



**CONSERVATION  
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

## The Western Edge: A Place of Unique Heritage

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The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak body for environment and climate groups in the ACT Region. We represent close to 50 member groups, bringing together a united voice on environment and climate issues to Government, business and community.

Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region's most important wins for wildlife, bushland, climate and communities. As a hub for the ACT Region's environment and climate movement and a not-for-profit, non government organisation, we run campaigns, promote and upskill local groups, undertake research, advocate passionately, and engage and inform our community.

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## Introduction

As well as being home to many threatened species and ecological communities, the Western Edge (WE) also preserves many aspects of the ACT's human heritage, both Aboriginal and European. These reminders of the Territory's past are currently preserved within the bushland setting they were originally created in; a setting which is crucial to Canberra's beloved and long-established status as the "Bush Capital".<sup>1</sup>

If the ACT Government were to allow urban sprawl development in the WE, even if these sites were to be preserved, it would deprive them of this "bush capital" context, rendering them as poorer and less representative samples of the history of Canberra and the broader Limestone Plains. Furthermore, given that "[the] suitability of [the Western Edge] for urban development is still subject to further assessment to clarify the extent of ecological and heritage values",<sup>2</sup> urban development would risk potentially destroying or interfering with as-yet undiscovered cultural heritage sites in the WE. This report seeks to outline the important heritage values of the Western Edge, gathered from existing desktop research and publicly available studies.

## Heritage Values

### Indigenous Heritage

Aboriginal people — the ancestors of the Traditional Custodians of the Canberra region today, including those of the Ngannuwal, Ngambri, and Ngarigo peoples — had moved to the region before the peak of the last ice age. The earliest evidence for Aboriginal occupation in the ACT dates to 25,000 years ago at Birrigai Rock Shelter, in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.<sup>3</sup> This was just before the Last Glacial Maximum of 22,000-18,000 years ago, a time period in which an ice sheet would have covered the continent from the Snowy Mountains down to Iutruwita/Tasmania, just barely avoiding the Canberra region. Little is known about the lives of Indigenous Australians during this time period, especially in the ACT, with few archaeological sites pre-dating 3000 years ago.<sup>4</sup> However, some details can be filled in through the ethnographic record, albeit with the caveat that this was the writing of early European settlers, who may have had little understanding or knowledge of Aboriginal cultures beyond what could be overtly observed.

A typical account of an Aboriginal man's hunting or fighting gear in the Canberra region consists of multiple spears and a woomera (spear-thrower), a nulla nulla (club), two kinds of shields, 1-2

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<sup>1</sup> National Capital Authority (NCA) 2014. *National Capital Open Space System Review Report*. Presented by Shelly Penn for the Australian Government.

<https://www.nca.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/National%20Capital%20Open%20Space%20System%20Review%20Report%20%28February%202014%29.PDF>

<sup>2</sup> The Planning Studio & AQ Planning 2023. *Western Edge Growth Management + Engagement Framework*, p. 25. Prepared for the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT Government. Released 8 April 2026 as part of FOI Log 25-048, pp. 180-247:

[https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/3047109/25\\_048-Documents\\_Part2.pdf](https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/3047109/25_048-Documents_Part2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> GML Heritage 2020. *Western Edge Investigation Area Cultural Heritage Assessment*. Prepared for the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT Government. Released 8 April 2026 as part of FOI Log 25-048, pp. 1-252:

[https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/3047107/25\\_048-Documents\\_Part1.pdf](https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/3047107/25_048-Documents_Part1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

boomerangs, and a stone axe.<sup>5</sup> Many of these, especially the axes but also potentially the spears, create stone byproducts which can be seen in the archaeological record. This account does not include the stone tools that would have been regularly used in daily life, including pebble tools; hammer stones and anvils; mortars and pestles; whetstones; core tools; waste flakes; scrapers; backed blades; and points. The other major, “characteristic” aspect of material culture in the Canberra region, and across the southern half of Australia more broadly, was kangaroo- and especially possum-skin cloaks, typically worn with the fur on the inside for warmth.<sup>6</sup> Tools for their creation and processing, such as shell scrapers and bone awls, are also in evidence archaeologically. Other elements of Canberran Aboriginal material culture include bark huts, and the use of *Xanthorrhoea* (grass-tree) stalks to start fires.

