



Toodyay Naturalists' Club Inc.

THE TNC NEWSLETTER

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We gratefully acknowledge the Ballardong, Yued and Whadjuk Peoples as the traditional custodians of this land and duly respect a deep and unbroken connection to their cultural, physical and spiritual existence. We pay respect to their Elders, both past and present, and emerging.

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President's Report

by Greg Warburton

WHEN Vicki and I settled in Toodyay nearly 30 years the first community group we signed up for was the Toodyay Naturalists' Club (TNC). For me, it was very much like connecting to my younger years as I had been a member of the WA Naturalist's Club in the seventies. Coincidentally, the person who recruited me to the WA Naturalists' Club back then was our long-time Patron, the late John Dell.

I remember TNC would meet at the kindergarten building in Hamersley Street often with founding members in attendance. I realised that this little organisation punched well above its weight with strong membership and influence on environmental matters throughout the Avon region. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful association with the Club that saw me on the management committee in one role or another for the next 25 years or so.

Expert guest speakers were always willing to make the trip to Toodyay and talk on a range of fascinating subjects at our monthly meetings. I remember one speaker presented on her studies of pollen for forensic investigations. A few days later there was a documentary on her ground breaking work featured on ABC TV.

I soon learned that within the membership was a pool of extensive knowledge, experience and expertise that always ensured 'member's nights' were informative and entertaining. Then of course there were the outings to local reserves and locations beyond the Shire. These excursions were led and guided by people who really knew their stuff. They were educational as well as fun being out in the bush with wonderful like-minded people. Then there were the Club run events such as the Drummond Symposium and the 40th anniversary celebration in 2008 to name only two.

I've always been impressed with the books, newsletters and articles produced by the Club. A little book entitled 'The Avon Valley – A Naturalist's View' became a constant companion and even now, 40 years since its publication it is still a very popular reference.

An opportunity arose for me to represent the Club on a community reference group for a mining company in the Yilgarn. The regular trips to Southern Cross and the Windarling Peak iron ore mine set me on a course of conservation campaigning for the protection of the Helena and Aurora Range.

Some years later a similar situation arose much closer to home when a valuable ore body was discovered next to the Julimar State Forest. This saw the formation of the Julimar Conservation and Forest Alliance (JCAFA), a sub group of TNC. I'm proud to be part of this group as it continues to work effectively promoting the natural assets of the forest and campaigning for its protection and improved management.

There are too many high points and achievements that I have had the privilege to be a part of during my time with the Toodyay Naturalists' Club to list them all here. However, there are three I must mention:

- The first being the funding, design and construction of a bird hide at Red Banks Pool. On paper it seemed a pie in the sky idea. However, nearly 15 years later this unique structure and valued community asset provides amenity and information along the popular Bilya Walk Track.

Cover photo: Red-headed Trap-door Spider

Photo: Rebecca Meegan-Lowe

President's Report (cont)

- Another noteworthy achievement was the creation of the Dawn Atwell Nature Reserve. Through extensive surveys and submissions TNC successfully lobbied the Toodyay Shire to change the vesting of this 65-hectare pristine bush habitat to 'conservation'.
- Then, as a part of its 50-year anniversary TNC published 'Exploring Toodyay Naturally', a high-quality, lavishly illustrated book that was the result of much hard work, collaboration and contributions by members. Plans to update and revise this book are afoot in time for the Club's 60th anniversary.

During my time the Club's messaging and community engagement has been progressively enhanced through digital communication. An excellent website provides current information and also facilitates the recording of sightings that contribute to an ever-expanding data base. But it is good old-fashioned face to face talking to people that really connects with the public and often results in new memberships. Drummond House on a Saturday morning or at the annual Toodyay Agricultural Show are examples of opportunities to do this.

As Vicki and I embark upon our relocation to NSW I think of the many things I will miss about Toodyay, the Naturalist Club is on top of the list. Obviously, continuing my role as President of TNC is a geographic impossibility but I will remain in the position until the AGM in July. In the meantime, I will hand over certain functions to my able Vice President, Lynn Phillips.

I give my heartfelt thanks to all those that have provided me with support and guidance over the years. I'd want to especially thank and acknowledge our truly remarkable secretary Desrae whose enthusiasm and dedication to the role is a real driving force for the Club. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity TNC has provided me to contribute to the promotion and conservation of our precious and increasingly threatened natural environment.

