

Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

TERMITES : **NATURE'S RECYCLING AGENTS**

Condemned as pests by most people, these industrious little workers are vital to the Australian bush.

Few insects have as bad a reputation as termites. This is unfortunate because they are one of nature's most important recycling agents. With the help of micro-organisms in their gut, they digest the cellulose in dead wood, roots and leaves, returning nutrients to the soil.

In wet environments, microscopic protozoans, bacteria, fungi and worms are nature's recyclers of plant material.

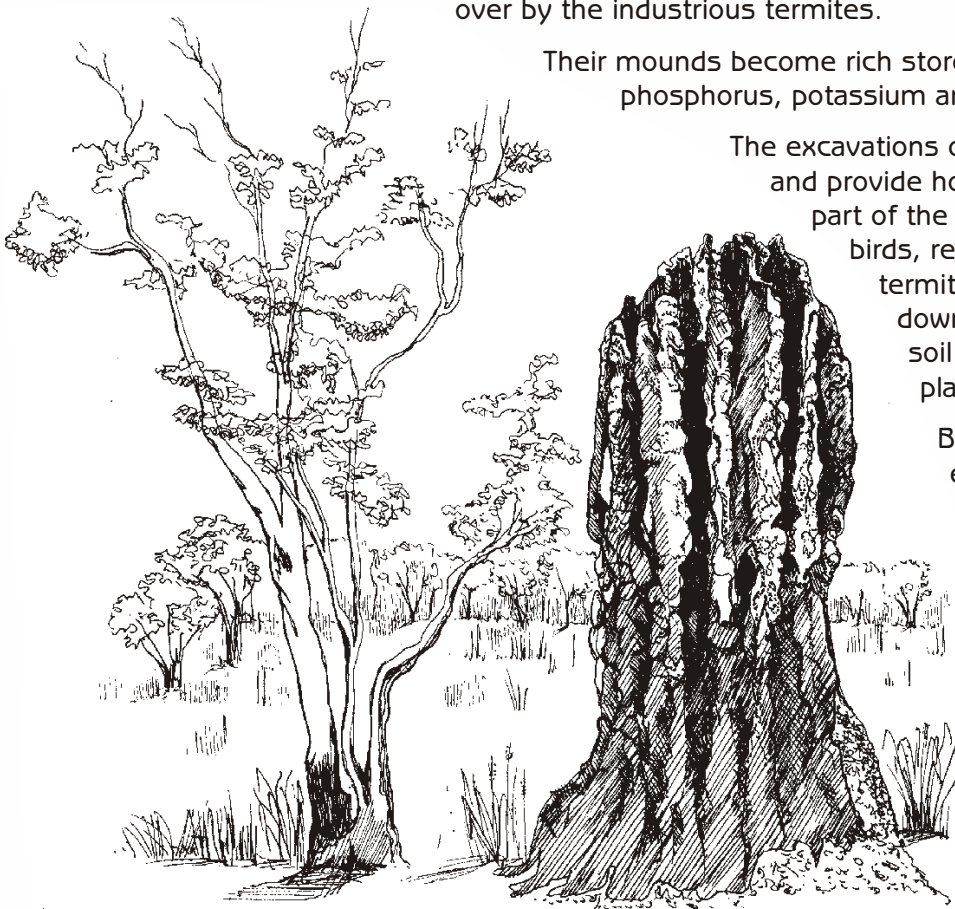
However, in Australia's arid lands, conditions are too hot and dry for these decomposers. Their job is taken over by the industrious termites.

Their mounds become rich storehouses of carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients.

The excavations of termites alter the structure of trees and provide hollows which have become a necessary part of the habitat of many animals, including bats, birds, reptiles and arboreal mammals. When the termite colony dies and the mound breaks down, this natural fertiliser is returned to the soil creating fertile patches where new plants can grow.

Based on where they live and what they eat, termites can be placed into three groups: *dampwood*, *drywood* and *subterranean* (underground).

Dampwood termites generally live in damp rotting logs or in rotting parts of dead or living trees. *Drywood* termites only get their water from the wood in which they live and have no contact with the soil. *Subterranean* termites generally live in or under the ground, or require contact with the soil, or some constant supply of water.



