

Gregory National Park and the Stokes Range: June 2001

This diary was written by Roger Sheppard during the trip. When I asked if anyone would be interested in producing something for our website, Roger kindly sent us his diary and gave us permission to use it here. The only editing I have done was to remove a few personal items.

DAY 1—10 June 2001

I'm staying at the Darwin YHA where I'm sharing a 4-bed room with a couple from Ireland. I get up quite early this morning at around 7 am—it is still dark, so I try not to make too much noise as I dress and collect my pack and overnight bag and head to the hostel dining area to have a simple breakfast (muesli and a cup of tea). One of my fellow walkers on this Willis's trip, Simone, is here too—but I don't realise she is one of our group (even though I met her last night at the pre-trip meeting with Russell) until she comes over to say hello!

We are both ready and waiting outside the hostel on Mitchell Street when Russell Willis, our guide for this walk, eventually arrives to pick us up (after he'd run around picking up our other fellow walkers from their accommodation places). There are seven of us on this trip, plus our guide Russell and his assistant Alan (both of whom I know from previous Willis's Walkabout walks), so we have two vehicles to get us to the start of our walk.

From Darwin, we drive south along the Stuart Highway to Katherine with a brief stop at Pine Creek for drinks, ice creams or etc. We have another break from the driving when we reach Katherine, parking in Woolworth's car park. Again, we have a snack/ice cream etc.—is this lunch? About half-an-hour later, we resume our drive, now heading west along the Victoria Highway. At Russell's suggestion, some of the others and I volunteer to drive for sections of the long (over 300km) drive. We stop at small settlements along the way (including Victoria Crossing) for a break from the travelling and to stretch our legs and sustain ourselves with drinks, ice creams etc.

We resume the drive, the last leg, until we come to a reasonably flat, grassy area a short distance from the road—this is our campsite for tonight! Russell and Alan head off to do a long car shuffle, to leave our two vehicles somewhere safe between here and where we will finally emerge at the end of this trip in two weeks' time. In the meantime, we set up our tents, collect some firewood, have cups of tea and wander around or just sit chatting as we wait patiently for their return—which will probably be well after dark.

After sunset, we build a roaring campfire and sit around it in the dark, in anticipation of dinner some time later tonight (and to keep ourselves warm). By the time the car shuffle is completed and Russell and Alan have returned, it is quite late in the evening as Russell cooks our evening meal for us—a meat stew and simple dessert. By the time we finish dinner, we are all glad to retire to our tents.

DAY 2—11 June 2001

We have a relaxed morning and take our time over breakfast. Russell tells us to head off on the walk (following a rough track beside a small, dry creek bed until we reach the end of the straightforward section) while he goes off to leave the vehicle in a 'safe' place near to, but not obviously visible from, the road.

The walking route is straightforward for the first kilometre as we set off, initially following a crude track beside a shallow creek bed. We have to wind our way through and/or around the sometimes rough bushes and small trees. When the vegetation gets too unpleasant, we drop down into the dry creek bed where we are walking or rock-hopping over stones and boulders of mixed and awkward sizes, some of them quite large—this requires some concentration. To add to our discomfort, bothersome flies are annoying us and our packs are at their heaviest!

Russell soon catches up to us. A kilometre or two later, the terrain has closed in and is quite scrubby, but we are still following the now small water course which runs through this scrub. We have a choice; stay with the scrub and small creek (which now has a small flow of water at times), or climb higher to hopefully escape the scrub. The party is undecided, so we divide into two groups; some of us (me included) opt to stay with the scrubby creek with Russell, while the rest follow Alan and climb further up the slope to hopefully avoid the rough scrub.

It is now rather hot as we push our way through scrub and sometimes over awkward boulders and rocky areas. Oskar (in our group following the scrubby creek) is not faring well in the heat, and slips and hurts his finger, and seems exhausted. I alert Russell who comes back to check that he hasn't broken or dislocated a finger when we were making our way over an awkward jumble of rocks and platforms in this now rugged and steep country. Some of us, me included, carry some of his load through this section. His finger does not seem to be dislocated, just hurt, so Russell applies some first aid, then we resume our walk, but with a few of us carrying some of Oskar's load. The good news is that we are not very far from our lunch site at a large swimming pool.

We do indeed soon come to a beautiful, huge and welcoming swimming pool below a magnificent rock wall with many huge boulders scattered around the bottom side of the pool. This is our lunch site! We have to clamber over huge boulders at the bottom end of the pool to get to the flat rock surrounds under the waterfall at the head of the pool—and I realise I've been here before...on another Willis's trip, presumably? It doesn't take long for us to jump into the water to cool ourselves and revive our energy and enthusiasm. Then we settle down to have our lunch.

I go exploring in a shallow but large cave above and to the side of the pool; inside I find (and photograph) a very small but very attractive snake curled up in a little hollow in the cave wall; it has bright yellow stripes around his body. I return to the pool to fetch my camera from my pack, then I have to put in a new film before I can eventually take a photo. No one else seems interested initially, but eventually others come to look. It is then we realise there are three similar snakes curled up in little holes at different parts of the rock wall; they are not all exactly the same, but certainly very similar. Now everyone wants to take a look and take photos!

