

Larapinta: Salty Water

**WE JUST CAN'T
ESCAPE IT!**



**THE WORLD'S
LONGEST DAY TRIP?**
KATA TJUTA & ULURU



LARAPINTA
A TRAIL IN (LESS
THAN) 12 SECTIONS



BACK IN ALICE
EXPLORING EAST

LURKING AROUND LARAPINTA



A Trip to The Red Centre

**A Report:
In (mostly) Pictures!**



Mount Sonder

Lurking Around Larapinta

Larapinta, in the local Arrente language (with a slightly different local spelling), means 'Salty Water.' It seems that even if we get off boat and head to arid Central Australia we can't escape it!

Like our recent trips, this one didn't quite go to plan. From my point of view, it was 'almost' complete. Andrew however had a very different experience. The main aim of this trip was to walk the Larapinta Trail; a hard, rocky, and to a large extent, remote, trail to the west of Alice Springs in Central Australia. I had booked an 'end-to-end' trip with a guiding company. Whilst I am not averse to organising remote walks on our own (portions of the Tassie Trail, The Mackay Highlands Great Walk, and the TA, had we got any further, are considered remote) given my 'allergy' to hot weather, I figured support in an arid environment was prudent. Fortunately the weather was not as hot as we originally expected, (a couple of weeks before our trip daytime temperatures had been in the mid 30's; our daytime maximums were around low 20s) making walking days reasonably comfortable; from a temperature point of view anyway. Terrain was, sometimes, a very different matter.

We had booked a couple of days in Alice at either end of the trip to, firstly, acclimatise, and secondly, wind down. The main activities that we chose during these few days were enjoyable; the world's longest day trip, and a private chat to some local night sky enthusiasts. Both excursions were expensive but nice activities to bookend a hike.

Because most of the Larapinta Trail was so rough and it was dangerous looking up (and particularly taking photographs) whilst walking for a significant portion of the track, (thoughts along the trail essentially equated to 'where do I next put my foot!') this document has more photographs than text because I took a lot of photographs in the short time I was thinking anything other than 'where do I put my foot.' I have tried to use photographs that don't have other people in them (apart from Andrew and myself). This has meant I have not been able to share some fabulous views. Where there are people in the photos, I have fuzzed out the faces of people if they are too close, and in one case fuzzed out an entire individual (sorry N). There are also quite a few photos of plants and flowers. Initially I was going to take a photo of an identification card one of the



guides had in their pack, but was told this was available for purchase at the bookshop in town. I was also told there was a publication that might be even more interesting than identification cards. When I went into the bookshop I found the publication was out of print; at this point I had forgotten all about the identification cards, so the plant photos in this document are unlabelled. The photos in this document also come from three cameras so whilst they will be adjacent the correct date when they were taken, they may not necessarily be in order. They have not been computer edited (apart from the basic alignment, fuzzing, cropping etc) so the colours will be different. As usual most photos are saved as 'small' and may be fuzzy. The term 'craven' in the bird lists just means the individual/s spotted was/were either a crow or a raven - I have given up trying to identify them!

Preparing to leave

Coomera River, Gold Coast to Brisbane Airport

26th April 2023. Late last night, before we went to bed, the wind decided to pick up, again. Significantly. Predictions indicated the wind was supposed to be dropping but we saw several gusts of over 29 knots on the gauges... counterpoints to a steady median of mid twenties that had predominated yesterday. At 0300 both Andrew and I were awoken from our slumber by the rocking of the boat. I looked out the window. I didn't see what I expected to see. We jumped out of bed and put the gauges on! Whilst the wind was only blowing mid twenties, it sounded much louder. The tide however was opposing it, and that is what caused the commotion. We were within our swinging circle so nothing to be worried about there, however because of the combination of 'wind over tide' we were facing north east, beam on to the waves, and 180 degrees from where we expected to be!

Satisfied we were not dragging we both went back to bed and tried to get back to sleep. I had had a disturbed sleep overnight quite apart from the 0300 wake up. For the past two days I have been out of sorts, have eaten more than I normally would, and reverted to eating probably what I shouldn't. This resulted last night in a grumpy back, an alert heart (when I should have been winding down to sleep), and a few odd dreams overnight, ensuring that upon waking I was quite stiff in places. And quite lethargic!

I finally got up around 0630. The sun was coming over the horizon of South Stradbroke Island and reflecting beautifully on the houses of the corner of the Sovereign Islands. With a subdued Southport in the background due to rain it would have made a great photo. However, I was more interested in checking the gauges. The wind sounded 'up' again. Checking the forecasts Windy.com confirmed the wind speed was supposed to be easing. The gauges were reading low to high 20s. I saw gusts near and over 28 knots! This is not the weather we want to lift the boat out of the water! Despite a few patches of blue sky we got a short bout of rain at 0655. The wind seemed to have dropped by 0700... and we hoped it was not just temporary.

It was blowing low 20s when we started to pick the anchor up at 1240, the task taking around ten minutes. This was longer than expected; nowadays it takes around 5 minutes to pick up the anchor but it used to take me up to 30! Wind and tide did of course influence the time today and I was

still cleaning the mud and shell off the anchor at 1255 as we motored up the Coomera River. We made The Boat Works at 1357 for a 1400 lift, tying up to the feeder dock just as a mono left it to be hauled up on the 70 tonne lift. The wind had dropped. Significantly. It was now, fortunately, blowing all of 1.9 knots!

Whilst Andrew was supervising the lift, my job was to grab a car, do a quick shop at the Hope Island Woolies, pick up valves that had been sent to a friend, and get the car back by 1530! I was back at 1515. Because the old storage area is being redeveloped, and we were only requiring storage for three weeks, we were placed in the yard ready for our annual maintenance when we come back. We were ready to walk out the door at 1600 and chatted to the boat next door to fill in time before being picked up at 1700. Just after 1800 we were having dinner in the restaurant at the Ibis Airport Hotel. My luck hasn't changed at this establishment...the 'Green Salad' wasn't green, and despite the dish being labelled 'gf', it came without any stated bread!

Getting our land legs.

I haven't really noticed a big difference between land and sea for the past couple of years, even with our two big stints on land, but today it was noticeable. The winds

for the past couple of weeks have been a bit grumpy. The sea state in our protected anchorage for most of that time at Tiger Mullet Channel not too bad, but there were white caps and waves of noticeable height on occasion, as well as the obvious bow wave as other vessels went past. Getting off today went like a dream and as my first job was to grab the booked car and go pick up a parcel I wasn't really concentrating on anything else. It was only when I got back to the boat, now ensconced in the work yard, that I started to notice my balance. The feeling was a little odd at first and I moulded my mind to the fact Sengo had probably been put down at an angle to let water run off the back. And then Andrew asked me. 'Is the boat rocking, or is it me?' So, clearly, I wasn't imagining things....we were both feeling it!

The point was driven home when I did a short yoga session at the hotel before going to bed this evening. I had better balance standing on one leg a couple of days ago on a rocking boat than I did tonight in a concrete building on land! I hope it doesn't take us too long to get our land legs! We are going to need good balance on trail over the next couple of weeks.

We watched 'Alone Australia' and 'Rogue Heroes' on SBS On Demand before going to bed. In terms of the former, we will have to wait to see how the Adventurer we met in the Kimberley in 2017 goes...we will be out of internet reception range for the next couple of weeks.

The Red Centre

Brisbane to Alice Springs: mixing up Red and Green

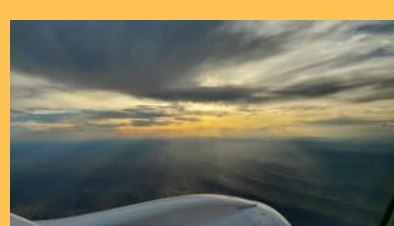
27th April 2023. I had woken a couple of times during the night, probably more due to poor food choices yesterday than the really soft pillow provided, and finally got up at around 0530. It was still dark outside but in order not to disturb Andrew I had an early shower...warm to hot water I could enjoy for more than a few seconds. I don't waste water but on boat our showers are a very quick and water-efficient affair. At 0600 outside it was light, but overcast.

We didn't have breakfast at the hotel, we weren't hungry, and checked-out around 0710. By 0730 we had dropped our bags in to the airline and had made the smooth transition through security (not everything has to be taken out of carry-on bags these days). I pondered a purchase in the 'book shop' and Andrew read his tablet. We had had some breakfast by the time we boarded the flight, the plane taking off around twenty minutes later than expected. We landed at Adelaide fifteen minutes after the original scheduled time.

