

Escaping COVID – Diary of a Birdwatching Trip to Kakadu and the Top End with Willis’s Walkabouts (4-17 October 2020)

Sandy Berry



Migratory bird expert Peter sets up his spotting scope to give us a better view of the thousands of small brown birds on the shoreline (Photo by Ian Smith).

in a COVID hotspot, i.e. the Greater Sydney Region, for at least 14 days. Agnieszka and Geoff got around this by spending two weeks before the trip touring regional NSW. As Ian and I live in the Southern Highlands, we just had to make sure we stayed away from the Sydney Region for two weeks. We all travelled together in Geoff’s van from Bundanoon to Sydney Airport with no stops.

The airport was eerily deserted – just the passengers for our flight. Being ‘Economy’ passengers we had to board the 737 by the rear stairs. “*Can you manage the stairs?*” blurted the attendant as she checked my boarding pass. I hoped that I could – after all, we had been training for the trip by frequently walking down to Long Point on the Shoalhaven before breakfast.

Our flight necessitated a stop-over in Brisbane where, after standing in queues for a couple of hours and enduring a maze of bureaucracy, we spent the night in quarantine at the Ibis

Oct 4-17 KAKADU NP

Expressions of interest to join Ian Smith and Sandy Berry on this guided trip with Willis’s Walkabouts: Kakadu Birdwatching and Nature Special. It is a birdwatching trip for bushwalkers and includes two days of birdwatching around Darwin, two days birdwatching along the drive to Kakadu via Pine Creek and Goymar, a seven day full-pack walk on the escarpment from Gunlom to Barramundi, an early morning Yellow Waters Cruise, two days return to Darwin via Mary River (cruise), South Alligator River and other birding sites. For more information refer to

www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au. The walk should be at a suitably slow pace to allow for birdwatching and nature observation. DISTANCE: MEDIUM. TRIP GRADE: EASY/MEDIUM. MAPS: LEADER: SANDY BERRY.

Bushwalkers mostly opt to visit Kakadu during the cooler, dry months of winter. The best time for birdwatchers, however, is during the ‘Build-Up’ from October to December.

Bushwalking during the Build-Up is challenging – daytime maximum temperatures are commonly 35-40°C and minimum temperatures 25°C or higher, with very high relative humidity. However, the combination of bushwalking and birdwatching allows for travel at a much slower pace, more suited to the climate.

What follows is what we (Geoff and Agnieszka Moxon, Ian Smith and me) experienced on a trip with Willis’s Walkabouts that combined both bushwalking and birdwatching.

2 October. Darwin at last! What a relief to land at Darwin airport and be told “*You are free to go!*”. Getting here had been a challenge. Indeed, it had been too much of a challenge for Therese (Horsington) and Bill (Jackson) – they had to opt out due to the Northern Territory’s quarantine restrictions. The NT border was open to NSW residents provided that they had not been



High standards of dress are strictly enforced in the Northern Territory (Photo by Ian Smith).

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Russell, Sandy and Geoff push their way through lush vegetation above Barramundi Creek (Photo by Ian Smith).

Airport Hotel. We soon got used to having a police escort to ensure that we did not abscond and spread our NSW germs into Queensland. Wearing facemasks, we gasped for air during the four hour flight to Darwin.

Our trip was run by *Willis's Walkabouts*, and Russell Willis met us at the airport. We were his first interstate clients since January 2020. Russell drove us to his home to sign-off on the paperwork, and for some refreshments, before dropping us off at our accommodations in the CBD.

3 October. This was a day to get used to the heat and humidity, and of course, to visit the 'NT General Store' and purchase any items that we had forgotten to pack. After today we would rise at 5:30am for the rest of our trip.

4 October. We set our phone alarm to wake us at 5:30am. Up and dressed, we discovered that we had actually woken at 4:30am – the phone had adjusted its time for daylight saving in the southern states. Russell picked us up at 7am and we drove north-east to Lee Point on the outskirts of Darwin. There we met Peter, a friend of Russell, who is a Darwin birdwatcher with a keen interest in migratory waders as well as bush birds. Carrying a spotting scope, Peter marched us up the beach to see a pair of nesting Beach Stone Curlews. Then we came to a stony point where the water was edged with thousands of mud and sand-feeding waders – Sandpipers, Greenshanks, Plovers, Curlews, Whimbrels – all sitting out the high tide. As the tide receded the birds dispersed to feed on the freshly exposed mud-flats and sands. Some of these birds had migrated