There is another large cave area in the rock wall on the other side of the 'waterfall', so now we explore that too. But it is a bit tricky getting there, as we have to negotiate a very narrow ledge down low near the water on a vertical rock face to get across to the cave entrance up above the water level, with only very tenuous handholds (but a slip would only mean a fall into the pool less than a metre below). Inside the cave, on the ceiling, is a large painting of a crocodile, and around it is another large painting. I don't remember seeing these on my previous visit to this spot.

Eventually, we leave this magnificent and lovely place to resume our walk, and to find a campsite for tonight. We are all getting quite tired now, so the walk becomes a bit of a slog as we negotiate occasional sections of sandstone platforms, boulders and rocks, and then mostly through long grass and shrubs in late afternoon. Russell and I are ahead of the 'mob' as we are pushing our way through long grass and small shrubs, hoping we will find a reasonable campsite soon—the rest of our crew have paused to rest a little distance behind us, so we wait until they are on the move again before continuing.

And very shortly, voila! We come to a quite large pool almost surrounded by high rock walls, with a waterfall on the far side. I can't resist a swim here after the hot, tiring slog, but the others follow Russell as he climbs up steep rocky terrain and even small 'cliffs' to see what is above us. When I do catch up with them, I'm relieved to find a large, open (almost panoramic) area with even some fairly flat sandstone for our campsites. And there is plenty of firewood around and marvellous 360° views of the surrounding country from this great, elevated site.

I help collect some firewood before going for a toilet break! Dusk is quickly approaching, so we soon have our tents up and Russell has a fire going as he begins cooking tonight's dinner. I'm feeling good and fit after quite a long day that included some difficult terrain and strenuous walking at times. There are lots of rocks and boulders scattered around, so we have to set up our tents on rock platforms which are mostly not really flat—but flat enough for a good night's sleep after a hard day!

DAY 3—12 Jun 2001

We enjoy a relaxed morning as we take our time over breakfast. There are some clouds scudding across the sky, but they don't portend rain. When breakfast is over, we begin walking—we are climbing gently at first, but very soon we are climbing more steeply. The grassy vegetation we are walking through is not particularly long, and grass seeds are not a problem—nevertheless, we all have our gaiters on.

We are soon climbing over quite large sections of chunky and broken rock formations in beautiful and rich colours of deep yellow and orange through to red. There is a sparse cover of medium sized trees. It was quite warm when we began today's walk, and it is getting hotter as the day wears on.

Late in the morning, we come to a rocky area that we now descend through, which gets quite steep as we continue. Those of us who are not comfortable with sheer or near sheer drops close by where we are walking (and that certainly includes me) now tread very carefully.

Just after midday, we come to a spot that we had been aiming for and which we now welcome—a small creek with clear, running water. Russell's intention was to have morning tea here, but it is just after midday and the popular vote is to make this our lunch stop. Christian and I are keen to have a refreshing and cooling swim, so we head off to find a deeper section of the creek just below us; but we find only quite shallow water. But it is still refreshing, and some of the others soon come and join us.

The lunch break is quite extended (as they usually are on Willis's walks). My lunches on Willis's walks are traditionally Vita Weat biscuits (hard and crunchy and with sesame seed) with Kraft cheddar cheese (which keeps very well even in hot and humid conditions). Some of the others in our group have the same!

The rough, chunky and broken lattice formation of sedimentary sandstone formations are very typical of this region (and in Kakadu), and are distinctive and ruggedly attractive. There are some birds about—we can hear their calls, but most we can't identify (most are familiar to me from previous walks in Kakadu and this general region, but my memory is now not so good at identifying many of them). Kapok bushes with their distinctive and bright yellow flowers abound.

After lunch, we begin climbing to the top of the escarpment. It is steep and rough, so not an easy climb—and we are all carrying two or even three litres of water. With the afternoon wearing on, we are looking out for a suitable camping area before it gets too dark. We wait while Russell and Alan independently head off in search of a suitable site on top of the escarpment; but they soon return with the bad news that there is no water up there. So we have to retrace our steps down to a large, rocky area with plenty of flat rock to camp on, and where there is a nice creek running through with two welcome swimming pools.

Someone finds a couple of Aboriginal art sites nearby, high under an overhang in the rock wall; one site consists of hand stencils, but the other is more interesting and includes two animals—one quite large, the other much smaller. It is quite a steep climb up to it, but worth the effort.

It's getting quite dark, and even quite cool, by the time I descend back to our campsite. The usual conversations ensue, but I mostly don't contribute—the discussions are quite serious and/or intellectual in nature, so I don't contribute much (my memory puts me at a disadvantage). Alan is sitting next to me, so we chat for a while. I do stay around longer than on the previous nights, before I retire to my tent.

DAY 4—13 Jun 2001

It is a routine morning; we have breakfast, then pack up and set off on today's walk, with full packs still. Russell has already indicated where we will initially head this morning (up onto one of the rocky ridges above us), so Christian and I head off before the others get going—Russell tells us he will follow shortly with the rest of the crew, but will take an easier, more gradual climb up a valley and meet us on the top of the ridge. Already it is quite a hot day.

On the ridge, Christian and I wait for the rest of our group to join us, but after a considerable time, there is no sign of them. Christian decides to climb a bit higher to see if he can sight them, but can't. So I stay put where we expect to meet them (in case they have decided to ascend a different valley) and Christian heads down to look for them. And suddenly, there they are.

