

## Kakadu Short Circle: April 15-28, 2012

Updated 8 December 2011

The route described below is the longest of several possibilities. This is the only one of our trips that allows you to visit the upper reaches of Koolpin Creek, an area noted for its abundance of Aboriginal art sites. This trip provides most groups with more time for visiting Aboriginal art sites, birdwatching, botanising and/or simply relaxing than is possible on most of our other circle trips.

The walk begins at Flying Fox Crossing on the South Alligator River in the southern part of Kakadu, about 330 kilometres and four to five hours from Darwin. A relatively flat eight kilometre walk along the banks of the river and across the plain brings us to the beginning of Koolpin Gorge.



Climbing over the ridge at Koolpin

Saltwater crocodiles have been making their way into lower Koolpin during the wet season in recent years. Unless park management has given the all clear, very unlikely this early, we will have to climb over a ridge and join the creek above the falls. The views are fantastic, but it is strenuous. The photo at left shows the climb. Once we are above the first falls, crocs are no longer a worry and we can swim to our hearts content.

Koolpin Gorge is beautiful. The pools are perfect for swimming. The waterfalls and views are a photographer's delight and a memory to treasure. Aboriginal art sites tell us that this has been a special place for thousands of years. (Upper Koolpin



First two waterfalls at Koolpin

contains one of the greatest concentrations of art sites which are accessible to the public.) Although the gorge is only four kilometres long, it is too good to rush through. We take at least a day to reach the top.



Upper Koolpin art site.

From the top of the gorge, we follow Koolpin Creek to the area where it begins – that short sentence doesn't do justice to the walk.

One pool follows another. There are small waterfalls and cascades. There are numerous Aboriginal art



Relaxing at upper Koolpin campsite

sites to be found along the way. Most groups will take a relatively leisurely three or four days to do this. Faster groups might spend a day at a base camp allowing time to explore without full packs. It is often easier to walk some distance away from the bank of the creek so you will need to carry more water than when you are walking along the creek edge.



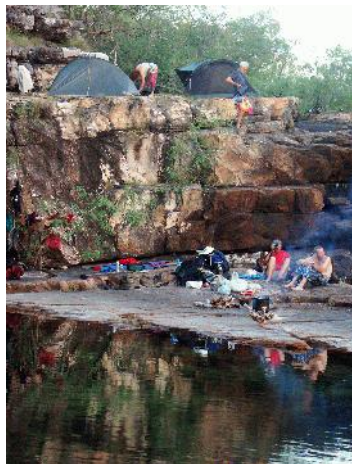
Swim stop, upper Koolpin cascades

From Koolpin, we make our way to the top of Graveside Gorge where a double waterfall drops 100 metres into a pool in the gorge below. After taking time to have a good look at Graveside, we move along to Cascades Creek and the first of its many pools and art sites. The walk down the four kilometre gorge is a slow one. There are a few places where you have the choice of edging along narrow rock ledges (close to water level, no big drops), floating your pack through the creek, or climbing up and around.

The pools and art sites are too nice to pass by, so stops are frequent as we make our way down to the cascades for which the creek is named. The last 500 metres often takes two hours or more as the deep pools and a natural water slide are much too inviting to rush past.



Cascades waterslide. We've had people from age 8 to 77 enjoy this slide.



Upper Gronophylum campsite. Every single campsite on this trip is next to your own private pool.

Next, we visit Gronophylum Creek with its unusual multi-trunked palms, beautiful, sandy camp sites and deep, clear pools. The rugged landscape away from the creek is reminiscent of central Australia with its red rock and spinifex covered hills. A short, steep climb to the top of a nearby hill presents us with an incredible panorama. Following the creek, you might walk three kilometres in an hour. If you followed a compass bearing, the landscape is such a jumble of broken rock that walking three kilometres might take you several days.

From Gronophylum, we cross to the Barramundi system and its many waterfalls, too many for a photo of each so all we can do is give you a taste. Our final campsite in Barramundi Valley is on the banks of a huge, shady pool below a small waterfall.

