

# Spinifex in your socks

*Bushwalking the Pilbara*

The Pilbara countryside is an artist's palette, but no amount of mixing will reproduce exactly the blue skies, red dirt and yellow spinifex, or the views that go all the way to the horizon. A soon-to-be-released book, *Bushwalks in the Pilbara*, will guide visitors through its scenic grandeur.



by Judymae Napier and David Whitelaw

The Pilbara region covers more than 563,951 square kilometres of Western Australia's north-west, from the 'beach to the border'. An area nearly two-and-a-half times that of the State of Victoria, it is grand in both size and variety. Pristine islands, shell seabeds are all part of this unique landscape. A closer look reveals WA's highest peaks, deepest gorges and oldest rock formations. In a playground of this magnitude, there is no waiting in line. There are endless opportunities for those who don't mind going out and getting dirty to embark upon a journey of discovery in this final frontier.

Distances from Perth to the Pilbara region and between its parks are great, and this can limit the amount of time visitors have available to spend in each park. With this in mind, there is a variety of trails that will help you

experience the best of each park—some of the best walking and, in some places, scrambling in the Pilbara. While many of the trails are suited to a range of experience and fitness levels, the more adventurous walks pose significant risks and must not be undertaken lightly.

### Take the high road

There are several walktrails for those who like to be on top of things. The Badjirrajirra Trail is a loop that traverses the top of Cape Range National Park, negotiates the rugged limestone, passes spectacular canyons and offers breathtaking views east to Exmouth Gulf and west to the narrow coastal plain, sand dunes and beaches that form part of the world-class Ningaloo Marine Park. The trail begins and ends at the Thomas Carter Lookout, which—at 311 metres above sea level—is one of the highest points

on the cape. Thomas Carter was a natural historian and collector of bird specimens who lived for a while at nearby Point Cloates. He is most famous for collecting the type specimen of the spinifexbird (*Eremiornis carter*).

Limestone sinkholes are a predominant feature of this cratered landscape, providing a window into the cave network that worms its way beneath the ranges. To avoid a fall, stay on the formed trail, which takes you up and down the ranges, and passes through dry creek beds carved by torrential rain and flooding. The climate is much drier now, but summer rainfall continues the weathering process, undercutting hard layers and eventually causing large blocks of material to break off and tumble to the bottom of the gorges. There is no permanent water in the Cape Range gorges and medium to long-range walks through the area are recommended for the cooler months of the year.

Dodging camels is not something you'll have to do along the Chichester Range Camel Trail, but spare a thought for the animals and people that made and negotiated these tracks. The camel trail in Millstream-Chichester National Park was the transport route used by camel and bullock teams to carry goods from the port at Cossack to the inland Pilbara and to export the wool clip back out. They would carry up to nine tonnes of supplies. The Chichester Range escarpment was so steep that a blacksmith's shop was set up permanently at the foot of the range near Python Pool. Here, the smithy repaired wheels and brakes that had come apart on the 'big hill'.

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**Main** The Chichester Range.

