Desert Impressions

by Marianne Lewis

LANDSCOPE

Expeditions go to many places. Here is an account of one such journey, prepared from the diary of an expedition member.

The white-trunked coolibahs rose majestically from a carpet of golden everlastings, the play of light and shadow creating the effect of being inside an Impressionist painting. This 'desert' was nothing like my preconceptions. The distinguishing characteristic of desert is unreliable rain. But this had been a good year: the rains had come! Instead of the endless spinifex, sand and heat I had expected, kilometre after kilometre of Western Australia's heartland was transformed into a veritable garden, stunning in its sheer beauty, colour and diversity.

Our destination was one of Australia's great deserts, and I was on a 'holiday' with a difference: a journey back to a place where I had never been. My fellow travellers and I were taking part in a *LANDSCOPE* Expedition, based at a camp in the vast, remote Gibson Desert Nature Reserve.

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Main: Vast, undulating plains of spinifex whisper in the quiet of the desert.
Photo – Tom Keating
Inset: Flowers of a poverty bush (*Eremophila cuneifolia*).
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Below: A view of the Gunbarrel Highway, an icon of the outback.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

The expedition heads for the desert.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

We were a diverse and interesting lot, come together from far-flung places to share in the task of monitoring the plants and animals that live in the buckshot and breakaways, mulga and spinifex of this unique desert landscape. Our small group of eight expeditioners quickly became acquainted along the way, aided by our gregarious leader, Dr Per Christensen, pioneer in research linking feral animals to the decline of native marsupials.

Departing Perth and its wind and rain on Wednesday 2nd September 1998, we travelled north via Wubin and Mount Magnet to our first destination, the shearers' quarters at Nallan Station. The second day's solid driving saw us pass through Wiluna and reach Carnegie, a remote cattle station and our next stopover on this journey into the interior. On the third day we left all civilisation behind as we made our way to base camp on the nature reserve, 600 kilometres east of Wiluna, via the boneshaking corrugations and ruts of the Gunbarrel Highway.

The Gunbarrel Highway—the very name conjures up romantic images of journeys to faraway places. Surveyed and built by Len Beadell and his Gunbarrel team between 1956 and 1958, this now-famous road opened up the interior, making it possible to reach the remote deserts. Once you get out past the station country, into the 'real' outback, much of this 'highway' travels straight as a bullet for hundreds of kilometres through a landscape of vast,

undulating spinifex plains. The route is punctuated with stands of mulga and dotted with salt lakes, claypans, temporary freshwater lakes, sand dunes and rocky ranges with occasional breakaways. When we travelled through this vast landscape, the rain had had its effect on the unsealed road. A ribbon of red ochre was now dried by the sun to sculptural detail, yet the evidence of wet was still there in the deeply gouged potholes and tyre marks created by travellers ahead of us, anxious to get through before the road became a river.

Lured by the aura of romance and mystery surrounding the outback, we journeyed together to a place where it can be difficult and dangerous to venture alone. Here we were, following in the footsteps of intrepid explorers, going where only the brave, the adventurous, or the foolhardy would go. No five-star holiday, this! Our aims were pragmatic, and we were all prepared to rough it, sleeping in swags, cooking over an open fire and making do with the odd 'bush shower'. 'Field work on a remote expedition can be hot and dirty work,' we were told at the pre-trip meeting by co-leader 'Tub' Liddelow. 'Be prepared for close encounters with bush flies, prickly spinifex and scorpions.' Tub—charming, outrageous, practical, quintessential Aussie bushman and veteran of many desert forays—inspired confidence: I was prepared to be hardy.

What I wasn't prepared for was the sheer magic of the experience.

It is hard to imagine what this degree of remoteness feels like. You have to actually experience it. And once you have, this country has cast its spell. As far as the eye can see, no other human habitation. No traffic noises. No human-made structures. No television. No street lights. The nearest corner store left 600 kilometres behind. Sight, sound, smell come alive.

Top left: Poverty bushes create splashes of brilliant colour.

Top centre: The mauve flowers of the native borage (*Halgania* sp.) add to the desert palette.

