this site we also found the rare and beautiful *Dryandra viscida,* so named from its sticky seed capsules.

Sadly in this area, large tracts of this unique flora are rapidly being destroyed by mining activities. Evidence of this came with a shock when we headed west along a pipeline track in search of a beautiful new yellow flowered Grevillea that I found here the year before. The roadside where the plants had originally been located was now considerably widened, and with the widening went the new Grevilleas!! Despite thorough searches of the bush in the area and along the track in both directions no further plants were to be found. Fortunately material collected the year before was successfully grafted and the plant, about to be published as a new species by Peter and I, is at least surviving in cultivation!!

From Digger Rocks we headed west towards Varley, where we found an unusual form of the rare *G. prostrata* with larger than normal leaves and pinkish-white flowers. Here also was the extremely widespread *G. eryngioides* with its beautiful glaucous blue-grey lobed leaves and wonderful suckering habit. What a pity it doesn't have showier flowers.

Continuing west we stopped to admire the spectacularly large specimens of the Granite Plume Grevillea *G. magnifica* growing on and around Holt Rock. Many had leafless flowering racemes to 5m in height. Superficially similar to *G. petrophiloides*, the Granite Plume Grevillea has far larger flower racemes and is always found on granite intrusions. The rapid growth rate and large plumes of showy pinky-red flowers make this one of our very best garden plants. Native birds love it.

To be continued next issue.

Neil Marriott is an ecologist who works with the Victorian 'Trust for Nature'.