

Wandering the Wilds with Willis (June 2008)

by Paul McCann



Munjina Camp

Always looking out for new places to walk, back in the early nineties I found out about Willis's Walkabouts. I went on several trips in 1992 and 1993 and found the walks to be good value given the long distances involved reaching the more remote parts of the Kimberley and the Top End of Australia. Since then it was always my intention to see the Pilbara region of Western Australia with its spectrum of colours from the deep reds of the rocks to the blue sky and the hills covered with golden spinifex. So when Russell included trips in the Pilbara in his program I knew one day I will go there and join one of the walks.

June 2008 provide the opportunity. They had a trip that was running and I had the money. So I booked and on the 1st June off I went. I also wanted to do another walk in the Kimberley as well and did not wish to fly back to Perth from the Pilbara and fly north again to Kununurra. This presented a problem. The trip started in Tom Price but here was no regular coach service to the town. I tried several tour companies and they were reluctant to drop me off and pick me up again two weeks later. Eventually I found a company who offered a jump on jump off option which meant I could go onto Kununurra after the walk in the Pilbara.

So one day in June I stepped off the tour bus in Tom Price and found my way to the caravan park where I met the guide and the rest of the group. One couple were from Canberra and the rest from Sydney including the guide Andrew. We had a meeting and divided the dinners up amongst us

before going to bed.

Next morning the bus arrived on time and took us to where the Great Northern Highway crosses a tributary of Munjina Creek. Off we set into the spinifex covered hills with seven days food. We followed the tributary creek downstream to some rock ledges where we had lunch. After lunch we walked downstream without the packs and returned to the rock ledges where we camped. The creek had more water than I had imagined and the vegetation was fairly thick close to the creek. Some sections were swampy, quite a surprise in this semi arid country. The guide cooked a lovely meal from the ingredients supplied by Russell followed by a nice desert. Won't go hungry on a Willis trip!

Next day we headed up onto the plateau and cut across country joining a side gorge which was followed down to the main branch of Munjina Creek. We followed Munjina Creek downstream to where the tributary we camped at the previous night joined the main creek. After setting up camp we wandered down Munjina Creek for a few kilometres and returned to camp for another lovely meal. Can't complain about the meals on Willis trips. The sound of the running water was lovely to hear during the night, thought I was back home rather than in the dry Pilbara.

We decided to stay at this camp for two nights and did a day walk up the west branch of Munjina Creek. We were told there was an art site up this creek which we found. There are only a few art sites in the Pilbara region, no where near as many as Kakadu or the



Munjina Creek

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*Dales Gorge*

Kimberley. After viewing the art we continued up stream passing a waterfall to a lovely pool where we had lunch. After lunch we returned downstream past the waterfall back to camp where we enjoyed another nice meal prepared by our guide. Having your dinner cooked means you can relax and enjoy the surrounds.

Next morning we headed west back up Munijina Creek and across the open tops to a tributary of Dales Gorge. We followed the creek down to where it dropped

*Wingermoontha Pool ?*

into Dales Gorge and scrambled down the steep slopes to the creek below the falls. We had lunch then walked upstream to a pool with a deep turquoise colour similar to a pool with too much chlorine. The pool had a layer of white calcium and magnesium salts on the bottom which reflected the blue sky above producing the turquoise colour. No one had the inclination to go for a swim despite the water tasting okay. After lunch we continued down the tributary creek to Dales Creek passing another small waterfall along the way.

We set up camp at the junction with Dales Creek and found a nice pool downstream deep enough for a swim.

Next morning we packed up and left the packs under some shrubs. We walked down Dales Creek hoping to find a feature named on the map as Wingermoontha Pool. We walked downstream far enough but did not find any pools in the location marked on the map but did find a large shallow pool further upstream. Maybe the map is wrong. We returned to the packs and continued up Dales Creek stopping for lunch along the way.

Later in the afternoon we realized we may not reach our desired campsite by dark so we stopped short at a spot we thought was okay. The full moon made it worthwhile camping out in the open for the night despite the strong breeze which seemed to blow all night.

