

The Bushland Whistler

Friends of Forrestdale Newsletter ◆ 6th Edition ◆ May 2014

PIARA NATURE RESERVE (Bush Forever site 262)



In the language of the local Aboriginal people, “Piara” is the name given to the candlestick banksia (*Banksia attenuata*). It is also the name of a nature reserve in Piara Waters, formerly part of Forrestdale. (The recently formed suburb, incidentally, adopted the name of the reserve, not the reverse. In 1992, after the government had acquired the bushland block for the conservation of its flora and fauna, they asked Friends of Forrestdale to suggest a name for the reserve. As the candlestick banksia grows abundantly there, Piara was the name we chose.)

A little under 42 hectares, Piara is an island reserve, isolated and surrounded—or will be soon—on all sides by housing estates.

Modern residential estates comprising large houses on small blocks, allow for little if any space for gardens or trees. The original native bushland is eradicated entirely, along with the myriad wildlife species it contained.

Nature reserves are therefore vitally important. They not only provide breathing space, a welcome respite from the glare and intense heat of so many baking surfaces such as roads and rooftops, but they also enable the continued existence of natural ecosystems—ecosystems that have an inherent right to exist.

Piara nature reserve is part of the Jandakot Regional Park. It comprises banksia woodland, *Melaleuca preissiana* damplands and a conservation category wetland.

The candlestick banksia (above) is possibly the most plentiful banksia species in Piara, but menzies banksia is abundant too, as is the holly-leaved banksia. The Christmas tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*), pricklybark (*Eucalyptus todtiana*) and the western sheoak (*Allocasuarina fraseriana*) are also well represented.



Comprehensive flora and fauna studies have not yet been done in the reserve, but a walk in Piara’s bushland at any time of year will reveal it to be a haven for birdlife. On a morning’s walk 20 to 30 species can usually be seen and potentially, during the course of a year, 80 species could occur there. If the animal tracks on the sandy firebreaks are any indication, Piara is a haven also for mammals and reptiles.

As with many metropolitan nature reserves, Piara is in need of care. Much rubbish and litter, either dumped deliberately or blown from adjacent construction sites, is scattered along the fences and in the bushland around the perimeter of the reserve. This gives the reserve not only an untidy, uncared-for appearance, but also smothers native vegetation and causes degradation. The Friends of Forrestdale and the

Department of Parks and Wildlife will begin removing the rubbish soon.