The next morning is fairly strenuous. A one kilometre walk brings us to the steepest climb of the trip. From the spectacular vantage point at the top of the hill we enjoy a magnificent view out across the plateau and over the broken rock country that makes up the headwaters of



View from the high point between Barramundi and Waterfall Creeks

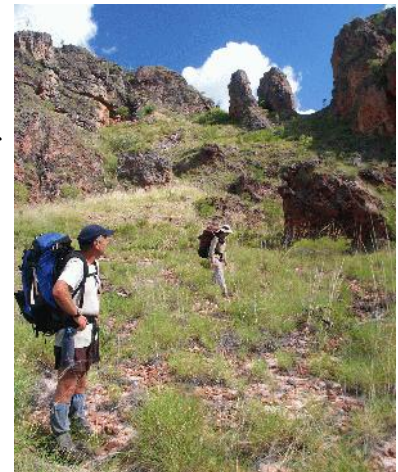
Waterfall Creek. A climb down to a small rocky plateau brings us to a creek which has carved a small cave through the sandstone. Several of those who have swum through have said it is their favourite in all Kakadu. We take our time so you can fully appreciate this location.

From here, another climb takes us down past more

Aboriginal art onto the plain above Gunlom Falls. A six km walk past the largest termite mounds we have ever found on the plateau brings us to a rocky area with numerous pools and cascades. A further four kilometres gets us to the top of Gunlom Falls where we look out over the plains below.



Swim stop, upper Cascades Creek Falls



Spinifex covered landscape near Gronophylum Creek



Big pool next to final camp, Barramundi Creek



A final swim in our last private pool before joining the tourist track at the very end of the walk



Senior traditional owner Violet Lawson showing some bush medicine.

The walk may be over, but our trip is not. From Gunlom, our bus takes us to Cooinda and the Kakadu wetlands, a very different environment from that through which we have been walking. The wetlands are flat and full of mosquitoes, not the best place for a bushwalk. However, they are also full of wildlife.

Late that afternoon, we will do a short walk with one of the senior Aboriginal traditional owners who will explain a bit about bush tucker and what it was like growing up back in the park long before it was a park. The day finishes with a meal at the Cooinda bistro and a night in the budget accommodation. First thing the following morning, we board a boat for a Yellow Waters cruise. The early hour ensures that we see the wildlife at its best while the day is at its coolest.



Darter at dawn, Yellow Waters



Large estuarine crocodile, great to see from the boat. There are none of these in the areas where we swim on our walks.

Better still, at this time of year, the boats are nowhere near as crowded as they are in peak season July and August. Cruise over, we board our vehicles for the long drive to Darwin, arriving in time for people to catch planes that night.

**Maps.** 1:50 000 El Sherana (1st few km at beginning of walk), Koolpin & Goodparla or 1:100 000 Stow (1st few km at beginning of walk), Jim Jim & Mundogie or 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas.

## Terrain and Difficulty

**Overall** Level 3

**Climate** Level 3-4. It will be hot. It will also be humid although the humidity normally drops substantially between March and May. The average daily maximum is 33-34°C (91-94°F). The average minimum is 20-22°C (68-71°F). It can, however, get much cooler. Rain is unlikely but possible. We recommend that you bring a tent or mosquito net with a fly.

**Terrain** Level 3.

**Start to Koolpin Gorge.** Fairly flat, relatively easy. The scrub varies dramatically from year to year so it is easier in some years than others.

**Koolpin Gorge.** One or two steep climbs. Considerable rock hopping, moderately difficult in places. If water levels are especially high, a pack float may allow you to avoid one extra very steep and rugged climb.

**Koolpin Creek above gorge.** Relatively flat, some long stretches between pools. Scrub varies from year to year so the walking can range from quite easy to moderately difficult.

**Koolpin to Graveside to Cascades Creek.** A mix. Flat easy stretches are interspersed with slow rocky ones.

**Cascades Creek.** Rock hopping all the way. Some sections are very slow.

**Gronophylum Creek and traverse to Barramundi Creek.** Flat and easy in places, slow rock hopping in others. Variations in scrub due to fires makes it much easier in some years than in others.

**Barramundi Creek to end.** Two steep descents, one steep climb. Flat and easy in most places. Most people consider the terrain on the crossing from Barramundi Creek to Waterfall Creek to be the most difficult on the trip.

**Overall.** None of the walking is on a marked trail. If you have never done any off-track walking through moderately rough terrain, nothing we can say can adequately describe the experience. The photos in these notes and on our website, [www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au](http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au), can give you a partial picture, but they cannot substitute for the real thing. Most of those who have not had any off-track walking experience find it more difficult than those who have done it before. The photos on our "Terrain & Difficulty" page, [www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/rockhop.shtml](http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/rockhop.shtml), are small but they should help you visualise exactly what is involved in some parts of the trip. Click the photos to see larger versions.

Anyone who does not regularly (average twice a month) go bushwalking carrying a full pack would benefit from doing some pre-trip training. Do this and you will almost certainly enjoy the trip. If you are not an experienced off-track bushwalker and you don't do any training or any other form of strenuous physical exercise, you might feel that the trip is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience.