Top right: The spectacular Sturt's desert pea, one of the best-known desert plants.
Photos – Wayne Clarke

Above: The calls and colour of a flock of budgerigars transform the desert scene, then are gone.
Photo – Jay Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

A DESERT PALETTE

First visual impressions of this wide, wild, beautiful country were awash with colour. My eyes feasted on the rich diversity at each different site. Startling white-trunked coolibahs and lofty, stately desert bloodwoods, set in a desert paved with golden everlastings. Scattered poverty bushes (*Eremophila* to the botanist)—blue, purple, mauve, red, pink, coral and every shade in between. Hummocks of bright green spinifex juxtaposed with soft grey blue spinifex. Masses and masses of profuse purple flowers of the magnificent purple mint bush (*Prostanthera magnifica*) enhanced by the golden-yellow blooms of a cassia growing nearby. This juxtaposition of the complementary colours purple and yellow was a continuing theme, to be repeated many times in other species—purple eremophila, solanum, golden acacias, everlastings. The colour-play continued beyond the plants to the ground, the animals, and the sky: deep ochre-red earth and termite mounds mirrored in the colours of dingoes, 'roos, camels, snakes, desert dragons. Puffballs of white cloud above, reflected in endless carpets of 'snow' underfoot—tiny white everlastings.

The desert was a kaleidoscope of colour and changing light as clouds drifted across the vast landscape; space,

space and more space. Some expeditioners keep coming back to the Gibson, and it was not hard to see why. Anticipating the visual treasures, fellow expeditioner Kaye Vaux had brought along her paintbox to capture the ephemeral beauty of the wildflowers. Kaye, septuagenarian and seasoned expeditioner, was on her fifth *LANDSCOPE* Expedition. Another of our party, Chris Crafter, has an affinity with the desert country: this was her third consecutive *LANDSCOPE* Expedition to the Gibson.

Expeditioners checking a pit trap line.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Tub Liddelow, veteran of many desert forays, examining animal tracks.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

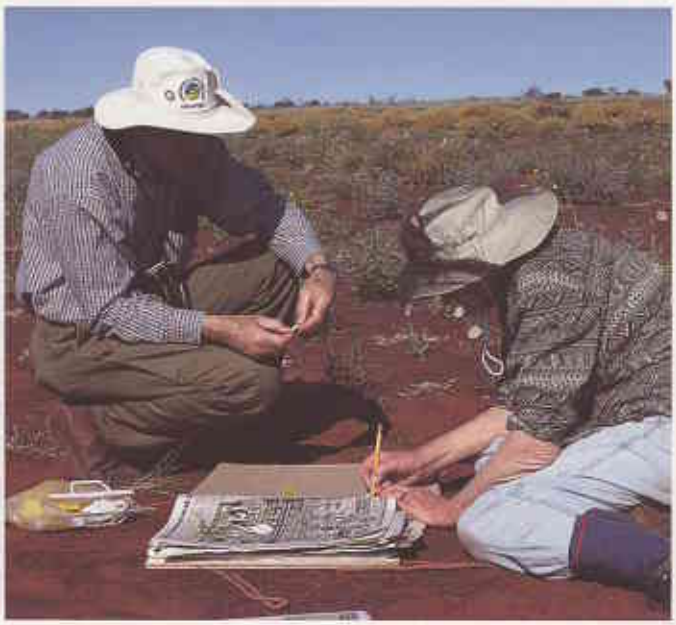
FEATHERED FRIENDS

During the day, it was the keen birdwatchers who were most alert to the movement or sound of birds in the trees. Wayne and Desrae Clark, like me here for the first time, were keen members of the Toodyay Naturalists' Club with an interest in birds—and pythons! Bill Scutchings, a quiet man and a master of understatement, was a keen interstate birdwatcher who had been involved in surveys of a rare sub-species of the red-tailed black-cockatoo in South Australia.

