

River Conservation Society

Newsletter No. 40
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From the Chair

What a mixed sense of events over recent months. We have the news of the RCS founding member and former Chair, Dr. Cicely Howell, passing away, while on the positive side we had a very successful launch of our new website. More regarding Dr. Howell appears later in this newsletter, so please read on.

After many, many hours of work by Robert Pearce and Nick of WPWebsites and involved several consulting emails and meetings; news reached the Committee that the website was ready for launching. Adverts, communications with the news media and general invitations were sent out to everyone on the RCS contacts list and we nervously waited for the 8th November when a booking had been made for the Lesser Town Hall in York.

The response, yours and the general public, was nothing short of fantastic, thank you all! For those unable to join us on that day please take the opportunity to look us up at www.riverconservationsociety.org I'm sure you'll agree that the information and details contained in the website are worthwhile. Already we have had a steady flow of folk seeking information, indicating a willingness to volunteer for projects, with some seeking to renew membership.

On behalf of the Committee and membership in general I thank you all for your work and support.

May your Christmas and New Year celebrations bring a sense of contentment and well-being. We can look forward to a new year of working together for the environment along with the wider community.

Trevor Moffat

(Chair)



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In memory of Dr. Cicely Howell



Many of you will have already heard the news that our much loved founding member Dr Cicely Howell passed quietly away in the early hours of Monday November 3rd, 2014. Certainly some of the RCS members were able to attend the Mass at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in York on 17th November. Naturally we are saddened by this news yet may rejoice in the fact that Cicely is now with her husband Tony, and together they may triumphantly march forward. As the current Chairman I cannot allow this occasion to pass without some reflection on behalf of the River Conservation Society.

As I have only known Cicely for a few years I've been able to draw on the input and memories of Ian and Jan Beresford-Peirse, and I thank Ian and Jan for being willing to help me.

All that follows must be coloured by the drive, determination, enthusiasm, and strength which Cicely brought to all her interests including conservation of all creation, as she saw and believed in it.

The River Conservation Society was formed in March 1990 on the banks of the Avon, in response to public concern over increased degradation of the environment of the surrounding banks of the river; e.g. rising salinity, algal blooms, denudation of natural vegetation and erosion due to stock access along the river banks. It was Cicely who proposed the establishment of the RCS at that meeting in 1990.

From the beginning Cicely and Tony put their "shoulders to the tasks at hand", for many years she as Chair and he as Secretary.

In the course of time The Society was one of the first to implement a fencing programme to assist the landowners to fence along the waterways and repair old fences. This then allowed revegetation to occur and new plantings to be carried out.

In 1997 and 1999 the Society obtained the assistance of the Waters and Rivers Commission to excavate sand banks encroaching into the large Gwambygine Pool, just south of York. Subsequent annual native vegetation plantings above this pristine Pool is helping to stabilise the sand banks and reducing the erosion from silting up Gwambygine Pool.

The Society commissioned biological surveys on the Avon with particular attention on the largest of the Pools being Gwambygine. It has an extensive bird life, tortoise population and a number of cru stations that sustain them, from which we now know very much more. Here again Cicely was out there with her desire to be "hands on" getting muddy and studying the stomach contents of the tortoises.



The Society's interests are very much broader than the preservation of the riverine environment. In 1993 it established the York Regional Herbarium which until recently was located in the Sandalwood Yards on Avon Terrace, with assistance from Greening Australia and the W.A. Herbarium. A dedicated band of volunteers has continually added new material to the collection from a number of official Reserves. The Herbarium was moved to the Kings Park Herbarium in 2013, and a digital record is now available for viewing at the York Public

Library. The Department of Planning and Infrastructure has vested the management of these Reserves to the Vale of York Reserves Committee (VOYRC), which is a constituted group under the River Conservation Society. Some of these Reserves are not well known as they currently just use their Lot numbers like 424 or 29391 and others their road name like Fleay Pool Road or Chinaman's Well on Allen Road.