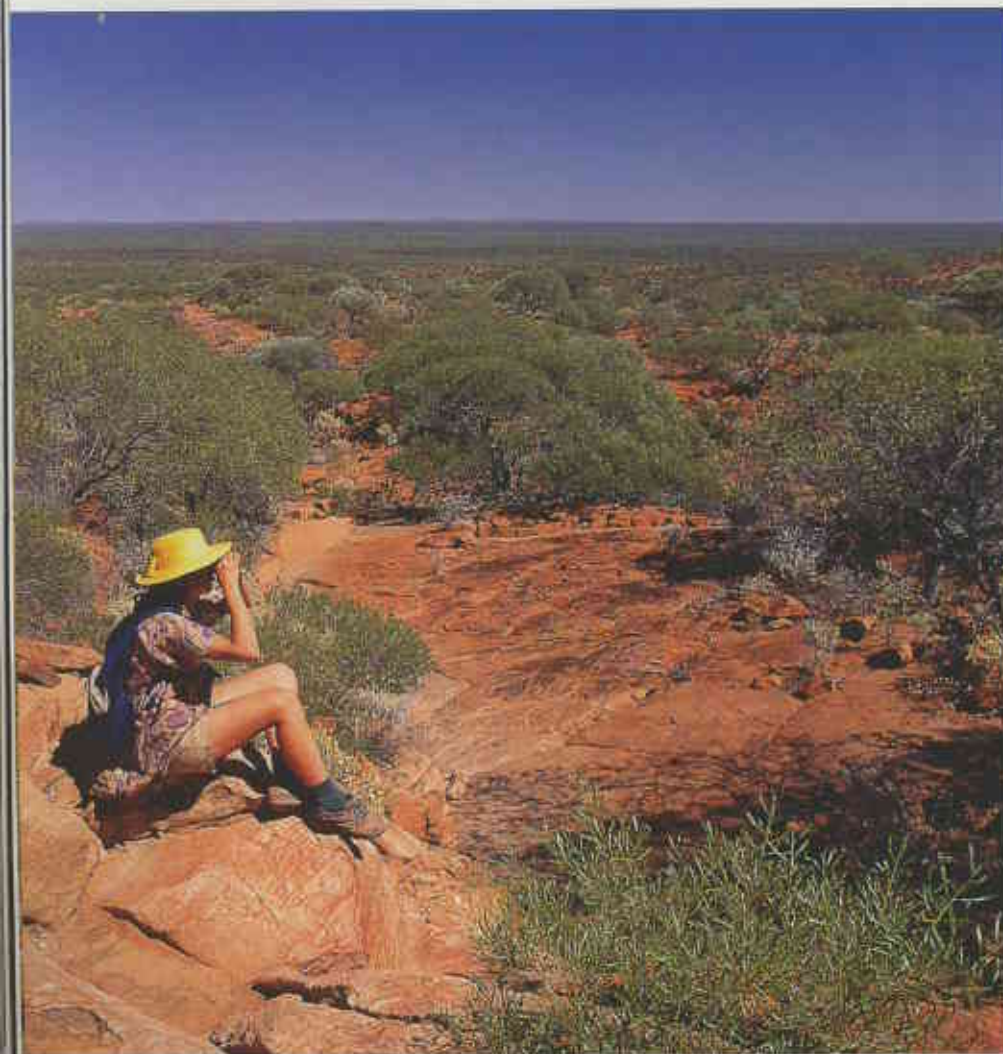
*Photo – David Bettini*

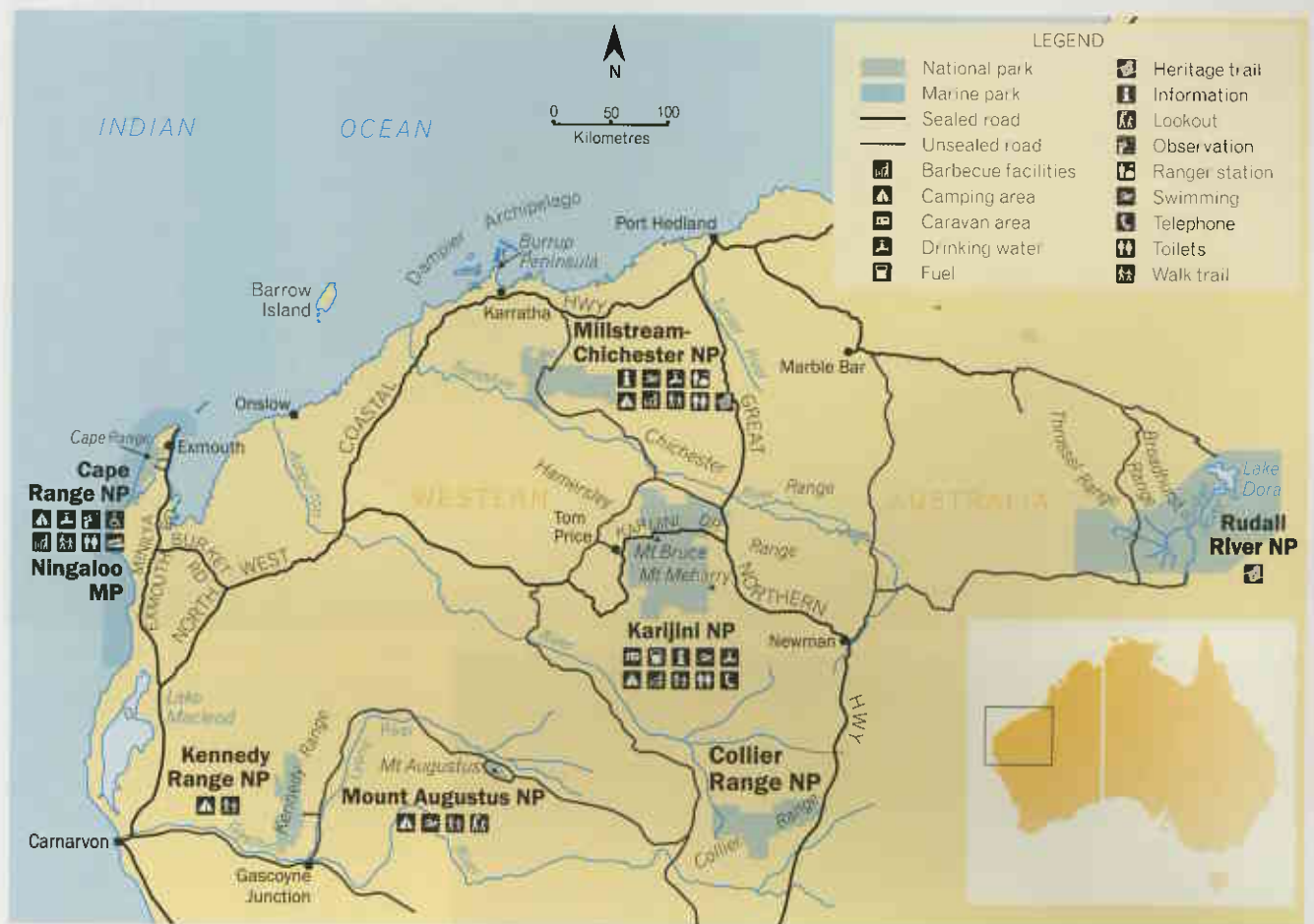
**Inset** Roadside wildflowers, including pincushions, mulla-mullas and daisies.

