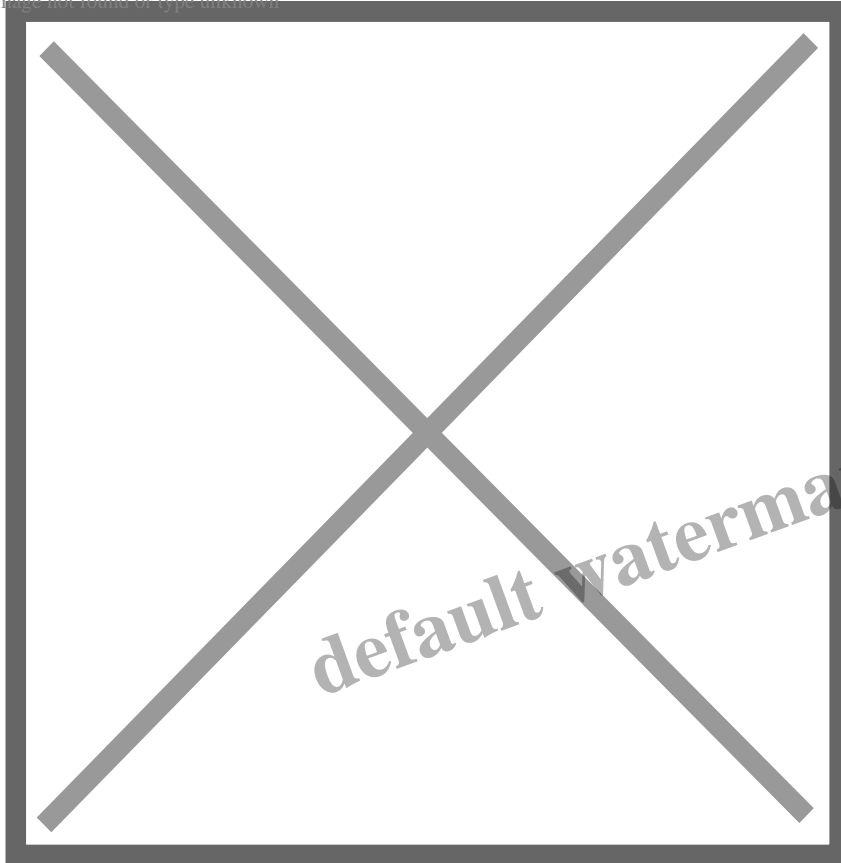


Wheatbelt woodlands in Western Australia: loss, hope and a guitar

Description

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Wandoo tree and guitar made by [Aaron Fenech](#), with wandoo back and sides

I worked in the woodlands in Western Australia for over 30 years and grew to love them. Despite past losses, much remains, and there is hope!

A Scot ends up in Australia

Although I grew up and spent the first part of my life in Scotland, I've now lived in Western Australia for over half my life and most of my professional life. I arrived in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia in July 1984, having spent the previous 2 years in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. I'd gone to California from Scotland for a 2 year postdoctoral position at Stanford University, with the expectation that I'd look for a job at a British university after that.

The then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made sure that I'd need to tread a different path. While at Stanford, Mrs Thatcher was busy pulling various sectors of UK life to bits – including the miners and the universities. Although most attention has been given to [Thatcher's battle with the coal miners](#), the [impacts of her policies on UK universities](#) were profound. Staff cuts, reorganisations and new funding models altered the face of the universities and some became mere shells of their former selves. For

instance, the department in Aberdeen University where I did my PhD work was reduced from 18 staff members down to 8. So, no jobs for Hobbs in the UK in 1984, then!

Hence I started looking anywhere and everywhere for potential positions. I received my fair share of rejections – including a memorable one from a university in one of the central US states that consisted of a postcard basically saying “Thanks, but no thanks” which also had this statement at the bottom: “The University of xxxx is an equal opportunity employer and welcomes applications from women *and other minorities*”. Wow. I hope things have changed there now!

I eventually was offered a 5-year position with CSIRO – the Australian Government research organisation – in Perth, Western Australia. I really knew very little about Western Australia, or Australia in general. I knew about Skippy the Bush Kangaroo (a kid’s TV program when I was growing up) and that kookaburras (whatever they were) sat in old gum trees. I had to look in the atlas to see where Perth was.

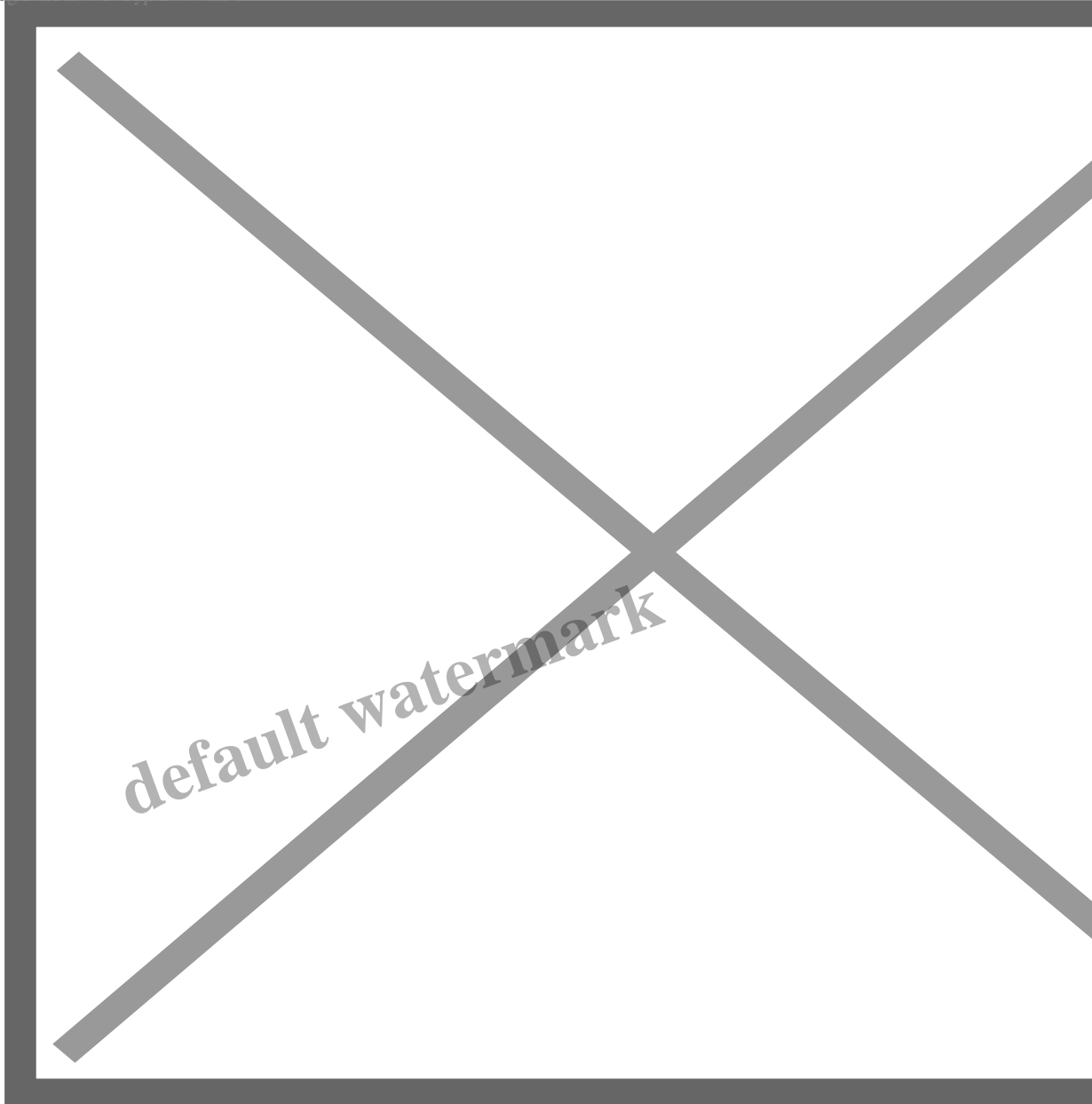
Skippy the Bush Kangaroo (1968-1970)

Moving to the end of the earth

OK, I thought – 5 years in Australia and then maybe Thatcher will have moved on and I can return to Scotland. I moved to Perth, the most isolated capital city in the world which, at the time, had the air of a large country town and colonial outpost. Pre-internet, the only ways to communicate with the outside world were by very-snailly snail mail, very expensive phonecalls or via a [telex machine](#), and it felt very much like the edge of the known universe. I joined a research group that was to work on the remaining patches of native vegetation in the Western Australian wheatbelt. Fragmentation of native ecosystems in the face of agricultural, urban and mining development is a worldwide phenomenon, and back in the early 1980s, understanding of its consequences and how to manage the remaining patches was in its infancy.

The flight from eastern Australia into Perth flew right over the wheatbelt (an area roughly the same size as the UK), and, as I looked down at this dramatically altered landscape, I had a moment of panic, thinking “What on earth have I done?!”

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The Western Australian wheatbelt. The satellite image (from [OzForecast](#)) shows the extent of cleared land (lighter colour) stretching from the south coast north and into the arid interior. Green areas are forest and larger reserves. The aerial photo is a typical scene from the window when flying across the wheatbelt.

Ecologists by and large have traditionally liked working in nice environments with intact native systems.

My first few excursions into the wheatbelt reinforced what I had seen from the plane – this was certainly not an intact system. Rather, it was a huge area that had been extensively cleared for agriculture right up until the 1970s. Wheat and sheep paddocks replaced much of the woodland, heathland and other native systems that characterized the area. In some places the agriculture was not doing well because the soils were infertile and prone to blow away or to become saline as salt water rose from the depths following clearing. And in many places, only small pockets of the original vegetation were left and many of these had been altered by uncontrolled stock grazing, weed invasion and rubbish dumping.

