

Jim Freeman

the Bibbulmun bushman

In 1976, Jim Freeman drove past a large log on the side of Brookton Highway with the words 'Bibbulmun Track' carved into it. A few weeks later, he and his son Robert set off on the track for five days and he hasn't looked back since. Today, Jim is a well-known, loveable character who will forever be connected to WA's famed long-distance walking trail.

by Lauren Cabrera



Touched by nature



WELL TO LAKE MARRIBOU
THE WATER WAS HIGH, TIGHT
AFTER WOOLBALLE THE WATER LEVEL

Bush poets Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson painted a picture of an Australian bushman, tough and independent, resourceful and down to earth. These ideal qualities that underpin the national character are alive and well in Jim Freeman.

Born and raised in rural WA, Jim spent his childhood on farms and timber mills, and is most at home in the bush. He can turn his hand to anything and doesn't need or want for much, instead enjoying the simplicities of life.

In 1976, in the car with his son Robert, driving from Merredin to Perth, he noticed a big log on the side of Brookton Highway with the words 'Bibbulmun Track' carved in it. After some investigation and minimal planning, he bought a backpack and decided to walk the track with his son, over five days, from Brookton Highway to Whittakers Mill.

Forty-five years later, he has completed the track in its entirety 14 times, walked every alignment and was the first person to do a double end-to-end in 1996.

SECOND HOME

Jim moved to Dwellingup in 1956 and married his sweetheart Mavis, who was a school teacher in the local area, in 1960. Together they have completed four end-to-ends of the Bibbulmun Track and have four children — Robert, Ian aka 'Sam', Jenny and Paul — all born locally in WA's south-west

The Bibbulmun Track is indeed a second home for Jim and while he has been accompanied by one of his sons or Mavis, although he admits to enjoying solitude on his walks.

"I much prefer walking by myself," Jim said. "It's a lot quieter and I can stop where and when I like, much more peaceful. I like waking up and getting going."

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Previous page

Main Looking out over the Darling Scarp from Mount Helena campsite.

Photo – Liz Grant/DBCA

Inset right Jim walking the track in 1976.

Photo – The Freeman family

Inset left Jim at Dookanelly campsite.

Above Jim takes a break at Dookanelly campsite.

Photos – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Right Jim speaking at an end-to-enders picnic in 2006.

Photo – Bibbulmun Track Foundation



CHANGING TIMES

In the early days of Jim's walking career, it was easy to get lost on the track.

"The yellow markers were simple equilateral triangles with no waugal, which made picking direction an interesting choice, rather than a definite guide," Jim said.

"I had to backtrack and find my way around heavy flooding or impassable rivers so many times!"

On his first walk in 1976 he wore his work boots and a backpack with an external frame that he carried for 22 years until it physically fell apart.

Jim would get ready for a long trek by walking to work with up to 30 kilograms of lupins in his backpack to build up some walking strength.

"The equipment has changed so much since then. Backpacks and tents are now half the size and weight — but three times the price!" he said.