Our awareness was heightened to the point where it became a friendly competition to see who would spot something first. Perhaps a crimson chat, its vivid feathers vying with the red of Sturt desert peas. Or flocks of budgerigars in flight, creating shimmering clouds of green and gold through the mulga. It might have been a solitary emu, striding along the road. Bustards, Bourke parrots, maybe a peregrine falcon. The highlight

Below: One of the many geckos released from the pit traps.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Below right: Wayne Clarke and Kaye Vaux press and record plant specimens.
Photo – Graeme Liddelow



for me was being the first to spot a Major Mitchell cockatoo in full flight. Pristine white, and majestic as it turned in flight, its undersides flashing pink in the morning light. I still feel a thrill of pleasure in reliving the memory of this beautiful creature flying free and wild in the arid interior. Since the first *LANDSCOPE* Expedition to visit the Gibson Desert in 1992, the bird count has climbed to 99 species. Particular attention is paid to recording breeding species.

WEATHER EYE

The desert was a place of moods and contrasts. Black clouds piling up on the horizon. Thunder and lightning, a tremendous sound and light show, leaving a taste of ozone in the air. Fat drops of rain, wet earth and vegetation giving off pungent smells. Lightning strikes are the cause of many fires in the desert, and the sight of them in the distance added to the dramatic mood. Checking the vegetation plots, we had to run to the bus for cover when it rained and hailed on us, only to marvel minutes later at a glowing rainbow.

Nights were cold and could be windy, sometimes still and starry, the full moon casting sharp-edged moon-shadows. One night the wind blew boisterously all night and we set out early to check the roads the next morning, hopefully before the wind obliterated the prints left by nocturnal animals on tracks smoothed the previous day. We worked with the sun low in the sky behind us, to show up the tracks. We were delighted to see the tracks of bustard, emu, dingo, snake, bobtail, euro and kangaroo. Not so welcome a sight were the tracks of fox, rabbit, camel and feral cat.

ANIMAL HAVEN

Fortunately, baiting is carried out every second year, which keeps cat numbers down (see 'Hunting the Hunter', *LANDSCOPE,* Summer 1994–95, and 'Back in the Outback', *LANDSCOPE,* Summer 1992–93). Track counts revealed 4.8 cats per 100 kilometres, but this was reduced to 3.5 cats per 100 kilometres following the baiting. The Gibson Desert results will be compared with the cat baiting strategy developed for Project Eden on the Peron Peninsula.

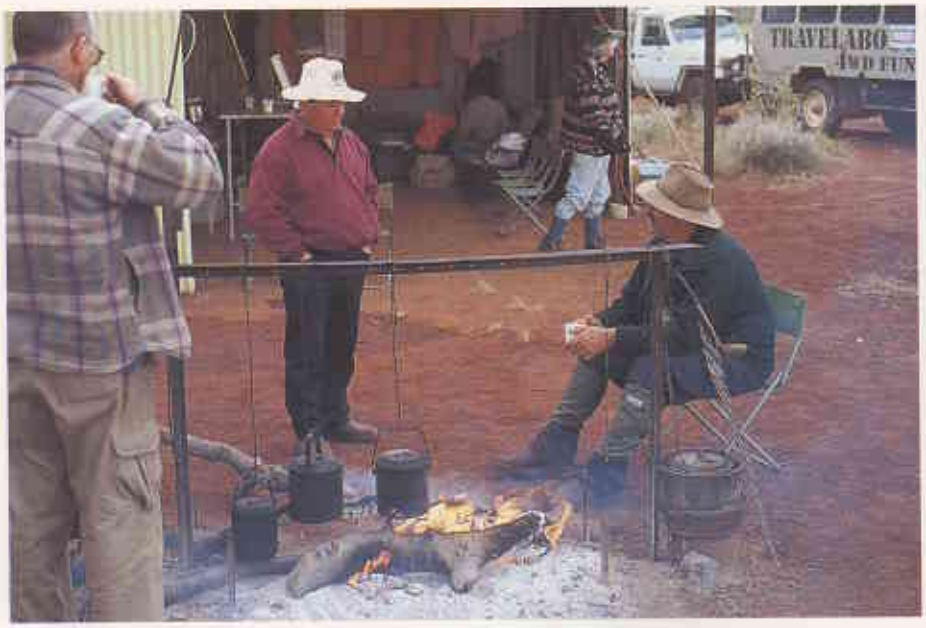
Top: Out on a limb: the tree goanna (*Varanus tristus*) basking in the sun.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Above: Expeditions provide the opportunity to observe small animals such as the sandy inland mouse.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Days were mainly sunny and hot, so another early morning task was the checking of pit traps at several different sites. This is the most effective means of trapping and monitoring small vertebrates. On this expedition six species of mammal and 15 species of reptile were captured, identified and released. Over the years results can be compared to evaluate the effectiveness of management strategies in the study area of the reserve. We learned that small mammal and reptile populations are less affected by feral cat baiting than by rainfall in the desert.

