

BUSHWALKING IN THE KIMBERLEY, 2009

On 3 February 2010, a large audience enjoyed four short, illustrated presentations in which Kimberley Society members spoke enthusiastically about their bushwalking experiences from the previous year. Their notes about the presentations appear below.

Glycosmis Bay Bush Walk (contributed by Jeffrey J Gresham)

In early July, a party of 11 intrepid bushwalkers, the majority of whom are Kimberley Society members, landed at the remote Faraway Bay airstrip in the very north of the vast Kimberley region. Given previous flight delays that day, there was only just enough daylight left for the party to hurriedly make its way westward from the airstrip to a camp site near a beautiful inlet called Monitor Bay. This lovely spot was “home” for the next three nights as the areas to the north (Boab Bay) and around Monitor Bay were explored without the burden of full packs. The party then continued westward for approximately 10 km until it reached the major creek that flows northward for another 10 km before discharging into Glycosmis Bay. This beautiful, teardrop-shaped bay has 30 to 40 metre high vertical cliffs dropping into the ocean. Several nights were spent camped at this delightful spot and exploring both north and east of the bay. This included the area referred to as the “Lost City” in Ian Wilson’s book, *The Lost World of the Kimberley*. This is an area containing abundant rock art of outstanding quality and preservation. After 12 days of hardship and deprivation the party was delighted to be picked up by boat from Faraway Bay to enjoy a night of comfort and warm hospitality at the camp before returning to the realities of the southern winter.

‘Doline’ walk (contributed by Mike Donaldson)

In 2008, en route from Mitchell Plateau to Bigge Island by helicopter (that’s another story) I spotted a remarkable sink-hole or doline on an isolated sandstone hill-top near Mudge Bay, on the northern Kimberley coast, adjacent to the Bonaparte Archipelago. We circled the feature and, although time did not allow us to land and examine it, a series of low-level photos revealed a huge cave in the side of the hill, and I was sure it would contain some amazing rock paintings. So in July 2009, as a party of seven, we returned to ‘The Doline’ to investigate. The plan was to helicopter in with an Aboriginal ‘guide’ (he hadn’t been there before either), quickly look at the area while the helicopter returned for the rest of the party, then let our guide return with the last chopper flight, leaving us to walk, in a SE direction, the 40 km back to Mitchell Plateau over the next week or so. Our guide commented that the country was so rugged we may never be seen again!

As it turned out there were only a few paintings at this remarkable topographic feature, perhaps due to the absence of permanent water. We spent a few days in the area exploring likely art sites identified from Google Earth images, and we did find a few interesting sites, but the country is very rugged and the going was difficult. A highlight was the re-discovery of a painting of a ‘Bradshaw boat’ found about 10 years ago by Tony Sache on a walking trip, and publicised by

Grahame Walsh as perhaps the oldest depiction of a sophisticated water craft anywhere in the world.

After a few more days walking back towards the Plateau it was decided to speed the trip up a little with a helicopter lift back to the lower Mitchell River (satellite phone technology is a walker's best friend!). Several very pleasant days were then spent in the vicinity of the lower Mitchell falls examining known art sites and finding some spectacular new ones on extensive day walks away from the river. Then it was a leisurely 10 km stroll back up the river to Mitchell Falls and the DEC camp ground, and a charter flight back to civilization. And we came back with a full complement of seven, not having lost a soul in the exercise!

Tracing a part of Brockman's 1901 expedition in the Prince Regent Nature Reserve (contributed by Chris Oakeley)

In July, our party of nine, led by Hamish McGlashan, left Mt Elizabeth Station (north of the Gibb River Road) in two 4WD vehicles on the Walcott Inlet track and tried unsuccessfully to force a track north from Pearson's Crossing to Pitta Creek. We left the vehicles on a ridge, and two of the party drove them to Bachsten Camp the next day. The remaining seven found the initial walking rough (the average age of the party was 65.7) but the terrain became rougher with outcrops and entangling vines before we reached delightful stretches closer to Honeymoon Pool on a bend on Pitta Creek. This was a fabulous spot with wonderful waterfalls and waterlilies, doves, ravens, insects, turtles, a particularly noisy frog, and places to bathe.

On Day 3 we ascended Pitta Creek, beautiful country, and then stocked up with water for a long, dry leg NW to the valley that supposedly contained Brockman's cave. This country was a maze of outcrops interspersed with gorgeous meadows. But it got horribly hard. In a tangle of outcrops, one of the party fell and fractured his jaw, so we decided to take a short cut – great mistake – down a 'real doddle' gully. It was very hot as we struggled, seriously short of water, through huge boulders, vines, green ants and undergrowth. At the bottom as the sun went down we found a tiny stream. It was the best water in the world. That night, from way up where our colleague had bloodied the rocks with his jaw, we heard the goose-bump-making howl of a dingo that rose and fell in waves of loneliness among the cliffs.

Day 4: We set off NNW for the cave through tall cane grass. Then the valley opened up. Above us were plenty of cave-looking holes in the cliffs – and then we saw an Aboriginal standing stone, to the West, exactly where Hamish had calculated the cave should be. We ascended along slanting strata with fine views to the cave, which consisted of chamber after chamber, delving 40 metres or more into the hillside with old fireplaces, lines of natural pillars, and rocks covered with a patina and worn smooth from contact with human bodies. You could see that no one had been there for years.

