

## **Kakadu Vignettes**

*This was written by John Mayze and Jane Searle and summarises some of their thoughts about the trip. Italics are comments from guide Russell Willis.*

### **Mammals**

Things with fur were rarely seen. One day as we crossed a tricky creek, we heard the lonesome call of a dingo pack but no sightings though we saw plenty of their foot prints in the sand around the water courses. A week later a couple of black wallaroos were given an enormous surprise by the appearance of the lead walkers. Black wallaroos are very shy and are rarely seen. Flying foxes went out in singles or small groups each afternoon but the early morning .found them returning to roost in squadrons. One night we camped very close to a flowering eucalypt that they fed on all night. In the morning, keen eyed Martin found a little embryo on the ground that could have been almost full grown. Occasionally, as we invaded some of the caves, we disturbed some of the little bats that are about the size of a swallow.

*Most of Kakadu's mammals are small, nocturnal and rarely seen. The above is typical of what people see on our Kakadu trips.*

### **Insects**

Masses of them! Beautiful dragonflies and dainty damsel flies patrolled their stretch of water. Pairs of butterflies flitted around bearing colour splashes of ochre, black and white and were found where the flowers were. The most common spider was the orb weaver and we were shown a small scorpion. On the flat grassy terrain termite mounds popped up with monotonous regularity and, up on the escarpment, we were intrigued by the sight of red soil mined out of the ground and formed in wide spreading low rise mounds. Quite obviously a termite of some sort but which one?

The most constant battles were fought with the green ants that clung to every opportunity as we passed to bite us as they made things momentarily unpleasant. Thank God the bites had no lasting effect. The little mosquito and midge were very different, slyly coming out at dusk and zeroing in on their unsuspecting victims. Don and Margaret had mystery visitors during the night and the recommended advice from their medico was not to scratch their hidden parts, but to air the parts and the bedding. WARNING: The medical advisor is rather perverse in his attitude to cats and people!

*Mossies are always in far fewer numbers on the escarpment where we walk than in the lowlands where the roads and tourists are. In the drier months, many people don't bother with a mossie net and sleep under the star.*

### **Reptiles, Amphibians and Molluscs**

Snakes alive! Keen eyed Martin found a small death adder one morning that soon drew a keen crowd of onlookers. It was just beautiful with the most elaborate striped effect across its body .... like Aboriginal art. When it felt threatened it puffed itself up like a cobra and looked very fierce. Hard to do when you are only two feet long.

Early one evening in Twin Falls gorge, we were having our soup and Margaret gave out a squeal as something slithered over her bare foot. Torches quickly came on and a baby green tree snake was revealed, green on top and light lemon underneath. One evening Martin found another moving through a very thin small shrub, a brown tree snake with tan and cream bands, maybe two and a half feet long and seemed not to mind the glare of publicity. During the tramps through the long grass several snakes were flushed out but only seen by a few. Lizards, tortoise, frogs (little ones) and terrestrial snails. There were people that had obvious reptilian phobias and some had arachnophobia and others cliffphobias. With time and exhaustion these were overcome.

*Like the mammals, Kakadu's snakes are mostly nocturnal and seldom seen. Martin's exceptional eyesight made this trip an exception – he spotted nine of the 13 snakes we saw. If you leave them alone, they leave you alone. In 32 years of bushwalking in Kakadu, 20 years of which was running Willis's Walkabouts, I've never had a snakebite or even the threat of a bite on one of my trips.*

## **Fish**

Every creek had fish and fingerlings. The fingerlings were cute as they considered us worthy tucker and every now and then one became aware that we were being 'tasted' One little tribe had red tails. Saw one plate sized barramundi.

## **Birds**

With Marilyn's "John, did you hear that?" the bird life of Kakadu was revealed – but no one had brought a field guide. Dawn chorus in many campsites occurred as the sun rose. During the day the dry crackle of small flocks of black cockatoos could pierce the air or their screeching cousins the sulphur crested. Kingfishers were about, but far from plentiful and we viewed a beautiful azure chap resting in the shade under a log above a creek one lunchtime. Bee eaters were always around areas where the grevilleas abound. They are so showy. Birds seen: great bower bird, butcher bird, Corella, cormorants, cuckoos (heard), darter, doves, white-breasted sea-eagle, egrets, chestnut finch, fly catcher, friar-bird, pygmy goose, herons, bar breasted honey eater, other honey eaters, kingfishers, whistling kite, black kite and other uncertain bird of prey, lorikeets, parrots of uncertain types, oriole, barking owl, rock pigeon and other pigeons, quails (see Martin the flusher), white bellied shrike thrush, wood swallows, tree martins, and others not clearly defined by any of us. (*On one similar trip some years ago, a keen birdwatcher tallied over 100 different species.*)

## **Ferals**

Sadly they are in abundance especially the cane toad. We saw masses of scats and tracks in the dried mud and sand of brumbies, pigs and buffalo. Several pigs were flushed up as we walked but they were only seen by the lead walkers if at all. Walking away from Twin Falls to return up into the escarpment we saw some brumbies grazing, the white stallion just had to come over and check us out. He looked aggressively beautiful with his arched neck and raised tail as he pranced about telling us off from 250 metres away. The horses are retired stock horses owned by the Aboriginal owners of Kakadu. The dreaded cane toad is everywhere and at one site we found three eviscerated toads in the stream. Perhaps the ever present crow was responsible. Russell said there were cats but we had no sightings.