Anyway, we now set off across a large, open and flat area towards another valley. We endure a hot slog across this section which is very wearying. We are heading towards another valley where we will probably make camp. The heat is getting to me, and to the rest of the group too, I suspect. On and on we walk until at last we descend into a shallow valley, looking for an elusive campsite (not where Russell had planned to camp, I don't think, but time is getting on).

As we descend, we have to contend with scungy vegetation like lantana (in abundance) and similar, as this gully gets steeper and more confined. We forge on, but there is no sign of anything that looks like somewhere we could camp. Christian and I and a few others are now a bit ahead of the rest of our crew, so we stop and wait for Russell and the rest to catch up to us. I need to go for a shit, so while we are waiting, I scramble up the very steep grassy slope to one side of us; but I can't see where I am putting my feet as I push up through the sticky, long grass that hides rocks and stones, causing me to involuntarily 'sit down' several times when my foot rolls on hidden rocks. I eventually complete my business and descend back down into the gully.

The rest of our walkers soon appear, so we all continue further into the depths of this steep and rocky gully. We are all looking for a campsite that offers at least some resemblance to being 'flat'. But the further we go, the steeper and more confined and rough the gully gets, with more and larger rocks and boulders. It is now too late in the day to look for another place to camp, so we make do with campsites that are not all as 'comfortable and flat' as we would wish for. As a result, our individual campsites are quite spread down the gorge.

Simone and I have a swim in the cold and quite shallow water of the only reasonably sized pool, and we feel much refreshed after that. I sit doing crosswords and writing up this diary as I nibble on some scroggin. It's about 4 pm, and most people are just resting and snoozing, until Russell has dinner ready. It's been a long day, and we all retire to our tents quite early tonight.

DAY 5—14 June 2001

It's a routine morning once we do get going, after we all have a bit of a sleep in. And every day, we have a full pack to carry—though each day, the pack will be a little lighter, of course. But at this stage, our packs are still quite heavy. We each have two evening meals to carry on this trip, to tide us over the 14 days. The lucky ones will have a slightly lighter pack to carry if they are carrying the meal for the early days of this trip (though we try and even out the load on each person).

It is another clear and sunny day, and quite hot—at least it isn't very humid at this time of the year. We break camp and descend out of the valley we are in, and are soon walking in less steep terrain. Very soon, we come to a large pool surrounded on two sides by chunky rock walls. We stop for a permitted swim—whacko! The swim in the cooling water is enervating. We redon our clothes and clamber over the rock ledges alongside the pool before heading into the more open country beyond, and where we enjoy the walk in the relative coolness of the morning.

Shortly afterwards, we climb gently to a large plateau area where we continue our walking on fairly level terrain. I'm chatting with Rachael as we walk, about our families and camping trips we've been on. We are walking over stones and larger rocks that require us to walk more carefully, to keep our balance.

As we trudge on, the walk becomes a bit of a slog again—we should be getting used to this by now, and I guess to some extent we are. At last we come to a descent into a more interesting area where there is a large pool; of course, we are all soon in the water for a swim. The pool is well shaded by trees, and by rock walls to one side of the pool. Christian is carrying a small camping stove, so he can have a cup of tea in the middle of the day at lunch time. Today, he invites me to join him. And certainly a cuppa revives the spirit and is refreshing. We chat amiably.

It's time to move on. But from here, we need to drop down off the escarpment we are on and make our way down to the valley far below (where two deep gorges join). This is country on a grand scale, and it's a long way down. But we come to an awkward rock formation that is somewhat exposed, and that we have to skirt around as we descend, with little in the way of handholds and footholds. Daan and others assess the best way to negotiate this awkward and difficult section; as we wait, we enjoy the views over the huge and deep valleys we're looking down over and about to descend into.

One by one, we each negotiate our way down and around this awkward and exposed rock formation without our heavy packs, and then have it passed carefully down to us by hand once we are safely past. The exposure is real, but not too horrific—and if I managed it, then it can't be too bad...can it? But certainly it does require some care. Daan (and others) have been helping the rest of us to negotiate this section, but now as he makes the descent, he suffers the indignity of his pants splitting at the crutch...and they are the only pair he has with him!

Safely past this obstacle, we make our way down the still quite steep slopes right down to the valley floor. Now we face a bit of a slog as we rock hop our way through this rough gully, where care is still needed. It is tiring and slow.

We are wondering whether or not we'll find a reasonable campsite somewhere down here! But we do, by way of a sandy bank (well, yes, there are lots of rocks and boulders around too) beside a pool. And from here, we can look back up to those magnificent, chunky sandstone walls around us. There are lots of palms and other small trees that show wonderful colours in the late afternoon light. I was getting quite tired just before we found this campsite in late afternoon (in fact, I was up in the bush having a bog when Russell called back to us that he'd found a good campsite downstream). A quick swim in the creek (that we've been following) soon revives my spirits somewhat. The campsite is in a wide, open valley with beautiful rocky walls to one side of us, but the creek banks are quite sandy on this open stretch of the creek.

I opt to camp on the side of the creek opposite to where most of our party have set up their tents (and the side where the campfire is); but I'm not alone—three of us have decided to set up our tents on 'this' side of the creek. I'm writing this diary after enjoying my soup entrée and waiting for the next course as the light is starting to fade. A pleasant meal and conversation around the campfire rounds off the day.

DAY 6—15 June 2001

We have a reasonably early start to the walking this morning as we continue further down the creek we've been following. We are in rocky terrain, so we are rock-hopping most of the time. As yet it is not too hot. My pack, though still quite heavy, is reasonably comfortable. Yellow flowers on some of the bushes growing here are a delightful contrast to the rich, earthy colours of the rocks and ranges.