all the way from Siberia. We walked along the beach to Buffalo Creek and some mangroves, returning to the carpark through the bush behind the beach. There were plenty of birds to spot – Spangled Drongo, Olive-backed Oriole, Varied Triller, Little Friarbird, Brown Whistler, Figbird, and many more. Next stop was by an Osprey nest atop a mobile-phone tower by the roadside. Then we called by the back of Leanyer Swamp near the sewage treatment works. It was pretty desolate – a wasteland full of dumped cars and other trash – but the birds didn't seem to mind, including the flamboyant Red-headed Honeyeater and Red-backed Wren. Then we went to the Botanic Gardens for lunch, and an unsuccessful search for a Rufous Owl. We went back to our accommodation mid-afternoon to rehydrate and refresh before heading off at 4:30pm to the Casuarina Coastal Reserve for another couple of hours of

birding. That evening we dined *al fresco* at the Surf Club whilst watching the sun set over the Arafura Sea. During our first day we saw 48 species of birds.

5 October. Another 7am start with a visit to the East Point Reserve – 200 hectares of greenspace just 7km from the CBD. Seeking out whatever birds we could find we followed pathways along the water's edge, through rainforest and, mindful of crocodiles, along the mangrove boardwalk. We totted up 42 species including the Black Butcherbird, Pacific Baza and Mangrove Robin. In the afternoon we went to Holmes Jungle Reserve where we saw twenty species, including Masked, Long-tailed and Double-barred Finches.



Agnieszka, Ian, Geoff and Russell rest beneath scant shade on the escarpment (Photo by Sandy Berry).

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Agnieszka, Geoff and Russell identify a potential snack (a Cocky Apple)
(Photo by Ian Smith).

decorated with white shells, green fruits and green plastic bits and pieces.

After filling-up the fuel tanks at Pine Creek we headed east along the Kakadu Highway, stopping by the Mary River (the Roadhouse is closed indefinitely) late morning. Along the shady rainforest – fringed but dry riverbed and banks we saw twelve species including the Little-shrike Thrush, Forest Kingfisher and Dollarbird. Having entered Kakadu National Park, our next stop was Yurmikmik Trackhead on the road to Gunlom. We did the short walk to Boulder Creek (mostly dry) where we had lunch whilst the birds kept a low profile. Then we went on to the green, well-watered campground at Gunlom. This was our last bit of luxury for a while – flush toilets and hot showers, and picnic tables. As Ian and I wandered around the campground seeking out birds we came upon two feral bulls grazing on the lawns.

In just a couple of days in Darwin we observed 79 bird-species.

6 October. It bucketed rain whilst we waited for Russell to pick us up and take us to the bush. For the next couple of days our party numbered seven, as we were joined by Russell's wife Carol, and Anna, a young Italian tour guide with a keen interest in the native fauna. Our first stop was at Adelaide River Cemetery where Geoff was keen to find the grave of his father's cousin, Wing Commander Archibald Tindal, aged 26, who had the misfortune to be the first RAAF casualty to die from the Japanese attacks on Australia. He courageously manned a Vickers Gun on the ground, firing at the Japanese planes before they shot him.

There was very little water in the river but quite a few birds were about, including a Pheasant Coucal and a Jabiru. We stopped for lunch at the Emerald Springs Roadhouse where a Grey Butcherbird took a great interest in our sandwiches. Then we drove on south of Pine Creek to birding sites on the Ferguson River and the Edith Falls Road. We hoped we might see Gouldian Finches and Hooded Parrots. We saw neither, but we did see Crimson Finches, several Rainbow Bee-eaters and a Nankeen Night Heron. Ian spied three Brolgas. We spent the night at the Pine Creek Hotel – glad to be indoors as it rained heavily.

7 October. We had an early morning walk around the settlement of Pine Creek. The local policeman, out on patrol, stopped by us to tell us where to find a Great Bowerbird's bower. The bower was

During the night cattle and horses grazed near our tent. We were woken occasionally by the haunting cries of the Bush Stone Curlew, as well as heavy rain showers.

8 October. Having packed up our wet tents and packs into the Hilux, we bumped our way back over the corrugations to the Kakadu Highway. We called into Bukbuklook (named for the Pheasant Coucal) and did the short walk to the lookout, no birds but a nice view. On to the Gungural campground and the South Alligator River where we spied several birds in the rainforest bordering the dry watercourse. Anna was keen on playing recordings of bird calls to attract them, a practice some consider unethical; for us it was sometimes hard to distinguish recordings from actual calls!



R to L: Russell, Agnieszka and Geoff experience the wildlife on our Yellow Waters cruise. Perhaps Agnieszka has just spotted the 5m crocodile by our boat!
(Photo by Sandy Berry).