Adelaide airport is quiet: the airport on approach from the water looked like it had only one runway - it has a couple but only one wide one. After a cuppa and nibbles we settled down to wait.

Ironically, the plane we got on to in Adelaide to head to Alice Springs had come from the Gold Coast! Perhaps we should have investigated our options further when we booked our flights, but Brisbane Airport and Gold Coast Airport (Cooloongatta, NSW) are about the same distance away from Coomera. We have been used to flying out of Brisbane so it is automatic to look for flights from there. Had we flown from Cooloongatta we would have saved the cost of dinner, and an overnight stay in a hotel!

The flight to Alice' left five minutes later than scheduled. We still had the emergency exit row, as we had had on the earlier flight, but we were seated on the other side of the plane. I remember Andrew specifically asking me which side we wanted to sit at when we booked the tickets. I also remember applying a bit of science to the answer and choosing the side based on where the sun was going to be, or rather was not going to be. I think however I must have got my port and starboard mixed up; I cant imagine why I would want the sun streaming at me through the window - I had to pull the shutter up for comfort on this trip.



On approach to Alice Springs the most obvious thing I noticed was how green the country was. A couple of weeks ago an ex-cyclone had dropped a fair bit of unexpected rain on the area and I guess this has helped invigorate the usually dry and arid land. I was looking forward to, hopefully, new growth on our impending walking track.

Alice Springs Airport isn't big, and the city only has a few taxis. We were in queue at the taxi rank and wondered whether we should ring to book or just wait for the next vehicle to arrive. There were a couple of 'groups' in front of us but the next taxi to arrive was a bus. It was big enough for seven of us to pile in. The two who got out at the Casino happened to be the hosts of a pre Alice Springs Cup event (they were late) and they paid for the trip up to that point. Two passengers got out at the DoubleTree Hotel and then three of us got out at Desert Palms next door. We paid \$10 for the extra trip to cover the extra five of us. Given the cost of the first taxi fare, we thought that was a fair price. The lad who got out at our accommodation was a jockey who had come up specifically to ride in the big race. The main event was on Sunday - we were going to miss it - that's when we would be starting our walk.

We had dinner at the restaurant at the Golf Club behind our accommodation, watched a bit of YouTube, fought with the TV reception, and put the alarm on for 0500.



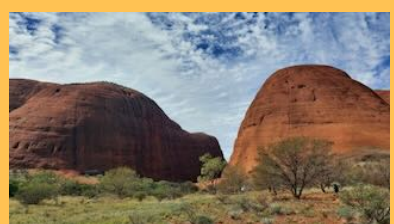
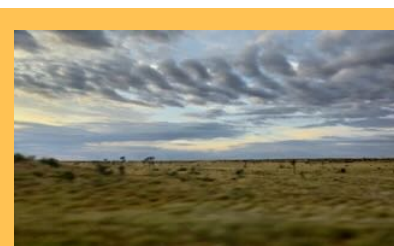
The Worlds Longest Day Tour! Apparently.

28th April 2023. Kata Tjuta and Uluru. The first confirmation we had received for today's tour indicated a 0628 pickup. The second confirmation indicated a 0620 pick up. Too many more of these, I thought, and we wouldn't need to go to sleep! The alarm was on for 0500. Andrew managed a shower after he dragged himself out of bed...I didn't bother, I figured I would have one when we got back.

We got to the hotel reception just after 0600 and sat outside the door to wait for the bus. The bus wouldn't be able to turn in, so at 0615 we wandered a few meters to the road, along with another Queenslander doing the same tour. We were 'sort of' the last pick-up.....whilst there were no other 'hotel pick-ups' we weren't leaving here until a transfer bus had arrived behind us to give us more occupants. These three 'lads' technically weren't on the tour; they were in transit to Yulara.

The sky was just getting light when the bus pulled away from the curb around 0630. The sun fought to be seen as it rose from behind the clouds (I had earlier noticed rain on the bom.gov.au rain radar to the south of Alice Springs) but as any photos I take from a moving vehicle now generally consist of pressing my phone to the window so I don't get any reflections, it was really in the wrong direction to record adequately. It was however light enough to clearly see the landscape not long after 0700, and at 0715, and probably travelling at around 100km per hour, I got the first bird spot of the day...a black shouldered kite (I assume black shouldered and not letterwing) sitting proud as punch on a dead vertical limb of a spindly tree only a few meters from the highway's edge. Had we been driving ourselves and able to stop it would have made a great close-up photograph (providing of course the individual didn't move: wildlife seems to have an allergy to me when I pull out the camera, and tends to fly off or move away before I get it in focus).

Our first stop was at Erldunda Roadhouse for a stretch, toilet break and nibble if you wanted it. It was also where the company picked up the lunches; the gf option was woefully inadequate, everybody else got nice looking



wraps. The second stop/stretch of legs was at a roadside lookout admiring Mt Conner. The guide called it a tor; I would call it a butte. The third stretch/toilet stop was at Yulara, swapping some guests onto the tour. And then we got to Kata Tjuta. There were two small walks here; one guided, one not. The unguided walk was 50 minutes - 25 minutes each out and back but it still seemed rushed. The downside of a guided tour is that there is a timeline, a concept we can't ascribe to on a boat. However, because it is now late Autumn and the available daylight hours are reducing, we were on a fairly strict timeline, hence we were encouraged not to dawdle!

Near Uluru we visited the Cultural Centre (we were only given 30 minutes; if you wanted to watch the video, read all the boards (there weren't that many) and look at both art galleries you probably needed 60), followed by a slightly interpreted trail along the bottom of Uluru, before heading to the 'sunset viewing area' (along with several other busses and cars). Of course I have done this before (37 and 38 years ago!) but the rock was still 'pretty spectacular.' I had changed the lens on my good camera during the day and I now had the landscape wide angle on. The upside of this is that it probably has better optics. The downside is that it isn't a zoom lens and if I don't wish to include my shadow in the final shots I may have to crop them.

We started heading back to Alice Springs just after sunset with breaks at Curtain Springs and Erldunda (where a couple of young bucks didn't follow instructions and got left behind), before getting back to our accommodation just before midnight. My watch indicated 1159 when we got to our villa, the phone however indicated it was 'tomorrow.'

Birds seen: black kite, black shouldered kite, brown falcon?, eastern barn owl, willy wagtail, craven, magpie, and lots of small birds too fast for identification.



A free day in Alice'

29th April 2023. Sleeping in. Having not gone to bed until after midnight this morning I was surprised I woke up when I did. But then I realised it was because I was thirsty, probably dehydrated from yesterday rather than from the air-conditioner in our room going overnight (like yesterday morning -we had kept it off this time), and after a glass of water I went back to sleep. I had two further such episodes before finally pulling myself out of bed for the day around 0730. Andrew snoozed on until after 0900 so I filled in the time by enjoying a shower, writing up yesterday's notes, and enjoying the morning on the front verandah; moving the chair to behind the shadow of a large palm tree to avoid the brightness of the rising sun.

We left the resort area around 0955 and headed to the cafe at Olive Pink Botanical Gardens for brunch. It was busy and we were lucky to get a table, I am not sure if the popularity was due to tourists, the Alice Springs Cup or that it was just a normal Saturday morning. From brunch we headed to town, making small purchases in a bookshop, an adventure store, and Woolworths (for meals - our room is self contained), before starting back toward base. Until we did a double take, realised the item we actually went into the supermarket for had been forgotten and we reversed our steps. Eventually we got back to base sometime after 1300, spending the afternoon relaxing: I spent it on the veranda reading about the Uluru Statement, Andrew spent it inside catching up on motor racing. Dinner was at the Asian themed restaurant at the accommodation premises next door before we retreated back to base to sort out our gear for the morrow.

Birds. Mudlark, craven, yellow throated miner, Australian ringneck, galah, crested pigeon, pied butcherbird, spotted dove



The Larapinta Trail

Section 1a: Alice Springs to Wallaby Gap

30th April 2023. The start of the trail...

Our instructions were that we would be picked up at 0730 at our accommodation. Given the tightness of the front gate and access to Desert Palms we figured this would mean waiting on the street, and so after a final tidy of our bags, and handing our key in, we made our way to the footpath and stood by the curb in the brisk morning. The sun was now up and the only person who passed us was out for her morning run: I bet she was warmer than we were...

