

Larapinta Trail NT: 5–26 July

Walkers: Bill, Brian, Chris, Coralie, Diane F, Glenda M, Glenda O, Heaton, Irene, Janice, John, Linda, Liz, Lothar, Mike, Shirley, Terry, Val, Viv

Diane:

Remote walking in unfamiliar country presented a challenge before we even left home. Coats, no coats? How much water? Tent inners or tent flies or even both? We all chose different options. How many blister packs, band aids or bandages?

This remote desert experience was like Tasmania without flies, rain, bog and mossies. What a surprise!

To ease into the trek, we had clambered up the spectacular Mt Sonder, hiked along the banks of the ancient Finke River and made excursions into Ormiston Pound.

All too soon it was time to heave on the packs and leave behind the relative comforts of the Ormiston Gorge Camp Ground (showers, tables, ice-cream shop) and head into the rugged unknown. Walking was quite easy for the first 3 hours as we traversed the lowlands in the shade of the lower peaks of the West MacDonnell Ranges. The track was generally easy to follow, with markers at frequent intervals. The 'base of the hill' came before we knew about it. Heaton was sure that the track designers would have us climb and descend another knoll before the climb proper came. Half way up the first steep section and sweating profusely in the heat of the day, we were very glad that we were actually making progress towards the top of the range.

Astounding views came at the top. Extensive vistas in all directions made us appreciate the expanse of the West MacDonnells. We had a bird's eye view of Ormiston Pound and gazed at Mounts Sonder, Razorback and Zeil and beyond these, Haasts Bluff.

Traversing the quartzite ridgeline was tough on the feet. The sharply angled rocks meant we had to watch every step and we welcomed the opportunity to compare notes with two other parties walking the route in the opposite direction. One group advised us to camp on the ridge above our intended overnight stop. By the time we arrived at this spot we were grateful to do so and set about grooming the rocky sites to ensure relatively flat sleeping.

Although we had been laden with water for 2 days, it was amazing what emerged from packs that night. Brian proved his worth by sharing his 'Gingernuts' with us over a cuppa but became a legend when it was discovered he had carried a BASE MAT to sleep on. His responses to our gasps of awe were "it only weighs 2 kilos" and "I thought everyone carried one".

It was a wonderful spot to view sunset and for a brief while stargaze before the moon rose and we cast ghostly shadows on the rocky ground. Diane bravely went to bed under a tent fly only and resolutely blocked out Heaton, Mike and Coralie's stories of scorpions and spiders. We believe (although it was not verified) that she had every orifice blocked to prevent entry by any 'creepy crawlly'.

The wind, which had sprung up during the night, made breaking camp tricky. Unpegged tents threatened to parachute over the cliffs. After a hasty breakfast, we descended to Waterfall Gorge. The track was very steep and covered with loose rocks so in hindsight it was wiser to do this section with



rested knees and less water.

Waterfall Gorge was a small sandy riverbed with interesting cliff edges. We climbed up behind the waterfall and left the gorge. Moving along the base of some sparsely vegetated low hills, Liz and Mike found many desert flowering plants to photograph for a talk to a Warrnambool group interested in Australian plants.

The morning was spent traversing this country, slowly climbing over a series of low saddles. Eventually we turned south and headed into Inarlanga Pass. This was the surprise packet of the day. In this cool and protected area we Diane and cycads in Inarlanga Pass

came across a dense growth a dense growth of cycads. Some of the female plants were resplendent with red cones. Skills in negotiating rocky drops and narrow ledged were required as we made our way to the intersection of two sections of the track.

Back in the dry country, we passed ochre pits, their chalky colours dripping down the cliff faces.

The At the Serpentine Chalet Dam camp, the first accessible water for 2 days was found in tanks. That night we were able to have a small fire and the ritual of boiling drinking water in billies for the next day began. A trip to the dam proved to be a disappointing bathing spot (green and big enough only for dipping Diane's big toe in) but interesting for its historic, structural and scenic qualities.

Brian:

Massive rock formations, broken, split, twisted and moulded into fantastic shapes. Deep, spectacular gullies and gorges gouged out by volumes of water that we could only try to imagine. Bone dry rock surfaces smashed by nature, sprouting wildflowers of beautiful shape and colour. Sandy river beds, precious waterholes – oases of life. Ancient, awesome, daunting, spectacular!

Failed resort. Massive rock cleft at Serpentine Dam – engineering feat to build dams. Small mountain of rock washed up blocking first dam – overflow of silt blocking the second – man beaten by nature!