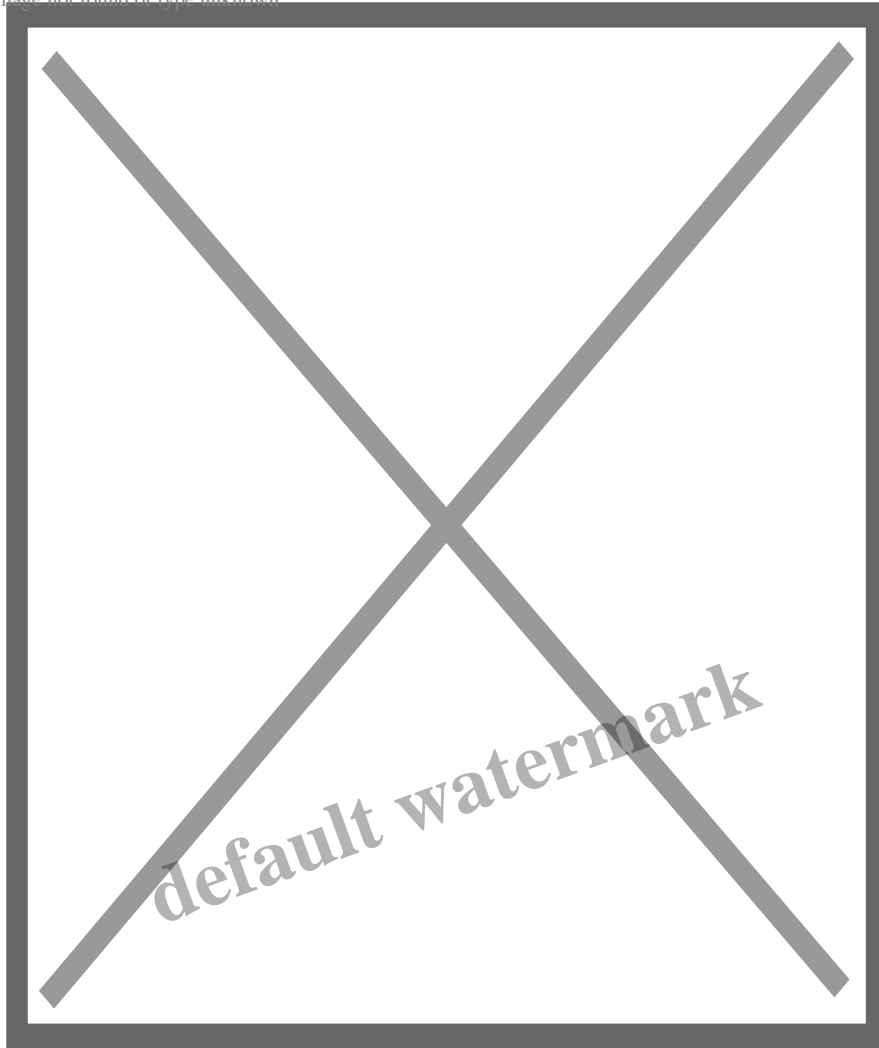
Wheatbelt woodlands

Clearly, my stay in Western Australia has lasted longer than I first anticipated. My position with CSIRO was made permanent after a couple of years. Perth matured into a thriving cosmopolitan city, and links with the rest of the world improved by leaps and bounds as technology and the internet developed. I came to develop a deep appreciation for the biological wonderland I had inadvertently landed in.

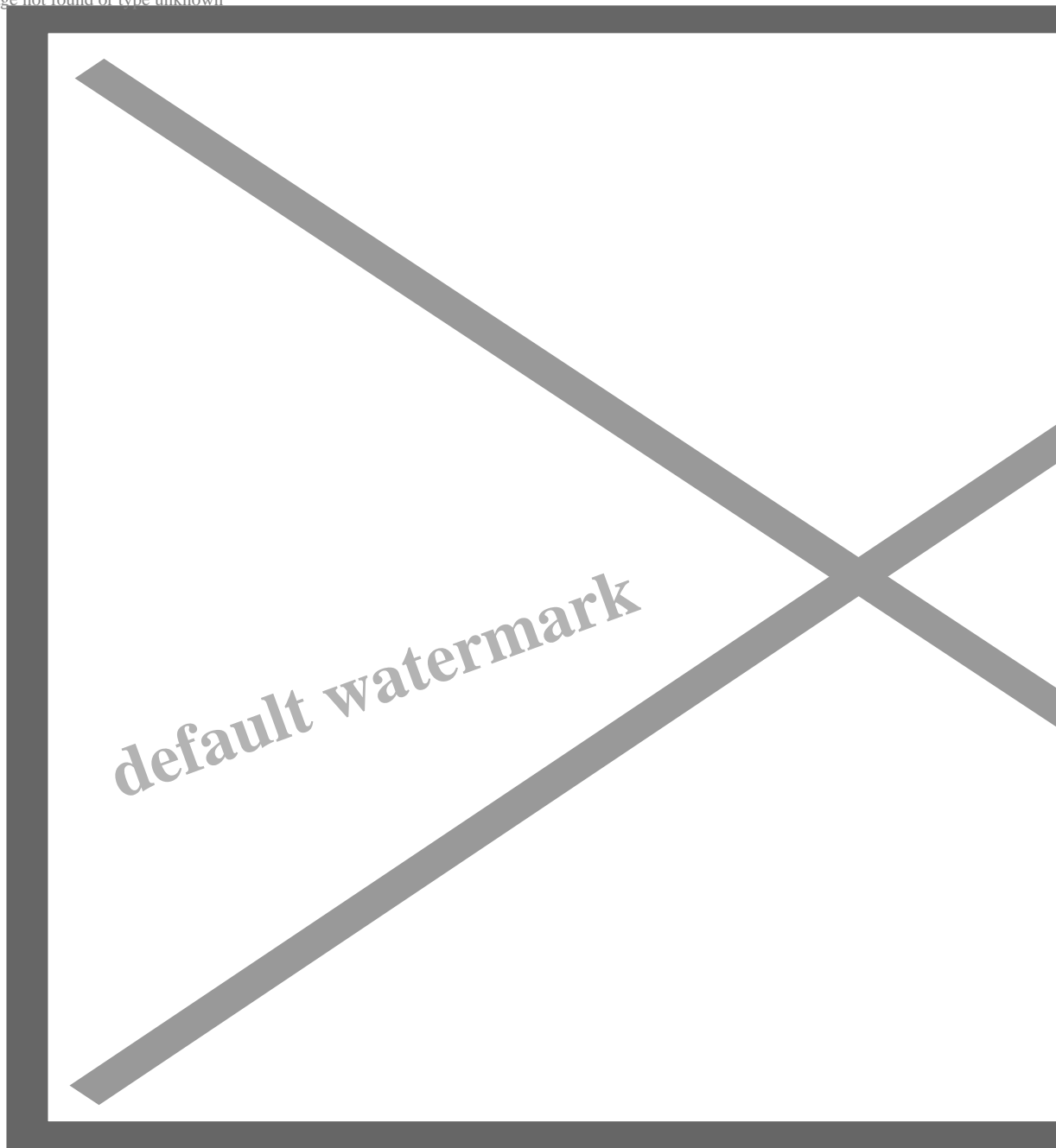
Despite my initial reaction to my future study area, the place began to grow on me. I came to appreciate that many of the little pockets of native vegetation that were left, as well as the few larger reserves that survived, retained an astonishing and fascinating array of life. Southwestern Australia has been listed as a “global biodiversity hotspot” – a place characterised by exceptionally high levels of species richness and unique biological assemblages, but which is also subject to intense threats. The flora of the southwest is spectacular – from tall closed forests in the west and south, through the open woodlands and heathlands of the wheatbelt and into the more arid areas to the east.

When I first arrived in Western Australia, there was a lot of ecological research going on in the hyper-diverse [kwongan](#) or sandplain heathlands. On my first ventures into the heathlands, I encountered weird and wonderful plant forms that made me wonder whether I’d landed on a different planet, never mind a different continent. The array of flowering plants was staggering, and I had to completely re-learn my plant ID skills (built entirely on northern hemisphere plants) in the face of entire groups of plants I had never encountered before.

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Hyper-diverse kwongan and old growth karri forest, southwestern Australia

There was also a lot of interest in [jarrah](#) and [karri](#) forests in the higher rainfall areas – with karri rivalling the [Mountain Ash forests](#) of eastern Australia in terms of their magnificence and presence of very tall trees. But there was relatively much less going on in the open woodlands in the drier areas, about which surprisingly little was known. The woodlands stretch across the wheatbelt, where they mostly occur in relatively small reserves, into semi-arid parts further east, an area now known as the [Great Western Woodlands](#) – extensive areas that, luckily, escaped clearing and are relatively intact (albeit subject to mining and other assorted activities). It was the wheatbelt woodlands that piqued my interest and eventually captured my heart.

The woodlands are mostly dominated by an array of species of eucalypt. Although not as grandiose as the tall forest species, the wheatbelt eucalypts are stunningly beautiful. [Salmon gums](#), [gimlets](#) and [wandoos](#) inhabit different parts of the landscape and change with the seasons with characteristic pink, bronze or white coloration on the trunks and branches.

Here are some photos of Salmon gum, gimlet and wandoo woodlands, including a photo of the extensive woodlands still remaining in the Great Western Woodlands.

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Conserving and restoring woodlands

I focused a lot of my research on the woodland remnants in the wheatbelt. Understanding how to conserve these remaining woodlands involved gathering a lot of basic information on how the native systems worked and were being affected by the transformed agricultural landscapes around them. Part of this is obviously understanding the main building blocks that make the woodland – the trees. How do they grow, how do they flower, set seed and regenerate?

But it's not just the trees – it's all the other plants that grow in the woodlands, all the birds, mammals, reptiles and insects that live and feed in the trees, in the soil, in hollow logs and everywhere in the woodland system. It's also not just the species but the things they do and the processes that keep the woodland going – pollination of flowers, dispersal of seeds, hollow formation to provide nests, decomposition that recycles nutrients, and so much more. And then there is how all this is influenced by seasonal climate variation, fires and other extreme events like storms and floods. Once you start thinking about the interconnections within and between ecological systems, there's a lot to find out about!