Checking the traps left its own distinct impressions. The thrill of anticipation. What would we find? Would it be a native mammal, a skink, or perhaps a snake? Quite often it was the ubiquitous *Mus domesticus*, the common house mouse, which thrives even in the desert.

Tactile senses came alive. Gentle handling of soft, furry, diminutive mammals with names bigger than they were—*Pseudomys desertor* (desert mouse), *P. hermannsburgensis* (sandy inland mouse), *Sminthopsis ooldea* (ooldea dunnart), *Ningaui ridei* (inland ningaui). The thrill of actually touching a reptile. I held a tiny gecko in my hands—such beauty in its intricate design and coloration. Seemingly so small and fragile, yet tough enough to flourish in the harsh environment of spinifex and sand that is its natural habitat.



AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

Most days we divided into teams to carry out the variety of research tasks—track counts, vegetation surveys, pit trap checks and opportunistic bird watching. Evenings were special times when we all got together around the campfire to share the experiences of the day and plan the next. Smells and tastes were the senses that came into their own at this time of the day.

On the way back to camp I could judge our nearness by the smell of the mulga campfire, sometimes spiked with the unforgettable and exotic aroma of sandalwood. The mouth-watering smells of a sizzling barbecue. The taste of traditional damper with golden syrup. Roasted sandalwood nuts. Cópious amounts of billy tea to wash it down while listening to our leaders and fellow expeditioners tell stories around the campfire. Buckets of water heated on the campfire for hot showers, and then the comfort of a warm swag under its canopy of stars. Exhilarating to wake to the sound of birdsong.

All too soon it was time for the return journey. On Friday 11th September we awoke to a cool morning following a gloriously starry night. Much activity as the campsite was packed up, tidied, and last-minute photographs taken. Into the 4WD bus, the truck and the utility, and away by 7:15 am. Our route on this day would take us south to the Gunbarrel Highway, which we would cross mid-morning. Another 174 kilometres on the David Carnegie Road (4WD only, and MUCH rougher than the Gunbarrel) would take us from the Gibson Desert to the Great Victoria Desert and to our camp site near Empress Spring, named by David Carnegie in August 1896 in honour of

Top left: A welcome fire and a billy of tea at the Eagle Bore campsite.
Photo – Graeme Liddelow

Centre left: Changing moods of the desert as a storm approaches.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Left: Dwarfed by a footprint, a desert dragon surveys the scene.
Photo – Wayne Clarke

Queen Victoria. Carnegie's expedition had been without water for several days of sweltering heat when it came upon Empress Spring courtesy of a rather reluctant local guide. The discovery of water in a cave more than 10 metres below the surface, well camouflaged and appearing no different from the surrounding arid countryside, saved the life of Carnegie and his expeditioners.

Our own expedition was comforted by the knowledge that, in the event of exhausting our water supplies or any other emergency, we had the resources of modern technology at our disposal: satellite phones, two-way radios in all vehicles, comprehensive first-aid kit, and access to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. We had regular radio communication with Kalgoorlie and were at no time without an extensive back-up system if necessary.

We arrived at Empress Spring just on nightfall. It had been a long day, punctuated by several stops, including a puncture to the ute and several photographic stops to record spectacular wildflowers, a mulga snake and an old abandoned International ute which was in amazingly good condition. The only mobile traffic we encountered were two mobs of camels, one of 13 and one of 15.

