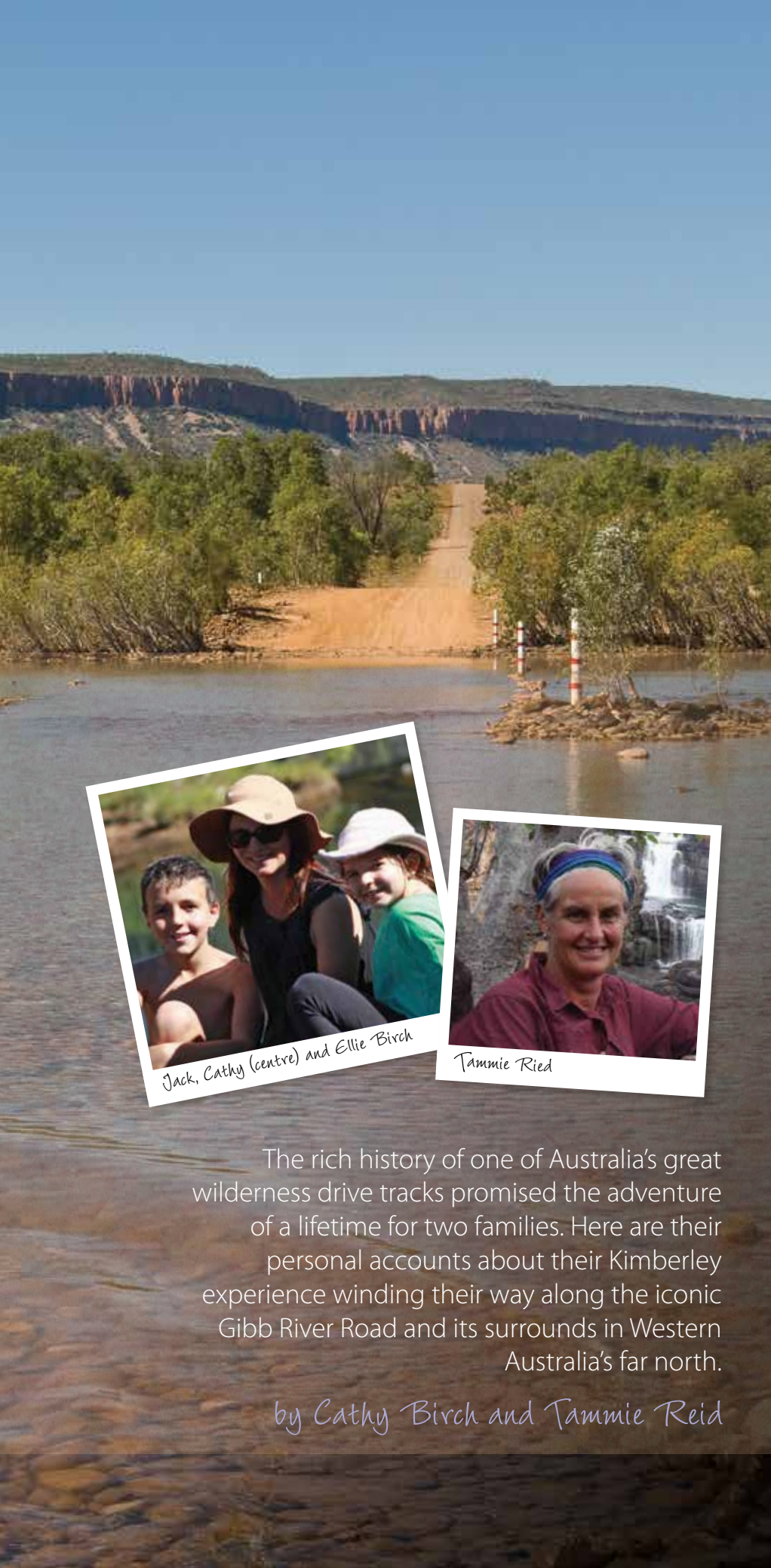


Trekking the *Gibb*





The 668-kilometre Gibb River Road was originally a stock route pioneered for central Kimberley pastoral stations to drive their cattle to the ports of Derby and Wyndham. It later became a road transport route across the Kimberley plateau linking King Sound at Derby to the Cambridge Gulf at Wyndham. The Wyndham meat works closed in 1985 and the road is now more of a tourist route than a beef transport road. It traverses the rugged King Leopold Ranges, snaking through red granite folded ranges and the headwaters of the Fitzroy River, negotiating steep jump ups. These breakaways must have rung loud with curses when the droving teams pushed their mobs through and over the very dry tableland country. The Gibb River Road is a growing and popular four-wheel drive tourist experience, linking many stations, parks and reserves, gorges and Aboriginal communities.