The tour vehicle arrived and the guides got out to introduce themselves before we, and another individual who had turned up whilst greetings were being had, piled into the back of a Troupie. There were already three walkers inside, and we introduced ourselves whilst the vehicle and its trailer made its way a hundred meters or so to the Hilton DoubleTree Hotel to pick up the last of its clients.

Then we were on our way. But not far. The Larapinta starts near the Old Telegraph Station and here we got out, grabbed our packs, were given a briefing, and headed off on the first part of Section 1. Today's stroll was only purported to be 12 km. The terrain was lightly undulating, but a good warm-up for us given our lack of bushwalking for the past couple of weeks. The Ghan shot past at one point but I was too late to get a good photo, and two of us discovered that the track this close to Alice is quite popular. Twists and undulations around the foothills masked oncoming visitors as two of us tried to find secluded spots to 'spend a penny' behind sparsely dense scrub and on suitably even ground!

We had started our walk at around 0830 and at 0930 we had our first break; morning tea in a creek bed. At around 1530 we made camp. The brochure suggests our accommodation was either in tents or swags but tents weren't really spruked. Andrew was reluctant but I thought it was worth a try, at least for a night. It was in the end the wrong decision, and the last night we spent, shivering, in what was essentially an open envelope with a flap!

At 1730 we had dinner. At 1830 we had the briefing for tomorrow.

Birds seen today...wedge tailed eagle, peregrines (?), black faced wood swallow, mallee ringneck, zebra finches, yellow throated miner.



Section 1b - Wallaby Gap To Simpsons Gap

1st May 2023. We were woken at 0555 by the howl of a dingo!!! A real dingo had indeed been seen at camp overnight (by two campers) but the one that woke us this morning was human!

We were walking out of camp at 0700 and were back on track at 0715. We made Simpsons Gap around 5 hours later, visiting Scorpion Pool and Fairy Pool on our way. The track was reasonably comfortable to traverse today; the range to our south kept us company, the range to the north towering over us. Golden Orb spiders were detoured around where possible. The distance today was similar to yesterday.

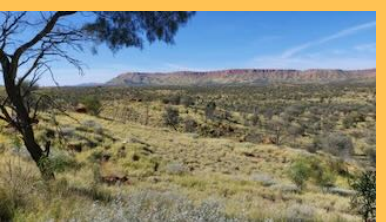
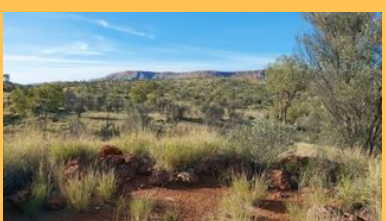
At Simpsons Gap we had a chat to a ranger with size 16 feet...He was wearing Keen's Targhee III boots so I warned him of my issues with this particular model of footwear, and what weaknesses to look out for. I got the feeling, however, that he will wear out the bottom of his boots before he has any problems with the sides of them.

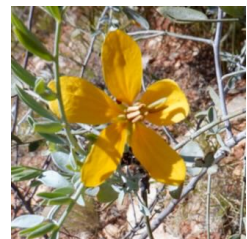
Because it was a planned short day there was an afternoon trip to the Desert Wildlife Park...we have been here before (on our land sojourn in Dec 2016 before we sailed around the Kimberley in 2017) and a couple of hours wasn't going to give us a long time to see much. We took the talks at the Nocturnal House and Bird display to fill in the time.

Back at camp we took a tent, decanting our sheet and sleeping tube from the swag, and blowing up our hiking mattresses, which we had brought with us on the off-chance we didn't like the mattresses given. As it was the swags were that large that only one swag would fit in each tent, so had we not come prepared we would have been sleeping in different tents.

Birds seen today;..mudlark, white-faced heron, zebra finch, white plumed honeyeater, spinifex pigeon, willy wagtail, hooded robin

At the Desert Wildlife Park show: black breasted buzzard, barn owl, mopoke, eastern curlew, magpie





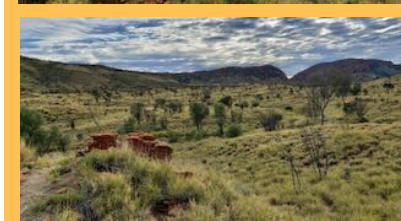
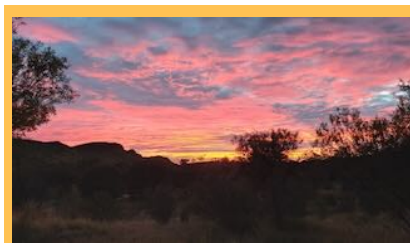
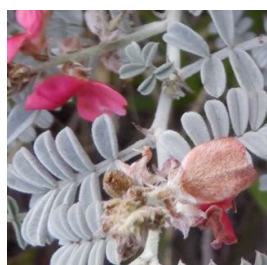
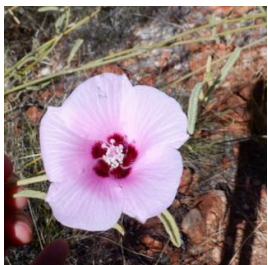
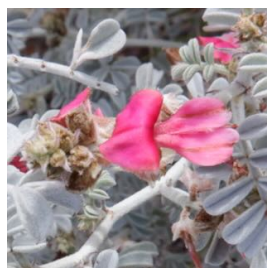
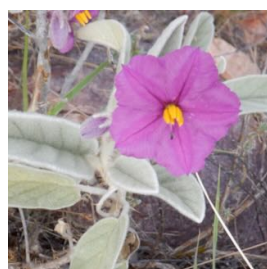
Section 2: Simpsons Gap to Mulga Camp

2nd May 2023. Andrew was much happier this morning having slept on his own mattress. And overnight had been much warmer for us (not that you would call it warm): at this point all other participants were sleeping in swags.

Cirrus clouds filled sunrise and we started walking at 0750. It was another reasonably easy walking day with undulating terrain. By 1530 we had set up our tent (without the fly) and could start to relax.

The sky had changed during the day, starting with cirrus clouds at sunrise to clearing during our walk, and then thicker cumulus arriving toward late afternoon. Today was the first day I noticed the flies!

Bird list. Crested bellbird, mallee ringneck, zebra finch, black faced cuckoo shrike



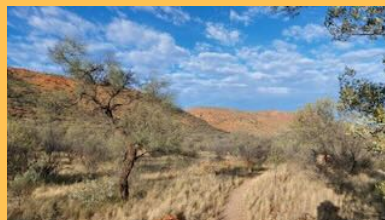
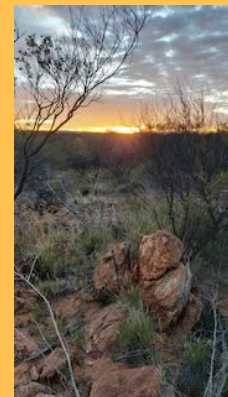
Section 3. Mulga Camp to Standley Chasm

3rd May 2023. Starting in the dark. The alarm was on for 0345. Breakfast was scheduled for 0415. We were scheduled to leave camp at 0500.

Section 2 officially ends at Jay Creek but because of a current dispute/complication regarding access to the commercial operator's normal campsite, yesterday's trek was shorter. Which not only meant a (10km) longer walk today, it meant starting in the dark to enable us to reach camp late afternoon. I am not a fan of walking in the dark, and certainly not over rocky remote paths. We technically saw the sunrise, all two minutes of it, and we did stop at one point to admire the pink clouds, but we were warned that we couldn't dawdle, even if we might be tempted.

After a toilet stop at the Jay Creek Shelter we started Section 3. It was a scrambly day with some (lots) of rock hopping, gorge admiring, and a bit of swearing right at the end. Andrew's knees had blown by the time we got to camp and I wasn't sure what he was going to do (he was adamant he was quitting and going back to Alice Springs at the earliest opportunity). I was sporting a couple of small rub spots, and a couple of large ones; in places I was not expecting.

Camp was stand up tents. Dinner was camel and date sausages.



