

*Jesse Brampton
16/7 Norfolk St
Fremantle. WA 6160
phonelfax 09 - 430 7687*

On Foot in the Fitzgerald

(2000 words)

In 1841 the explorer Edward John Eyre, approaching the end of his epic east-west traverse from Adelaide to Albany, said of it:

"...a more wretched arid-looking country never existed...Most properly had it been called Mount Barren."

A hundred and fifty years later, a team of CALM (Conservation and Land Management) scientists gushed:

"...one of the richest areas for plants is WA, with 1,748 identified species..It has a richer fauna than any other conservation area in the south west ..."

The Fitzgerald River National Park - 329,039 ha of little-known splendour, 420 km south-east of Perth. It is a park which, despite being one of the largest and most botanically significant in Australia, is to most West Australians little more than "some place down south". Late in April, lured by whispers of a tough but spectacular walk, and intrigued by these contrasting perspectives, I set out to hike the Fitzgerald and uncover the commoners truth of it.

The first unavoidable fact about the Fitzgerald is that it is big. The second is that it is dry. These two parameters dominated planning. We arranged a water drop at the mouth of the Fitzgerald River, then, on our way to the eastern end of the Park, bounced down the track to Quoin Head to leave another drum there.

Late in the afternoon four of us set out from Mylies Beach, near Hopetoun, walking west into the Park.

"The sea is my insistent companion tonight, breaking in long smooth rollers on the small crescent-shaped beach, and splashing wheezily against the jagged points. Periodically a bigger wave rumbles in and shakes the rocks, roaring onto the beach in a lather of soapy froth.

The sun has set, stooping behind a bulbous granite headland which wears a faintly ridiculous punk-like fringe of burnt trees. Evidence of the massive fires of two summers ago is unavoidable - after just an hour's walking my trousers are a lattice-work of charcoal draglines, my hands black from fending off branches.

Already I have reason to believe this calamity of nature will work in our favour, for the coastal scrub, once head-high and notoriously difficult to penetrate, has regrown to an open knee-level burr laced with the skeletal remains of that which was. Though the nature and texture of the landscape is thus necessarily changed, I am grateful for our easier passage - it will make what promises to be a challenging hike more enjoyable..."

Our first full day, from West Beach to Quoin Head, provided ample proof that it would indeed be a physically challenging walk. Terrain varied from rolling slopes of ankle-trapping coastal heath to short steep hills littered with quartz and granite and split by thickly-vegetated gullies. We climbed a jagged lizard-like spine, scrambling among boulders as big as houses, then plunged down through burnt-out mallee scrub to the dazzling white ocean of dunes bordering Hammersley Inlet. Beyond, the track lead out onto one of the beaches which alternated with rugged fifty-metre cliffs as a border between land and sea. All the while the delightfully named Whoogarup Ranges dominated the view north.

Paradoxically, it was this very changeability, this testing topsy-turvy variety, which generated the unique beauty of the Fitzgerald. A kaleidoscope of combinations contrasted beach to mountain, dune to heath-land, scrub to ocean, inlet to rocky river valley, earth to wind, water, sun and sky.

Unexpected delights lay around every corner. As we crested a rise and began to wind down towards Hammersley Beach a cry of "Look - dolphins!" rang out from the front. There, surfing down the face of one of the endless perfect breakers, were five shining grey dolphins. They rode that wave 30, 40, 50 meters, until it dissolved into a swirl of white water. Then they simply vanished.

"Work, or play?" somebody wondered. I said nothing, but imagined I'd seen smiles as wide as ours on their snouty faces. Ten minutes later we saw them again, a whirl of twisting bodies darting through a school of fish which leapt flashing and frantic into the sun. Definitely work, this time. Lunch. Or - perhaps - play-lunch?

Sometimes the line between our human world and nature dissolves and I no longer know what is blatant wishful anthropomorphism and what is observation. Does it really matter? Perhaps if we allow ourselves to ascribe human characteristics to the creatures of the wild we may relate more closely to them and thus be more inclined to respect them and their right to a place on this earth.

