

Mitchell Plateau No. 3: August 16–29, 2009

Update: 18 May 2009

Bounded by the spectacular gorges and valleys of the Mitchell and Lawley Rivers, the Mitchell Plateau (Ngauwudu in the local Aboriginal language) is one of the most species-rich areas in WA. The vegetation is dominated by a rare mixture of fan palms (*Livistona eastonii*) and eucalypts and contains some of the largest pockets of monsoonal vine forest in the Kimberley. The region is home to more mammal species than have been collected from any other similar-sized area in W.A. One of these, the monjon (a rock wallaby formerly called the warrabi) was not photographed until 1985. (We have seen a number of monjons on our trips.) Over 220 species of birds have been recorded in the area. If you'd like an example of the birds you might see, please go to our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, click on Photo Galleries on the left menu, then scroll down and click on *Birdwatching and Bushwalking*. This page has general information and a link to a list of the birds that we saw on one of our Mitchell Plateau trips.

The Mitchell Plateau has one of the two highest concentrations of Aboriginal rock paintings we have found in the Kimberley. (The other is the Drysdale River.) We visit examples of all styles including Bradshaw (Gwion) and Wandjina. There is so much art that almost every trip finds at least one site we haven't visited before. Some sites are recent, almost certainly 20th century. Some are ancient, almost certainly predating the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

Each time we visit the area, we find something new and interesting. We have a choice of doing a single long walk or a two day walk followed by a longer one. If we choose the latter, those taking part can acclimatise without having to carry all their supplies. Spare food and equipment can be left with the vehicles during each walk.

One possibility is a one or two day walk to Surveyor's Pool, an isolated pool surrounded by six metre white cliffs. A second possibility is a short walk to a potentially interesting waterfall the map shows only a few kilometres from the road. A third is driving down to the coast for a two day exploration of Crystal Creek where we can find a shady gorge, good pools and a small waterfall which does not appear on the map. We have found flowing water even toward the end of an exceptionally dry season. One of our groups decided to explore further and did a day walk out to Crystal Head. That walk was long and rugged but rewarded with excellent views out over the islands to the north. The guide will decide which to do based on the interests and abilities of the group, available water supplies and the condition of the 4WD tracks.

The main (perhaps only) walk begins with a relatively short walk from Mitchell Falls car park us to Little Merten Falls where we find a number of Aboriginal art sites. Moving on, we soon come to Big Merten Falls and Merten Gorge and then Mitchell Falls. Just how much water we will see will depend on the previous wet season. In some years Mitchell Falls is still flowing well, in others it has dropped off to a trickle. Whatever the flow, there are numerous pools, perfect for swimming.

After exploring the area around the top of the falls, we climb down into Mitchell Gorge where we find numerous Aboriginal art sites and many inviting pools. (Traditional Aboriginal belief does not permit swimming in the pool immediately below Mitchell Falls so we will restrict our swimming to the many other pools along our route.)

There is so much to see that the seven kilometre walk down river to the lower falls (less known but just as spectacular as the main falls) normally takes us at least two days. From there we plan to do a day walk through the lower gorge to the tidal rapids formed where a rock bar blocks the river. At very low tides you could walk across with dry feet. When the tide changes, the water swirls back up the river with a rush and the bar disappears.

From the lower falls, we move west to a deep, narrow gorge which we follow to its head. The environment here is very different to that along the Mitchell, so we take our time so that we can appreciate all that it has to offer. From the top of the gorge, we walk back to the Mitchell River upstream of the falls. If time permits, we spend a day there, exploring the rock formations, looking at the Aboriginal art sites and enjoying the pools.

