

# Cassia Hill Self Guided Walk

## Simpsons Gap

### Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park



**Distance:** 1.8 km loop  
**Time:** 1 hour  
**Grade 2:** Easy

This loop walk gets its name from the low cassia shrub-land covering the hillside. After a change of scientific name cassias are now called sennas. However, they are still commonly referred to as cassias.

Use this leaflet as a guide along the walk to introduce you to common plants of the area. You can identify the plants by finding their plaque.

#### Mulga *Acacia aneura*

This is the most important source of wood for traditional weapons and tools because it is characteristically strong and durable. The Mulga's seeds make this tree an important food plant throughout central Australia. Mulga is the most common tree in the area and its opportunistic flowering, as a response to rainfall, ensures that seed pods can be found even in dry times. Seeds are roasted and ground into a paste with a flavour and texture similar to peanut butter.

Another popular food associated with Mulga is the Honeyant. Honeyants are found deep in the ground under the tree, usually in sand country. This luxury food can be gathered after considerable digging. The ants collect honey dew from lerp scale insects which live on the Mulga branches. It is then taken to their underground nests and stored in the bodies of certain worker ants.

The conical shape of the Mulga tree funnels water to the root system to take advantage of any available rainfall.

Mulga trees are killed by fire but the related heat from the fire is necessary to break open the hard outer coating of the seed and enable germination.

#### Silver Cassia *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *artemisioides*

There are ten different subspecies of *Senna artemisioides* in central Australia. Classification is difficult as hybridisation between them is common.

The different subspecies are not usually distinguished by Aboriginal people. With the exception of *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *artemisioides* and *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *filifolia* they are all given the same name. The traditional uses are also generally the same (grubs found in the roots and flowers used for decoration). The scientific name for the Silver Cassia comes from the name of the Greek Goddess Artemis, whose statue was cast in silver.

#### Witchetty Bush *Acacia kempeana*

The Witchetty Bush is a very important plant in central Australia because of the large tasty grubs that are found in its roots. Savoured by Aboriginal people, the nutritious nutty flavoured grub is eaten raw or cooked quickly in hot coals.

Witchetty Bush seeds are collected by Aboriginal women and are usually treated in the same way as Mulga seeds. The wood also has similar properties to Mulga and may be used as a substitute if Mulga is unavailable. As with many other species of *Acacia*, the Witchetty Bush

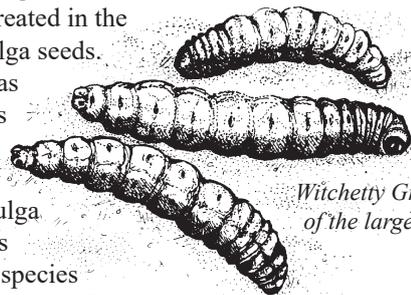
will flower after a rainfall event. Many birds love eating the seeds of this shrub and when the time is right, you may see flocks of Galahs busily enjoying a feast.

#### Blunt-leaf Cassia *Senna artemisioides* subsp. *helmsii*

Notice the distinctive leaf shape and colour. They are pale grey in colour due to the dense covering of short woolly hairs. Fallen leaves create a carpet of leaf litter that insulates the plant's shallow roots during summer. The smoke from the smouldering leaves is believed to have healing properties for sick babies. This practice is known as "smoking" a baby. This plant was named after naturalist and plant collector Richard Helms.

#### Rock Fuchsia Bush *Eremophila freelingii*

Common on gravelly hill slopes, this is an important medicinal plant. The leaves are crushed and used as an infusion to wash sores or drunk to treat headache or chest pains. Early European settlers also used the leaves to make medicinal tea. Inhalations from crushed leaves are considered to have healing properties and are traditionally used as relief from colds. Gently rub a leaf and sniff your fingers to discover the smell for yourself - please don't pick the leaf.



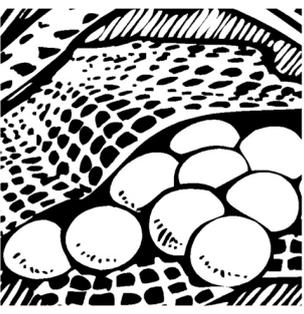
Witchetty Grubs are the larvae of the large grey Ghost Moth

Parks & Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory

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## Desert Cassia

*Senna artemisioides* subsp. *alicia*

This subspecies of *Senna artemisioides* is sometimes mistaken for its close relative, the Oval-leaf Cassia (*Senna artemisioides* subsp. *oligophylla*). The Oval-leaf Cassia has leaves that are much larger and rounder. The brightly coloured flowers of sennas are commonly used for decoration during Aboriginal ceremonies, wedged under head and armbands and sometimes through the perforation in the nasal septum. Twigs are also used in the construction of elaborate headresses.

