

HFNC Wyperfeld National Park campout on 16-18 August 1996

Rod Bird

Participants: Roger Thompson, John & Glenys Cayley, Rod Bird, Hilary Turner, Louise Byrne, Anne Duff, Jennifer Pollard and Bob Walcott.

Background to Wyperfeld

Wyperfeld is one of the great National Parks of semi-arid Australia, albeit much of it has been severely modified by grazing animals and rabbits over the last 150 years. It contains three main habitats:

- * **Mallee scrub** - including Dumosa Mallee (*E. dumosa*), White Mallee (*E. gracilis*), Yellow Mallee (*E. incrassata*), Oil Mallee (*E. oleosa*), Red Mallee (*E. calycogona*), Narrow-leaf Red Mallee (*E. leptophylla*), Green Mallee (*E. viridis*), Broombush (*Melaleuca uncinata*) - on slopes of dunes, shallow calcareous sands of flats or troughs of dunes, red sands or ironstone gravels of the plains. In the last instance, pockets only of the tall mallee remain because most these better heavier soils have been cleared for agriculture. An area of red-swale mallee has been recently added to the Park in the south (e.g. Milmed Swamp, Arnold Springs and Chinaman Flat). The Malleefowl is to be found in the Mallee areas. This favoured habitat is scarce because since 1980 many wildfires have severely reduced the area of Mallee not burnt for more than 20 years. The large stand of undisturbed (uncut) Broombush mallee occurs in the E-W dunefields SW of Wirrengren Plain; this is now in the Park.
- * **Sand dune and sandhills** - supporting Slender Cypress Pine (*Callitris gracilis*), Scrub Cypress Pine (*Callitris verrucosus*), Mallee Tea-tree (*Leptospermum minus*), Desert Banksia (*Banksia ornata*), Porcupine Grass (*Triodia bunicola*) and a host of sand-plain heath flora. Dune fields of Lowan Sands of the Big Desert have now been added to the Park to better represent this diverse and attractive community. The highest points in the Park are Hopping Mouse Hill, Quandong Hill (80 m) and Trig Point Hill (107 m).
- * **Flood plains** - Black Box (*E. largiflorens*) flats, River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) lining the creeks, Buloke (*Allocasuarina luehmannii*) towards the dunes, grasses and other herbaceous species. Outlet Creek links the flats and ancient lakes stretching from Pine Plains to Lake Albacutya. These are the grazing areas of the Park - for Kangaroos, Emus and once for domestic stock.

Edward Eyre travelled up the Wimmera River in 1838 to Lake Hindmarsh, driving stock on the way to Adelaide. He made a strike north to Pine Plains, hoping to get to the Murray River, but this was aborted by lack of water. The Wimmera River is one of very few that actually flows inland, rather than to the sea. Pine Plains (part of Wirrengreen Plain) was occupied in 1847 by J.M. Clow. In 1855 the southern half, the Wonga Lake Run, was split off but it was not a success. After many clashes here and elsewhere, the Wotjobaluk tribe was decimated and survivors were soon displaced from this major meeting and trading ground between Murray River and southern tribes. These plains are (were) the terminus of the Wimmera River waters, lake-bed herbfields adjoining pine-buloke woodlands of great ecological significance.

William Morton surveyed the area in 1861 and lodged many botanical collections from the Lake Hindmarsh-Underbool area with Baron Ferdinand von Mueller. There are at least 364 native species of vascular flora recorded now in the Park.

An article by R.J. Fletcher [Vic. Nat. (1996) Vol 113(3):107-114] entitled "*Back to the heart of the Mallee*" gave an account of retracing a trip by Arthur Mattingley in 1907. Mattingley was largely responsible for the temporary reservation in 1909 of 3,900 ha as National Park, principally as a refuge for Malleefowl. In 1921, 1922 and 1930 a further 2,600, 3,000 and 2,600 ha were added but the entire area seems to have remained a grazing lease. Cattle grazed the Park until 1960, when the National Parks Service took control.

