





OASIS IN THE LEOPOLDS

Late last century, the King Leopold Range was still thwarting explorers' efforts to pass through it. Now, in the midst of this rugged area, which will soon become a national park, is the oasis of Mount Hart, where the Department of Conservation and Land Management is making its latest venture into ecotourism.

BY CAROLYN THOMSON

The King Leopold Range was first explored by Europeans in 1879 when Alexander Forrest was commissioned to survey the country from the De Grey River to the Northern Territory border for pastoral areas. Forrest reached and named the range on June 6. He described the area as rough, but said it had 'first rate feed and plenty of springs'. Despite the grandly beautiful scenery of the range, Forrest found it impassable. The expedition lost several horses and, as a result of their difficulties, names such as Devils Pass and Mount Hopeless were given to the area's features. Forrest named Mount Hart. He also named Mount Matthew after one of his brothers.

In 1898, stockman and explorer Frank Hann became the first European to cross the King Leopold Range. He discovered an 18-kilometre-long, well-watered pass near Mount Matthew that cuts through the King Leopold Range by means of a deep gorge. Boab trees along Hanns Pass still have his initials carved into their trunks.

Mount Hart was first taken up as a pastoral lease around 1919 by Edgar and Chalmers. The station was said to be 'badly infested with [cattle] tick, buffalo fly and dingoes'. About a third of the lease was regarded as unusable, due to the rugged nature of the country. It was a hard living and Felix Edgar walked off the lease broke in 1934. The lease was taken up again in 1936 and eventually transferred to 'Stumpy' Fraser in 1951. He moved into the original homestead,



near a low hill known as Mount Hart, but when the nearby waterhole dried up, built another about 16 km north. When this waterhole also dried up, he built the third Mount Hart homestead about a kilometre away. At this time the Gibb River Road had still not been built, cattle prices were bad and mustering was done on donkeys. In 1957, Stumpy also walked off broke.

The property eventually came into the hands of the Mt Hart Pastoral Co, owned by Charlie Telford and his family, in 1962. Charlie built the fourth homestead, which remains as a tribute to his bush ingenuity. He planted the original garden with grapefruit, frangipani, oleanders and lemons, all brought from Adelaide on the back of an old semi-trailer. Many of these plants still survive today. Old Charlie was 63 when he came out to the area. He sold out in 1967 and, after a series of owners, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) acquired the area in 1992 to create the proposed King Leopold Range National Park.

MAN-MADE OASIS

On assuming the management of Mount Hart station, CALM was left with a major dilemma - what should be done with the homestead? Mount Hart homestead sits on the bank of the Barker River. This man-made oasis in the rocky ranges is surrounded by eight acres of lush gardens.

The homestead structure is a unique example of Kimberley station architecture. There are no doors or windows and it has a central breezeway to ensure air circulates through the building. It was constructed with handmade concrete bricks, each with a long-necked beer bottle in the centre to save on materials. Every bedroom has a built-in wardrobe because furniture was hard to get and susceptible to termites. The building can comfortably accommodate nine guests.

The homestead would be expensive to maintain, but an important example of pastoral history would be lost with its demolition. The department came up with a unique solution. CALM appointed Taffy and Jenni Abbotts as homestead managers to operate a small tourist venture. Mount Hart's isolation (it is 50 km and at least 2-3 hours drive from the Gibb River Road, itself a wilderness adventure to travellers), old-fashioned bush hospitality and comfortable accommodation now attract visitors from far and wide. People drive in from the Gibb River Road for an overnight stay or fly in for a shorter visit.



Previous page

Main: The King Leopold Range.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Inset: The homestead of the former Mount Hart station.

Photo - Col Roberts/Lochman Transparencies

Left: Mount Hart is an important destination on the 'Ibis Aerial Highway', which will make remote parts of the Kimberley accessible to tourists.

Photo - Carolyn Thomson

Taffy and Jenny have painted the building and made other improvements, such as resurrecting an ancient tennis court. A new amenities block was built with the help of CALM staff, and Taffy is extending the homestead with a stone dining area. As part of the area's conversion to a national park, contractors are currently destocking the area of cattle.

Mount Hart is a good base from which to explore Matthew Gorge and small pockets of semi-deciduous rainforest below nearby Mount Matthew. It is an ideal spot for groups of bushwalkers, birdwatchers and other nature lovers.



Top: Jenni and Taffy Abbotts manage Mount Hart homestead, which provides old-fashioned bush hospitality and comfortable accommodation for visitors. Photo - Carolyn Thomson

Above left and right: The gardens at Mount Hart homestead and the Barker River. Photos - Carolyn Thomson

Left and right: Dragon tree (*Sesbania formosa*) grows along the creek and nectar myrtle (*Xanthostemon paradoxus*) grows on the sandstone around Mount Hart. Photos - Kevin Kenneally

Below: The lush gardens and streamside vegetation of Mount Hart attract numerous birds including the star finch. Photo - Babs and Bert Wells

Below right: The gardens around Mount Hart homestead were established by Charlie Telford in the 1960s. Photo - Carolyn Thomson





WILDLIFE

The homestead and its lush surroundings are a magnet to wildlife. Sugar gliders, northern quolls, and brindled bandicoots live in the gardens, and native bush rats are sometimes flushed from beneath the oven. Euros and two species of wallaby live in the bushland. Bats live in the old mess. It was planned to demolish the ramshackle old building until CALM scientist Norm McKenzie advised that it was home to one of only two known colonies of the yellow-lipped bat, which is endemic to the western Kimberley. Horseshoe bats and bentwing bats also inhabit the building. However, after the last wet season most of the 40 or so animals moved camp and only a handful are now found there.

