

Mitchell Plateau No.1: March 28 - April 10, 2010

This is a major expedition at a testing but spectacular time of year. Good physical and mental fitness and the ability to swim at least 100 metres unaided are absolutely essential.

The Mitchell Plateau (Ngauwudu in the local Aboriginal language) is one of the most species-rich areas in WA. The vegetation is dominated by a rare mixture of fan palms (*Livistona eastonii*) and eucalypts and contains some of the largest pockets of monsoonal vine forest in the Kimberley. The region is home to more mammal species than have been collected from any other similar-sized area in W.A. One of these, the monjon (a rock wallaby formerly called the warrabi) was not photographed until 1985. (We have seen a number of monjons on our trips.) Over 220 species of birds have been recorded in the area. If you'd like an example of the birds you might see, please go to our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, click on Photo Galleries on the left menu, then scroll down and click on *Birdwatching and Bushwalking*. This page has general information and a link to a list of the birds that we saw on one of our Mitchell Plateau trips.

The Mitchell Plateau has one of the two highest concentrations of Aboriginal rock paintings we have found in the Kimberley. (The other is the Drysdale River.) We visit examples of all styles including Bradshaw (Gwion) and Wandjina. There is so much art that almost every trip finds at least one site we haven't visited before. Some sites are recent, almost certainly 20th century. Some are ancient, almost certainly predating the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

Every time we visit the area, we find something new and interesting. This trip will be no exception. This will be our first visit to the plateau during the wet season when every creek should be in full flow and the waterfalls at their spectacular best. "Spectacular" – that word could be an understatement. When you walk through the area later in the year and look at flood debris ten metres and more above the river level, you can scarcely imagine the awesome nature of the river in full flood. Those floods are of short duration. Perhaps we will see one, perhaps not. In any case, even the normal wet and early dry season flows are far greater than those later in the year when the roads are open.

Vehicular access is out of the question at this time of year so we will fly both ways. The flight, approximately 350 km, takes you across Cambridge Gulf, Drysdale River National Park, the Carson and King Edward Rivers. We will also fly over the Mitchell Falls so that you get to see them from the air as well as from the ground.

Restricting ourselves to fixed wing aircraft would cost less but would eliminate any chance of reaching Donkins Falls, the highest, single-drop waterfall in the area. It would force us to spend a full day walking from the airstrip to the Mitchell River. We want the best, so we will use a helicopter and get dropped off at Surveyors Pool from where we will make our way back to the Mitchell River, past the lower falls and up to the main falls. **If** we have people coming in or out, we will have a helicopter food drop. If not, we may do a three hour return walk and collect our drop from the helicopter base.

From the main falls, we work our way upstream to the little known upper gorge and falls, then across to Donkins Falls. If time permits, we will do a loop walk down to the bottom of the falls and back. A helicopter will collect us from Donkins Falls and bring us back to the airstrip for the flight back to Kununurra. (Donkins Falls and nearby Donkins Hill were named by Philip Parker King in 1819. Mr Donkins provided the tinned meat which made King's voyage much more pleasant for the participants than earlier voyages had been.)

Terrain and difficulty

Overall Level 4

Climate Level 4. It will be hot (although not as hot as you might think) and it will be humid.

The average daily maximum is 33°C (91°F). Temperatures over 35°C are relatively rare. (Daytime maximum temperatures on the Mitchell Plateau are among the coolest in the Kimberley at this time of year.) The average nighttime minimum temperature is 19°C (66°F). The lowest ever recorded is 10°C (50°F). You are not going to get seriously cold, but if there are strong winds, a light-weight windcheater can make you more comfortable. Sleeping bags are not needed. Rain is fairly likely but we might not get a single drop.

On average it rains one day out of six, mostly in short, sharp bursts. Averages can, however, be misleading. A late season cyclonic depression might make it rain for days at a time. (This makes it somewhat harder to walk but it also makes the waterfalls more spectacular and keeps it relatively cool.) It's just as likely that it won't rain at all. This would make it hotter than normal. There will be many opportunities to swim and cool off, but you must be prepared for hot, humid conditions.

Terrain

Level 3.

Some sections of the walk are fairly flat and relatively easy. Others involve considerable rock hopping and are moderately difficult. There are a few steep climbs but these are short and over relatively quickly for most groups. As short as they are, these climbs are strenuous. Some may require using your hands to hold on as you climb up or down. None are technically difficult. None require ropes or other special equipment. There will be some places where you have to step from stone to stone as you walk along the edge of a creek.

You will almost certainly have to float your pack across the Mitchell River. **If you can't swim at least 100 m unaided, do not do this trip.**

Even in the boggiest of seasons, the Kimberley has nothing that can compare with the mud of Tasmania. However, if you have a particularly wet year, you may find yourself sinking up to mid calf regularly on some days.

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 on our website, 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.

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 2-3. 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 may 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 two rates as level four because of the long first day. Those who have already done section one seldom find it particularly difficult.