*Photo – Bill Bachman*

**Left** Mount Augustus National Park, looking east across mulga plains from Edney's Lookout track.

*Photo – Bill Bachman*





Trails at Mount Augustus National Park will have you roaming up, down, around and over as you explore one of this State's most intriguing natural and cultural features. At twice the size and almost three times the size of Ayers Rock (Uluru), Mount Augustus rises abruptly from its flat surroundings. It has many fine examples of Aboriginal art that are many thousands of years old. At dawn and dusk, the colours of Mount Augustus change almost by the minute—from deep indigo to bright pink, orange or red, and occasionally green. You have to see it to believe it! (See 'Mount Augustus National Park', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1995.)

WA's two highest mountains—Mount Meharry and Mount Bruce—are found in the Pilbara region, and both are in Karijini National Park. The park also protects a section of the Hamersley Range, which is the most extensive elevated area of land in Western Australia.

Mount Meharry is the tallest peak, at 1,245 metres, and Mount Bruce is the second highest, at 1,235 metres. You can four-wheel-drive to the summit of Mount Meharry, but the Mount Bruce

**Right** Hancock Gorge in Karijini National Park.  
*Photo – Jiri Lochman*

walktrail requires you to walk all the way. Mount Bruce, known as Punurunnha to the local Aboriginal people, signifies the boundary of different language groups and features in many local legends. The visitor's book at the summit also tells a few tales. "I feel like an eagle up here ... it's fantastic" to "I'm on top of the world". Most of a day is required to do the walk, enjoy the views and explore the airy summit ridge. Visitors who can't get all the way to the top can still enjoy some great walking, views and interpretation closer to the car park.

### The low road

If Mount Bruce feels like you're on top of the world, Hancock Gorge would have to be a journey to the bottom. While the gorge is not completely enclosed, with the height



of the cliffs and its sheer narrowness, it might as well be. Rocks have been worn smooth by the turbulent waters of flash floods, a reminder that the gorges are no place to be when there's rain about. Rocks and gravel flood over the gorge rim, scouring their way



down to Junction Pool, where they combine with the debris and water from three other gorges before continuing downwards to the river floodplain. This trail includes some demanding climbing on high, narrow ledges, and is not for the faint-hearted.