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Sunrise over the Yellow Water Billabong (Photo by Sandy Berry).

On leaving Gungural, Carol and Anna headed back to Darwin whilst Russell, Geoff, Agnieszka, Ian and I drove on to Maguk where we would leave our vehicle and head off on our six-night walk. The scheduled walk was to have started at Gunlom, but just weeks before our departure the indigenous managers decided to close the new walking-track to the escarpment from Gunlom, thus denying any access to the escarpment area and along Waterfall Creek. This left us with no alternative but to do a shorter walk, starting from Maguk and following Barramundi Creek as it winds through the escarpment above the waterfall.

It was very hot and muggy as we shouldered our packs, complete with six days of provisions, and climbed up the track that leads to the top of the waterfall. Russell hadn't been up there for a while and we lost the track up near the top. We made our way along a rough route to Barramundi Gorge. I found myself suffering from heat stress and nausea and needed a rest and cool-off before we finally reached a pleasant shaded, sandy campsite. We revived ourselves with a cooling swim in the big pool by our camp, followed by plenty of drinks.

9 October. Broke camp at 7:30am and followed Barramundi Creek upstream over rock pavement, then ascended the creek bank where the going was much easier. Agnieszka spotted some local wildlife – a small herd of cattle, led by a bull. Luckily, they crossed the creek when they saw us. We diverted up a side creek to the 'Emerald Pool', a beautiful, very deep pool beneath a waterfall – a most welcome respite from the late morning heat and humidity. After lunch we walked another

kilometre upstream to a pleasant small campsite by a shallow pool. We spent the afternoon trying to keep cool, and watching the Mistletoe Bird that visited our camp. Late in the afternoon I noticed that there were several green ants lingering on the roof of our tent fly – what were they doing?

10 October. We left camp at 7:30am and followed the creek upstream for 200m before scrambling up the steep, rocky slope to the top of the escarpment. Up there the country was very open and rocky, with spinifex. We had good views across the low hills, but there were no outstanding geographical features. There was little shade and the temperature was rapidly climbing towards 40°C. Grevilleas were common, and we saw some rare *Callitris* pines as well as occasional clumps of palms.



View from Ubirr of late afternoon light on the East Alligator River floodplain (Photo by Sandy Berry).

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Great Bowerbirds like white, in this case pieces of bone, Gubara
(Photo by Sandy Berry).

The Darwin Woollybutt (*Eucalyptus miniata*) were flowering bright orange – a second crop – they had previously flowered in winter. We stopped awhile at a rock shelter with bits of aboriginal art before steeply descending to the valley of Barramundi Creek and our campsite for the next two nights at the 'Buff Pool'. This is a lovely pool, deep, with a cliff on one side and ancient, shady *Allosyncarpia ternata* trees above the sandbank on the other. The afternoon and evening were very hot and we needed to drink copious amounts of water to stay hydrated as we sat beneath the trees.

Armed with our 'Bush Tucker Identikit' booklet, Agnieszka was proving to be a dab hand at seeking out bits of bush tucker. The green ants sought out our tent fly again.

11 October. With daypacks and lunch we set off at 7:30am to climb up the steep, loose, rocky slopes to the ridgetop above Barramundi Creek, upstream and south-east of our campsite. We descended into Barramundi Creek above the waterfall that feeds into the Buff Pool. The creek cut its way through a cool and shady gorge flanked with rainforest. Although early in the

morning, the day was already hot and we stopped for a cooling dip at the first opportunity; luckily the vegetation was often lush and shady. We soon encountered a pair of figures painted on the gorge wall – Russell told us that they are "the Guardians of the Gorge". Not far beyond we reached a very large, deep, cold pool which required a tricky scramble on our part to proceed upstream. After about a kilometre the gorge ended and we found ourselves in the creek headwaters on the escarpment tops. Near the dry creek-bed we came upon a rock formation decorated with a modest amount of aboriginal art. The rocks and vegetation gave little shelter from the mid-morning sun whilst we ate our morning tea. We retreated to the shade of the gorge for lunch then retraced our steps to reach our camp by mid-afternoon. Within minutes we were all in the Buff Pool refreshing our bodies and souls. Later in the afternoon Geoff and Agnieszka took us to a nearby group of Pandanus palms to see a family of Crimson Finches. As for those green ants – to my horror I discovered that they had been eating our tent fly. There were about twenty 2mm holes in the roof! Obviously silicone treated ultralight nylon fabric is tasty to green ants.