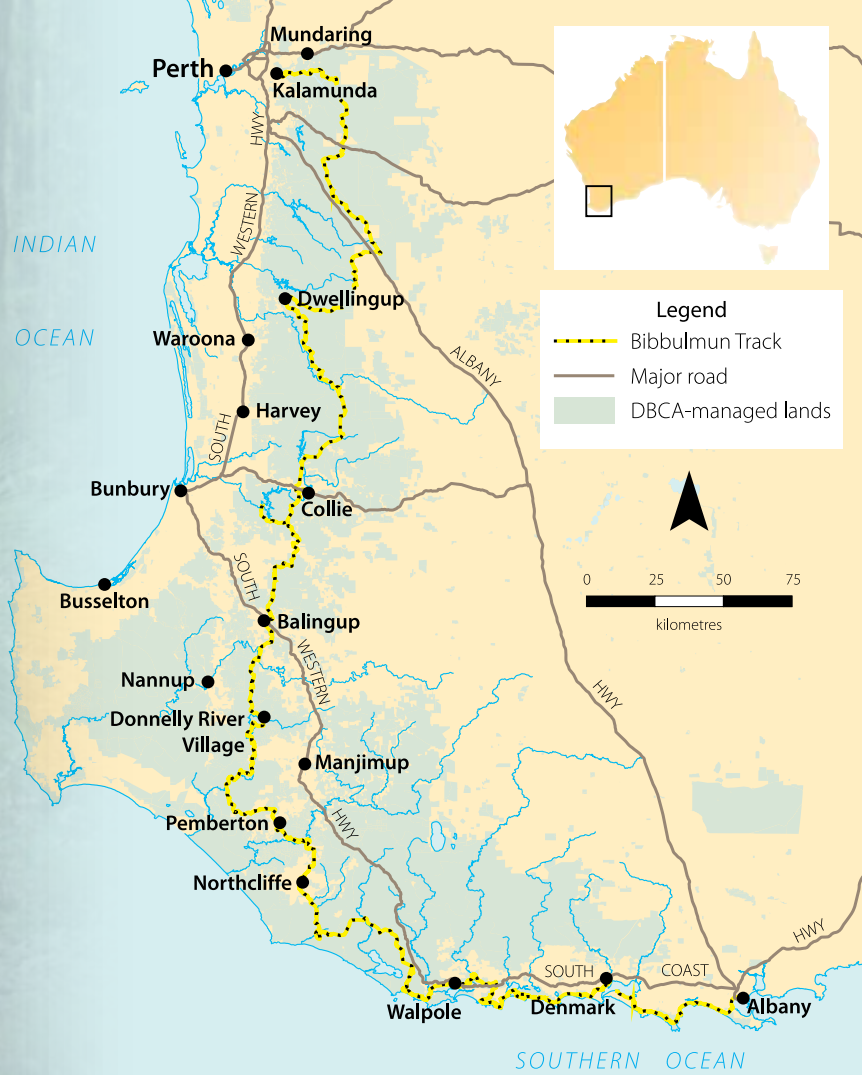
Executive Director of the Bibbulmun Track Foundation, Linda Daniels said there have been vast improvements since Jim's first walk.

"The original Bibbulmun Track followed forestry roads and tracks and had



Jim stats:

- 45 years on the track
- 14 end-to-ends
- 12 Team Challenge events at five days per event
- 16 days per year conducting trail maintenance since 1998
- 53 days — average time for an end-to-end including a handful of rest days
- 4 backpacks
- 6 pairs of boots



Above left Finding your way on the track is now easier thanks to directional markers

Left There are 49 shelters along the Bibbulmun Track.
Photos – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

no facilities. It has undergone a couple of major realignments onto purpose-built walking track taking in the most scenic locations. Additionally, the campsites offering shelter and water have made the experience far more accessible and appealing to people of all ages.

Improved signage, maps and technology such as smartphones and Personal Locator Beacons have greatly reduced risks without taking away from

the experience of being on a wilderness track,” Linda said.

Multiple access points mean people can walk the track for as long as they want — from a couple of hours to a couple of months. The Foundation website is packed full of itineraries and suggestions for new and experienced walkers alike. Many end-to-enders have completed their journey over a number of years walking short sections at a time.

Jim completed his first end-to-end in 1979 as part of the official opening of the track as well as Western Australia’s 150th year celebrations. Back then, the track was only about 550-kilometres long, starting in Kalamunda and finishing near Northcliffe. It was divided into 38 stages, 15 to 25 kilometres apart with a spot to pitch your tent and often a toilet and water at the end of each stage.

