

A hare in a tortoise race

A growing community of people is attempting to complete Western Australia's long-distance trails in record time. Is it possible to enjoy and appreciate nature while you're pushing yourself to your physical limits and going as fast as you can?

by Lauren Cabrera



Western Australia's long-distance trails facilitate a certain level of escapism, since the time it takes to complete the length of the trail means time away from our fast-paced lives and an opportunity to appreciate nature.

For some, those hundreds of kilometres through varying terrain represent a challenge; the ultimate test of physical endurance to complete an end-to-end in record time. It is a polarising mindset that is certainly not for everyone.

While designed to be enjoyed at a leisurely pace, there is increasing interest from serious athletes taking on the challenge of completing the 1000-kilometre Munda Biddi Trail and Bibbulmun Track as well as the 125-kilometre Cape to Cape Track in record time.

Embarking on an end-to-end journey is inherently risky with limited access to food, shelter, water and first aid. With increased pace, comes increased risk and added pressure on support crews and potential rescuers. Travellers who push their limits can encounter fatigue, injury, disorientation and even delirium.

Planning and preparation are key, as well as good physical health, well maintained equipment and good old-fashioned tenacity.

PICKING UP THE PACE

Each year, thousands of cyclists from all over the world attempt to complete the Munda Biddi Trail between Perth and Albany. Cyclists typically take an average of three to four weeks to complete the trail and carry enough clothing, food, and camping and first aid equipment to last them a few days before taking advantage of 'trail towns' along their journey to stock up on supplies, have a meal or even stay in accommodation for a shower and a good night's rest before continuing.

Munda Biddi means 'path through the forest' in the local Menang language and the trail includes steep climbs, rocky tracks, deep sand and slippery pea gravel.

In May 2017, Declan von Dietze set the record for the fastest end-to-end, completing the trail in four days, six



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Main Cape to Cape Track.

Photo – Tourism WA

Main below On the Munda Biddi Trail.

Photo – DBCA

Above Bibbulmun Track near Albany wind farm.

Photo – Mary McGeough

Right Cycling along the Munda Biddi.

Photo – DBCA



“Craig rode for 22 hours, slept for eight hours, and then rode for another 33 hours without a break, burning 28,000 calories in the process.”

hours and 39 minutes. In October 2020, 21-year-old Albany local Craig Wiggins set a new record of two days, 17 hours and 22 minutes.

In order to complete the feat, Craig rode for 22 hours, slept for eight hours, and then rode for another 33 hours without a break, burning 28,000 calories in the process.

“I like going fast, I enjoy that, and the suffering, pain and mental challenges are all part of it,” said Craig.

“I will say, however, that it made me want to come back and do it again a lot slower and camp out at the huts. That would make it a lot more enjoyable and give me a chance to take it all in.”

The majority of riders prefer to take their time, completing the trail in weeks and even months. Some complete the trails in sections over a number of years.

“Completing the Munda Biddi as fast as possible has zero appeal to me,” said



Kim Harrison, who completed an end-to-end in 2016.

“A group of us took about four weeks to complete the ride, which gave us time each day to enjoy the unique landscape, check out the various towns, pubs and scenic attractions, with a bonus rest day in a couple of towns along the way.

“It was a great ride in every respect – good for the mind, body and soul.”

The Munda Biddi Trail Foundation maintains it’s always great to see people enjoying the trail and they welcome any rider so long as they cause no harm to themselves, to others, or to the trail itself. The Foundation does not take a formal role in organising, promoting, endorsing or

certifying the rides and as such no record is ever ‘official’.

“It is great to see the Munda Biddi Trail being fully utilised in many different and exciting ways,” Munda Biddi Trail Foundation Chair Neil Brodie said.

“While risks are present for all riders, there are specific safety risks for those who choose to make their trail experience more challenging.”

WALK OR RUN

The Bibbulmun Track is Western Australia’s oldest and arguably most well-known long-distance track having been opened in 1979 as part of the State’s 150th year celebrations. The Bibbulmun Track Foundation lovingly describes the

popular track as one that ‘stretches 1000 kilometres through a wide variety of jarrah, marri, wandoo, karri and tingle forests, interspersed with sections of coastal peppermint and heathlands. It traverses some of the most beautiful and wild areas of the south-west of the State and offers facilities unrivalled on any long-distance track in Australia’.

Walkers commonly enjoy the Bibbulmun Track by completing sections at a time, while some choose to do it over a number of years, and others are happy to

Above Cosy Corner walk trail on the Bibbulmun Track.

Photo – Mary McGeough



“The Bibbulmun Track is so beautiful, we are so lucky to have it, but it throws everything at you.”

just do a day or overnight walk. End-to-end walkers take an average six to eight weeks to walk the track, staying overnight in campsites and trail towns along the way.

