Floristics and distribution of Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests and Scrubs in north-eastern New South Wales

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Abstract: Acacia blakei forests and scrubs of north-eastern NSW are described and compared to similar vegetation found in the south-east of the state, primarily dominated by *Acacia silvestris*. Like those in the south, Northern Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests form often discrete stands with abrupt margins on steep slopes in rugged terrain on shallow often rocky soils. The structure is usually of a cohort with stems of an even height and size up to 20 m tall, and a sparse understorey with few grasses, herbs or shrubs. These systems are potentially maintained by infrequent extreme fire events. Notes are made on their management and conservation.

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Introduction

Clayton-Greene & Wimbush (1988) were the first to fully describe an unusual vegetation association of dense *Acacia*-dominated scrubs and forests on the eastern fall of the Great Dividing Range in southern NSW. This class of vegetation, primarily dominated by *Acacia silvestris* (Bodalla Silver Wattle), occurred between the Byadbo region of the Snowy Mountains to south of Deddick in Victoria. The assemblage was characterised by being composed of dense stands of *Acacia* often of a uniform height, with very little understorey (sparse in grasses with only scattered smaller shrubs), and occurring on steep north and west-facing slopes, on metasediments or coarse grained granite. The edges of these *Acacia* scrubs were sharp and clearly-defined.

Similar vegetation, called 'Black Jungle' or 'Black Scrub", was classified under Forest Type 214 (Anon 1989), and as *Acacia* Scrub (Map Unit 4) by Keith & Bedward (1999) in their mapping of south-eastern NSW forests. Though *Acacia silvestris* was the most common dominant, other wattles such as *Acacia binervia*, *Acacia doratoxylon*, *Acacia falciformis* and *Acacia kettlewelliae* sometimes formed similarly structured assemblages (Clayton-Greene & Wimbush 1988; Keith & Bedward 1999). Keith (2004) considered that these assemblages showed little close affinity with other vegetation classes but did share taxa with rock outcrop communities.

Keith (2004) considered these *Acacia*-dominated systems, which he termed Southern Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests, as a curious anomaly, as the only (non-regrowth) class of vegetation in eastern flowing catchments of the Great Dividing Range to be dominated by *Acacia* rather than *Eucalyptus*. Similar vegetation however has been reported elsewhere in eastern NSW for over a decade. Stands dominated by *Acacia bulgaensis* occur in the Wollemi, Yengo, Parr and Pokolbin areas west of Newcastle (Bell et al. 1993; Binns 1996). Vegetation dominated by *Acacia blakei* subsp. *diphylla* occurs in areas north from Gloucester (Binns 1994; Binns 1995; Anon 1995; Hunter 1998; Hunter et al. 1998; Benwell 2000; Hunter 2004). Extensive field investigations have highlighted that the latter northern vegetation, in particular, mirrors the physical and structural characteristics of the southern scrubs and forests. Here I describe, compare and contrast these Northern Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests and Scrubs with those from southern NSW.

Occurrences in Northern New South Wales

Many assemblages similar to the 'Black Scrubs' of southeastern NSW have been reported. Binns (1994) described an Acacia blakei subsp. diphylla-Plectranthus graveolens low forest or woodland from the Chaelundi area north of Dorrigo. An Acacia blakei subsp. diphylla forest association was noted near the Henry River Falls on metasediments in Guy Fawkes River National Park (Anon 1995). Benwell (2000) described an Acacia blakei subsp. diphylla scrub associated with low quartz sedimentary rock types and acid volcanics in Nymboida National Park. Benwell (2000) also discusses finding similar stands within Guy Fawkes River National Park. Extensive stands of Acacia blakei scrub also occur within Oxley Wild Rivers National Park (pers. obs.) where they are quite extensive compared to other northern occurrences. These stands are often associated with dry rainforest, and due to their similar colour on aerial photographs may be included in dry rainforest mapping units (CRA 1999). Table 1 compares features shown by the southern and northern stands.

