

Australia Round 2 and Platypus for Christmas

After a total of 4 ½ months in the Aboriginal settlement of Hall's Creek, sandwiched between that vast wilderness known as the Kimberleys and the Tanami Desert, and a month travelling in the Top End and to the Red Centre, we headed off to close the circle around Australia from Hall's Creek to Perth. This was a journey that would take us across the Northern Territory, skirting the southern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria and into north-western Queensland to the Gulf at its south-eastern corner; crossing the southern Cape York Peninsula to Cooktown and our first view of the Pacific and the Coral Sea; zigzagging from coast to interior southwards through Queensland and into New South Wales; New Year of 2006 in Sydney and into Victoria, back north into New South Wales and South Australia; into such famed locations as the Murray and Darling Rivers, Broken Hill, Lake Eyre, Coober Pedy and the Eyre Peninsula. Then to close the circle traversing the Nullarbor, the 'treeless plain' to Esperance, where after our landing at Perth we started our great Australian odyssey. From Esperance we continued south and west to explore the Tingle and Yarra forests and their unique, yet threatened fauna. The ultimate high before Perth, sightings of Numbat and Echidna in the wild.

Life in Hall's Creek was to experience what but a handful of white Australians know. In the southern cities, where most Australians live, few have any idea of the squalor and decadence lived by the Aboriginals! And it is not all the white man's fault but certainly the white man's burden. It was an interesting time for us but with numerous frustrations. With Land Cruiser packed with camping gear we were not sorry to leave Hall's Creek behind us as we took to the road, with the first overnight stop at **Victoria River roadhouse**. A hot, thundery and oppressive afternoon – so first call was of course, the pub. With 'frosties' in hand we slid into conversation with three anglers, our curiosity aroused by eavesdropping! They were talking about finding dead 'freshies' – to us Johnstone's Crocodiles – up to 3.5 m long floating belly up in the Victoria River. On cutting them open they found Cane Toads, highly toxic amphibians originally imported from Central America. These large toads were imported into northern Queensland early in the 20th Century to control insect pests attacking the lucrative sugarcane plantations. But nobody seemed to have been aware that the pests were nibbling away up to 2 m above the ground. Cane Toads are fully terrestrial and so were useless to the cane farmers. But the toads thrived and ate their way through a great range of small indigenous fauna, and poisoned many predators that tried to include them in their diet. Their march continues apace and we encountered them in many places in the north-east. That evening at Victoria River there was a dramatic thunderstorm, plenty of rain and a torchlight walk revealed dozens of Cane Toads.

Whilst in Hall's Creek we had been in correspondence with a group named the '**Toad Busters**'. Rallying townsfolk, ranchers and Aboriginals they were trying to halt the westward march of these toxic beasts. In one newsletter we were informed that in the vicinity of Victoria River roadhouse Cane Toads had been all but wiped out! Our torchlight walk revealed scores of Cane Toads, including gravid females. Unless some biological control method is found the Australians have lost the Cane Toad war, no single battle has been won! Cane Toads 10 – conservationists 0! At the present rate of the 'westward march' these master amphibians will reach the Indian Ocean at Derby and Broome by 2008. The only barrier to spread to the south will be the desert.

Our next stop was at the not very encouraging sounding 'Heartbreak Hotel' near **Cape Crawford**. On the way we passed the Elsie River cattle station, south of Roper Highway (a narrow gravel road!), famed as the brief home of Jeanne Gunn, author of "We of the Never Never". Newly married, she spent only one year on the station, when her husband died. The book gives an insight into the harsh nature of living in the northern tropics in the early 20th century.

The road that stretches to 'Heartbreak' is a single tar strip and when you see a roadtrain you give way, he will not. In the north the roadtrain drivers are a law unto themselves! The 270 km stretch to 'Heartbreak' is as flat as the proverbial pancake, with only one slight rise towards the end. We arrive to a dense smoke haze rising from one of the frequently burning bush fires at the end of the 'Big Dry'. We were greeted by a mob of the piously named, but dull-coloured, Apostle Birds. After moving into our cabin, as is our want (and it was a hot, dusty day) we headed for the corrugated iron-walled pub. Very rustic and very suited to the jackaroos and miners that prop up the bar counter. A group of geologists and mine staff from Boolaroola drive the 45 km to Heartbreak every evening to eat and drink, each with his or her personal stubby-holder. For the uninitiated, the stubby holder is as Australian as the Kangaroo and the Koala, and is slipped over your bottle of beer to keep it cold. The hotel is run by a retired Dutch couple and staffed by folk that appear to have 'run away' from life out there. The chef also serves as gardener, driving his lawnmower with one hand, beer in the other.

