

## ESPERANCE TO HALLS CREEK MAY 2005

The wanderings of Wombat, Celt and Hun through that strange land known uninterestingly as Western Australia. But uninteresting it is not! W & C (not WC) had lived with the cold Southern Ocean at their backs for seven months and were not sorry to look northwards at the promise of a warmer climate. The dry should have been well established and evidence of the rains only remaining in green vegetation and maybe the odd pool. Never believe the weather forecasters!

So with a well laden Land Cruiser we pointed the bonnet in a northerly direction and away we were. But, guess what, storm clouds on the horizon and mud on the side tracks. We had planned the short run to Peak Charles National Park but road conditions and the possibility of a first nights camping in the rain made us weaken and book in to the Norseman motel. The village of **Norseman** started its life as a gold mine and in fact that precious metal is still mined here on a small scale. The story goes that a prospector's horse by the name of Norseman was pawing at the ground when something lodged in its hoof. The rider had a look and is said to have found a gold nugget, so the rush was on. Certainly the settlement has seen better days with much run down, dilapidated and very much a neglected air. As it was still early afternoon and the village has little to offer the three of us headed to the pub. A typical barren and uninteresting Australian establishment but cold ale and cider always tastes good. Typical of pubs in these regions, televisions showing the latest horse and greyhound races and a betting corner adjacent to the pub. Along with their love of ANZAC, ANZAC biscuits, country & western music and mateship, the Aussies are very fond of their gambling. It seems that no settlement in West Oz is without its means for you to lose your money.

We had several drives up and down the main street of **Kalgoorlie** noted for its historic buildings dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We would have only driven it once but we couldn't find a fuel station. This, the second largest town in Western Australia after Perth (that doesn't mean it is big – remembering that the vast state of WA - the size of Sudan - only has 2 million inhabitants, of which well over half live in the capital city) is also founded on gold. Here fortunes were made but mostly were lost at the numerous brothels, taverns and to the numerous sharks that cruise such lucrative deposits. The clouds were building again but now we wanted to get away from the madding crowd and pointed our noses to the **Goongarrie National Park**. As with many national parks and conservation areas in Western Australia there is little or no development, which can be both good and bad, depending on one's point of view.

We started our search for 25 mile rock which was said to be good for camping, after two abortive off-road efforts we eventually found it - or at least we think we did. As is common in this mallee woodland (low, multistemmed eucalyptus trees dominate) there are numerous low granite outcrops that were put to good use by early prospectors and pastoralists. Water running off the outcrops gathered in pools which were often enhanced with funnelling walls and deepening of these natural tanks. Today they are used by birds and mammals that often travel considerable distances to access this precious liquid.

Unfortunately, species that mainly benefit today are exotics such as camels, brumbies, goats and European rabbits. The imported red foxes have eaten most of the small indigenous beasties so have to concentrate on the rabbits. But obviously between the foxes and the dingos the rabbits are thriving. Population sizes of some of these foreigners in Western Australia are staggering, with camels numbering in the hundreds of thousands, feral goats uncounted but certainly very high, rabbits – well they breed like rabbits ..... In the two days we spent in the park the only native mammals we saw was a family group of common wallaroos, or euros, a medium-sized, rugged country dwelling kangaroo. Birdlife was poor, although we did have a good sighting of a wedge-tailed eagle. The Hun in his potterings located the grave of one P.Mack “killed by blacks, 1896.” Probably a conflict over water in the natural tank! These isolated killings were not infrequent and resulted in mounted posses of miners, police and ranchers hunting down and killing Aboriginal men, women and children – an activity which the modern day Australian likes to downplay and forget. Something like, nobody was a Nazi in Germany after 1945, nobody believed in apartheid in South Africa after 1994.....