At Dales Gorge, in Karijini National Park, you can follow a trail that takes you along the rim of the gorge before negotiating the steep slope down to Fortescue Falls, one of the park's spectacular all-year-round waterfalls. The many trees seen along the gorge rim and surrounding landscape include river gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) up to five metres high and weeping northern paperbarks (*Melaleuca argentea*). Descending into the gorges, you pass native fig trees (*Ficus platypoda*) and cypress pines (*Callitris glaucophylla*) known to have survived for 380 years inside this dynamic gorge environment. Further along the Dales

**Top** Late afternoon reflections in Dales Gorge near Circular Pool in Karijini National Park.

Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

**Centre left** Fortescue Falls in Karijini National Park.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

**Left** Mixed wildflowers including *Goodenia* sp., along Edney's Lookout track, at Mount Augustus.

Photo – Bill Bachman

**Right** Snappy gums in Karjimi National Park

Photo—David Bellini

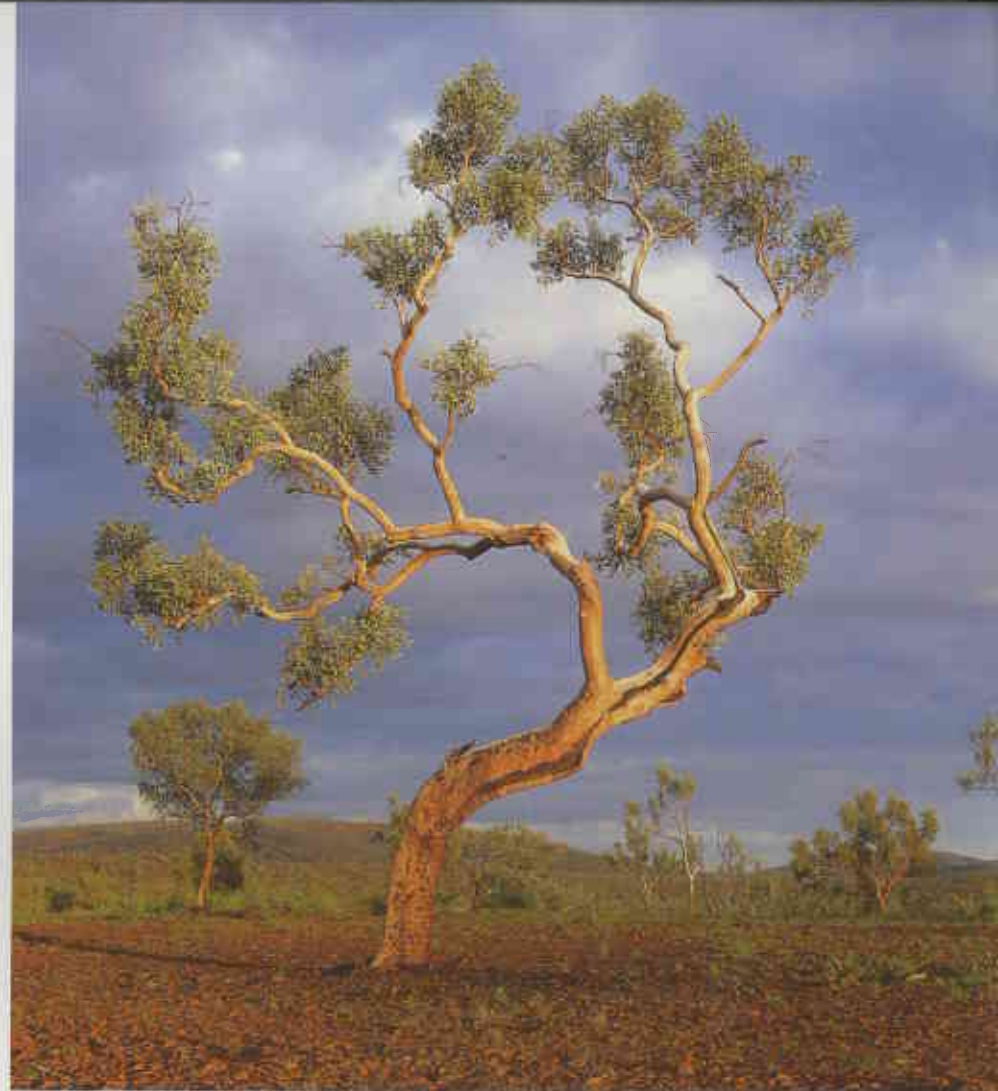
**Below right** The Homestead Visitor Centre, in Millstream—Chichester National Park.