Day 3 saw us on our way by 7.45am. Mercifully the climb to Count's Point wasn't too steep in the cool of the morning and with considerably lighter packs we ascended steadily. Counts Point was reached by morning tea time and out came the cameras for another photographic fest. For the umpteenth time, Mt Sonder featured again.

While this pleased Liz, the rest of us were more blasé.

Mike, Brian, Liz, Coralie & Diane on Counts Point

We followed the ridgeline, tangling occasionally with the distinctly unfriendly spikes and spines of



the vegetation. Although the Spinifex glistened beautifully in the morning light, we soon found it was unwise to subject bare skin to its barbs. Weeks later most of us were still extracting splinters from our hands.

On the horizon, Mike and Coralie debated whether the objects on the hill ahead were trees or people. Eventually the objects focused into Warrnambool Walkers (Linda, John, Bill, Viviane, Val, Irene, Terry and Shirley) who had walked up greet us from the Serpentine Gorge Car Park.

After a hillside lunch we headed down to the bus and back to Alice Springs. Our first overnight foray into Lherepirnte Land had ended.

Overnight Walk Part 2

The team was almost the same as before except Brian was out (retired) and Janice was in. After completing her own research and listening to our experiences, Janice opted for super-lightweight travel (no rain coat, no tent fly and only 4 'Rye-vita' biscuits and a wedge of cheese for lunch).

This section started with an exciting and bumpy 4WD adventure. At times it was better not to look; just let Doug, the driver, get on with the job. His mighty 4WD beast eventually dropped us at the beautiful Birthday Waterhole. A semi permanent water outlet, this was a delightful spot to spend the night.

Mike, Liz, Coralie, Heaton & Janice Day 2 Ridgeline

Birds and dingoes frequented the area also. Late that night we heard the plaintive mating call of a lone male. Liz and Mike were about to berate Heaton for messing about at that ungodly hour when a whole dingo chorus erupted. We sank deeper into our sleeping bags.

A lively discussion about how much muesli Mike and Liz would need entertained us at breakfast then it was time to harness ourselves into laden packs and steel ourselves for the climb onto the Chewings Range.

The first 3.5 hours were pleasant enough as we followed the trail past Mintbush Spring and up onto Stuart's Pass. Despite the early start the climbing was hot, slow work. Lunch was enjoyed in a cycad gully near Rocky Cleft.

We met a father and daughter who had spent the night near the summit and told them about the steep descent they had in front of them. Ha! They must have thought we were simple. We soon found the section ahead of us was even more precipitous! The track was also difficult to follow and we often needed two pairs of eyes to keep on it.

Hauling body and pack a step at a time up that slope required stamina and large amounts of grit.



When we finally reached the summit cairn mid afternoon the total distance walked for the day had been 7.7 km. But a tougher, meaner 7.7 km in those conditions would be hard to find.

Brinkley Bluff provided us with superb panoramic views once again.

Janice beside her tent: Brinkley Bluff Summit.

It was quite hot as we drank a reviving cup of tea crammed into a shady area provided by the stunted vegetation. Janice and Heaton cooked a sumptuous meal in billies over the fire while the rest of us prepared 3 course feasts on fuel stoves.

Heaton:

Highlights of both high camps were the pre dawn and post sunset colours with ranges silhouetted against bright backgrounds. Blues, purples and reds of all shades came and went during these half hour periods. Reds and more reds were predominant during the pre sunset and post sunrise periods.

The near full moon threw so much light we probably could have walked by it. One surprising feature was the extent of the ranges. Each high point gave us views of range after range to the north, east and west.

The walking on day 2 was little short of spectacular. The ridge top traverse towards Reveal Saddle provided magnificent views east and west along the Chewings Range. By this stage our feet were feeling the effects of heavy packs and rocky terrain and regular airings of the socks and toes became essential to our comfort. Rear ends were also suffering from sitting on too many rocks and Coralie was doing a roaring trade in swapping a session on her (carried) tripod seat for 'Splices' at the next kiosk.

We picked up the Bridle Trail, an old trading route used by early settlers just after 'second breakfast'. This led us down into a riverbed, which we followed to the relative metropolis of Standley Chasm.