One thing is for sure, the Gibb River Road is not for the faint hearted. And for Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) senior project officer Tammie Reid and marketing manager Cathy Birch, months of planning, and high expectations for an ambitious adventure were all worth it.

THE TRAVEL PLANS

Tammie set off with backpacks and lightweight camping gear, maps, reference books and guides, first aid gear, recovery and safety communications equipment, and a rooftop tent on her four-wheel drive for a month's journey along the Gibb River Road. This was something she and her husband Ian had looked forward to for a long time and at last, with three months long service leave up their sleeves and their children all now adults, it became a reality.

Meanwhile, Cathy, together with husband Dan and two children Jack (11) and Ellie (7) set off after much preparation and excitement to discover Western Australia's vast north-west and the somewhat infamous Gibb River Road four-wheel drive track.

The rich history of one of Australia's great wilderness drive tracks promised the adventure of a lifetime for two families. Here are their personal accounts about their Kimberley experience winding their way along the iconic Gibb River Road and its surrounds in Western Australia's far north.

by Cathy Birch and Tammie Reid

WINDJANA GORGE NATIONAL PARK

This place is steeped in history and highly populated with freshwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus johnsoni*). The water-streaked walls of the gorge are incredible and there are a variety of different walks, including the seven-kilometre return Gorge Walk, which takes you along the full length of the gorge and back. The walk provides an up-close look at the park's resident fruit bats and corellas which, together with a number of waterbirds, take shelter in the tall broad-leaved leichardt pines, native figs and paper-barked cadjeputs. It's a great place to take photos of crocodiles without getting too close. *Cathy*

TUNNEL CREEK NATIONAL PARK

We had a great experience walking through the cool caves of Tunnel Creek—Western Australia's oldest cave system. The walk is quite dark so it is necessary to have a torch. Other walkers reported seeing a freshwater crocodile in the water partly hidden by a small waterfall, but we had already walked past it. The walk experience

was amazing with stalactites throughout the cave and interpretive references to the Bunuba Aboriginal leader known as Jandamarra being shot at Tunnel Creek in 1897. *Cathy*

BELL GORGE – KING LEOPOLD RANGES CONSERVATION PARK

We were welcomed by DPaW campground hosts, a retired bank manager and his wife, from the eastern states who volunteer their time each year. They provided us with information about the park, camping sites, facilities and the walk to the spectacular waterfalls at Bell Creek Gorge. The walk is reasonably challenging but certainly worth it with a beautiful waterfall and Aboriginal artwork to discover. There are more than 200 bird species in the park, including the spectacular rainbow bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*), which darts around giving flashes of its brilliant colour, while the sticky kurrajong (*Brachychiton viscidulus*) brightens the gorges with its stunning pink flowers. *Tammie*

DIMOND GORGE ON OLD MORNINGTON STATION

Dalainger, also referred to as Dimond Gorge, is on the Australian Wildlife Conservancy's Mornington property and is the final cut through the King Leopold Ranges before the Fitzroy River flows onto the plains. It's spectacular and holds great cultural significance for the local Aboriginal community. There is a radio phone in a shed at the turn off so camp site availability can be checked before committing to the drive. There are various walks, other spectacular gorges and water holes, an abundance of birds to spot and regular evening presentations from the researchers based at the property. We also enjoyed the 'library' at reception—an open enclave complete with comfy couches and all the information and field guides you could ever need about the plants, animals and people of the Kimberley. *Tammie*

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Main Crossing the Pentecost River ahead of the impressive Cockburn Ranges.

Photo – Marie Lochman

All other photos – Colin Ingram, Cathy Birch and Tammie Reid/DPaW unless otherwise indicated.



