

## **Wet Season Adventure in Kakadu. Trip Report for Willis's Walkabouts 2014 “Kakadu Super Circle No1” led by Paul Blattman.**

We left Darwin on the morning of 5th January 2014 and were dropped off at the locked gate at the South Alligator River crossing in the early afternoon. Five of us shouldered our packs and walked across the low level bridge which had some flood debris indicating it had recently been under water. We were on a 21 day wet season adventure in Kakadu National Park and weren't to see another human for 19 days.

The weather was very hot and sunny at the start and the first few km were along a dirt road. We stopped for a cooling wallow in a few inches of water where a clear shallow creek ran across the road. In the late afternoon after leaving the road behind, we stopped and set up camp on a high sandbank. Dark clouds were gathering. We just got our tents up in time and then a big thunderstorm with torrential rain hit us. We put up a large fly in pouring rain and gathered some soggy firewood and then had to use a secret weapon to get a fire going under the fly so dinner could be cooked. Cotton balls rubbed with Vaseline works well as firelighters. Messy, but fortunately it worked and soon dinner was under way. The rain cooled things right down and as none of us had a sleeping bag some felt a little too cool during the night.

We were up with the birds to a mostly clear sky and had breakfast and packed up our wet tents. After a few hundred metres we came to our first obstacle, the remains of an old bridge left over from a mining operation before Kakadu became a national park. In drier times I had simply waded across the shallow creek downstream of the bridge but this was croc country and now the water level was up: so the only option was to cross the bridge. Along the way we had collected a wooden pole each and used these to assist our crossing. Some used the poles as balance beams by holding them horizontally at waist height while one person used his to push against the opposite beam.



Crossing the old bridge over Koolpin Creek

We followed the old overgrown mining track up to its junction with the access road to Koolpin Campground. At Koolpin Campground we wandered down to the water's edge to check the croc trap at the request of the Mary River ranger. They hadn't had time to remove the trap before the road was closed for the wet season and were hoping it hadn't been damaged by the early flood. The rangers place a trap there during the dry season to keep crocs out of the area to protect campers. The trap was still floating and appeared to still be undamaged.

From the campground we leave all trace of civilisation behind and climb up past a series of waterfalls into the beautiful Koolpin Gorge. Once we are above the 3<sup>rd</sup> waterfall we were out of reach of the estuarine crocodiles and so it was safe for us to

stop for a swim. From this point on, the majority of the trip is up on the Arnhem Escarpment where the only crocodiles are freshies which won't bother you as long as you don't harass them or get them cornered. We would still have to descend into estuarine croc country at a couple of spots in the second half of the trip and at the end. Extreme caution is required in estuarine croc country and absolutely no swimming.



*Grevillea formosa* in flower

We soon came to our first aboriginal artsite on an isolated group of boulders. Here we disturbed a pair of endemic black wallaroos which gave us a good look at them as they hopped off. We also found a lot of the endemic *Grevillea formosa* flowering on the flat rock slabs nearby.

Our camp that night was on a high sandy beach beside a beautiful big pool. We had a fairly relaxed afternoon and had dinner almost over when a small thunderstorm sent us scurrying to secure things against the strong wind gusts and a brief shower.

The next morning we came to a big rock outcrop with lots of rock art and a couple of stone archways and a narrow slot that led us to another artsite and a pitch dark tunnel. We took our head torches to explore the tunnel and found lots of large moths, bats and a pair of Giant Cave Geckoes which started fighting in our torchlight.

Over the next few days we walked from one creek system to another with lots of swim stops, artsites, pockets of shady monsoon forest and beautiful campsites.



Giant Cave Geckoes

All around there were lots of wildflowers the like of which you don't see in the dry season. One morning as we were walking along an old buffalo path we found fresh tracks and could smell buffalo. We soon came across a large buffalo bull which fortunately charged off away from us. About another km further on, we surprised another two buffalo and three feral pigs which all ran off into the scrub.

We saw a lot of aboriginal art during this trip - some very ancient and some more recent. One of the artsites we visited included a battle scene. There was rock art from a multitude of styles ranging from very ancient hand stencils and wallabies painted in red ochre to the much more recent X-ray style art painted in white ochre with fine red cross hatching. Some of the art also depicted crocodiles, goannas, various birds like ibis and broilgas, freshwater turtles, fish, men and women and even rainbow serpents.