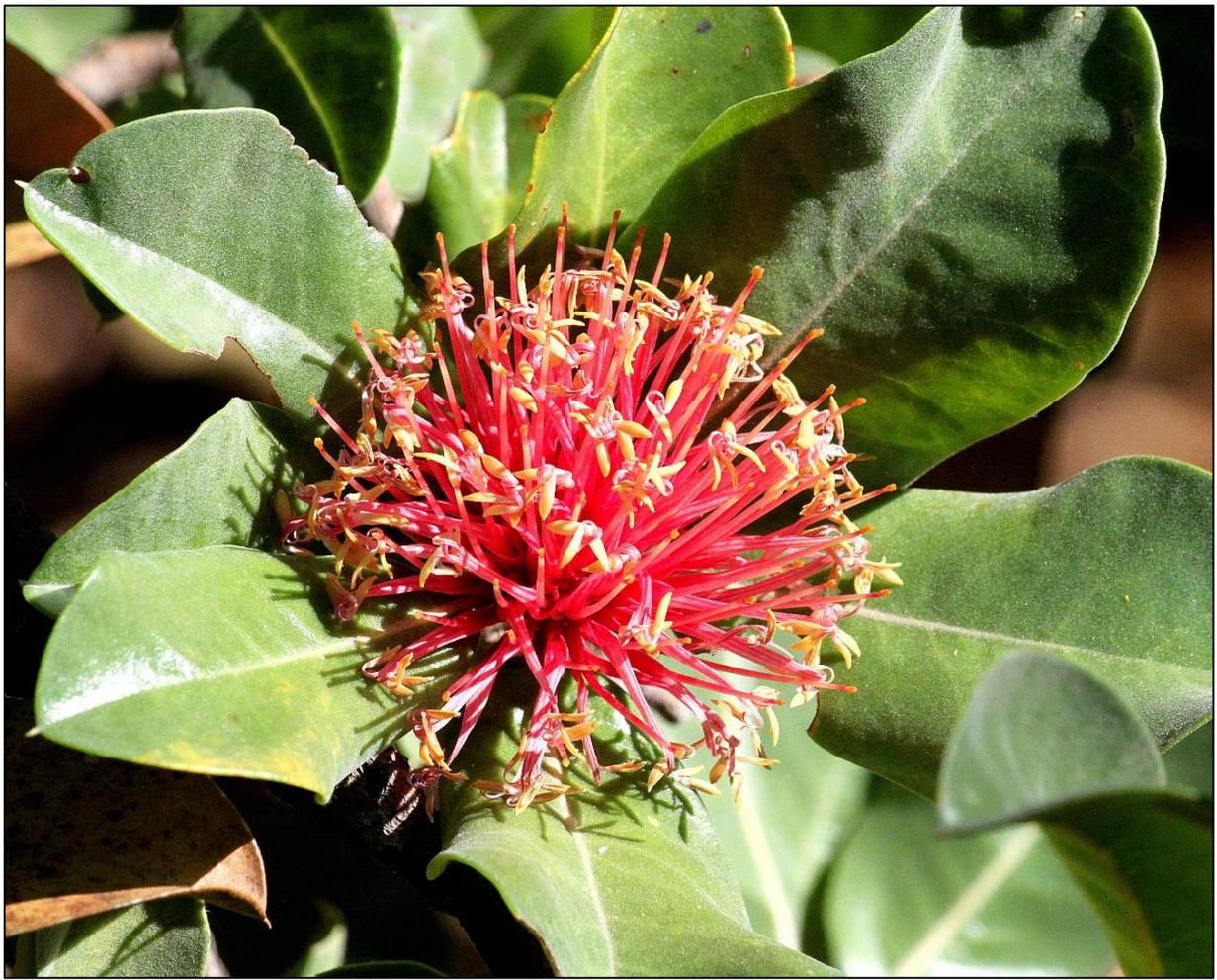
It is hoped that residents of the new estates surrounding Piara nature reserve will, in time, take an active interest in the welfare and protection of this valuable asset to the district. ✧



A grove of *Melaleuca preissiana* trees; a kangaroo trail is in the centre of the photograph – Piara nature reserve



Modong or Moonah (*Melaleuca preissiana*) with understory of sword-sedge (*Lepidosperma longitudinale*) – Piara nature reserve

