

# The Way We Were

When walking in any bushland, it is often interesting to try to work out what its history has been, as that can give a clue for how it should be managed now.

So, in Wambyn Nature Reserve, York, this large dead tree stands on the edge of a wet flat in Wandoo woodland. Judging by its girth, it was perhaps 400 years old at the time of its death. It is surrounded by five healthy young trees, perhaps 60 to 80 years old.



Why did this big tree die?



A closer inspection clearly reveals the cause of death – it was ringbarked. At the turn of the 19th/20th century, ringbarking was

promoted as the fastest way to clear country and get grazing for stock under the opened-up canopy. Men were paid by piece-work – so many acres ringbarked per day. There is a good contemporary description of the practice in the Blackwood Valley\* and it was encouraged right across the forests and woodlands of the south-west.

Wet flats are a distinct habitat within the eastern wandoo woodlands, where broad clay valleys become waterlogged in winter. In their undisturbed state, these areas are covered with low perennials, geophytes and annuals, often a succession of everlastings. They are extremely high in biodiversity, especially of the annuals, and provide important foraging sites for fauna (see *Managing*

*your Wandoo Woodlands* for more detail). Early settlers saw them as ready-made paddocks and flocks were soon being shepherded on them. 'Increasing the productivity' by ringbarking followed.

While it was, I suppose, a reasonable action for those days (but even then, what a waste of superb timber) the long-term effects are deeply saddening.



In the lowest part of the area, an active saline creek eats away at what was once a species-diverse wet flat



Revegetation looks good around a fallen trunk where fire has emphasized its ringbarking scar.

Walking further across what was the wet flat at Wambyn (which was gazetted as a NR only in 1970) shows what it has become – a saline wasteland. But there is hope – revegetation with salt-tolerant shrubs is looking good in places. It took 80 or so years to degrade this far. Five years of effort is starting to reverse the process. But it will require determination from more than one generation of Western Australians for a very long time if it is to succeed.

Moral of this story? Don't clear any remnant vegetation without taking into account the long-term effects of that clearing first.

*Penny Hussey*

\* "West of the Arthur" John Bird. 1990. West Arthur Shire Council. See, eg, p120.