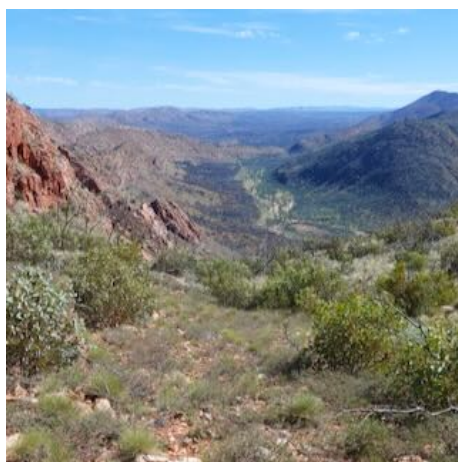


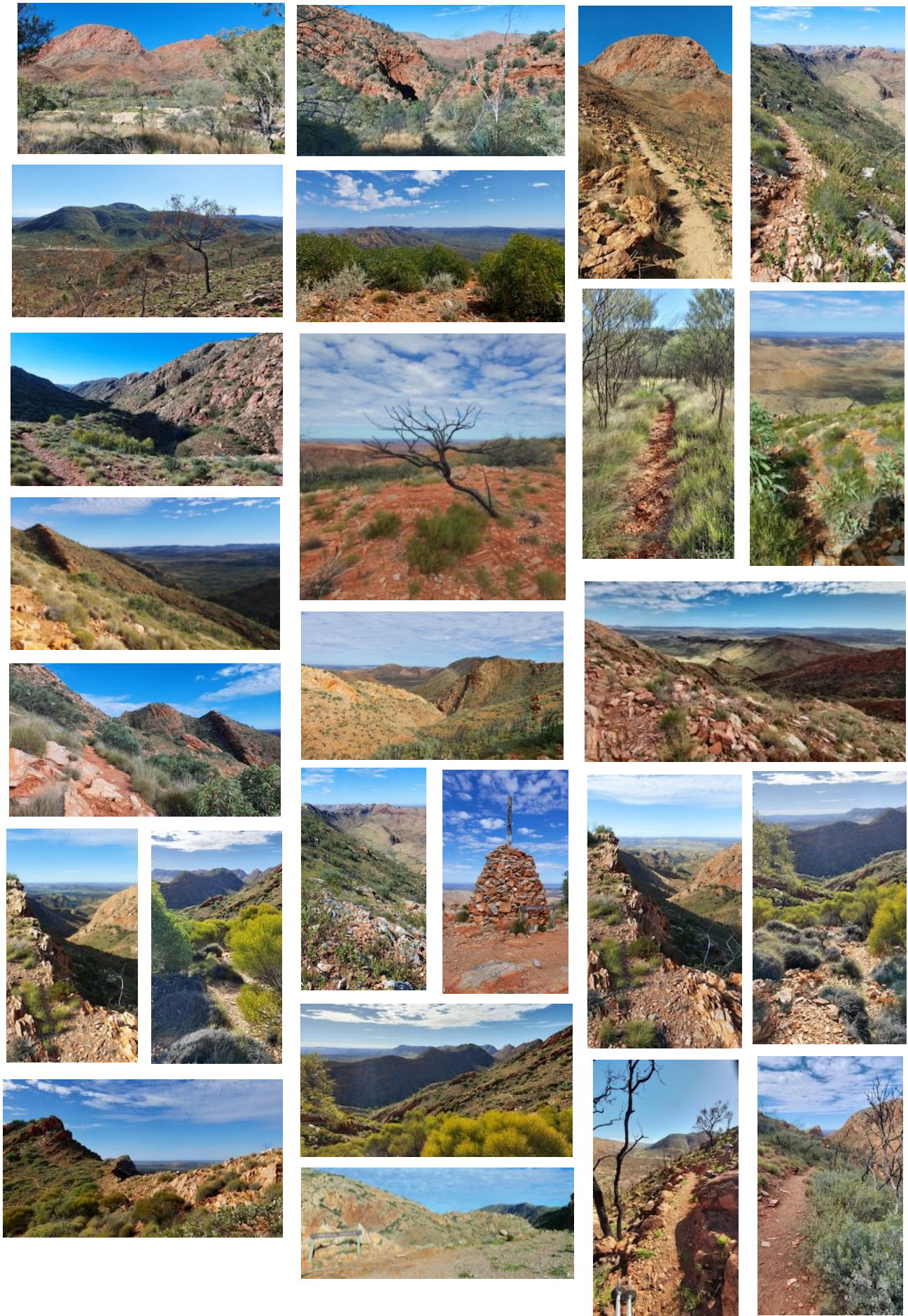
Standley Chasm to Birthday Waterhole

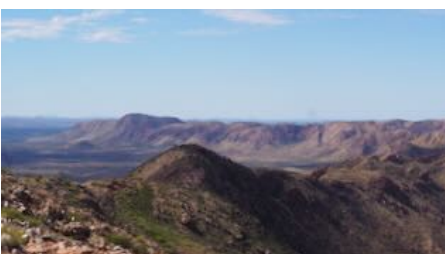
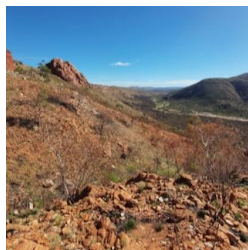
4th May 2023. Via Brinkley Bluff. Andrew sat out today. He was ready to quit completely but if he did, I would too, so in order to keep me walking he opted to stay around camp. I petered up the hill with the rest of the group. Slowly. And the views, when they came, were fantastic..

There were a few others on the track today; we passed a school group between Reveal Saddle and the cairn on Brinkley Bluff, and there was a solo Italian walker who was doing the trek to Brinkley Bluff as a day walk and ended up with the left overs of our lunch supplies. The only section of today's track I didn't really like was the one gutter rock scramble on the way back down...this may have been due to the rub spots on my feet.

Birds noted: White necked heron...dusky grass wren (my first I think), hooded robin, cravens







Section 5 -Birthday Waterhole to Hugh Gorge

5th May 2023. Taking the 4WD to camp. I skipped Section 5. Technically I couldn't have started today, even if I had wanted to. The walkers left at 0500...in the dark. I had misplaced my head torch yesterday morning and only found it by stripping out everything in my daypack mid morning today. Last night I had opted not to walk today, after another walker had also made that decision, so with Andrew there was to be three of us at camp. The description of the day's walk last night sounded challenging and I had the feeling that the guide was trying to weed out any issues by commenting that if we found ourselves in trouble on the track the entire group would have to turn around...it wasn't until later I realised the warning was probably not meant for me, but an entirely different walker....

The non-walkers were still up at 0345 with the rest of the group. Camp was packed up before sunrise..and we had left camp behind by the time first light popped over the escarpment, highlighting the sentential pair of trees in the warming shades of the ranges.

The drive to the next camp was along 4WD tracks but it wasn't all that far, and we had set up camp, and were relaxing, by mid morning.

J went for a walk before lunch toward Hugh Gorge. Andrew and I followed her second stroll in this direction after lunch.

The four walkers and the guide came back around 1640. We had re-erected the tents that we had demolished in the morning (by this time there were three other tents being used). The two remaining walkers were, I think, a bit disappointed tents hadn't been erected for them...but they hadn't told us they wanted to swap to tents, otherwise we would have put them up. As it was we had issues setting up the fourth tent. Upon trying to put up the pole for the fly for the fourth tent I discovered that not only was there a split down one of the metal sections of the poles (a couple of inches, it was quite significant) but the elastic laced within the series of metal sections had been caught in this section on and off over time (a wad of the outer sheath of the elastic was caught in the end of the crack) and the elastic was around half the thickness it should be, having been shaved down via the cutting metal. I was surprised it was still holding together. Which it did for about another minute, and then it broke in spectacular fashion; the split metal breaking off the pole and the elastic breaking with an awful crack. Fortunately I



was on the opposite side of the tent to the breach but we are lucky that A and J, both standing within close proximity to the break, and the rebounding, energy-driven pole, were not injured. Andrew took the broken pole back to the guide and got a 'less-than-enthusiastic' reception... he didn't quote the entire conversation to me but the comment from the guide apparently mentioned something about 'tent parts not growing on trees!'. It is not as if Andrew broke the pole, and frankly if it had broken whilst the fly was on they would have a shredded and torn fly as well. Clearly this is a sore point, as when I suggested later (when I next saw the guide) that someone needs to audit these tents when they get back to base, I was told in no uncertain terms that there was no one back at base to check the tents, and the guides need to (are required to) repair tents during the trip. It was somewhat of a defensive response, and I will admit it did put my 'nose out' a bit (as Andrew's nose had been put out a few minutes before). Frankly, there was no way they could have adequately repaired what we had seen putting up the extra tents anyway: Andrew and I were lucky there was nothing wrong with our tent, the other tents all seemed to have broken zips with gaps in them (something that just cant be fixed on trail and quite inconvenient with overnight temperatures close to (and potentially below) zero!).

