



for a living planet

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Media release

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WA 'baubles of the bush' all beer and cheer at Christmas

While Europe celebrates its traditional white festive season with record snow, Australia's Southwest will swelter through another scorching yuletide with its very own native Christmas trees and "baubles of the bush".

Nuytsia floribunda – otherwise known as the native Western Australian Christmas Tree – may be aptly named as it strikes full bloom across the lower part of the State each summer, but it's the glittering critters that hang off them that add another decorative dash to the bush.

Jewel beetles – as their name suggests – have been collected throughout history for their bright, iridescent colours that never fade. Their bodies, wings and legs have been made into jewelry from ancient Egypt to Asia.

There are about 1200 species of jewel beetles in Australia, including many found only in the Southwest Australian Ecoregion – a triangular swathe of land that stretches roughly from Shark Bay to Eucla on the West Australian-South Australian border.

The Southwest Australia Ecoregion is often referred to as "the jewel of the Australian continent", as it has some of the highest numbers of unique plants and animals on earth and is listed as an international "biodiversity hotspot."

Southwest Australia is considered to be in the same league as the Amazon Rainforest, Borneo, Madagascar and the Galapagos Islands for its biodiversity. WWF, with governments and other partners, is running a major project – the biggest ever in Australia – which will map the "hotspots within the hotspot". These are the places and natural features that should attract maximum conservation effort in this unique and remarkable region.

Shiny, metallic jewel beetles of every colour imaginable can be found in this corner of the continent. As pollinators of native plants, they play a crucial role in the Southwest Australian Ecoregion.

Jewel beetles are most active during the summer months and are so abundant in the WA Wheatbelt at times that up to 20 different species can be found feeding and mating on the same eucalyptus. However, their striking colours and attractiveness to collectors is the reason why jewel beetles are also one of the few protected insects in WA.

Other threats to their survival border on the bizarre. Male jewel beetles of the species *Julodimorpha saundersi** are attracted to brown beer bottles (one thing never in short supply over Christmas), leaving the females high and dry. The sex-starved insects stumble upon bottles thrown from cars and try to mate with them. Researchers believe they are attracted to glass bumps on the bottom of the bottle which refract light and, in the eyes of the courting males, resemble female beetles.

WWF Healthy Bushlands project officer Mike Griffiths said the boozy trysts impacted jewel beetle populations because the males used all their energy trying to mate with bottles instead females.

This press release and associated material can be found on www.wwf.org.au

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“Sometimes you get clusters of jewel beetles on beer bottles and they’ll stay there for days and days,” Mr Griffiths said. “Not only do they expend all their energy, they become sitting targets for kestrels and other birds which pick them off and eat them.”

WWF WA director Paul Gamblin said it was yet another example of unexpected human impacts on the environment.

“Like every living species in the Southwest Australia Ecoregion, there is a fine line between the natural order of things and human impacts – even unexpected consequences, such as jewel beetles being more attracted to beer bottles than their own kind,” Mr Gamblin said.

“In some ways, it proves humans and jewel beetles aren’t so different! But in all seriousness, every living thing has its part to play in the natural world and we should respect and preserve that. After all, without the essential role of native insects to pollinate them, we might have ended up with ‘bah hum-bugs’ instead of WA Christmas Trees!”

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Image captions: Castiarina sagittaria on a WA Christmas tree flower – by Geoff Byrne WWF.
Julodimorpha saundersi gather on a discarded beer bottle in an attempt to mate with it – by Jiri Lochman, Lochman Transparencies.

To download a slideshow gallery of Southwest Australian jewel beetles, or for further images, please go to <http://www.divshare.com/gallery/812648-258>

* Reference **Jewel beetles and beer bottles**, DT Gwynne, DCF Rentz, 1983, *J Australian Journal of Entomology* # 22, page 79-80. Please note original reference to *Julodimorpha bakewelli*, of which *Julodimorpha saundersi* has since been recognised as a separate species

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