The following morning we had excellent views of two pairs of Koel – large cuckoo-like birds – and a Great Bowerbird had his bower near the ablution block. This latter bird we got to know well in Hall's Creek. This was a day of driving through flat grassland, as much of traveling through Australia is! These tablelands are home to vast herds of cattle on stations 100 000s of hectares in extent. Great swarms of locusts were competing for grass and many splattered their yellow, sticky inards on our Land Cruiser. We pulled into the **Barkley Homestead** roadhouse at lunch time where we learned the unimportant fact that they use 500 l of diesel every 24 hours in the generator. They are just too isolated to be connected to the national grid. Fifty kilometres from the Queensland border we enter the northernmost reach of the colossal Lake Eyre & Diamantina drainage basin; its southernmost end we meet many weeks later. Here we, appropriately, experienced great thunderstorms, torrential rain and the end of the 'Big Dry'. Our 2005 road atlas showed a new, double-lane highway but obviously the publishers were ahead of the road builders, as most was still single lane. The only highlight of our night in the mining town of **Mount Isa** was the black flying foxes feeding in the mango trees. We had 'done' the Stuart Highway in the Top End and now we travelled the Matilda Highway. We never did find a Chris Highway. That day we passed the point where the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition reached in their south to north crossing of the continent, the Quambi Motel which first served as the old Cobb & Co. coach station and entered the **Shire of Carpentaria**. Just 2500 people live in its 65 000 square km but we have to add that much of it is inundated during the 'Big Wet'.

With the rainy season having started great flocks of water birds coursed the floodplain. Many Brolga Cranes and a few Sarus Cranes, several ibis species and an assortment of ducks, as well as magpie geese. Our destination was the small fishing settlement of **Karumba**, lying on the south-eastern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Because it was also getting close to the cyclone season the shrimp and prawn boats were all on dry land and the fishermen in the pub. Because of the humid heat and threat of being cut off by flooding for weeks on end, we were the only non-residents in town. We were informed that they had not had a 'real wet' for years, so far only 'light showers'. Obviously definitions differed from ours. We had the Sunset Caravan Park to ourselves, walked to touch the waters of the Gulf but keeping a wary eye out for 'salties'. Agile Wallabies were common and quite bold. At the Sunset Tavern on the beach edge a flock of red-tailed black cockatoos were feeding on the nuts of the Beach Almond, and judging by the discarded shells and leaves they had been at it for some time. Flocks of gaudily plumaged rainbow lorikeets were everywhere, and it was here that we first sighted Pied Imperial pigeons. One meal at the Tavern had some drama when the chef caught a young carpet python in the kitchen. If there had been an African situation the snake would have been beaten to death but this lucky reptile was released into the scrub.

Our conclusion was that Karumba was a great place and may see us again! The only downside were the vast swarms of mosquitoes and the threat of dengue fever! The shire sends in pickups with giant

foggers on the back every 2 weeks, so we wondered if they didn't do this, how many mosquitoes it would take to carry you off into the Gulf! At the Sunset Tavern Mathilde continued her quest for the 'perfect' pavlova! She gave this one top marks but completely different to the one sampled in August in Alice Springs. Walking back in the evening we saw the dreaded Cane Toads everywhere, especially under the lampposts picking up fallen insects.

We continued along the Savanna Highway from **Normanton**, passing through flat sparsely wooded and badly overgrazed woodland. We had wanted to travel north on the Burke Road into central Cape York Peninsula and then cut across to Cooktown but we decided that getting bogged down in mud, or getting caught between rising rivers, and waiting for the return of the Dry was not an option. With a name like **Mount Surprise**, we just had to stay over. The village is based on the railway which runs two carriages up from the Pacific coast and comes for just one night each week. The little train has its own garage which is well chained and padlocked. We wondered whether people steal trains in these parts. Certainly not the sort of transport one could easily hide! It is in this area that cattle rustling is still seen as a sport although locals deny it, and was prevalent at least well in the 1980s. By some, nearby Croydon has been dubbed as the 'cattle rustling capital of Australia'. Certainly many aspects of life here give one the impression that this is very much frontier country. In the pub we asked what, if any, properties were on the market and the barmen said nary a thing. We had seen three empty railway houses but he said government refuses to sell "They must rot, useless bunch of bastards."

The main road passes through 40 Mile Scrub National Park which is said to be home to Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo. Our only mammal sightings here were of two dead European rabbits on the road. There seems to be no habitat in Australia that has kept these rabbits out.