There were lots of birds heard today but not many seen. The first identified bird (heard) was a tawny frogmouth just prior to dawn. Lots of small bird sounds followed, probably honeyeaters, but none were seen. Birds actually spotted included a male non-breeding splendid fairy wren, a willy wagtail, and, of course, cravens.



Section 6A - Hugh Gorge to Rocky Gully

6th May 2023. We left the Chewings Range today and ventured halfway towards the Heavy Tree Range. The track was undulating, and purported to be similar to Day's 1 and 2. And it was. Even Andrew joined us and he enjoyed the walk. Although we were technically between the two ranges, I felt encompassed between two ancient and magical rock formations; I suspect majoring in Earth Science thirty years ago helped lead me to that appreciation.

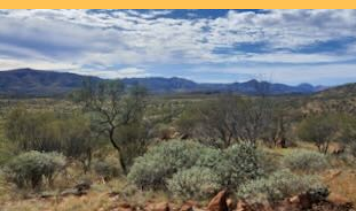
We were in camp early, around 1130. The afternoon was spent mostly chatting and reading. Lots of interesting plants were seen along the way. Praying mantis' were also spotted: there were some individuals in this group with particularly good eyesight! We also admired a Mulga ant nest. Ants are amazing creatures. There are so many out here and it is fascinating to watch what they carry about. Today some individuals were carrying native fuchsia flowers (bigger than themselves), whilst others were running off with small bits of cheese (the cheese was opportunistic -we didn't feed them). We also noted ants eating a praying mantis cocoon.

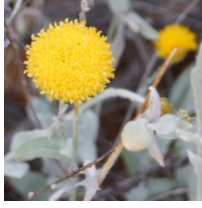
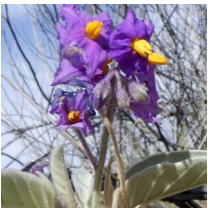
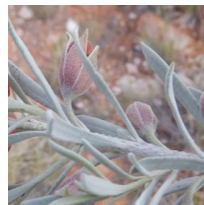
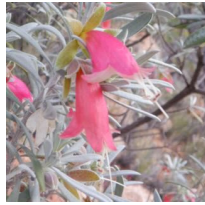
I actually got some eye exercises done today...ironically the exercise was called bug on a string - and I was battling the flies to stay focussed!

Due to clouds the sky was pink this morning around dawn. Based on the clouds, and the most current forecast they had, the guides advised the group to carry raincoats; Andrew and I didn't have to make room in our packs - we always have our rain jackets with us.

Not many birds were spotted today: a bunch of zebra finches, one black shouldered kite, spinifex pigeon.

The wind was quite insistent during today's walk; whistling wind making the atmosphere a bit spooky, audibly ghosting through sparsely spaced trees. Fortunately the guide managed to find us a particularly large rock to shelter behind for lunch.





Section 6B - Rocky Gully to Ellery Creek

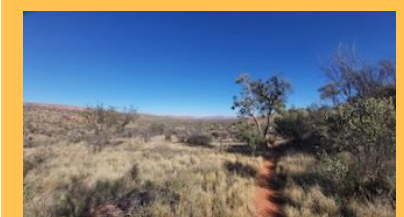
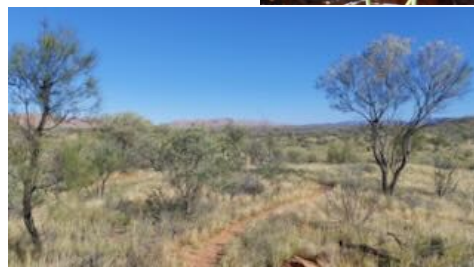
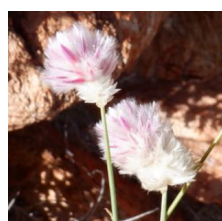
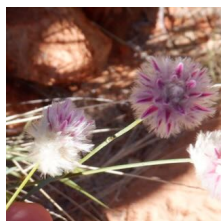
7th May 2023. Roll call was for 0715. Andrew and I walked out of camp at 0716..the rest of the group was a few minutes behind us. This meant I got to use the public toilet at the independent camp. Andrew started in a great mood but unfortunately it had dissipated by the end of the 16 km plus walk today...although the terrain was not particularly harsh. It was however particularly exposed:

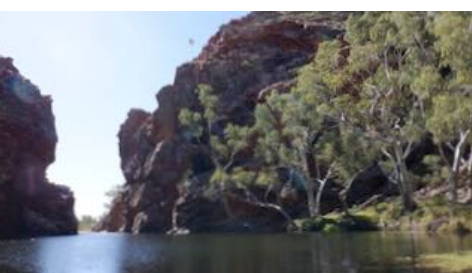
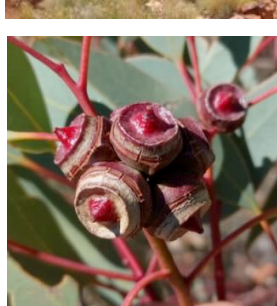
New plants (for me) were discovered (nulla nulla) and one dead caterpillar was spotted. (I should have taken a photo as the caterpillar is a major creature of creation lore for several local First Nations groups).

Birds: Mudlark, Major Mitchell cockatoos, white necked heron, craven

Whilst the track was rocky in places today, there were at least some opportunities to look up and admire the view whilst taking a couple of steps without falling over. The majority of the previous days have not allowed you to do this....the ground has been too uneven.

Lunch was on top of a windy saddle





Section 7 -Ellery Creek to Serpentine Gorge

8th May 2023 Classed as undulating by the guides with some sharp rocks, today's terrain wasn't as scary as purported - although morning tea was at the trig point on top of hard rock (with sharp eroded surfaces) in very cold wind. The associated ridge did require some extra careful footwork, but most of today's track was easily doable with path substrate very like our Nerang National Park training runs crossed with Lilydale toppings.

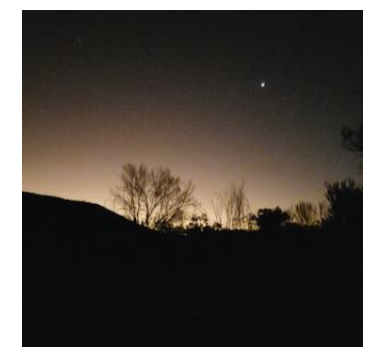
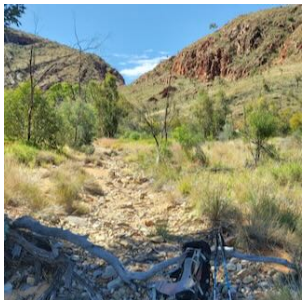
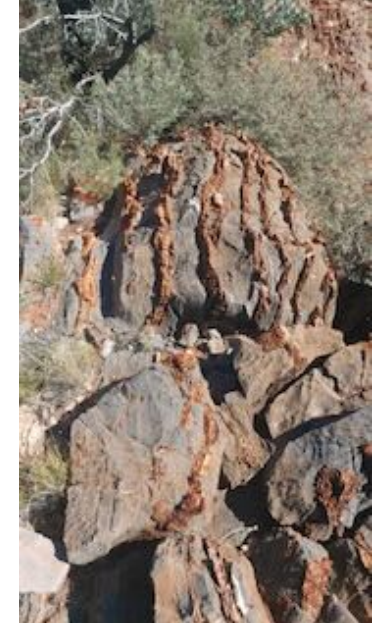
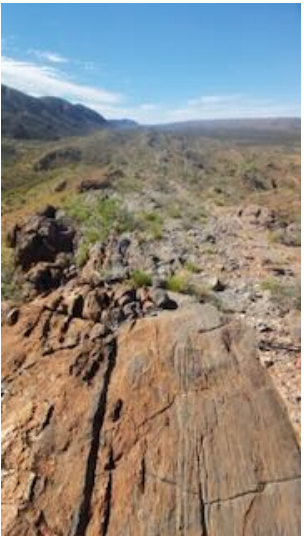
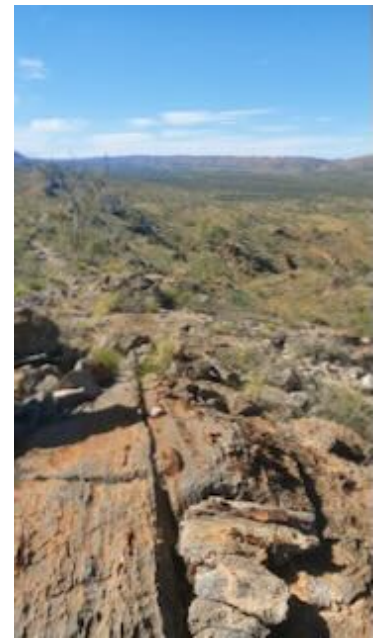
The day was cold. Almost all of us started with two or three layers. I still had two at the end of the day - a short thermal under my long sleeve shirt.