Packs

Pack weight - level 4. You need to carry two weeks food. This will include about 3½-4½ kg of the evening meals. You do not need a sleeping bag but you do need a tent with a fly.

Art

This is one of the best areas for art in the Kimberley. We visit a large number of sites.

Swims

This is the best time to see the waterfalls. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.

Camp sites

Mix of sand and rock ledges and possibly grass. Most sites should be good to excellent but we have to avoid some of our dry season campsites which could get flooded. You are unlikely to see anyone else anywhere along the route..

Lowlights

Heat and humidity. Possible lack of rain can make it more uncomfortable than normal. Exceptional rain can slow us down.

- Highlights** The Mitchell Plateau's biggest waterfalls seen at their spectacular best. Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites. The lush 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.
- Fishing** It's good here in the dry season. Faster water may make it harder at this time of year.

Notes

Photo Gallery. The photos in the three Mitchell Plateau photo galleries on our website were all taken later in the year but they will give you a good idea of the kind of terrain through which you will travel as well as some of the things you will see along the way.

This is the end of the wet season. We cannot say how much, if any, rain we will get. **But,** never forget, tropical rain is not like the rain in temperate climates. Given the normal temperatures, you are likely to be more comfortable walking in the rain than walking when it is not raining.

Natural shelter. The area where we will be walking contains one of the greatest concentrations of rock shelters we encounter on any of our trips. Even if we get exceptionally heavy and continued rainfall, there will be times when we can escape the rain in rock shelters where we can relax and watch the rain come down just as the original inhabitants have done for thousands of years.

Your shelter. Most tents are too warm for the conditions we will encounter. The ideal solution is a free standing mosquito net (mossie dome) with a fly. We have some of these available for hire.

Bedding. You can leave your sleeping bag at home but bring something warm in case of a cold snap.

Clothing. Even when it's warm, cotton can feel quite cold when it is wet and windy. We recommend bringing some sort of lightweight wind breaker for prolonged wet conditions.

Helicopter flights. Helicopters are scheduled to arrive at their Mitchell Plateau base at the end of March. We have scheduled this trip based on their availability. If they have not arrived on time, we will be unable to use helicopter transport and the trip will increase to level five difficulty.

Swimming required. If you cannot swim at least 100 metres unaided, don't come. We can't know how many flooded creeks and rivers we will have to swim nor can we be certain just how far the distances will be but we can be absolutely certain that we will have to swim our packs across on one or more occasions.

Crocodiles and swimming. We have never seen a large crocodile anywhere in the area where we will be walking. However, we once met someone who told us that he had seen a large crocodile below Mitchell Falls. There are large crocodiles in the lower reaches of both the Mitchell and the Lawley. There is no barrier to their travel below major waterfalls. We recommend that you restrict your swims to side creeks and small pools unless your guide tells you otherwise.

It is very important that you pack well enough so that you can keep most things in your pack dry, even if you have to pack a wet tent or other wet items. On a long trip like this where durability is important, a good pack liner is essential. Garbages will almost inevitably tear and leak. Wet food can rot and leave you with little or nothing to eat during the day. You are responsible for keeping your share of the evening meals dry.

An airbed is very helpful when you have to float a pack a fair distance as will be the case when we cross the Mitchell River. However, if you have to constantly get in and out of the water as could happen in flood conditions, an airbed could be more of a hindrance than a help.

To take part you need above average fitness, the ability to swim (there are a number of river crossings which may require floating your pack), a sense of adventure and a desire to see the best that Kakadu has to offer. You do not, however, need to be a superman or superwoman.

The price is based on the Mitchell Plateau helicopters being available. Using helicopters before they arrive at their base would increase the cost substantially. We have been told that they should arrive on 25 March.

Itinerary: Mitchell Plateau No.1

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change

Section 1 Surveyors Pool to Mitchell Falls

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 for everyone doing the first section, 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 between 6 and 6.30 a.m. Helicopter flight to Donkins Falls on the Mitchell Plateau. Begin walk. Bush camp.

Day 2-6 Bush camping, carrying full packs.

Day 7 Food drop. Anyone finishing here flies back to Kununurra.

Section 2 Mitchell Falls to Donkins Falls

Day 6 Those beginning with this section travel to Kununurra.

Day 7 Those beginning here fly to the Mitchell Plateau. Bush camp carrying full packs.

Day 8-13 Bush camping, carrying full packs.

Day 14 Finish walk at airstrip or where helicopter will pick us up. Fly back to Kununurra. Drop off at your accommodation, early afternoon.

Final note Extreme cyclonic conditions at this time of year are rare but they can happen. This could delay our departure or return by a day or two. We will carry a small quantity of emergency food but you might wish to bring something extra for yourself.

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 began flying between Kununurra and Broome or Darwin in April 2009. Call 1300 660088 for flight dates and times or see www.skywest.com.au