The flat land was now giving way to the Great Dividing Range, and Ravenshoe, the highest located town, at 800 m above sea level, in Queensland. Turning north now to **Cooktown**, perched at the edge of the Coral Sea of the Pacific. It was here that Captain James Cook had to beach his ship after striking a submerged coral reef. Excitement in Cooktown came in the form of a Papuan Frogmouth (a giant nightjar-like bird) sitting on eggs, and the leaf mound nest of a brush-turkey just in front of our cabin. They really do look like turkeys, with the cocks having long yellow wattles. Their nest mounds function much the same as incubators, with the eggs lying deep in the mound. The temperature within is regulated by the parent birds by either shovelling on more, or removing, vegetation and testing the temperature by immersing the near naked head into the mound. The chick on hatching is fully feathered, can fly and receives no parental care. On emerging from the mound it is on its own. We were audience to a titanic struggle between a large lace monitor trying to dig eggs from the mound and the male turkey trying to keep it away. The latter vigorously kicking vegetation at the predator until the giant lizard had had enough. This was repeated several times over the hours. Did the monitor devour the eggs? We never found out.

The owners of the lodge in Cooktown also own an air transport business. He had spent several years illegally flying weapons and ammunition from South Africa to Angola, and on the return carrying out diamonds. His wife was not complimentary about doing business in Australia: "Australia is OK if you don't want to run a business and you don't have to have anything to do with the government. Youths have no go and are lazy, too many regulations and people don't dare question why." They were seriously considering moving lock, stock and barrel to New Guinea! That should tell us something but we are not quite sure what!

We spent time exploring the surrounds of Cooktown and liked what we saw. So now we have two 'favourite' spots in Australia, here and Karumba.

Our next piece of road was strictly 4x4 in the Wet and we were not sure whether that would help given the clay soil and very steep sections. The road hugs the coast and passes through part of the rain-forest cloaked hills of the **Daintree National Park**. The only downside was passing through the Aboriginal settlement of Rossville which took us back to the squalor and filth of our time in Hall's Creek. At **Cape Tribulation** back to a paved road and of course more people. Nevertheless, new birds, warning signs for Saltwater Crocodiles and in any case as it was the stinger jellyfish season nobody was in the water. This is also it seems the 'last stand' of the new-wave and latter day hippies. But as all over Australia everybody it seems takes their beer drinking very seriously as indeed they do their tattoos! A brewer's dream!

This was another area where there has not been a really good 'Wet' for 10 years. The swamp forest here is brittle dry with standing water in only a few places. Shortly after our return to South Africa a massive, drenching, cyclone hit this area, so we presume the locals were soon longing for the 'Big Dry'.

Very hot and humid heading south, taking the car ferry across the **Daintree River** one immediately enters vast plantations of sugarcane and development. The wilderness has gone except in the hills to the west. We spent time in those hills near **Julatten** in a privately owned nature reserve. It certainly lived up to its reputation as a premier birding spot and we filmed Tawny Frogmouth with a large, well rounded, chick and an active Kookaburra nest in a tree hollow. Food of the day seemed to be mainly white-lipped tree frogs. Large numbers of rainbow lorikeets feeding on tree flower nectar and the occasional glimpse of the Buff-breasted Kingfisher from which the reserve takes its name.

Then on to **Cairns**, and what a tourist circus it is, with every third shop hawking trips – adventure tours! – to the Great Barrier Reef. Tourism gone mad we fear and our first introduction to the tropical reaches of the so-called Gold Coast. Shopping malls, restaurants, ice-cream parlors, hotels and cluster housing. Christmas music booming from every second store, all rather surreal. But we did weaken at the Baskin Robbins ice-cream parlor and then we headed south to seek out some quieter spot.

Mission Beach was our choice, on the coast and an area well known for its Cassowaries, Australia's rainforest "ostrich". On a long walk through the forest and to the beach we encountered our first wild Cassowary crossing a clearing between two forest patches. A later sighting brought us within 5 metres of one of these foraging birds and it was cooperative enough to let us capture it on film. But always being aware of its dagger-like claws, that are said to be able to disembowel one within the blink of an eye! Sadly, the numbers of Cassowaries is diminishing here as holiday developments run rampant with seemingly minimal control.

A few hours in **Townsville**, a pleasanter more established town than Cairns, and one of the best aquariums we have visited. Then we set on **Bowling Green Bay National Park** but the brochure says it is essential to book as it is very popular. It gives you the number to phone to book but when you get through the friendly chap at the other end has never heard of the park! Eventually it is located on his computer. As it turned out the Alligator Creek campground was empty and we selected a better site than the one we had been allocated. To crown it all we could have paid in the park but the telephone chappie was adamant we couldn't! The mysteries of the civil-service mind.

Our time spent in the hills within Bowling Green National Park was a relief from the frenetic coastal lifestyle. Why Bowling Green? We never found out but perhaps named by somebody with a sense of humour as we only encountered rugged hill and gorge country. We had the place largely to ourselves apart from mobs of agile wallabies, unadorned rock wallabies and very inquisitive bush turkeys. One male regularly checked on our camp, sampling everything, including soap of which he didn't approve, left uncovered.