Two of the more colourful garden residents - a green tree snake and a northern brown tree snake - have even been given names by the homestead managers. Cherabin, black bream and northern long-necked tortoises inhabit the creek. After rains, a chorus of frogs call to their mates and numerous green tree frogs have to be evicted from the homestead.

The bird life is rich, especially in November. Breeding pairs of the red goshawk, regarded as being very rare in the Kimberley, have been recorded in the immediate area and colourful but elusive Gouldian finches and purple-crowned wrens are sometimes seen along the creekline. A resident azure kingfisher delights visitors with its morning display of aerobatics in the river. Other avian visitors include corellas, channel-billed cuckoos, mangrove robins, yellow orioles,

Above: Green tree frogs invade the homestead in the wet season and often have to be evicted from the house.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Left: Sugar gliders can glide for at least 50 metres. This helps them exploit food resources and avoid predators.
Photo - M & I Morcombe

and crimson and star finches. Predators include wedge-tailed eagles and peregrine falcons. Taffy Abbotts reported seeing a peregrine falcon with a freshly killed ibis in the garden.

Wild donkeys are the scourge of Mount Hart. In September 1993 the Agricultural Protection Board killed 1 200 in three days. In the 1960s Charlie Telford even had a donkey cannery operating, using a team of Aboriginal shooters to supply the meat.

AN AERIAL 'HIGHWAY'

The ancient Kimberley landscape is punctuated with astonishing gorges and waterfalls, spectacular cave systems, lush rainforest patches and abundant wildlife. It is like nowhere else on Earth. But, until recently, to see this aspect of the Kimberley, travellers had to take on the tortuous Kalumburu-Gibb River Road. This red, dusty, boulder-strewn track was the cattle road that linked outback stations to the ports of Derby and Wyndham. The route also links up to Tunnel Creek, the Mitchell Plateau and other remote sites. Travellers had to be prepared for wilderness camping with no facilities. This meant carrying in all food supplies, plenty of spares and water. The Kalumburu-Gibb River Road was, and still is, a wonderful adventure that compares with tackling the Gunbarrel Highway across the red centre or driving the Canning Stock Route. The trouble is, few people have the time, the means or the resourcefulness to undertake such a journey in this rugged country.

The Kimberley's attractions are separated by vast distances and only

Above: The yellow-bellied sheath-tail bat is found throughout tropical Australia, including Mount Hart, in the winter months. The rarer and much smaller yellow-lipped bat sometimes lives in the old mess near the old homestead.
Photo - Babs and Bert Wells

Above right: Donkeys are the scourge of Mount Hart, which had a donkey cannery operation there in the 1960s.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Right: A gorge near Silent Grove campground is one of the attractions of the proposed King Leopold Range National Park.
Photo - Kevin Kenneally



accessible by four-wheel-drive for part of the year. The 'Ibis Aerial Highway', to be launched in the 1994 tourist season, is about to change this. Tourists will soon be able to close the vast distances between watering holes by flying over the magnificent Kimberley landscape. Airstrips have been built at the main visitor points, such as Bell Creek Gorge, Windjana Gorge and El Questro, to enable sightseers to join ground tours. Mount Hart is an important link in the aerial highway, providing a convenient stopping point and a chance for visitors to get a taste of outback life. Already, six airline companies visit the homestead, stopping for morning tea or lunch and to admire its lush gardens and learn something of its pastoral history.

CLOSER TO NATURE

Like the Ibis Aerial Highway, the Mount Hart homestead can help bring people closer to nature in the Kimberley. When the proposed King Leopold Range National Park is finally declared, it will protect the contorted sandstone range, majestic gorges, rainforest remnants and rare wildlife. Visiting the homestead will help visitors appreciate the Kimberley wilderness and its special values and the lifestyle of those who pioneered this rugged region.



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Hand in hand with nature. This brushtail possum is just one of the animals studied during fauna surveys of the Batalling Forest. See page 16.



Lush vegetation and a welcoming smile greet you as you arrive at Mt Hart Homestead, the 'Oasis in the Leopolds'. See page 48.



'Fire, Wind and Water', on page 42, tells of recent research into the rehabilitation of exploration tracks in the Rudall River area of the Little Sandy Desert.



Deep beneath the Southern Ocean lies the wreck of the Sanko Harvest. This rotting hull is now an artificial reef attracting marine life and divers alike. See page 23.



Plantations of brown mallet in the early 1900's began a chain of events that resulted in the 'Woodland Wonderland' of Dryandra. See page 28.

FEATURES

- NATURE'S MEDICINE**
JIM ARMSTRONG & KATE HOOPER 10
- BOUNTIFUL BATALLING**
GORDON FRIEND, KEITH MORRIS & CAROLYN THOMSON 16
- HARVEST FROM THE SANKO**
ANN STORRIE & GREG POBAR 23
- WOODLAND WONDERLAND**
DAVID MITCHELL & NIGEL HIGGS 28
- FRANK HALL: WILD COLONIAL BOY**
LEN TALBOT 37
- FIRE, WIND AND WATER**
NEIL BURROWS, BRUCE HARVEY & MALCOLM GILL 42
- OASIS IN THE LEOPOLDS**
CAROLYN THOMSON 48

REGULARS

- IN PERSPECTIVE** 4
- BUSH TELEGRAPH** 5
- ENDANGERED FITZGERALD RIVER WOOLLYBUSHES** 36
- URBAN ANTICS** 54

COVER

Woylies prefer clumped, relatively open vegetation with sandy soils that are easy to dig. They are found, among other places, at Batalling Forest and the Dryandra Woodland. See stories on pages 16 and 28.

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