Beyond Standley Chasm

"Camp on the grass in front of the toilets. The flood lights come on for half an hour at a time and you can't put any tents up until 5 pm," the girl at the kiosk instructed us. After the freedom of the bush camps, this came as a surprise but no tent emerged above the horizontal until the appointed hour. In the meantime we ate ice creams, drank iced coffees and explored the delights of Standley Chasm. The rock wallabies greeted us in the evening cool and some even sniffed hopefully around our tents.

The track profile for the Standley Chasm to Jay Creek section tackled on day 3 looked daunting.



Up and then more abruptly up! However, steps of rock fashioned by the route makers helped reduced the impact of the endless ups and downs over rocky crags, which formed an amphitheatre beyond the Chasm.

At Millers Flat we considered our options: the high route was appealing for the views to be gained but would take an hour longer than the low route through cycad gorges. The lure of our last panoramic views prevailed.

On top Heaton insisted we all sample a cycad nut. It was extremely bitter, even the Dutch couple sitting with us spat it out politely but quickly. We later learned that it was highly poisonous in its raw state and had been the downfall of a number of early explorers.

Much to Liz's relief the downhill section to Tangentyere Junction was relatively easy. The lower countryside after this was less rocky and undulating and we were soon at the beautiful Fish Hole.

Reaching for his camera to record the scene, Mike found he didn't have his camera! This cost him and Liz over an hour of extra walking as they retraced their steps to retrieve it.

At Jay Creek we said goodbye to Janice (after cannibalising her pack) and met up with more Warrnambool expeditioners who had walked in from the access road. They joined us for the last two days of the trip. Here are some of their reflections on the section from Jay Creek to Mulga Camp and through to our final destination of Simpsons Gap.

Highs and Lows

Terry:

Highlight: It is hard to pick any one highlight, however the fact that I actually did the walk would have to be one. Also the changing scenery from dry Mulga to the Ghost Gum waterhole we experienced on the first day. It was an easy walk, which I handled comfortably and was able to observe the country and wildlife.

Lowlight: No lowlight or "What am I doing here?" thoughts.

Viviane:

Highlight: The magic of the red desert sand, hardy plants, hot unforgiving sun, cold nights, beautiful stars and the nice warm feeling of sitting around a camp fire.

Having achieved the overnight walk. "An experience"

Lowlight: The awful toilet



Linda:

Highlight: The change in the vegetation where we passed through the home of a Brushtail Possum colony.

Camping out in the million star resort.

Lowlight: The only think I can think of would be the ants but that's scratching the bottom of the barrel.

Bill:

Highlight: Sitting by the night camp fire and looking up at the overhead star spectacular show including a very clear and obvious milky way.

Lowlight: Lack of evening frivolity (eg community singing), main activity being watching water boil and people going off to their tents.

The whole group on the trail before Bond Gap (final day)



From the organiser, Linda:

It came as quite a shock when I realised that quite a lot of the planning involved had to be changed due to lack of local knowledge, even though I had liaised with the owner of "Larapinta Treks" on Alice Springs. Once I had accepted this fact I felt very comfortable about the trip.

It is difficult to write about the whole process so I will jot down points.

- It's a big ask to expect people to sit on a bus for 3 days up and back, however, there were no complaints just sore bums
- Catering for the needs of three groups was tricky, especially when the composition of the groups could change on anyone day, but I hope everyone's needs were met.
- Meeting up with the car travellers, Chris & Lothar, Mike & Liz, Janice and her family and John & Glenda who flew in, added greatly to the enjoyment of the trip (especially Lothar's catering capacity)
- Deciding not to move each day added to the relaxed atmosphere, as packing and unpacking the trailer, which contained luggage for 12 people could have become stressful.
- The word flexible keeps coming to mind but within that a certain amount of structure was needed e.g. departure times, meeting times

I could keep going on but I won't. What I do want to say is a huge THANK YOU to everyone who came. Thank you for your support, encouragement and understanding when things did not go according to plan. Seeing the expressions on your faces at the end of the day was reward in itself. Also a special thank you to the organising committee, Stef, Coralie, Diane and Irene without whose help the trip would not have eventuated..

Killarney to Port Fairy: 3 August

Walkers: *Karen, Linda, Bill, Helen C., Jeff C., Anne P., Rob P, Jeannette M and guest appearances by Irene and Mabel.*

To ensure that we had an easy walk during low tide we met at 8am at the Killarney reserve. Fortunately the recent wild weather had calmed and we had a clear sunny day ahead. Linda brought the dogs along for workout and soon we were on the beach heading towards the smell of fresh brewed coffee at Port Fairy. The firm sand made the going very easy and we enjoyed lots of conversation with our newcomers and a bit of bird watching (the feathered type – sandpipers and pied oyster catchers) along the way. The dogs had a marvellous time romping along the beach, even taking the occasional dip in the water. They made new friends along the way with the many dogs and walkers taking in the sunshine.