It became apparent that simply maintaining the fragments that were still in pretty good condition wasn't sufficient – some repair of damaged fragments was required. The relatively intact woodlands are beautiful, but many are far from intact now. Some parts of the wheatbelt retain only pocket handkerchief fragments of woodland, many of which have been heavily grazed by stock, invaded by pasture grasses and, in some cases, affected by rising saline water tables. And much of the native fauna has been decimated by introduced foxes and cats. The eucalypt woodlands of the Western Australian wheatbelt were listed in 2015 as a [Threatened Ecological Community](#) under the federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. They also featured recently in a list of systems undergoing or at risk from [ecosystem collapse](#).

The many faces of woodlands in trouble in the wheatbelt

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The term “collapse” suggests something sudden and dramatic – like a heart attack for a person. Such events are increasingly occurring – for instance severe fires and prolonged droughts. However, for the wheatbelt woodlands, the collapse is more of a gradual affair as various forces combine to slowly suck the life out of the woodlands, much like a slow wasting disease. Magnificent stands of large salmon gum trees obscure the fact that these stands have no young trees – no new generation to take over when the older trees eventually die. Wandoo woodlands have been subject to periodic declines during which the adult trees become sick or die, with dramatic follow-on effects on the woodland flora and fauna.

Sadness and hope

Pretty depressing stuff, huh? And it all seems to be [getting worse](#). Sometimes, as an ecologist and someone interested in conserving the world’s ecosystems and species, the losses and declines can get pretty overwhelming. Indeed, many people involved in conservation experience a form of grieving – grief over what is being lost and destroyed and despair about our individual collective ability to do anything about it. [See more on this topic in [another post](#)].

And yet, as I wrote in [an article](#) a few years ago, it is possible to also retain hope for the future even in the face of grief and loss. I’m constantly amazed when I walk through some of the little remaining patches of woodland how much of value still remains there. And some of the bigger reserve areas remain truly spectacular and are home to some pretty amazing creatures – one of my favourites is the [Numbat](#), a small marsupial that is still found in wandoo woodland in a very small number of places, but which is being translocated to safe havens elsewhere. Once widespread, numbats, like many other Australian mammals, declined dramatically in the face of predation by introduced foxes and cats, as well as competition from rabbits and changed fire regimes.

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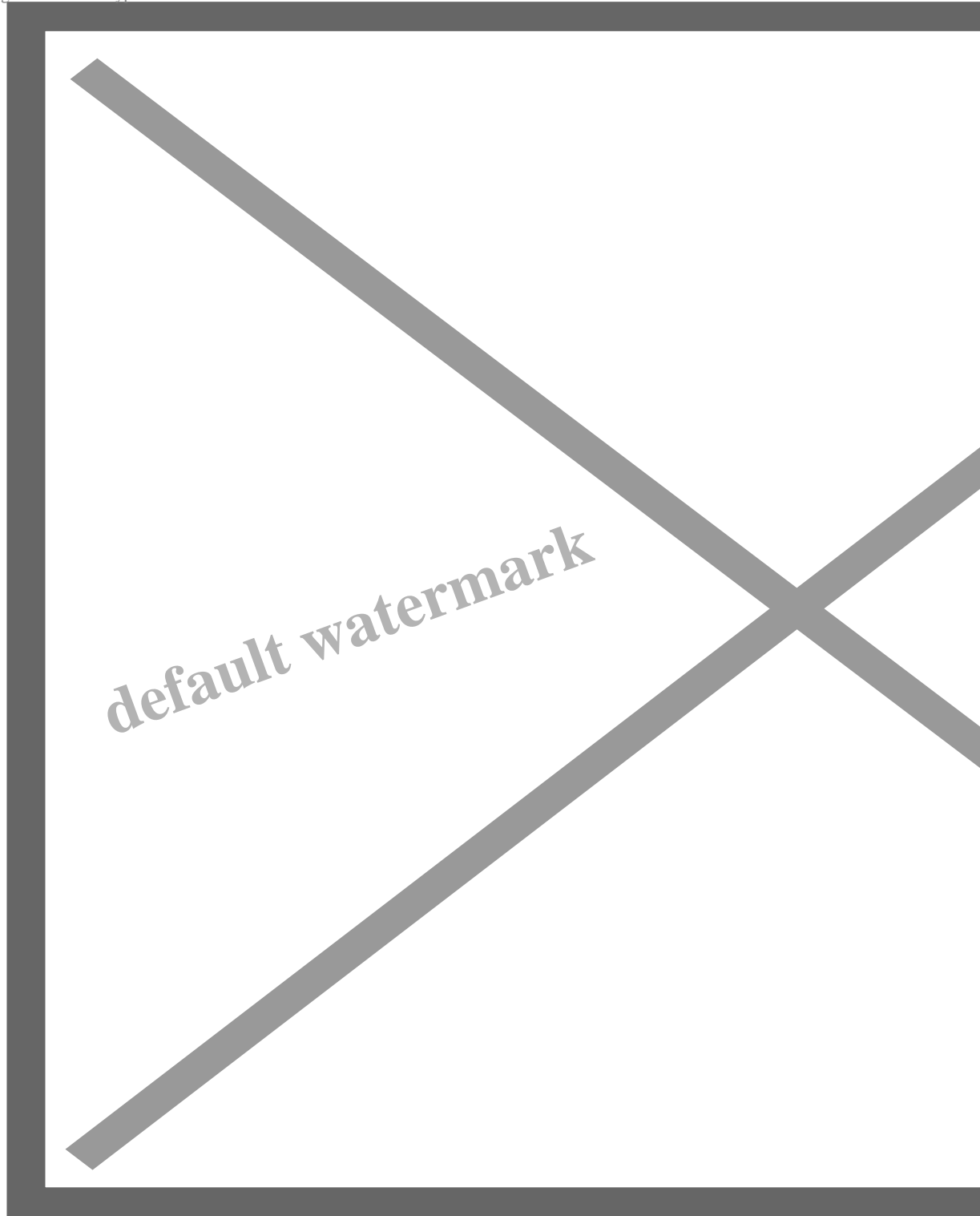
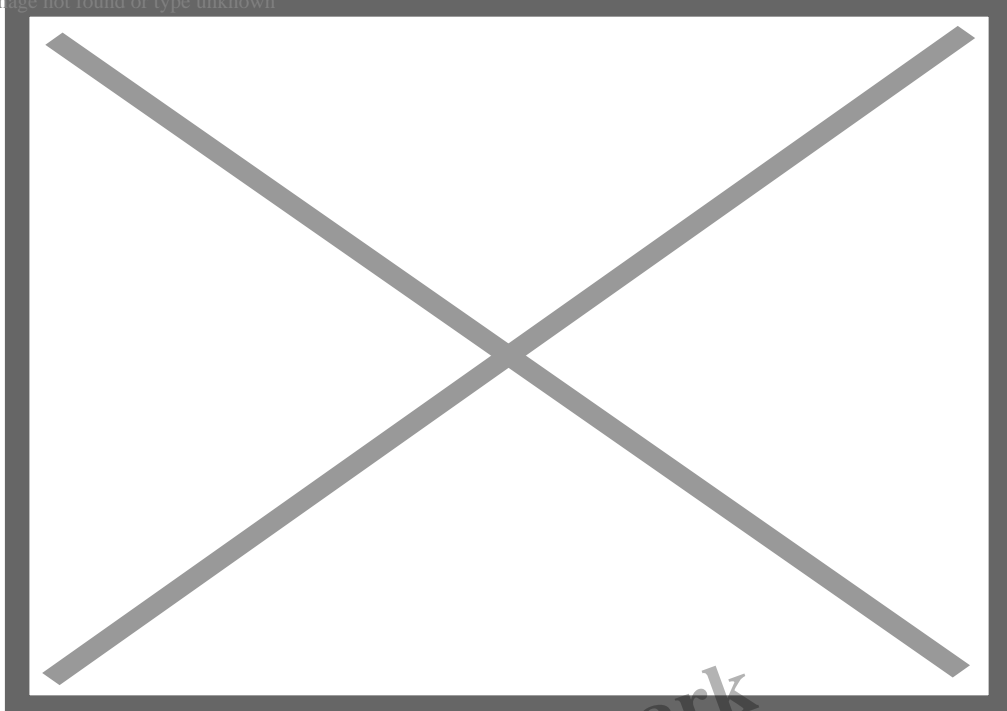


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Baby numbats (photo by [Bryony Palmer](#)) and graphic by [Project Numbat](#). See lots more cute numbat photos on Facebook at [Project Numbat](#) and [Dryandra – a Southwest Australian Safari](#)

Another favourite is the [Chuditch](#) or Western Quoll, the so-called “native cat”, a predator that is doing OK in some places but is also the subject of ongoing conservation and translocation programs.