The present NP is made up of parts of "Pine Plains", "Cambacanya" and "Brimin" pastoral stations. "Cambacanya" today, on the approach to the NP, is wheat cropping and open-cut gypsum mining. Prior to the drought of 1914 the Poulton's had 50,000 sheep - during the drought these were turned into the scrub and only 10,000 survived. This must have accelerated the destruction of native vegetation on the Black Box flats in the park.

The evidence of weed infestation is everywhere, especially that of Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*). This weed apparently invaded the park from the south with floodwaters in 1976. The LCC (1974) noted its presence, particularly in Outlet Creek. It is certainly common now on the floodplain.

The Land Conservation Committee in 1977 recommended that Wyperfeld be expanded from the then area of 57,000 ha to 96,800 ha by adding 2,700 ha of Pine Plains to the north and further areas of sand dune country to the east and south of the Park. It recommended that ultimately all of the Pine Plains area should be included - historically and currently it is leased from the Crown. The LCC *Mallee Area Review Final Recommendations* (1989) indicated that the last grazing license would be removed from Pine Plains by no later than July 1996. This would make a very complete National Park, taking in all ecological zones of the original river system region and surroundings.

Pine Plains was composed of "*miles of country without a trace of Mallee; large plains without a vestige of timber; evidently the dried up beds of ancient lakes fringed with picturesque Red Gums; whilst the graceful Murray Pines grow profusely on the sand ridges*".

The 1989 LCC Review recommendations expanded Wyperfeld NP to 95,970 ha (including 28,860 ha Pine Plains extension) plus a further 182,270 ha Wilderness Area (North Wyperfeld Wilderness Zone, South Wyperfeld Wilderness Zone, and Chinaman Flat Wilderness Zone) - a total of about 278,000 ha.

A program on ABC TV ("*Australian Story*", 30 Oct 1996) concerning Pine Plains was identified only as a farm near Patchewallock taken over by the National Parks. Brian O'Sullivan's family had leased the Pine Plains block since 1914, paying an annual licence for the grazing. The program showed the new public access O'Sullivan Lookout Hill and the rounding up and carting away of cattle that were run on the leasehold land. Brian is a National Party politician and resisted the move. His sister-in-law Susan has a tourism accommodation venture nearby, completing a project begun by Brian's brother Tim.

The floods recorded by NPS at Wyperfeld are interesting: 1830-34, 1850-54, 1870-74, 1892-93, 1911-12, 1917-22, 1956-57 and 1975-77. According to the NPS information, the last time a flood filled lakes beyond Brambuk was in 1911-12. The 1974 LCC report notes that water had not flowed through the park since 1917. The 1989 LCC report states that water last reached Wirrengren Plains in "about 1918". Fletcher (1996) states that floods reached Wirrengren Plain in 1853 (flooded to a depth of 3.6 m) and in 1945 (flooded to a depth of 1.2 m). This 1945 record contradicts the LCC 1974 statement but there were great floods on the Wannon & Glenelg in 1946, so perhaps it was correct.

Much of the Wimmera River flow has been diverted to the Wimmera-Mallee Stock and Domestic Water Supply System, where at least 75% is lost by evaporation and seepage before it reaches the users. If this open-channel system is piped then perhaps 70,000 ML of water would be saved annually - the LCC recommended that water should be allocated for environmental flows to Wirrengren Plain.

The large old River Red Gums found near the camp on the edge of sand hills at the start of the walk to Brambuk appear to have germinated many hundreds of years ago, following a major flood that carried seed to that level. That they still exist implies that their roots must be drawing from reserves far below the surface. 'Old Be-al', which grows in a trough of sand hills a few hundred metres Sth of Lake Plagianth, was severely burned in a fire in recent years (1989?) in the accumulated litter beneath the canopy. This huge tree over 30 m tall and wide, contained foliage down to the ground. A photograph is shown in Garnet's 1974 "*The Vegetation of Wyperfeld National Park*"). It may have subsequently died.