We reach a junction with another gorge system, and from here the going gets a bit rougher as we push our way through more intrusive vegetation. We eventually stop for a break while Russell and Alan check to see what lies ahead of us—more of the same. In the meantime, we've had a welcome swim in a small pool of water. We resume the walk, and though it is not particularly hot, it is still unpleasant as we have to negotiate vegetation that is still scrubby and sometimes awkward to traverse, and this slows our progress.

We eventually come to more straightforward terrain where we stop to have lunch on a pleasant, sandy area beside a wide stretch of a creek. On the far side of the creek, we can see the snout of a freshwater crocodile! The scenery is still quite stunning and makes up for any hardships. Flowering trees and shrubs include some grevillea species with bright orange flowers. And now there is a pleasant and welcome cool breeze.

It is around 2.30 pm before Russell stirs and we resume our walk (and then only because Christian suggests it)! Shortly after we set off, we come across a huge Baobab tree, a 'perfect' specimen of this unusual species; most of us take a photo or two. The going gets rougher when we encounter a section where boulder and 'stone' hopping is required; this involves some concentration and balance, as the stones and boulders are mostly of quite mixed sizes.

I'm soon feeling quite buggered, as I think we all are. Alan leads some of us on a slightly different route on higher ground while Russell continues at a lower level. Russell has chosen the better route, as we encounter hidden holes in the terrain (unseen because of the grass), and heavy scrub. We rejoin the other group and head on for some time until, after not finding much in the way of a reasonable campsite, Russell suggests we stay put while he looks for one. He also invites anyone to join him—I'm silly enough to accept the invitation. We zoom up a side gorge but find only sub-standard sites below our 'expectations'.

In the end, we make do with a site we classified as 'not up to par' at first sight—this is as good as it gets, we decide. Our tents are set up in little groups at the better sites. This arrangement works out quite well; in fact, we have an enjoyable and sociable evening, better than most! I'm glad to get to bed tonight, even though my tent is in a scrubby area upstream on a small branch of the creek that joins the 'main' creek just below most of our tents.

DAY 7—16 June 2001

The day starts with a leisurely breakfast (my breakfast is just a plate of muesli, today and every day—but I always enjoy it). When we eventually do start walking, we realise that Alan and Kim are missing—but they are apparently somewhere nearby taking photos, and they soon catch us up.

It is another clear, sunny day as we set off walking further up the gorge we have been following for the last day or two. This morning's walk is not as arduous as the last few days as we continue up the same gorge, though it is now more open. We have wonderful walls of rock on both side of us, but that on the right is the more impressive, having a substantial overhang. I wonder how it can support itself (I wouldn't like to be around if and when it collapses).

Morning tea stops are never very early; it is 11.30 before we stop today, and I take the opportunity to catch up on this diary. Others are taking advantage of the pool to have a swim and cool off (I don't think it is particularly warm today, so I just have a quick dip).

I particularly enjoy the walk today—those magnificent walls of rock towering beside us are inspirational. Russell stops, so I start writing up my diary; but now Russell wants to get moving again (the break was not for lunch, just a brief rest!). Today's walk doesn't seem nearly as arduous as the past day or two, helped by a mild, cool breeze and less bothersome terrain (at least for me).

The walking conditions begin to change as the gorge closes in somewhat, and we have to negotiate obstacles like some thick scrub combined with awkward clumps and mounds of rock, even some walls of rock. Suddenly I see a tabby cat take off into the nearby scrub! Russell is close by when I express my astonishment, and turns just quickly enough to glimpse it disappearing.

Russell and Alan between them negotiate a route that gets us out of the scrub—but this involves some 'rock climbing' manoeuvres—like negotiating narrow rock ledges with some exposure! But we all handle this well (it was not too hairy). After this, we still have to trudge through some more unpleasant scrub as we follow a small creek. Eventually we come to a sort of cave overhang that is huge, and with a flat sandy floor below it and near a creek and pool. This is tonight's campsite. There is a distinctive pattern of white stains on the sandstone 'overhang', almost as if painted on the rock [and this will be very visible from nearby areas we will visit in coming days]. This is our campsite.

I find a small 'cave' in the wall at the back of the overhang which I claim as my bedroom (it is only just high enough to accommodate my very small tent—so I have an awkward manoeuvre to clamber up and into my tent (and again when I get out again). Others camp on sand under a narrow rock overhang next to our cooking area. I'm sitting next to Rachael at dinner this evening and we chat easily about lifestyles and family. In fact, we have a pleasantly social dinner with everyone close together and joining in the conversations as a cohesive group.

DAY 8—17 June 2001

Another clear day dawns. We have a big day ahead of us, to climb to the very top of the escarpment—and for this, we will each need to carry three litres of water (since we won't find any on the top).

We set off early. It is a bit cooler this morning, at least when compared with yesterday (or is this just wishful thinking). We are soon climbing steadily as we set off cross country, walking in grassy, undulating terrain, so the walking at this stage is straightforward. We come to a feature I've not seen or heard of before—a mound of rocks forming a small circular wall just large enough for an Aborigine can to crouch in, with vegetation to camouflage himself as he holds a lure to attract a bird. As a hawk descends to pick up the lure, the Aborigine is able to grasp the bird by its feet! Amazing, but true! We come across several of these traps today.

