

Little Desert National Park

Pomponderoo Hill nature walk notes

Dalkaiana Wartaty – Welcome. The Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples (collectively Wotjobaluk), the Traditional Owners of this land welcome you to country. This short, easy self-guided loop-track is sandy underfoot and takes you through an area of typical Little Desert country. Enjoy 360-degree views of the Little Desert from the Pomponderoo Hill lookout platform.



Getting there

This walk is in the Little Desert National Park, approximately 375km north-west of Melbourne. It is on the park's northern boundary, 4km south of Dimboola on the unsealed gravel Pomponderoo Hill Road. This road is suitable for two-wheel drive vehicles all year.

Fire and people in the landscape

Bushfires are and have been a natural and recurring event in the Australian landscape. Lightning strikes are the main way bushfires are started naturally.

Aboriginal people have used fire for many thousands of years to 'care for country'. The Traditional Owners of this land; the Wotjobaluk people, used and still use fire for hunting, cooking, warmth and managing the landscape. Fire also holds great spiritual meaning, with many stories, memories and dances being passed down around the fire.

This landscape has evolved with fire and it's evolved with people in it, but it's working out what is the right type of fire, what is the right intensity and the right frequency to make sure the landscape increases in its health.

Regular fuel reduction burning continues to take place along the park boundary to reduce the speed and intensity of bushfires, therefore providing township protection. From the lookout platform you can see a gap in the vegetation that acts as a barrier to slow or stop the progress of a bushfire.

There is little evidence now of the 1977 bushfire that swept through here and desert plants and animals have adapted to surviving the effects of fire, and in many cases, require fire as part of their cycle.

Bushfires burn and regenerate desert plants. Firstly, flames release minerals bound up in living plants as ash on the soil surface.

Secondly, the heat of the fire can alter some of the soil's chemical properties, temporarily killing off soil's micro-life. This means there are more soil nutrients available for new seedlings immediately following a fire. This effectively fertilises the soil for a short time.

However, too frequent fires will eliminate even some fire-adapted species. Therefore, we must all help protect the park from bushfires. You can help by lighting fires only in the fireplaces provided.

What grows above the ground is often determined also by what lies beneath. Soil is an ecosystem all by itself and is a complex mixture of different materials, both organic and inorganic. Organic material comes from plants and animals and inorganic materials are made from non-living substances like pebbles and sand.

Fire, frost and drought play their part in what you see around you today.

Things to see and do

Walking



1 km, 30 minutes return

This walk loops around typical desert vegetation. A lookout half way gives great views of the park and the surrounding area.

This information corresponds to numbered markers along the walk.

1. Stringybark country

Surrounding you is what is referred to as Heath Plain, Sand Heath or sometimes Stringybark Heath, all part of Stringybark country.

Stringybark country has a varied understorey and featuring here in this location are the spring flowering gold-coloured Guinea Flower, pink and white heaths, hakeas, yellow flowering wattles and tea-trees. Beside the peg here is a small shrub called a She-oak.

2. Scarred for life

Fire burn marks and wilted or dead leaves are signs of drought stress and wildfire. Two other plants associated with Stringybark country are Heath Tea-tree and the red and yellow bell-shaped flowers of the Common Correa (*Correa reflexa*).

3. Mobile soil

Water and wind move this soil easily and bad track erosion is often closed and layered with vegetation to stabilise it.

4. Desert Banksia (*Banksia ornata*)

Evolved to live with fire and frost, thick woody cones protect seeds from the fire's heat. They open immediately after fire to release their seeds into new ash-beds. A new generation of banksia begins.

5. A tough life on the top

Life is tougher for plants on the dunes tops. Water drains away quicker and the winds are stronger, evaporating rainfall too.

Nutrients are as scarce as they too are leached from the sand over the years. Do the plants here look smaller and stunted to you?

Can you see any animal tracks left by birds, insects macropods (kangaroos/wallabies) and reptiles, such as the Mallee Bearded dragon?

6. From the Lookout

Can you see Heathland and Heathy-Woodland? Heath grows on the sandy nutrient poor soils. Brown Stringybark grows above the heaths, producing a heathy-woodland. To the east lies the heritage Wimmera River and it's flood plain.

River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and Blackbox (*E.largiflorens*), dominate the river woodlands. These plants have adapted to heavy clay soils and irregular flooding. River Red Gums love water and are never far it.

Can you see 2 trees growing to the southwest?

What do you think it means?

These large trees provide shelter and protection to hollow dwelling birds, animals and insects. Sugar Gliders and possums shelter inside by day and emerge at night to forage for food. Parrots need hollows to nest in, safe from the cunning and hungry goanna.

7. Fragile soils

These soils are fragile and readily affected by rain and wind. You could very well imagine the problems that would have been encountered had the desert been cleared as was proposed in the late 1960's. Where we stand now, may well have blown away. Management of these areas needs well thought out ideas and considerations. Protect the environment and tread lightly. Only use existing tracks. Don't take shortcuts or cut corners, shortcuts cause erosion. You may have seen some areas fenced off for revegetation.

8. Brown Stringybark

The Little Desert variety of this tree has developed according to its rainfall and soil types. Some grow as multi-stemmed trees and most have developed an underground trunk called a lignotuber for storing water and protection from bushfires. Those seen here could be one tree or several. A unique adaptation to desert life.

9. Oak trees of the desert

Several different she-oaks occur in the park. One type, Slaty She-Oak (*Allocasuarina muelleriana*) grows behind the numbered peg.

Like banksias, she-oaks have thick woody roots which protect their seeds from fire. She-Oaks also regenerate from rootstock, effectively giving them two chances at recovery.

10. A helping hand to survive

The grass like tussocks here are Black Rapier sedges (*Lepidosperma carphoides*).

These sedges live in partnership with a fungus. Grasses themselves are not usually found in the poor nutrient soils of heathlands. Sedges however have a helper; they live in close association with a root fungus which passes on nutrients to them.

Even though the plants centres have dried out, they can re-sprout from the outer edges of their tussocks.

Continue walking onto the car park and enjoy your exploration of the Little Desert National Park.

Be prepared and stay safe

For emergency assistance call Triple Zero (000). If there is a green emergency marker sign near you, read the information on the marker to the operator. Little Desert National Park is in the Wimmera fire district. Bushfire safety is a personal responsibility. Anyone entering parks and forests during the bushfire season needs to stay aware of forecast weather conditions. Check the Fire Danger Rating and for days of Total Fire Ban at www.emergency.vic.gov.au, on the VicEmergency smartphone app or call the VicEmergency Hotline on 1800 226 226. No fires may be lit on Total Fire Ban days. On Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating days this park will be closed for public safety. Warnings signs may be erected, but do not expect a personal warning.

Check the latest conditions at www.parks.vic.gov.au or by calling 13 1963.

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