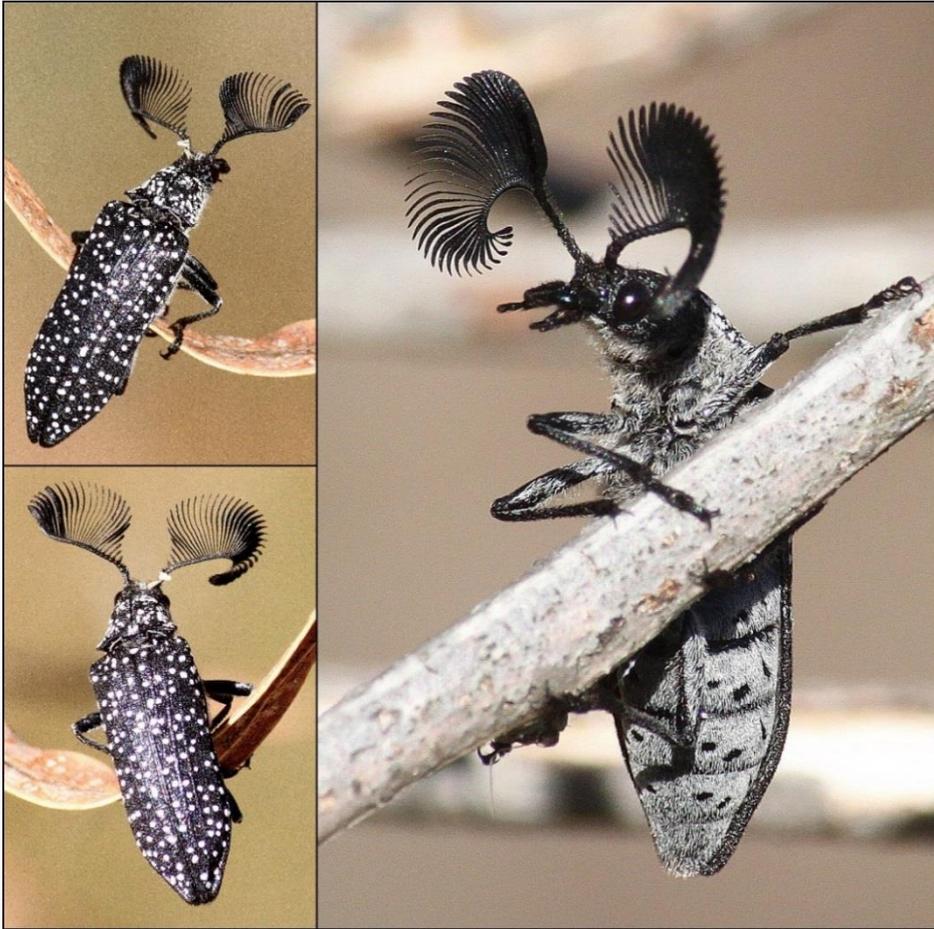


Holly-leaved banksia (*Banksia ilicifolia*); (not all leaves of this species are holly-shaped) – Piara nature reserve



Menzies banksia (*Banksia menziesii*) – Piara nature reserve

FEATHER-HORNED BEETLE (*Rhipicera* sp.)



When summer is over and the weather starts to cool, the feather-horned beetles begin to appear. These extraordinary spotted insects, sporting outlandish antennae, emerge each year for a brief time in autumn. In the Forrestdale area they can be seen in various habitats, including native bushland and suburban gardens.

Only the males sport the bizarre antennae; those belonging to the females are not nearly so lavish.

As pictured left, feather-horned beetles can be encountered perched on branches and foliage of shrubs and trees. But more often they are observed in flight.

With their antennae spread like fans (fan-horned beetle being the alternative name for these insects), the males fly around at a leisurely pace in a seemingly aimless manner.

Their behaviour, however, is unlikely to be aimless, for the elaborate antennae have a definite function: to detect pheromones released by the females to let it be known they are ready to mate.

An unlucky consequence of these beetles spending much of their time flying about, is that they often get caught in spiders' webs!

Feather-horned beetles belong to the genus *Rhipicera* and in Australia there are six recognized species. But, despite the conspicuous nature and abundance of these beetles, very little is known about their life cycle.



Still, limited knowledge of their biology need not lessen the enjoyment of witnessing the annual emergence of these engaging insects as they once again herald the arrival of autumn. ✧

Above: Male feather-horned beetle displaying his antennae.

Left: Golden orb-weaving spider (*Nephila edulis*) on her web in Piara nature reserve; freshly caught on the web when the photo was taken was a small native bee and a feather-horned beetle (insert). (The line of debris on the web comprises the carefully placed remains of the spider's past meals.)

WESTERN WOODY PEAR (*Xylomelum occidentale*)



Attractive foliage, a profusion in summer of creamy white flowers and clusters of large woody pear-like fruits, combine to give the western woody pear tree an eye-catching quality.