The side excursion into Serpentine Gorge at the end of the day was lovely.

Birds. Black faced wood swallow, orange chat?, painted finches, zebra finches, dusky grass wren, western bowerbird (heard by guide), craven

Andrew stayed at camp today..he was entertained with crested bowerbirds playing around his feet, black kites, whistling kites and cravens





Section 8 - Serpentine Gorge to Serpentine Chalet

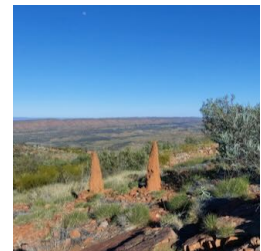
9th May 2023. The walkers were on the track around 0750. Andrew was back on shore leave and headed to Alice Springs with one of the guides.

By morning tea we were up at the junction of the track and the side trail to Counts Point. The side walk was worth the effort. The Friends Of Larapinta have installed a seat at Counts Point so you can admire the remaining western expanse of the West MacDonnells to Mount Sonder, Mt Giles and Mt Ziel. The meteor crater Goss's Bluff was also seen from this high elevation..

After our gorgeous view was a steep descent to a sheltered lunch spot inside Mulga forest (where a grey headed honeyeater was spotted) before a final meander down the slope across to the Section 8/Section 9 junction. It was on the walk down from Counts Point that I had my one and only combative spinifex encounter! Purportedly the little shards of the plant can take months to work their way out of your skin - I hoped I had got most out by the end of the day.

A few of us took a quick look at the dam for the failed chalet enterprise before heading back to camp. Before settling in, I wandered back down the access road and had a look at the building foundations and the interps board for Serpentine Chalet. It probably seemed like a good idea at the time but other outback businesses outshone this failed business project.

Tomorrow's lunch wraps were pre-made. Those travelling the long Section 9 tomorrow had to carry theirs with them. We had the luxury of putting ours in the fridge until required..





Section 9 - Serpentine Chalet to Ormiston Gorge

10th May 2023 - 30 kilometres ...all of which we didn't do.

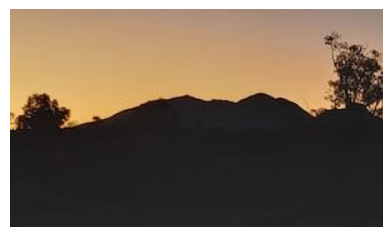
Given Andrew's knees (and by this time he had lost quite a bit of his walking mojo) he was never going to walk this section..it is listed as the hardest section of the Trail. Me, I had the chance, and would have done it if I had to...but as one guide was going to be stuck with A in camp anyway and I really wanted to make sure I completed the remaining sections of track with some enthusiasm (I have previously done one hard 30km trek over hard, uneven ground and that was enough), I opted to stay back at camp too. So did J!

The walkers left around 0400, apparently. They had breakfast at 0300 and were loud enough to be heard. Those staying at camp officially got a couple of extra hours sleep..our breakfast scheduled for 0630. The guide wanted to be driving away at 0830. I didn't look at my watch specifically at the time of departure but I think we were early. Those staying at camp had offered to drop and re erect the walker's tents and with three of us on the job that went pretty smoothly, although finding a tent site without crushing desert rose at the new campsite (all walkers were now in tents). was a challenge. After this Andrew stayed in camp reading, entertained by a baby magpie at his feet. Crested pigeons and mudlarks had also been cheeky enough to loiter nearby. A whistling kite soared above keeping an eye on its territory, and a pied cormorant stood sentinel on a rock surrounded by water in the bed of the Finke River. J and I visited Glen Helen 'Resort': J having a shower whilst I managed to get lost in reeds to the north side of the waterway. The bird spot here was a juvenile white necked heron.

The walkers returned at 1725...stiff but triumphant. Dinner was vegie lasagne (just vegies for me) with salad and individual meringues/pavlovas for desert.

The wildlife interest of the day was a pie dish beetle...this little fellow looks like a seed pod!

Other birds noted: Yellow throated miner(heard), ringneck parrots, budgies (seen by guide driving), tawny frogmouth heard at 0700 whilst packing up.



Section 10 - Ormiston Gorge to Finke River Campground (near Glen Helen)

11th May 2023. We had a sleep in...well, comparatively speaking. Breakfast was at 0700 with the idea of being ready to leave at 0745. We were on track around 0815. Today was an undulating affair with one high point. Mount Sonder became the predominant feature of the day and I could feel myself becoming obsessed with this mountain with a similar passion that I have for Mount Larcom in Queensland.

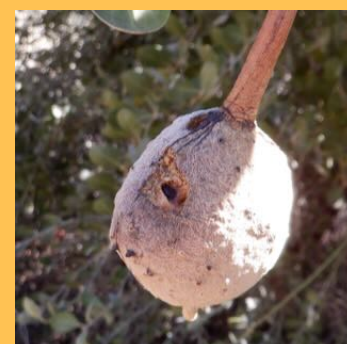
Andrew joined us on this section, apparently the shortest on the trail. We spent the morning criss-crossing with another commercial tour group who moved past us for lunch, whilst we had it in a riverbed not far from camp.

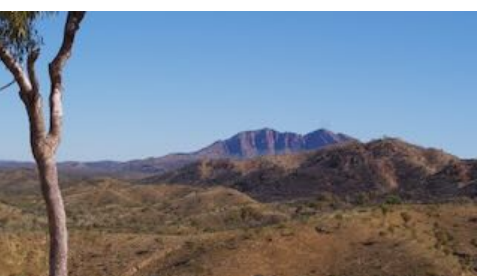
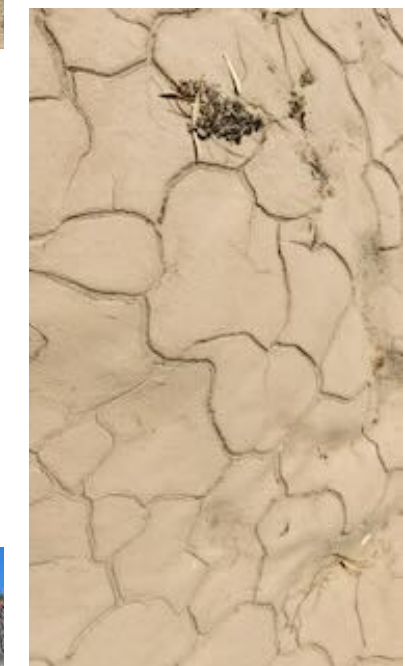
Birds spotted on the track. Black fronted dotterels, cockateels, Major Mitchell's, white plumed honeyeater, singing honeyeater, spinifex pigeon, a wood swallow with a dark face (not still enough to determine species), white necked stork, mudlark. Other birds for the day included a magpie, pied butcherbird (both morning chorus), whistling kite, crested pigeons, willy wagtail.

We were back at camp at 1415. At 1430 we all piled into the Troupie and headed to Glen Helen again, I didn't get to the Gorge..I joined the others for a shower (at the same time, not in the same shower)!

At 1630 after a drink on the Lodge balcony, we headed back to camp. A short rest in camp before a brief catchup with M (a friend from Vic whom I haven't seen for 5 years..but she had just completed Section 9 and was due to go up Sonder tomorrow morning so we didn't chat too long).

Dinner...burgers..me without the bun. Dates with pistachio nuts for desert. I headed to bed around 1930.



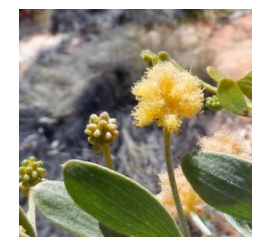


Section 11A -Finke River Campground to Rocky Bar Gap

12th May 2023. There was an up today. Quite a significant up...well that is not quite true..it's just that it felt like it....we didn't start it until after we had already walked 7km.