With the 60th anniversary of the Club approaching I have no doubt the dedication and devotion of members for their beloved 'Nats' will ensure its ongoing success.

The Toodyay Manor 8/5/2026



*Above: Well-wishers gathered for afternoon tea
Photo: John Solomon*



*Above right: The gift shared with TFOR & THS members
Photo: Wayne Clarke*

The Red-headed Trapdoor Spider *by Rebecca Meegan-Lowe*

IF you keep your eyes peeled while walking in bushland during winter months in south-west W.A., you might come across a Red-headed Trapdoor spider, otherwise known as *Missulena granulosa* (Actinopodidae). The accompanying photos show the spider we found on a firebreak at our Toodyay property in July, a couple of years ago. We were impressed by its rather intimidating appearance but also concerned for its safety as it trundled through an area of high ant activity. We were relieved when it safely crossed the open ground and disappeared into a grassy bank.

The Red-headed Trapdoor spider - which is unrelated to the deadly Funnel-web spider in the eastern states of Australia - prefers to live in uncleared bushland away from human activity. The spider we encountered was a male, and most likely searching for a female. It was probably several years old, the age at which the males reach maturity and leave their burrows, usually in winter.

Having left their burrows, male spiders search for the pheromones, or scents, of female spiders with which to mate. The males do not return to their burrows, but typically wander through the vegetation until they eventually starve to death or are eaten by predators.

It is much more common to see the male of this species rather than the female. Females spend their entire lives in their burrows, waiting for the males to visit, and are rarely seen above ground. While the males of many spider species search for females at night-time, male Red-headed Trapdoor spiders often search for females by day. This daytime wandering makes them vulnerable to predation.

It is the male spider, rather than the female, which has the red head and mouthparts that give the species its common name. The females are mainly dark in colour and larger, although there is some colour variation between most individuals.

Red-headed Trapdoor spiders are sometimes called 'mouse spiders', although their burrows are not as large or long as those of mice. The spiders are nonetheless remarkable for their ability to excavate burrows to an impressive depth of 30cm. Burrows may even have an internal chamber off to one side of the main shaft, complete with its own internal door. The latter provides an additional place to hide in and is also the brooding chamber for spider eggs.

Baby spiders, or spiderlings, hatch in summer and stay in their mothers' burrows for several months before venturing into the outside world. The majority will die through misadventure along the way, but hopefully enough individuals survive to establish the next generation.

One of the most important studies of Trapdoor spiders commenced in 1974 when spider expert Professor Barbara York Main surveyed burrows of a different species, *Gaius villosus* (Idiopidae), in a reserve near Tammin in Western Australia. Individual burrows were marked and monitored regularly from year to year.

Given that females do not leave or swap burrows, scientists were able to say with certainty that they were looking at the very same individual every time they checked up on Spider 'Number 16'. This particular spider died in 2016, with evidence suggesting a parasitic wasp invaded her burrow and caused her death, rather than old age.

Continued on Page 4

The Red-headed Trapdoor Spider

by Rebecca Meegan-Lowe

... cont from Page 3

Living in her burrow for some 43 years, Spider Number 16 is by far the world's oldest documented spider. Various factors helped her reach this extraordinary age. These include very low metabolism (this species has the capacity to survive weeks or even months without food), her low-energy hunting technique (waiting for prey at the top of her burrow rather than actively hunting), avoidance of harsh weather conditions (by living in a protective silk-lined underground burrow) and by the burrow's location in undisturbed natural bushland.

As Professor Main pointed out, land clearing is one of the biggest threats to Trapdoor species. Spiders survive best in areas of undisturbed native bush, where there is suitable habitat for the excavation of burrows and where males can move through the vegetation in comparative safety.

Protection of remnant native vegetation - including understorey and ground cover - is of vital importance to all wildlife. While it is tempting to focus on the welfare and survival of creatures such as mammals and birds, all species have their place in the ecosystem including this beautiful and impressive spider.



Above: Red-headed Trapdoor Spider

Photo: Rebecca Meegan-Lowe

My time in Wittenoom

by Max Howard

MAX, a member of the WA Police Force for a period of 45 years, was a lone policeman based in Wittenoom arriving late 1981. At that time, the town had a population of around 150 people.

Max had done many country stints but his time spent in this district he spoke of being extremely special.