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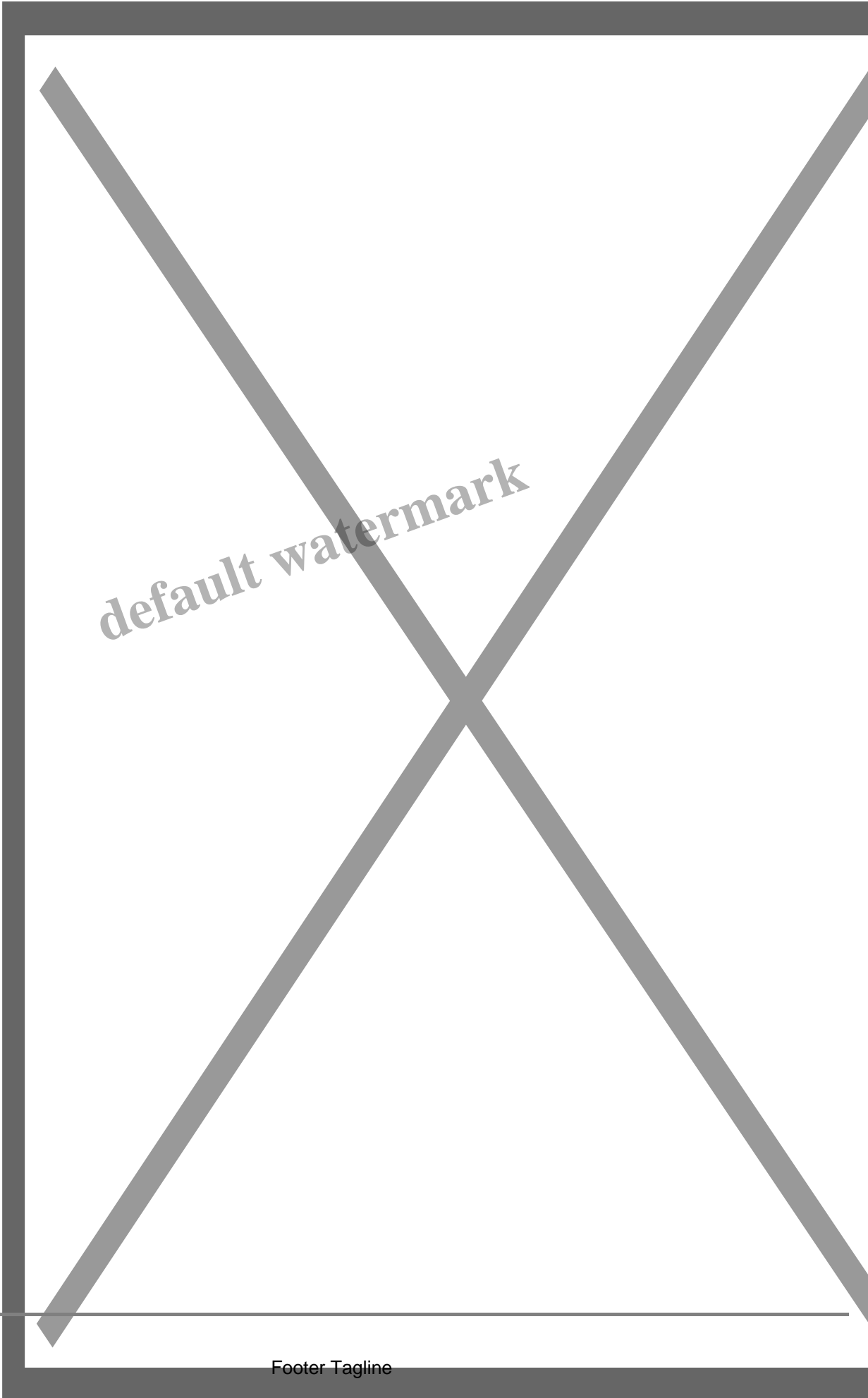
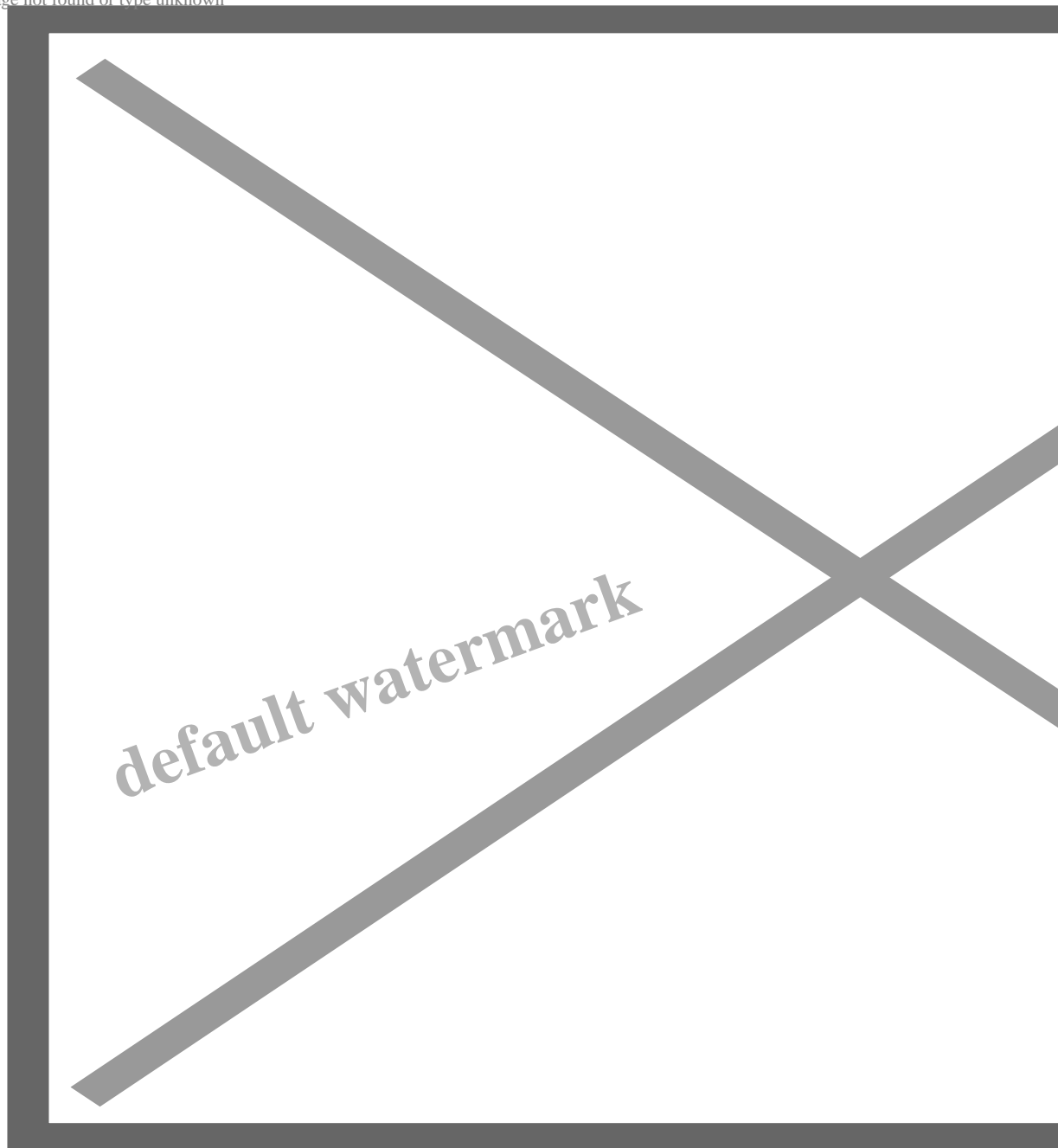


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A chuditch being released after checking during [annual monitoring at Julimar State Forest](#) in Western Australia. After release, the chuditch made a run for the hollow in the fallen log on the right.

Numbats and chuditch need intact functioning woodlands to persist. As well as maintaining the intact woodlands there are opportunities to repair damaged areas so that they can once again thrive and become suitable homes for numbats and other species. And there's the potential to return native vegetation to some areas of farmland for the benefit of both conservation and agriculture. Restoring damaged woodlands and putting native vegetation back to areas where it had been cleared both require an understanding of how the native systems worked and how to fix the damage or put an entire

system back together again. I discussed the topic of restoring ecosystems in an [earlier post](#), and I and my colleagues have spent the past few decades working on many different aspects of the restoration equation.

