

EXPLORING THE KIMBERLEY COAST

In March 1995, Kevin Coate spoke to the Kimberley Society about one of his expeditions, tracing the route out on a display map before he showed his slides. The expedition included visits to Broome, Lacepede Islands, Doubtful Bay, Koolan and Cockatoo Islands, Walcott Inlet, Isdell River, Montgomery Island, Llangi (an Aboriginal site), Slate Island, Kuri Bay, Augustus Island, Camden Harbour, Prince Regent River, Careening Bay, Prince Frederick Harbour, Anjo Peninsula, King George River and Cambridge Gulf.

The party sailed from Broome at the south west base of the Dampier Peninsula, an area of red pindan soil and vegetation, past the James Price Point cliffs and on to Cape Leveque. Here there is a lighthouse built in 1911, but now automated and no longer manned. The tidal range in the Kimberley is vast, up to 10 to 11 metres twice daily. This means that sea travel and landings are dictated by tidal knowledge. The basic rock is sandstone which makes for very photogenic photography.

The first landing was on the Lacepede Islands—four low lying sandy cays that were used by pearlers and for the mining of guano. They offer excellent sea bird breeding sites and many birds were observed and counted here and on the next island visited, Adele Island, 100 km north of Cape Leveque. In 1990, Kevin discovered red-footed boobies and great frigate birds breeding here, previously unrecorded.

Nairs Point on the mainland opposite Cockatoo Island was remarkable for the folded sandstone and the high tide mark.. Nearby was Koolan Island, also in Yampi Sound, which has ceased iron ore mining (allowing the vegetation to return) and boasts the most scenic rubbish dump in the world. Kevin counted 38 white breasted sea eagles feeding there. The party called into Crocodile Creek on the mainland, where a recreation camp was established for the workers.

Next they entered Walcott Inlet through the narrow Yule Entrance where the tide races out at 11 knots or more causing immense whirlpools and requiring a powerful boat to get through. Three large rivers empty into this vast inlet, the Charnley, Calder and Isdell. Small boats were used to explore up the Isdell where there were flat grasslands and swamps rich in birds—bustards, brolgas, spoonbills and a pied heron, to mention but a few. Many crocodiles were seen (some freshwater Johnsons and a few "salties" or estuarine *Crocodylus porosus* sunning themselves on the banks), so special precautions were necessary in the small boats.

At the entrance to Doubtful Bay is Steep Island with spectacularly high cliffs of King Leopold Sandstone. Here they met the topsail schooner *Willie* and landed on the mainland with Aboriginal guides Donald Llangi and Neville Molluman to inspect the aboriginal cave paintings of Wandjinas and rock cod, a rare sight indeed. It necessitated a rugged climb to the top but they were rewarded with a superb view to the Glenelg River.

The Sale River was easily accessible by the large boat but they embarked in the dinghies to get further up river. The naturalists had sailed up here to camp in the 1980s on white sand amid high cliffs and waterfalls higher upstream. There were plenty of fish, sooty grunters, and

good swimming and *Stylidium muscicola* in damp spots. They also found remnant rainforests up the creeks, with ferns and limpid pools. The colourful rainbow pitta was seen, extending the identified range. An almost tame water monitor, *Varanus mertensii*, seemed to eat anything offered it. The Woollybutt was in flower and sported a green tree frog, much admired and photographed. A new grevillea was discovered here in 1985 and called after the botanist, Donald McGillivray.

From Raft Point, Kevin's expedition party sailed across to Montgomery Reef where the tide traps water on top and creates many tumbling water falls. Here, there was much marine life to investigate, especially corals, giant clams, sea cucumbers and marine molluscs.

Donald was pleased to get back to his birth place at Llangi, an aboriginal spiritual area with Wandjina figures and several burial sites. The Warriors was a strange rock formation causing much comment. Large black lipped oysters were abundant and much sought after. Camping ashore was encouraged to get the people off the cramped quarters on the boat for a change and to observe any interesting plants and animals. Flat backed turtles are known to breed here but, not being the season for egg laying, none were seen. The Aboriginals use long poles to prod the sand looking for eggs, a great delicacy.