Had planned to head due north and deeper into the southern Little Sandy Desert but rains had been extensive and hard, and of course unseasonal, many secondary roads were closed. Much of the mallee country we were passing through was badly overgrazed, with erosion common. The problem in large part seems to be sheep grazing on leasehold Crown Land, so little or no motivation to look after it for future generations, and compounded by the fact that much of this country is marginal and unsuited for the levels of grazing being forced upon it.. At **Menzies**, another gold mining settlement that went to the wall with little to show for it, we turned north-west on to the road to **Sandstone**. A good sand/gravel road that would carry us nearly 300km and unbeknownst at that stage boost our adrenalin flows. Interesting wooded country but again overgrazed and overstocked with cattle. Birdlife generally poor except for a large flock of powder grey and pink gallahs, a cockatoo, feeding at the roadside. About midday drizzle started but as we were about half way and no concept of what was to come we pressed on. An absolute high point, and one that drove the Hun to visual orgasm, was a pair of **dingos** on the road. A pair of males that showed absolutely no fear of the vehicle and showed themselves at their best. No doubt if we had been cattle ranchers, understandably they would have been shot as they are important predators of both sheep and calves. A strange series of events, as at the start of the days drive we found dingo tracks, later a dead dingo on the road and now the living beasties themselves. The origins of the dingo have long been in question but fairly recent genetic work has shown them to be Asian wolves that it is presumed were “tamed” and brought to Australia by the ancestors of the Aborigines. This is much the same way that early man in Europe is believed to have “domesticated” the grey wolf and golden jackal.

After that highpoint things started to go rapidly downhill.... By 2pm the rain was falling steadily and with determination, obviously forgetting that we were supposed to be in the dry season. Great gouts of cloud we later found out were coming in off the Timor Sea and pressing in a south-easterly direction across the Pilbara to offer us unparalleled entertainment. The road was becoming slippery, floodways were flowing but we had no choice but to keep pressing on. One drift looked too daunting so we decided to sit it out –

or so we thought! First a lorry splashed and squelched past us but then he had real height and weight. Then along came a bakkie (ute in the local parlance), a rancher by the name of Stretch said no worries mate, so away we went, waited at the other side and of course the low ute bogged totally dead centre. No worries, he has a rope, so reverse back with Cruiser hitch up and twang, a snapped rope. Said item of twisted nylon had seen much better days, but no worries tie it together and try again with same result. We tell him we can push on to Sandstone and get help, what's the rest of the road like – no worries should be fine!! Offer to take his wife with – just returned from a foot operation in Cal', so he has to piggyback her out, but not without her beer in one hand and fags in the other. They had obviously both been on a bit of a bender, hence the confidence about the road ahead!!! “Just tell them in Sandstone that Stretch is in the creek.” Peter has by this time done some wading, barefoot and boots and more was to come-how strong, how deep? In the end it took us 2 hours to cover the 40km! Then came the proof that a Cruiser can float, at least for a short while, when we hit a long stretch of flooded and flowing road. By this stage waves were hitting our car and at over one metre, front end started lifting but our rear weight saved the situation. After three episodes of this in rapid succession we knew we probably wouldn't drown but our sturdy steed may have become another Australian flashflood statistic. The longest stretch of high 4x4 Wombat & I have ever done... None of us are praying folk but we all called on Thor and Wodin to cool it a bit – after all it was the dry season! Almost dark when we drove into the tiny settlement of **Sandstone** and took the last two rooms available – all it seems had been running from the floods. Now although the hotel has historic standing, it had certainly seen better days, dirty, unkempt but the atmosphere in the pub was superb. Filled with prospectors, jackaroos and the like, and two guys who Peter learned later were itinerant loafers, played good music. One on guitar, the other with a skiffle – you remember, the old tea chest, broomhandle and rope to provide the rhythm. A good way to unwind! Virtually all settlements in the interior of Western Australia have their origins in the mining of some mineral or other; when the minerals run out or are no longer economically viable the community dies or a few hardened souls hang in for the long haul.