Day 2, from Quoin Head to Twin Bays, was spectacular and exhausting. The long arduous climb up Two Bump Hill rewarded us with stunning views. The wild ragged pristine coast stretched miles away to the east, while the craggy bulk and shadow-split slopes of Thumb Peak (519m) loomed in the west. The weather continued to smile on us, and we ate lunch in reverent silence.

Tramping into the afternoon we drew ever closer to Thumb Peak then, hard up to its granite skirt, swung away to the south, tracing an arc around its lower flanks. A series of short steep gullies kept the heart pounding, but a cool sea-breeze brought welcome relief on the ridges. Tempted by what the track notes called "unsurpassed views of the coast", we scrambled up the white quartz hill to trig-point Bremer Bay 17. We were not disappointed. Once again it seemed the great-hand-in-the-sky had spun the kaleidoscope and the elements had fallen into another breathtaking pattern. We sat till we were chilled, took quick note of a track leading in to what we presumed was Twin Bays, and set off through the scrub to the beach, arriving there at 4.30 pm.

Perfect, we thought - a few minutes to find the hut and water-tank (upon which we were relying), then perhaps an hour to set up camp before darkness. Wrong. Following the track notes too literally, we over-shot badly and found ourselves - an hour later - still crossing headlands, looking for the track. In failing light we scattered for one last frantic search. To our great good fortune the hut was sighted, way back from whence we'd come, a scant five minutes before darkness would have consigned us to an miserable thirsty night. Relief outweighed frustration, and the half-hour night hike seemed a moderate price to pay for the cool clear water in that tank.

"Day 3. Anzac day. Late in the morning we spilled down off the hills onto Dempster Beach. The sun was warm, the sand bright white and unmarked, the water clear sea-green and the waves lovely gentle five-footers just begging to be body-surfed. We were like small boys, throwing down our packs, racing to strip away sweaty clothes and dashing madly into the water. All that was missing was one of yesterday's dolphins to play with..."

Leaving that night's campsite at the mouth of the Fitzgerald, we turned inland and laboured north up the broad river valley, staggering under our camel-like loads of water. With two days still to travel we'd packed eight litres per person. Eight litres is eight kgm's - that's twenty pounds! Oh for the day somebody invents dehydrated water!

Once again the physical strain was counter-balanced by the startling scenery through which we walked. Gone were the crusty looming mountains; gone was the iridescent ever-present ocean; gone was the fascinating coastal heath - instead we found cliffs of white, gold and red spongelite (a local rock somewhat akin to sandstone), long pools of cool dark water, tangles of kennedia creeper and wild hibiscus, and sudden vast inland panoramas stretching across a rumpled olive mantle to the wavering smoky horizon.

We made camp on a broad sand spit which all but filled a sweeping bend in the river valley. The sinking sun lit the cliffs above in glowing golden hues and we scratched our heads and muttered, almost grizzly at this heedless off-hand beauty. Eyre commented on these cliffs, calling them "precipitous...an ochre of various colours - red and yellow, and of a soft friable description." A dry prosaic character, was our Edward John.

His feelings toward this landscape had not changed. The previous day he'd written -

"...passed through a barren and worthless country for eleven miles, and encamped upon a deep ravine, in which we procured brackish water. Our horses were greatly fagged."

We knew how they felt. Long days, heavy loads, scrub alternately thick and tangled and burnt black and spikey, and a rough rocky footing which made mockery of attaining any kind of rythm were taking their toll on us.

The brackish water of Eyre's time was now thoroughly salty. Nonetheless it provided an invigorating swim and - to my great surprise - four good size black brim. These made a welcome addition to our simple dinner. Hiking engenders - no, demands - a simple lifestyle. As always, it was this that I found so nourishing - the simplicity, and the easy intimacy with nature.

