

## TRAVELS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY – 2005

Middle of July arrived and our first stint in the majestic settlement of **Halls Creek** was at an end. Oh, how we would miss the cultural and Dreamtime happenings of the Aboriginal community. Watching the locals sitting in groups under the shade of trees, surrounded by the tin gods whose contents helps them to reach exalted heights and communication with their ancestors. Loud Country & Western music – part of their tradition and culture so they say – and the screams and yowls of battered wives, partners, children and mangy dogs. Culture in its most refined form!

We digress...Driving northwards and passing through the scenic eastern Kimberley hill country, our first stop was at **Parry's Creek** near Wyndham, our second visit. A peaceful and quiet campground on the bank of a bird-rich billabong, with the bonus of a small outdoor restaurant dishing up first class food. Walking is pleasant here along the billabong and amongst ghost gums, so after a meander we perched ourselves in the shade and waited for things to happen. Our first sighting of a pheasant coucal, a non-parasitic, ground-dwelling cuckoo and at night large black flying foxes were flying amongst the large trees fringing the billabong. We had seen no obvious fruits, so we are not sure what was drawing them to the area. When things are going well, there is generally some little gremlin waiting to leap out of the shrubbery! After thousands of kilometres on Australian roads and tracks, and not a single puncture, the Celt brilliantly moving the Cruiser a couple of metres into the shade ripped the side wall of one of the tyres on an inconveniently placed fiendishly sharp rock! A good excuse to drink more wine after such labour.

Now began the drift to the east, entering Northern Territory after purchasing a new tyre (here you carry two spares as distances between garages can be formidable) and shopping. At the state boundary large roadside signs greet one warning of the dire penalties for carrying fruit, vegetables and honey across borders. The officials have lifted rules and regulations in this land to levels that have to be “seen” to be believed. Fruit flies, fungal spores, viruses have great respect for official borders as you all well know and can only be transported in or on your over ripe bananas, breadcrumb spattered honeypot..... Other signs warn of the grave penalties for transporting cattle and horses across borders without state veterinary clearance. We sincerely hope that the feral cattle and brumbies that roam throughout the Top End are fully aware of these regulations. Before crossing the state boundary and close to the town of **Kunnanura** we encountered a large shallow, reed-fringed billabong with large flocks of the majestic brolga crane, and close to town two big mobs of red-tailed black cockatoos. Within Northern Territory and shortly before our overnight stop at the tiny settlement of **Timber Creek** we had our first sight of a large saltwater crocodile hauled out on a mud bank in the Victoria River. From that point there was absolutely no temptation to swim! Here we added blue-faced honey-eater to our list and Mathilde encountered several agile wallabies on the edge of camp, so we spent some time watching their antics.

The next day we pushed on towards Darwin, passing through the town of **Katherine**, with a short stop at the rural campus of the NT University. A camp of some 10 000 little red flying foxes spend about two months here each year but this year apparently they have extended their stay, much to the disgust of staff members. For us it was a great opportunity but with pathways, walls and windows covered in multi-coloured excrement one can perhaps sympathise a little. This is the most abundant and widespread of northern Australia's fruit-eating bats, and one which is prone to long distance migration to and from sites where fruits are abundant. A fellow South African now lectures here, on a four-year contract, and we had a chat to him about the problems of the Dark Continent and the Red Continent. Each certainly has its fair (perhaps unfair) share!

Onward towards **Darwin** and two tired individuals peddling their bicycles, weighed down with camping gear! It seems that peddling your way around Australia now has the same karma as the once near obligatory trip to Nepal during the flower-child era. We passed several such peddle-weary folk and all looked positively miserable about the experience. Quite understandable, so why do they do it?