Max began his presentation with a description of the Wittenoom area being pastoral running sheep and cattle and named after one of the very early settlers of the area, Frank Wittenoom. Photos were shown of the glorious Pilbara landscape.

Asbestos mining began around 1941 with Lang Hancock commencing in the Wittenoom Gorge in 1947. With the discovery of iron ore life changed with tourism becoming an important income. The town had a grocery store, a nursing post, a school, hotel... and a policeman!

The weather of the area had, for around seven months of the year, average temperatures of 37°C. The busiest tourist time was from May to September, winter and spring.

Wildflowers were beautiful with the unusual, but very special, Green Bird Flower (*Crotalaria cunninghamii*). The Royal Mulla Mulla (*Ptilotus exaltatus*) grows in such inhospitable soil but, Max said, it is such a magnificent plant with good rains. Although the photograph of the Sturt Pea was from his own garden he said that following rain in the Pilbara it grows so rapidly showing its magnificent red blooms. Another striking blue flowering plant was the Ashburton Pea (*Swainsona maculochiana*).

The first of the birds shown were the Grey-headed Honeyeater, a very handsome species, and the tiny Pilbara Grass Wren. Next were a series of shots of the Western Bower Bird that Max stated were quite common; they are known to be wonderful mimics. Max had a marvellous experience with a Square-tailed Kite. A nesting female was sitting quietly - and was being hand-fed! Max said he had heard of this happening before. The photo of the Kite was magnificent.

The beautifully marked Spinifex Pigeon is a ground nesting bird with incredible camouflage that one needs to watch when walking in long grass. If disturbed it will flee with the 'broken wing' show.

The beautifully marked Children's Python [*Antaresia childreni*] was photographed lying on a large rock sunning itself.

The *Hakea suberea*, or Corkwood, has a bark that indigenous peoples use to treat burns.

Max spoke of Joffrey Creek and the series of beautiful pools and the birdlife, the ferns and mosses growing in large crevices that, if entered, were so cool as to resemble an air-conditioned hideaway!

In August of 1983 Max was promoted to Sergeant and returned to Perth January 1984.

Of his time in the Pilbara he had a listing of 114 bird species and, of the whole area, there were 151.

(See page 6 for Max's images from Wittenoom)

My time in Wittenoom... cont

Photos Max Howard



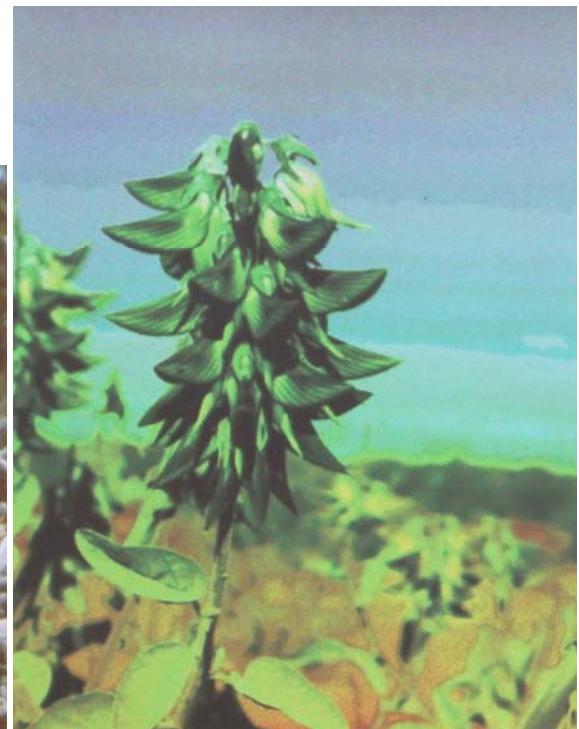
Above: A beautifully marked Children's Python

Top right: The Ashburton Pea (Swainsona maculochiana)



Bottom right: Green Bird Flower (Crotalaria cunninghamii)

Below: A Square-tailed Kite prepares its nest



An impossumable problem?

by Robyn Taylor

Is getting possums out of the roof an impossumable problem?

I always thought possums, especially the brush tail, look so cute and cuddly. Their scats can be seen at certain times of the year under the eucalypts as evidence how many there must be that need a place to live during the breeding season.

I have rescued a few baby possums in my day, ones that may have fallen out of a tree or from a mother's pouch while feeding when the baby was still hairless and blind.

So I have a soft spot for possums. Still do, but now with reservations.