So next day water everywhere but now we know there is a tar (bitumen here) road ahead. But even here flood warnings, temporary pools and lakes everywhere. Pass small settlements, including Yalgoo and Mullewa, at latter find out farm/station where we can hire accomodation. **Mullewa** is literally crawling with Aboriginals and we hear later that a curfew is in place to keep them out of the “white town” at night – sound familiar to you there in South Africa from years gone by. 70km up the road and we move into the renovated “shearing shed” at Wandina Station (ranches hereabouts are called stations). Comfortable and clean but the floors taken over by myriads of tiny ants! After floods we can survive everything! Another station that has been badly overgrazed but efforts are being made to ease up. Went with the manager and his wife to look at the flowing creek some 20km from the homestead – good to look at lots of wonder without the prospect of being washed away! On one of the billabongs a flight of five black swans. The owner has introduced several hundred Damara sheep because of their hardiness but we saw 6 dead ones and one on the way out – it was helped on its way with a knife to the throat. Probably plant poisoning in a region with which the sheep were not familiar. With the

decline in wool prices and steady meat prices more farmers are shifting to Damara and Dorper sheep from South Africa. On the way back from the stream Bruce showed us one of several feral goat traps that are in place around the property. Many thousands of feral goats roam the Outback and until recently have been considered a pest. A large market for young male goats, for meat, has developed in the Middle East and especially in Saudi Arabia, and for good money. So the pest has become a purse-filler!

On Wandina we also had our first look at a malleefowl nest in progress. These “oven-brooders” are close to the size of a turkey and dig a large circular crater in sandy soil on which they pile a great conical mound of vegetation in which the hen lays her large eggs. By opening up and closing the mound, depending on external temperatures, the eggs are incubated without the female having to sit. On hatching, the chicks are already well developed, fully feathered and have to look after themselves – no parental care needed. Also saw the grave of one Dingo Ross, a wandering dingo hunter (“dogger”) who somewhere early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century arrived at the homestead steps in a bad way – obviously beyond repair on arrival he found his last resting place on Wandina.

Now we pressed north-westwards to the coast but crossing the **Murchison River** bridge and to the settlement of Murchison along the way. In part we touched on the E.T.Hooley stock route, one of many Australian trails blazed by graziers when moving sheep and cattle between stations, grazing grounds and markets. In this flat country we couldn’t help pondering on how they found their way, how much was by chance and how much by aboriginal knowledge. Certainly many more Aborigines worked then than they do today! Survival on these routes was totally dependent on waterholes, springs and wells – miss one and your stock would begin to die, miss two and you might well join them. Well 9 has been rebuilt in historic fashion and still holds water.

Passed the delightfully named Billabalong Station and finally at Murchison settlement. This consists of a Shire (County) office, road works establishment, the heart being an offbeat roadhouse with fuel, cooldrinks (the owner bemoaned the fact that the Shire wouldn’t give him a licence to dispense beer – so did we!) and a few old gin traps well looked over by the Hun. AND our first sighting of red-tailed black cockatoos, one of Australia’s largest parrots, and what a sight. There was a flock of about 15, with an almost butterfly like flight and gentle call, they rose high on our favourite list. From here we turned on to the so-called Butcher’s Track that cuts through Mulga woodland (mostly Acacia species) on red sand country. A long drive on sand and clay, fortunately dry, and no other car sighted. Apart from fair numbers of emu, it was mainly quiet on the wildlife front.

On the Great Northern Highway for a short distance north (all relative in a land this size) and then into the **Shark Bay World Heritage Site**. This is a vast area of land and sea that protects the largest seagrass beds in the world, which in turn provide food for one of the world’s largest dugong populations. We camped at **Hamelin Pool** site which has become famous for being one of the largest and most accessible populations of stromatolites. These are amongst the oldest organisms on earth and were previously classified as blue-green algae but now being known to be a bacteria. The stromatolites are inshore in a large bay that has a high level of salinity, higher than that of the open

ocean, and has an almost oily calmness. To be honest, they are not much to look at, but form aggregations, or “blobs”, that may be inverted saucer-shaped, or even like mushrooms (if you have a good imagination). Think of a life form that is not millions but billions of years in development and largely unchanged from when they were the only form of life on earth.