For the rest of the morning, we continue our walk across undulating and lightly forested country. It is not difficult terrain to walk through, but it does get rather boring after a while, with no more particular highlights—except perhaps for the circular clumps of cloud (like clumps of cotton wool) overhead, and that seem to mirror the pattern of sandstone mounds down on the ground!

Not only is it hot, but our packs seem to be getting heavier (though in reality, our packs by now are, of course, a lot lighter than when we began this trip). The sun is very warm, but there is a pleasant cooling breeze at times. We stop briefly to revive ourselves with nibbles, and a drink of water; the need to carry lots of water is now very obvious (though we didn't doubt it). We trudge on.

My pack becomes a bit lighter today when Rachael, having lost the two food packs she was carrying when their contents were used for last night's meal, offers to carry the powdered milk supply which I've been carrying (and I'm still carrying an evening meal pack in my backpack).

I'm feeling much fitter today. I've been drinking lots of water each morning before we set off walking, to abate the problem of a dry mouth I've had over the last several days.

We come to another hawk trap. Some of our crew clown around and sit inside the trap, mocking the capture of a hawk (and having their photo taken)—I find this a bit offensive for some reason; it is as if they are mocking, or at least showing disrespect for, the Aborigines and their ways.

We continue the long walk over reasonably rough but otherwise straightforward terrain. And it is very warm, though probably not as hot as on some previous days we've coped with—perhaps it is just the monotony and relentlessness of this long trudge. The variable sizes of the stones, some of them almost pebbles, can be difficult and uncomfortable to walk over without our feet continually rolling off the stones as we plant our feet—and this seems to throw us off balance somewhat. So I'm happy when Russell stops for two morning teas today.

I'm not sure that I'm really enjoying this! The gorges are great, but here on top, it gets a bit monotonous. On the bright side, it doesn't feel as hot today. Eventually, we come to a place that Russell and Alan are quite familiar with, and where there is a waterfall in a well shaded area; a great spot for lunch, it seems. We begin the descent into it, but we don't find any promised waterfall, or anything like we were promised! We work our way back to a flatter area covered in long grasses, and where a small stream is meandering through the terrain. As we explore, we get wet feet! But there is a surprise in here too; someone finds a very large and beautifully coloured praying mantis (or is it a grasshopper?). Cameras come out, and I have mine out too, but I'm not sure I can get in close enough to get a good, reasonable photo (despite the creature's size, 15 cm or more long), and I certainly don't have a lot of depth of field. But I take a photo anyway, just in case a reasonable photo does result [postscript: the photo turned out quite well, so one should always try].

People are still wandering around in the very long grass looking for somewhere that looks like a good place to have lunch. In the end, several groups of people have decided they will stop and have lunch where they are anyway. I follow suit, next to water in a small stream (mostly hidden by the long grasses) where several others are also having lunch. Since I now have more cheese and biscuits than I will need for the rest of this section of the trip, I splurge and consume more than my allotted day's quota!

It is well after 3 o'clock when we get ourselves organised and leave this area and continue towards somewhere where we can camp tonight. Russell suggests we'll stop and make camp as soon as we find a good campsite that can accommodate all of us. We drop down into a shallow gorge and follow it to an area that could fill the bill. Others who have looked further downstream find nothing better, so this is our campsite. It looks good to me—plenty of running water, a good cooking area where we can all sit together, and enough good tent sites for all of us.

I go for a bath in a pool down near where Kym has set up her tent at the 'bottom' end of this area. The rest of us set up tents near what will be the campfire area. I set up my little tent on a small platform just below the cooking area.

Just on dusk, as Russell is cooking, I take a tripod shot (no flash) of the general camping area. And Kym took a picture of my campsite for me, using my camera. Dinner is soon ready, but the seating arrangement by the fire doesn't facilitate social interchange between us all (we are all quite spread out), so it is not a particularly sociable evening.

DAY 9—18 Jun 2001

We wake to a lovely, clear and almost cool morning. There is some leftover sago pudding from last night's dessert; no one else is interested, so I get to have it with my breakfast. A cow is making a lot of noise; it seems he doesn't like us invading his territory. I need to go for a shit, but in this terrain, it is not ecologically appropriate to do that down in the flat area where we are; so I climb up to the top of the escarpment to 'dig my hole'.

Before we set off walking, Russell outlines the proposed route we will follow for the remaining days of this trip—nothing too horrendous, it seems (to our relief). In the meantime, before we leave this almost idyllic camp, we go for a stroll down the small creek which runs through here. It drops reasonably steeply as we follow it downstream, and we take our time here while we take some photos. It is quite late in the morning by the time we set off walking (with our full packs) across the top of this plateau. I'm feeling really well today, though my pack still feels quite heavy (even though I'm carrying only one evening meal at this stage of our two weeks' long walk. I'm still carrying three litres of water, just to be on the safe side).

The walk is pleasant enough, with no particular highlights or problems. We have a late stop for morning tea before we resume our trudge across the top of the escarpment. Eventually we drop down into the valley again, involving an awkward and steep descent where we all get 'sticky' as we walk through young spinifex grass.

