

## **Mitchell Plateau No. 2: July 5-18, 2009**

Bounded by the spectacular gorges and valleys of the Mitchell and Lawley Rivers, 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](http://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 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some are ancient, almost certainly predating the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

Our first exploration of the Donkins Creek area was in 1996. Every visit since then has convinced us it is one of the best new bushwalking areas we have discovered in the past ten years. By using a helicopter for a food drop and to transport us across some difficult terrain, we include most of the highlights without a lot of the hard work. (Donkins Creek 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.)

### **Section 1: Lower Mitchell River and the Western Gorge: July 5-11**

The trip begins with a flight from Kununurra to the Mitchell Plateau. If the Drysdale trip which precedes this runs, we may fly out in a float plane and land below the lower falls. If not, we will take a normal plane and land at the Mitchell Plateau airstrip. From there we will take a helicopter to the Mitchell River.

We will spend the rest of the week exploring the Mitchell River below the main falls and the Western Gorge, a shadier and narrower gorge than anything else we encounter on the trip. Our exact route will depend on how and where we arrive.

The lower falls on the Mitchell is little known but 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.)

On day seven, a helicopter (or two) brings in our food and those joining us for the second section and flies us to Donkins Creek just above the main falls. Those finishing with section one are flown back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip where a light aircraft returns them to Kununurra.

### **Section 2: Donkins Creek and the Upper Mitchell River: July 11-18**

A helicopter will pick us up from wherever we finish the first week's walk and take us to Donkins Creek. We set up a base camp near our landing point and spend the rest of the day exploring the nearby rock shelters and the area above Donkins Falls which plunges over 100 metres into a narrow gorge. The following day we do a long loop walk down into the gorge below the falls and back.

On the third day, we break camp and head upstream through a small gorge. The walking here is slow with a number of small climbs and a substantial amount of rock-hopping. It is so rugged that four km often takes a full day. 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.

Another day's walk brings us to another wonderful campsite in a small gorge. The following day we break out of the rugged country and cross back to the Mitchell River watershed, stopping to explore some of the small creeks where we saw the most wildlife on earlier trips.

Eventually, we reach the Mitchell River itself where we hope to visit another gorge and waterfall we first found in June 1997. (There is no hint of a waterfall on the map.)

We spend the next couple of days working our way along the Mitchell River to the main Mitchell Falls. Depending on when it was last burnt, some of the terrain along this section can be as slow as anything we encounter in the two weeks. There are numerous Aboriginal art sites, some of which require small detours. Which ones we visit will depend on the speed and interest of the group. As always, there are many inviting pools so there are ample opportunities for swim stops.

When we reach the main falls, we join the marked trail and walk out to the Mitchell Falls car park, stopping to visit Big Merten and Little Merten Falls along the way. A short walk on the final day brings us to the car park where we meet the transport that will take us to the airstrip from which we fly back to Kununurra.

## Terrain and Difficulty

<b>Overall</b>	Level 3
<b>Climate</b>	Level 2. Average daytime max 30°C, average nighttime min 10-12°C. It has been known to drop to near freezing. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.
<b>Terrain</b>	Level 3. 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.
<b>Vegetation</b>	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.
<b>Hours</b>	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.
<b>Packs</b>	<b>Pack weight</b> - level 3. You need to carry 6 days food. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.
<b>Art</b>	This is one of the richest areas for Aboriginal art in the Kimberley. We visit many sites in a number of different styles.
<b>Campsites</b>	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are very unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites. You may not see anyone else at any of them.
<b>Swims</b>	Good pools at every campsite. Many opportunities for swimming each day.
<b>Lowlights</b>	Helicopter noise in the lower Mitchell Gorge. The long walk on the first day. Possibly poor shade at one or more lunch spots.

- Highlights** Waterfalls and beautiful gorge scenery. Perfect weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites. Helicopter flight.
- 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.

If only one to three people are doing only one section, we will 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 in the vehicle or at your accommodation in Kununurra during the walk.

Our helicopter food drop and flight 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 keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the drives.

You should have a package containing your breakfasts and lunches for the second half of the trip ready for us to leave with the helicopter pilots when we arrive at the Mitchell Plateau. It **may** be possible to leave a small amount of your food for the second half of the trip in cold storage with the pilot.

**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.

**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.

Both sections include visits to a large number of Aboriginal art sites. If you have no interest in these, you need to be prepared to relax on your own while the others are visiting the sites.**Map.** The 1:100 000 Warrender map covers the entire walk. Part of the helicopter flight and some of the views will extend onto the 1:100 000 Bigge map. **New maps.** In April 2004, the 1:50 000 topo maps for the area were finally issued. Almost all of the walk is on the Donkins Hill map. The part below the lower falls on the Mitchell River is on the Mitchell River Map. The views to the west go onto the Manning Peak map (and others further on).

# Itinerary: Mitchell Plateau No. 2

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

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

## Section 1 Lower Mitchell River and the Western Gorge

**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, 6.00 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 4.30 a.m.  
Fly to Mitchell Plateau. Begin walk. Bush camp.

**Day 2–6** Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.

**Day 7** Food drop and flight to Donkins Creek. Those finishing here fly back to the Mitchell Plateau airstrip by helicopter and from there to Kununurra in a light aircraft.

## Section 2 Donkins Creek and the Upper Mitchell River

**Day 7** 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 lower Mitchell Falls or Western Gorge.

**Day 8-13** Bush camping carrying full packs most days.

**Day 14** Finish walk. Fly to Kununurra morning, arriving in time to connect with afternoon flights to southern capitals.

**Important** **Regional Link** (formerly Air North), the only airline currently operating into Kununurra

**Note** 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](mailto: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.