It was not long before we reached our destination at Rebecca's café. We lingered for an hour enjoying the coffee (some had two rounds), cakes, and watching the street life. Mabel (who had cycled into town) and Irene also turned up in time for coffee with us. It was hard to leave our seats but we had to get back before the incoming tide so we set off for the return trip. It had warmed up quite a bit during the late morning and one walker decided to take a dip. Well, it was actually the in-coming tide deciding to give her a bit of a soaking (fortunately only ankle deep). The tide was rising quite quickly and chased us up the beach quite a few times into the softer sand but we still had ample time to make it back to Killarney.

A pleasant morning was had by all. We had some new visitors join us – Helen, Anne, Jeannette, Jeff and Rob who added welcome company and humour. We may see some more of them on future walks as they are especially keen to do a walk from Port Fairy to Warrnambool.

Karen

Tower Hill Wattle walk: 16 August

Walkers: Lothar, Chris, Cathy, Marg, Val, Liz, Mike, Karen, Andrew and David

Couldn't wait to get to Tower Hill on such a beautiful, sunny day. The group met at the Tower Hill picnic ground and set out on the first of three walks, down the Lava Walking track and around Fairy Island. We had already been greeted by the emus in the carpark and as we strolled down the track we were cheered on by lots of very large wallabies and kangaroos and very sleepy koalas.

We had to stop to admire the wattles, they were putting on a splendid show in the bright sunshine, creating a pretty patchwork effect on the hills. The Sydney Black wattles are currently in bloom. They were once known as Queens wattles, which are not native to the area but were the only species available at the local nurseries when Tower Hill was being replanted. The local black wattles will come into flower in about three months to give us another show.

The lakes have filled up after the recent wet spell and there were plenty of swans and ducks on the water. We took some of the views in from the tops of the hills and ambled back down the boardwalk to start the second loop. This time taking in the track to the last volcano to enjoy more vistas of the wattle covered hills. The kangaroos were also enjoying the afternoon sun and were so relaxed that they didn't bother getting away from us in a hurry. We saw a couple of very big joeys squeezed into their mother's pouches.

After a short tea break, we took the third loop out towards Tower Hill itself and down towards the north rim. At the top we could see as far as the Codrington wind farm and Port Fairy. There were lots of kangaroos down below near the lake and two lounging in the grass on the track ahead. They wouldn't move until Mike got within a few metres to take pictures. They were a lot bigger than him and seemed to like the attention anyway. Soon we were back at the picnic ground for tea and cake, before the emus started inviting themselves to our table. There were more koalas to admire – all big and fluffy with their winter coats and hanging on to the smallest branches they could find. It was a lovely afternoon walk, there was plenty of wildlife and the wattles had put on a spectacular show for us. Thanks again Lothar.

Karen

Mt Dundas: 23–24 August

Walkers: *Heaton (leader), Coralie, Diane D, Carolyn, Marg*

We met at Hamilton, drove north to Cavendish then turned off before Balmoral and followed minor roads. The Mt Dundas Range has three distinct peaks. We set out to walk to the communications tower for the overnight camp.

The car shuttle took 90 minutes. We noticed that water had covered parts of the road recently and branches had fallen. Local farmland was green and lush and there were plenty of young lambs in the sheep flocks. Alpacas grazed protecting the lambs from fox attack.

True to the weather forecast, wet weather gear turned out to be our garb for the weekend.

The interesting walk took us through low scrub and there was a beautiful array of wildflowers already in bloom. Coralie spotted two greenhood orchids. Some of the time we followed animal tracks but always Heaton made compass bearings that kept us heading in the right direction.

We climbed to the high point to make camp at mid afternoon. As it was raining, the girls pitched their tents. Heaton tied the four corners of an old tent fly to trees giving us a sheltered area. Logs and gum leaves lying on the ground were sodden but dead upright trunks were relatively dry and would burn. With bark collected from the lee side of gum trees and with a fire lighter or two a small fire was coaxed to burn. Gradually we had a wonderful blaze. Standing around in our soggy clothes, before long our coats and trousers were heaton', steamin' and dryin'. What a bonus.