We settled into pleasant accommodation at a place called **Berry Springs**, just south of Darwin, to be close to the **NT Wildlife Park**, run by the territory conservation authority and home to a wide range of birds, mammals and reptiles of the Top End. It has some very pleasant bush walks and a natural billabong that attracts much birdlife, including a few new species for us. The night house is excellent and one of the best we have visited, including some of those in Europe's top zoos. In the afternoon we headed off to sample the delights of the Litchfield pub, right next to the rodeo grounds. The beer and cider were good but the décor very Australian – Formica, chrome and characterless.

Then to Darwin to meet up with niece and husband, Megan & Mike, who had just flown in from China. They would spend a week with us as we toured Kakadu National Park, they in a hired campervan. At 4am we picked up Mathilde's sister Henni at the airport, after her long flight from Austria, via Frankfurt and Singapore. We had to do a few things in Darwin, including booking our February flight back to South Africa, and after a mix of eating (camel, kangaroo, water buffalo and crocodile), a bit of a wander around the sights, concluded this was one of the nicest cities we had visited. We concluded that the tropical winter climate, and finding a good bookshop, were significant influences in our making that decision!

**Kakadu** is Australia's largest national park and at 20 000km<sup>2</sup> equivalent to South Africa's Kruger National Park. We have mixed feelings about the place, in that we managed to find mainly quiet and simple campsites but one has the impression that in some ways tourism has already spun out of control. Most seem to come to Kakadu for the rock art scattered through the sandstone country, executed by the ancestors of the Aboriginals that live in settlements within the park. It seems that the latter can do pretty much as they wish, particularly since the federal government took over the management of the park from the territory several years ago. They run cattle in the conservation area- we saw one herd feeding alongside water buffalo at Yellow Waters on the South Alligator River, even though you are assured that the buffalo have been all but wiped out. Some more negatives before the positives. Feral pigs are literally everywhere and little seems to be ongoing to at least limit their numbers, the same applies to feral cats. Dingos

there are aplenty and that's fine (although it shouldn't be forgotten that they are also exotics), but packs of Aboriginal dogs also roam in parts and almost certainly hunt on their own account. The seemingly unstoppable cane toad, introduced to Queensland from the Americas, has now spread throughout the park and beyond. Its skin secretions are highly toxic and local predators are paying the price. The cat-like, northern quoll, common just 5 years ago is now on the verge of extinction here, for the simple reason it sees the toad as legitimate prey. At least one species of monitor lizard, and one python are also believed to be now virtually extinct in the park and surrounds for the same reason. Young crocodiles have been poisoned and even one 3.5 metre saltwater crocodile with a cane toad in its gut succumbed. Control of the toads at this stage seems a non-starter-although denied there is strong evidence that it has already spread to the Kimberleys of northern Western Australia.

Our first camp near the South Alligator was within hailing distance of restaurant and draught beer – so how could we resist, after an afternoon of photographing and filming agile wallabies! A Brahminy kite was a regular at the outdoor tables awaiting the bits of meat thrown to it by the waiters. A handsome bird that had to be alert to the continuous attentions of black kites and Torresian crows. One major plus for us in Kakadu is the great number of walking trails of varying length that one can do at one's own pace and unaccompanied. At this time of year at the height of the Big Dry, tourists reach their highest densities, but most only clutter the shortest and easiest walks, and especially those with some Aboriginal graffiti as the focus. So if you are prepared to walk a bit further you can avoid much of the madding crowd. It never ceased to amaze us that those folk we did encountered saw nothing smaller than a black-necked stork. The fascinating green tree ants, numerous honeyeaters and the few lizards that were around received nary a glance. The digging activity of a Gould's Monitor lizard on the bank of the South Alligator River (no alligators but large numbers of saltwater crocs, generally known as salties) did elicit interest from one other couple but the inshore activities of feeding shoals of top-eye mullet did not.