The morning we went down to film and photograph large schools of fish were foraging in the shallow water, even with a visiting barracuda, next day there were none. Just behind the campground is a shell quarry, where billions of small bivalves have become cemented together with leached calcium/lime and were carved into blocks for building by early white settlers. In fact the fringes of the vast Hamelin Pool are formed into beaches of deep accumulations of these shells. To give an idea of the size of Shark Bay, we drove along one shore for 130km to **Monkey Mia**, and still not at the end. Now, Monkey Mia is a touristified location known for its habituated bottle-nosed dolphins. We don't like the concept but have to admit that when a female and calf came right to the beach, and give you the beady eye we can understand that it does give people a better idea of what these intelligent mammals are all about. We sat under a beach shelter supping ale, watching dolphins, pelican and the strange antics of tourists but decided this was not for us. To the settlement of Denham for, we hoped, a meal and drinks but our timing was out and the Aussies are usually not prepared to go that extra centimetre even if you are paying them! So, we had to suffer and again sip Emu bitters and Wombat ciders. Then, right let's have some takeaways, the owner cleaning his windows, little shop full but he announced he wasn't serving even though food there was. So, chuck you farly and back to Hamelin Pool. The third one, a lazy day with some relaxing, birdwatching, washing and the like. A bird call that has had us puzzled since our arrival is finally pinned down as the chiming wedgebill, a rather nondescript lbj. Bird books translate the call as “when did you get drunk?” Personal question!

Onwards northing along the coast to the town of **Carnarvon** which does not have a great deal going for it, other than a patch of mangroves, a growing tropical feel and we could do internet café, post office and shopping. Restaurants rather scarce and those there were not too exciting. Celt felt like a T-bone but of course they had run out.... Book into accomodation at fringe of town, in caravan park – pleasant enough with backdrop of banana plantation. Now the Abo gevaar was settling in – at the bottle shop (only sells full one's) cannot get quart beers because we are told the Abos use them as quite effective clubs on each other. Likewise, 4 and 5l casks of wine all lie behind us, now only 2l – we are told this is to stop the indigenous folk drinking themselves to death. From what we have seen they are doing a pretty good job of doing that anyway. Paternalism yet again raises its ugly head! Back to the quart bottle club bit, we can well imagine a small beer bottle, or rock for that matter, could be just as effective. But of course these decisions are dreamed up by little civil servants in the ivory towers of Canberra, Sydney and Perth. In any case many of them seem to have a penchant for sniffing petrol – how about banning that? In the central desert areas (Aboriginal reservations – yes, you remember the SA “homelands/tuislande?”- they are introducing a non-appealing petrol called Opel to stop them sniffing, so what happens they make their way to towns where they can steal it and sniff it. White Australians will not stand for

countrywide conversion to Opel petrol because it costs about a third as much again as regular but is subsidised in the reservations!! These asides added spice to our journeying.

A really first class seafood meal at the Whaler in **Exmouth** – Celt had best calamari ever, Wombat had prawns and the Hun his old fish & chips standby, then into Cape Range National Park for two nights at Yardie Camp. Unfortunately, small and cramped but made the most of it by walking to Yardie Gorge in the hopes of locating rock wallabies on the steep cliffs but despite a couple of hours wait no sightings, although pairs of corella (an all-white cockatoo) settled in rock crevices but we were not sure whether they were looking for nest sights or just resting. Along the way we have found corellas to be super-inactive, although very noisy. Common wallaroos obliged for cameras both near the gorge and near camp. At night large numbers of ghost crabs were on the move and they are always entertaining to watch. On our one flank in camp we had two “wordly fellows” with their broads and Peter heard one yob describe somebody they knew as “...a guy who drinks piss and lets his piles hang out.” We are still trying to figure out if that was some sort of compliment or insult. The Aussies have a language unto themselves, indeed they do. Driving in the park, plenty of common wallaroos, several Australian bustards – once considered to be the same as the African kori and to us looks identical but can’t keep those genetecists down! Large white lilies were in evidence in low lying areas and these turned out to be a species of Crinum. Stood out strongly against the extensive meadows of spinifex grass. A large flock of gallah cockatoos feeding amongst the spinifex let Wombat in fairly close to film. Quite clumsy as they stumbled and tripped around amongst the grass.