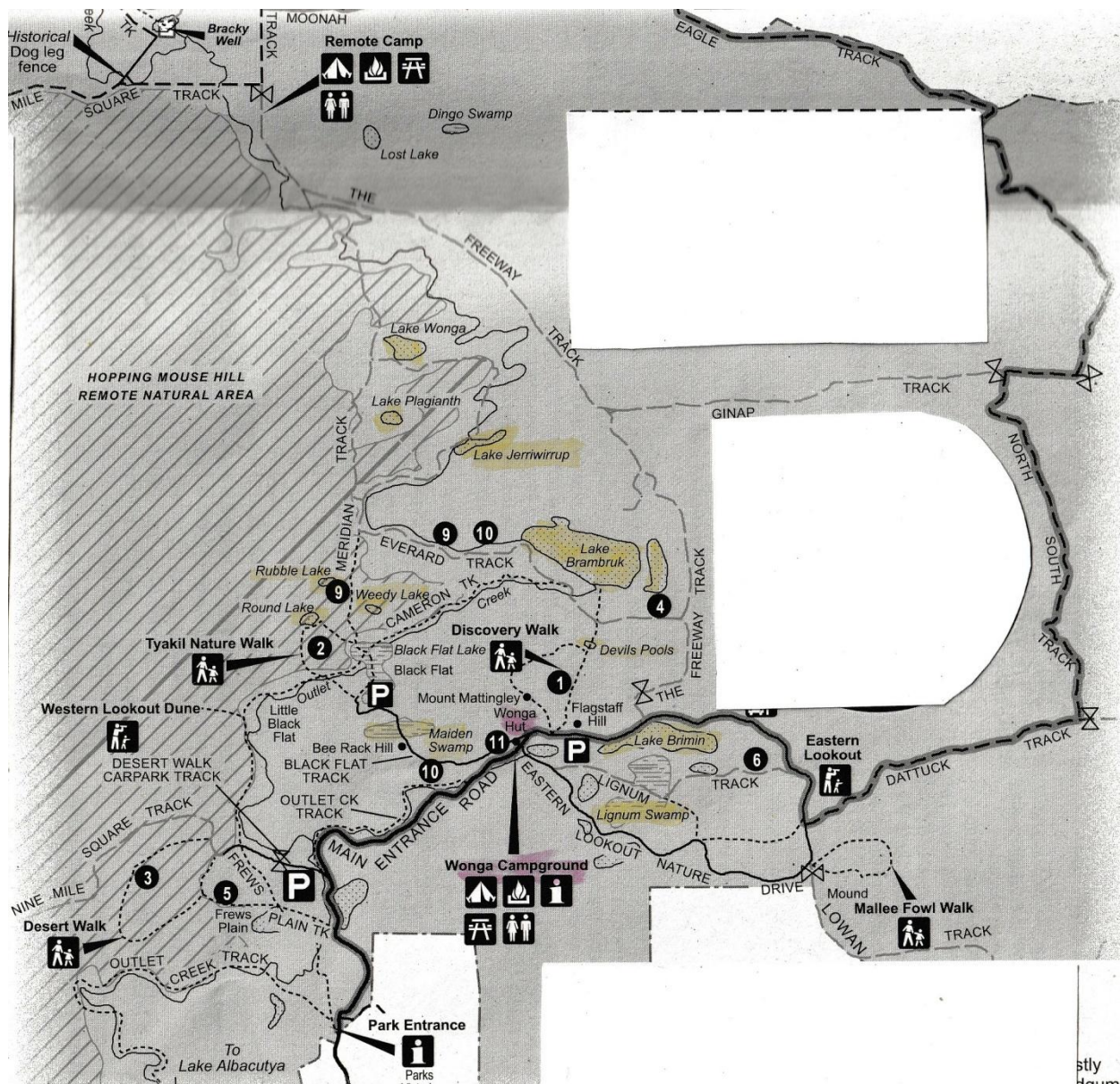
Friday 16 August

Annie Duff, Jen Pollard, Bob Walcott and Rod Bird left Hamilton at 4.15 pm and had dinner at Rainbow (Eureka Hotel) where we waited an eternity to receive our meal. The pub was full of Friday night drinkers, in the bar across the window. We arrived at Wyperfeld at 9 pm [290 km from Hamilton], having listened to gloomy weather reports of widespread thunder, lightning and snow for the weekend.