Leichardt's grasshopper

In one artsite we also saw what is said to be a painting of the sextant carried by the explorer Ludwig Leichardt when he passed through that way in 1845. In several places we found the endemic Leichardt's grasshoppers that were first described by Ludwig Leichardt in his journal and then remained unknown to science until they were re-discovered in 1973. The blue and orange grasshoppers have long featured in the creation myths of the local aborigines as children of the lightning man, Nammargon, a powerful ancestral being. These grasshoppers are only seen during the wet season.

At some of the swimming spots, rainbowfish would nibble on our skin and at another we found an old freshwater crocodile's nest with eggshells scattered in the sand.

In some of the monsoon forest pockets we found a variety of orchids flowering and huge millipedes about 15cm long crawling around in the leaf litter and saw and heard Rainbow Pittas in the trees above.

In one place we found a Great Bower Bird's bower which I had previously seen on two other trips in the last three years. The bower was obviously still in use with fresh berries decorating it. There were the remains of two older bowers alongside.



Great Bower Bird's bower

During a number of nights it rained through the night causing the nearby creek to rise considerably. At two campsites we had to relocate some of our tents during the night to avoid being flooded. On this trip we had enough rain to make the waterfalls look spectacular, especially the big waterfalls: Jim Jim Falls and Twin Falls.



Jim Jim Falls



Twin Falls

Due to the increased crocodile risk in the wet season, we are not permitted to wade across Twin Falls Creek below the falls and must instead cross above the falls.

When we got to the top of Twin Falls, the creek was too swollen for us to be able to cross safely so we had to spend an extra day waiting for the water level in the creek to come down. Eventually the creek came down enough for us to cross but it wasn't

going to be easy. We found a spot about 1km above the falls where the creek was divided into three broad channels by two rows of paperbark trees and the current flow was moderately tame. Each channel was approx 30metres wide. We waterproofed our packs using pack covers or garbage bags and tied one end of a 20 metre length of light rope to the first pack then one of the strongest swimmers swam out towing the rope while another strong swimmer assisted by paying out the rope. When the swimmer reached the end of the rope the assistant pushed the pack out into the current. The swimmer then towed the pack the last few metres to the first row of paperbark trees where it was shallow enough for him to stand up and there was some shelter from the current.



Floating a pack across a small creek

After the swimmer hauled in the pack the assistant swam across the first channel and the process was repeated for the remaining two channels and the pack was finally deposited on the other side of the creek. The swimmer and his assistant then had to swim back to the starting point and repeat the process. The second and third time we tied two packs together and took them across two at a time. On the last time the two stronger swimmers waited at the first row of paperbarks to help the others while others to swam across the first channel one at a time. After repeating this for the remaining two channels we were all finally safely across with our packs, the whole exercise taking around an hour.



Cascades Creek waterslide

Another spectacular place was the cascades on Cascades Creek in Graveside Gorge. Among other features there is also a natural waterslide in the cascades. With this much flow over the waterslide we had to be very careful entering as you had to get a few metres out through the rushing water, over slippery rocks to reach the smoothest part of the waterslide where it was safe to ride. At the bottom of the waterslide, after a 5 metre ride you splash into a nice deep pool.

After walking for 10 days we came to our food drop and restocked. There were several sealed drums of food which had been placed there three months earlier, just before the roads in this part of Kakadu were closed for the wet season.

On many mornings before we started walking we would hold a "blister clinic" to tape up and pad any potential blisters before they could develop into a major problem.

We got rain on most days but it didn't rain all the time and there were plenty of sunny periods and lots of opportunities to dry out our gear.

During the day there were often swarms of bush flies, biting march flies and sandflies and sometimes at night lots of mozzies.



A shallow wade in Graveside

On our last day in the bush we came down off the escarpment and had to walk across several km of flooded lowland sloshing through ankle deep water to reach the car parked outside a locked gate at our finish point. The car had been positioned there for us three weeks earlier and was a welcome sight.

On our last two days in Kakadu we did the touristy things: a visit to the Waradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre which has an excellent display; a Yellow Waters Billabong cruise; a cultural tour with Violet Lawson, an aboriginal senior traditional owner who showed us some of the plants and their traditional uses; a walk around

the aboriginal artsites at Nourlangie and a visit to Bowali Visitor's Centre which also has an excellent display. Two people went off for a scenic flight over Jim Jim Falls and Twin Falls while the rest of us had a look at Ranger Uranium Mine and at Mamukala wetlands and bird hide.

On our last night we stayed in cabins in Jabiru where hot showers and a bistro meal at the Sports and Social Club were most welcome features.