Flanking Cape Range for some 500km is the **Ningaloo coral reef**, as it lies close inshore it is much more accessible than the better known Great Barrier Reef on the Pacific coast. So, we girded our loins and did the tourist thing – joined a glass-bottomed boat for a couple of hours along with an assortment of terrorist types. Despite our initial reluctance it was very worthwhile. Truly amazing and huge coral structures, stagshorn, brain, cabbage and bummies, amongst others. The bummies – needless to say – take their name from their shape and form, and towered above all others and were probably 4-5 metres tall. A good variety of colourful fish, sea cucumbers and nudibranchs. Beyond the barrier reef at this time of year large numbers of whale sharks cruise feeding on the eggs and sperm that are ejected by the coral polyps. This timing can be counted down to the nearest hour each year as conditions of tide and moon become ideal. We have only ever seen it on film and as it occurs at night when reef, white-pointer and tiger sharks are active it is unlikely that we will ever be tempted to observe it “in the flesh.”

Another delicious lunch in Exmouth and we headed for the **Giralia Station** just 140km from town. An interesting drive through spinifex and mulga scrub. The station is now owned by the conservation authorities but the previous owner has life rights and has developed a small accomodation business. Rooms actually converted mobile coolrooms but they were adequate and we survived the night. CALM (Conservation & Land Management) have been buying up leaseholds and sole-owned properties and clearing them of stock to give them chance to recover from many decades of overgrazing. We hope they are in there for the long haul as it will take at least 100 years in many cases.

Then we headed into red sanddune country cut by creeks showing signs of recent flooding, fringed all-about with white-barked coolibah trees. We had not travelled any great distance but how could we not stop to camp within sight of **Mount Stuart** and the sheep station of the same name. We considered going to claim it as Celts birthright but we didn't expect that proposal would be met in friendly fashion. It is named for McDoual Stuart one of the greatest explorers to plod the trails of inner Australia. One can only wonder at the fortitude and grit of those people. He was to Australia what Burton, Speke and Stanley were to African exploration. So, we pitched our tents on the bank of the House Creek, under coolibah trees and close to a billabong – what more could we want! Birdlife was good, including territorial calling of wedge-tailed eagles, blue-winged kookaburras, a lovelorn pair of gallahs and ever present Torresian (known to us as Mother Theresa's) crows, with their highly varied call repertoire.

Fuel fill up, some shopping in **Tom Price**, a modern settlement with its economy almost totally anchored in iron ore. Surrounding hills obviously “thick” with iron oxides to be harvested for the building of cars, buildings, and, and..... Trains leave here for the coast that haul hundreds of wagons laden with ore.. read the bit on Port Hedland! Not a very inspiring location so we pushed on to **Karajini National Park**, one of the premier conservation areas of the Pilbara. Fairly rugged hill and gorge country, dominated by spinifex grass, snappy gums and in sheltered spots one of the Australian cypresses. We camped at Dales which although quite full, all was quite well spaced out and relatively quiet. Most people come here to “walk the gorges.” Now, this is another strange Aussie phenomenon – many, probably most, tourists wend their way around Australia hopping from gorge to gorge. Something akin to a bird twitcher and ticks on his bird list. The park lies within the Hamersley Range, which encompasses Mount Bruce the second highest peak in Western Australia. However, in the world context it is merely a bold pimple trying to emanate attitude. Yes, we did walk the Dales Gorge and impressive it was, with several deep and clear pools. Wombat had a dip and the Hun flew his cares (and his testicles) to the wind and washed away the travel dust. Wombat and I reckon he was hoping for numerous young gins to join him but alas this was not too be and he had to settle for shoals of small fish. The only mammal we saw on this walkabout was a young feral cat, Australia's most destructive and strangely elusive predator.

Back on the road but not far – needed to do mundane things like washing, drinking and relaxing... Reached **Manjina roadhouse**, otherwise known as Auski tourist village, and got nice rooms, did the chores and read (and drank – very important in the dry heat!!!). Large flocks of the attractive spinifex pigeons came in through the afternoon to drink, as did another first zebra finches. We had expected to see both further south but... Then to cap it all a “convention” of traffic cops started arriving to take up their rooms. These bastards look and act the same all over the world – the beer paunches, and the skinnies, comparing number of ticket distributions. It seems they – about 15 of the beknighted gentleman and no ladies as is the Aussie way – were on a “hit the roadtrains” outing. That's something we have not mentioned so far, the ever present mechanical horses and their giant and multiple trailers, usually three of these but not unusually four. They usually travel at speed, like the whole road and they know bloody well you will not argue with them. We often wondered how these monsters could stop in emergency, our

conclusion, they probably couldn't. As it was our anniversary we had a quiet celebration between the three of us – drinks and fish and chips, not what we would have preferred but a Pilbara roadhouse is not overflowing with options.