Morning tea had been on the Davenport River where a patch of water sported a whistling kite (looking down on us with amusement), a darter, two pacific black ducks, a white necked heron, a variegated fairy wren, a rufous whistler, willy wagtail, mallee ringneck, pigeons, and a brown goshawk. Cockateels flew over not long after we left....and apparently budgies as well (I didn't see them).

Lunch was at Hill Top Lookout (at the top of the 'up') before we made a decent descent down again





Section 11B - Rocky Bar Gap to Redbank Gorge

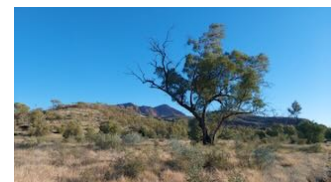
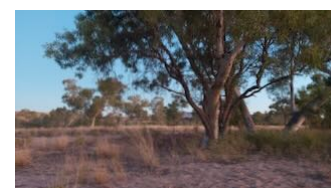
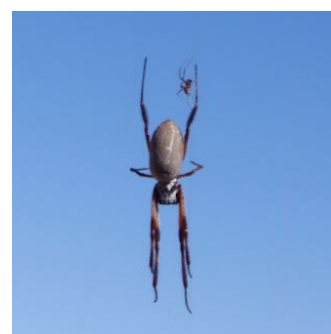
13th May 2023. A more civilised grade today. A bronze-wing pigeon was spotted (the group waited until I caught up to see it) and I saw a grey shrike thrush and willy wagtail, but all other birds today, although close to the track, were either hidden or too quick to identify.

There were a few interesting items of note - the termite mounds have changed, and caves held items of either occupation or research.

The jewel of today was not a bird but Redbank Gorge at the end of the day's walk; where I actually went for a 'swim'...well, I went in up unto my neck. I may have considered going in a bit further but I still had my sunglasses on. It was too cold to stay in long.

We got back to camp around 1530. Andrew was reading at Glen Helen, one of the guides having not been too subtle this morning about not knowing how to feed him over lunch time, so I guess he took the hint and got himself a substantial cooked lunch. The guide's comment when I got back to camp about Andrew not being 'obligated to eat further meals with us' had me worried as to what conversation had gone on after the walking group had left. Contrasted with immediately after this with 'we still have a duty of care and he should be back at camp.' - Make up your mind, people! Whilst the tour group would be expecting everyone in the main to be walking - the nightly (and sometimes during the day) briefings checking whether walkers would be walking or staying back at camp for the next Section lies in contrast with the subtle, and not so subtle, statements to those staying in camp that the guides didn't know how to feed us if we weren't on track. Quite frankly, these comments were stressful, and took away some enjoyment of the trip. I can't see why we didn't make up our lunch each night as they had on Section 9. This would have solved the issue of catering at camp if necessary. We have carried our lunch on all other guided walks we have done. I walked over to Glen Helen to retrieve Andrew back to camp. We were back by the time afternoon tea came out but given the guide's last comments, neither of us took any.

I headed into the tent early to pump up the mattresses (My mattress had been having a struggle keeping inflated over the past few nights and last night Andrew's mattress had gone out in sympathy), and prepare myself for a 0145 alarm!





Redbank Gorge



Section 12 - Redbank Gorge to Mount Sonder

14th May 2023. The end of the Larapinta Trail. The alarm was on for 0145 but I turned it off at 0140 so as not to disturb Andrew (apparently I was unsuccessful in this). I had been awake on and off from 2323; my bladder was wanting me to get up. In the dark. And in the cold. I managed to convince myself I could wait two hours until the alarm went.

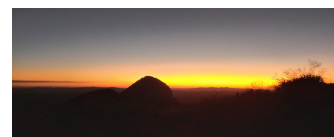
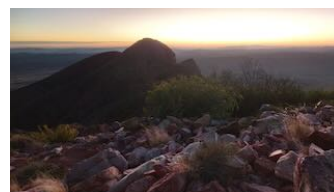
It was very cold but it wasn't the coldest time of the morning, which is traditionally just before sunrise. To make things easy to get up I had gone to bed with practically all my clothes on so there was a minimum number of layers to add when I finally dragged myself out of the tent.

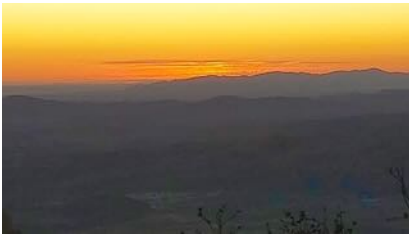
Breakfast was at 0215. We were loaded into the vehicle and heading toward Mount Sonder at approximately 0245 - later than I had expected. We made the top with first light just showing from the east, having tottered up the track with some haste, and occasionally, battling freezing winds. Although the slowest, and occasionally out of breath, I did not find the walk too taxing - I kept my focus (my head-torch light) on the back of the feet of the walker in front of me. At times when the group took a break and looked back we found we were followed by a row of lights in the dark - like pilgrims heading to the summit to praise the sun god. Which, of course, we all were!

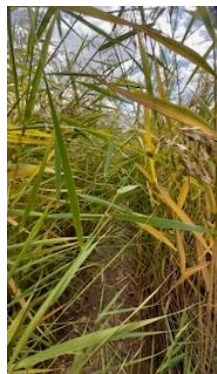
Later estimates were of 50 plus people on top of the mountain. It was nice, but it would have been nicer to share it with Andrew as originally planned.

I may also have been feeling a bit flat due to food - which, whilst most all of it was tasty, hadn't been ideal during the trip. Despite giving my food allergies to the company, they had made the assumption that wheat-free meant gluten-free (it doesn't), and the guides had shopped with that single-focus in mind without checking my other food allergies (I only list four when I am away). Most commercial 'gluten free' 'stuff' has two of my other allergens in it - potato and corn. Corn gives me 'melancholy' and so the toast this morning (with both potato and corn in it), was probably a factor in not being as excited at the sunrise on top of Mount Sonder as the guide expected me to be. (I had given permission to 'do their best; with lunch wraps (if that was their modus operandi) but that wasn't a licence to ignore everything else)). Not a lot else was on offer for breakfasts - I deliberately didn't read the cereal packet (there was probably an issue with that as well. And I specifically said I didn't want to know what was in the bread but the guide told me anyway!) Porridge isn't an option - it has a really high GI and whilst giving a good amount of energy for a while, it also gives a big drop which I don't react well to - not ideal for a sustained walk. Most people counter this by eating processed sugar - I prefer to avoid that. On previous nights I had been questioned regarding pasta at dinner. One lot of pasta had 13% corn in it - I told the guide I was willing to try it but if I was feeling down it was on their head. Another lot of pasta was queried but I don't know why they bothered - there was both corn *and*, *two* different types of potato in that product! Subsequently I had the veggie mix only on that occasion and it was not entirely to my liking. Combined that with the comments regarding presence at camp, and not feeling entirely welcome, well - you can see why the conquering of Mount Sonder at the end of the Trail didn't quite feel as triumphant as it should have.

Andrew and J were waiting for us when we returned to camp around 1100. Brunch of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, smashed avocado and cheese went down a treat.







Glen Helen Gorge

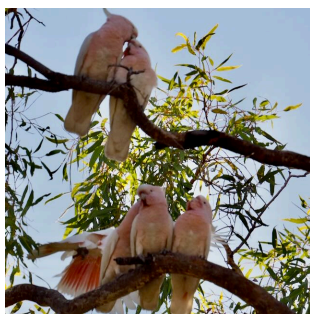
At 1230 we were driven across the road. The majority went for showers, Andrew went to find a chair to read a book, and I headed to the 'mouth' of Glen Helen Gorge. There is only so far you can go if you don't go for a swim but I wasn't kitted out in bathers. I ended up chatting to a couple of Australian residents of German descent before heading back to the Lodge to find the rest of the group around the table on the balcony.

We were picked up at 1600. Dinner and prep talk for tomorrow followed soon after and most walkers were in bed by around 1930. Andrew and I stayed up a bit longer, but not as long as we expected. The forecast was for a 'slight' chance of rain overnight, and a light shower suddenly arrived at 1945...I was in the process of getting ready for bed and rushed back out of the tent to help Andrew put the camp chairs (and other items around the trailer that would be better avoiding rain) under cover.