As we travelled along the coast we got quite depressed at what we refer to as destruction and the developers as development! At **Conway NP** we went into the Queensland conservation offices to try to find locations to see the seriously endangered Prosperine Rock Wallaby. A very pleasant staff member explained their habitat was disappearing at such a pace because of development that few probably survive. One small population near town would disappear as a holiday housing estate was being constructed. Another large estate at Bowen is being developed but apparently the freshwater resources are already over utilized. A string of natural spring fed lakelets in the area have been drained. When we asked what the department was doing, she told us that they have no say and cannot veto developments. So then we had to ask ourselves why have a conservation department in the first place?

We then followed her advice and headed for **Cape Hillsborough National Park**. We did some interesting walks, looked down on green turtles swimming in the clear waters below the cliffs, good birds, including a newly emerged Brush Turkey chick, and a fine Carpet Python right outside our hut. And early one morning a chap on a bicycle riding along the beach with an Eastern Grey Kangaroo bounding along behind him. It turned out he had bottle-raised it as a joey and this was the way he and the 'roo' got their exercise.

In **Mackay** on the Pioneer River, we ask a chap for directions to the post office, says he is going in that direction and will walk with us. He was born in Cairns, where his father was a logger working the steep rain-forest covered hills. They used oxen to haul the logs and one day the log chains snapped and dad was no more. As we went off to the post office he headed into a body-piercing and tattoo emporium. Wonder what he came out with as his arms were already well decorated!

In the **Eungella Forest National Park** we set on a bit of luxury as it was after all Christmas! Our goal here was the elusive Platypus, as it is said that this is the best place in Australia to see it. Certainly when we were there it proved to be true. We watched one of these evolutionary oddities foraging up and down the stream, and again the next day. When the first stuffed specimen was sent to Europe, naturalists were adamant that this was a concocted fraud made up from parts of different animals! So, if anyone wants to see platypus in the wild we can recommend Eungella. Another highlight here are the Brushtail possums that come for their nightly feed at the restaurant.

We now travelled through vast areas of recently cleared bushland. As it was mostly cattle country we surmised it was to create more grazing areas, as too dry for cultivation. This was the story throughout the cattle ranges of Queensland, land clearing, overgrazing and erosion. On one 120 km stretch we passed no settlements, homesteads or vehicles, just mobs of cattle.

From the gloriously named settlement of Dingo we joined the **Capricorn Highway** heading westward. Our destination the Tableland National Park but the road and park were closed because of a wild fire, the smoke from which we could see billowing in the distance. We were now in one of Australia's most productive coal mining areas but fortunately the only sign of them were the long trains that haul this fuel source to the coast and away to China and Japan. Booked into a cabin in the town of **Emerald**, nice and green with lots of screeching parrots, bliss. Then peace shattered by screaming police, ambulance and fire-engine sirens. Must be at least a major mining or rail accident, but no, we were informed this was the local Christmas parade!

Then to find an open bottle shop to rehydrate after the hot day and heading towards a hot evening. The only place open is the Memorial Club pub and purveyor of ale and the like. This is an ex-servicemen's club and they are scattered all over Australia, and good for a meal and a drink. BUT.... Says the attractive barmaid they can only sell to us if you show your service card. BUT... I

never carry it when I am travelling, not that I have one, and you don't want me to die of thirst on Christmas Eve surely. She relented and we got our fix!

The town of **Roma** is not the sort of place you would send a postcard home from but it does have its claims to fame. It was an oil drilling centre in the early 1900's and still supplies natural gas to Brisbane and Gladstone. It also claims to have Australia's largest cattle auction yard, and it certainly is massive. It was opened in 1969 and now up to 10 000 head of cattle are auctioned at every Tuesday sale. In 2002 / 2003 over 374 000 head changed hands here, that is an awful lot of steaks and beef-burgers.

Onwards to the south, passing **Dulacca**, where the Queensland government initiated its prickly pear cactus eradication programme. 40 000 ha of land was offered to those who could clear this amount of land of the Central American invader. Reports of this infestation beggar belief, both in area covered and density of these continuous stands. What is it about Australia that results in exotic beasts and plants running rampant on such an unbelievable scale? Apart from manual and chemical attempts at eradication, the key to the program was the caterpillar of the humble cactoblastus moth. Outside Chinchilla at **Brigalow** there is a memorial, surely the only one in the world dedicated to a caterpillar. They deserve it as they munched their way through millions of hectares of cactus, allowing the land to be returned to grazing and cultivation.

Now the **Bunya Mountains National Park** was in our sights, and reached after passing through tracts of agricultural lands. The mountains are ringed at their lower levels by dry eucalyptus and scrub forest, but on the higher slopes one enters temperate rain forest. Australia has only a handful of coniferous tree species but here grow two, the Hoop Pine and the Bunya Pine. They produce large cones but have more elaborate leaves than the simple needle-pines. We stayed in private accommodation on the fringe of the park, where we saw our first Catbirds, King Parrots, Crimson Corellas, Satin Bowerbird and Topknot Pigeons. The Riflebirds eluded us, even though we heard their distinctive call frequently in the denser parts of the forest. Unfortunately it was a weekend and the area of park headquarters was crowded, included mobs of bikers that had come up from the coastal towns. The crowds fazed us more than they did the habituated red-necked wallabies.