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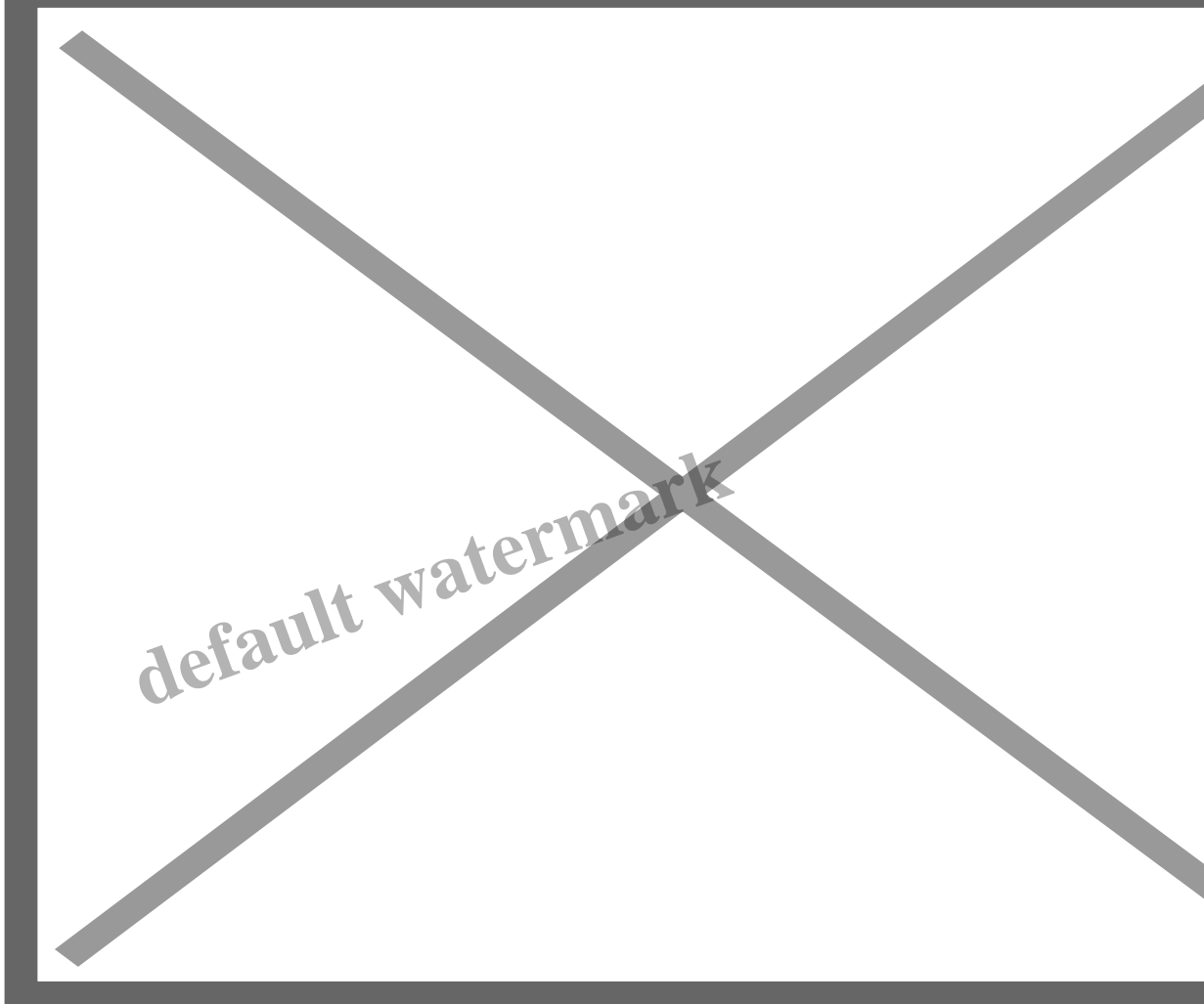
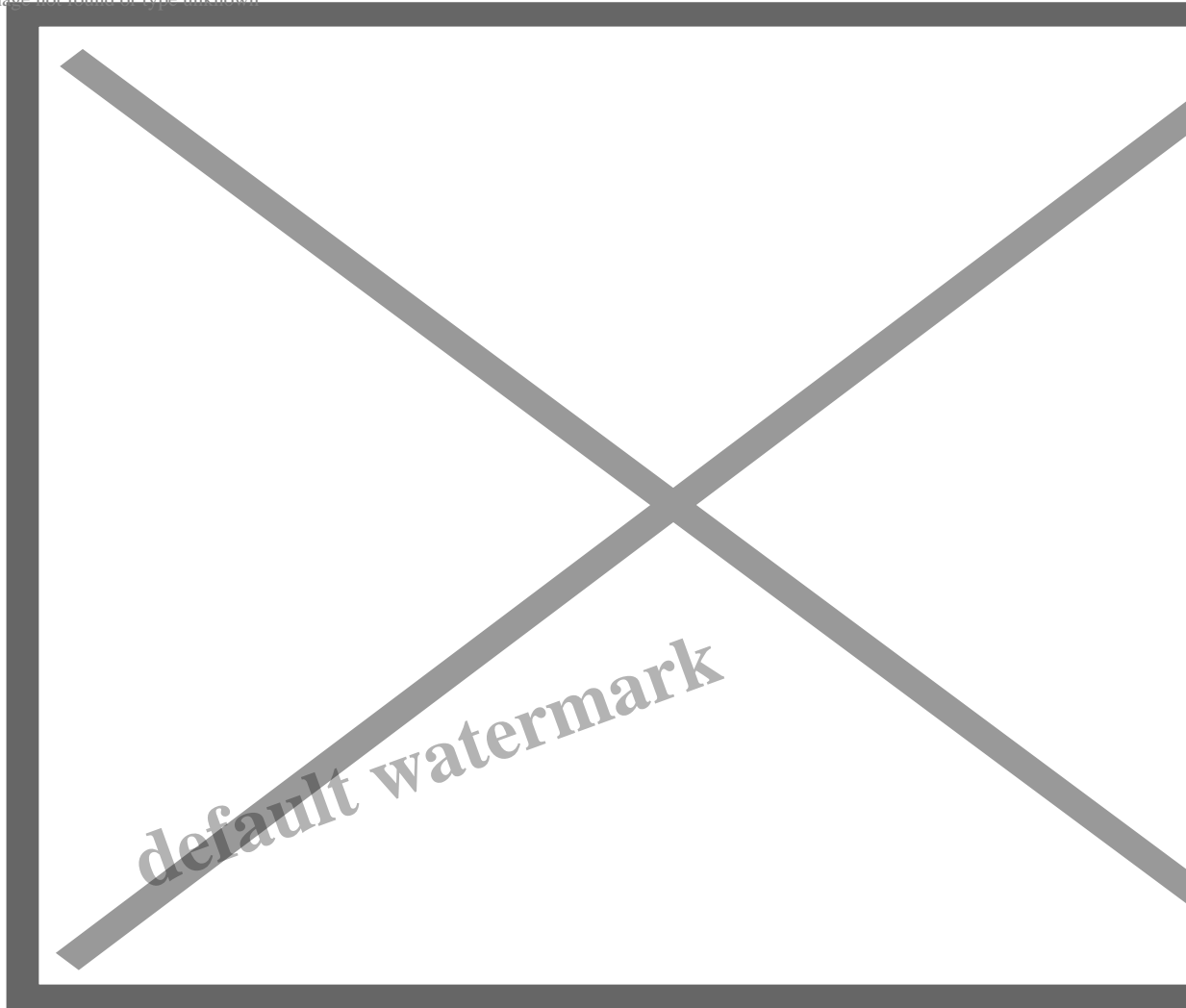


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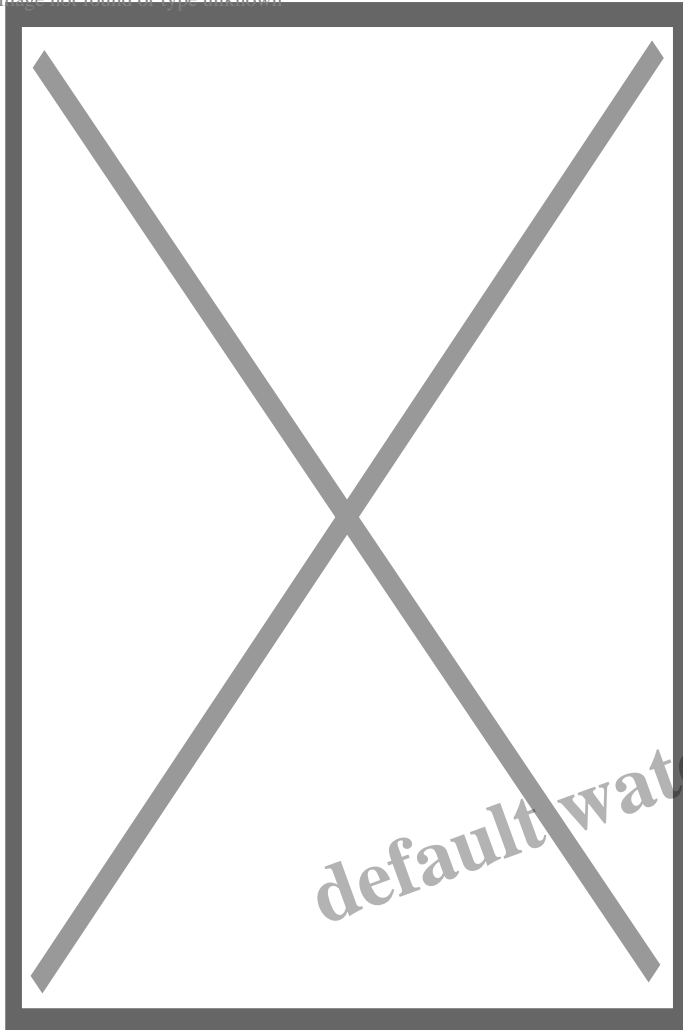


Hope for the future: young trees growing in restoration sites.

Through the dedicated efforts of many researchers, students, conservation managers and community members, we now know a lot more about the wheatbelt woodlands. Great things are happening in conservation and restoration of these systems and the species they contain, as well as in reconnecting with the knowledge and practices of the indigenous Noongar peoples.

Much more could – and needs to be – done, of course. Government budgets for conservation management are woefully inadequate – while the Australian government is happy to pour money down a bottomless drain to pay for high tech warplanes and submarines (that seem to have a habit of not turning out as flash as the promises suggested), budgets for conservation, restoration, bushfire recovery, climate adaptation etc are lean and inadequate. The NGO sector is doing an admirable job of supplementing the meagre government responses, with organisations like the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and Australian Bush Heritage undertaking some of the most innovative and effective conservation action in the country.

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“This old tree”. Steve and Ros Barnes (Bridge of Wings CD, 1997, Western Wave, Fremantle).

A song inspired by a solitary old tree in the Western Australian wheatbelt.

A wheatbelt guitar?

So, that’s the world of woodland conservation in Australia – a mix of ongoing decline and hopeful indications that things can be turned around. How does all this relate to guitars?

I spent a lot of time wandering around and doing fieldwork in the wandoo and salmon gum woodlands of the Western Australian wheatbelt. As I mentioned, I came to really relate to these open woodlands and the “sense of place” they imbued on the wheatbelt landscape. As my interests in guitars developed, I began thinking about whether it would be possible to build a guitar from all-Australian woods and, in particular, the wood from the trees I’d been studying all those years. It’s good to look at what’s in your own back yard as well as exploring all the other options from far afield. It seemed unlikely that the wheatbelt trees would be good for guitars because I knew from talking to farmers and others that the timber from trees like wandoo and salmon gum was incredibly dense and hard to work.