Birds. Dusky grass wren on Mount Sonder, white necked heron at Glen Helen. At camp; pied cormorant, willy wagtail, craven, magpie, butcher bird, mallee ringneck and whistling kite, striated pardalote (possibly)

Around camp....



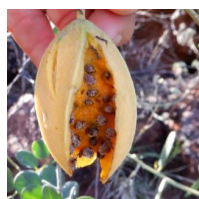
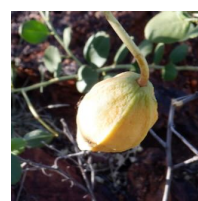
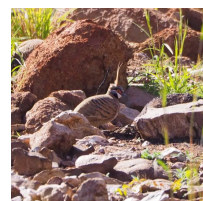


Our last morning view of Mount Sonder



Ormiston Gorge Pound Walk

15th May 2023. With the Larapinta over you would think we could relax...but there was no time for a sleep-in today and the alarm was on for 0545. The rain had apparently continued on and off overnight but despite a slightly deflated mattress I had slept well, and had not heard it after the two initial bouts as we went to bed. I did however hear a light pitter patter on the outside of the tent at 0510. Terrific! We are about to get up!.



Fortunately the rain did not last long and we got up in the dry, most tents being able to be put away with almost (imperfectly) dry flies, although a couple were apparently soaked. Lightening flashed across the distant sky as we enjoyed our last toast and cereal of the camping trip.



Despite wet flies, and a temporarily lost tent bag, we were heading away from our Finke River camping area at 0740, ten minutes after the scheduled time. I hadn't found time to explore the waterway as hoped this morning, and the attempt at a better photograph of the resident whistling kite had resulted in the bird flying off as I got the camera out; typical!

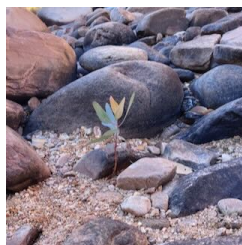


We started the Ormiston Pound Circuit around 0800...Andrew sitting out this one not because of the steepness of track (it wasn't) but because he didn't want to get wet (there was a guaranteed high water crossing), and I found the walk, despite the fire devastation from March, one of the prettiest walks on this trip. The distance wasn't long but we couldn't dawdle, the 8.5km needed to be finished by lunchtime, and there was at least one other commercial walking group behind us. Lunch was the usual wrap and salad mix under a picnic shelter in the Ormiston Gorge Carpark .



The trip back to Alice didn't seem onerously long; we were back at the Desert Palms by 1500. The afternoon was spent picking up a hire car, getting breakfast supplies, having a lovely shower, and an early 1800 dinner back at the Asian inspired restaurant at the Hilton DoubleTree Hotel next door. The later evening was spent catching up on YouTube and sending domestic emails to start organising boat maintenance for the end of the week!





Back in Alice

Heading East...for a change

16th May 2023. By 0720 I was up, had taken a couple of ibuprofen (unsure if the headache was due to two glasses of red wine last night or the stress I had put on my neck going across Ormiston Gorge yesterday), had had a shower, and put the kettle on. Andrew was awake but still in bed. Peeking out past the curtains I could see evidence that it was cold outside...there was frost on vehicle windscreens!

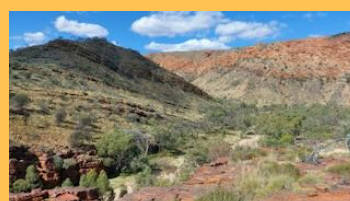
The expected high temperature was 21 degrees in Alice' today. Last night we had worked out today's plan of activities, and it didn't involve early starts...therefore no alarms! But I had woken at 0630 anyway. This time yesterday I had eaten toast and cereal in the dark, and the cold, hoping that the rain would stay away, and the lightening stay to the south. This morning, there were no such threats from the sky to worry about.

We didn't leave our room until well after 0930 and after checking the book store for a book that ended up being out of print, the info centre for a local map, and shopping for lunch, we drove east.

Emily Gap, not far out of town, was pretty, but water prevented access to the Aboriginal Art site. One interps board had a request to not take photos in the Gap. Another interps board had a request not to take photos of the art. I took no photos either way. Nor did I take any photos at Jessies Gap, but we did see some art there. This Gap didn't have any real water (just a puddle) but it wasn't as pretty either. Bird life at both places was minimal and lost in the vegetation, but it was near the middle of the day when most self-respecting avians should be resting.

We skipped Corroboree Rock on the Ross Highway and instead had our lunch in the picnic area at Trepina Gorge. We took the two kilometre loop track across the top of the escarpment and back to the carpark/picnic area via the Gorge. Despite 50 bird species being recorded here, a white plumed honeyeater and shrike thrush were the only birds we saw. We didn't stick around

Trepina Gorge



to see if we could spot more; the flies were incredible and their presence was not conducive to a long stay.

By this time it was around 1430 and I wanted to visit one other 'historical' site before heading back to base.

The Napwerte Conservation Reserve is around 30 km south of Alice Springs and site to some 5000 year old (ish) petroglyphs (Ewaninga Rock Carvings). This is an Arrantte mens site. Arrernte women are not allowed to enter and photographs are banned. The petroglyphs are not interpreted in order to respect local lore. It was an interesting site and one completely different from the usually expected rock art. Birds in this area included a pair of mulga parrots and a pair of crested bell birds.

After a dinner of Woolies' corned silverside and packet salad we headed out to Earth Sanctuary for a private tour. We didn't quite get the allocated time but we enjoyed the experience none-the-less. I certainly learned a few pointers about observing the night sky.

When we got back to base we found the room had a few visitors.....cockroaches - thankfully all our left over food was in the fridge!

Birds: Black kite, Australian kestrel, mulga parrot, crested bellbird, shrike thrush, white plumed honeyeater, wood swallows?, pipit?, mudlark, magpie, craven.



Exploring around town

17th May 2023. A late start; although not a sleep in - we both woke up reasonably early. But we had nothing planned specifically for today - the aim was to enjoy an easy day hanging around town. There were a couple of museums under consideration but in the end we chose the Aviation Museum, predominantly because it was in the same area as the Araluen Arts Centre and Northern Territory Museum.

One of the sheds at the Aviation museum opens at 1000 - the other shed opens at 1100. We got to site at 0950. By the time we looked around the small 1000 opening shed, the open shed outside and spent around 90 minutes watching a couple of historical documentaries, we didn't manage much time inside the later opening shed before our hungry stomachs urged us to go and find some lunch; which was a pity because there was a flight simulator in the second shed and it would have been fun to have a go.

The Araluen Arts Centre has a cafe with a Spanish theme but I managed to find something to eat avoiding capsicum and corn. After lunch we had a look at the gallery and after considering a couple of books in the gift store, and a print by Albert' Namatjira (one of his many Mount Sonder pieces - the only print option was far too big) we decided we had had enough, and after getting dinner provisions at Woolworths, headed back to base to pack.

The evening was spent watching YouTube on our tablet - the television was an issue to turn on.



Back to Queensland

18th May 2023. We left the fiddly television and the cockroaches behind this morning, dropping off the car at the airport around 0720. It was cold; the car gauge indicating that outside was only 4 degrees Celsius! The airport seemed empty; three other passengers were the only obvious people in the terminal. The Qantas check-in opened around 0745.

We were through security at 0757. Alice Springs is not a big airport - there is one cafe, and one newsagent. The cafe was obviously not open. The newsagent was and I headed to the book area to see what was available for my on-flight reading (ending up in the wrong side of the counter to purchase a book - *the attendant* was going to charge me \$3 more than the asking price- I made sure that didn't happen). By the time I extracted myself from the newsagent the cafe was open and we spent the time in the cafe having a morning cuppa; until the flight was called.

As per our flight to the Northern Territory we were back into the emergency exit seats. Again I had miscalculated with regard to the location of the sun, having to put the shade up mid trip. Lift off was at 0925. We landed at 1114.

There was a short delay scheduled at Adelaide but the plane was late because of a delay leaving Brisbane. Our final landing was due to be ten minutes late. However the crew informed us we had to wait in line for access to our runway. Eventually we got off, picked up our bags and met our lift at the pick up area. We got back to Sengo, in the dark, at 1800.

Dinner was a dehydrated meal from the excess sent back from New Zealand in February. We were in bed not long afterwards.

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