The last section of the descent is awkward—we have to be careful we don't slip on the grass, and especially that we don't dislodge rocks or stones which could descend and hit the people below us. The last part of the descent is steeper and awkward as we emerge into an area where there are some scattered large rocks and a couple of sloping rock shelves. We stop here for lunch, but first we go for a swim just below these shelves in a great swimming pool below a high rock wall. I have a bigger than usual lunch, as I have more than my 'quota' still left for the remainder of this trip.

No diary recorded for this afternoon!

I find the conversations around the campfire tonight a bit boring and uninteresting. As well, I have very scaly flaking skin on my arms and legs, and red blotches—perhaps due to the combination of my body's reaction to penicillin, and some sunburn. It looks awful (but not otherwise very uncomfortable).

DAY 10—19 Jun 2001

The early rays of the sun on some of the rock outliers on top of the sandstone range close to our camp, create a beautiful setting to the morning. We are all a bit slow getting ready to set off walking this morning. After breakfast, Russell says he is setting off on a day walk with just a day pack to check out the local area, and invites any of us to join him. So, after breakfast, most of us do just that as he heads up one of the branches of the creek that flows below our camp.

The gorge that we follow is quite open as we set off, with some impressive rock overhangs and more of those beautiful, grand and chunky rock formations. There is attractive vegetation on the slopes below these. It is a pleasant stroll, all the more so without heavy packs and at a sedate pace, but some lose interest and return to camp when the walking is not so easy as we come to heavier vegetation. Eventually only Alan, Russell and I remain when we reach the convergence of three gullies.

We decide to return to last night's campsite for our second night here. Russell ponders whether or not to take a different route on the return walk, but he eventually convinces himself that it is not a good idea—perhaps because he is still having a bit of trouble with his back? We return the way we came, but the walking seems harder and the vegetation more dense than when we walked this route this morning; perhaps we are walking on the opposite side of the creek? Daan gets a bit impatient with Russell at times, and now 'takes over the lead' on the return walk!

When we are almost back at camp, I join in with others for a swim in a pool in the lower reaches of the creek we are following, near its convergence with another branch, before dinner. I'm feeling quite tired tonight, so don't contribute much to the conversations around the campfire.

DAY 11—20 Jun 2001

We break camp and set off fairly early from this campsite, after having camped here for two nights. Initially following the creek branch that we walked up when we first arrived at this site (and which I enjoyed), we head upstream. Quite soon afterwards, we head up a very steep, but short, gully. We are walking over rocks and boulders on this ascent, so we have to concentrate and take care.

At the top, we walk over generally flat terrain. Thus begins a three to four hour slog across mostly flat country (just a few short ups and downs at times, and through long grass. We pass another hawk trap. As we slog on, I notice that there are lots of cloud formations, all roughly circular and of similar size, and forming a pattern—as if they are mirroring the pattern of the chunky, roughly 'circular' latticed rocky mounds down here on the ground! We trudge on (we seem to do a lot of this)!

We pause at last for a brief snack break and a drink. Then we resume this walk. We are walking over generally flat and, dare I say, uninteresting country. And it is particularly hard on our feet—we are walking over stones of very mixed sizes and that are mostly hidden by the grass. As a result, our feet will often slip or roll on these stones when we step onto them, and this will often throw us off balance somewhat—at almost every step, it seems. Quite often, a foot will roll over right onto its side (it is a wonder that we haven't had any ankle injuries). So walking is difficult, or at least awkward and uncomfortable.

On the bright side, the weather is more temperate (that is to say, not too hot). We stop to look at a small owl in a tree (spied by someone with sharp eyes); others identify the particular species, and some take its photo (including me; I'm not sure it will show up well in the photo, but I have just as much chance as the other photographers with my simple camera which has as good a telephoto capability as most of the SLRs clicking around me)! We've seen a quite a few birds in this area.

I'm carrying Russell's spare pair of 'shoes' (thongs, in fact!) at the moment, to at least lessen his load a little; he is carrying most of the cooking and other gear that the rest of us don't have to bear, but he stubbornly refuses other offers to carry some of his load.

Around midday, we drop into a small gully where there is a shallow pool; time for a break. I strip and jump in to cool off and refresh the body. It is mostly quite shallow and there are lots of rocks and boulders, so effectively, it is difficult to swim; I just move through the water by hauling myself over the slippery rocks with my hands. Then I sit on rocks beside the water and catch up on this diary. My arms (and other parts of my body) are still mildly blotchy red—the result of some sunburn, and the still some after effects of my penicillin allergy. But it is not particularly uncomfortable or sore.

It is 4 30 pm when we finish our quite prolonged lunch break and set off to start looking for a campsite for tonight. Again, Alan has gone ahead to do a 'recce'. I'm feeling quite cold now—in fact, we've had a quite cool breeze blowing for most of the day, which is a change from the heat we've had to put up with on most of the days on this trip.

We continue downstream beside the small creek that runs through here. Then we begin a gentle descent and reach an area of rock platforms—a possible campsite? Most of the potential sites are on a bit of a slope, or not large enough to accommodate the size of the tents that most people have. But Russell figures that 'this is as good as good as it gets'. Russell is building the campfire on a rock platform, when suddenly some of the rocks start exploding! There are four or five explosions in the first ten minutes or so, but he nevertheless persists. Alan has been exploring, but found no other likely campsite.

We have some interesting conversations around the fire tonight. I get into a discussion of Aboriginal art styles such as the so-called 'Bradshaws', and how Aborigines and other groups feel about these, and their art generally. Who should be allowed to view some of the art sites?

