

Bachsten Creek - Charnley River, WA (July 2009)

Russell Willis

Northern Australia is a great place to escape the southern winter. It is full of amazing places to go bushwalking – some are relatively well know, others unknown save for a fortunate few, and some are relatively accessible. Others, like the Charnley River, require a major expedition just to get to the start of the walk. Paul McCann, a member of CMW, joined me on my Bachsten-Charnley expedition last July.

Getting to the Charnley requires some serious four-wheel driving. You fly to Kununurra, spend the better part of a day driving to Mt Elizabeth Station on the Gibb River Road, then spend the better part of two days on one of the roughest 4WD tracks in the north. We met a group coming out as we were going in. They had big Toyotas, but they weren't game to continue. We did.

If you leave early and don't spend too much time exploring on the way, you can manage the 143 kms from Mt Elizabeth to Bachsten Camp (showers, toilets, campground, accommodation and cold drinks) in a day. This was the start of our first walk – six days exploring the two branches of Bachsten Creek.

Half an hour from the camp, you get to Bachsten Falls, a series of drops ending at a large pool (*Fig 1*). We wanted to explore more than I'd been able to do on previous trips, so we headed west across a ridge and down to lower Bachsten Creek. From that point, pool followed pool, art-site followed art-site (*Fig 2*) as we made our way up the second branch of the creek and back to where we'd begun.

Fig 1.

One of the joys of bushwalking in the north is the campsites. Night-time temperatures are pleasant, the weather is near perfect (you hardly ever get rain in the dry season), most nights you can camp next to pools perfect for swimming, wood is plentiful and, outside of a few popular places, you can always have a camp fire.

At the end of the week, we returned to the camp for a well earned hot shower and cold beer. Bachsten had been a mere taste of what was to come. The 62 kms from the camp to where we left the cars at the Brockman River

Fig 2.

took us until lunch time – we did, however, have two fairly lengthy stops along the way.

River? The Brockman River is much smaller than Bachsten Creek. Barely a trickle compared with the nearby Calder and Charnley Rivers. What got called a river and what got called a creek depended very much on who did the naming and the time of year when they first saw it. A 30 minute walk from the cars to the Calder brought us to our first fishing spot. The easy part was over.

Our first camp on the Charnley was only 9 kms from our Calder camp – 9 kms “as the crow flies”. We weren't crows. Ridge followed ridge as we had to cut across the grain of the land. With so many small creeks, I hoped to find a better way down than the previous time. No luck, but at least it was no worse. We finally made it down to the Charnley with about half an hour's light remaining. Forget twilight – no such thing in this part of the world.

Figs 3, 4, 5 & 6 show the broken country we had to traverse and the ledges where we camped at the end of the day (*Fig 6* absent). A bit of not quite hell followed by paradise. The hardest day of the walk was over.

The next day, we did a day walk down to the tidal area, then shifted out packs to a campsite on the far side

Fig 3.

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Fig 4.



Fig 5.



of the river. It was only about 200 metres from where we'd camped the night before, but the walking on that side was much easier so the move was well worth while.

We spent the next week in the Charnley Gorge, slowly moving upstream, dropping packs to explore some of the more interesting side creeks and visiting as many of the major art sites as we could find. I've been walking in the Kimberley for 30 years. Much of the art along the Charnley is like nothing I've seen anywhere else. *Fig 8* is an *Argula* or *Wandjinna* devil.

Walking up a gorge has advantages and disadvantages. You are never very far from the water so you can stop for a drink or a swim as often as you'd like. Flat ledges and sandy banks (*Figs 9, 10*) make easy going, but sometimes those ledges require a bit of scrambling (*Fig 12*).

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We would sometimes come to a point where it was obviously easier on the other side of the river. In previous years, I'd always been able to find dry crossings. This time we'd had a good wet season so it wasn't easy. Sometimes it wasn't possible at all.

Fig 13 shows CMW Member Paul McCann on a tricky crossing, but one which could be done with dry feet. *Fig 11* shows one of the wetter crossings. Not a problem with our water temperatures.

We had shade and a pool at every lunch site; every one of our campsites on the Charnley had a pool – and good fishing. Not always barramundi like the ones in *Fig 7*, but we had fresh fish every night we were next to the Charnley.

Fig 7.



Alas, all good things must end. The Charnley Gorge goes for another 20 kms above where we had to leave it. The walk back to the Calder was longer, but easier as water and flat ground along the way allowed us to camp en route. There was even a final bit of fishing at the Calder before beginning the 2½ day drive back to Kununurra. If we'd really pushed, we could have done the drive in two days, but there were more pools to enjoy. Why push? It was a holiday!



Fig 8.

(More photos over page – Editor).

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From the Editor:
 Russell Willis is the proprietor of **Willis's Walkabouts Australian Bushwalking Holidays**, which can be found online at www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au and is a long time advertiser with *Into The Blue*.

Russell adds:
 If anyone would like to organise their own Charnley expedition, I'm more than happy to provide the needed info, no charge. I can even provide the maps. If you like the idea but don't want the organisational hassle, you might want to consider joining my next Charnley expedition.