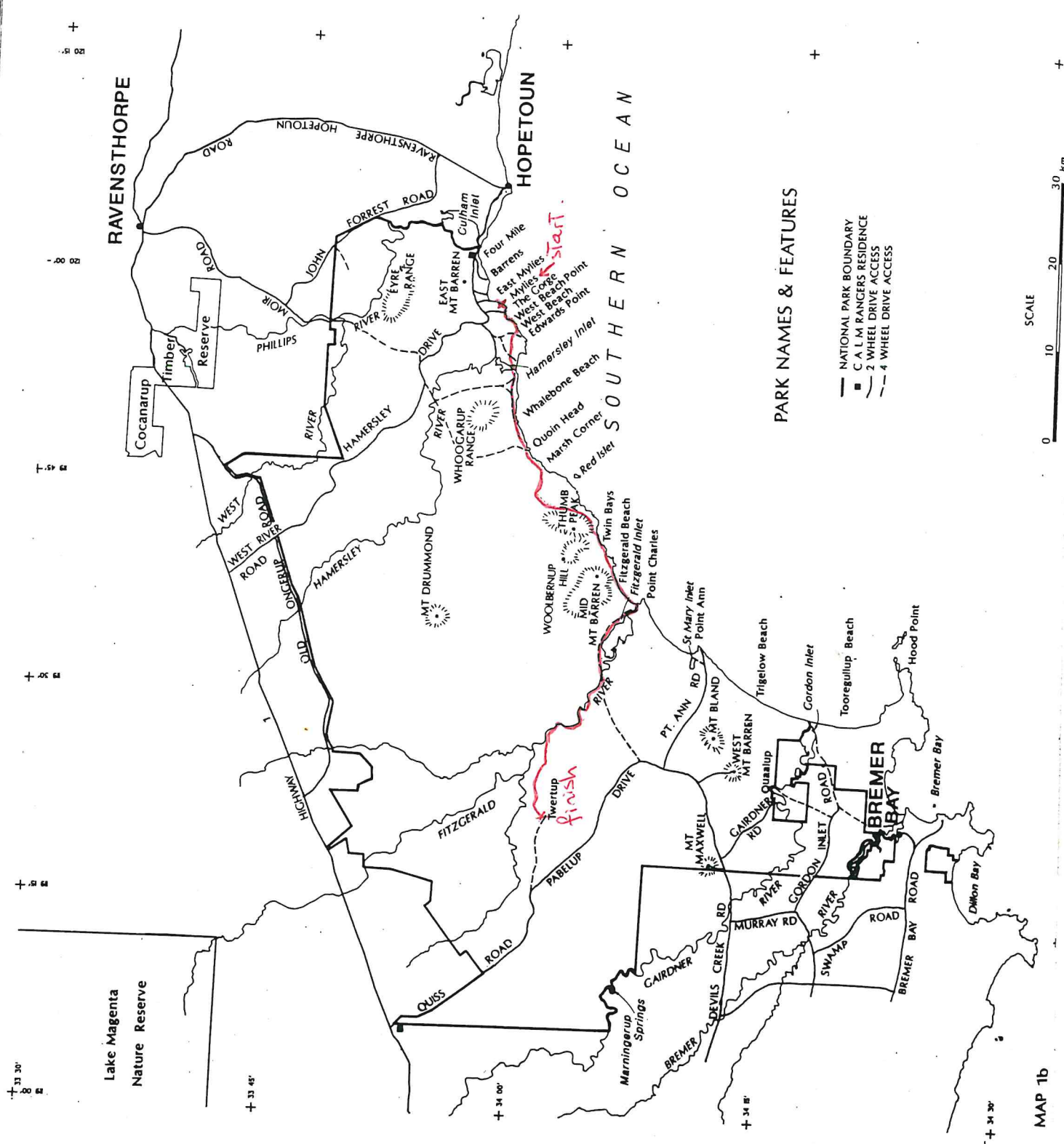
That night, lying on the coarse welcoming sand, I watched a warm wind blow fairy-floss clouds across the stars, and wondered if our made-to-order fine weather was about to end. It did rain, but only briefly, the heavy drops splattering like over-ripe grapes on my bivy-bag. Morning dawned cool and almost clear, and with tangible sadness we broke camp for the last time.

