

Precious Woodlands of Mount Majura

Ian Fraser

Talk at the Friends of Mount Majura World Environment Day 2008 celebration

The lowland woodlands (and the integrally associated grasslands), like the precious protected remnant we're now in, are minute remnants of a vast swathe which just 200 years ago extended for over 2000km west of the dividing range from southern Queensland to Adelaide. In the southern tablelands alone there were at least a quarter of a million hectares of pure treeless grassland. There are accounts of riders traveling through grasslands up to horses' bellies, with flowers to the horizons and quail constantly bursting ahead. Not much more than 100 years ago flocks of Bustards and Brolgas roamed the Canberra plains. I'd have loved to see this spot that we're on, even a hundred years ago. Barely 0.5% (one two-hundredth) of these original south-eastern grassy lands remains, and here in the ACT we are custodians of a very significant proportion of that remainder. The arc of near unbroken Yellow Box – Red Gum woodland that sweeps across the northern ACT from here on the lower slopes of Mt Majura and Mt Ainslie, through Mulligans Flat and Gorooyaroo to Kinleyside and Hall, is one of the largest such remnants in Australia. The woodlands and grasslands are to Canberra what the rainforests are to Cairns, and we have the same sort of obligations.

So why isn't a woodland just a forest by another name? A woodland differs from a forest in that the trees are more scattered – the canopies don't overlap. Unlike the shrubby understorey of a local forest, native grasses and other herbs carpet the floor of our lowland woodlands. Where conditions are unsuitable for tree establishment – too cold or too wet – there are less and less trees until they disappear altogether, while the grassy understorey continues. In this way the woodlands and grasslands merge to become parts of the same natural system, which is why I always bracket them.

However not all woodlands are the same, though ignorance, laziness and conscious disingenuousness sometimes lumps our special woodlands with all others, often to make further loss seem less significant than it is. We are at the stage where we can't afford to surrender any more woodland or grassland. But how and why did that happen?

The woodlands and grasslands grew on good soils, they were open structured, which allowed easy passage for stock and people and the endless grasses seemed to promise an infinite food supply for the settlers' flocks and herds. We are very prone to seeing a resource as infinite until it's all gone. The woodlands and grasslands were the land of choice for farmers and graziers and later they provided obvious sites for the development of inland cities.

Trees were felled, the land was ploughed, exotic pastures were introduced, delicately evolved burning patterns were changed and towns covered them. Now only fragments of the original woodlands and grasslands survive and many of these are damaged. Many of the species that rely on them are threatened with extinction; others probably vanished before we even recognised them. Some we certainly do know about however.

When the great botanist-explorer Allan Cunningham crossed the Limestone Plains in 1824 he saw flocks of emus. In the previous year explorer Mark Currie in 1823 had his greyhounds kill several. By the late 1860s they were already rare and the survivors were ruthlessly ridden down. Today emus are very rare indeed anywhere in the high country, and long gone from the ACT (the Tidbinbilla birds are recent reintroductions).

Bustards were plentiful here until the late 1860s; on one day in 1868 George Harcourt (he of the inn) shot 5 along Ginninderra Creek. The opinionated John Gale reports flocks of 'scores' in the 1850s, though his memory sometimes improved with time... To the settlers they were edible 'turkeys'. By 1886 the Queanbeyan Age found it worthy of note that one had been seen on the Canberra plain.

Brolgas, 'Native Companions', were also present in large flocks, and regarded as an unequivocal pest in crops. A mob of 80 fed in a paddock behind the Canberra Post Office (not far from here, at Ainslie) in the 1870s.

Bush Stone-curlews wailed their chilling, thrilling, song across the wooded plains for much of the 20th century. A friend of mine remembers them calling just down the road in Watson as he grew up.

Banded Lapwings, while never common, were regularly seen at Canberra airport, among other places. Grey-crowned Babblers were common at Hall in the 1930s. Zebra Finches were apparently common – though perhaps not permanent residents – around the city at least until the 1940s.

These have gone, probably for ever, but the most useful way for us to mourn them is ensure that other woodland species in trouble do not get the same way. There would be no excuse for that, and we should not expect forgiveness. Threatened species (as defined by ACT legislation) which use and in part rely on the Mt Majura woodlands include Regent Honeyeaters, Swift Parrots, White-winged Trillers, Varied Sittellas, Painted Honeyeaters. The best thing you can do is what you're doing – cherishing these local woodland (and forest) communities, repairing them, and encouraging others to understand and value them better.

And for what you're doing, I thank you.

Ian Fraser

8 June 2008



Photographs: W. Pix