I live in an old house overlooking town with a corrugated iron roof that's a bit rusty in places and supported by timber rafters.

While there had been occasional noises in the roof, scratching and thumping above the bathroom and elsewhere, it was generally ignored until last summer when the situation really got out of hand. A terrible barney took place above the kitchen with harsh screams, more thumping and a light fitting being displaced so the debris of many decades, possibly even a century, came down over the kitchen bench. Two possums stuck their heads out from under the rafters outside, then their bodies from an unbelievably small aperture.

They looked down at me. Then one did an amazing Tarzan act swinging from rafter to rafter. I was intrigued and thought 'how cute and clever'. There was evidently another possum inside the roof that chased the others out, and maybe one that escaped was a female.

Little did I appreciate that was just the beginning. The next mishap was the dislodgement of the light well over the dining table. The builder who installed it had to be called.

I contacted the Shire about how to remove the possums but the suggestion of lending a cat cage that could be installed through a non-existent manhole wasn't useful. Another was removing one of the old sheets of iron to install the trap - not advisable for various reasons given their age.

The last straw was the urine seeping down the inside walls. TFOR member Kai Shanks came to the rescue with chicken wire, but the wily creatures found other ways of getting in. Ron Witt a recent TFOR member came up with the solution of a one-way flap that could let them out, but not back in. That seemed to work, but new entrances must have been found.

One night following a sun-downer with friends on the verandah, on the other side of the house, a thump was followed by a possum landing on the carport roof. It ambled along to a tree that appears to be regularly used to gain access for another night's adventure. The branch has since been removed.

The moral of this story? Don't underestimate the cunning of possums.

See 'Member's Gallery' page 12 for an image of the culprits

Breeding of Black Swans in the Northam Weir

by Jennifer Donegan and John Masters

AFTER the late rains in March, the Avon River provided the perfect habitat for the commencement of a pair of Black Swans (*Cygnus atratus*) to start breeding and constructing a nest on an island in the Northam Weir.

The date of the first sighting of the breeding pair was on Sunday 12th April 2026 which is an early observation and was viewed from quite a distance away from the main river bank.

The Avon River was providing a good food source of aquatic vegetable matter at the right depth and the pair was defending their nest.

On Sunday 19th April 2026, we witnessed a change over from one swan to another to share the incubation and cleaning of the nest duties. The incubation period is between 30-45 days.

The nest is compiled of quite thick sticks and you could see that the centre of the nest was already lined with a feathery down.

On researching the Birdlife WA records since 1989, there is no indication of a breeding pair of Black Swans and only one record of a sighting of two juvenile Black Swans in 2014 in this area of the Avon River in Northam.

Further Birdlife WA records show there has only been 300 sightings of Black Swans in this area for the last 26 years - half the sightings compared to the Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*).

The local York Ornithologist – Simon J Neville has written in his book ‘The Birds of Western Australia Field Guide’ that ‘The Black Swan have complex territorial behaviours and social interactions leading to aggressive defence of territory or pair bonding between breeding pairs’.

There is a concern that should the water level rise, there is a chance of inundation and intervention may be required to ensure that the breeding is successful.

NB The nest was viewed from a distance away with no disturbance to the pair of nesting birds.



Photo: Jennifer Donegan

Julimar Conservation And Forest Alliance

by Melissa Adams

JCAFA experienced a quiet start to the year as several members attended to significant personal matters. Nevertheless, some of us came together for a planning meeting in January to define our 2026 strategy. Our objectives for the year include: establishing a clear active campaign purpose; prioritising education and community outreach through local events and print collateral; cultivating strategic partnerships; securing funding for such things as brochures, camera poles, trail cameras etc.; and conducting seasonal biodiversity surveys.

In February, we resumed discussions with DBCA regarding prescribed burning within Julimar State Forest. We highlighted our concerns about the loss of breeding trees and feeding habitats for Carnaby's Black-cockatoos in Cocanarup and the Fitzgerald River National Park from the devastating fire earlier this year. As Julimar State Forest is a critical breeding site, it requires protection from such threats. However, DBCA maintained that prescribed burns are necessary to prevent a similar catastrophe from occurring here.

Portions of the PHS195 and PHS260 prescribed burns commenced last month and have hopefully concluded for the year. Members plan to conduct a walkthrough soon to ascertain any lasting impact on the landscape.