Belonging to the Proteaceae family, the western woody pear (*Xylomelum occidentale*), also called native pear, ranges from just north of Perth to Augusta. It is one of two species of woody pear to be found in Western Australia; the other (occurring between Shark Bay and Kondinin) is the sandplain woody pear (*X. angustifolium*), a small, elegant tree with long narrow leaves and silver-grey fruit. Both species are endemic to the state. Four other *Xylomelum* species are found elsewhere in Australia.

Although never plentiful in Forrestdale, the western woody pear is now almost certainly gone from the area. The last known specimens, a large grove of them, once grew on the site of the new Forrestdale business park, but (along with stately *Eucalyptus tottiana* trees) they have been cleared for development.

Luckily, western woody pears are still to be found in certain places in surrounding districts, including Oakford, Kelmscott and Seville Grove. Bob Blackburn reserve in Seville Grove is one such site where stands of this

distinctive West Australian tree have been preserved.

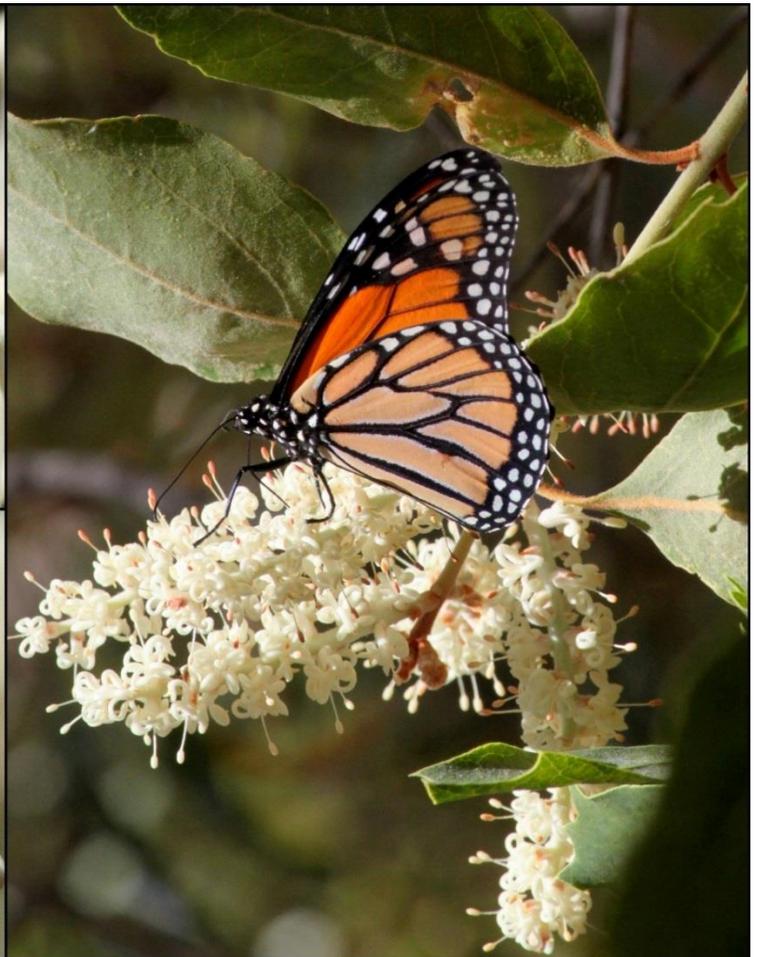
Velvety textured and rich rusty brown when young, the hard, woody fruits cling to the branches for years; with age, their colour fades and they become blotched and streaked with various shades of grey. Mature fruits, when they split open, release two large, winged seeds, which can float in the breeze, away from the parent tree. Western woody pear trees are slow-growing, but, given the chance, can reach heights of 7 or 8 metres. The flowers are sweetly scented and rich in nectar, which is an important food for wildlife. ✧



Western woody pear branches hanging with fruit in various stages of maturity



Flowers of the western woody pear have a beautiful scent ...



... and attract a variety of nectar-feeding insects including native flower wasps, butterflies and bees