The Demon Fault, the western boundary of Demon Nature Reserve, runs along the western base of the Malara Plateau east of Tenterfield. Along this geological feature is a distinct linear patch of vegetation dominated by *Acacia blakei* subsp. *diphylla* which forms a dense cohort of scrub on the steep western facing slopes (Hunter et al. 1998). The *Acacia* scrub



Fig. 1. Acacia blakei scrubs on the Demon Fault within the Demon Nature Reserve.

forms a distinct linear patch whose boundary is clear and sharp within a larger *Eucalyptus* forest. The understorey was sparse with scattered grasses and a few shrubs (Fig. 1). The height of most of the stand was only 4 to 8 m but some sections consisted of much older cohorts.

Stands of *Acacia blakei* forests and scrubs were found on steep north and western facing slopes in dissected metasediment gorge country within the Washpool National Park western additions (Hunter 1998). These stands occurred on shallow soils but had sharp and distinct boundaries with the surrounded *Eucalyptus*-dominated forests. The understorey was very sparse, with only a few grasses and some scattered smaller shrubs. The dominant *Acacia blakei*, up to a height of 20 m, formed a cohort of similar-aged individuals with little recruitment evident (Fig. 2). In floristic analyses this community was closely allied to rock outcrop assemblages which they sometimes occur around (Hunter 1998).



Fig. 2. Stand of *Acacia blakei* forest within Washpool National Park.

Hunter (2004) described stands of *Acacia blakei* subsp. *diphylla* forests and scrubs within Mann River Nature Reserve. The stands were often associated with shallow soils on northerly facing slopes of course grained granite. These stands often also occurred around rock outcrops and were floristically associated with outcrops in floristic analyses

Characteristic	Southern Wattle DSF	Northern Wattle DSF
Dominant taxon	Acacia silvestris sometimes A. kettlewelliae, rarely A. doratoxylon or A. falciformis	Acacia blakei subsp. diphylla sometimes A. blakei subsp. blakei
Boundaries	Discrete & very abrupt within a sea of Eucalypt forest	Discrete & very abrupt within a sea of Eucalypt forest
Slopes	Steep north & west facing	Steep to gentle primarily north & west facing, sometimes east facing.
Landscape	Usually in remote, dissected terrain	Remote dissected terrain
Soil	Shallow & rocky	Shallow & rocky
Rock type	Metasediments and course grained granite	Metasediments and course grained granite, rarely acid volcanics
Canopy	Generally uniform, closed canopies, stems of similar height & size away from ecotone	Generally uniform, closed canopies, stems of similar height & size away from ecotone
Diameter at breast height	$0.8-20$ cm. Average 4.4 cm ± 3.3 cm.	16.1–37.5 cm. Average 22 cm ± 6 cm. (Mann River)
Height	5 to 20 m tall	5 to 20 m tall
Understorey	Sparse, little ground cover, few grasses, some scattered shrubs	Sparse, little ground cover, few grasses, some scattered shrubs
Floristic relationships	With rock outcrop floras	With rock outcrop floras
Occurrence	3585 ha (south eastern NSW Keith & Bedward 1999)	Possibly 700 ha

 Table 1. Comparison of Southern Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forest (sensu Keith 2004) and Northern Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests.

 Information for southern localities derived from Clayton-Greene & Wimbush (1988), Keith & Bedward (1999) and Keith (2004).





Fig. 3. Acacia blakei forests within the Mann River Nature Reserve.

(Hunter 2004). As with the previously described stands the understorey was sparse and open and the boundaries of the patches were clear and distinct within a general Eucalyptus forest and woodland matrix, although scattered Acacia individuals were commonly found in other forests and woodlands. The Acacia stands were mainly of even size within each patch though different patches were often different heights. In most patches the stems were 10-18 m tall, with stem diameters (dbh) averaging 22 cm (Fig. 3).