We also discussed progressing a data-sharing process with DBCA to ensure our field findings, including black cockatoo nesting sites, camera trap footage, and iNaturalist BioBlitz records, are utilised effectively. We are seeking guidance on the preferred submission channels, specifically for updating black cockatoo tube/hollow locations and the technical standards required to ensure our data is actionable for the Department. To facilitate this, we have a meeting scheduled with DBCA ecologists in June.

While the cyclone threat and forecast rain forced the cancellation of our March survey, four members were able to conduct plant and bird surveys in early April. We targeted a portion of the PHS260 burn area (specifically the intersection of 7 Mile and Gakaling Roads, Creek Road, and Whittaker Road) to establish a baseline for future comparison surveys. While the vegetation results are still being collated, we successfully recorded 21 bird species.

Kelly Sheldrick, the Citizen Scientist Program Manager at the Conservation Council of WA, is an ecologist working in the Bat conservation field. Recently, she was contracted by DBCA to survey bats in Julimar State Forest. Despite a few rainy days, Kelly and her team caught 17 bats across four species (one recapture). Most were young adults, with the exception of one older individual. As expected for this season, males were entering mating condition. The species recorded included: 10 Southern forest bats (*Vespadelus regulus*); 3 Lesser long-eared bats (*Nyctophilus geoffroyi*); 1 Chocolate wattled bat (*Chalinolobus morio*); 2 Gould's wattled bats (*Chalinolobus gouldii*).

On Thursday, 7th May, we presented our proposal to reclassify Julimar State Forest as a National Park to the Shire of Toodyay. We offered the proposal as a formal resource for the Shire to reference, and it was gratefully received.

Finally, we would like to wish Greg and Vicki Warburton the very best in their next chapter. Both have been central to the protection of the Toodyay environment and Julimar State Forest. They will be greatly missed!

As the year progresses, we are seeking volunteers to support our surveys, grant writing, and social media (among other skill sets). If you feel you have skills to offer, please contact us at julimarforest@gmail.com

Female Birds - when nature became sexist

By Wayne Clarke

HAVE you noticed how much brighter and more colourful our male birds are in comparison to the females, like with most parrots, lorikeets, rosellas, magpies, robins and fairy-wrens?

In fact nature gave female birds a conservative dress colour - on purpose. The female (in most cases) spends much of her time laying and incubating her eggs, and she wants to remain as inconspicuous as possible so as not to attract predators.

Splendid fairy-wren males are brilliant blue while the female is predominately brown; her tail is a dull blue in contrast. Her bill is a reddish-brown colour in contrast to the males black bill; they are sexually promiscuous.

Western Australian magpie males are black and white with the back of the neck (nape), the back and rump white in contrast to the female whose nape and back are white scalloped with black; they appear more grey than the males.

The plumage of the male Red-capped parrot is striking, with its brilliant red-cap, bright green-yellow cheeks, with breast and underparts bluish-purple. The wings, back and tail are dark green. In comparison the female, although similar, has dull colours with a greenish-red cap, a more grey-purple breast and red flanks.

Rufous whistler males are quite striking birds with their dark grey back and tail, rufous underparts and white throats and usually a black face and mask that borders the throat. Females have a grey-brown head, throat pale brown streaked white or buff, harlequin-like (as in the photo below).

Other features are the female bird's singing ability (or lack of), their size (female raptors are often generally larger than males); caring and upbringing of their young is often left to the male (the emu a prime example); or they are abandoned to their own devices from birth (like Malleefowl).

There are exceptions to these observations:

- Female Painted button-quail are brighter and more coloured than the males. After laying her eggs the male then incubates them, with all the birds hatching and leaving the nest at once; they are then fed by the males for up to ten days; and
- Female Pied butcherbirds, Grey shrike-thrushes, Australian magpies and both Brown & Singing honeyeaters are notable songsters.



Above: A female Rufous whistler on a bird bath in March, and a male whistler with a fresh grub.

Photos: Wayne Clarke

Members Gallery



Above: Greg (Co-Patron) and Vickie with the other two Co-Patron's from the Toodyay Naturalists' Club, Wayne Clarke and Rob Boase; Rob about to present them with a card, and a gift of a Limited Edition Print by Rica Erickson - see Page 2 for an image of the gift, the Albany Catspaw

Photo: John Solomon

Below: Uninvited pesky Common Brushtail possums with hob-nailed boots that have invaded Robyn's roof cavity.