Due to Cicely and Tony's belief in the role education has to play in conservation, the Society soon became a conduit to provide public interest and education in the flora, fauna, the geology and the land forms of the whole district. These interests were presented; on continue to be so, to local authorities, government agencies and the wider community through research and study programmes, biological surveys and hydro geological mappings. Further to this the Society organises specialist speakers, bush walks and site picnics to provide public appreciation of such areas as the Needling Hills, Wallaby Hills, Mt Bakewell, Cut Hill and Gwambygine Pool and its Reserve (not to be confused with the Avon Assent area of Gwambygine Park developed by Alcoa and managed by the Shire of York).

The River Conservation Society has been able to carry out all this work through the dedication and verve of its founding member Cicely Howell and the volunteers over the years, along with actively seeking funding from the Federal and State Governments through their various agencies, the Lotteries Commission and, importantly, through the public's generous donations the River Conservation Society's Public Gift Fund. The Public Gift Fund enabling donations of \$2 and over to be tax deductible was also the concept of Cicely minutes show, "It was proposed by Dr. Cicely Howell that the option for members of the general public to make tax deductible donations be provided by the setting up and registering of a fund to be called, The River Conservation Society Public Gift Fund..." This was agreed to be all present.."

Cicely has always been at the forefront of all projects and now, as her sister Sue has said in an email; it is left to the next generation.

RCS Reserve of the Quarter: Needling Hills.

At a glance...

Reserve Name: Needling Hills

Area: Approx 428 ha

Location: York

Access: Private property; access by permission only

Guardians: Land owners Gary Sargeant and Kevin Binning

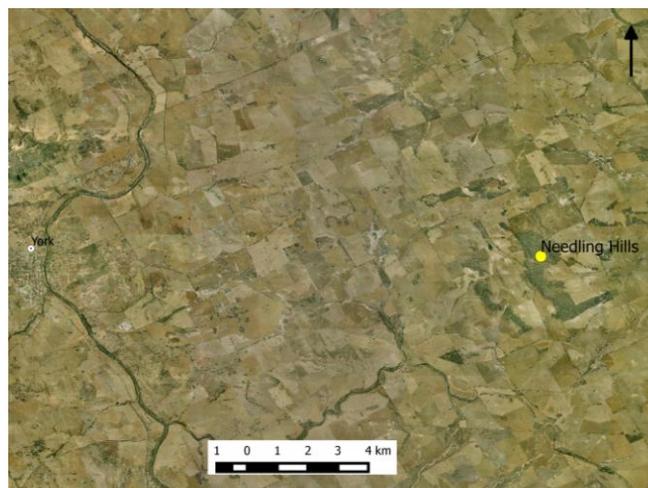


Figure 1. The location of Needling Hills, York.

Needling Hills is not a formal reserve area but a large area of remnant bush east of York owned by Gary Sargeant and Kevin Binning. The Needling Hills peak at 387 metres above sea level and have very interesting geology, being one of the most south eastern outcrops of Jimperding belt metamorphic rock that begins around Toodyay. The hills shed a significant amount of water into the surrounding landscape, and the fractured rock, combined with deep weathered sands, give rise to a number of fresh water springs and soaks that provide access to water year round.

The vegetation of the hills include some important wetland units that contain over thirteen reed species (cyperaceae and juncaceae). Over the rest of the hills, there is a mosaic of woodland and sandy heath (Kwongan) which grow on 'gutless' sands and out cropping

quartzite which offers little in the way of nutrients.

In 2005/2006, a host of RCS volunteers were allowed into Needling Hills on Gary Sargeant's property to undertake flora surveys. A series of 14 quadrats were surveyed over several months and around 83 native species were recorded (see the RCS herbarium records), including one newly discovered species which has been assigned a Priority One Conservation status.

Gary Sargaent has undertaken extensive revegetation on his property to buffer the native vegetation of Needling Hills from landuse impacts. He suggests that the quadrat vegetation has changed considerably since the RCS flora surveys, growing so much that the quadrat markers are no longer visible. Anyone wishing to visit Needling Hills can contact Gary Sargaent on 0408 906 520.



Plate 1. Thorny Devil found at Needling Hills during the 2009 "Kwongan Colloquium" field trip.



Plate 2. (Top to bottom); Woodland on a steep slope at Needling Hills 2005; Cicely riding pillion with Gary Sargaent at Needling Hills in 2005; Bernie, Joy, Sheila, Mike, Heather, Audrey and two unknown persons undertaking vegetation surveys at Needling Hills 2005; and dense shrubland at Needling Hills in 2006.

