

As the long

days of Australia's hot summer crept towards Christmas 2001, park rangers, firefighters, and people living in wooded areas listened to the weather forecasts with growing dread.

Usually the southern hemisphere's summer months, which are December, January, and February, bring frequent soaking rains. But at the end of last year, rainfall in the large eastern state of New South Wales was well below average—up to 90 percent lower in some areas—and the widespread woods and heathlands were tinder-dry.

By the last week of the year the mercury was spiking to more than

and the last blazes were finally brought under control, 170 homes and more than 200 sheds, shops and apartments had been destroyed, as well as dozens of cars, trailers and boats, many head of livestock and countless wild animals.

But 15,000 other structures had been saved and no lives lost among the army of volunteer and professional firefighters and support staff from around the country who had been battling the flames. They were feted with a ticker-tape parade down the main street of Sydney.

The Christmas 2001 outbreak was to become the



In Australia,
a year-end wildfire
destroyed homes,
killed wildlife and
burned nearly 2
million acres. The
effects—and what
to do next—are
still being decided.

by David Halperin



BLACK CHRISTMAS

100 degrees fahrenheit with gale force winds, classic weather for bushfires, as wildfires are called in Australia. On Christmas day the first flames broke out, and within hours bushfires were burning up and down the eastern part of the state.

Twenty-two exhausting days later, when the weather changed

worst bushfire episode in the state's history, with more than 900 fires, nearly 2000 miles of fire perimeter, and more than 1.86 million acres of forest and shrubland burned. City outskirts were damaged, and the fire situation dominated every news report and every conversation.

Bushfires are no rarity in Australia.

About the size of the United States' 'lower 48', it is arguably the driest continent on earth, and its climates range from 'mediterranean' through subtropical to tropical. And while much of the central and Western areas of the country are sparsely populated desert or semi-desert, much of the southern and eastern seaboard is wooded.

In the latest fires, as in ones that hit Sydney, the country's largest city, in 1994, sunny skies over the city were smeared with a dull red layer of smoke, producing an eerie light like an eclipse. Plumes of smoke stretched 200 miles out over the Pacific. Sydney's air pollution was the worst ever recorded, forcing some flights to be diverted to other cities and causing breathing problems for asthmatics.

One air traveller reported "as soon as we were over the northern edge of Sydney, I could only see a blanket of brown smoke as far as the eye could see. Roads were closed, and big flakes of ash and burned leaves

rained down on urban backyards and gardens. In many suburbs, the flames glowed on the horizon at night

An unexpected side effect, also seen in Australia after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines, was a series of brilliant smoke-induced sunsets.

HOW THEY HAPPEN

Bushfires caused by lightning strikes have always happened in Australia, but human activity has greatly increased their frequency, starting with the first Aboriginal settlers who arrived 40,000 years ago.

Teams of firefighters worked in round-the-clock shifts for three weeks to put out the fires. Altogether some 20,000 people joined the effort.

AMERICAN FORESTS
MAGAZINE
Summer 2002 issue.