Day 5: In the morning, while descending from a small cliff, Hamish had a frightening and spectacular fall. With the luck of the Scots, he fell clear of all the boulders and landed in a stream. He managed not to drown and wondered

why his pack was so heavy until he discovered his sodden sleeping bag that night. We formed a *peloton* – as they do in the Tour de France where cyclists take turns to lead – and battled the cane grass for kilometre after kilometre, SW, hugging the edge of the valley between the cliffs and the hidden streams, one of which we measured deeper than our ski-sticks, constantly looking down to see what we were stepping on – rocks, air, fallen trees, streams etc. We were like Lilliputian men wading our way through an upturned, very dirty, men's hairbrush.

Somewhere along this valley I happened to look up and beside us were four wonderful clothes peg Bradshaws, slender girls with long ringlets in their hair and with multi-barbed spears stuck in the ground and faint over-paintings. The valley became narrower and the *peloton* slower, and, as the sun went down, we camped for the night at the junction of several gorges and made a bonfire of everything that was not absolutely necessary. In the morning (day 6), we filled up every receptacle with water and climbed a spur out of the valley. In Brockman's time this valley had been burnt and he had been able to escape via one of these gorges. He would not have been able to take his horses through this valley as we experienced it. As well, the iridium satellite phone was almost useless. We could not hold satellites for long enough in these gorges.

The waterless country SW to Bachsten Creek was easy going and had been burnt, and we came across great termite nests, silky grevillea, crested cockatoos, and finally water at sundown. At this stage we were 2.5 days late for our rendezvous and more or less out of food.

Day 7: We reached the spectacular Bachsten Falls and had a water massage, a sunbathe, and a small croc scare; then we cut SSW across country with marvellous scenery and hit the creek again and the first track in all our walk, leading to Bachsten Camp, hot showers, beds and a bottle or three of wine.

Day 8: Two strong 40-year-olds from Derby joined our party. Hamish roused us at 5.30am for another of his memorable cross-country shortcuts, north to "Hairy Armpit", a site that had been photographed by Brockman's party in 1901 and changes noted in both 1992 and 2000 (Donaldson). We confirmed the recent changes were due to flood damage. It was a wonderful rock-art gallery and a place to rest and camp, and as we wandered slowly SSW down the river (Day 9-10), we stopped in places where the lagoon was a mass of mud-lark, and the sky filled with hundreds of rainbow bee-eaters with four whistling kite gliding between them over our heads. The camping sites were populated with waterlilies and water goanna, peanut bushes, black brim (sooty grunthers), and mists rising from the water in the early morning. And so we continued until we hit the Walcott Inlet track and our vehicles, left there for us by Rosemary McGlashan. We made a side trip into Wren Gorge, to find and record the rare black grass wrens of which we saw four, and photographed the spectacular gallery of rock art. It's a glorious place to linger.

Day 11: On the way back to Mt Elizabeth Station on the track shared with stray cattle and dingos, we explored some outcrops north of Pearson's Crossing containing fine grinding holes, spear sharpening sites, more art, and another

group of four Bradshaw figures with spears, but without ringlets, and a child or possum on one shoulder, and a more modern, recently touched up, birthing figure. An excellent dinner at Mt Elizabeth Station provided a most welcome finale.

Bachsten Creek Revisited (contributed by Roger Passmore)

With the Bachsten Camp as a focal point, one can design walks with different degrees of difficulty. A previous trip had been a marathon, averaging 10-15 km a day. This time we had five “first-timers” in our group of 10 (biologists outnumbering geologists, unusually) and the priority was looking around rather than travelling great distances.

Spending the first night at the camp provided a respite from the long drive in, and gave us the chance to look at the art work on nearby rock faces and cave walls. In the following days, after admiring the Bachsten Falls and inspecting some great Wandjinas in an overhang near the creek, we proceeded up a steep-sided gorge as far as its terminal waterfall and huge pool. A new innovation – staying three days at the one campsite – provided extra opportunity for rock art search and swimming through the narrow stretches.

Bachsten Creek and its tributaries contain some very scenic sections, and are generally easy walking. Memories of the vine thickets and bouldery sections have faded. We saw several exceptionally good Wandjina art sites, and a small number of Bradshaw paintings. Returning to Bachsten Camp after seven days, we then took day trips into the ranges further east and to Wren Gorge. Given that we did the trip in August, with temperatures starting to increase towards the summer season, swimming in the numerous waterholes took a high priority.

This area is not prolific in Bradshaw paintings, but the sum of artwork was sufficient to keep everyone’s interest. The eye-opener for the regular walkers was the amount of animal life to be noticed, if not actually seen. “Scats” were an item of great interest to the biologists. On such evidence, a motion-sensing camera was set up most nights, giving a few interesting moving flicks of marsupials and rodents. Probably the most excitement though, was the sighting of a red goshawk, apparently “once in a lifetime”, followed by making close eye contact with a large olive python and a junior ‘freshie’.

Being accessible by 4WD vehicle (notwithstanding the jump-ups) from Mt Elizabeth Station, Bachsten Camp provides a favourable starting-point for Kimberley walks. The art, scenery and animal life have induced our young group to head to the Kimberley again in 2010.