

September 2009 Simpson Desert Field Trip

By George Madani

The first day of spring, and a bright sunny morning saw a tiny crew of three souls heading west over the Blue Mountains. It was day one in a month long adventure into the red sands of the Simpson Desert where we would be participating in the longest running arid zone ecological project in the southern hemisphere made famous by Professor Chris Dickman from the University of Sydney.

We headed into the desert via the Windorah International Yabby Races, where yabbies are raced to raise money for all the local charities including The Royal Flying Doctors. The Birdsville Races was next on the itinerary where we were joined with 7000 of our closest friends turning the normally ghost town of Birdsville into a throng of activity. The races provided some entertainment for the punters but not nearly as much as “Dangerous Dave” who volunteered to step into Fred Brophy’s famous boxing ring. With no previous boxing experience and the lucid advice of ‘try not to get hit in the face’ Dave courageously entered the ring and went up against the fearsome economized stature of ‘Tom Thumb’. Although being narrowly defeated by points decision, Dave did quite well, seeing through all three rounds and winning the crowd over, with locals suggesting that “if more scientists were like you the world would be a better place”. Dave certainly earned his rally on the bells and drums.

Whilst in Birdsville we also managed to chat to the Federal minister for infrastructure, transport and regional development the Honourable Member for Grayndler, Anthony Albanese, we also got our photos with the minister wearing the world famous rat-catcher t-shirts.

After watching a few races trackside, we left Birdsville and headed north along the Eyre Developmental Road towards Bedourie, our last port of call and indulgence of civilisation before heading into the red playground. As we neared the tiny town great numbers of flock bronzewings raced past in tight flocks as they headed to water for their evening drink. Our evening drink involved a stop at the Bedourie Hotel where we also enjoyed a counter meal and a chat with the cheery publican Jim Smith.

Well satiated and refreshed we continued on into the night, departing the highway north of Bedourie and heading west into the great expanse and solitude of the nocturnal desert. Small dunnart like figures darted across the track in front of us as other mysterious tiny figures hopped out of the beam of the headlights and into the darkness leaving us wondering as to their identity. Finally, arriving at Main Camp there was nothing to do but unroll our swags under the multitude of stars studding the velvet night sky above.

First order of the day and we set about unpacking and getting gear sorted whilst also making our little home under the gidgee trees more comfortable. With tables and chairs set and the fire pit dug out we soon even had a kitchen sink set up on a couple of old 44 gallon drums so that we really did give meaning to the term ‘outdoor living.’ Then it was off to open up the traps to see what was out and about.

A few days trapping turned up a few colourful members of the incredibly diverse, skinks of the *Ctenotus* genus, some blind snakes, knob-tail geckos and of course the small mammal fauna, hairy footed dunnarts, tiny ferocious ningau's at 8 grams, some sandy inland mice, even a pair of spinifex hopping mice with their great big ears, oversized feet and long elegant brush tipped tails. But the pièce de résistance was the mulgara, a muscle bound predator with strong jaws filled with teeth designed for destroying its prey, amongst the native mammal fauna they are the apex predator.. But, they are pleasant enough to handle and beautiful with their fine fur, pointy faces and bright eyes.

A few mornings into the trip and our little desert family grows when the next crew arrives from Sydney with two enthusiastic volunteers, Rachel 'Irish' and TL. They are quickly made to feel at home and given the low down to the pace of life out here. There may have even been a bit of competition between the boys as to who could impress the girls with their desert knowledge the most.

The next component of our research schedule involved fitting tiny radio transmitters onto the Sandy Inland Mice (affectionately known as *P.herms* amongst the rat-catchers) to look at microhabitat use in the sand dunes and gidgee woodlands. We took the night work in shifts, periodically returning to camp to warm up by the fire and working out the constellations in the night sky. But the night was full of other surprises and during the radio tracking we turned up other exciting creatures out and active in the late night including a little spotted snake and an echidna busily feeding on exposed termites.

Our other task was tracking down sand goannas as part of Nicole Hill's PhD project, Nicole is looking at how these scaly creatures move throughout their environment and what role they play as regulatory predators. This involves finding them first which often involves a chase followed by the shifting of a lot of sand as we try to extract these tricky varanids from their underground hideouts.

Two weeks into the trip and more reinforcements arrive in the form of two heavily laden 4WD's filled with excited volunteers, fresh supplies and led by the main man himself Professor Chris Dickman. There are handshakes all round as new friends are made and old ones re-acquainted, a catch up of news from out in town, and an update on the proceedings of the current trip.