On leaving Auski we headed in the direction of the controversial settlement of **Wittenoom** – a village the government seems to wish didn't exist. Until the 1960s this was an active asbestos mine set in an attractive gorge, the ore body started to run out and the mine closed. Tourism flourished in later years but then the government put pressure to bear to move people out, close down the village on the flimsy basis that the area was unhealthy because of asbestos fibres. Research has shown that risks are higher in the city of Perth! The question is why does the government persist with these falsehoods? Today there are just 12 inhabitants but these are doughty souls who are telling government to take a short walk off a tall cliff. Official maps either do not mark Wittenoom, or note that it is dangerous and closed. Bollocks, we have been there (and survived), loved the scenery, saw good birdlife and in the village wallaroos and red kangaroos. WE wish the 12 inhabitants the best of luck in their fight for the right to be left alone.

On now to **Millstream-Chichester National Park** off to the north-west, which we liked so much we established for three days. Pitched tents on the edge of a large, deep billabong – now in crocodile country so a bit more cautious. As with most national parks here it was a former sheep station, with the good old colonial house still standing and now used mainly as an information centre. Unfortunately, much of the information pertains to Aboriginal culture – which comes down to what one classifies as culture and what to subsistence survival. We have big problems grasping this culture thing. Filmed and photographed the common wallaroos that roam about, including joeys in pouches and a range of behaviour. Sturt's Pea was in glorious flower and is the state's vegetative symbol. From the homestead a couple of kilometres walk through paperbark, snappy gum and coolibah woodland brings one to the Crossing Creek. All has been pretty hammered, flushed and battered by Cyclone Monty that waltzed through the area this past March but still a special place. Here were gathered hundreds of corella cockatoos, what a sight and more especially what a sound. We went back the next day from the north bank to the same pool and were again treated from 10am by this amazing gathering of parrots. Nobody collects your camping fee here, an honour box believes you will do the right thing – we did. The last evening, clouds were starting to build in the north-west so put some stuff away “just in case.” And in the night it started to rain and it continued to rain, and in the morning it was still raining. To sit it out, or wet pack and get out whilst we could? The latter was finally chosen but what a mess, with the red dust of the day before having been transformed into a gluey, slippery sludge that penetrated everything. By this stage we were beginning to wonder what the road to the coastal highway would be like. We were about to find out – bloody awful. Not too much flowing water but ice-like clay on which even 4x4 was a game of chance. For some unknown reason the road builders had used white kaolin-type clay in the dips where traction was impossible, and you just have to hit the accelerator at the right time and let her glide. Fortunately the stretch over the Chichester Hills was a narrow band of tar as we were now hit with dense fog. We were trying to remind ourselves that this was the DRY SEASON!



After a long grind we finally hit the tar road that goes up the coast. Low on fuel but we “knew according to the map” Whim Creek had petrol – we were told hadn’t sold fuel for ages since taken over by one of the mining companies. Port Hedland to the north we wouldn’t make, so south it was again to **Roebourne** to fill up. What a dump – pure Abbo and after looking at a couple of historic points on the coast we gladly headed north. Obviously, there had been flooding on the main road with some creeks still flowing and we watched one just starting to flow, great roadside pools and mud.

Now **Port Hedland** would not be on our to-do-again list as this town serves only to export iron ore from the interior. BHP have a lot to answer for with their great open ore dumps that with offshore winds have carried dust to every nook and crannie in town. In fact the whole exterior of the town is coated with red iron oxide. We took accommodation out near the airport with the main goal of ridding our equipment of mud and that’s what we spent most of the next morning doing! Then into town, shopping, lunch at a hotel – very Australian décor (read pretty basic), gambling room adjacent, but pub food good and plentiful. Celts T-bone steak deficit was scrubbed. We were lucky as the rain started up again in the afternoon but all was clean, dry and packed away.

