

FLORA

WELLSTEAD - ALMOST WATTLED OUT!

Compiled by the Wellstead Heritage Committee

'WATTLE' is an old word in the English language meaning 'rod or stake.' The word was introduced to Australia during the construction of the 'wattle and daub' huts of early settlers, when the flexible acacia saplings were used for the frames. However, the people of Wellstead could almost interpret the word as the 'rod that almost broke the camel's back'!

Wellstead is farming country tucked between the Stirling Ranges and the Southern Ocean, approximately 100 kms north-east of Albany. Since 1987 the locals have surveyed the district's population of birds, eucalypts and banksias and published the results in a series of booklets assisted by Gordon Reid Foundation funding. The aim was to record what exists in the bushlands of the region, learn about it and, armed with that knowledge, plan its preservation.

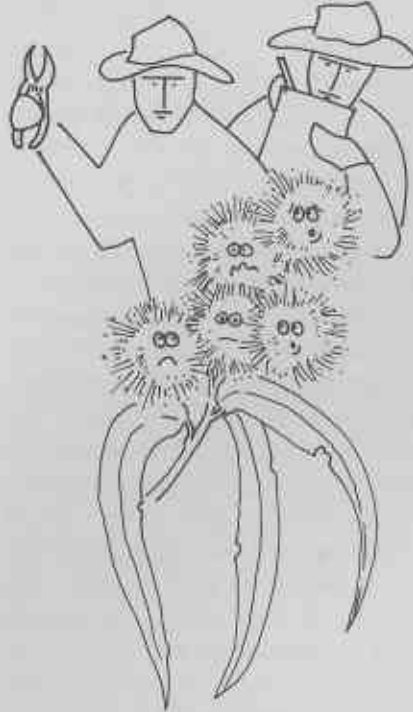
The mammoth task of surveying the district's acacia species is almost completed and ready to be published in their fifth book.

Penny Hussey from *Land For Wildlife* suggested some years ago that the group select 'wattles' as the next survey topic. This sounded easy enough. Estimates indicated there were possibly 20 to 30 species out in the district. An official survey sheet was created with the assistance of the Perth Herbarium and it was arranged that samples of each specimen were to be sent to them for official identification. Latitudes and longitudes were studied and GPS experts lent a hand to pinpoint localities.

Ten locals bravely agreed to participate in the survey. A local artist unsuspectingly took on the task of sketching each plant when in flower and adding the pods later

Family: *Mimosaceae*Genus: *Acacia*

Common Name: WATTLE



when the collector brought them in. The Albany Herbarium assisted in the research of the meanings behind the scientific names of the species.

Who would have dreamt there could be so many different shades of yellow and subtle variations of perfume? Pods were aptly described as long, curly, short etc., seeds were round, oblong, flattened or perhaps curled – the local knowledge of botanical adjectives steadily increased!

Just as the collectors began to develop confidence it was disconcerting to discover that the foliage of most wattles cannot be described as a true leaf. They have flattened, expanded leaf stalks called phyllodes that function like leaves. These can vary from wing-like, angular, boat shaped, spiky, soft to leathery or hairy. It was also discovered that nectar is not produced in the flowers. Ants are attracted to a nectar-producing gland on the axis of the leaf-like phyllode.

Many a time the survey team wished that they had picked a plant family that was easier to classify. Western Australia has 560 species of *Acacia* and this small district has so far identified 59 species! It was confirmed with interest that eight of the species discovered in the survey were rare, threatened or had insufficient data to determine their status.

Acacias are of great value in remnant vegetation and are at the forefront of regeneration in burnt or degraded areas of bush. They are legumes that add nutrients to the soil by coexisting with *Rhizobium* bacteria that take nitrogen from the air and add it to the soil. The seed pods are a food source for birds, insects and many other animals including man. Their pods are easily collected. The seed has a hard water-resistant coating that is broken down by abrasion or hot water. They are easy to propagate and quick growing.

The really hard work is now under way with many local computer experts preparing the vast amount of information at the Wellstead Telecentre. Next stop is the printer, and finally the book launch!

Did you know ...

... that the deadliest animal in Australia (using human fatalities as an indicator) is the horse? An average of 21 people a year die in riding-related accidents. Using the same criterion, the deadliest venomous animal is the honeybee, which causes up to 10 deaths a year.