Because there is mining going on in the east of the park (we sometimes wondered about the national park status, not to mention the World Heritage Site designation), the town of Jabiru (the local name for the black-necked stork) has shops, banks, garages but most importantly for us a colony of the large black flying foxes. They roost in the trees around the town's swimming pool and apparently have done so for many years. Our camp on the East Alligator River was a haven for flying foxes at night feeding on the numerous eucalyptus blossoms, and during the day the sulphur-crested cockatoos took over. Close by we had earlier seen these handsome parrots feeding on Grevillea flowerheads – neatly nipping them off at the stem and then holding them in one foot whilst gently extracting nectar. The areas around these trees were soon littered with discarded orange blossoms. A visit to the Ubiri rock north of the camp was more for the views over the vast East Alligator floodplains than the rock art but the hordes of tour groups soon drove us from the heights, good view or not. Along the river walk we saw plenty of big salties but in the monsoon forest fringing it two bird specials gave us good views, yellow-footed scrubfowl and the rainbow pitta. The second night flying foxes resumed their foraging and we picked out two ring-tailed possums in the torchlight and a

nothern brown bandicoot rat scuttled around the fringe of our camp. Apart from agile wallabies and antilopine wallaroos mammals do not feature strongly in Kakadu viewing but we did get glimpses of short-eared rock wallabies and a black wallaroo. This wallaroo is only found in a few rugged, shallow, well bushed gorges within Kakadu. In fact where Celt glimpsed the male wallaroo we also had fairly good views of the similarly localised chestnut-quilled rock pigeon. Then a mob of Frenchies arrived disturbing the peace so we stepped sideways waiting for their departure and better light to film the wooded plain around Nourlangie Rock.

Near our camp the **Cahill Drift** allows vehicles to cross in and out of eastern Arnhem Land (if you have been approved by the Aboriginal council!!) – that is at low tide only as its proximity to the mangrove fringed coast results in a fairly massive tidal rise and fall. To our surprise, despite lots of very obvious saltwater crocs and big warning signs about them, people fished off the causeway at low tide but still with the water flowing. We tried a couple more bush camps as we moved southwards through the park, one close to the Cooidah resort – a major tourist trap but it does have draft beer!! And it is the only point where one can take a boat into the billabongs and on the South Alligator. By this stage Megan & Mike's time had run out so they had departed for Darwin. So, switching off from the hordes around us we did our tourist thing. It was well worth it as we photographed and filmed a lot, had superb views of salties, jabiru and many other birds, including great flocks of plumed whistling ducks flying to the night feeding grounds. As the sun started to set previously unseen Nankeen night herons in good numbers started to emerge from the dense foliage of riverside trees. A rapidly drying up billabong on the floodplain played host to hundreds of birds, that included Australian pelicans, pied and white-faced herons and royal spoonbills. If we go back to Kakadu in December we might well repeat the exercise.

Next morning on the edge of camp a large sounder of pitch-black, rather hairy feral pigs were disporting, ranging from tiny piglets to a very large boar. Everywhere one moves in the park there is evidence of their digging, wallowing and foraging. Along with the cane toad, the pig is the major threat to the habitats and wildlife of Kakadu but little is being done to reduce their numbers.

Our last camp in the park was at Maguk, pleasant and close to a stream. Most tourists come here to swim in a pool about 2km upstream, make a lot of noise and then leave. We sit quietly and watch a shoal of large black bream and then the real highlight in lower streams archer fish. These piscine hunters have taken the art of spitting to survival levels. They cruise the waters under the banks, observe an insect on a leaf up to 2 metres from the water, and with an accurate stream of water forced through the mouth knock the wee beastie into the water and devour it. Barramundi Creek and its associated billabongs are important nurseries for a number of fish species, including barramundi and saratoga, and we couldn't help wondering what effect the sun lotions and deodorants washed off human bodies upstream was having on water quality. This is one of the few natural waters where it is safe to swim, or so they say as just downstream was a set crocodile trap!

The last morning a final walk along Barramundi Creek and we were treated to an auditory treat, with several pairs of blue-winged kookaburras confirming their territorial

boundaries. Much sign of brumbies, another exotic that seems to be widespread in Kakadu.

