



Touched by nature

A brush with nature



After discovering a talent for drawing at a young age, Philippa Nikulinsky has been enchanted by Western Australia's native species and has spent a lifetime illustrating them along with her husband and fellow artist, Alex. Philippa's artwork graced the covers of *LANDSCOPE* magazine for 22 years and earned her an Order of Australia medal.

by Lauren Cabrera



Having spent her childhood in Kalgoorlie, in close proximity to the harsh lands of arid Australia, young artist Philippa Nikulinsky began illustrating the natural environment around her. She was drawn to plants that were able to survive in the dry landscape and found an admiration for the strength of species that grew back despite the most severe conditions.

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Main Caustic bush (*Cynanchum viminalis*) with butterflies, autumn 2006.

Right Red-eared firetail (*Stagonopleura oculata*), summer 2000–01.

Inset Philippa at her studio.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Left Brush-tailed phascogale, summer 2001–02.

Below Philippa's first cover, spring 1992, woylie, winter 1994 and Leafy sea dragon, winter 2002.

The intricacy of Philippa's depictions of native wildlife is well regarded in the scientific community for its accuracy and finesse. Having spent years travelling the country with fellow artist and husband, Alex, she pours over her subjects, working meticulously to get the details just right.

From 1990 to 2012, *LANDSCOPE* was fortunate enough to have Philippa's artwork grace the covers of the magazines. The iconic beauty of her work made the publication stand out on the shelves and quickly become a collector's item.

GETTING THE CALL

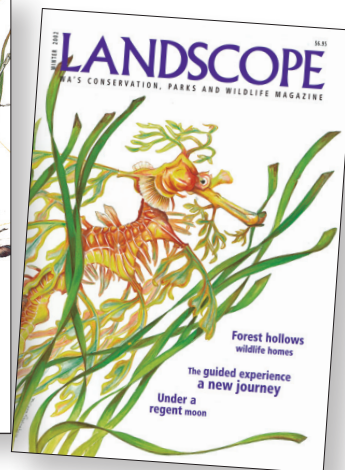
"I was known as a botanical artist back then and someone from *LANDSCOPE* contacted me to illustrate one of the covers," Philippa said. "I was asked to paint some flowers for the spring 1991 edition, back when the cover artwork was set inside a frame in the centre."

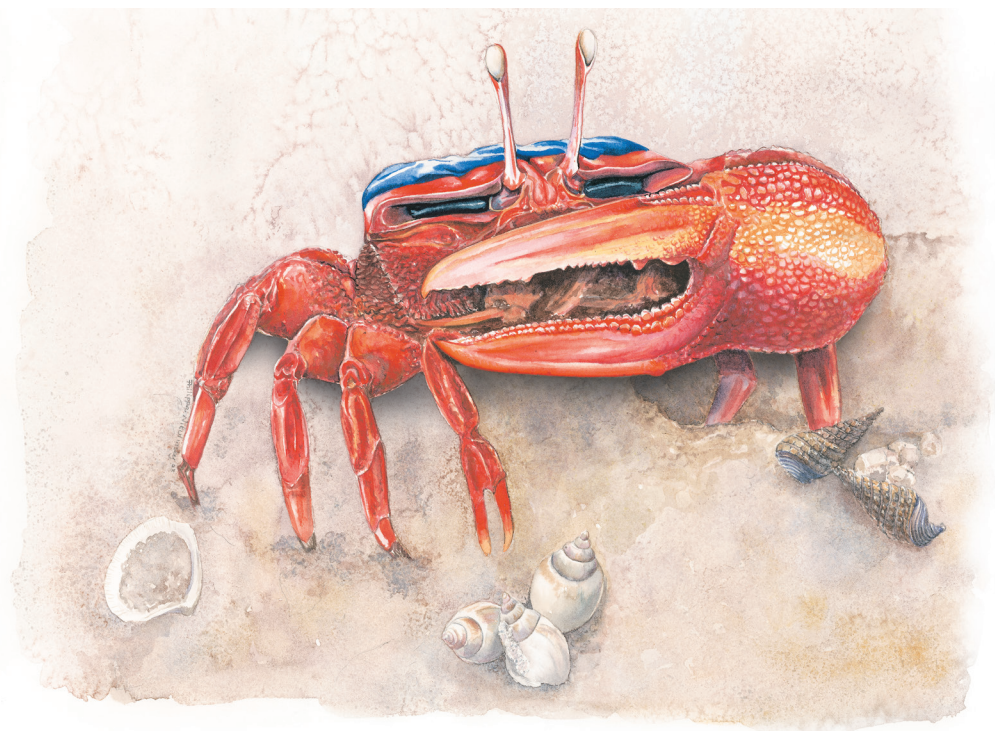
"Later, when they asked me to paint a bird, I'd never done that before, having mainly illustrated plants. It was a challenge, but I love birds, so I was happy to do it."

