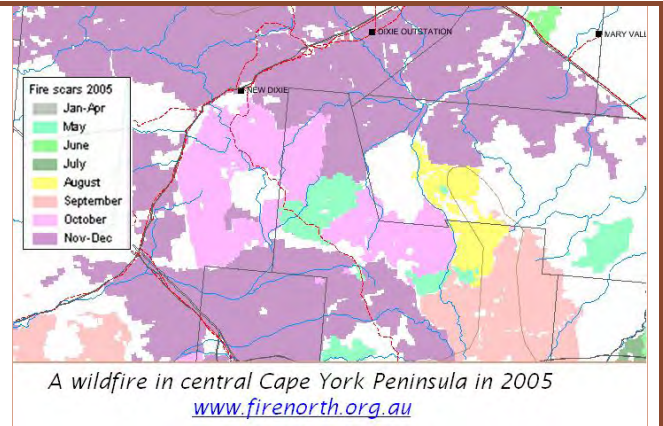


Things to consider

Protecting feed for the year

If a wildfire starts in the late dry season, it may not stop until it reaches a permanent river or major road. If large areas of pasture are burnt, cattle must be moved out of the burnt areas and fed hay and lick to keep them alive. The need to control such fires by back-burning can mean even more country is lost, and much time is lost in fire-fighting. Fire breaks are needed to prevent these losses. Experienced pastoralists do this by burning no more than 10% of a property in a strategic manner in the early dry season. Although they lose some high quality green feed, they prevent losses of much greater areas of, admittedly lower quality, feed to late dry season fires.



Brahman cattle ©Kerry Shephard

Animal health - different opinions

Control of cattle ticks relies on good cattle management, especially spelling areas from grazing animals. Many pastoralists on the peninsula also undertake tick control by burning areas of old grass, particularly at storm-time. Some people think that feeding on green pick improves animal health - others that cattle do poorly if they stay on areas of green pick too long. Cattle that are in poor condition at the end of the dry season may not survive the break in the weather. Some pastoralists believe cattle die at this time of the year if they get colic from suddenly changing from feeding on burnt ground to green grass.

Vegetation thickening

Leaving country unburnt, or burning regularly in the early dry season, along with overgrazing, can lead to vegetation thickening. In the space of 10 to 15 years, it is possible for open country to become completely impassable. Country types most at risk are open flats and ti-tree flats (see p 5). Thickened country is hard to muster in. Open grassy flats can support four times as many cattle as flats covered by ti-tree. On Cape York Peninsula, thickened flats are also poor habitat for wildlife (see below).



Ti-tree invaded flat ©Stephen Garnett

Wildlife needs patchy fires



Brown Treecreepers feed on insects that live in the bark of trees © Ian Montgomery

Animals that need grass, leaf-litter, or low shrubs to nest and shelter in, or that feed on fruits, flowers, or insects under the bark of trees, cannot survive in burnt areas. When fires are small, animals can retreat to nearby unburnt habitat, and recolonise when the vegetation recovers. If large areas are burnt, these fire-sensitive animals may disappear from an area altogether. Some animals are attracted to feed in burnt areas, where food can be easier to find, but no animals are entirely dependent on them.



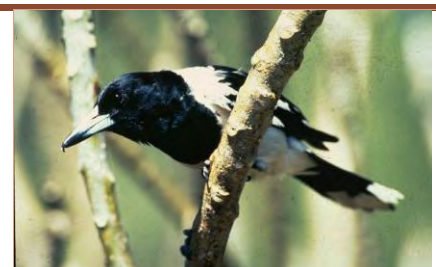
Sugar Gliders need blossoms for food © Euan Ritchie

Vegetation thickening and wildlife



Golden-shouldered parrots nest in antbeds on open grassy flats © Sam Abell

Some animals need open vegetation to live in. They may rely on the grasses and their seeds for food, or they may simply be better able to avoid the attention of predators that lurk in dense vegetation. For example, Golden-shouldered Parrots cannot survive in thickened country because the antbeds they nest in are shaded-out, and many nesting birds are killed when butcherbirds ambush them from the branches of nearby small trees.



Pied Butcherbirds are more successful at hunting Golden-shouldered Parrots in dense vegetation ©Roland & Julia Seitre