Roger Thompson had arrived early and established a camp fire at the northern end of the **Wonga Campground**. This camp site is in the lee of a sand dune and gives some protection from the wind. Hilary Turner and Louise Byrne had also arrived before us. John and Glenys Cayley arrived later and we were all settled down around 11 pm. The night was very calm and quite cold.

Saturday 17 August

A Southern Boobook was calling in the early hours, followed by vociferous Laughing Kookaburras at 4.30 am, then Australian Magpies and Red Wattlebirds. No chance of sleeping late in the bush!



The proposal was to walk Mattingley's original route from **Lake Brimin** across **Lake Brambuk** to **Lake Jerriwirrip**. This is the first part of the old route north through **Wonga Lake**, 6 km to Bracky Well on the edge of Emu Flat, and thence a further 4 km across Lake Agnes to Pine Plains. Outlet Creek ends at Wirrengren Plain, which constitutes the bulk of Pine Plains.

It would have been nice to have walked as far as **Bracky Well** but this was a little too far for our party. We resolved to complete part of the route. At 9 pm we set off, taking the **Brambuk Nature Walk** over a sandhill and past the **Devils Pools** (containing a little clayey water) where Emu can often be observed at water. Regent Parrots were nest hunting among the Black Box and River Red Gums at **Lake Brambuk** and the flood plain. In all we saw about 50 of these parrots for the day - beautiful sleek birds with "*the moon upon its wing*" (John Shaw-Nielsen) and a most splendid fast flight on pointed yellow wings. The flying birds chatter softly and this often announces their passage. There too, 100 m from the track at the start of the flat surrounding the old lake bed, is an Aboriginal canoe tree.

Brambuk may have been named after the mythical heroes Bram Bram Bult who travelled along the Wimmera River and Outlet Creek in search of the killers of their uncle Doan.

Brambuk was dry but there was water there in October 1977. That followed an unusually wet 1975 when the Wimmera River filled Lake Albacutya and flowed down Outlet Creek into the Park, filling Brambuk to 3 m depth. Rod had a photograph of reflections of River Red Gums in the water at Black Flat, and remembered seeing the hundreds of seedlings that had germinated along the high water mark of the lake in the late spring-early summers of 1975 and 1976. Outlet Creek has not since carried water into the Park.



Water in Black Flat in 1977



Emus, Black Box and Horehound infestation



Western Grey Kangaroos



View from a dune at Jerriwirrip to Brambuk

There is evidence of the death of many trees on the flats - especially Black Box (*E. largiflorens*) that germinated so profusely after the various floods. Those near **Lake Brimin** may have grown from 1922 or as recently as 1945. The lack of flooding may see further loss of older trees. Diversion of water from the Wimmera River is probably the major reason for decreased flooding frequency.

From Brambuk we took a bearing of 30 degrees W of N to hit **Lake Jerriwirrip**. This took us across some high sand dune scrub, punctuated by a yellow splash of Golden Wattle flower and dark green of many Scrub Cypress (*Callitris verrucosus*). The fruit of this species is very wrinkled, unlike that of the Slender Cypress (*C. gracillis*). We saw a Peregrine Falcon, Chestnut Quail-thrush and Major Mitchell's Cockatoos.

At Jerriwirrip we saw several Kangaroos suffering from blindness. Here, as later, they would bound away, often coming back to us, hopping in a tight uncoordinated circle. The most badly afflicted appeared to have poor balance. Most were in reasonable condition, but the forage was good.

We turned west along the old track, now a walking trail, and joined up with the **Meridian Track**. This we followed south to **Black Flat**, from whence we took the **Maiden Swamp Trail**, diverting a little to the RHS to hit **Outlet Creek** and following that back (adjacent to the entrance track) to the camp. We saw several Red-capped Robins on one dune that had been fenced for revegetation works.

We arrived back at camp at 2 pm, having had lunch on the way and having walked about 16 km. The weather had been cool but no rain - warm enough for shorts. After a short break for refreshment we drove along the **Eastern Lookout Trail** to the lookout. Some 500 m further along the Trail, about 150 m before the deviation "Road Closed" sign, we saw a Malleefowl alongside the road. It has opened the nearby mound but it did not appear to have been active. We all had good views of the bird.