Our cabin, one of three, is owned by 'the Dane of Bunya Mountains', an elderly, retired, nearly deaf gentleman who was obviously starved of conversation. He had lived on the mountains for 30 years and has noted a general decline in birds and wildlife in general. He had nothing good to say about the conservation authorities or the government. "Johnny [John Howard, the long-standing premier] will be happy when the last wildlife has gone." We felt that was a bit scathing but much is wrong with Australia's conservation policies and land management but there have been some successes.

At park headquarters a big sign instructs the public not to feed the birds, so naturally dozens of people were feeding the king parrots and rosellas. Staff were about but made no effort to intervene. A shop in the park sells seed but at the staff office they explain they are against it but

Now back on the road the landscape, farms and the like have lost the "Australian feel" - European just warmer, bigger and perhaps in some ways more productive. By the 29th December we had Queensland to our back as we entered New South Wales. At Tenterfield a sign at a petrol station states: "Last place with Queensland prices!" New South Wales taxes are higher and the prices of fuel noticeably so. We climb to 1330 m on the **Great Dividing Range** and then drop down to Tamworth, said to be the capital of Australian country music. The Nashville of the island continent! At the village of **Wallabadah** we haul into the pub for lunch, simple and typical Australian, not for tourists. We ask at the bar and are told, go to the kitchen, order and pay. We have learned in these places that the menu is in the head of the cook and not on the printed page. It was a good wholesome meal and at A\$ 5.- one of the cheapest we had in the country.

Further south, at Blandford we seem to travel for kilometres with a huge thoroughbred horse stud on either side of the road. Finally a big sign proclaiming it the property of the Dubai ruler, Sheikh Mohammed. That explained its size as he does nothing on a small scale. The small town of Stone which proclaims itself the “horse capital” of Australia, no doubt courtesy of the Sheikh. We then entered the famed wine-producing area of Hunter’s Valley. These we can see in South Africa so nothing to hold us here.

Now we headed for **Sydney** as prearranged with an old school friend of Chris. We spent 6 days in the city, with magnificent views of the harbour, opera house and the famous bridge, and a grandstand view of the New Year’s firework display. Thank you Kerr and Judith for a fine time, great hospitality and catching up over the decades in your mansion at McMahons Point. The Sydney Aquarium was superb, Toronga Zoo not as good as we had expected, the water taxis a great way of getting around, the mobs of grey-headed flying foxes in the botanical garden great.

New Year’s Day topped at 45° C at Sydney Airport and fire warnings were going out in all directions. Those eucalyptus forests are like tinder boxes. One fire in the west of the state that day killed 30 000 sheep! The following day the maximum temperature only reached 23° - a land of sharp contrasts.

On the 4th of January we hit the road again as thousands of kilometres still lay ahead of us. Climbing the **Blue Mountains** and peaking at 1200 m, where we encounter the switch-back steam train as it travelled right next to the road. The latter now meandered between the Blue Mountain and Abercrombie River National Parks. A lot of travel through farmland but once in the south-west, mostly small, national parks and reserves abound. Great “forests” of cycads in the Clyde River National Park covered the eucalyptus forest floor.

And here is a good Australian tale: between Bermagui and Cobargo along the road is a spotted gum tree, known locally as the “pee tree” and it is protected! Why? In the 1920’s the local bank manager, after his weekly visit to the pub, stopped on his way home to empty his bladder at the base of this very tree. A tree felling program in the area was about to demolish this “national monument” but the banker purchased it and gave it to the Mumbulla Shire Council on condition it must never be felled. The roads here have been aligned to bypass this tree.

Another local tale concerns the Tathra Warf Hotel. In the 1920’s the proprietor would only sell drinks to “genuine travellers” 10 miles from home, the existing road from Bega was 12 miles. The plans to straighten the road were adjusted to keep Tathra Hotel 10 miles from Bega.

Most of our non-camping overnight stays were in prefabricated cabins, many variations but the theme the same, and not infrequently converted cool rooms. Something we came to call the Great Australian prefab culture!

There is still an amazing area covered by natural forest in south-eastern Australia and many of the region’s conservation areas are centred on these forests. At **Haycock Point** we encounter our first Eastern Whipbird, its call certainly more impressive than its dull plumage. The fishing village of Eden is famed for its former symbiosis with Killer Whales and whalers. Apparently the Killer Whales drove whales into the bay and alerted the whalers who then came out with their harpoon boats. Once dead the Killer Whales only ate the slaughtered whales’ tongues – a big meal in itself – and left the rest to the whalers.