Whilst aromatic stews cooked, Coralie offered smoked almonds and claret and Heaton's homemade cerise plum wine was fragrant, fresh and alcoholic – a real hit.

We settled for an early night, the rain continued and the forest was pitch dark.

In the morning we headed down on the other side of the peak to the creek. We walked through private cleared land (with permission). Kangaroos were at home and there was a fox in the rocky area on the next rise. Traversing the wet mossy rocks was made with care. Inventive Diane used her scarf to hold my pack firmly when the chest strap broke.

We decided to leave the real high point, 467m, for another day and instead we sidled down to meet the road which circumnavigates the reserve. We proceeded to the parked car which was left safely just inside the fenced reserve. Our Mazda did a wonderful job carrying us back to the start: boot filled with three backpacks whilst Carolyn in the front seat nursed the other two packs. Water had flooded the back roads in several spots and a couple more trees had lost branches in the strong winds. Heaton skilfully drove us back to the start.

We headed for a Hamilton pub that served coffee and cake by the open fire and we planned to return to Mt Dundas on a sunny day to see the Western District and the Grampians from what must be a great vantage point.

We walked in happy company and our thanks to Heaton for such a good weekend.

Marg

Nelson 27–28 September

Walkers: Sat: Mike, Liz, Dianne, Karen, Lothar. Sun: plus Chris, Linda, Irene, Bill.

The Saturday group met in Nelson late morning, settled on our cabin and tent site then headed straight to the Princess Margaret Rose caves for a fascinating tour of the underground limestone formations. The information centre had pieces of the limestone stalactites/stalagmites to touch and feel so that visitors were not tempted to do the same in the caves. Fingerprints leave a brown mark on the formations and previous visitors had taken souvenirs in the past (this practice was at first encouraged until it was discovered that the cave formations could disappear if it continued). Some of the formations looked just like tiered wedding cakes as they were so named and it was hard to keep hands off the waxy, translucent limestone but we all behaved ourselves. The tour guide pointed out a hole in the ground where the first person to discover the caves had come down, it was very narrow and deep and in the darkness would have been quite eerie and disorienting. It took him many years to get up the courage to have a look. The guide also pointed out where there had been a land collapse that had blocked the cave at one end and created a stable, and nearly airless environment. There was an area of the floor covered in animal bones where creatures had fallen or been chased into holes in the ground and perished from injury or starvation, as there was no easy way out.

We had lunch at the info. centre watching the drizzle outside and the finches, wrens and parrots on the lawn, probably hoping for a lunchtime feed. The skies cleared for an afternoon stroll along the loop at the top of the caves where we could view the original entrance and a tree marking where the cave had been blocked. We had lovely views of the river and surrounding bush. At the end of the walk near the picnic ground we spotted some wild pigeons and nearly trod on our first orchid sighting of the weekend.

We returned to Nelson in the afternoon for aperitifs at the pub, then another stroll on the outskirts of town before returning to the pub for dinner where footy finals fever was well under way for the locals who all seemed to barrack for the winners (BB's). After a leisurely and enjoyable meal we returned to the hut for after dinner drinks and a very long game of cards!

Sunday morning was cool but dry and after a short post-breakfast stroll along the river we returned to find the remaining walkers had arrived for the Canyon Walk along the Glenelg River. After a quick car shuffle we started off at the top of the North Nelson Track where the walk would take us back into town (approx. 13km). The river and canyon was a spectacular backdrop to the abundance of wildflowers and orchids. Someone in the group (who we won't name but who's initials are KB) was a bit over enthusiastic and kept slowing up the pace but it was worth finding the pink caladenias (pink fingers, lady fingers), bearded green hoods and green and red spider orchids.

We stopped for lunch at a small picnic spot and continued along the track, visiting the jetties and boathouses along the way. We past Donovans and came across some burnt out bush dotted with the amazing sight of hundreds of grass trees with flowering spikes. Also, more orchids!!! There were more green/red spider orchids and pink fingers and the stragglers found some purple sun orchids, pink/crimson hare orchids and a couple of pairs of spectacular yellow tiger orchids. In fact, the burnt ground had sprouted thousands of orchids just about to bloom but unfortunately, not for us. This would be a spectacular sight in a week or so.

We stopped off at Simsons Landing to pick up cars and the remaining walkers continued on to Nelson for a well-earned coffee (and cakes!) to round off a wonderful weekend. Thanks to our hosts Mike and Liz.

Karen