There are some excellent stands of Slender Cypress (*Callitris gracillis*) on sand ridges along the drive to Eastern Lookout. A short walk to the LHS of the track takes one to a fine stand which seemed to have escaped the 1946 firestorm which killed so many in the area. A fire in 1959 entered from south of the Park and also killed many cypress of both species and Buloke (*Allocasuarina luehmannii*).

The NPS has planted other seedlings, guarded with mesh, along the dunes but progress is slow. Rabbits have prevented natural regeneration.



Malleefowl on a mound



Slender Cypress on a sand dune



View west from a dune on the Desert Walk

We wandered around the **Mallee Walk**. *Clematis microphylla* was blossoming along the way and the brightness of the *Hibbertia* blossom was accentuated by the deteriorating light. We were tired but happy after a day of walking as we drove back to camp.

A lively evening ensued, with plenty of food, a good fire, bottles of wine, bird tapes of Barking Owl and Bush Stone-curlew, and some poetry readings from John Shaw Neilsen to celebrate the Smoker Parrot, Magpie and Neilsen's Wimmera! The wind was rising a little and the air was quite chilly late at night.

Sunday 18 August

We awoke to a stiff frost and a clear sky. The air was quite chilly, with a stiff breeze, and no shorts were worn today. After driving back along the Main Entrance Road to the car park at the beginning of the **Desert Walk**, we completed an interesting and varied 7 km stroll around the loop. Some excellent views of the Park are had from the high dunes. The dark green shapes of Slender Cypress Pine are evident in the distance. A Blue Boronia (*Boronia caerulescens*) was flowering in this early Spring period.



Australian Ringneck



Splendid Fairy-wren



Major Mitchell's Cockatoo

Birds of note seen on this walk included Red-capped Robins, Weebills, Black-eared Cuckoos, Regent Parrots, White-browed Babblers, Australian (Mallee) Ringnecks, Splendid Fairy-wren, White-winged Choughs and Major Mitchell's Cockatoo.

We were back at camp by 11.45 am for lunch and to pack up the tents. This we managed before a small shower of rain prompted everyone to finish their packing and start on the drive home.



Tents packed ready to leave and lunch time at the Wonga Camp

We had been very lucky with the weather, for those staying at Hamilton reported snow, hail and very low temperatures had produced an eminently forgettable weekend there.

When all others had departed for Hamilton Rod continued on to Hattah lakes in the Hattah-Kulkyne NP and thence to Mungo NP and Mutawintji NP in NSW – a tour of other dry country National Parks.

The **Wyperfeld birdlist** for the weekend comprised 46 species and is presented below:

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| 1. Australian Magpie | 17. Laughing Kookaburra | 33. Singing Honeyeater |
| 2. Australian Raven | 18. Little Raven | 34. Southern Boobook |
| 3. Australian Ringneck | 19. Long-billed Corella | 35. Splendid Fairy-wren |
| 4. Australian Wood Duck | 20. Magpie-lark | 36. Spotted Pardalote |
| 5. Black-eared Cuckoo | 21. Major Mitchell's Cockatoo | 37. Sulphur-crested Cockatoo |
| 6. Brown Treecreeper | 22. Malleefowl | 38. Tree Martin |
| 7. Chestnut Quail-thrush | 23. Masked Lapwing | 39. Wedge-tailed Eagle |
| 8. Chestnut-rumped Thornbill | 24. Nankeen Kestrel | 40. Weebill |
| 9. Emu | 25. Noisy Miner | 41. Welcome Swallow |
| 10. Galah | 26. Peaceful Dove | 42. White-browed Babbler |
| 11. Grey Butcherbird | 27. Peregrine Falcon | 43. White-eared Honeyeater |
| 12. Grey Currawong | 28. Purple-crowned Lorikeet | 44. White-winged Chough |
| 13. Grey Shrike-thrush | 29. Red Wattlebird | 45. Willie Wagtail |
| 14. Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo | 30. Red-capped Robin | 46. Yellow-rumped Thornbill |
| 15. Inland Thornbill | 31. Red-rumped Parrot | |
| 16. Jacky Winter | 32. Regent Parrot | |