Bell Creek Gorge



Dimond Gorge



Rainbow bee-eater. Photo – L-A Shibish



Silent Grove campground. Photo – L-A Shibish

MANNING RIVER GORGE

The walk here was fantastic. We first swam across to the other side of the Manning River. You can take a boat to pull yourself across, but we chose to swim and cool off before the walk. The track to the gorge is a fair hike but, like all the walks in the Kimberley, is well worth it. We spotted an olive python (*Liasas olivaceus*) making its way into the water as well as water monitors. Once we reached the gorge we took in the scenic views.

Cathy

MCGOWAN ISLAND

The road into Kalumburu and out to McGowan Island was quite hard on our vehicle so we were glad to experience the island and take a break from the heavy corrugations. As this was a no swimming area, the kids spent hours building sandcastles for crazy crabs (*Coenibita variabilis*). That night we camped under beautiful boab trees (*Adasonia gregorii*) and watched an amazing sunset, which was vivid red due to a distant fire. We were treated to fireworks and delicious salmon courtesy of other visitors.

Cathy

POINT WARRENDER

The drive into Point Warrender is not for the faint-hearted (like me). However, once we finally got down the track we were rewarded with an amazing view of this stunning coastline and had a fairly secluded place to camp and fish. Though we didn't have any luck fishing from the rocks, we did catch quite a few fish including threadfin salmon, skip jacks and two mud crabs after much time spent in a dinghy. Some friendly black kites and a dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*) scavenged around our camp site hoping to share our catch with us.

Cathy

PUNAMII-UNPUU – MITCHELL FALLS, MITCHELL RIVER NATIONAL PARK

This part of the drive was enjoyed by all with a few river crossings and amazing

scenery of fan palms (*Livistona eastoni*); it was like driving into a tropical oasis. The walk to Mitchell Falls was a trip highlight and, aside from being beautiful, the fan palm forest is one of the most biologically important areas in the state. Up to 50 mammal species, 220 bird species and 86 kinds of reptiles and amphibians may occur in the area. There are two smaller falls (Little Mertens and Big Mertens Gorge) along this challenging and reasonably long walk and at the end are the beautiful cascading Mitchell Falls. We stayed for hours enjoying the magnificent view and swimming at the very top of the falls. We walked both ways, visitors can instead opt to take a helicopter flight over the falls and back to the camp site.

Cathy



McGowan Island



Mitchell Falls. Photo — David Bettini

“The walk to Mitchell Falls was a trip highlight and, aside from being beautiful, the fan palm forest is one of the most biologically important areas in the state.”

Cathy

NGAUWUDU – MITCHELL PLATEAU

This several-day diversion into the Mitchell Plateau was well worth it. We hiked through this country and experienced rock art, gorges, palms, rainforest patches and water lilies and listened to and watched for the elusive scuttling Dalal or black grass wren (*Amytornis housei*). An evening campground presentation by the DPaW ranger John Hayward included images of the park in the wet, transformed with water raging and completely washing out all four tiers of the Mitchell Falls, giving an insight into the breathtaking forces at work in this part of the country. Surveyors Pool/Aunayu is another enjoyable walk into a place known by the Wunambal people as a powerful place for their Wanjina-Wungurr law. The white rocks at the base of these falls are said to be the eggs of the Rainbow serpent. *Tammie*

KING EDWARD RIVER – WANDJINA ROCK ART SITES

There are two accessible rock art areas near Munurru, the newly redeveloped camp site at King Edward River which is managed by DPaW through an MOU with Kandiwal Aboriginal Corporation. One site is accessed

by a gravel road after crossing King Edward River, and the second is accessed several kilometres after the camping area.

These sites have been developed and protected under the direction of the Wnambal Gaamberra traditional owners and convey the deep respect and age-long connection they have with the land. The traditional owners welcome visitors to these sites and ask that visitors respect the land and stop for a moment to think about where they are. It was late afternoon when we visited, with a golden glow reflecting on the rock art and surrounding savanna grasslands, making these breathtaking and emotional visits for me. *Tammie*

MINERS POOL AT DRYSDALE RIVER STATION

Drysdale River Station offers bookable facilities for overnight stays and has great outdoor dining. We opted to camp at Miners

Pool, just out from the main station, where we could swim in the Drysdale River. The campsite offers basic toilet facilities here and a large area for setting up tents. *Cathy*

ELLENBRAE STATION

This shady, garden homestead was established by the original station owners to welcome weary Gibb River Road travellers. It's a nice spot for a morning tea of scones, jam and cream. Some beautiful double-barred finches (*Taeniopygia bichenovii*) joined us. *Cathy*