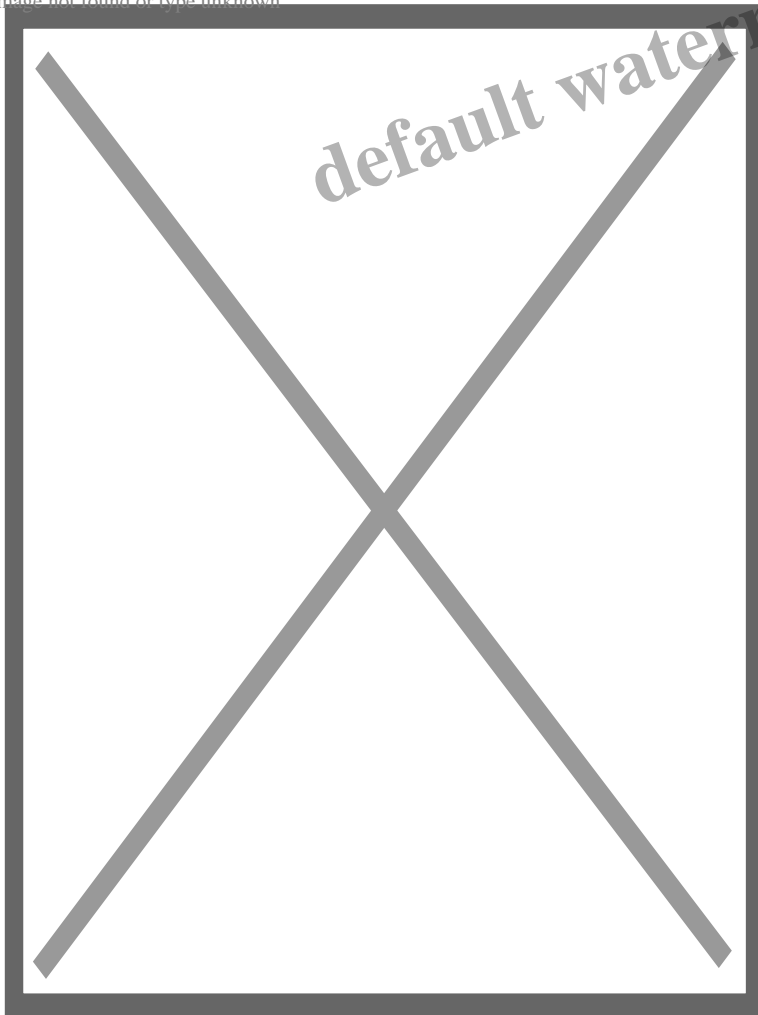
This was backed up by comments I found on various guitar forums – for instance, in a [discussion thread about wandoo](#)

on the Unofficial Martin Guitar Forum, someone commented: “Wandoo is very hard and very dense and about 1 step away from “Impossible to work” with hand tools unless they are ridiculously sharp”

On the other hand, guitar makers were already using a variety of other Australian woods with great results. Australia’s biggest guitar maker – [Maton](#) – started out in 1946 and has made using Australian timbers one of its defining characteristics. Likewise, [Cole Clark](#), who started up in 2001, use mostly Australian, and sustainably harvested, timbers. More on these and other Australian guitar makers in future posts.

While exploring what Australian guitar makers are doing in terms of using Australian woods, I came across a young guy who had recently launched himself into being a full-time independent guitar builder. [Aaron Fenech](#) is based on the Gold Coast in Queensland, and set up shop full time only a few years ago. As it appears is often the case, Aaron [did not start out as a professional guitar maker](#). He did apprenticeships in automotive refinishing and carpentry before completing an environmental science degree and becoming a public servant and spending time in Western Australia. But he also started making guitars in his spare time. He said “I used my passion for making guitars as a way to switch off from work, I would literally get home from work and go straight to my shed. It was my happy place for sure.”

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His government job became increasingly demanding, and eventually he decided to take time away from the pressure and long hours in the public service to try his hand at starting his own guitar-making business. As well as making his own guitars, he ran a guitar-making school giving people the opportunity to learn the skills required to build their own guitar. Although he initially questioned the wisdom of trading a secure job for a potentially risky business venture, he's [not really looked back](#). He no longer runs the guitar-making school and instead concentrates on building fine guitars that are gaining increasing recognition. His guitars are now being distributed more widely, with some popping up on [Reverb](#) recently

Yes, we do wandoo

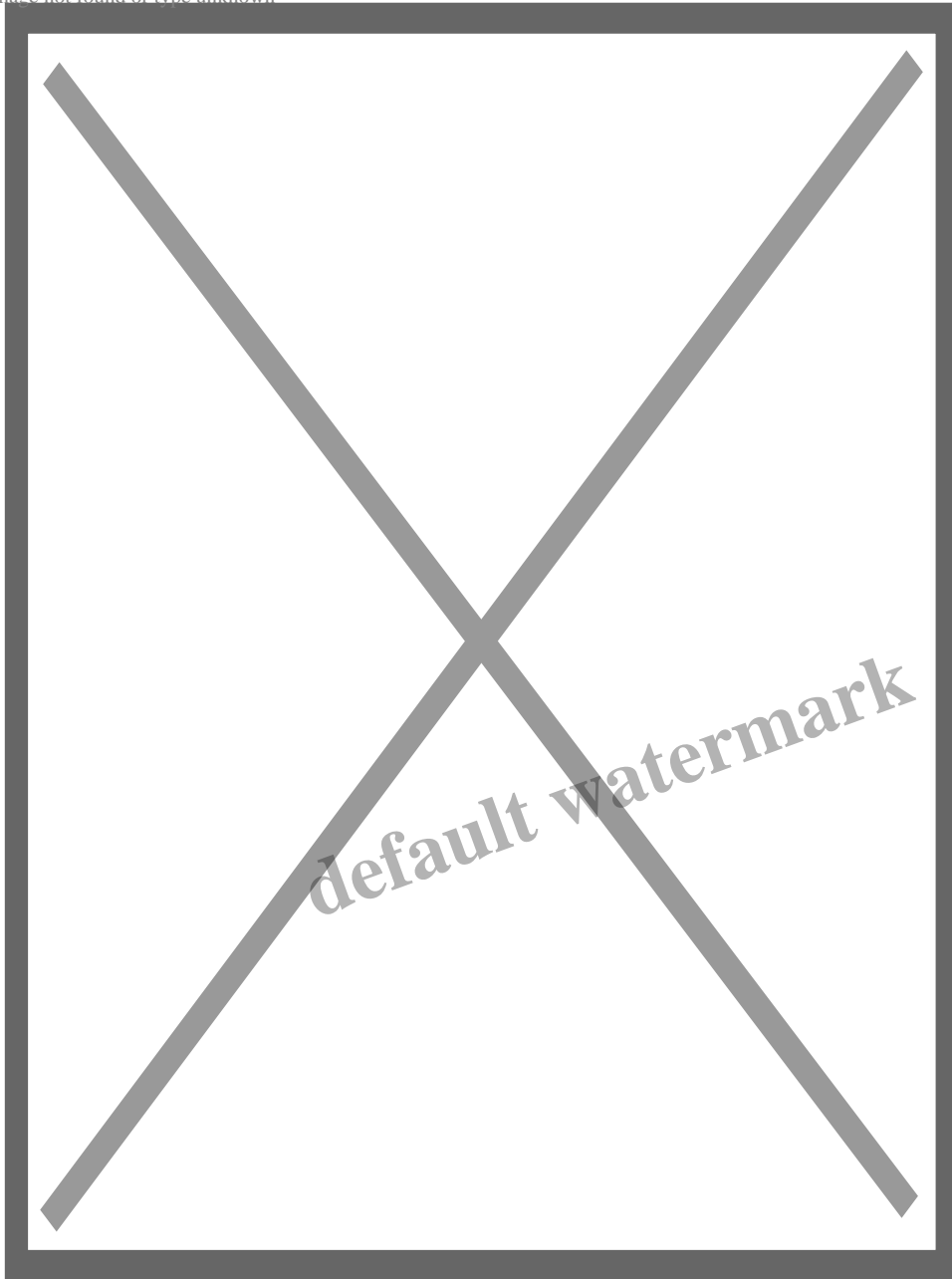
When I got in touch with Aaron, it quickly became apparent that he was extremely enthusiastic about using Australian timbers. We discussed my interest in the possibility of a guitar made from all Australian woods, and Aaron agreed to take this on as a project. When I mentioned Western Australian woods, I was surprised when Aaron mentioned wandoo as a possibility – given the apparent difficulty of working with this wood.

I found out later that Mike Dickinson, the 'wood guy' (Exotic and Sustainable Wood Buyer) at Martin, had mentioned in [a 2013 interview](#) that wandoo was the favourite wood that he had purchased. Nevertheless, the wood was only used in a small number of Custom Shop Martin guitars, often as [a central wedge on the back](#) along with another tonewood. It certainly isn't a commonly used wood.

Wandoo simply means "tree" in the local Noongar language. The name actually refers to several species of tree – *Eucalyptus wandoo*, which has two subspecies (*wandoo* and *pulvera*), found mostly in the western wheatbelt, *Eucalyptus capillosa* (Wheatbelt Wandoo), found in the eastern wheatbelt, and *Eucalyptus accedens* (Powderbark Wandoo), which is outwardly very similar to *E. wandoo* but at some times of year has an orangey powder coating on the bark.

Aaron said he had a few sets of wandoo, supplied by someone he knew someone in Western Australia, if I was interested in pursuing it as an option for the back and sides. He wasn't sure where the wood had come from, and without more information there's no easy way to tell which species of wandoo it's likely to be. Very little wandoo is commercially harvested and, as we have seen, fallen timber in native woodlands provides important habitat for those cute numbats and chuditch as well as any number of other creatures. The wood was most likely salvaged from fallen timber on farmland.

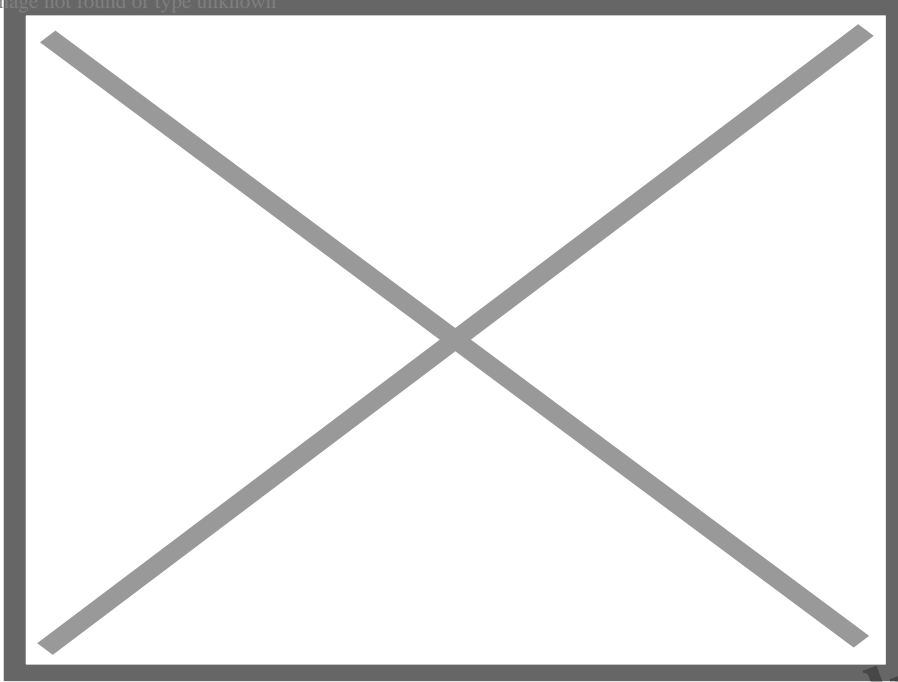
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The wandoo set

I asked if there were any Western Australian woods that might make a good top, but it seems that options there are decidedly limited. On the other hand, Aaron had had good results with other woods from eastern Australia, and he suggested considering [Silver Quandong](#) – *Elaeocarpus kirtonii*, a rainforest tree that grows in northern New South Wales and Queensland.