Today the track is 1000-kilometres-long with 49 campsites. It still starts in

Jim's top tips:

- Carry your fuel and water in different looking bottles
- Carry your water in an aluminium bottle so it doesn't break
- Keep your water bottle on the outside of your pack so you have to stop to take a drink
- Carry two extra meals
- Start practising walking a year before your end-to-end
- Get your backpack properly fitted (Jim has used the same backpack since getting it properly fitted in 1998)
- August is the best month to walk the track
- Don't pack too many clothes, you won't need them



Kalamunda but now finishes in Albany, sharing a southern terminus with the long-distance mountain biking trail, the Munda Biddi.

GIVING BACK

Jim was once asked what his favourite section of the track was.

"Aw, somewhere between Kalamunda and Albany," was his

Above Jim takes a rest on the track.

Photo – The Freeman family

Top right Crossing the suspension bridge at Long Gully.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Above right Jim and his wife Mavis.

Photo – The Freeman family

reply, with his usual cheeky, dry humour.

To give back to the track that he feels has given him so much, Jim has spent 16 days of every year (in between walking trips) since 1998 undertaking track maintenance activities in the Perth Hills and Donnelly districts. For 20 years, he focused on a section of the track that starts near Murray River and finishes at Dookanelly campsite.

Jim, like hundreds of other track maintenance volunteers, does everything from trimming back bushes and trees to clearing the path after storms.

One year, after a bushfire that had burnt tree stumps below ground level, Jim had to find the track without any markers and put up new ones.

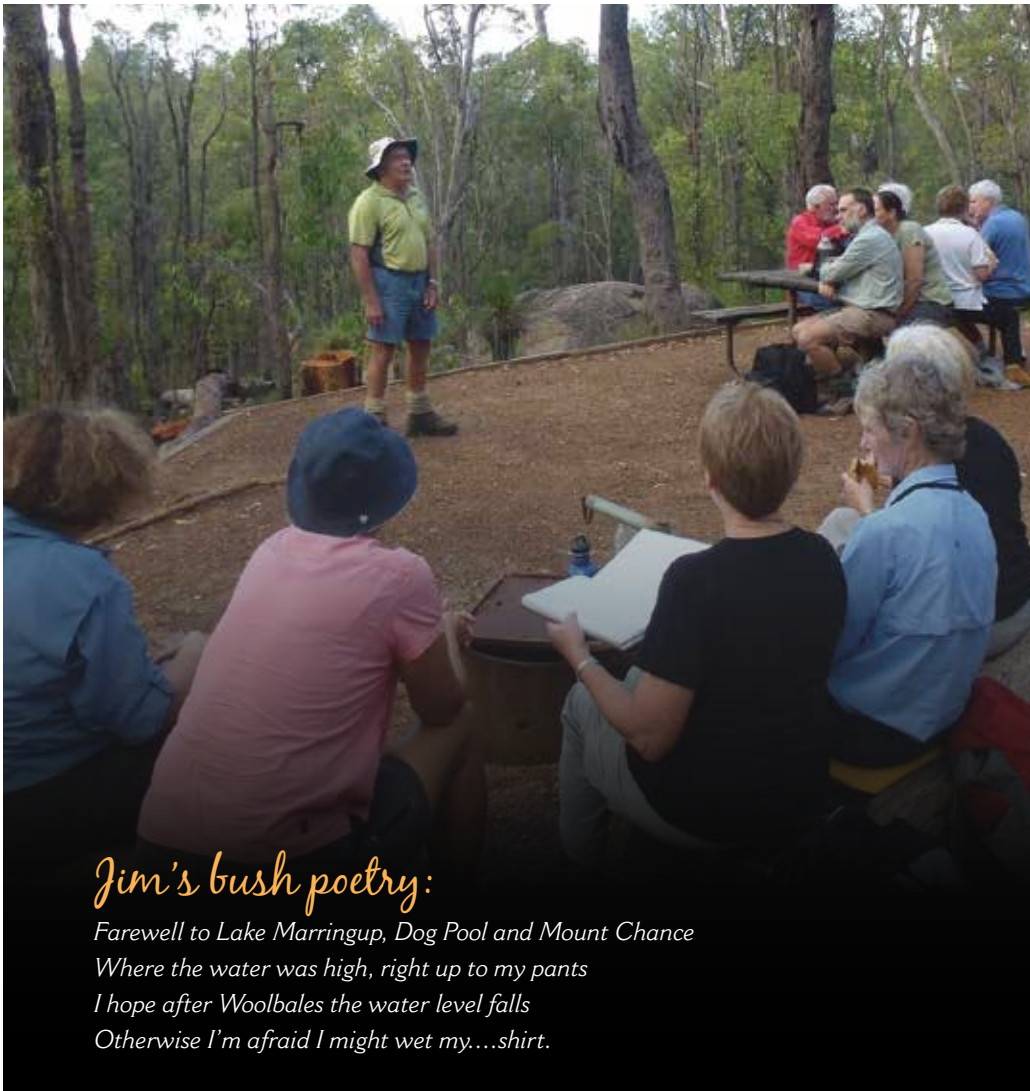
"Part of the problem is you know the track so well you could follow it without