Perhaps the most famous aspect of Aboriginal culture in the ACT is the gathering of large groups to hunt and feast upon bogong moths (*Agrotis infusa*), as well as conduct initiations and other ceremonies, during the moths’ aestivation in the mountains of Tidbinbilla, Namadgi, and the so-called “Bogong Mountains” near Tumut over summer.<sup>7</sup> Gathering in huge densities of up to 17,000/m<sup>2</sup>, and with dead moths covering the cave floors up to 4 feet thick, the moths were a rich source of food for the Traditional Owners during the few months they were present in the region. As such, this was a highly important event for Aboriginal people not just from the immediate area, but from large distances away, with journeys of up to 300km being recorded. Owing to this, and the variable timing of their migration, the presence of the moths would be announced via smoke signal.<sup>8</sup> The moths were caught when they were sleeping during the daytime by dislodging them from the cave wall or smoking them out; disoriented, they would fall and could be snatched up into bags before they had a chance to fly away. They were cooked in the ashes of large, purpose-built fires, sometimes on dedicated sites, singeing off their inedible wings and legs. They would then be sifted to remove their similarly inedible heads.<sup>9</sup> Once prepared in this way, bogongs could either be eaten directly, or made into a paste which could last longer and was more easily transported to other locations.<sup>10</sup> While this was not a phenomenon exclusive to the Canberra region, it is one of the most iconic aspects of the Aboriginal culture of Canberra. Additionally, it has indelibly left its mark upon our maps: the name “Uriarra” (Ngambri *Yuriarra*) is said to mean “running to the feast”; the feast in this case being bogong moths.<sup>11</sup>

Many traces of Aboriginal culture can be found in the Western Edge. Both single-artefact sites and artefact scatters have been found throughout the WE, being listed under multiple collective

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<sup>5</sup> Flood, J. 1980. *The Moth Hunters: Aboriginal Prehistory of the Australian Alps*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. Reprinted 2021 by Ligature, Balmain. Via Libby and Libraries ACT. (Page numbers where relevant taken from Libby edition.)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196

<sup>7</sup> Flood 1980; GML Heritage 2020; House, P. H. 2004. *Uriarra Moth Stone: A Ngambri Site of Significance*. Environment ACT, Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Flood 1980; GML Heritage 2020

<sup>9</sup> Flood 1980; House 2004

<sup>10</sup> Flood 1980

<sup>11</sup> House 2004

entries on the ACT Heritage Register.<sup>12</sup> Other Aboriginal site types, including culturally modified trees, cultural areas, and quarries, are also found in the WE. Overall, 318 Aboriginal sites have been identified within the WE,<sup>13</sup> many of which currently have no legal protections whatsoever.

Rivers served as important transit corridors for Aboriginal people, long-term inhabitants and seasonal visitors alike. As the major arteries of the Molonglo and Murrumbidgee rivers, as well as many smaller rivers such as the Cotter River and Bulgar Creek, flow through the WE, it would have been an important location for transit. Aboriginal sites cluster around these rivers,<sup>14</sup> raising the possibility that there may be more sites yet to be discovered at these locations. Additionally, the use of these river landscapes as ancient pathways makes them inherently important aspects of Aboriginal heritage in the ACT. While the landscape of the WE is too low-altitude for bogong moths to favour it as an aestivation site (although they have been known to be blown off-course or otherwise redirected<sup>15</sup>), there are still traces of bogong hunting in the area. Most notably, the “moth stone” on the Uriarra Station is well-attested in the historical record as a site where Aboriginal people would bring their captured moths down from the mountains to cook and eat them, giving the station and thus the village their names.<sup>16</sup>

