

World Heritage values

The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (WHA) encompasses a diverse array of both natural and cultural features which make the region of outstanding universal significance to all humankind. The same features led to the listing of the area as a World Heritage property in 1982.

The Tasmanian Wilderness WHA is one of only 23 World Heritage properties that satisfy all natural criteria for selection, one of only 17 that satisfy both natural and cultural criteria, and one of only two World Heritage properties that satisfy as many as seven of a possible ten criteria. The area is indeed unique and of outstanding global significance to all of humanity.

Geology and geomorphology

The WHA comprises 1.38 million hectares, or about 20% of the state. Within its boundaries is a profusion of complex and well-exposed geological features and the most significant examples of glaciated landscapes in Australia. The region is one of the few places in the

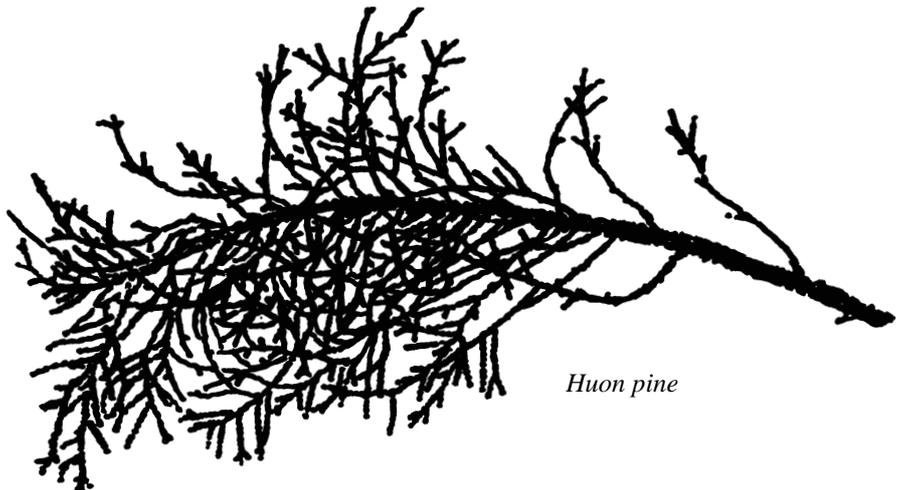
world where an understanding of climatic change can be gained free from the complications of continental influence. The array of landscapes and geological types underlie a great diversity of soil types of high conservation value and a landscape of tremendous beauty. The karst (cave) features and the invertebrate fauna that inhabit them are of international significance. The landscape reveals geomorphological features that represent the tectonic events associated with the separation of the Australian and Antarctic plates during the latter stages of the break-up of the great southern 'supercontinent', Gondwana. Ancient mountain rocks studded with marine fossils tell of much earlier periods when this region of the world was beneath a shallow sea.

Vegetation

The WHA is rich in habitats containing rare and endemic (found only in Tasmania) plants. Of the 462 plant species in Tasmania that are listed as rare or threatened, nearly one-third occur within the boundaries of the WHA.

The lily *Milligania longifolia*, is one such rare species. It is found along the lower Gordon River and nowhere else. It is consequently at risk should its habitat be disturbed. Similarly, the levee bank rainforests of the lower Gordon River are unique in the State. The rare Huon pine, famed for its longevity, also occurs in the region.

The WHA is the Australian stronghold of cool temperate rainforest and alpine vegetation. These plant communi-



Huon pine

ties provide living evidence of a remote past in which Tasmania was part of Gondwana. These species hold a key to understanding the relationships of the flora to that of the rest of Australia and other southern continents.

Fauna

Nineteen rare and threatened vertebrates are found within the boundaries of the WHA. This represents 80% of such species in Tasmania. The endangered orange-bellied parrot, of which less than 200 individuals remain, breeds solely within the south-west corner of the WHA, while the few remaining individuals of the highly endangered Pedder galaxias (a species of freshwater fish)

are restricted to a single lake. The remarkable Pedra Branca skink, with a population of only 400 individuals, is confined to the tiny rock island, Pedra Branca, some 30 km off the south-east tip of the state. The island is incorporated within the boundaries of the World Heritage Area.

The fauna of the WHA also shows a high degree of endemism, with many groups revealing links with the ancient Gondwana. The most ancient representative of the crustaceans, the mountain shrimp (*Anaspides tasmaniae*) and the unique velvet worm (*Peripatus* sp.), inhabit the WHA. The latter species is considered a 'missing link' between the annelids (worms) and the arthropods (crustaceans and insects). Many invertebrates that are internationally recognised as threatened, such as the velvet worm, are found within the WHA.

Aboriginal heritage

The WHA is rich in cultural diversity, with some of the richest and best preserved archaeological deposits known in Australia. Examples of some of the earliest known forms of art, in the form of Aboriginal hand stencils, lie within caves deep in the heart of the WHA. Caves and rock shelters, as well as a profusion of coastal middens and stone scatters, bear testimony to the Aboriginal people who lived in the

area during the height of the last Ice Age — the most southerly humans on Earth.

European heritage

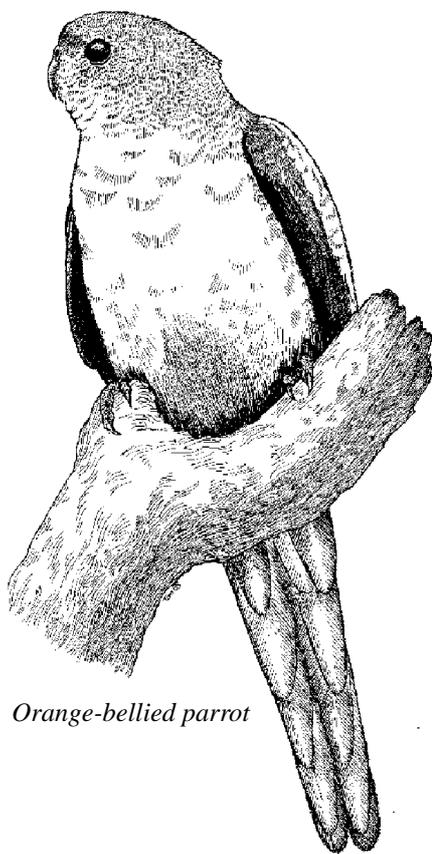
The wilderness has never really been an untrodden land — as Aboriginal occupation over at least the last 36 000 years clearly demonstrates. The region is similarly rich in European history. The earliest of Tasmania's penal settlements, Sarah Island, represents a dark chapter in the history of colonisation which was to have an impact on the Tasmanian psyche for generations to come. Piners, prospectors and trappers who extracted the resources of the region have all carved out a legacy within the wilderness of Tasmania.

Today, the lower Gordon River acts as the western gateway to the WHA. As visitors travel up the river to Heritage Landing they are experiencing a taste of the incredible beauty and undisturbed natural and cultural riches of the Tasmanian wilderness.

Further reading

Smith, S. J. and Banks, M. R. (eds) (1993). *Tasmanian Wilderness-World Heritage Values*. Royal Society of Tasmania, Hobart 1-8.

Parks and Wildlife Service. (1991). *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area: Draft Resources and Issues*.



Orange-bellied parrot