



# Desert gets best rain in 30 years

**Nicky Phillips**

FOR most of the year Ethabuka Reserve, which abuts the Simpson desert in the far corner of western Queensland, is a dry, hostile place.

But for the past week, since torrential rains fell across much of the middle of the state, the desert plains have looked more like an inland sea.

The Bureau of Meteorology estimates that during the 10-day period ending on March 3, 403,000 gegalitres of rain fell across the Northern Territory and Queensland.

"To see such an immense amount of water was truly impressive," said Max Tischler, an ecologist with the conservation group Bush Heritage, who flew over the flood plains yesterday. "This is definitely going to breed life into the landscape."

The floods were probably a once-in-a-30-year event, he said. "Talking to some of the people that have lived [in the area] all their life, they haven't seen anything like it since the 1970s."

Ethabuka Reserve, a 213,300-hectare conservation property owned by Bush Heritage, is usually a wide expanse of spinifex grass and sand dunes, Mr Tischler said.

The environment is so inhospitable that most of the resident mammals are small rodents.

Some of the rivers in the area are dry 99 per cent of the time, he said.

"This is the arid zone. The average annual rainfall for the area is 130 millimetres."

But on March 1 more than 185 millimetres of rain fell at Bedourie, the closest town to Ethabuka Reserve, about 157 kilometres away.

"When you looked out on the horizon you could see the desert was already springing to life with a tinge of green."

Mr Tischler said the rain would attract an abundance of native animals. "Around the rivers and waterholes we'll get a lot of birds colonising, and probably breeding there as well."

He said fish, small mammals and reptiles would also "erupt"

in the area.

"We could get some of the species reaching really high numbers ... it is going to be a fascinating season to watch the landscape."

But with an increase in native animals came an increase in feral predators, such as feral cats and foxes.

"That's something that we are going to have to target."



**Springing to life ... the Georgina River.** Photo: Adam Kerezszy



**Impressive ... the Ethabuka Reserve.** Photo: Adam Kerezszy/Bush Heritage