"I went to the zoo and studied the birds; their feet, their beaks and their wings. When they asked me to paint a seahorse, I went to the aquarium and sat in front of the tank, watching them move for hours."

The *LANDSCOPE* team would contact Philippa ahead of each issue and ask her to illustrate a subject from one of the articles of the magazine. She generally had around a month to produce the artwork.

"Sometimes I had free reign to illustrate what I wanted, but mostly the team let me know the species they were after."





"I always had creative input though, no matter how prescriptive the task was."

Philippa credits her time with *LANDSCOPE* to the development of her skills. One moment stood out when she was asked to paint a woylie.

"I had never painted fur before!" Philippa said. "I thought, how on earth am I going to do that? So, I took a close-up

photograph of my cat's fur and then used that to develop my own way of painting fur so it looked more life-like."

"If I didn't have the time pressure to get the artwork done for *LANDSCOPE*, I may not have ever developed that technique."

COVERGIRL

After years of designing covers for the magazine, Philippa became quite well known as the *LANDSCOPE* cover artist.

"*LANDSCOPE* was a really important part of my career," she said. "I had an exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and had an entire wall dedicated to my cover artwork, which shows how important it is to me.

"Last year I had an open day at my home studio, it was a ticketed event. I had four groups of 30 people come through and more than half of them

Top A wall of *LANDSCOPE* covers at Philippa's 2019 exhibition.

Photo – Angela Nikulinsky

Above Flame-backed fiddler crab, summer 2003–04.

Far above right and right Philippa's initial sketches for the winter 1992 cover, featuring forest red-tailed black-cockatoos.

Photos – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

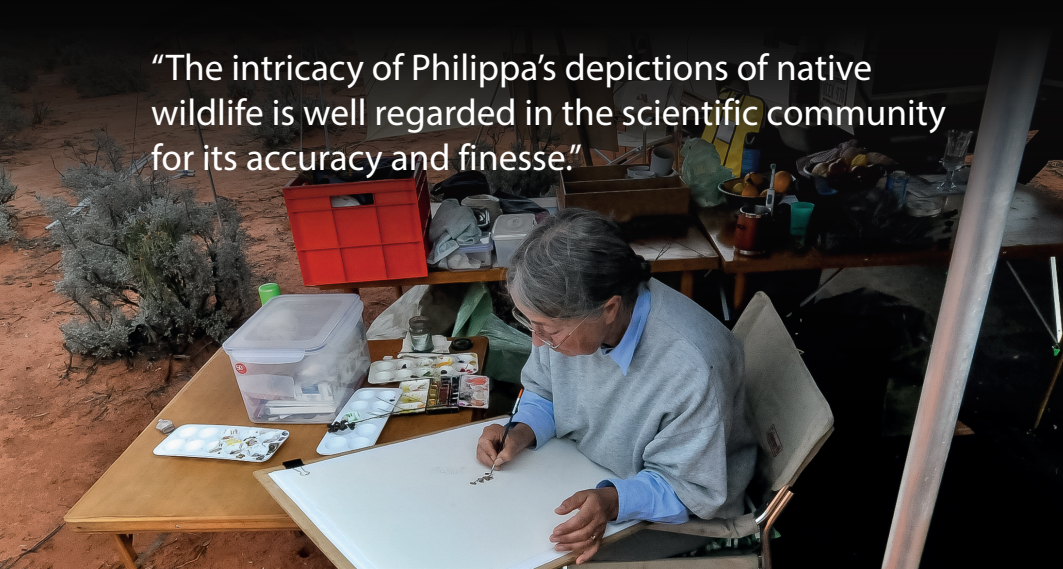


Discover more about Philippa's life and art

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's '*LANDSCOPE*' playlist on YouTube.