## Historical European Heritage

Europeans first arrived in the Canberra area in December 1820, as James Vaughn, Joseph Wild, and Charles Throsby were led to the region by Aboriginal guides. The first permanent European settlement was the property of “Canberry”, purchased from the government of New South Wales by Joshua John Moore in 1824; he was shortly followed by Robert Campbell of Duntroon in 1825.<sup>17</sup> Despite a large number of land grants being made, early European settlement, especially in the Western Edge, was sparse and slow. Records of European contact with the Aboriginal people before the 1840s are sparse, with the relationship between Garrett Cotter and Onyong (also known as Jindoomung) in the 1820s being some of the only recorded material we have. As Europeans began to settle outside the official Limits of Location line established by the government, the protections provided by the line were slowly rolled back.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> GML Heritage 2020; ACT Heritage Council 2003. *Aboriginal Places - Urban and Rural Bushfire Containment Lines*. Entry to the ACT Heritage Register. [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/148299/aboriginal-places-urban-and-rural-bushfire-containment-lines-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/148299/aboriginal-places-urban-and-rural-bushfire-containment-lines-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf); ACT Heritage Council 2004. *Aboriginal Places - Canberra Nature Park Fire Trails*. Entry to the ACT Heritage Register. [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/148542/aboriginal-places-canberra-nature-park-fire-trails-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/148542/aboriginal-places-canberra-nature-park-fire-trails-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf); ACT Heritage Council 2005. *Aboriginal Places - Pierces Creek Forest*. Entry to the ACT Heritage Register. [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/148573/aboriginal-places-pierces-creek-forest-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/148573/aboriginal-places-pierces-creek-forest-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf); ACT Heritage Council 2005. *Aboriginal Places - Stromlo and Kowen Forests*. Entry to the ACT Heritage Register. [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/148548/aboriginal-places-stromlo-and-kowen-forests-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/148548/aboriginal-places-stromlo-and-kowen-forests-entry-to-the-heritage-register.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> GML Heritage 2020

<sup>14</sup> Flood 1980; GML Heritage 1980

<sup>15</sup> Flood 1980

<sup>16</sup> House 2004

<sup>17</sup> GML Heritage 2020

<sup>18</sup> GML Heritage 2020

As the Canberra region continued to develop, more buildings began to appear in the Western Edge. In 1876, grazier and carrier Richard Moore built the Greenhills homestead in the region of Bulgar Creek, towards the southern end of the WE. Moore was a prominent local figure, serving in organisations such as the Selector's Association, the Pastoralists' Association, and the Stock and Pastures Board. He also served as an alderman for Queanbeyan from 1905-1917; he was the first small-scale "selector" (as opposed to a larger-scale landholder) to hold office in Queanbeyan.<sup>19</sup> Moore also fervently advocated for Canberra as the future site of the national capital. Greenhills became an important building for the region as well, coming to serve as just the fourth post office in the future ACT, as well as a general store, which, among other customers, sold supplies to workers on the Cotter Dam. Greenhills was also unusual in being built out of stone, and its ruins are some of only a very few examples of early stone-built buildings surviving in the ACT today.<sup>20</sup> As such, it is listed on the Heritage Register "as an example of a stone homestead... that is now endangered and which contributes to an understanding of the ACT's cultural history".<sup>21</sup>

The Yarralumla School (also known today as the Bulgar Creek School), on Narrabundah Hill, was established in 1878 as the second ever school in the Limestone Plains region.<sup>22</sup> Named after the Yarrowlumlá [sic] homestead over 7km to the northeast, and the Parish of Yarrowlumlá [sic] in which it was situated, it was built on land leased from Frederick Campbell, owner of Yarralumla Station and the grandson of Robert Campbell.<sup>23</sup> It was merged with the Nerrabundah [sic] or Long Gully School, which today sits beneath Yamba Drive, in 1898, and was closed in 1906.<sup>24</sup>

By 1908, when the Canberra settlement was selected as the site for the then-Federal Capital Territory (FCT), much of the natural landscape had been denuded for timber and to provide more space for pastoralism. To combat this, several forestry plantations were established, including at Uriarra and Mt Stromlo, along with their corresponding forestry settlements of Uriarra Village and the Stromlo Forestry Settlement in present-day Duffy.<sup>25</sup> In 1911, the Commonwealth Solar Observatory was established on Mt Stromlo, forming the foundations of the Mt Stromlo Observatory complex. The site was formally chosen as the permanent location for the Solar Observatory in 1914, and remained a prominent location for Australian astronomy until its destruction in the 2003 bushfires.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> ACT Heritage Council 2016. *Background Information: Greenhills Ruin*. Report for the ACT Heritage Council.