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Silver quandong. Photo: [The Queensland Times](#)

Aaron experimented with this species as an alternative topwood and [has now produced many guitars](#) using it. Queensland maple for the neck, Blackwood for the bindings and wandoo for the fingerboard, and there you have an all-Australian guitar. I signed up and arranged to go and visit Aaron to pick the guitar up in April 2018.

Guitars on the Gold Coast

Aaron's set up in the Gold Coast is very salubrious compared to many of the places I found guitar makers in other places. A custom-built workshop is a stone's throw away from the beach and a bunch of great pubs and restaurants. Aaron runs the place with his partner Stacey and their passion and enthusiasm is palpable as soon as you walk in.

This comes across in articles and interviews too – for instance, Aaron was interviewed by local brewer, [Burleigh Brewing](#), for their website. Being interviewed by a brewer, in itself, gives an insight into how Aaron likes to live! When why he believes it is so important that others live their passion, Aaron replied: "Well it may sound cliché, but life is not a dress rehearsal. Yes it's important to be financially stable but it's just as important to live your life with purpose and meaning and do something that inspires you and others around you to live your best life. I think as human beings, if we are lucky enough to find something in our lives that fulfills us we should grab it with both hands."

He gave me a great tour of his operation, keeping me waiting before he brought out the new guitar. He'd finished it a few weeks before. He said that he likes to have 2 weeks after the guitar is strung up before passing it on to the purchaser – "The guitar still thinks it's a tree for a week or so". Of course, the guitar is amazing. It's heavier than some because the wandoo is so dense. But it looks and sounds beautiful, and the wandoo figuring is mesmerising.

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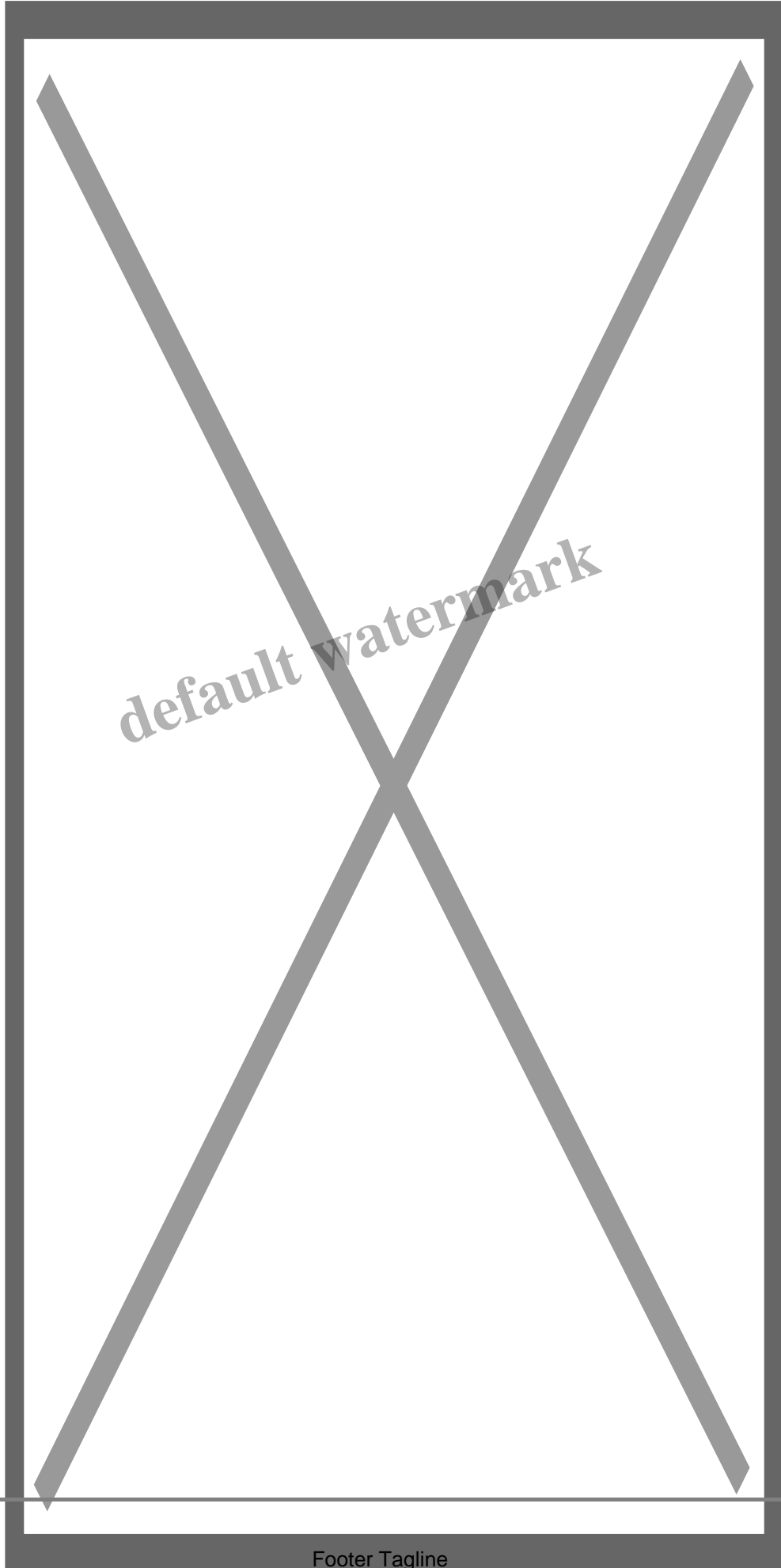
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A very happy hand-over! (Another photo of the guitar is on the [home page](#))

Wanju wandoo!

("welcome, tree" in [Noongar](#))

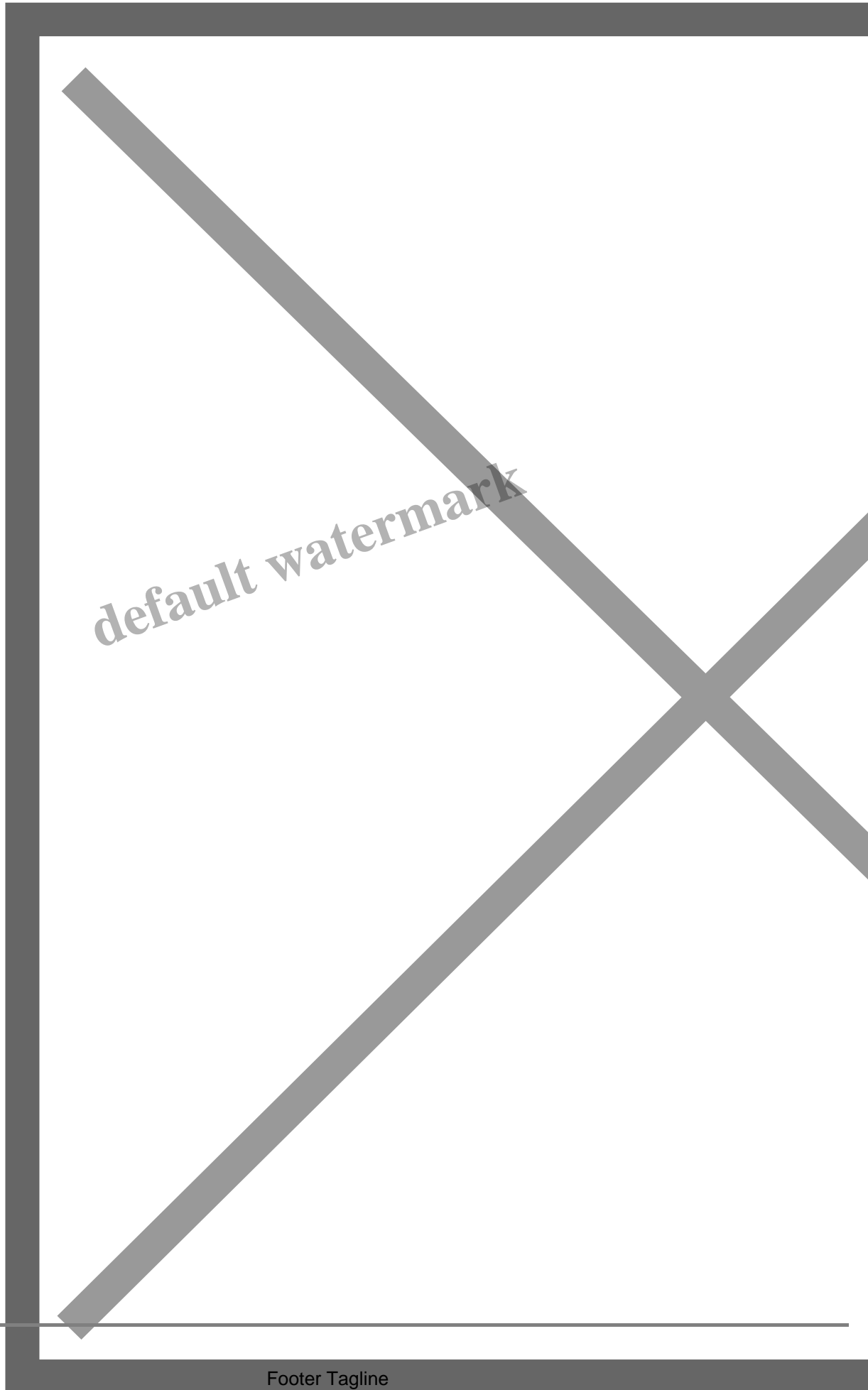
A few weeks after I flew back to Western Australia with the guitar, I took a trip out to York, east of Perth, with Gillian, my wife, to celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary. We'd had a weekend in York celebrating our engagement all that time ago and so it seemed appropriate to mark the anniversary in a similar way. 30 years ago, we'd taken a walk in a nature reserve close to York that was home to some spectacular wandoo woodland. I'd taken a photo of Gillian next to a particularly grand tree – and we thought it would be fun to see if we could relocate the spot. After a fair bit of wandering around, we eventually did find it.