In the state of Victoria we establish ourselves for three days at **Cann River**, making day trips to several of the small conservation areas. Here we had at the top of our wish list one, of two, species

of lyrebird but it eluded us. Unfortunately the breeding season was past, when the males' imitative calling help one to track them down in the dense forest undergrowth. For days we had been hearing what we were certain was a tree frog but at Cann River the mystery was solved, the frogs were in fact birds, the Bell Miner. We had several sightings of black, or swamp, wallaby – a denizen of dense undergrowth. One rule in these parks in the south-east really puzzled us: if you were staying in the campsites you were not allowed to have open fires (most people ignored this) but if you were a day visitor you were permitted to have a fire. The logic of this defeated us.

Now we followed the **Great Alpine Road**, a long slow climb along the Tambo River, finally cresting amongst ski resorts, ski lifts and the building of more of the same. At 1808 metres we started our descent to **Harrierville**, sliding on melting tarmac in very unAlpine temperatures. We are invited to a free outdoor concert along with the rest of the village. Sitting on the lawn with wine and good music, all rather civilized. In front of our accommodation we find a Satin Bower Bird bower, the males of this species favour the collection of blue objects to attract the females.

At Milawa we call in at the cheesery and bakery, at the former buying a fine five year old cheddar! Our first introduction to the **Murray River** was at Swan Hill. But we push on to a guest farm at Pental Island also located on the south bank of the river, whose level was very low. Given all the water pumped out for irrigation it wasn't a surprise. Much of the river gum forest was heavily logged in the past so much is secondary growth. Many large dead trees still stand but were ring-barked some 70 years ago to encourage growth of young trees.

In the **Hattah Kulkyn National Park** we followed barely used tracks through the sand dunes. Encountered rabbit exclusion fences but their tracks were equally numerous on both sides. Lack of maintenance or just an impossible task? Select a 'wild' campsite in open woodland on the bank of the Murray River. Large flocks of sulphur-crested Cockatoos coursing up and down the river. Kookaburras plentiful and cheeky Australian magpies 'invade' our camp. A camp we reluctantly left but the days were dwindling.

We cross the Murray River northward and re-enter New South Wales, on the way to **Broken Hill** we stop at the Maiden Hotel in Menindee, in order to raise our bottles to Burke & Wills, who many years before had passed through this very spot. We leave the woodlands and enter the low scrub plains, very similar to that of the South African Karoo. Lunch stop at Broken Hill, one of the most productive mines in the land, but we do not linger and soon pass into South Australia. Many of the small settlements established along the now defunct **Ghan Railway** are either ghost towns or home to a few hardy desert hands. Another railway is only used to haul coal from Leigh Creek to Port Augusta. These trains are a staggering 2.8 km long! The Prairie Hotel on the western flank of the Flinders Ranges offers only wild fare in the form of camel sausage, emu and kangaroo. If you are planning to pass through here, the fare is meagre and overpriced.

In the **Flinders** we stayed in an old, rather rundown, homestead at Warraweena, a privately run reserve. Heading in it started to rain, the track was slippery and we had images building of our Sandstone adventure in Western Australia. The reserve is managed by one Stony Steiner, a Swiss fellow who escaped the European rat race and is more Australian than the Australians. We would have liked to have spent another night but as more rain was forecast we decided to get out while we could. We searched for yellow-footed rock wallabies around Aroona Dam without luck, although there are said to be about 50 of them in quite a limited area.

Onwards now towards **Lake Eyre** and the base camp of McDouall Stuart at the appropriately named Stuart Creek. Later the Ghan Railroad was laid along part of this great explorer's trail. All that remains of the Ghan, a few abandoned stations and some sleepers and the raised rail bed. An information board informs us at one of the stations (Curdimurka) that in 1989 no less than 381 mm

of rain fell within 44 hours. Station owners and hands were unable to move around their properties for weeks, and in some cases they had to wait months to reach the outside world.

The largest functioning cattle station in the world, **Anna Creek**, is located in this area. It covers 24,000 km² and in the dry season runs up to 12 000 head of cattle, rising to 17 600 in the wet. Mustering the cattle is undertaken with fixed-wing aircraft and motorbikes, horses only being used near the holding pens. Most of the cattle are Santa Gertrudis but there are also Longhorn crosses. The further north we head the drier it gets. Dense clouds of fine dust billow behind us as we head along the Oodnadatta Track and into the Gibber Desert. Rescue a German couple with a hire vehicle with a broken jack, blown out tyre and only one spare. They return to Leigh Creek but we bump into them again at Williams Creek and Coober Pedi. It was a strikingly hot day and on top of vehicle problems they were suffering from heat stress.

