

Drysdale River National Park No. 1: June 3-17, 2012 Update 6 Dec 2011

Drysdale River National Park is the largest and least accessible in the Kimberley. There is no public road leading to it. There is no airstrip inside it.

This inaccessibility is the key to one of the park's main attractions — few introduced pests and an ecology that remains relatively undisturbed in comparison to much of the rest of Australia. The park is a paradise for birdwatchers. It is usually easy to spot freshwater crocodiles in the pools below Solea Falls. Fishing is excellent, at its best below the falls. It's a bush paradise. Getting there is the problem.

We could use helicopters but the cost would be prohibitive. Driving takes the better part of two days each way. Fortunately, a new float plane operator has arrived in Kununurra to replace the one we used to use. We now plan to fly both ways and land on the Drysdale River in a huge pool several kilometres downstream from Solea Falls.



Coming in to land on the Drysdale

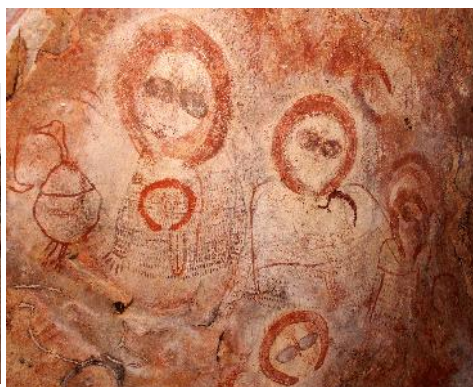


2011 group in front of the larger float plane

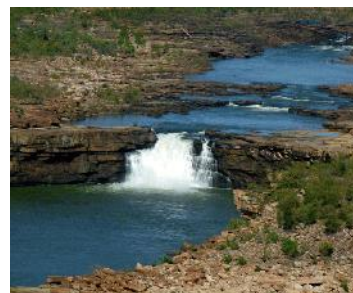
From there, we spend the next several days slowly making our way upstream to Solea Falls, stopping to explore a number of side creeks and climb the nearby hills. There is so much to see that it is likely to take us several days to do the first 10 kilometres of this section as we take time out to enjoy the variety of vegetation, gorges, beautiful pools and Aboriginal paintings.



Sandy campsite, lower Drysdale



Wandjina paintings, lower Drysdale



Aerial view of Solea Falls



Bradshaw or Gwion art, lower Drysdale

The area through which we will be walking contains one of the highest concentrations of Aboriginal rock art that we have ever seen in the Kimberley. We will certainly spend many hours exploring some of those sites. Who knows, with so many sites in the area, we may even discover some we haven't seen before.

With so many things to see off the main river, we spend a substantial part of the first week exploring with daypacks. The Drysdale itself is wide and open, but some of the smaller creeks take us into dense patches of monsoon forest, a very different environment to the main river.



Enjoying the shade on a day walk up Forest Creek

Keen fishermen and women might find it worth bringing a collapsible rod or hand line. There are barramundi below Solea Falls and a variety of other fish above. You are not, however, likely to catch much on the smaller creeks once you get away from the main river.



Barramundi can be found below Solea Falls.

Solea Falls marks a transition as we move out of the lowlands onto a low plateau.

If the 2nd Drysdale trip is not running, we continue up the Drysdale River to Planigale Creek, follow it upstream for some days, then turn back north and return to the pool where we began.

Planigale is a lovely little creek, pool after pool, art site after art site, with the occasional waterfall along the way. On one trip, a family of broilgas put on quite a show, allowing us to get quite close



2010 group at Solea Falls. 2010 was a particularly wet year. Solea is always flowing in June, but not always this well.



Planigale Creek campsite

before they moved on. Broilgas or no, as with all out trips, there will be time to enjoy the wildlife, the flowers and all nature around us.

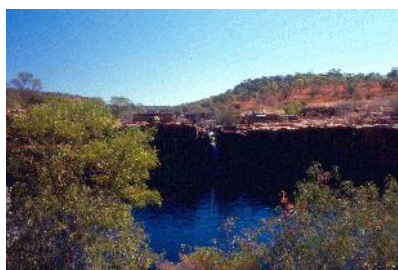
If the 2nd Drysdale trip is running, we will check out possible landing sites on the way in. Depending on what is possible, we should have a choice of two routes from Solea. The guide will discuss these with the group and make the decision based on the interests and abilities of the group members.



Planigale broilga

The first is to increase our speed and do an exploration of Johnson Creek which joins the Drysdale just above Solea Falls. The lower parts of the creek flow through open woodland, an environment very different from that through which we have been travelling. We will take our time and stop to have a close look at the birds and the vegetation at various points along the route.

