

Mitchell Explorer: May 11 - June 8, 2008

We began our explorations of the Mitchell Plateau area in 1987. Over the years we have gradually expanded the areas we visit and have worked out the best routes through them all. In early 2004, the Australian army produced new 1:50 000 topographic maps of the area. We studied those maps and began to dream of a new trip, one which would combine the best of the areas we know with a series of unnamed rivers and gorges which look fascinating on the new maps. The 2006 version of this trip was a great success. Building on that experience should make this one even better.

The Mitchell Plateau (Ngauwudu in the local Aboriginal language) is one of the most species-rich areas in WA. The vegetation is dominated by a rare mixture of fan palms (*Livistona eastonii*) and eucalypts and contains some of the largest pockets of monsoonal vine forest in the Kimberley. The region is home to more mammal species than have been collected from any other similar-sized area in W.A. One of these, the monjon (a rock wallaby formerly called the warrabi) was not photographed until 1985. (We have seen a number of monjons on our trips.) Over 220 species of birds have been recorded in the area. If you'd like an example of the birds you might see, please go to our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, click on Photo Galleries on the left menu, then scroll down and click on *Birdwatching and Bushwalking*. This page has general information and a link to a list of the birds that we saw on one of our Mitchell Plateau trips.

The Mitchell Plateau has one of the two highest concentrations of Aboriginal rock paintings we have found in the Kimberley. (The other is the Drysdale River.) We visit examples of all styles including Bradshaw (Gwion) and Wandjina. There is so much art that almost every trip finds at least one site we haven't visited before. Some sites are recent, almost certainly 20th century. Some are ancient, almost certainly predating the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

Section One: Mitchell Plateau Airstrip to Donkins Falls: May 11-21

The trip begins with a flight from Kununurra to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip. We'll avoid a tedious walk along the 4WD track by hopping into a helicopter and flying straight to the top of Mitchell Falls. The aerial views are spectacular. We spend the rest of the day exploring the area around the falls.

From here, we make our way upstream along the Mitchell River, eventually reaching a rather spectacular but little known gorge and waterfall we first found in June 1997. (Even the new map fails to show the waterfall.) Only a few hundred metres away are two small billbongs providing a wonderful contrast in a very small area.

The next segment of the walk takes us across some relatively flat country to the headwaters of Donkins Creek. The environments here are different from anything else we encounter in the areas we have visited before. This area is not geologically spectacular, but it has an interesting flora and fauna and is where we've spotted the most wildlife on some of our previous trips.

Beginning shortly downstream from where we first hit it, Donkins Creek enters a small gorge. The walking here is slow with a number of small climbs and a substantial amount of rock-hopping. The gorge is, however, quite pretty and there are a number of pools where we can stop for a swim and/or to look at whatever birds may be in the area.

Finally we break into the open and reach a magnificent campsite about a kilometre above Donkins Falls. At about 100 metres, Donkins Falls is the highest single drop waterfall in the north Kimberley. The area around the falls is a fascinating mix of different environments. If time permits, we will do a long day walk down to the base of the falls and back. This gives us the chance of visiting a mangrove area near Prince Frederick Harbour and finding a few more birds that cannot be seen elsewhere on the trip. (Donkins Falls and nearby Donkins Hill were named by Philip Parker King in 1819. Mr Donkins provided the tinned meat which made King's voyage much more pleasant for the participants than earlier voyages had been.)

On day eleven, a helicopter (or two) brings our food, those continuing and those joining us for the second section to a meeting point at the top of Donkins Falls. Those finishing with section one are flown back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip where a light aircraft returns them to Kununurra. Those continuing are flown a few km north so we can avoid some of the most difficult walking we have ever encountered in the Kimberley.

Section 2: Donkins Hill, the Hunter River and the Unknown: May 21 - June 1

The area around Donkins Hill is extremely broken and slow going but the north end of the mountain is home to a number of interesting art sites so we will get dropped off there and spend the rest of the day exploring.

The following day, we drop down to the Hunter River and begin heading upstream, going beyond where we have ever been before. The map shows the river passing through rocky terrain, but, not far from where we leave it, we should break into the open and have an easy go as we make our way across to the unnamed river which looks so exciting on the map – long pools and gorge on the main river, more side gorges than we can possibly explore. We'll wander along, looking for art sites and waterfalls, enjoying an area few non-Aboriginals have ever visited. We can't say how far we'll go, but that doesn't matter because, at the end of this section, a helicopter will come in and collect us from wherever we are. That same helicopter (or two) will bring in the food for those continuing and those joining us for the final section. It will carry those continuing to a point near the bottom of the Western Gorge and bring those finishing back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip where a light aircraft returns them to Kununurra.