In 2018, ultra-marathon runner and exercise physiologist Shane Johnstone broke the end-to-end record by completing the track in 11 days, seven hours and eight minutes. The seasoned long-distance runner had a dozen-strong support crew and a number of running companions joining him for different legs of his journey, which raised \$15,000 for charity.

At the finish line, Shane said it was the hardest thing he had ever done but he was glad he could still enjoy the track while running an average of 80 kilometres a day over the 11-and-a-half-day journey.

Above Walking along Mandalay Beach that intercepts the Bibbulmun Track.

Photo – David Reid

Above right Hiking along the Cape to Cape Track to Quininup Falls.

Photo – Dom Lim

“The Bibbulmun Track is so beautiful, we are so lucky to have it, but it throws everything at you,” said Shane.

Ultra-marathons are incredibly taxing on the body, with athletes taking weeks to recover. Athletes condition their bodies and minds over months and years in the lead up to an event so they can endure the discomfort, muscle fatigue, inflammation, nausea and psychological stress over a long period.

“Trail running on the Bibbulmun Track has increased greatly in popularity,” Bibbulmun Track Foundation Executive Director, Linda Daniels said.

“However, we don’t keep official records as we don’t wish to encourage people to try and beat them because, apart from the huge physical toll and risk factors of completing the track in record time, it is logistically very difficult. Access for support crews in the northern half is particularly challenging due to disease risk areas.”

In 2004, seasoned walker Roxanne Pendreigh was looking for new adventures and a girlfriend invited her on an overnight hike on the Bibbulmun Track. After 24 hours on the track she



was hooked and spent the next six years completing the track in sections, in no particular order.

“Every long weekend and break I was out there and each section was a new adventure,” said Roxanne. “I was driven to finish it; I walked with more than 10 different people over the years and met so many characters along the way.”

“My time on the track truly transformed me, it was a physical and mental challenge and a place to restore the body and soul. It was a pretty special time.”

COASTING ALONG

The Cape to Cape Track is the shortest of WA’s long-distance trails, spanning a respectable 125 kilometres between Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse and Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse in the south-west corner of the State.

The Friends of the Cape to Cape Track say it takes the average walker between five and eight days to walk the length of the track.

“While we are very enthusiastic about people enjoying the track, there are some serious safety issues at certain points along the way for those attempting it at speed,” Friends of the Cape to Cape Track Chairman, Kevin Lange said.



The track makes use of old 4WD vehicle tracks, constructed single trails, and natural beach sections that are mostly sand. There are easy sections, which make excellent short walks, but some beach sections are long, and hard going.

Mum of two and amateur trail runner, Michelle Hooper, decided to challenge herself to run the Cape to Cape Track in the fastest known female self-supported time.

Michelle needed to run under 26 hours to complete the feat, and she did just that completing the distance in 25 hours 49 minutes and 49 seconds.

She says the Cape to Cape Track had become a go-to place to clear her head and stretch her legs, taking in the

incredible geology of the coastline among the wildflowers and vegetation.

"I really loved the section through Boranup Forest," Michelle said. "Contos Cliffs are magical to run. I was 60 kilometres in and I found myself running along the cliffs at sunset, the waves crashing below as the sky became an array of fairy floss colours, creating memories I won't ever forget."

Walking enthusiast Mary McGeough has walked some of the world's great long-distance trails and is currently working her way through the Bibbulmun Track in sections. She completed the Cape to Cape Track with friends in 2019 and jokingly referring to their journey as 'slack packing' since they only carried a day pack and slept in local accommodation along the way.

"I think everyone who sets out to complete an end-to-end is doing it to test themselves and prove something," Mary said. "I walk for the enjoyment and the pleasure of it; appreciating the beauty of the world in its own right."

THE VERDICT

Whether you enjoy going fast and pushing your limits or enjoy taking your time and soaking in the scenery, Western Australia's long-distance trails provide a challenge for whatever you're looking for.

"Some people just like to go fast and have the physical ability to do just that," Declan von Dietze said. "I've had more phone calls, texts and emails from fast bike riders looking to enjoy the Munda Biddi Trail and asking for tips than I have from people wanting to break any record."

Ultimately, it's a matter of opinion about what and how one person enjoys and appreciates spending time in nature as long as you stay safe, understand the risks and leave only footprints...or tyre tracks.

Above Enjoying the Munda Biddi.
Photo – MTBGuidebook.com

Above left Mary McGeough and friends at Canal Rocks while completing the Cape to Cape Track.
Photo – Mary McGeough

Left Declan von Dietze meets locals on his record-setting ride.
Photo – DBCA

Below Bibbulmun Track near Mount Dale.
Photo – Michael Tuffin



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For more information about any of the trails mentioned please visit explore.parks.dbca.wa.gov.au and trails.wa.com.au