markers, so you have to put yourself in the boots of someone walking it the first time, when placing signs," Jim said.

The Bibbulmun Track Foundation ran a Team Challenge event for 12 years, concluding in 2014, that brought teams of four 'city folk' onto the track over four days completing activities and challenges, some of the props for which were built by Jim.

Jim was the 'tail end Charlie' on the Team Challenge events, which brought out not only his skills as a guide, but his ability to entertain all with his humour, bush poetry, and stories.

"In the bush, everyone is equal," Jim said. "It's always interesting to see people you think would have trouble actually breeze through the challenging aspects of the track and the opposite is



Jim's bush poetry:

*Farewell to Lake Marringup, Dog Pool and Mount Chance
Where the water was high, right up to my pants
I hope after Woolbales the water level falls
Otherwise I'm afraid I might wet my....shirt.*

true as well. You can't pick a walker, they come in all shapes and sizes."

END OF THE ROAD

"The beauty of the track is that it tells the stories from the past, like when you come across old farm fences and burnt bridges," Jim said.

"You can see how it has changed and adjusted through the foot traffic and the impacts of extreme weather. The track has changed just like I have changed, and in a way, I feel like we've grown up together."

Jim has never been injured on the track, save for a few blisters, and he intends to keep it that way for the next two years until he officially retires from his duties.

"I reckon 25 years is a good number, so I'll keep maintaining my section of the track for another two years to round it off."



Top Jim reciting bush poetry.

Above Clearing the track of dangerous branches.

Above right Volunteers do a Christmas clean up.
Photos – Bibbulmun Track Foundation

Right The Bibbulmun Track near Mount Helena.
Photo – Liz Grant/DBCA

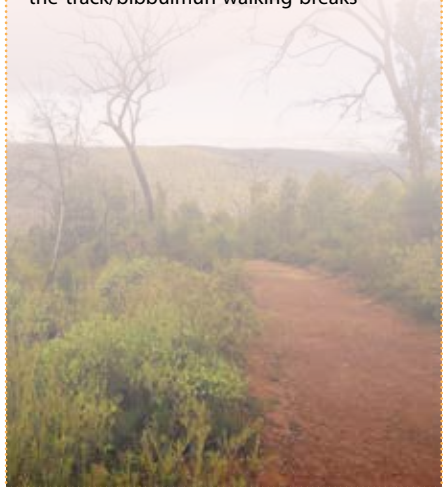
Do it yourself



Where is it? The Bibbulmun Track starts at the Northern Terminus in Kalamunda, 24 kilometres east of the centre of Perth, and finishes at the Southern Terminus in Albany near the new visitor centre on York Street.

Itineraries: Bibbulmun Walking Break itineraries range from two to six days and include suggestions for day-walks as well as interesting sites and attractions to visit, in and around Track Towns.

More info: bibbulmuntrack.org.au/walk-the-track/bibbulmun-walking-breaks



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