Next morning we continued upstream and reached Dignam Creek around morning tea time. So we dropped our packs and headed up Dignam Creek with our lunches. We decided to turn back after lunch and observed a hole in the cliff in a side gorge on the way back to our packs. We set up camp back at the junction.

Off again next morning up Dales Gorge as the gorge narrowed and the grassy flats became swamps. We had to get our feet wet crossing the creek, something I never expected in the Pilbara. The vegetation got thicker along the creek as we approached the Gordon Falls. There were some lovely pools in this section near the falls. We found some flat rock just downstream of the tourist track to Circular Pool where we had lunch. After lunch we walked upstream and followed the tourist tracks to Circular Pool, Fortescue Falls and Fern Pool before

*Dales Gorge*

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Witternoom Gorge

returning to the packs to set up camp. We used the stove here to cook dinner as no fires are allowed in Karijini National Park. But the stove seemed to be not working too well and it was a while before dinner was ready.

Next morning we headed upstream and up the tourist track to our rendezvous point with the bus. The bus arrived and we discovered the driver had not brought all our food parcels with him. So we were dropped off at the visitor centre while the bus and the guide returned to Tom Price to collect the food parcels plus a bottle of port. After they returned we rejoined the bus and was dropped off at Kalamina Gorge for the start of the second walk. Two new faces joined us here as well.

The second walk started by following Kalamina Gorge downstream. The gorge soon narrowed and some deep wading became necessary. The gorge was very spectacular and lots of photos were taken by all.

Soon we found that we either had to swim a pool or scramble around a narrow ledge. We opted for the ledge which was a bit exposed in places. We managed to get around and continued down the much wider gorge to a small campsite further downstream.

Next morning we continued downstream to a junction with a side creek coming in from the west. We dropped our packs and continued downstream with our lunches to a nice pool where most of the group decided to have a swim. The water was warmer than further upstream in the gorges. After lunch we walked downstream a little further before returning back upstream to the packs. Two of us

decided to explore a side gorge on the return upstream which proved to be an easy way up on to the plateau. We returned to the packs and set up camp.

Off again bright and early following the side creek upstream to an art site comprising peckings in the rock faces. The peckings were made with a piece of much harder rock with a point. The peckings consisted of shallow holes chipped in the rock face in the shape of various figures. The creek would have provided a reliable water source for the original inhabitants of the area. After viewing the art site we climbed up on to the plateau and headed west across the open woodland to a creek running into Knox Creek. We followed the creek downstream to Knox Creek and found a small waterfall and pool. The pool

was stained a muddy red colour by iron leaching out of the rocks. Needless to say no one wanted a swim. We continued down Knox Creek to the point where it began to drop into the gorge and set up camp on the rock ledges. Several people decided that a wash was essential despite the colour of the water. The water was okay to drink but could taste the iron.

We set off on a day walk across the open tops next morning to Joffre Falls. Along the way we observed several mounds of pebbles collected by the *Pebble Mound Mouse*. This enterprising little rodent weighing only 10 grams can drag stones up to 5 grams in its mouth and pushes them into position with its front paws to build a home for its family. We had lunch and a swim at Joffre Falls and explored the narrow canyon below the falls before returning to camp.



Witternoom Gorge

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Witternoom Gorge

Next morning off again with our packs up over the tops to a spectacular viewpoint overlooking Red Gorge where it is joined by Knox Gorge to become the spectacular Witternoom Gorge.

We followed the gorge rim north and found a way down a steep gully to the bottom of Witternoom Gorge. We were a long way upstream from the asbestos mines. We found a nice lunch spot under some shady trees and had lunch before crossing the creek and setting up camp on the rock slabs opposite.

Next day was a rest day while the guide went for an reconnaissance walk up onto the plateau and across to Weano Gorge. Two of us walked upstream to where Witternoom Gorge narrows just downstream from Knox Gorge. A swim was required to continue further upstream to Knox Gorge and beyond. The water was too cold for me but the other person decided to give it a go reaching the junction with Knox Gorge.

We returned to camp and after lunch wandered downstream a short distance. The vegetation was thick in places and it was decided to return to camp. The guide returned later in the afternoon with good news that he found the route across to Weano Gorge.