### **Vegetation**

Level 2-4. Much of the walking is through relatively flat, open woodland with a grassy understorey. Some short sections of grass may hide a broken rocky surface where you will have to be particularly careful. There may be some slow sections where you will have to pass through thick scrub. The vegetation can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt.

The spear grass normally reaches its peak in March, often three or four metres tall in some areas (much shorter in others). We are likely to encounter short sections of partially collapsed and seeding spear grass during some portion of the trip, but this late it is unlikely that there will be much.

### **Hours**

Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer. Section

### **Packs**

**Pack weight** - level 4. You need to carry 13 days food. This will include about 3½-4½ kg of the evening meals. We recommend both a lightweight sleeping and a tent or mosquito net and fly.

### **Art**

Koolpin has one of the greatest concentrations of rock paintings in Kakadu. There are a number of good sites in other areas as well.

### **Campsites**

Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else anywhere along most of the route.

### **Swims**

Excellent. This is a good time to see the waterfalls on this route. We will have good pools at almost every campsite lunch spot as well as other pools along the way..

### **Lowlights**

Heat and humidity. Carrying food for 13 days. Pushing through thick grass.

### **Highlights**

Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites. A still fairly green landscape that dry season visitors can only imagine.

### **Wildlife**

Birds are always present but spread out at this time of year. You are unlikely to see many large animals. The Yellow Waters cruise is excellent for birds, many of which you are unlikely to see on the walk. It also gives you a good chance to see large estuarine crocodiles.

### **Fishing**

Not permitted on this walk.

### **Notes**

Slow groups will do a shorter version of this walk, possibly moving directly from one of the Koolpin tributaries to Cascades Creek.

Although most of the walking is *relatively* easy, you need to be prepared to carry your food for the full trip. There is no point on the route where you come anywhere near a road or 4WD track so a food drop is not possible.

You should prepare a package containing a change of clothes and a towel to come out with the bus if you want to take advantage of the hot showers at Cooina. You should have enough money to pay for your drinks at the pub.

Make sure you keep some money and a water bottle with you during the drives. It may not be possible to get at your pack until the vehicle is unloaded at the end.

Although we have scheduled a walk with senior traditional owner Violet Lawson at the end of the trip, this may have to be cancelled for cultural reasons. This would be very unusual, but it is possible.

## **Cooinda**

Cooinda is resort situated in the heart of the Kakadu wetlands. This is an area noted for its wildlife — and mosquitoes. The former make it a great place to visit, the latter make it an uncomfortable place for an overnight walk. The attractions at Cooinda include the Yellow Waters cruises, the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre and a short dry season nature walk along a marked trail.

The Yellow Waters cruise provides the best way to see the wetlands and allows you to see the wetlands wildlife at close range, far closer than you could approach on foot. The late hour ensures that you see more of the wildlife than those who do the midday cruises. The cultural centre is a few hundred metres from the hotel and provides an insight into the lives of the Aboriginal traditional owners of the park. The nature walk offers a pleasant way to spend an hour or two, especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

Both the cultural centre and the hotel offer a variety of souvenirs for sale. Bring extra cash or a credit card if you think that you might wish to purchase anything beyond the drinks, ice creams and lunches that most people purchase there.

## **Itinerary: Kakadu Short Circle**

**Note 1**            **Day 0 is the day before departure.**

**Note 2**            **This itinerary is subject to change.**

**Day 0**            Pre-trip meeting, 6.30 p.m., Pool Side Bar & Restaurant, Holiday Inn Darwin, 122 The Esplanade. **Note.** There are two Holiday Inns next to each other on the Esplanade. The meeting is in the taller one, closer to the roundabout at the end of the street. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

**Day 1**            8 a.m. pick up. Pick up is from your accommodation if you have notified us where you are staying at least a week before departure or have made alternate arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from Darwin Transit Centre at 69 Mitchell Street.  
Drive to Kakadu. There will be a stop along the way to buy cool drinks, etc.  
Begin the walk. Bush camp, carrying full packs.

**Day 2–12**        Bush camping, carrying full packs.

**Day 13**            Return to vehicles. Drive to Cooinda, arriving late afternoon. Book into budget accommodation. Visit Nourlangie Rock if time permits.  
Opportunity to wash clothes and have hot shower. Bring towel and toiletries and money for drinks.  
Late afternoon Yellow Waters cruise.  
Cook-it-yourself barbecue meal at the pub.

**Day 14**            Drive to Darwin, stopping at park headquarters if time permits. Drop off at your accommodation, late afternoon.