Based on full floristic field survey sites Acacia blakei communities typically contain the shrub Ficus rubiginosa; the forbs Cheilanthes sieberi subsp. sieberi, Commelina cyanea, Desmodium varians, Dianella caerulea, Gahnia aspera, Lomandra longifolia, Lomandra multiflora, Opercularia hispida, Pomax umbellata, Pratia purpurascens, Scleria mackaviensis, Sigesbeckia australiensis and Hybanthus stellarioides; the grasses Cymbopogon refractus, Entolasia stricta, Oplismenus aemulus and Themeda australis.

Acacia blakei appears to be the only species that forms these clear and distinct assemblages with these ecological characteristics in the eastern flowing catchments of northern NSW. The abrupt and clear boundaries of these systems are distinctive in many situations, but in some situations the boundaries (as with many vegetation communities) can be extended and somewhat blurred (as is the situation in the southern occurrences as well - Clayton-Greene & Wimbush 1988). Other wattle taxa, such as Acacia falciformis, Acacia dealbata, Acacia elata, Acacia irrorata, often form dense stands but only as an understorey component of Eucalyptus forests or as short-term (i.e. > 20 yrs) regrowth following disturbance in sites that will eventually support eucalypt forests.

Similar vegetation on western flowing catchments of the north-east

On the western flowing catchments on the Northern Tablelands and North Western Slopes structurally similar wattle forests and scrubs also occur, and are dominated by

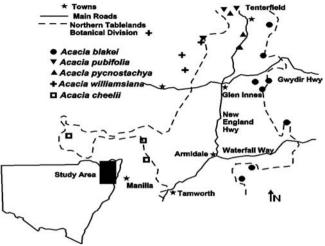


Fig. 4. Known locations of Wattle Dry Sclerophyll Forests and Scrubs of north-eastern New South Wales. Acacia blakei is the only taxon dominating these communities in eastern flowing catchments.

taxa with broad affinities to Acacia blakei (Juliflorae) and which share the same site characteristics (Fig. 4). Between Deepwater and Tenterfield Acacia pycnostachya forms scrubs and forests in Bolivia Hill and Bluff River Nature Reserves (Hunter & Clarke 1998; Hunter 2002). In the northern parts of the Northern Tablelands Acacia pubifolia forms similar stands at Torrington, and in Queensland within Girraween and Sundown National Parks (Hunter & Clarke 1998). Acacia cheelii forms dense cohort stands in the southwest of the Northern Tablelands at Mt Kaputar and Warrabah National Parks and at Ironbark and Melville Range Nature Reserves (Hunter & Clarke 1998; Hunter & Alexander 2000; Hunter & Hunter 2003). In north-west New England, Acacia williamsiana forms structurally similar stands in similar situations at Torrington State Recreation Area, Kwiambal and Kings Plains National Parks and Severn River Nature Reserve (Hunter 1997; Hunter & Clarke 1998; Hunter et al 1999; Hunter 2000ab).

Management and conservation

Clayton-Greene & Wimbush (1988) showed that the 'Black Scrubs' of south-eastern NSW were long-lived with some trees of Acacia silvestris and Eriostemon trachyphyllus having ring-counts indicating ages of up to 100 years or more, though most appeared to be between 25 and 35 years old. These scrubs did not appear to carry low intensity fires probably due to the sparse understorey and the comparative lack of flammability of Acacia leaves (Clayton-Green & Wimbush 1988). However due to lack of resprouting ability the dominant wattles were likely to be killed by fire (Keith 2004). Such evidence, along with investigations of previous fire patterns, lead Clayton-Green & Wimbush (1988) to surmise that these scrubs were maintained by infrequent intense fire events, and that they may not persist in the absence of such events. Each cohort is likely to be related to a specific intense wildfire event (Keith 2004). A very similar dynamic was proposed for rock outcrop floras of northern NSW with which these scrubs and forests are closely allied (Hunter et al. 1998; Hunter 2003).