They sailed past Kuri Bay, the first cultured pearl operation established after the war, then past Augustus Island into Camden Sound to land at the ruins of the settlement of 1864. This was the first white settlement in the Kimberley. It was a disaster and lasted less than a year, with six colonists ending their lives buried on Sheep Island, their cemetery. One colonist, John Meade, was buried elsewhere and Kevin was anxious to locate his grave. Donald thought he knew where it was and, given that he'd last seen it as a small boy in the 1940s, they were overjoyed to find he could lead them to it. Many relics remain of the original settlement, and these were inspected at length. The party was able to show that Mt Lookover was in the wrong position on the maps, so that was useful information for DOLA.

Green ants were encountered on all trips to the mainland and Donald was happy to show how to make them into a refreshing drink by grabbing a handful, squeezing them into a container, and adding water. Passed around for everyone to sample, it was quite astringent and tasty, strangely enough.

Loisette Marsh, a marine biologist, was collecting corals throughout the trip and she found an unusual mushroom coral *Fungia* sp. They saw Humpbacked whales travelling up the coast on their annual migration. They called into King George Basin, sailing around St. Patrick Island and admiring Mt Waterloo in the distance. On reaching the Prince Regent River, they sailed up till they reached the entrance to Camp Creek where, five km upstream, a wonderful campsite is fringed with tall *Melaleuca leucadendra* at the confluence of the fresh and salt water. The limpid pools on the creek were covered in large blue waterlilies, *Nymphaea violacea*. It was a tranquil spot with waterfalls further up above a deep plunge pool. Small turtles were present in these pools, both long and short necked.

The next stop was made 15 km higher up the river at King Cascade, a famous waterfall named after Phillip Parker King who landed there in 1820 to refill his water containers, called

barecas. The pool below the cascade empties at low tide and is home to a large saltwater crocodile. They sailed on to Amphitheatre Falls where there were paintings of fish in the caves and delectable barramundi in the water. The birding was good and they saw a blood finch, white quilled rock pigeons, yellow-faced partridge pigeons and Torres Strait pigeons. A Northern Native cat, or quoll, was caught in an Elliott trap set by the naturalists.

At Careening Bay where King careened his cutter HMS *Mermaid* in 1820, they found the ancient plants or Cycads, *Cycas basaltica*. Here, they were thrilled to find and photograph the 170 year old markings on the Mermaid tree, an ancient huge boab inscribed by the ship's carpenter to commemorate their stay. Was this the first graffiti in WA?

Next stop was where the Hunter and Roe Rivers empty into Prince Frederick Harbour. King was certainly a Royalist! Naturalist Island nestles in this huge harbour, named by the WA Naturalist's Club who camped there in 1985. The botanists were pleased to find a patch of rainforest above the beach and investigated it thoroughly, collecting the while. They found *Ficus racemosa*, a stem-fruiting fig, *Brachychiton viscidulus* and *Clerodendrum* with black and red fruits. Porosus Creek, named for the salt water crocodile, is a tributary of the Hunter and was investigated also. Up the Hunter they found a freshwater spring mentioned by Alan Cunningham in his diary and used to fill the explorers' barecas when they were desperately short of water. Lindsay Peet informed us (from the audience) that the Japanese landed in the Roe and Moran Rivers during WWII and camped for three days.

Many islands were visited including Laplace, Dice, Augustus, and Lacrosse in Cambridge Gulf but before this they called in to Bigge Island to view the many unusual cave paintings there. They show a European influence in that the men are smoking pipes and carrying water containers. Anjo Peninsula and the Truscott Air base were a must, to see the ruins and remains of the occupation of the 1944–46 Air Force war base. At Vansittart Bay, the fishermen pulled in Mangrove Jack and Spotted Cod for a sumptuous meal.

King George River, where there are miles of the deepest gorges in WA, was another must. Where they anchored, there was 150 metres of water under the boat and 100 metres of sandstone cliffs above. Tall falls where the river plunged from the high plateau added to the already spectacular scenery. More botanising here as people explored this fascinating area.

At Wyndham, at the base of the huge Cambridge Gulf, the memorable sea trip ended after they travelled down to the Gut where King had also explored. Kevin illustrated his interesting talk with superb slides of unforgettable scenery. Many thanks for sharing your travels with us. We look forward to more of the same later.....

Daphne Choules Edinger