[https://www.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/871151/greenhills-ruin-background-information.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/871151/greenhills-ruin-background-information.pdf); ACT Heritage Council 2016. *Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of Greenhills Ruin, Stromlo)*. Provisional entry to the ACT Heritage Register.

<https://www.legislation.act.gov.au/View/ni/2016-544/current/html/2016-544.html>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> The Planning Studio & AQ Planning 2023, p. 24

<sup>22</sup> Hall Heritage Centre n.d. *Yarralumla ('Bulgar Creek') [1878-1914]*. Accessed 18 May 2026.

<https://heritage.hall.act.au/school/2892/yarralumla-bulgar-creek.html>

<sup>23</sup> Hall Heritage Centre n.d.; Watson, A. W. 1928. 'Mr. F. Campbell: Death of Well-Known Pastoralist'. *The Tumut and Adelong Times* 28 August 1928, p. 1. Via Trove:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/139282976>

<sup>24</sup> Hall Heritage Centre n.d.; Hall Heritage Centre n.d. *Nerrabunda ('Long Gully') School [1886-1900]*.

Accessed 18 May 2026. <https://heritage.hall.act.au/school/2891/nerrabunda-long-gully-school.html>

<sup>25</sup> GML Heritage 2020

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1911, the FCT had a population of just 1714.<sup>27</sup> In order to boost primary production and ensure Australian economic security, many states began implementing various “Soldier Settlement Schemes” from 1915 onwards. The FCT’s scheme began in 1918, with the additional goal of boosting the territory’s population. As part of the Scheme, the Commonwealth Government leased at least 67 blocks of land across the modern districts of Gungahlin, Woden, Lanyon, Paddy’s River, and Stromlo, plus an unknown number of blocks in Belconnen, until it ceased in 1927. Of these blocks, 8 were either partially or fully within the WE.<sup>28</sup> Many of the Soldier Settlers struggled to maintain the rent on their properties, owing to a combination of lack of experience, poor conditions, and, in some cases, poor health;<sup>29</sup> in part, this was due to the contemporary perception of farming as an easy task leading to the assessors not bothering to properly check if candidates were truly suitable.<sup>30</sup> Prominent Soldier Settlers in the WE included Eric McMurtrie, who rented Stromlo Block 9 (on the northern side of Cotter Road, near the present site of Cotter Dam) from 1935 until the 1950s;<sup>31</sup> Hilton Clothier, who rented Stromlo Block 43 (encompassing much of modern-day Stromlo Forest Park) from 1920-1925, followed by Stromlo Block 19 (to the west of the modern suburb of Kambah) from 1926-1931;<sup>32</sup> and Thomas Jamieson, who rented Stromlo Block 12 (between Mt Stromlo and McMurtrie’s Block 9) from 1926-1929.<sup>33</sup> All three had enlisted and fought in WWI, and often found themselves struggling to make ends meet in this new setting.<sup>34</sup> These and many others contributed to the early history of the ACT, and remains of their lives and the landscapes they lived in can still be found in the Western Edge today.

## Modern Values

The Western Edge in its current, undeveloped state is still an important part of Canberra’s identity and heritage to this day. In the 1970s, it was recognised that, in order to maintain Canberra’s aesthetic appearance and identity as the Bush Capital, open spaces would need to be reserved and preserved from development. This came together in the form of the National Capital Open Space System (NCOSS) in 1977, spearheaded by George Seddon.<sup>35</sup> While much of the NCOSS is dedicated to preserving the appearances of hilltops and ridgelines, rural spaces were also recognised as being crucial to Canberra’s appearance and character. Within the WE, the Bulgar Creek-New Station Creek-McQuoid Creek area was recognised and named as a crucial part of Canberra’s rural character, “act[ing] as a foreground to enhance views from the Cotter Road and Kambah Pool Road of the Murrumbidgee Escarpment and the triple-tiered