AWC Report: Winter/spring at SW region

The last few months have been a busy time for the Australian Wildlife Conservancy ecologists based in the south-west region. Winter ended with some exciting new additions to the fauna at Karakamia – three water rats were translocated from a breeding facility at Perth Zoo to the dam system at the sanctuary. These animals join four individuals which were released at Karakamia in 2013. Monitoring via motion sensitive cameras has shown that at least two of the water rats have located each other and are now nesting together in the same burrow.

In September the team spent a week trapping Black-footed Rock-wallabies at Paruna Wildlife Sanctuary. The population there is the result of a successful translocation program. Bird surveys at Mt Gibson Wildlife Sanctuary were also conducted in September, with the help of volunteers from Birdlife Australia, and resulted in a new addition to the sanctuary's inventory list – the Blue-breasted Fairy-wren. The team is currently back up at Mt Gibson conducting the annual small mammal and reptile survey. The survey runs until the end of October, after which the ecologists will head straight to Faure Island Wildlife Sanctuary to conduct the annual monitoring survey there.

Coming up....

Water Rats Surveys

Our water rat project is now in progress with habitat areas between Northam and Beverly along the Avon River currently being inspected and identified for survey purposes.

Water Rats are an important indicator of aquatic ecosystem health with water rat numbers having declined across the southwest, probably due to the failing health of our river systems and predation by foxes and feral cats. Protecting the

remaining populations and restoring habitat along waterways could reverse this trend, but the first step is to identify where water rats still persist.

Volunteers and members wishing to participate in these surveys can contact the River Conservation Society at info@RiverConservationSociety.org or visit our website at www.riverconservationsociety.org.

We encourage members of the public and RCS volunteers to report the locations of water rat sightings, with photos where possible, along the Avon river between Northam and Beverly, or the Mackey and Dale river systems to the society.



Plate 3. Common water rat, *Hydromys chrysogaster* (the distinctive white-tipped tail is under water). Photo credit: Australian Museum.

RCS NEWS

CCWA State Conference 2014

By Irene Tallentire

CCWA's 2014 State Conference and Annual General Meeting were held on Saturday 4th of October 2014 in West Perth.

The most interesting topics included the 2015 goals:

- Shark campaign
- Collie coal mining expansion
- Gas fracking
- Uranium mining in the Eastern Goldfields
- Citizen Science
- WA Senate election re-run
- Eco-communities

- Transforming Perth – Psaros property development and priority projects including increased public transport, eco-buildings, bike paths and social research.

I noted that a cut to WA and federal funding forced CCWA to cut staff. Hence they achieved a 17% saving on expenses.

Brush cutter donated

RCS would like to thank Al Brest of York for the kind donation of a new brush cutter to the society. The donation of this implement will make looking after our reserves much easier.

RCS Trailer

We are calling for a volunteer to paint the RCS projects trailer which is currently located at Karakamia Conservation Reserve. The RCS will pay for paint and materials used for the job.

What's out in York?

Bridal Creeper!

Bridal creeper (*Asparagus asparagoides*) is a Weed of National Significance (WONS). Unfortunately, the York region is considered a priority infestation area for this weed. It can grow on a variety of soil types but prefers moist conditions and areas of high nutrient accumulation such as waterways. Ergo, our local infestations are primarily along the Avon River.

It has a thick tuberous root mass which allows it to survive the drought conditions across our hot summer (when it dies back) and makes its management tricky. The weed produces bright red berries that are about 8mm across and dispersed by birds, foxes and rabbits.

Bridal creeper can be management by herbicide, physical removal, grazing and fire. Further control of the weed can be achieved by reporting any infestations you have on your property to the Department of Agriculture, monitoring your property for new infestations (under powerlines and tall trees where birds roost are good areas to

look) and disposing of any weed material in a black plastic bag for deep land fill.



Figure 2. The location of Bridal Creeper infestations (red) along the Avon River in York; mapped by Wheatbelt NRM Inc.



Plate 4. Bridal Creeper in fruit. The weed goes yellow and dies back after fruiting.



That's all for this quarter! We rely on your input to make this newsletter interesting and relevant. All members are welcome to contribute. Please forward email submissions to:

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