As if to underline the scientist's perspective of the Park, our final day brought flocks of flapping swans and ducks on the river pools, pounding emus among the charred mallee, kangaroos leaping from shady sleeping places, and flowers, flowers, flowers everywhere. Time and again I had to remind myself it was not yet spring. We began a list of those species flowering but gave up at nine banksias, an equal number of hakeas, almost as many grevillias and numerous eucalypts, acacias, kennedias, dryandras, orchids and others. A rich flora and fauna, indeed.

Yet I could so easily see this place from Eyre's perspective, too, for this was harsh country, with its rock, its mean shattered watercourses, and its tough relentless scrub. Harsh, yet harshly lovely. It snatched at one's heart with its quixotic contrasts - the gorgeous and the grotesque, the lovely and the lamentable, the breathtaking and the brutal - so often side-by-side. *This* was the common man's truth - and I loved it.

"I love the loneliness of it; I love the silence, and the utterly tangible emptiness. I love the peace and the unspoiled beauty, for here in the Fitzgerald there is little sign of white man's presence, save a few old wheel tracks. I love the simple fact that four of us can come out here and do this - come out and walk almost a hundred kilometers through stunning country, and not see a soul; that we can strip naked and frolic in both ocean and river; that we can share such warm and open friendship in the nurturing arms of nature."

And, above all, I love the blessed fact that this is here at all. We are fortunate indeed. Wake up, Western Australia - wake up to this gem on your doorstep. It is a common man's natural paradise - despite the bleak mutterings of E.J. Eyre. After all, he'd been out a little longer than us.