"The intricacy of Philippa's depictions of native wildlife is well regarded in the scientific community for its accuracy and finesse."



would have mentioned that they knew my artwork from the covers of *LANDSCOPE* magazine. A lot of people collected them.

"One young woman told me that she became a botanist because she was inspired by the covers of *LANDSCOPE*. So many people know me for the covers."

LASTING LEGACY

Over her 55-year career of painting and illustrating, Philippa has authored a number of books that compile collections of her botanical drawings, including 'Wildflowers of the Eastern Goldfields' that was presented to Queen Elizabeth II on her visit to Perth in 2011.

One of Philippa's earlier books, 'Western Australian wildflowers in watercolour', was the first colour book published by Fremantle Press, which has

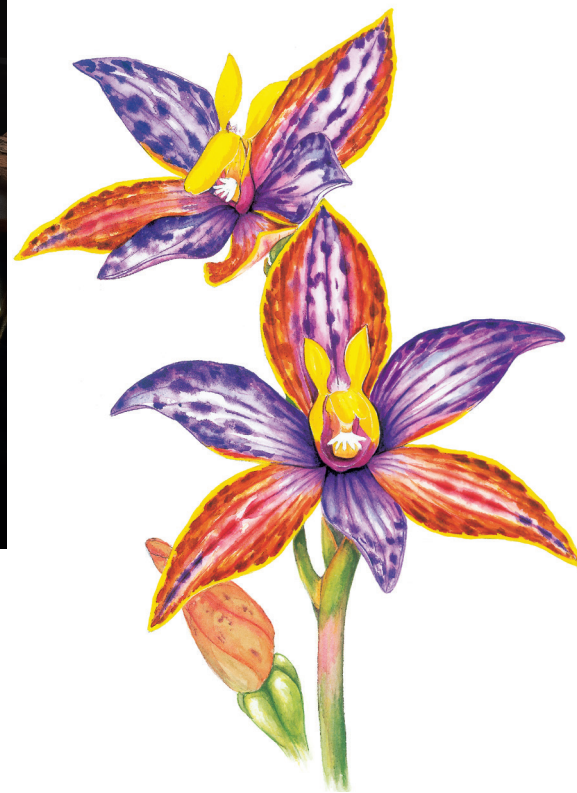
since asked her to create a new book for the 50th anniversary in 2026.

Philippa also had the pleasure of taking a number of participants on *LANDSCOPE* expeditions (see 'Lasting adventures' on page 12). They fondly remember their time out in the bush, learning skills and techniques to capture the beauty of WA.

"People loved the expeditions," Philippa said. "Some came out with me several times!"

"We camped or stayed in the homesteads. Some of the group came with me to paint flowers, and the others went with Alex to paint the landscapes. It was such fun."

In 2016, Philippa was welcomed as a member of the general division of the Order of Australia for 'significant service



to the visual arts as a botanical painter and illustrator, to professional associations, and as an author'. In 2019, she earned an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Western Australia for her art.

Her four children are all creative, pursuing careers from furniture design to music, teaching, architecture, and graphic design. She has 11 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, who all visit Granny most Sundays for lunch in her studio home.

At the age of 83, she still draws and paints every day and is still just as captivated by Western Australia's plants and animals as she's always been.

Above left Philippa has travelled most of WA observing and drawing wildlife.
Photo – Alex Nikulinsky

Above A Queen of Sheba orchid, winter 2005.

Left Australian pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*), summer 2006–07.

Lauren Cabrera is the *LANDSCOPE* editor. She can be contacted at lauren.cabrera@dbca.wa.gov.au or (08) 9219 9903.

You can find out more about Philippa and shop her collection at nikulinsky.com.au