The trip concludes with a one and a half day drive from the Mitchell Plateau back to Kununurra.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall	Level 3
Climate	Level 3. Average daytime max 33-34°C, average nighttime min 15-17°C. It has been known to drop below 10°C. Generally low humidity. Rain unlikely but possible.
Terrain	Level 3. Although most of the walking is relatively easy, the trip does include substantial amounts of rock hopping.. Some short sections will be quite rugged. People without bushwalking experience are likely to find it more difficult than those who have had such experience.
Vegetation	Level 2-3. Can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt. It is likely that you will spend some time pushing through some fairly thick scrub or grass. At this time of year, the spear grass has finished seeding and dried out. It may be necessary to push through thick spinifex in some places.
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. The first full day's walk is very long and may take 8 hours not counting breaks. On some days, you need carry your pack for only a couple of hours after which you can rest or explore without packs.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry up to ten days food. You need a sleeping bag but can probably get away without a tent.
Art	This is one of the richest areas for Aboriginal art in the Kimberley. We visit many sites in a number of different styles.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at any of the campsites.
Swims	Good pools at every campsite. Many opportunities for swimming each day. Crocodiles and swimming. We have never seen a large crocodile anywhere in the area where we will be walking. However, we once met someone who told us that he had seen a large crocodile below Mitchell Falls. There are large crocodiles in the lower reaches of the Mitchell. There is no barrier to their travel below major waterfalls. We recommend that you ask your guide about safety before jumping into any large pool.
Lowlights	Helicopter noise from flights over the lower Mitchell Gorge. Possibly poor shade at one or more lunch spots.
Highlights	Beautiful gorge scenery. Good weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites.
Wildlife	You see a variety of birds along the river and have a good chance of spotting freshwater crocodiles. You may see large crocs below the tidal rapids.
Fishing	Excellent along much of the Mitchell, possibly OK along some of the smaller creeks.
Maps	1:100000 Warrender or 1:50 000 Donkins Hill (most of the trip), Mitchell River (smaller part) and possibly Warrender,.

Notes

Photo Gallery. The photos in the three Mitchell Plateau photo galleries on our website were all taken later in the year but they will give you a good idea of the kind of terrain through which you will travel as well as some of the things you will see along the way.

The trip which would have connected with this one will not run this year. This means that you have the choice of paying a surcharge for the flight (estimated cost is \$300) or driving in both direction (a day and a half each way). If everyone is agreeable, we can extend the trip by a day to allow for the drive at no extra charge.

Bringing fresh fruit, vegetables or honey into WA is illegal whether you come by road or plane. You cannot even bring in containers that once contained fruit or vegetables. Bags are checked both on the highway and at the airport. Supermarkets are open late (Coles is 24 hours) so you will have time to shop in Kununurra.

A day pack is likely to be useful.

You have to carry only what you need for each individual walk. Additional food and clothing can be left in the vehicle during the walks.

You should keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the journey.

Itinerary: Mitchell Plateau No. 3

Note 1 **Day 0 is the day before departure.**

Note 2 **This itinerary is subject to change**

Day 0 Travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between Kununurra and Perth and Darwin. Connections to the eastern states are normally made through Darwin. Pre-trip meeting for everyone doing the first section, 6 p.m., outdoor area, Kimberley Croc Backpackers. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 Very early morning pick up from your accommodation in Kununurra provided you have given us the address at least a week before departure or have made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. If you are unable to notify us where you are staying, the pick up is from in front of the Kununurra Visitors Centre possibly as early as 4.30 a.m.
Fly to Mitchell Plateau. Drive to walk. Start walk. Bush camp.

Day 2–12 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.

Day 13 Finish walk. Begin drive back to Kununurra. Bush camp near vehicle

Day 14 Return to Kununurra late afternoon. Drop off at your accommodation. Trip ends.

Important Note **Air North**, the main airline operating into Kununurra uses relatively small aircraft and has a baggage allowance of only 13 kg on some flights. Unless special arrangements have been made, if you are flying to Kununurra and your baggage weighs more than 13 kg, it may not get on the plane with you. (This would be very unusual but it is possible.)
Contact Air North for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000;
Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au
Skywest began flying between Kununurra and Broome or Darwin in April 2009. Call 1300 660088 for flight dates and times or see www.skywest.com.au