## **Flora**

Thanks to the blessings of cyclone Monica we reaped the benefits of seeing a multitude of varied wild flowers. We revelled in the beautiful grevilleas weeping with nectar. *Cyclone Monica was responsible for the record-breaking late finish to the wet season. The extra rain meant that many wet season flowers were still in bloom.*

## **Camp and lunch sites**

As we passed by what appeared to be a great site for either lunch or a camp, Russell had the great habit of pulling a rabbit out of his hat and taking us to an even better one. One soon learned! After the heat of a walk the pleasure of falling into the cool water was just divine.

## **Our Leader**

A damn Yankee with an Aussie accent! Bespectacled, spare in body, great story teller, poetic, secretive, mystic qualities, a messiah? He walks like a metronome striding out with his overweight pack, bandana, hat and khaki shirt and slacks. Russell obviously never throws anything away and wears remnants of uncertain origin around his waist (perhaps a cut down car tyre or two) rendered in garish colours including crimson. A known 'freeballer' (the evidence has been seen) Always a thoughtful pause before a question is answered. The pause is so thoughtful one wonders if he has heard. If you are lucky, your question is answered. Unlucky is when the answer is another question like: "Russell, "How much time do we have for lunch?" ..... "How much longer do you need?" One tough man but seeing him with his lady Lynda at the Sailing Club he was sweet and affectionate.

## **The Landscape**

Consists of stunning escarpments, gorges, swamps of melaleucas, grevilleas, reeds and grasses and plains of spear grass. Great ancient plates of rock twist in all directions forming masses of flat rocky slabs or high tottering boulders.

## **The Skies**

At night so fabulously clear one could touch them. Nothing was nicer than collapsing onto a ground sheet after a big day to watch the night show. We made a point to learn some new something each time be it a star or constellation. The full moon made life a little difficult for some unable to sleep under a constant light source but that lasted only a week. We know that there are masses of satellites up there and Big Brother one day could definitely be watching us all where ever we are.

## **Physical Changes to us all**

Beards became common and not to be outdone, the ladies armpits became part of the same club. Nail polish became most unattractive on toes, especially when mixed with black sand. Body odour was a new thing to contend with but with us all more or less smelling the same it didn't matter. Weight loss occurred with most. Scratches, bruises, abrasions, cuts and blisters were all part of the deal and were attended to via variable therapies. Dr John conducted early consultations quite regularly during the last week. George had his sinus problem relieved, which somehow partially cured his snoring. Denise's sprain was expertly wrapped and Don has his ear syringed when some foolish insect took a wrong turn and landed in his ear canal. Luckily no broken bones! And to John's delight our resident psychiatrist Marilyn confirmed that he was absolutely normal, whatever that is. He didn't make it easy on everyone when the very first story he told was of how he strangled the family cat so he could collect its skeleton, at the tender age of 12 years!

## **Russell's Cooking**

The evening meal was a performance. When billies were boiling, soup would be first, either cup of or pot of. It was always welcome and settled rumbling tummies. Second course was 'something' with pasta, polenta, noodles or rice. The 'something' was concocted from a variety of dried vegetables, lentils, beans and spices. It was always flavoursome and there were no left overs. Finally who'd have thought that we would be eating dessert? Nothing is a trouble to Russell, custard and dried fruit, egg custards, fruity rice and sago all made up his extraordinary recipes and whilst food was cooking Russell took the floor with a recitations from Banjo Patterson .... he never missed a beat. Apart from tasting good, the food went through one without touching the sides, so to speak. It couldn't have been healthier. We did have a treat after the food cache was raided, fine wine from chateau Stanley Leasingham. It sadly only lasted a couple of nights.

## **Camp fires**

Every camp needs a pyromaniac and George filled the bill perfectly. He was well able to rise at early hours to rub the necessary sticks together to have a raging fire for morning tea. However, lurking in the background, keeping away from the light, was a budding fire maker, Graham, who succeeded on a few occasions to wrest the task from George.

## **How the country was covered**

We walked, hopped, jumped, waded, high stepped, low stepped, balanced over railway girders (ugh), high wire acts over logs, cliff clinging in the gorges, boulder scrambling, slipped and slid anyway to get through this circus act we had put ourselves in for . Turning turtle became a masterly act for some, even resorting to doing it in water . Russell's response was always, "F\*\*, f\*\* and f\*!".

One masterly saying from George after John's mention of going to the dentist, "Did he perform a walleectomy on you?"

## **Weather ??????**

The weather was superb. Marilyn our resident meteorologist, with great knowledge of mid level clouds predicted on a regular basis "weather change!!!!!!". Those of us without a satisfactory fly would spend an anxious night collecting rocks to stabilise meagre tarps. Fortunately the Gods knew better and when we heard these warnings we knew we could leave the tarp in the backpack. Not only did tummies rumble but anytime of day the rumbles could be heard in the distance. Our great leader and knowledgeable meteorologist poo-pooed the sensible suggestions from the masses such as an Indonesian invasion, RAAF bombing practice and also accelerated mining of uranium. Those of us with limited knowledge on any subject suggested it could be the results of military training and to our surprise at the Bark Hut Roadhouse after a short discussion with a military officer most likely a camouflaged general, we discovered the tanks were playing in their firing range.

## ***Want to know more?***

*Many of the people on this trip volunteered to talk to potential clients with questions as to what our trips are like. Please send us an email ([walkabout@ais.net.au](mailto:walkabout@ais.net.au)) or give us a call [(08) 8985 2134] if you'd like to contact one of them.*