Next on the itinerary was a shift north across neighbouring Carlo station and past the Tropic of Capricorn into Cravens Peak which, like Ethabuka station is also managed by Bush Heritage Australia. The days were warming up and the cattle on Carlo were taking shelter in the shade of the gidgee trees as we passed through. We too decide to take a break to cool off and decide to stop at a nearby turkey's nest, a large elevated dam filled with underground water pumped up from the Great Artesian Basin.

As we cool off in murky waters, excited multitudes of Zebra Finches beep their way from shrub to shrub and it's not too long before all the movement and sound attracts the attention of a high flying predator. A rare and elusive grey falcon suddenly appears from the north as though it has emerged from out of the sun and it sends the finches scattering deep into the bushes for cover amidst a flurry of panicked calls. But as quickly as it appears this prince of the sky is gone, giving the finches a reprieve for the time being.

We make camp at Kunnamuka Swamp where we set up amongst the lignum bushes and coolibah trees. Our main task here other than opening the Kunnamucka Swamp traps is to establish new sites. This means a lot of digging to put in the new pitfall traps, but the team take to the task with gusto. The friendly banter amongst the boys challenging one another's digging prowess soon leads to the throwing of gauntlets and it is not long before a race ensues which sees many a testosterone driven shovel get the job done in no time at all.

Once the work on Cravens Peak is completed we return to Ethabuka where, as a reward for all our hard efforts over the last few days we get to spend an afternoon at the Pulchera Waterhole. This waterhole is part of the Mulligan River system and was still full following rain which had fallen earlier in the year and thus, created a living oasis in the otherwise dry and harsh desert. Avocets, stilts and plovers lined the edges of the waterhole feeding in the shallows, whilst ducks, grebes and cormorants dived and dabbled on the waters surface as terns in breeding plumage cried overhead. Native hens and quails foraged in the grass lining the banks, as budgies vied with each other for the best breeding hollows in the surrounding trees and woodswallows and bee eaters swooped above catching insects in their beaks.

The real adventure was yet to begin, once again it was time to shift camp, this time west. So it was pack up camp, load the vehicles, followed by 5 hours of intense dune driving through the middle of a sand storm. We found out later that the same sand storm had travelled east blacking out the sun on its way to the eastern coast of Australia. Night had fallen when a tired but triumphant team pulled up at Field River with a howling wind blowing and only several kilometres between us and the Northern Territory border.

Field River was full of surprises, giant desert tarantulas, wild camels and amazing thorny devils that drink by absorbing water across their skin and into their mouths. But, the most exciting surprise was to come, one evening following an enterprising and industrious afternoon that saw a few of the lads dig and build a swimming pool in the banks of the Field Rive a giant water holding frog was found one night swimming in our new pool! These frogs normally stay encased in a water proof cocoon well below ground where they are known to sit and wait for years before drenching rains awaken them out of their torpor. It had been many, many years since one was last seen out in the desert so it was a real treat to see one.

Our own work complete it was time to link up with Queensland's Department of Environment and Resource Management to give them a hand with their own surveys in the adjacent Simpson Desert National Park. With no tracks to follow and the whole park at our disposal there was an adventurous and pioneering spirit to this next leg of the adventure as we set out to explore the parks secrets. With our seasoned field team now operating as a very well oiled machine the good folks at the DERM were very grateful for our help in setting up their sites and sharing our desert knowledge.

Our biggest privilege though was meeting Don Rowlands the local Aboriginal ranger and respected elder of the Wangkangurru Nation. He was gracious enough to share his knowledge and stories with us. We went tracking echidnas, goannas and thorny devils with fantastic results. He even showed us the traditional way to prepare pituri, a native

narcotic which was highly valued and traded widely when the traditional owners of this land still roamed the desert country. And when we ran out of foil to roast our vegies in the fire, Don showed us how to do it the same way he used to when he was a young lad roaming these parts.

Alas, all good things must come to an end and so it was that after almost 5 weeks of friendship, critters and memorable lifetime experiences our Simpson Desert adventure was coming to an end. So on a clear bright October morning, we rolled up our dusty faded swags for the last time, put away the camp oven and filled in the fire pit as we bade farewell to the Queensland DERM crew and a couple of our members who stayed on to help. We had a long drive ahead, but fond memories and friendships that we could take back with us.

And every now and again when you're caught in the hustle and bustle of the city, it's hard not to let your mind drift back to the peace and solidarity of those spinifex covered sand dunes. And until we next return that gentle desert breeze will still be blowing through those Gidgee trees at main camp as though we had never even been there...