Within eastern NSW potentially less than 5 000 ha of this vegetation may exist north of the Hunter region. Around 700 ha have been mapped in northern NSW though it is likely that not all stands have been recorded. In the south-east where more extensive investigations have occurred, 3585 ha are known. These distinctive communities are probably part of a long-term dynamic reliant on unique site characteristics and extreme fire events. In 1988 Clayton-Greene and Wimbush suggested that the only conceivable threat to the continued existence of the southern scrubs would be attempts to exclude intense fire by too-frequent low-intensity burns in the surrounding woodland. Under such regimes the likelihood of these wattle scrubs and forests persisting in landscapes where extreme fire events are actively discouraged by management activities may be reduced. Although most occurrences in northern NSW are within reserves managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service; most are small and isolated stands and they may be under threat while we do not understand the mechanisms enabling persistence. These communities should be perceived as both a significant and unusual vegetation association of limited extent.

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Appendix 1. List of vascular plant spo	ecies associated	Orchidaceae	
with Acacia blakei Dry Sclerophyll Forests and Scrubs of		Acianthus apprimus	DM
eastern flowing catchments of north-eastern NSW. Taxa		Bulbophyllum minutissimum	MR
were recorded from field plots. Nomen		Dendrobium kingianum	MR
of Harden (1992-2002) Flora of New	· 1	Phormiaceae	
where recent changes have been made.		Dianella caerulea var. caerulea	DM, MR, NY, WWP
DM = Demon Nature Reserve (5 x 0.1 ha site		Poaceae	
MR = Mann River Nature Reserve (4 x 0.1 ha sites).		Aristida acuta	MR
NY = Nymboida National Park (Benwell 200		Aristida calycina var. calycina	MR
WWP = Washpool National Park Western Additions (3 sites).		Aristida jerichoensis subsp. subspinulifera	DM
		Aristida ramosa var. ramosa	MR
PTERIDOPHYTES		Austrodanthonia racemosa var. racemosa	MR
Adiantaceae		Austrostipa rudis subsp. nervosa	WWP
Adiantum hispidulum	NY, WWP	Austrostipa ruais subsp. nervosa Austrostipa scabra subsp. scabra	MR
Cheilanthes distans	DM, MR	Cenchrus caliculatus	MR, WWP
Cheilanthes sieberi subsp. sieberi	DM, MR, NY, WWP	Cymbopogon refractus	DM, MR, NY, WWP
Pellaea falcata	WWP	Deyeuxia mckiei	DM, MR, NI, WWI DM
Pellaea nana	DM	Dichelachne micrantha	MR, WWP
Aspleniaceae		Dichelachne rara	DM
Asplenium flabellifolium	WWP	Digitaria breviglumis	DM, MR
Polypodiaceae		Digitaria diffusa	MR
Pyrrosia rupestris	NY	Digitaria tanjasa Digitaria ramularis	MR, WWP
		Echinopogon caespitosus var. caespitosus	MR, WWI MR
MONOCOTYLEDONS		Echinopogon vatus	DM
Anthericaceae		Echnopogon ovalus Entolasia marginata	MR, WWP
Arthropodium milleflorum	DM	Entolasia stricta	DM, MR, NY, WWP
Tricoryne anceps var. pterocaulon	DM, WWP	Eragrostis elongata	DM, MR, IVI, WWI DM, MR
Commelinaceae		Eragrostis leptostachya	MR
Commelina cyanea	DM, MR, WWP	Eragrostis molybdea	MR
Cyperaceae		Joycea pallida	MR
Cyperus imbecillis	DM	Microlaena stipoides	DM
Cyperus fulvus	MR	Notodanthonia longifolia	DM, WWP
Cyperus gracilis	MR, NY	Oplismenus aemulus	DM, MR, WWP
Cyperus lhotskyanus	DM	Oplismenus imbecillis	NY
Fimbristylis dichotoma	DM, MR	Oplismenus undulatifolius var. mollis	DM, MR
Gahnia aspera	DM, MR, NY, WWP	Panicum effusum	MR
Lepidosperma laterale	DM, WWP	Panicum simile	DM
Schoenus melanostachys	DM, MR	Paspalidium constrictum	DM
Scleria mackaviensis	DM, MR, WWP	Poa labillardieri	DM, WWP
Haemodoraceae		Poa sieberiana var. sieberiana	MR
Haemodorum planifolium	DM	Sorghum leiocladum	WWP
	DM	Themeda australis	DM, MR, WWP
Iridaceae		Tripogon loliiformis	DM, MR
Patersonia glabrata	WWP	Restionaceae	
Patersonia sericea	DM	Resubnaceae Baloskion stenocoleum	DM
Lomandraceae			DW
Lomandra confertiflora	DM	Smilaceae	N77
Lomandra filiformis	DM	Smilax australis	NY
Lomandra longifolia	DM, MR, WWP	DICOTYLEDONS	
Lomandra multiflora subsp. multiflora	DM, MR, WWP	Acanthaceae	
Eustrephus latifolius	DM, WWP	Brunoniella australis	WWP
Geitonoplesium cymosum	NY		