HOMEWARD BOUND

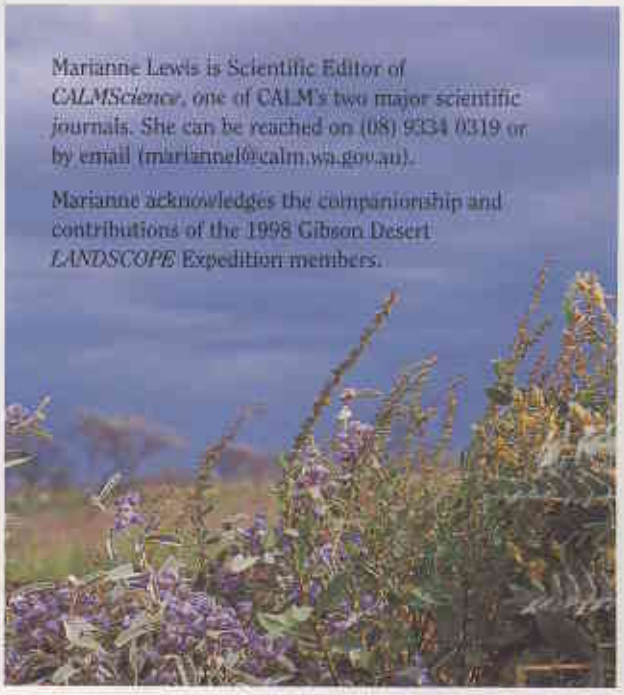
We made an early start on Saturday, as we had a long, long drive to Coolgardie. Gum trees increased as we proceeded through the sandhill country. Hakeas were in flower and we saw cockatiels, wedge-tailed eagles in glorious, soaring flight, pied butcher birds, a bustard and several honeyeater species. By now compulsive counters, we had tallied up 82 derelict vehicles on the Great Central Road—a reminder of the unforgiving and inhospitable environment—by the time we reached the turn-off to Laverton. We by-passed Laverton, but our route took us through Leonora, where we had our first taste of civilisation in the form of iced coffees and ice creams. The final night was spent in a real bed in a Coolgardie motel. No more starry canopies!

On Sunday we awoke to great excitement in the town, as preparations were underway for Coolgardie Day, an annual goldfields festival. After a pre-breakfast exploration of historical Coolgardie, we headed for Perth through the magnificent salmon gums. After 12 days together, we travelled with a sense of camaraderie and mutual achievement. And an intense desire to revisit vast landscapes, remote from the noise and bustle of the city.

Now, what's in next year's *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions brochure?

Top: The author at the entrance to Empress Spring.
Photo – Graeme Liddelow

Above: The expedition team, framed by a desert gum.
Photo – Wayne Clarke



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How many seals or sea lions are there around WA's coasts? See 'A Tale of Two Seals' on page 42.

"What I wasn't prepared for was the magic of the experience." See 'Desert Impressions' on page 35 for the story of a LANDSCOPE *Expedition.*

The malleefowl has declined to 46 per cent of its former range. Read about the combined effort to save it on page 17.

Enjoy the WA environment—and don't get hurt! See 'Balancing Act' on page 23.

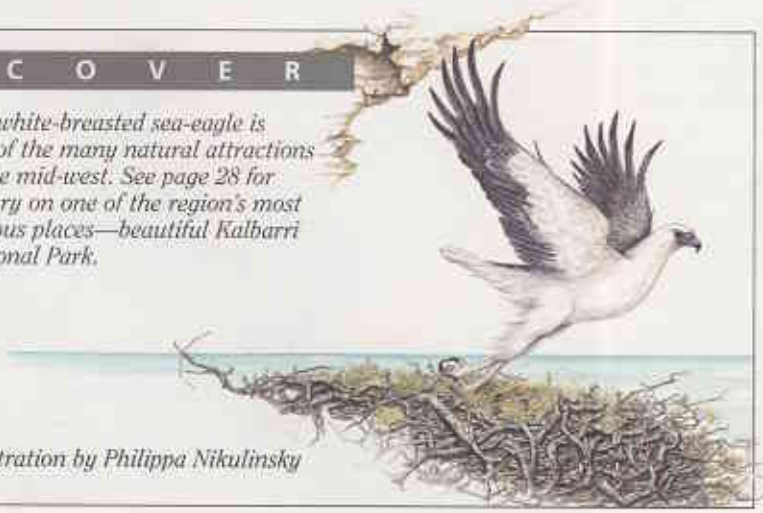
Traditional owners are working with CALM and other agencies to manage the land. See page 10.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The white-breasted sea-eagle is one of the many natural attractions of the mid-west. See page 28 for a story on one of the region's most famous places—beautiful Kalbarri National Park.



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