## Buffel Grass

*Cenchrus ciliaris*

Introduced to the Northern Territory in the 1950s for erosion control, this plant is now predominant in the central Australian landscape. It is an aggressive coloniser which displaces native grasses. Since its introduction it has run rampant along riverbanks and floodplains, both very important habitats in the dry Australian inland. Fire encourages Buffel Grass regrowth and, in turn, the presence of Buffel Grass increases fire intensity. This is hazardous and can prevent regeneration of native plant species. Fires often burn too hot to allow natural regeneration to occur. The management of Buffel Grass in conservation areas of Central Australia is an ongoing issue.

## Woolly Cloak Fern

*Cheilanthes lasiophylla*

This plant has a very different way of coping with the harsh conditions of central Australia. These ferns appear to die off in dry conditions, however they are actually dormant until it rains again. Depending on the time of year you visit, you will see either lush green ferns or what appear to be lots of small dead plants. Within three hours of receiving water these 'dead' plants become green and lively.

## Native Fuchsia

*Eremophila latrobei* subsp. *glabra*

This shrub with fragrant leaves bears red, bell-shaped flowers, often as a response to a rainfall event. It is tolerant of drought and fire. The leaves were used by Aboriginal people for medicine and ceremonial purposes. A closely related

species, *Eremophila latrobei* subsp. *latrobei* is distinguished by its bluish-green appearance due to the presence of fine hairs on the leaves.

Named after Charles Joseph La Trobe, who made a major contribution towards the establishment of Melbourne's botanical gardens.

## Dead Finish

*Acacia tetragonophylla*

Gently feel the spiny 'leaves' of this shrub. They are the plants own form of protection against grazing animals. Locals say that the drought has reached its 'dead finish' when animals are forced to eat those leaves. The leaves are actually a modified petiole (leaf stalk) called a 'phyllode', an adaptation which aims to reduce moisture loss from the plant. When green, the seeds are cooked in the pods before being eaten. Arrernte people, and other groups, use the sharp points of the leaves to remove warts.

Look around and you may be lucky enough to spot a Zebra Finch nest in one of these shrubs - a great place to protect the eggs and young chicks from predators like Perenties or large birds of prey.

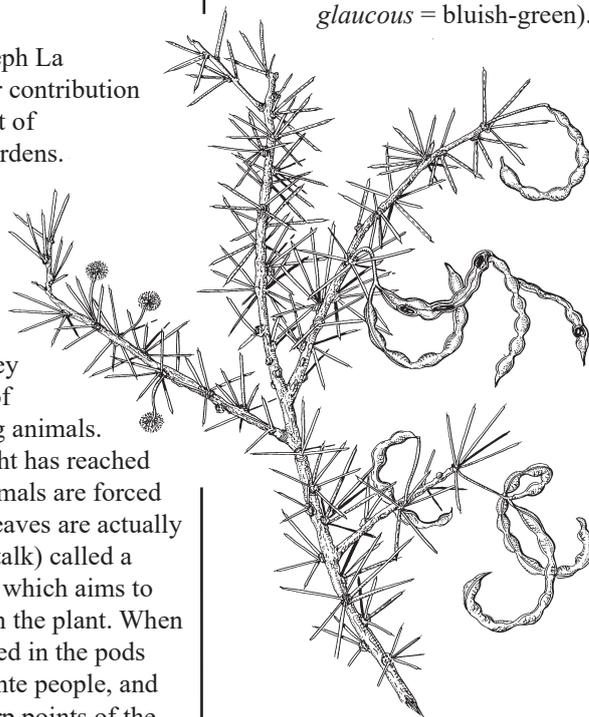
## Whitewood

*Atalaya hemiglauc*

The ability of this tree to re-shoot from its roots enables it to be fire tolerant and drought resistant. Traditionally Aboriginal people have favoured the soft white wood of this plant for the production of ornaments used in ceremonies. An edible grub is found in the roots and trunk of the Whitewood and the white sap that seeps from the trunk can be eaten. The creamy-white flowers appear in clusters and are followed by a papery winged fruit which spins like a helicopter as it falls to the ground.



Its species name comes from the fact the bluish-green leaf colouring is on the upper surface only (*hemi* = half and *glaucous* = bluish-green).



## Weeping Emu Bush

*Eremophila longifolia*

This plant can be quite variable in size, from 1m to 4m in height. It is easily identified by its soft, long, drooping leaves. The flowers are a dull red colour and are followed by a small fleshy fruit, reputed to be a favourite food for emus, giving this plant its common name. The plant spreads underground, so what appears to be several plants close together are all actually one plant joined underground by their roots. It is a very important plant for central Australian Aboriginal people and was used in several types of ceremonies.

## Long-leaf Corkwood

*Hakea lorea* subsp. *lorea*

The thick 'corkwood' bark protects this tree against fire. After being burnt in a campfire, this bark can be ground into an oily paste, which is used as a non-stick dressing for burns and abrasions. The seeds are eaten without preparation and Aboriginal people indulge in the nectar, which is either sucked directly from the flowers or sometimes added to water for a sweet drink. The drink is reputed to have a slightly alcoholic effect.