Then we come to the southern shore of **Lake Eyre**, the vast saline pan, that only a couple of times a century fills with water. It was hard to imagine on that day with shade temperature hovering around 50° C and not a cold beer in sight. Despite the heat we wanted to see the “mound springs”. These are freshwater and mineral springs that bubble out of the grounds, the minerals having formed mounds above the surrounding plain. Each is fringed by grass and they have a number of unique animals that are only found here. Mathilde is suffering early effects of heat exhaustion and we need to seek out shade! Not an abundant commodity in these parts. We find a large spring, fringed with tamarisk trees further along the road, not much shade but better than nothing. Although we both like parrots, the presence of hundreds of Corella Cockatoos also seeking shade, constantly shrieking, was not a welcome one. But like us they were not going to relinquish their place out of the sun.

Then on to **Williams Creek**, a settlement with just 4 permanent residents, a closed down shop and a wattle & daub pub with only three rooms with air-conditioning and they were booked. So we downed a few frosties, went to set up camp and returned to the “cool” pub. The very inadequate air-conditioning with vast flexible pipes coiled all ways probably dropped the temperature from 45° C to 40° C that evening. Mixed company, owner, daughter & partner, two Austrian couples travelling through and an estate agent trying to sell the pub. No mate, we are not interested!

That night there was rain and in the morning continuing travelling across Anna Creek Station, a rare sight, lots of standing water. After a rough road and a slaughtered tyre we arrived at the famed opal mining town of **Coober Pedi**. Like most mining towns it is not particularly charming but the numerous earth and rock ringed pits pay testimony to a hardy bunch. Many houses are underground, as is one hotel, just to escape the baking summer heat. We have returned after some months to the Stuart Highway, having travelled it previously in the north. Passed by the Woomera Restricted Area, where nasty weapons are tested, including British nuclear tests of over half a century ago. Bet they didn't warn the kangaroos, or the Aborigines for that matter! And now they rant and rave about North Korea and Iran! Overnight at Glendambo Roadhouse, AC's struggle with the heat, their water source is drying up and mainly reliant on rain water for the kitchen. They have two boreholes, one ran dry a while back and the second sucked its last drops that very morning. We noted their fridges well stocked with beer so they won't die of thirst. First thing in the morning the temperature is already on 30° C.

Again we head off away from the main highways into the ‘Never Never’, cross the India-Pacific Railroad (connecting Sydney with Perth) at Kingoonya, then along the eastern side of Lake Gairdner to the **Gawler Ranges**. We pass one vehicle in 300 kms, traverse the cattle stations of Kokatha, Kanguru Well, Moonaree and Thurliga. A mix of gibber plains, flat sand country with saltbush, sand dunes and salt pans. Plenty of feral camels roaming the country and several sightings of herds. Ahead of us we see the low hill range, the Gawler Ranges, round-topped hills, mulga and mallee woodland, and saltbush flats. This national park was only proclaimed in 2002 but we saw

emus, common wallaroos and a few interesting birds. The hot wind felt as it does when you open the door of a hot oven, but without the tantalizing smells.

Now we explore the **Eyre Peninsula**, an area that suffered horrendous bushfires in 2004: thousands of sheep and cattle died, homes were destroyed and five people perished in the inferno. Much of the area is farmland and Port Lincoln in the south-east is its principal town. Because of the heat and the tinder dry vegetation the region was on high alert because of the fire danger. The authorities were blamed for not being properly prepared in 2004, they didn't want a repeat. But having watched some of these wild fires we were not actually sure what could be done, other than evacuate people when a fire starts. Lo and behold, we were in the Port Lincoln library checking email when the fire alarms went off and we were all ordered into the courtyard and within minutes a fire engine arrived. False alarm probably with the heat setting off the sensors.

At **Elliston** we learn that on that day we are in the hottest spot in Australia, a mere 46° C. A brief call in at **Lake Newland**, unsigned nature reserve that lies parallel to the coastal sand dunes. A number of freshwater springs bubble up on the eastern shore of this lakelet, attracting many water birds, including on our visit a number of the localized Cape Barren Geese. At Point Labatt we look down on a small colony of Australian Sea-lions from spectacular cliffs, those in the crystal clear water offer the chance to observe their aquatic elegance.

With the temperature still at 44° C at 4 pm, on the 21. January we halt for the day at **Streaky Bay**. First priority of course cold beer in another "classic" Australian pub, formica tops and gambling machines, as well as plenty of well tattooed patrons. But the air conditioning was very efficient. In **Ceduna** we fall into conversation with a 'self-proclaimed' rubbish remover along the seafront lawns on Sunday mornings. Sundry Aboriginals lying and sprawled under trees surrounded by empty wine casks and beer tins imbibed the day before. Our informant tells us it is supposed to be an alcohol free area but obviously another law / regulation made to be broken, as we saw so much along the way.