Arriving in Katherine we find all accommodation full so head a few kilometres out of town to **Springvale Homestead** where they had the usual Australian “coolroom” type accommodation available but it was clean and comfortable. A very natural setting with a billabong and plenty of trees. Birdlife was prolific, including a nesting group of the handsome blue-faced honeyeater, plenty of sulphur-crested cockatoos and agile wallabies also feeding on the lawns. Now we were glad we had found everything full closer to town.

Now we were moving south along the **Stuart Highway** – yes, we kid you not. In fact in the Red Centre much is named after that venerable gentleman, Stuart Bluff, Stuart Campground, etc..... He was arguably the greatest explorer ever to have stirred the dust in Australia-and we are not biased. John McDoual Stuart criss-crossed this vast landmass and lived to tell the tales, unlike many of his fellow explorers of the time. Not too far south we headed eastwards along the Roper Highway towards the western side of the **Gulf of Carpentaria**. Do not be fooled, highway as we have found in Australia may be gravel, or if you are lucky a single tarred strip, not always two or more lanes. The Roper is not particularly well maintained and tar edges often several centimetres above gravel verges so one has to be wary of tearing tyres apart. At Roper Bar (refers to ford over the river unfortunately as this is supposed to be a dry community) filled up with fuel as options become more limited, and lunched on pies. Had a look at Roper Bar on the river of the same name. Quite broad, fringed with beautiful trees but sadly the local dark folk have turned it into a slurry of empty VB cans and whisky bottles. Note, we did say this was a dry community once you cross into east Arnhem Land. So, they drink up on the west bank and leave white fella his trash. The river is apparently full of salties so we wonder how many inebriated black fellas try to cross the bar and are dragged off.....

Heading into the still unproclaimed (in Oz we have learned this usually means that the geologists have still not finished their fossicking!) **Limmen National Park**, we found a really great bush camp to ourselves on the bank of the Towns River. At sunset the kookaburras excelled themselves with their chorus. Next morning we saw saltwater and Johnstone’s crocodiles, and to our surprise on first rising river fog! But this soon cleared to another fine, tropical winter’s day. Also a couple of agile wallabies came down to drink, warily watching the water for movement. Mathilde and I have decided that should we ever choose to live in Australia it would have to be up in the far tropical north. Continuing south through Limmen we passed a billabong close to the road, with three dingos drinking and rolling in the mud, as well as a pair of brolgas and a jabiru. Then for Mathilde a real highlight our first true blue brumbies, or wild horses. A stallion and a mare obviously in heat keeping their distance but nevertheless not too far not to be caught on film. From the conservation point of view not good as throughout the park we found horse sign. Next camp at Butterfly Spring, a natural seep against a rock wall that attracts many birds, and a dawn chorus that went on pretty much throughout the day. Sulphur-crested cockatoos there were aplenty, three red-tailed black cockatoos, red-winged

parrots and a black falcon unsuccessfully trying to hunt over the pool. An azure kingfisher was in residence but the deep shade wouldn't allow for filming. Spent afternoon reading down at the pool and in evening chatted to a retired geologist and his wife. Both expats, proud of Australia but bitterly disappointed with the way the Aboriginals were drinking themselves to oblivion and seemingly not making a success of anything. He had prospected throughout the Top End but was disillusioned with the burgeoning and seemingly uncontrolled way tourism was developing.

Then a bit of civilization!!!! Well, sort of. The historic Barkeley Homestead, located appropriately on the **Barkeley Tableland** – mainly dead flat natural grasslands, has accomodation, a good restaurant AND a talking white-tailed deer head. This is kitsch in the extreme but when it starts singing classic C&W and wagging its head from side to side..... It is a huge cattle station with musters involving thousands of head and up to 30 road trains at a time hauling them off to the ports for export. The meal was good, as was the bed.