So next morning off we went following the guide's footsteps up on to the cliff tops through a narrow slot. After admiring the view of Witternoom Gorge for the last time we headed west and came to a point overlooking the junction of Knox and Red Gorges.

After admiring the narrow gorges and looking down into the deep pools below the cliffs we continued across to Weano

Gorge. We had to walk up along the cliffs at Weano Gorge in order to cross the creek and reach the car park. We dropped our packs and had a look at the tourist lookouts overlooking Hancock and Weano Gorges with Joffre Gorge coming in on the opposite side.

Hancock, Joffre and Weano Gorges all meet at the same point and become Red Gorge.

Red Gorge is joined by Knox Gorge further downstream to become Witternoom Gorge. There are several walking tracks and routes in the area graded from easy to hard including a class 6 swim involving long swims through cold water and several abseils. The area is a canyoner's delight but the water is very cold.

We returned to the car park and met the bus which took us back to Tom Price for a shower and a nice meal. I had to rush off to rejoin the tour bus that took me to Broome and Kununurra to join another Willis trip along the Durack River. A report on that walk will appear in a future edition of *Into The Blue*, so stay tuned.

So overall the trip offered by Willis's Walkabouts is the best way to experience the spectacular gorges and ancient landscapes of the Pilbara. There is also plenty of opportunities for other walks and canyoning trips in the area. Worth a visit despite the long distance from Sydney. And if you have never been on a Willis trip before, they are worth considering. They go into places where others seldom visit and often has obtained special permission to walk in some areas normally off limits to most people. I can recommend them to all Club Members.



Joffre Gorge

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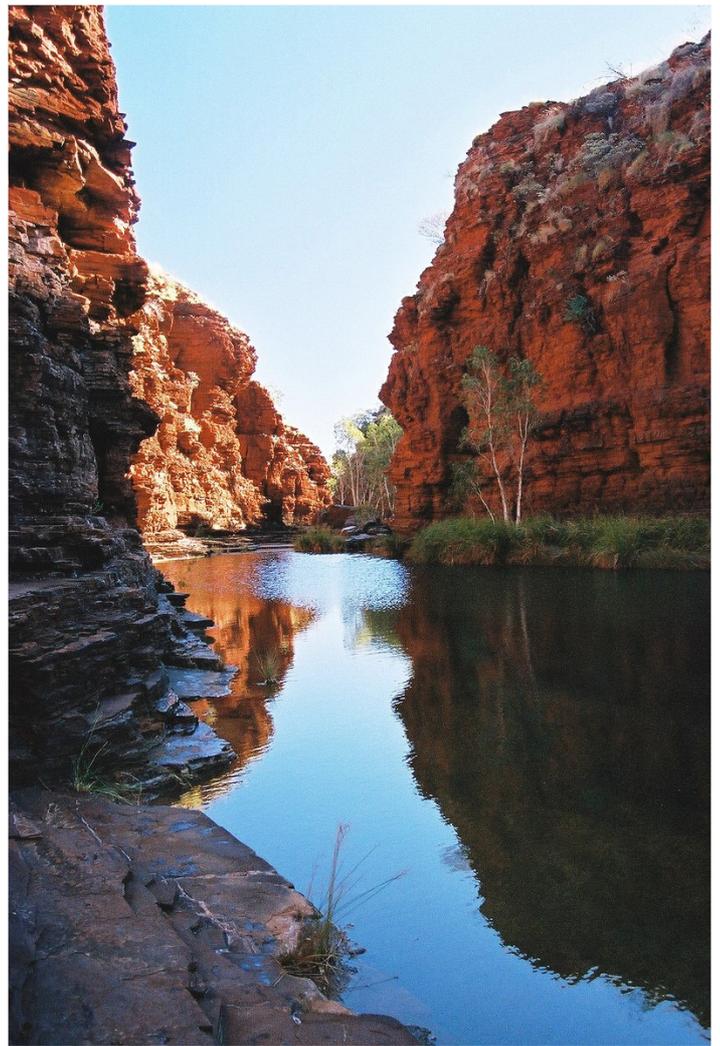
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Red Gorge



Red Gorge



Kalamina Gorge

All photos taken by the author.