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Apiaceae		Polymeria calycina	DM
Trachymene incisa subsp. incisa	DM, MR	Crassulaceae	
Apocynaceae		Crassula sieberiana	DM, MR
Alyxia ruscifolia	NY, MR		Divi, Mix
Parsonsia straminea	DM	Dilleniaceae	
	DIVI	Hibbertia obtusifolia	DM, MR
Araliaceae	WWD	Epacridaceae	
Astrotricha longifolia	WWP	Leucopogon lanceolatus var. lanceolatus	WWP
Asclepiadaceae Hoya australis subsp. australis	MR	Melichrus urceolatus	DM
Sarcostemma brunonianum	MR	Escalloniaceae	
	MIK	Rapanea variabilis	NY
Asteraceae		Euphorbiaceae	
*Bidens pilosa	DM, MR, WWP	Acalypha nemorum	DM, NY
Brachyscome microcarpa	DM	Beyeria viscosa	WWP
<i>Calotis dentex</i>	MR, WWP	Breynia cernua	DM, NY
Cassinia uncata	WWP	Phyllanthus gunnii	DM, NY, WWP
Chrysocephalum apiculatum	DM	Poranthera microphylla	DM
*Cirsium vulgare	WWP	Ricinocarpos speciosus	MR
*Conyza albida	DM	Fabaceae	
Euchiton sphaericus	MR, WWP DM	Acacia blakei subsp. diphylla	DM, MR, NY, WWP
Glossogyne tannensis	DM DM	Bossiaea scortechinii	DM
*Gnaphalium americanum *Um och oprio ug diagta		Desmodium brachypodum	DM, MR
*Hypochaeris radicata Lagenifera gracilis	DM, MR, WWP DM	Desmodium rhytidophyllum	DM
Senecio diaschides	MR, WWP	Desmodium varians	DM, MR, WWP
Senecio hispidulus var. hispidulus	MR, wwr MR	Glycine clandestina	DM
Senecio lautus subsp. dissectifolius	MR	Glycine microphylla	DM
Senecio lautus subsp. lanceolatus	WWP	Jacksonia scoparia	DM, MR
Senecio vagus subsp. eglandulosus	WWP	Mirbelia pungens	DM
Sigesbeckia australiensis	DM, MR, WWP	Podolobium ilicifolium	DM
Veronica cinerea var. cinerea	DM, WWP	Goodeniaceae	
Vittadinia cervicularis subsp. subcervicularis	DM, MR	Dampiera stricta	MR
*Zinnia peruviana	MR	Goodenia hederacea	DM
Bignoniaceae		Goodenia rotundifolia	DM
8	DM, MR	Haloragaceae	
Pandorea pandorana	DIVI, IVIK	Haloragis heterophylla	DM
Campanulaceae		Gonocarpus oreophilus	NY
Wahlenbergia communis	DM, WWP	Gonocarpus teucrioides	WWP
Wahlenbergia luteola	DM	Lamiaceae	
Casuarinaceae		Lamiaceae Ajuga australis	DM
Allocasuarina littoralis	MR, WWP	Ajuga australis Mentha diemenica	DM DM
Allocasuarina torulosa	DM	Plectranthus graveolens	DM DM, MR
Celastraceae		Plectranthus parviflorus	DM, MR, WWP
Maytenus silvestris	DM, WWP	Plectranthus suaveolens	MR