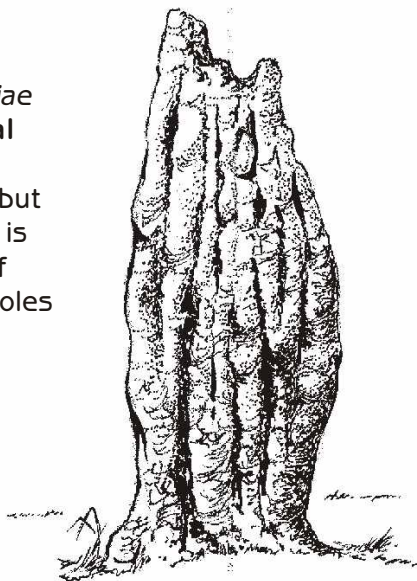
Northern
Territory
Government



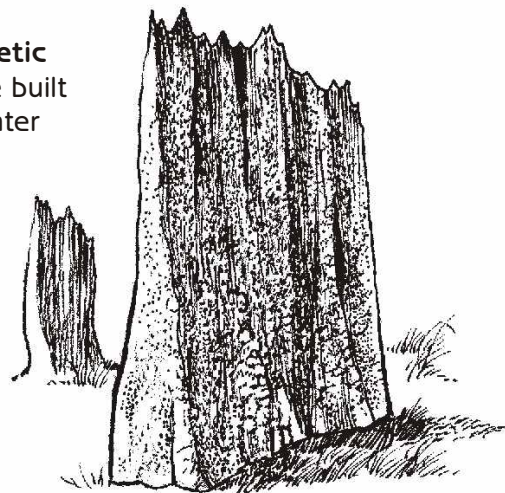
NESTS AND MOUNDS

Termites are easy to see in the Top End. Look out for these termite mounds as you explore the bush.

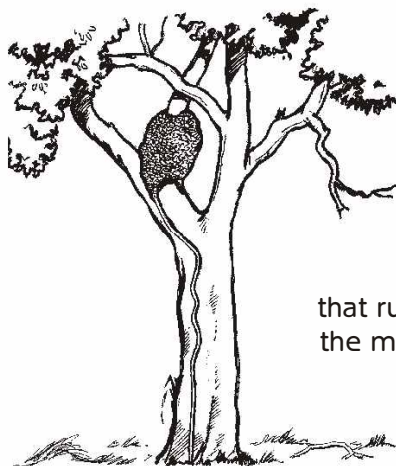
The grass-eater *Nasutitermes triodiae* builds tall **Cathedral Mounds** in the Top End. The beautiful but rare Hooded Parrot is one of a number of birds that nest in holes chewed into these mounds.



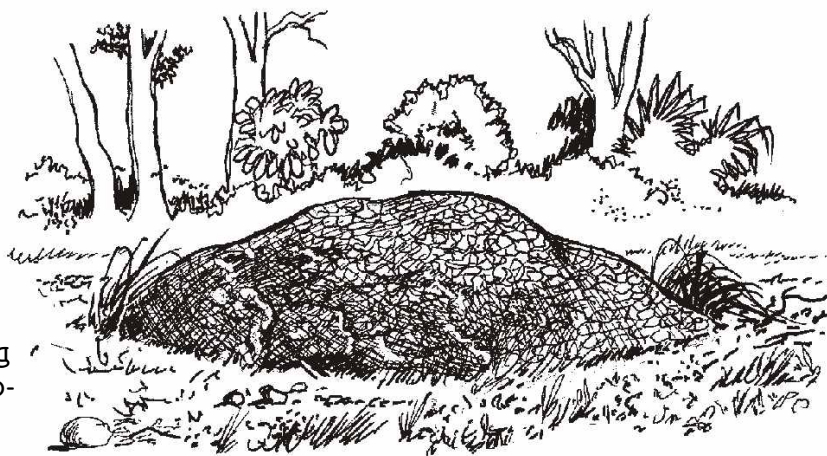
The so-called **Magnetic Termite Mounds** are built by another grass-eater *Amitermes meridionalis*. These Top End mounds have flat sides that face east and west.



Coptotermes acinaciformis is a voracious wood eater that devours trees and fallen timber throughout Australia. Look for its mounds next to tree trunks.



Nasutitermes walkeri builds black mounds in the upper trunks of rainforest trees. Look for their mud tunnels that run along the trunk from the mounds to the soil.



Termites of the deserts generally live underground, creating huge colonies that no-one can see.

Low mounds of the grass-eating *Drepanotermes perniger* are common in the MacDonnell Ranges of Central Australia.

Want to learn more about termites?

Check out the book *Termites of the Top End* by Alan Andersen and Peter Jacklyn. It has great colour photographs and loads of information.