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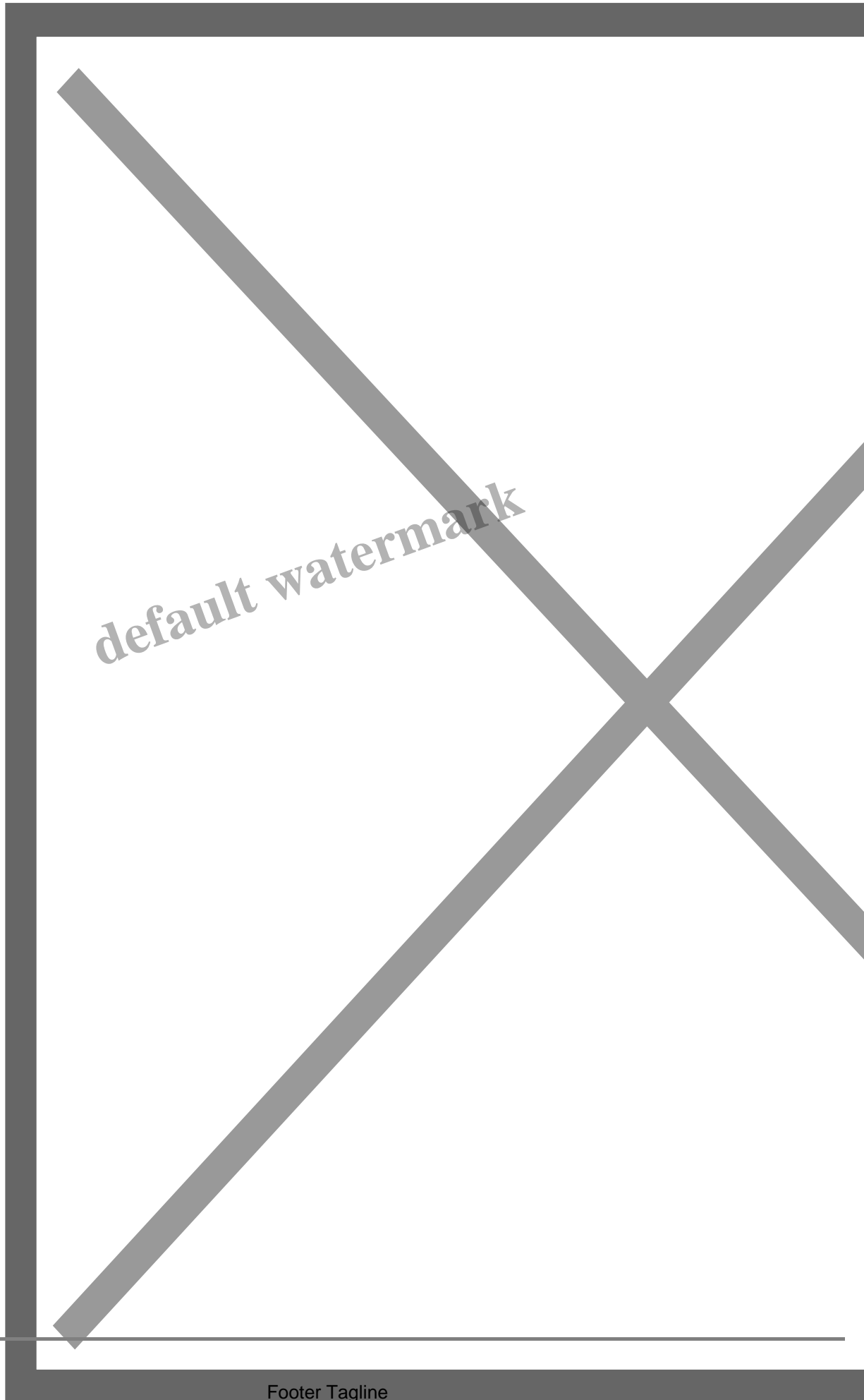
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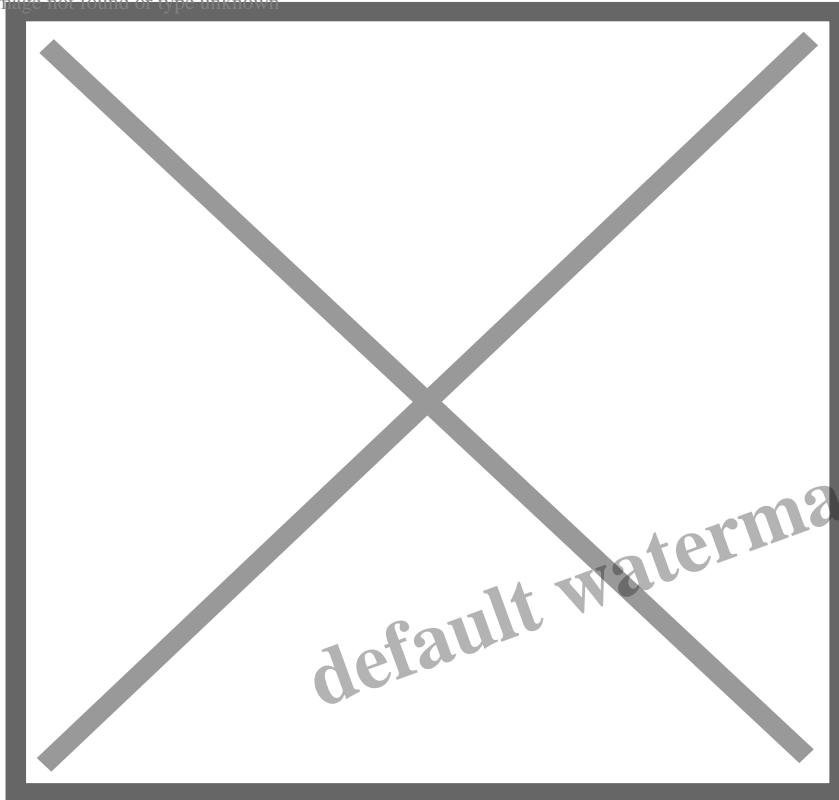
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Gillian and the wandoo tree, 1987 and 2018

I also brought the wandoo guitar with me – bringing it home to where it came from – to do some photography. The mix of beautiful trees and the amazing guitar was unbeatable. And to be there with my partner of 30 years made me feel like the luckiest man alive!

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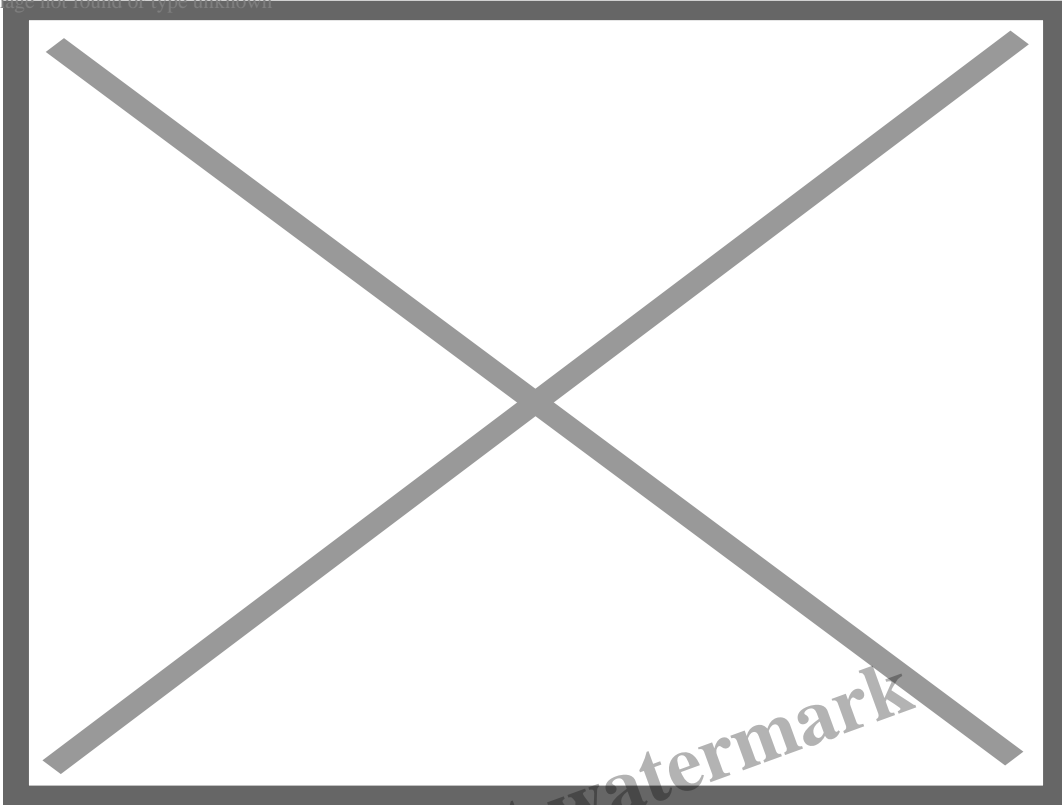


Life in Western Australia has been more amazing than I could ever have guessed all those years ago as I looked despairingly down from the plane on my future workplace. As my lovely past and present colleagues and students said in [an article](#) they wrote marking my retirement last year: “In the beautiful yet imperiled wheatbelt landscape of south-western Australia he had found his muse”.

Indeed I had. And now I come from the Land Down Under.

“Down Under”. Men at Work (1981)

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