12 October. We woke to a pre-dawn chorus of Friarbirds, Blue-winged Kookaburras, Red-tailed Black Cockatoos and Red-collared Lorikeets. The chorus was notable because it had been absent the previous mornings. Oddly, during the night we frequently heard a noise that sounded like a train! After some debate we reached a consensus that we were hearing the echo of kookaburras calling up-stream in the gorge. We broke camp at the usual time and followed the true right bank of the creek downstream. We saw quite a lot of birds, but no new species, while Agnieszka found more bush tucker. The walking was easy as we were following the pads of cattle or buffalo.

Leaving our packs, we followed up a side-creek till we came upon a large deep pool in a gorge, and an opportunity for a cooling soaking. Returning to Barramundi Creek we continued downstream, searching



At 7:40am Geoff, Russell, Sandy and Ian are fresh and ready for their walk to Gubara
(Photo by Agnieszka Moxon).

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Beetle sculpture by Mitsuaki Tanabi near Mount Bundy
(Photo by Agnieszka Moxon).

for a good clean waterhole and a lunch-spot. Cattle or buffalos had spoilt all of the pools in the creek for several kilometres, and we didn't find good water until we reached the junction with the side-creek that we had followed upstream on day 2 of our walk. The lush canopy of tall trees provided good shade for our late lunch-break. At 2pm we were back on the move again. It was very hot, and we had a long walk above the creek-bank in the sun. We did not find any more good water until we reached the top end of the gorge above our first night's campsite. Though not deep, there was sufficient water for a cooling soak. We were all very weary as we made camp on the hot rock slabs of the gorge. We had walked about 10km and the shade temperature was about 40°C.

13 October. We had a hot, uncomfortable night and woke feeling groggy. We broke camp at 7:30am and followed the gorge for 100m or so, then picked up a track that eventually led us down to Maguk carpark. Hundreds of Red-tailed Black Cockatoos swirled and screeched nearby as we descended from the escarpment. At the bottom we had a last swim in the lovely, huge pool beneath the flowing waterfall. This pool is very popular with Kakadu visitors and the first of them arrived at 9:15am. It was already very hot as we reluctantly left the cool water of the pool to walk the kilometre or so to our vehicle. We were back a day early!

We drove to Yellow Waters and the relative luxury of our accommodation at Cooina Lodge. Refreshing cool drinks were a priority for us. Russell was able to bring our booking forward a night and we retreated from the heat to our air-conditioned rooms. In the late afternoon we headed off for our 4:30pm sunset *Yellow Waters Cruise* on the Yellow Water

Billabong and tributaries of the South Alligator River. As we boarded the boat we were ordered to 'Apply'. It took a few moments for us to comprehend that the instruction was to apply hand sanitiser! Our cheery guide entertained us with jokes and spiel that he no doubt repeats on every cruise; in fact I recalled hearing it all on our cruise in 2016! Nonetheless, he was very good at seeking out small birds, and his commentary was quite informative. We were rewarded with sightings of 27 bird species including more than a thousand Plumed Whistling Ducks, numerous Intermediate Egrets plus Brolgas, Jabiru, Comb-crested

Jacanas and Green Pygmy Geese. We also saw a lot of crocodiles, some right beside the boat, as well as cattle, buffalo and horses. The sunset over the water was spectacular as we returned to the jetty in the last vestiges of daylight.

14 October. Our day started with the 6:45am *Yellow Waters Cruise*. This time we had the indigenous guides. Their spiel focussed on the drama of crocodiles and bush-tucker; they ignored wildlife that was not sort after for dinner. I noted 28 bird species, mostly seen also on the evening cruise. We also saw an Orange Tree Snake. Leaving Cooina, we headed to the mostly dry Anbangbang Billabong which we circumnavigated before inspecting the rock art sites nearby and at Nourlangie Rock. On to the deserted Jabiru township whence we quickly sought some respite from the heat and humidity in our shared cabin at the Anbinik Kakadu Resort. Late in the afternoon we drove out to the rock art site at Ubirr



Early morning at Mamukala Wetland, a late dry season refuge for thousands of birds (Photo by Sandy Berry).

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from where we noticed several fires burning, and Cahills Crossing on the East Alligator River.

15 October. Trying to beat the heat we left Jabiru at 7am and drove to the Nourlangie turn-off, then followed an unsealed road to a carpark and trackhead for the 3.5km walk to Gubara (or Kubara), a swimming hole in a patch of monsoon forest beneath the escarpment. Along the drive we encountered a dingo puppy on the road – it looked lost. After contemplating us for a short while it walked about 5m into the bush and howled for its mother. The walk to Gubara was very pleasant as the country had not been burnt recently. We passed by impressive rock outcrops and were fortunate to see a Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon and a Great Bowerbird and bower. After a refreshing soak in the shallow pool we had a very hot walk back to the car.