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> ArchivesACT n.d. *Thomas Jamieson*. Accessed 4 May 2026.  
[https://www.archives.act.gov.au/repatandrabbits/thomas\\_jamieson](https://www.archives.act.gov.au/repatandrabbits/thomas_jamieson)

<sup>30</sup> GML Heritage 2020

<sup>31</sup> ArchivesACT n.d. *Eric George McMurtrie*. Accessed 4 May 2026.  
[https://www.archives.act.gov.au/repatandrabbits/eric\\_mcmurtrie](https://www.archives.act.gov.au/repatandrabbits/eric_mcmurtrie)

<sup>32</sup> ArchivesACT n.d. *Hilton Arthur Clothier*. Accessed 4 May 2026.  
<https://www.archives.act.gov.au/repatandrabbits/hilton-clothier>

<sup>33</sup> ArchivesACT n.d. *Thomas Jamieson*.

<sup>34</sup> ArchivesACT n.d. *Thomas Jamieson*; ArchivesACT n.d. *Eric George McMurtrie*; Archives ACT n.d. *Hilton Arthur Clothier*.

<sup>35</sup> NCA 2014; GML Heritage 2020

backdrop of mountain ranges beyond the river”.<sup>36</sup> Green spaces were recognised as important not just for the appearance of Canberra, but also for their scientific value, with Seddon remarking that the ACT was “singularly well sited and well equipped to give a lead” in areas including “[environmental] regeneration, habitat requirements for both plants and animals on the urban fringe, and management techniques for the natural environment in settled areas”.<sup>37</sup> However, the NCOSS has already been ignored by development plans in the past: the Molonglo Valley, Canberra’s latest district, was once considered to be part of the Scheme, and development in the region was speculated to have the potential to cause disruption to nearby preserved areas such as the WE.<sup>38</sup> As such, it is imperative that the Western Edge is maintained as part of the NCOSS and, more broadly, as part of Canberra’s open space. With increasing environmental awareness, Canberrans are also beginning to more widely value the WE for its environmental heritage, as it contains the habitat for many threatened or endangered plant and animal species, as well as threatened ecosystems.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion and Looking Ahead

The Western Edge is home to many important aspects of Canberra’s cultural heritage. It contains many Aboriginal sites and artefacts, many of which have ties to the famed seasonal bogong moth hunts of Australia’s Southern Uplands. It preserves remnants of the early European history of Canberra, including some of the region’s earliest public institutions and aspects of the lives of some of its earliest settlers. And to this day, the WE’s wildness helps to maintain the city’s bush setting and character as a city that is nestled into the landscape. In many parts of the WE, however, the true extent of its preserved cultural heritage is unknown. The presence or absence of Aboriginal sites is often an unknown quantity, and it is widely agreed that further research needs to be conducted in order to fully understand the cultural significance of areas being considered for future development.<sup>40</sup> Developing over the WE could lead to the destruction of unrecognised cultural heritage, and would deprive any preserved sites, as well as the city of Canberra as a whole, of the setting of their natural environment. This would undoubtedly constitute a great loss for the city’s heritage and identity, and is therefore another good reason to save the Western Edge.

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<sup>36</sup> National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) 1984. *National Capital Open Space System: Policy Plan and Development Plan*, pp. 13-14.

<https://www.nca.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/George%20Seddon%27s%20An%20Open%20Space%20Policy%20and%20Development%20Plan%201984.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Seddon, G. 1977. *An open space system for Canberra*, p. 31. Prepared for the National Capital Development Commission.

<https://www.nca.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/George%20Seddon%27s%20An%20Open%20Space%20System%20for%20Canberra%20technical%20paper%2023-%201977.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> NCDC 1984

<sup>39</sup> The Planning Studio & AQ Planning 2023

<sup>40</sup> GML Heritage 2020; The Planning Studio & AQ Planning 2023