Chenopodiaceae		Prostanthera nivea	DM
<i>Chenopodium carinatum</i>	MR		DM
Einadia trigonos subsp. leiocarpa	WWP	Lobeliaceae	DM MD WWD
Clusiaceae		Pratia purpurascens	DM, MR, WWP
Hypericum gramineum	DM	Loranthaceae	
Convolvulaceae		Muellerina celastroides	MR
Dichondra repens	DM, WWP	Muellerina eucalyptoides	MR
Dichondra sp. A	MR	Malvaceae	
*Ipomoea cairica	MR	Hibiscus trionum	MR
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Moraceae		Proteaceae	
Ficus rubiginosa forma glabrescens	DM, MR, NY	Hakea sericea	DM
Myrtaceae		Lomatia silaifolia	WWP
Babingtonia collina	MR	Plantaginaceae	
Corymbia gummifera	DM	Plantago varia	WWP
Corymbia variegata	NY	Rhamnaceae	
Eucalyptus biturbinata	MR	Alphitonia excelsa	MR, NY
Eucalyptus campanulata	WWP	Persoonia sericea	
Eucalyptus crebra	MR	Pomaderris elliptica	DM
Eucalyptus dorrigoensis	WWP	Rubiaceae	
Eucalyptus fibrosa	DM	Opercularia aspera	MR, WWP
Eucalyptus prava	MR	Opercularia diphylla	MR
Eucalyptus propinqua	DM	Opercularia hispida	DM, MR, WWP
Eucalyptus radiata subsp. sejuncta	WWP	Pomax umbellata	DM, MR, WWP
Eucalyptus tereticornis	MR	Rutaceae	
Leptospermum arachnoides	MR	Asterolasia correifolia	MR
Leptospermum petersonii subsp. petersonii	MR	Correa reflexa var. reflexa	DM, WWP
Leptospermum polygalifolium subsp. transmontanum	DM, WWP	Zieria smithii subsp. smithii	WWP
Lophostemon confertus	DM, WWI DM, MR	Solanaceae	
1 0		Solanum campanulatum	DM, MR, WWP
Nyctaginaceae Boerhavia dominii	DM	-	
	Divi	Santalaceae Exocarpus cupressiformis	WWP
Oleaceae	MD		W W F
Jasminum volubile	MR	Scrophulariaceae	
Notelaea longifolia	DM, NY	Veronica calycina	WWP
Oxalidaceae		Veronica plebeia	WWP
Oxalis chnoodes	WWP	Sterculiaceae	
Oxalis perennans	DM	Brachychiton populneus subsp. populneus	DM, MR
Passifloraceae		Lasiopetalum ferrugineum var. cordatum	MR
Passiflora aurantia	WWP	Ulmaceae	
Pittosporaceae		Trema tomentosa	DM, NY
Billardiera scandens var. scandens	DM	Verbenaceae	
Bursaria spinosa	WWP	Clerodendrum tomentosum	NY
Polygalaceae		Violaceae	
Rumex brownii	WWP	Hybanthus monopetalus	DM
Portulacaceae		Hybanthus stellarioides	DM, NY, WWP
Calandrinia pickeringii	DM	Viola betonicifolia	DM
Primulaceae		Viola hederacea	DM
*Anagallis arvensis	MR	Viscaceae	
<u> </u>		Notothixos subaureus	MR