As we move upstream, the hills close in and the pools become larger. The going becomes a bit scrubby and progress becomes slow, but we are rewarded at Petrogale Falls where we find a large pool and a five star camp site on the flat rock ledges above the falls, a beautiful place for relaxing and fishing. It normally takes a day to a day and a half to reach Petrogale.



Petrogale Falls in a dry year

From Petrogale, we do a day walk up the creek through some interesting gorges. Next we head overland to the main tributary of Johnson Creek, passing through some unusual vegetation — almost unique in that it has escaped the ravages of the fires which have destroyed fire sensitive species throughout most of the north. Northern cypress (*Callitris intratropica*), a species which appears to be close to extinction in Kakadu can be found in abundance. It may not look unusual, but we can go several years without encountering small *Callitris* like the ones shown at left.



Johnson Creek above Petrogale Falls



From there we would probably explore new ground as we worked our way to a point further south on the Drysdale than we have ever been before.

The nature of the terrain on this section is such that we will cover a total at least 45–50 kilometres with full packs, probably more.

The second route follows the Drysdale River upstream, stopping to explore a number of side creeks along the way. This is the more leisurely option. Whichever we choose, we will need to finish at an area where a the float plane can land.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall	Level 3
Climate	Level 2. Average daytime max 30-31°C (86-88°F), average nighttime min 12-15°C (62-68°F) – averages hide the extremes, it can get close to freezing. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.
Terrain	Level 2-4. The start of the walk is relatively flat and easy but there are some longish stretches of soft sand. As we continue toward Solea Falls, the terrain becomes more difficult with lots of rock hopping and some scrambling over large boulders. Above the falls, the terrain gets easier once more.
Vegetation	Level 2-3. Most of the vegetation should be fairly open but it is likely that there will be some thick scrub to push through. It is not likely that there will be much. Scrub conditions vary dramatically from year to year so we can't say how much you will encounter.
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. 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 4. You need to carry 13 days food. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.
Art	This area contains one of the greatest concentrations of Aboriginal rock art in the Kimberley. We plan to spend a substantial amount of time visiting some of these. Those who have little interest in Aboriginal art should be prepared to relax near a pool or just watch the birds while others are visiting the sites.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at any of the campsites.
Swims	Good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot above Solea Falls, smaller pools below. Crocodiles and swimming. We have never seen a large crocodile anywhere in the area where we will be walking. Some local people have told us that there are only freshwater crocodiles in this portion of the Drysdale River. However, we have met someone who told us that he had seen a large crocodile. There are large crocodiles in the lower Drysdale. There is no barrier to their travel below Solea Falls. We recommend that you restrict your swims to the side creeks and small pools in the Drysdale until you are above Solea. If in doubt, ask the guide.
Lowlights	Signs of cattle along the first section of the Drysdale River and some other places. Carrying 13 days food.
Highlights	Solea Falls. Remote wilderness. Perfect weather. Good swimming. Large numbers of well preserved Aboriginal art sites.
Wildlife	You see a variety of birds along the river and have a good chance of spotting freshwater crocodiles, tortoises and a variety of lizards. You are unlikely to see many large land animals.
Fishing	Excellent in some places, little chance in others.

Maps 1:100 000 Carson (and Collison for a small section or a larger one if we go to Johnson Creek) or the new (issued in 2004) 1:50 000 Mount Connelly, Wallis Peak, Johnson Creek (very short section) and Mazzarol (if we do the long walk to Petrogale Falls on Johnson Creek).

Notes

Any one booking both Drysdale trips will receive a 30% discount on the total cost.

A day pack is very useful on this trip.

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Bringing fresh fruit, vegetables or honey into WA is illegal whether you come by road or plane. (You cannot even bring in boxes or other containers that once contained fruit or vegetables.) Bags are checked both on the highway and at the airport.

Transport. Exceptionally late rains could make it unsafe for the float planes to land. If, for any reason, they cannot land, we will be unable to do this trip.

Itinerary: Drysdale River National Park No. 1

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change

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, 6 p.m., Pre-trip meeting, 6 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 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. Float plane flight to Drysdale River. Begin walk. Bush camp.

Day 2–14 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.

Day 15 Fly back to Kununurra early morning. Trip ends. Drop off at your accommodation.

Important Note **Air North**, the main airline operating into Kununurra uses relatively small aircraft and has a baggage allowance of only 13 kg on some flights. 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 Air North for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000; Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au
Skywest has a number of flights between Kununurra and Perth, Broome or Darwin. Call 1300 660088 for flight dates and times or see www.skywest.com.au
Virgin Blue offers daily flights from Brisbane and Melbourne to Darwin and a limited number of direct flights from Adelaide to Broome. If you can't get a good fare with Qantas, flying Virgin Blue to Darwin or Broome, then Air North or a bus to Kununurra might save you some money. See www.virginblue.com.au.