PENTECOST RIVER

We spent a couple of nights camping along the Pentecost River, which rises below the Durack Range and flows north through El Questro Station. This is a great place for watching other travellers cross the river, croc spotting and taking in the incredible sight of the Cockburn Ranges. *Cathy*



Miners Pool



Surveyors Pool



Mitchell River. Photo – Tourism WA



Pentecost River

"The stunning scenery of the Kimberley was of course the absolute highlight of this trip. However, sharing the trip with our children was really special." *Cathy*

Cathy

"Much to our delight we had a wonderful, safe holiday and an experience none of us will forget. The stunning scenery of the Kimberley was, of course, the absolute highlight of this trip. However, sharing the trip with our children was really special. They didn't have any electronic gadgets so they spent their time in the car writing stories, reading, mapping the journey, helping out on the two-way by letting the four-wheel drive behind us know when another vehicle was coming the other way, taking photographs (until the batteries went flat), drawing pictures, telling jokes and enjoying the scenery. I hope we, as a family, have the opportunity to do the trip again and visit some of the places we didn't fit in this time and revisit some of the places we loved. The trip is a wonderful chance to step away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and enjoy spectacular Western Australia at its best. I, for one, looked at life a little differently when I returned from the trip."

- Legend**
- Sealed road
 - Unsealed road
 - Track
 - Conservation park
 - Marine park
 - National park



Tammie

"Travelling the Gibb was a lot easier than we had anticipated. There are hot showers, fuel and food supplies, information, tours, camping and accommodation options all the way along, even scones and cold drinks at the occasional station run bars. The good road conditions surprised us too; apparently a grader had passed just before our trip after some heavy rains had closed sections of the road for a number of days. But we still managed to rattle off our front number plate by the time we arrived at Wyndham!

What surprised us during our trip was the immense scale and impact of the geology and how easy it was to read the land and understand the huge forces that had created the Kimberley. You can literally see the impact of land masses colliding and buckling into the continent as well as the Fitzroy River relentlessly eroding the different granite and basalt rock types and cutting its way through to drain vast amounts of wet season rainfall through to the plains and eventually the ocean.

We enjoyed learning more about Aboriginal custodianship of the Kimberley, one of the oldest continuous living cultures in the world. There are still more than 30 different language groups in the Kimberley region alone. We combined our bush walks, community art gallery visits, station tours and gorge explorations with always keeping an eye out for signs of past habitation and investigating rock art that was thousands of years old. One rock art site depicted a thylacine (Tasmanian tiger), a marsupial that has been extinct for at least 2,000–3,000 years, so one wonders just how old this site is.

During our month-long trip, we lived among spectacular scenery, walked and swam in beautiful landscapes and built our knowledge of dry season Kimberley plants and animals. We met fellow travellers, interacted with many campground hosts and DPaW staff who care for the parks and reserves along the way.

The trip was everything we had hoped for and more—a refreshing and invigorating experience, and one that makes me proud to be Western Australian. We also began to truly understand what Aboriginal people have lived by for millennia: if you care for the land, the land will care for you."

Doing up the Gibb

Western Australia's Kimberley region has been recognised as one of the 'must-see' destinations in the world by international travel publisher Lonely Planet. The Kimberley is number two in the world's 'Top 10 Regions' for 2014, and the only Australian region on the list.

The state government is working to conserve the Kimberley's immense nature and culture through the Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy. The centrepiece of the strategy is the creation of the Kimberley Wilderness Parks, which will form the state's largest interconnected system of marine and terrestrial parks, covering about 50,000 square kilometers or five million hectares. The Kimberley Wilderness Parks include the Great Kimberley Marine Park (three million hectares) and Australia's largest national park, at two million hectares (naming of this park is still being finalised). Works to improve the Gibb River Road and Kalumburu Road for visitors, and to better protect the natural environment, include new toilet facilities at the junction of the Gibb River and Kalumburu roads, a rubbish cage at Drysdale River Station (for travellers returning from Mitchell Falls, as no rubbish collection is available there) and a redeveloped campground at King Edward River. Future plans include the development of new camping and visitor facilities at Carson River Station—a collaboration between DPaW, the Kalumburu Aboriginal Corporation and the Balangarra Traditional Owners. Work on the facilities will start in 2014.