Now comes the long run through the **Nullarbor**, the treeless plain. It is dead flat and runs for over 1000 kms east to west. Most of the vegetation is less than 50 cm high. Tall plants would be battered by the frequent gales that lash in off the fringing Great Australian Bight – the shark-like bite taken out of the belly of the island continent. The day before our arrival the shade temperature had stood at 51° C but heavy overnight rain had cooled it down to just 22° C. Anywhere else in Australia we would have been scouting the pools for frogs but in the heart of the Nullarbor there are none! The limestone rocks absorb the water so rapidly that no tadpoles could metamorphose in this limited time. Magnificent scalloped cliffs fringe a considerable length of the Bight, eroded by wave action and the gale force winds. These can be viewed just a few hundred metres at several spots from the highway and well worth braving the 'hurricane'.

One bird we had searched for in many parts of its range was Major Mitchell's, or Pink, Cockatoo. On the Darling River to the east we had seen two dead on the road but that is not the same as 'a bird in the bush'. As we crossed from South Australia into the Western state there were two of the magnificent parrots feeding on red berries in a bush at the roadside. They have a showy crest, coloured pink, orange and yellow, raised in display or alarm. This was at the very limit of their range so we were lucky.

The western side of the Nullarbor is no longer treeless but low eucalypt thickets prevail, known locally as mallee. Outside **Caiguna** we begin to drive on the longest dead straight stretch of road in Australia. It runs for 146 kms without any deviation to right or left. But it is a killing ground and we counted 43 dead kangaroos in just 5 km! To have counted them along the entire Nullarbor route would have run into the high hundreds.

Our last night on the grand tour was at **Fraser Range Station** that we knew from an earlier visit when we were based in Esperance. Accommodation is in converted shearers quarters and unusually for rural Australia it was built from sandstone blocks and not the standard prefabs.

We rented a cottage outside Esperance for a couple of days which gave us chance to sell our trusty Land Cruiser, disperse the camping gear we did not want to keep and re-acquaint ourselves with the couple of good restaurants. For the last few days and the trip to Perth we hired a car and drove to **Albany**, which during the days of sailing ships was an important port.

Happened to switch the TV on at our Kalgan River cabin – 14° C outside – Aboriginal demonstrators with a placard reading “Happy Australia Day: Invasion Day. Everything that has been done to us [they have done nothing themselves!!] has been done in the name of this!”

We travelled into the **Sterling Range** via the Chester Pass, good heath vegetation with amongst others Banksia and Grevilleas, but the weather was not conducive to a wander in the hills. We pass places with names with a lilt to them – Borden, Gnowangerup (“place of the malleefowl”), Tambellup and Cranbrook.

Although a lot of the land has been cleared for agriculture and grazing there are still substantial areas under indigenous forest, especially between Mount Barker and Denmark. The ‘**Valley of the Giants**’ is a protected area with mighty hollow buttressed Red Tingle trees. Unfortunately, despite the cool and misty weather the tourists were out in force. The two nights we spent in the area we lit a log fire to keep the cold at bay. It was not long since we had been experiencing 45 – 51 ° C! Certainly a land of contrasts.

We looked at a few coastal towns but decided on a night in a hotel at **Margaret River**. A trendy town, with the sort of bars and restaurants we have not encountered over much of Australia. Been in the sticks so long, don’t feel entirely at ease. This area is the ‘Hunters Valley’ of the west when it comes to wine production.

To the north-east, now away from the coast, we pass through impressive Tuart, Jarra and Tingle forests. These are mere remnants of their former glory before the first Europeans feasted their eyes on the timber value and set to with gusto to fell with axe and double-handed saw. Our last two ‘wild nights’ were spent in the **Dryandra Forest Nature Reserve**, in a cottage in an old forestry / logging settlement. It forms part of the Western Shield Project, aimed at protecting and reintroducing a range of endangered mammals, mainly marsupials, and controlling exotic species such as the Red Fox, feral cats and rabbits. Western Grey Kangaroos were plentiful and we saw two beasts new to us in the wild, the mongoose-like Numbat and the spiny ant-eating Echidna. Now we had seen both egg-laying monotremes, the other being the platypus at Eungella in the east. Birdlife was splendid, with flocks of white-tailed black cockatoos, impressive Kookaburra choruses and the ever-cheeky Australian magpies. At night we were visited by an inquisitive Brush-tailed Possum, intent on checking dustbin and anything else that might provide food.

Our last three days were spent in **Perth**, looking, walking, relaxing. To end our Australian odyssey on the final day we take a bottle of wine, glasses, ham rolls into King’s Park overlooking the city and Swan River. Beautiful weather, interesting birds and pesky jet skis on the river below. The next day Australia was to our backs and Africa lay ahead.

To those with an interest in language we end off with some of the phrases that are exclusively Australian:

Mud map = sketch map

Skid lid = helmet

Northern Territory work boots = thongs

Ground lice = sheep (mainly Gippsland)

Underground mutton = rabbits

Crook = sick, ill.

Chuck = vomit