I have my tent on a shallow ledge (barely wide enough to accommodate my tent) high on a rocky slope above the rest of our crew. I sleep well.

DAY 12—21 Jun 2001

It's a cool and overcast morning. Slowly, we all emerge and congregate around the fireplace for breakfast. I'm pretty much on target with the amount of food I've brought for my breakfasts and lunches. We enjoy a relaxed breakfast before we resume our walk downstream, in overcast weather. It is somewhat cool with a moderately cold breeze, so I'm wearing my long-sleeved thermal vest under my cotton T-shirt.

We continue descending the small creek we've been following. The going is slow as we make our way through low and scrubby shrubs, rock hopping most of the time. The further we go, the smaller the vegetation becomes. It is quite tiring, as the grass and spinifex make it hard to see where we are putting our feet; but I'm comfortable with this terrain at this unhurried pace.

We are walking through a lot of wattles with their bright yellow flowers at this time of year. We continually change direction to choose the easiest route through here. Rich red-orange rocky gorge walls of sandstone tower over us on both sides of this gorge. It's a lovely place to be walking through.

We come to a rock overhang, and as we investigate more closely, we find more Aboriginal art—but it is not particularly exceptional. Shortly after, about 1.30 pm, Russell decides to stop for the usual extended lunch break. We are in a gully, close to the creek and surrounded by brilliant yellow wattle blooms. Someone is snoring!

We continue following the creek after the break, as the terrain begins to open out. Our views get more panoramic, and there are lots of interesting rocky formations, open platforms and relatively low rock walls 'confining' the creek. Contrasting with the wattles are some grevilleas in lovely shades of rich orange, and there are other attractive flowering shrubs and trees.

We are soon walking in sandy terrain, at least for some of the time. We come to a large rock overhang where we stop for lunch among lots of large boulders and slabs of rock strewn about. We find some Aboriginal paintings on the back wall (though they are not particularly exceptional). Some of the art looks like a cross between the Bradshaw style and the more traditional styles. Russell thinks he can see more art on another rock formation some distance away across the small 'creek' that meanders through here; so we all traipse over. But when we get there, we don't find any art; just blotches of coloured and rough rock that give that impression!

Now the terrain really does open out a lot, and the walking is easier. We make good time though this more open, small 'forest' where there is still colour about in some of the scattered flowering shrubs and small trees. I take quite a few photos in here. We pause by a wide section of the relatively small creek we are 'following', for some sustenance.

At last we come to the area where Russell has a campsite in mind. But Russell and Alan now seem to be giving different directions as to where we should head. Some of us (me included) follow Russell while others follow Alan. We are presently on rocky terrain, and our campsite is apparently somewhere below us in more rocky country. Eventually, Russell asserts the 'leadership'.

We come to an area of rough stone ledges and walls which we begin skirting around and down on solid rock, and where the terrain is dropping off very steeply. But now we come to a steep but short drop of several metres where we all have to make our way down what is essentially a cliff face (oh! oh!). There are myriad albeit nebulous hand and foot holes/ledges in the rough rock to enable us to negotiate the short drop of several metres without too much drama or exposure, and a fall would be onto sand (but my heart is my mouth). But I surprise myself when I start down, though trying not to look down (but I do have to look where I'm putting my feet!), as I carefully make the descent. And then it is all over—I'm safely down on the sandy bottom.

I wait until the next person behind me begins the descent, then I head on to try and catch up to Russell (or at least keep him more or less in sight). At the same time, I check to make sure the next person behind me is aware of where I'm heading. I'm walking on sand through some reasonably open scrub. Soon after, I come to a large overhang (not quite a cave?) that Russell and several others of our group have already reached.

The rest of our group eventually all reach this spot, which is where we will be camping tonight (and in fact for several nights, it seems). There are few flat camping sites on sand, so most of us set up our tents on rock ledges or platforms under the overhang (having a small tent is, and has been, an advantage at many of our campsites on this trip). Russell is surprised; this spot is quite different than when he was last here, and flooding has apparently changed the topography and wiped out most of the sandy camping area .

I set up my tent on a ledge inside the overhang . The light is already fading, so we've reached this spot just in time to avoid trying to find it (or some other camping site) in the dark! The spot where we are camped is quite visible from some distance away, marked by extensive white stains on the face of the rock overhang that almost look like Aboriginal art! We sleep quite soundly tonight.

DAY 13—22 Jun 2001

I slept very well last night on my little ledge (which I'm sharing with three others) inside the 'overhang', and wake to a beautiful, sunny and mild day. This is our second last day—but effectively the last day of walking, if tomorrow (when we walk back out to the vehicles) is not counted.

We set off on a day walk today to follow the branch of the creek that passes close to our campsite. Initially the walk is quite straightforward, though we still have to watch where we put our feet. We keep crossing the little creek to avoid obstacles or to get around large pools in the creek. There are some thin clouds overhead that create interesting patterns at times. It's an enjoyable walk, as we can take our time and stop to take a photograph when something takes our fancy.

At one point very early on the walk, we find ourselves on the 'wrong' side of the creek. We can either backtrack some distance to get across the creek without getting our feet too wet, or we can continue on this side if we can crawl on hands and knees along a narrow and shallow ledge (effectively, an open-sided 'tunnel'). We all opt for the latter, at least after Daan shows by example that it is possible—and he is perhaps the biggest person in our group!

