

Drysdale River National Park # 1: June 10-24, 2007 Update 29 April 2007

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. On previous trips, we have gone to the park via the 4WD track that passes over the Aboriginal owned Carson River Station. In July 2004, we were informed that the Aboriginal community at Kalumburu had decided to close this access. They may have re-opened it again, but we can't count on it remaining open.

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 had planned to use float planes to go into the park. Sadly, Alligator Airways did not have enough work for their float planes so they disposed of all but one and can no longer offer this service. At this point we plan to drive in via Carson River — assuming that we can get the same permission that a private group has got. Those doing only this trip will fly out by helicopter and light aircraft.

From the point where we park the vehicles, 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.

From Solea, we have a choice of two routes. The guide will discuss these with the group and make the decision based on the interests and abilities of the group members.

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.

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. 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 beside a long pool so that our transport can reach us.

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 20% discount on the total cost.

A day pack is very useful on this trip.

This area contains one of the greatest concentrations of Aboriginal rock paintings 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.

If neither of the connecting trips run, there will be a surcharge to cover the cost of two empty planes. That surcharge should be somewhere between \$100 and \$200.

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.
Drive to Drysdale River. Bush camp near cars.

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 **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.