Photo: Robyn Taylor



Members Gallery



*Left: Grasshoppers
Photo: Bethan Lloyd*



*Right: Gould's Monitor (Varanus gouldii)
Photo: Mike Guley*

Below: Image from Desraé and Wayne Clarke's sensor camera captured a very thirsty Echidna drinking from a bird bath. It had climbed onto rocks to reach the bird bath, an indication of desperation during our hot summer.



Kaya/Gidday/Kia Ora

By Mike Guley

As you might ascertain from the above greeting I am a Kiwi who has been living in WA for the past ten years. The reasons I wanted to become a member of the Naturalists' here in Toodyay include learning more about the unique environment and also supporting protection and conservation initiatives.

A lot of my love for the natural world came from tramping (hiking) in New Zealand's back country. This also gave me a deep appreciation for the land and its guardianship. The Maori people have a special affinity with the land and I have been influenced by their approach, hence the photo of a print that hangs on the wall at home - that of the tui birds, holding the pounamu (greenstone) and the symbolism with the heart shape. The tui was called 'the parson bird' by Europeans because of the white 'dog collar' at the throat.

Birds are of particular interest to me and I have loved spotting and learning about the unique birdlife of Western Australia and Australia in general. The photo of the Boobook, which also has a relative in NZ called a morepork (or ruru in Maori), was taken at the entrance to our property in Coondle, the year after we bought the land. She was nesting with two chicks in a large tree on the border of the property and was clearly visible during the day – the neighbour's property was not inhabited at the time.

The lizards are also amazing here and I have seen some beauties while tripping around the countryside. The one in the photo (page 13) is currently residing on our property, under the deck, and while I can admire its beauty it also reminds me of the (sometimes) precarious relationship between people and the natural world, as it nibbles on our newly planted shrubs and digs holes under the deck for nesting. Two fortunate reptiles encounters include seeing a 1.5m, plus, monitor sitting right on the track we were walking near Esperance and closer to home, a Thorny Devil sitting beside the track on the Rugged Hills Reserve walk behind Coondle.



Left: Tui birds, holding the pounamu (greenstone) and the symbolism with the heart shape.
Right: Southern Boobook

Photos: Mike Gurley

Noxious Weeds of Toodyay

CALTROP



Above: Caltrop in Harper Brook a prostrate spreading annual weed.

Right: The stems of caltrop. Take a close look at the needle-sharp burs. Not something to amble over on a walk in bare feet!

*Photos: Wayne Clarke
See article back cover...*



DID YOU KNOW...

... that the Toodyay Naturalists Club has an extensive library on natural history in Drummond House. It is available for all members to use for research or for just general interest.

Some of the volumes available include eucalypts, eremophilas, verticordias, hakeas, orchids, birds and mammals of Australia, reptiles and amphibians. There are volumes on early explorers, weeds and pest plants,

Drummond House is open from 10am until midday every Saturday where you can come in and browse the collection and borrow books to take home and read at your leisure. For more information contact our Secretary, Desraé Clarke

ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

CALTROP

by Desraé Clarke

Also known as cat-headed or puncture-vine, Caltrop is a **declared 'pest plant'** and lives up to its declaration as a pest within the Shire of Toodyay.

It is called a '*cosmopolitan weed*' because it is widely distributed in many countries with no obvious country of origin.

The plant grows flat on the ground in many types of soil and has spiny, five-segmented burrs hence the name **puncture-vine**. It is an annual plant with small yellow flowers that are less than 10mm across. The leaves have small leaflets opposite each other arranged like a feather with between three to seven pairs of leaflets on each stem.

The seeds germinate in summer after rain with a woody taproot growing rapidly to extract moisture from deep in the ground. It takes caltrop three weeks to flower after the seeds germinate and within ten days viable fruit can be produced.

To control this pest plant it is best to dig it out of the ground and collect all the burrs ensuring protective gloves are worn. As the taproots can be very strong, especially with large older plants, a mattock may be necessary as the best way of getting rid of this nasty, spiny plant.

To dispose of the plant and burrs it is suggested to bag and place in the red bin. If a red bin is not available, keep plants and burrs bagged till winter then incinerate. As the spines on the burrs are strong, but minute in size, they puncture and are transferred via footwear and also in the pads of dogs feet.

This plant is toxic to sheep.

See photo Page 11

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WILDCARE HELPLINE 9474 9055

Member of the WA Landcare Network