Section 3: Lower Mitchell River & Western Gorge: June 1-8

This section begins with a helicopter flight to a place we call the Western Gorge, a shadier and narrower gorge than anything else we know of in the area. This gorge is quite pretty so we'll spend the rest of the day exploring it before heading across to the Mitchell River.

Our exact route depends on whether or not the Drysdale River trip which follows this takes place. If it does, we will do a loop which finishes below the lower falls on the Mitchell River at a point where a float plane can collect us. If it does not take place, we will cross direct to the lower falls and then as described below.

Although little known because of their inaccessibility, the lower falls are just as spectacular as the main Mitchell Falls. We will probably spend two nights there, exploring the nearby Aboriginal art sites and doing a day walk through the lower gorge to the tidal rapids formed where a rock bar blocks the river. At very low tides, you could walk across with dry feet. When the tide changes, the water swirls back up the river with a rush and the bar disappears. (The display is not as impressive during neap tides.)

We spend the next couple of days working our way along the Mitchell River to the main Mitchell Falls. There are so many Aboriginal art sites and inviting pools along the way that some groups have taken as much as four days to do the seven kilometre walk. (Most groups do it in two or three days.) Along the way we will get a feel for the power of the Mitchell at its peak as the floods in early 2000 removed most of the large trees along this section.

At the top of the main falls, we join the marked trail to the Mitchell Falls car park, stopping to visit Big Merten and Little Merten Falls along the way. From near the car park, we take a helicopter flight to the airstrip where we meet the plane which flies us back to Kununurra early on the final morning.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall	Level 3
Climate	Level 2. Average daytime max 30-32°C (86-90°F), average nighttime min 11-13°C (61-65°F). It has been known to drop to near freezing. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely but possible.
Terrain	Level 2-4. Although most of the walking is relatively easy, the trip does include substantial amounts of rock hopping.. Some short sections will be quite rugged. People without bushwalking experience are likely to find it more difficult than those who have had such experience. As some of the walk is exploratory, we can't be sure exactly how difficult it will be.
Vegetation	Level 2-3. Can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt. It is likely that you will spend some time pushing through some fairly thick scrub or grass. At this time of year, the spear grass has finished seeding and dried out. It may be necessary to push through thick spinifex in some places.

Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. The first full day's walk is very long and may take 8 hours not counting breaks. On some days, you need carry your pack for only a couple of hours after which you can rest or explore without packs.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 11 days food on sections one and two, 7 days food on section three.. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.
Art	This is one of the richest areas for Aboriginal art in the Kimberley. We visit many sites in a number of different styles.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at any of the campsites.
Swims	In the areas we know, good pools at every campsite. Many opportunities for swimming each day. In the exploratory section, we may have to miss some swims because of a potential crocodile problem.
Lowlights	Helicopter noise in the lower Mitchell Gorge. Possibly poor shade at one or more lunch spots. Possible scrub and rough terrain in some places.
Highlights	Waterfalls and beautiful gorge scenery. Perfect weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites. Helicopter flight. Exploring the unknown.
Wildlife	You see a variety of birds along the river and have a good chance of spotting freshwater crocodiles. You may see large crocs below the tidal rapids on section two.
Fishing	Excellent along much of the Mitchell, possibly OK along some of the smaller creeks.

Notes

Photo Gallery. The photos in the three Mitchell Plateau photo galleries on our website will give you a good idea of the kind of terrain through which you will travel as well as some of the things you will see along the way.

Birds. The variety of environments through which we will travel makes this a particularly good trip for birdwatchers. We will see a wide selection of birds, both common and relatively rare. The relatively rare birds we have a reasonable chance of finding include the black grasswren and the Kimberley race of the partridge pigeon. We've seen both on previous trips.

Art. As mentioned in the introduction, the Mitchell Plateau has one of the highest concentrations of Aboriginal rock paintings we have found in the Kimberley. (We have seen more Bradshaws than Wandjinnas but both are present.) Visiting the sites we know and looking for new ones is one of our main activities. If you are not particularly interested in the art, then you need to be prepared to wait by a pool and relax while others go exploring.

If only one to three people are doing only one section, we may bring them in or out on a scheduled tourist flight rather than on a charter. This may require a slight change to our schedule.