Then we headed for our last bush camp with Henni, in the **Davenport Range National Park**, over a rough 90km track through overgrazed ranchland. We were now back in spinifex grass country. We pitched camp at Whistleduck, along a dry creek bed, and the temperature fell to the point that we do not like. So, early to bed. In the morning walked along the creek to two waterholes but nothing much about.

Then the haul down the Stuart Highway to **Alice Springs**, a town that is now almost totally reliant on tourism. Seemingly every second shop is peddling “genuine” Aboriginal art, the ultimate didgeridoo, or the supreme cultural tour! Nevertheless there are a couple of good eating houses, the best being Overlander Steakhouse – touristy but the kangaroo, crocodile, smoked emu and steaks were first class and substantial portions. We booked a cabin for four nights at – of course – the Stuart Caravan Park – so on the farewell dinner for Henni we decided to take a taxi so we could let our hair down as it were – we did.

We made a day trip to **Simpson Gap** in the MacDonnel Range specifically to film and photograph the black-footed rock wallabies that live there. Also took a nice walk up Cassia Hill which gives a good view of part of the ranges and surrounding plains. We spent a couple of interesting hours with these handsome macropods. Also a day trip to the Palm Valley in **Finke Gorge National Park**. A pretty rough track takes you in but well worth it. These red cabbage palms and the MacDonnel cycads on the south facing cliffs are relicts of a very much better watered “Red Centre” and although the tourists head down the gorge few venture along the cliff path so we had that to ourselves. A surprise was the large numbers of white cyprus trees, indicators of a much more temperate climate, growing on the higher slopes of the range.

Then Henni flew off from Alice Springs, leaving us four days to drive the 1000km through the **Tanami Desert** back to Halls Creek. The first 200km was on tar, which ends at the **Tilmouth Roadhouse**, where we decided to overnight, even though early in the day. Why not? Really nice oasis and cold beer! One note of interest – a bunch of “geriatric” off-road bikers on a rally rolled up just for lunch, fill up and off. The bikes were in fine fettle but the guys had seen better days, limping , bent backs.... One chap got

down on his back to check something under his bike engine and then struggled like a tortoise to get back on his feet. Would have made a good short video.

The hype about the Tanami Desert track was overblown, in most part reasonable gravel, some corrugations, but nowhere a tiny sandy track as it is billed in some tour guides. We decided to push the 700km to **Wolfe Meteor Crater** and set up camp for the last two nights, which left us just a short run into Halls Creek on Sunday. Although through Australian eyes the Tanami is a desert, in fact it is not but a well-vegetated semi-desert, with relatively dense cover of spinifex grass and mulga (Acacia) woodland. The good rains that fell here just before we left Halls Creek for NT left their mark with abundant greenery and a fair smattering of flowers. We saw feral camels and plenty of red kangaroos. Refueled at Rabbit Flat roadhouse, billed as the most isolated fuel stop in Australia – the price per litre tells it all! Anyway, the proprietor, one Brian who has been here since 1961, is obviously starved for conversation and has some very strong views on Bush, Aboriginals, John Howard, pinko liberals, and south Australian do-gooders. Most we agreed with, but his belief that the invasion of Iraq was justified we did not! Nevertheless, an interesting half an hour in the middle of nowhere! Our camp at the meteorite impact site – much to our horror – was settled by our bunch of geriatric bikers + a helicopter..... But not too bad and the next day we had the area to ourselves.

We are now back in Halls Creek, or Hells Crack to the more enlightened, and girding our loins to hammer through to Mathilde's last Oz working day on 2 December. Weekends will see us away in the bush on Sophie Downs cattle station, courtesy of the owner to help us retain our sanity. The bowerbirds, Torresian crows and blue-winged kookaburras in the garden, not to mention the screeching corellas and galahs, help to drown out the inebriated neighbours, so we will survive and survive well, with the added help of a first class butcher and bottle shop.