We now needed a good camp and dry, and that we found at **Port Smith** – there is no port but extensive mangrove swamps and an incredible tidal rise and fall of many metres. The swamps were full of life, including myriads of fiddler crabs, mudskippers and in one big pool green turtles, large fish and two glorious lion fish hunting minnows. This backed off with a large flock of screeching corellas. Huge numbers of oysters were attached to mangrove roots and stems but didn’t sample them. Not sure why not looking back! The camp manager brought us two cooked giant mud crabs which Wombat and Celt enjoyed, but although he tucked in with gusto the Hun was not fully convinced! The carapaces of these beasts is so hard that I had to smash them open with a hammer. The camp shop doesn’t sell beer because of the proximity of an Aboriginal reserve but managed to “twist the arm” of the manager and he sold us 6 from his own stock. Nice guy as he only made a small profit!! This area is known for its abundance of the great frilled dragons but unfortunately it seems that at this time of year they are not to be found, at least we didn’t succeed.

Then the Hun’s last bit of journeying with us to the capital of the far north, Broome. Once the centre of pearl diving now mainly dedicated to the tourist industry and the export of live cattle brought in from the great cattle stations of the Kimberleys. We stayed in rooms at the outer caravan park and really quiet and peaceful, although probably a bit of a nightmare when full. Good birding in camp. Fly over and calling by a pair of brolgas and some parrots. Indulged ourselves at a restaurant on the bay – Wombat with 12 tiger prawns, Celt with Cajun squid and the Hun had barramundi. Whilst gorging ourselves a live-cattle ship was docking on the adjacent pier to take on a shipment for Indonesia. WE were told no less than 9300 beasts would be loaded over the next 24 hours. The following morning sure enough roadtrain loads of cattle were being loaded for their final journey. Out on the pier the riptides were incredibly strong and certainly not a place to go for a swim. Several people were fishing and we watched large yellowfins going for lures and cutting through the currents with apparent ease. A hawksbill turtle

came up for air but soon disappeared into the maelstrom. Had a look at lighthouse point with its incredible rock formation and two new birds for our Australian list, lesser frigatebird and brown booby. Another restaurant with excellent food in Chinatown but the service was appalling – a good job we were not in a hurry. Saturday and the Hun was released on to the tender mercies of Broome airport customs and then there were two.

Wombat & Celt pushed straight on to Derby, a little further north on the coast, through landscape of many boab trees (our baobabs and there is some speculation that their origins lie in the visits by Arab traders plying between the East African and west Australian coast perhaps over 1000 years ago). Derby is very much an Aboriginal settlement, with lawns, roadways and all decorated with empty grog tins and bottles, and of course 2l papsakke! The owner of the place where we stayed pointed out the courtship ground of a greater bowerbird, with elaborate stick arch, and surrounding decorations of white and grey stones, green plastic toy soldiers, green glass pieces and units of building plastic. At the swimming pool we caught two of the giant green tree frogs that were duly placed before the cameras next morning.

We still had a few days in hand so we decided to head deeper into the Kimberleys to the King Leopold Conservation Area, in the hill ranges of the same name. An area of spinifex grass, snappy gums, bloodwoods, pandanus trees and a palm that is only found here. Great campsite in our own “tree oasis”, flowing creek, a close-by olive python, blue-winged kookaburras, and plenty of cheeky great bowerbirds. At night we had visits from two squirrel-like sugar gliders, although marsupials they can glide like flying squirrels. Small carnivorous marsupials known as quolls also prowled around the tent at night. Certainly not as shattering to the nerves as when lions have done that to us in Africa. Walked in to Bells Gorge, big clear pools, waterfall, palms, boabs and to our delight a female and joey short-eared rock wallaby spotted by Wombat on the opposite cliff so we had a great hour with them.

Our last night was in a lodge “safari tent” on the Fitzroy River at Fitzroy Crossing, where Wombat had to finalize some admin things for the Halls Creek locum.

Halls Creek in summary – tropical, crawling with Abos, dirty but in good scenic surroundings and we will survive the six weeks well. Wombat’s workload only a fraction of what she had in Esperance but then civil service compared to private enterprise. We have gallah cockatoos in the garden, the Mother Theresa crows are regular visitors .....