Next we drove to the Nawurlandja art site. It was a 2km exposed, flat walk from the carpark to the art site which we thought was better than Nourlangie and Ubirr. The rock art here included an image of a sailing ship. After lunch in the shade of the rock shelter we walked the two hot kilometres back to the car, then drove back to Jabiru and our air-conditioned cabin. At about 4pm Russell suggested another drive out to the Border Store. None of us was keen to go, which was just as well, as soon the rain was bucketing down. We waded through ankle-deep puddles (Jabiru is very flat) to get to dinner at the restaurant in the caravan park across the road from ours.

16 October. It was pleasantly cool as we started towards Darwin at 7am. First stop was at Mamukala Wetlands, about 31km east of Jabiru. By October, Mamukala has become an important refuge for waterbirds as most of the other wetlands in the region have dried up. It was fabulous. There were thousands of Magpie Geese, thousands of Plumed Whistling Ducks and hundreds of Intermediate Egrets. From the bird-hide we had close-up views of Royal Spoonbill, White-headed Stilt, Radjah Shelducks, Jabiru, Comb-crested Jacana and many more species. Russell soon had us doing the 3km woodland walk – before it got too hot. This was also rewarding for woodland as well as wetland bird sightings, and Agnieszka found some tasty Bush Passionfruit. By 11am we had recorded 41 bird species. I noted how good all five of us had now become at identifying the birds and their calls.

We drove on to Mary River where Russell had booked us a 5 bed/1 bathroom Bush Bungalow at the Mary River Wilderness Retreat. After lunch we drove about 5km along the Arnhem Highway towards Darwin to a place Ian and I had visited before on a previous Willis's trip. This special site is unmarked and there is just enough space to park a vehicle or two safely. Hidden in the bush are several sculptures, carved into the granite slabs, known as the 'Australian In-Situ Wild Rice Conservation Project'. They are the work of Japanese sculptor Mitsuaki Tanabi – his tribute to wild rice and the

importance of biodiversity to future generations. Over 10 years he carved insects and lizards into the granite boulders, as well as a 269 foot long wild rice strand. Mitsuaki died in 2015, leaving the work unfinished. Subsequently his son Takamitsu completed the work over two years. Whilst we wandered around the sculptures the sky darkened. We were not long back in the car when again the rain came bucketing down. After the shower had passed we drove to the trackhead for the Billabong Walk in the Mary River National Park. Unfortunately this area had all been burnt very recently and birds were scarce. We did about 2km of walking through the charred bush before returning to the car. Back at the Wilderness Retreat we did one of the several walks starting from the camping area. Dinner at the Resort Restaurant was excellent.

17 October. Although it was the final day of our tour, and only about 130km to Darwin, there was still much to see and do. Once again we were up at 5:30am for an early breakfast followed by a short walk and birdwatching. On the road at 7am we headed towards Fogg Dam, about 45km from Darwin. The water level in the dam was low but we heeded the signs warning of a crocodile in residence, and refrained from walking on the dam wall. We spent some time observing birds from the bird-hide and the carpark. Back at the shady main carpark we did the Woodlands to Waterlily Walk and the Monsoon Forest Walk – about 4km or 5km all up, with long stretches of boardwalk. We saw about 30 species. We were delighted to see a pair of Rose-crowned Pigeons in the carpark. We searched for Rainbow Pittas over the whole length of the Monsoon Forest Walk. Having familiarised ourselves with their calls using a phone app, we could hear them calling, but we, and anybody else who we had met along the track, had not been able to see them. Having all but given up finding them we headed towards the carpark. Then, Geoff and Agnieszka, walking a bit behind Russell, Ian and me, spied two pittas about 15m behind the toilet building. In the end we all got to see them! It was a great way to finish our trip.

Over the whole trip we saw 135 species of birds, tasted quite a bit of bush-tucker, and inspected lots of indigenous art sites. Although our walks were mostly shorter than 10km each day we managed to see a great deal of what Kakadu has to offer the visitor, as well as having some time to see the country between Darwin and Kakadu. Russell made sure that we got as much as possible out of each and every day, whether we liked it or not!

See also Geoff Moxon's article *Darwin or Bust* on page 19 in the previous (No. 280 November 2020) issue of *Into The Blue*.