We proceed up the creek, rock hopping most of the time. At this stage, the rocks are generally not particularly large, so it is a straightforward walk, and we are enjoying the chance to walk at a leisurely pace and take in the interesting terrain, vegetation (lots of beautiful melaleucas) and general scenery. Most of us pause occasionally to take a photo in what soon becomes a very shallow gorge. There are quite a few small birds flitting around us. As we walk on, the rocks get much larger until many have grown to boulder size.

Just before midday, we come to a waterfall that is shown on our map; and naturally, we stop. It is quite high and there is another smaller fall just above it. As well, the impressive rock surrounds combine to create an added highlight of some grandeur that sets this feature as probably the highlight of today's walk. I'm not hot enough to be tempted into the water, but several of the others are; in fact, some take a quite high dive off the top of the fall into the plunge pool below (which was very cold indeed, judging from the reactions of those foolhardy enough to make the jump).

Russell hadn't planned to stop just here for our lunch (it's only 12.15), but everyone is enjoying the sun's warmth and the beautiful surrounds, so this becomes our 'official' lunch spot. The beautiful melaleuca trees in this open gorge, and in fact the gorge itself, have been a highlight of today's walk.

After lunch, we resume our walk up the gorge; our aim is to follow a side creek that will start us on the return route to our campsite, to complete today's 'circular' walk. And very soon, we come to that point. But first, we fill our water bottles, as we will not be near water for some time. The route we are taking will eventually lead us into the creek that runs past our campsite.

The early part of the walk is not particularly interesting as we walk over open and moderately steep and grassy hillsides. But we soon come to gullies and bothersome stony sections and scrub to negotiate, and occasionally some rock and boulder hopping. There are no particular highlights, so it is a bit of a trudge. Flowering grevilleas and yellow cassias add some wonderful colours to the vegetation.

We eventually find ourselves on a ridge where we can look directly across to and down over our campsite (easily identified by the extensive white stains on the rock face above the 'cave' overhang). We pause here while several of us take a group photo with the white stained rock face and general terrain in the background (and perhaps the last chance we might get to organise ourselves to do this).

We resume our walk back to camp, which involves a steep descent down sometimes grassy and sometimes rocky terrain (or both at the same time), and somewhat exposed in places. But we all make it back to our campsite intact, arriving at around 4.30 pm (though we did 'lose' Russell at one stage when he was looking for an easier route down). Someone boils the billy, so I'm having my cuppa as I write today's diary entry, with the sun streaming in on me. The others are resting, reading, having a bath or otherwise relaxing.

I have another bath late in the afternoon, joined by Christian. He and some friends are trying to arrange a bushwalking expedition in the Drysdale River region of Western Australia in the next week or so, and he invites me to stay on in the Darwin region area and join them, if I would like to—it is an area I would like to visit sometime.

DAY 14—23 Jun 2001

We are all a bit slow getting up this morning—are we all reluctant to face up to the fact that this is our last day? We will be walking to a small clearing/parking area just off the Victoria Highway where Russell and Alan left one of our vehicles at the start of our trip.

It's quite warm again today, but there is also a mild, cool breeze. We walk at a reasonably fast rate as we set off. We eventually divert from the route we followed when we set off yesterday, to instead now head towards the Highway. It is a reasonably hard walk (though not as hard as some other days) with quite a few ups and downs. We pause along the way to enjoy the views of the country around us, and to have a brief break from the walking.

After a couple of hours, we can see the Victoria Highway down below us. We might have surprised some tourists when we walked out of the bush with our full packs, as we head towards where Russell left the vehicle in a small clearing by the highway. And it is still there, waiting for us; there are a couple of other vehicles and people here too.

We take our heavy packs off—for the last time on this trip) and place most of them on the roof of the vehicle and tie them down; the others we stash inside the vehicle with us. Then we head north-east along the Victoria Highway for the boring, long haul all the way back to Darwin via Katherine.

Along the way, we pause to pick up the second vehicle where it was left when we did the complicated vehicle shuffle at the start of our walks, and also to have some lunch, and a drink, and an ice cream at Victoria Crossing (my lunch was a crocodile burger; I was looking forward to it, as I'd enjoyed crocodile meat at Jabiru when I had it for a meal some years ago—it was beautifully tender then, but this time it was pretty tough, and perhaps not quite cooked enough, in my burger).

Back on the road (and now in two vehicles, so we have a bit more room), we head for Katherine where we stop for petrol, and an ice cream, and/or chocolates etc! Back in the vehicles, we continue our drive, now along the Stuart Highway, on the long haul directly back to Darwin. It really is a long drive, and oh so boring now. Suffice to say it seemed to take a lot longer than when we made the outward journey at the start of this trip!

There was a lot of burning of bushland beside the highway, right to the outskirts of Darwin. We make another stop just on the outskirts of the city, where Russell checks in with his office, and we all get out to stretch our legs and buy some refreshments (by now, it is dark).

(Back in town, Roger received the news that his mother had passed away while we were on the walk. I've left out some of what he wrote about that.)

I don't join the others at the traditional dinner at the end of our walk. I just wander the streets of Darwin, wondering if it is just a bad dream—but of course, it was not; it was real. I have a pizza meal at one stage, then run into Russell and several of the other walkers who, by now, are aware of Mum's death; they offer their condolences. A sad, sad way to finish my walk.

THE END

Roger Sheppard's

GREGORY
NATIONAL PARK
DIARY

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