Photo—Dennis Sarson/Lochman  
*Transparencies*

Gorge trail you reach the aptly-named Circular Pool—a rock amphitheatre, spring-fed by crystal clear water tumbling down the fern-lined walls. A dip here makes all the effort worthwhile. Brightly coloured dragonflies flit over the surface of the water, their voracious appetites supplemented by smaller insects buzzing around the pools. Only the stunning colours found in the rocks and pebbles along the gorge floor are able to compete with those provided by the unique insects found in this ancient environment.

In the Pilbara, there is much to remind you of the hardships people faced when they came to live in a region so foreign to many of them. The area surrounding Millstream was once a thriving pastoral station, family home and tavern, nestled between the Hamersley Range and the Chichester Range in the floodplain of the Fortescue River. The walktrail around the homestead lets you explore Millstream as it was in the early 1940s. Information plaques show the way, and take the perspective of a 12-year-old boy, keen to share his favourite places and good times with you. The homestead environment is an oasis of permanent pools and lush tropical palms that have been preserved to give visitors an experience of the amazing contrasts that only water can bring to the dry outback country. The Millstream homestead is now the park's visitor centre, providing interpretive information and insight into the lives of local Aboriginal people and European settlers since before the last century.

The local Martu Aboriginal people know Rudall River as Karlamilyi. Located where the Great Sandy Desert



and Little Sandy Desert meet, it is one of the world's most remote national parks and is also Western Australia's largest. Rugged beauty, desert dunes, salt lakes and mountain ranges await its visitors. Be prepared, however, as the outback can be an unforgiving place for adventurers who are ill-equipped or not self-sufficient. (See 'Rudall River National Park', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1997 and 'Land of the Lost', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1996-97.)

### Meet you at the coast

If you enjoy exhibitions, the Burrup Peninsula is for you. On show is an open-air gallery of mystical artwork—engraved over thousands of years—that shows a richness of traditional culture. Many sites also house shell debris and stone artefacts, standing stones and patches of rock abraded from seed grinding. Temperatures among the rock piles can become quite high, so choose your time carefully. Don't forget to take a breath and capture the mood of this ancient rock art site and enjoy the experience that our unique Aboriginal heritage provides us.



For an experience of the more natural kind, a walk along the northern rim of Yardie Creek, in Cape Range National Park, offers great views of the gorge and Indian Ocean to the west. Look out for the stilt mangroves nestled along the creek's edge, the grey foliage and mauve flowers of the Yardie



**Left** North West Ferry on Yardie Creek in Cape Range National Park.  
Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

**Top** Osprey feeding on buffalo bream.  
Photo – Chris Surman/Lochman Transparencies

**Above** Black-footed rock-wallaby.  
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Creek morning glory (*Ipomoea yardiensis*) and rock figs (*Ficus brachypoda*) protruding from limestone cracks alongside the walktrail. As you make your way along the gorge, look carefully down and along the wall on the other side. The black-footed rock-wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis*) lives along the rock face of the gorge. A number of birds also nest along the limestone cliff faces, while white-breasted sea eagles (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) and ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) soar overhead. The rugged limestone landscape of Cape Range provides a stark backdrop to the turquoise waters surrounding Ningaloo Reef, but, in many ways, highlights the spectrum of scenery offered to visitors to the Pilbara region.

### A time to visit

Most visitors to the Pilbara region arrive during autumn and spring. Winter days are pleasantly warm and clear, although nights can be cold and sometimes frosty. In the peak summer months, the refreshing cool waters of the gorges and rock pools—which in winter can be too cold for swimming—compensate somewhat for the extreme heat. Summer has its own

advantages, with longer evenings and less bustle from other tourists in the parks. However, be aware that the weather can change dramatically, because the Pilbara has a tropical, semi-desert climate that is prone to cyclones and rain-bearing thunderstorms. This is all part of the excitement that makes sure we keep one eye on the weather when venturing 'out back'.

Getting around the Pilbara is all part of the discovery, with opportunities to fly, drive, take a guided tour or get off the beaten track. The destinations on offer can provide you with so many choices that there is always more to see and do, even after you've visited the rugged coastline, seen the mountain ranges and escaped to the desert sand dunes.

The selection of walktrails we have covered gives only a glimpse of the discoveries you can make. The Department of Conservation and Land Management will soon release a book on walktrails in all of the Pilbara region's national parks. *Bushwalks in the Pilbara* will invite those with an adventurous spirit to come and experience the Pilbara outdoors for themselves.

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*Bushwalks in the Pilbara*, a new book to be published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, will be available later this year at a cost of \$16.45.

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