

Bernier Island - the ultimate field trip

MENTION the words 'field trip' to most people and it conjures up an image of sunny days spent looking at pretty flowers and cute animals, and balmy nights spent around a camp fire.

Most CALM researchers know that variations on this theme exist, but we have been on the ultimate field trip.

Picture the scene - you are asked to endure a field trip to Bernier Island. The Bernier Island that sits in the sapphire blue Indian Ocean 50 km off the coast of Carnarvon.

This is the place where Peter Speldewinde and I will spend 20 days researching the Shark Bay mouse.

The reality

It has been pouring all night and there's a strong nor'easterly. Three and a half hours from Carnarvon and the mighty cliffs of Bernier Island appear. But there is a problem. The seas are so high and rough it is impossible to

get gear from Fisheries' boat to CALM boat, and even if we could, we would get swamped trying to land.

The bad weather likes Carnarvon so much it decides to hang around for another five days.

Biting in unison

Day six and the weather is fine, sunny and an ideal day to repeat the boat trip. We land safely on the world-famous Bernier Island. What are these quaint little flies that descend on us in swarms and bite in unison? Never mind, we'll set up camp and prepare to catch all the Shark Bay mice.

Day 14 and this is paradise. But why have we caught only six mice? Don't worry, maybe the females are pregnant and not moving around.

3.00 am on day 15: A nor'easterly blows up, the sea rises in sympathy and we are not to come off the Island for another five days. But why is Peter writhing around the tent in

by Graham Hall

agony? Could it be the chilli he cooked last night? If not, could it be that he is seriously ill?

4.00 am: He *is* seriously ill. Cool analytical research scientist keeps things in perspective, assesses situation for a few milliseconds and opts for organised panic. He presses Royal Flying Doctor Service emergency button and waits to hear soothing voice. Nothing happens and the silence is deafening.

Kidney stones

7.00 am: Are we the only people alive on the planet? No, the RFDS in Port Hedland comes through. Doctor tentatively diagnoses kidney stones and recommends we evacuate.

Just for fun, the wind is blowing harder and the sea has risen still further. It has also started to rain. (Research scientist makes mental note to attend

church more often.)

2.15 pm: Carrying painkillers for the patient, the Fisheries' boat charges towards the shore.

Peter who?

Rescuers casually ask research scientist how well he knows patient, because pain killers are suppositories. Scientist states firmly he hardly knows patient at all - certainly not *that* well.

4.30 pm: Patient and gear cleared from beach in two-metre waves, howling wind and driving rain.

8.15 pm: Arrive in Carnarvon to be met by ambulance and entourage of on-lookers. Warm glow is felt knowing we're entertainment for locals.

Day 17: Arrive back in Perth after successful trip.

Oh, happy me

Day 18: Former Director of Research informs happy research scientist he must return to Bernier Island to continue work on wonderful little mouse. Oh well, these things happen.