A day pack is useful.

Some items may be left at your accommodation in Kununurra during the walk.

This whole trip depends on the continued presence of a helicopter at the Mitchell Plateau. If the helicopter is no longer there, we will have to make major alterations to the itinerary. (As helicopters have been based there during the dry season for about ten years, this is highly unlikely.)

You should have packages containing your breakfasts and lunches for sections two and three ready for us to leave with the airline in Kununurra or with the helicopter base on the Mitchell Plateau. It **may** be possible to get fresh food sent in with those joining for section two or three.

Crocodiles and swimming. We have never seen a large crocodile anywhere in the area where we will be walking. However, we once met someone who told us that he had seen a large crocodile below Mitchell Falls. There are large crocodiles in the lower reaches of all of the major and some of the minor rivers in the region. There is no barrier to their travel below major waterfalls. We recommend that you restrict your swims to side creeks and small pools unless your guide tells you otherwise. It is particularly important that you ask your guide before swimming in the large pools on the main river we will be following on section two. (Small pools should be no problem. There will be many opportunities to swim on all sections.)

Mitchell Falls Pools. Traditional Aboriginal belief does not permit swimming in the pool immediately below Mitchell Falls. We will restrict our swimming to the many other pools along our route.

Helicopters are expensive. Seven people cost us the same as four. Rather than charge a high price which would cover us for four people, we prefer to offer the trip at a reasonable price with a surcharge for a group of four. If only four book, they will be given the choice of paying the surcharge, transferring to another trip or receiving a full refund.

Maps. 1:100 000. The Warrender map covers most of the walk. A small part will extend onto the Bigge map.
1:50 000. The Donkins Hill map covers almost all of sections one and three as well as a part of section two. A substantial amount of section two will be on the Manning Peak, Mudge and Mitchell River maps.

Itinerary: Mitchell Explorer

Note 1 **Day 0 is the day before departure.**

Note 2 **This itinerary is subject to change**

Section 1 Airstrip to Donkins Falls

Day 0 Travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between Kununurra and Perth and Darwin. Connections to the eastern states are normally made through Darwin. Pre-trip meeting for everyone doing the first section, 6.30 p.m., outdoor area, Kimberley Croc Backpackers. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 Very early morning pick up from your accommodation in Kununurra provided you have given us the address at least a week before departure or have made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. If you are unable to notify us where you are staying, the pick up is from in front of the Kununurra Visitors Centre possibly as early as 5.00 a.m. if we are flying. Fly or begin drive to Mitchell Plateau. Begin walk. Bush camp.

Day 2–10 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.

Day 11 Food drop and flight to Mitchell Falls Area. Those finishing here will be flown back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip by helicopter and from there to Kununurra in a light aircraft.

Section 2 Donkins Hill, the Hunter River and the Unknown

Day 11 Those beginning with this section catch an early morning charter flight from Kununurra to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip. If they have not notified Willis's Walkabouts where they will be staying before the departure of section one, they will have to contact the airline to confirm arrangements. We may use Alligator Airways or Slingair. That information will be available well before departure.
Fly to Donkins Hill area. Camp nearby

Day 14–21 Bush camping carrying full packs most days.

Day 22 Food drop and flight to Mitchell Falls Area. Those finishing here will be flown back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip by helicopter and from there to Kununurra in a light aircraft.

Section 3 Lower Mitchell River and the Western Gorge

Day 22 Those beginning with this section catch an early morning charter flight from Kununurra to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip. If they have not notified Willis's Walkabouts where they will be staying before the departure of section one, they will have to contact the airline to confirm arrangements. We may use Alligator Airways as normal or we may use Slingair as that company also owns the helicopters based at the Plateau and runs a scheduled service. That information will be available well before departure.

Fly to the lower Western Gorge.

Day 22-28 Bush camping carrying full packs most days.

Day 29 Short walk to pick up followed by early morning flight to Kununurra arriving in time to connect with most commercial flights.

Important Note

Regional Link (formerly Air North), the only airline currently operating into Kununurra uses relatively small and has a baggage allowance of only 13 kg. Unless special arrangements have been made, if you are flying to Kununurra and your baggage weighs more than 13 kg, it may not get on the plane with you. (This would be very unusual but it is possible.)

Contact Regional Link for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000;

Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au

Qantas Link cancelled their peak season direct flights to and from Perth in late 2006. Call 131313 to see if they are running again.