

DAWDLING DOWN THE DRYSDALE

At the meeting of 5 August 1998, apologies were received from Peter Knight, the scheduled speaker, who was interstate and had arranged for Dr Mike Donaldson to take his place and speak on the topic of bushwalking in the Kimberley. Mike, a foundation member and treasurer of the Society, is a mineral exploration geologist who is very interested in rock art and plants. He has recently, in collaboration with Ian Elliot, enjoyed seeing a long labour of love result in the publication by Hesperian Press of *Do Not Yield to Despair: Frank Hugh Hann's Exploration Diaries in the Arid Interior of Australia, 1895- 1908*.

Mike's topic was a walk, from which he had returned two weeks earlier, down the Drysdale River. Four of the participants were geologists and one a lawyer, and, though they aimed to average six kilometres per day, they actually managed ten and travelled a total of 120. The party flew to Kununurra, then took a light plane to Theda Station. From there Mark Timms, the owner, drove them to the edge of the Carson Escarpment where hardly anyone ever goes. Mike had already done one walk in this region and was so fascinated he wanted to get back. The others were mainly interested in birds and rocks.

There are no roads or tracks through the Drysdale River National Park where the walk took place. A GPS was needed to navigate so that they didn't get lost. They carried a satellite phone weighing only 2.2kg whereas a radio would weigh 5.5kg. They phoned in every couple of days to report their position. Their furthest point from habitation, six days walk from Theda, was Cracticus Falls, named after the Silver-backed Butcherbird and located in Petrogale Gorge of Johnson Creek. All the animal and plant names that now appear on maps covering the national park were bestowed in 1975, when CALM and the WA Museum did a survey of the Park, and subsequently approved by the Department of Land Administration. Our president, in his role as a botanist, was involved in the '75 survey.

Mike explained that balanced food is important when backpacking with each person needing 1kg per day dry weight, made up of 80% carbohydrate and 20% protein. The carbohydrate was mainly rice, pasta and Deb potato. Each person had two evening meals to carry—and had to cook them—and each provided his own food for breakfast and lunch. Because they stayed close to the river and its tributaries they did not need to carry water.

To illustrate his talk Mike had a selection of beautiful slides of the river, the scenery, some plants, but mainly the rock art, the fascinating Bradshaw figures (known as Goyon or Djennaggi paintings by some Aboriginal people). He found, to his disappointment, that he had to walk a considerable way before seeing any of the paintings as most of the gorges were of shale or finely banded sandstone, which are not suited to painting. The art is largely restricted to the Warton Sandstones. The party did, however, come across an Aboriginal burial site where the bones, painted in ochre, had been disturbed by animals.

In the Carson Escarpment they walked through Glider Gorge in dense vine thickets or closed forest. The gorge is named after the Sugar Glider found in the park. They came across huge sand banks left from the record flooding wet of last year, and flood debris was high above their heads as they went along the mighty Drysdale River, abounding in fish and cherabim. Sooty Grunters they caught to augment their protein diet, but the cherabim proved too elusive for Roger Passmore's net.

They struggled up Petrogale Gorge (Petrogale is a short-eared rock wallaby) to reach Solea Falls. Solea is Latin for horseshoe which is the shape of the falls. Here there were *Livistona loriphylla* palms, a great contrast to the grasslands. They dunked in pools above Solea Falls, home to the freshwater crocodile, *C. johnstoni*, and were always on the lookout for the larger and dangerous estuarine croc, *C. porosus* in the larger bodies of water. Here they found many Bradshaw figures. At Forest Creek they found a riverine forest and also a forest of young Dunn's Acacia, *A. dunnii*, the Elephant Ear Wattle.

Basalt in this area is 1,800 million years old. There are also fossilised stromatolites, of colonial blue-green algae, very ancient. Because the Bradshaws were painted in apparently inaccessible places, it appears that the country was different when they were executed. These figures, which some people liken to stick figures, are fine and elegant always, and have been dated to 17,000 years old using overlying wasps nests for carbon dating. They were done using a very fine brush showing musculature, delicate tassels and African-looking hairdos, some holding boomerangs or spears with barbs. There were also the so-called 'clothes-peg' figures and sometimes Wandjina figures superimposed over the Bradshaws, and many hand stencils and irregular infill animals, even a thylacine with the typical stripes and a knob on the end of the tail.

They eventually left the park and came out through Carson River Station by Bulldust Yard, picked up again by Mark Timms. This station is presently unattended, but they did muster last year. And so ended this arduous and adventurous walk, with all fit and well. Question time followed and, in addition to thanking Mike for his very interesting talk, the president mentioned that the Weekend Magazine in *The Weekend Australian* of 18 July 1998 had mentioned Grahame Walsh's rock art activities in an article headed 'Boats in the Outback'.

Daphne Choules Edinger

Further reading

Kabay, E D and Burbidge, A A (eds). *A biological survey of the Drysdale River National Park, north Kimberley, Western Australia, in August 1975*. Wildlife Reserves Bulletin Western Australia, no. 6, Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Perth, 1977.