PARK NAMES & FEATURES

- NATIONAL PARK BOUNDARY
- C.A.L.M. RANGERS RESIDENCE
- - - WHEEL DRIVE ACCESS
- - - WHEEL DRIVE ACCESS

SCALE



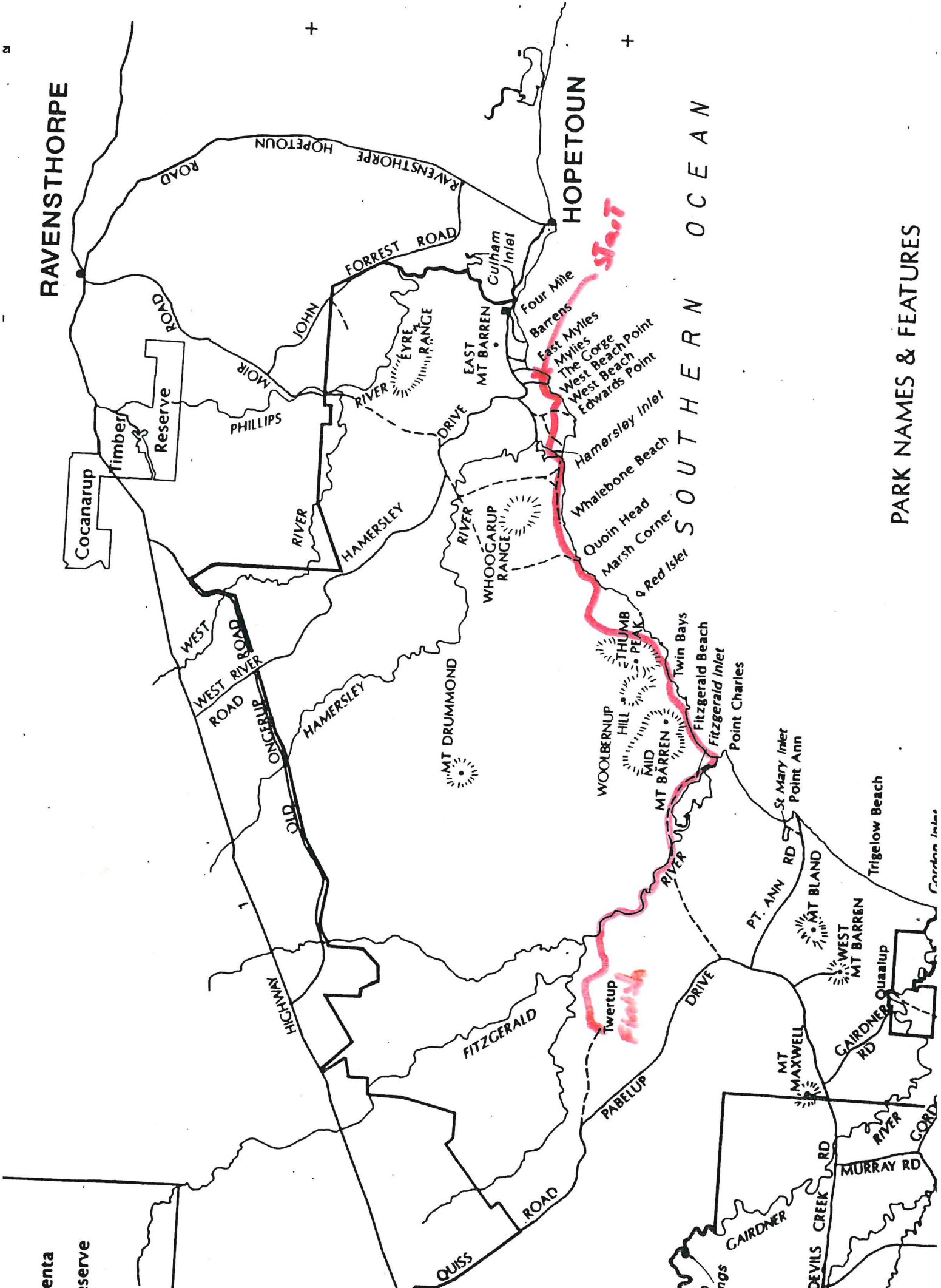
MAP 1b

RAVENSTHORPE

HOPETOUN

SOUTHERN OCEAN

PARK NAMES & FEATURES



enta
:serve

* Self-empowerment * Insight * Inspiration

...through Nature



Jesse Brampton
Unit 16, 7 Norfolk St
Fremantle. WA 6160

phone: 09 - 430 7687

fax: 09 - 430 7796

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David Gough
Editor, Landscape Magazine
CALM
50 Hayman Rd
Como
WA 6152

116 JEAN STREET
HAMILTON HILL
6163

Dear David,

The Fitzgerald River National Park is without doubt one of the jewels in the crown of WA's wild places. Yet so few know of it. So few know of its beauty, its wildness, its challenge or its wonder. I knew little about it before I set out to traverse it on foot, with three friends. Since my 3,500 km hike of America's Appalachian Trail, bushwalking has become an intrinsic core to my life, as has writing about those experiences since the publication of my book *Promises to Keep*. The Fitzgerald hike was a delight, possibly the finest five day walk I've done anywhere in the world.

Enclosed is the story of that walk, with maps and colour transparencies. I hope you might consider it worthy of publishing in Landscape Magazine. The Park deserves all the 'hands-on' user-friendly kudos it can get, and where better than in a quality magazine such as Landscape?

Should you want any insight into the work I do, two members of CALM staff have recent experience of my work in taking groups to the bush - Barry Hooper, at the Hills Forest centre, and Fiona Marr at Education. It's more than likely someone at Landscape has read *Promises...*

I look forward to your response.

Jesse Brampton

Jesse Brampton
1617 Norfolk St
Fremantle. WA 6160
phonelfax 09 - 430 7687

Captions for transparencies - Fitzgerald on Foot

Jesse Brampton

- 1 - "Unsurpassed views of the coast" from Bremmer Bay 17.
- 2 - Rugged cliffs dominated the scenery close to Quoin Head.
- 3 - Coastal heath, sand-dunes, mountains - some of the fascinating variety of the Fitzgerald.
- 4 - Rocky headlands separating small bays tested both balance and agility.
- 5 - Bill Waldron surveys the tranquil Fitzgerald Inlet as day draws to an end.
- 6 - Much of the water in the rugged Fitzgerald River valley was salty - unfortunately!
- 7 - An idyllic campsite beneath cliffs Edward John Eyre described as "an ochre of various colours... soft and friable."
- 8 - Jesse Brampton admires a Royal Hakea, one of many species endemic to the area.
- 9 - The abundance of flowers hinted of a spring-time wonderland.
- 10 - The strain of five tough days shows on Norman Major's face.



















