

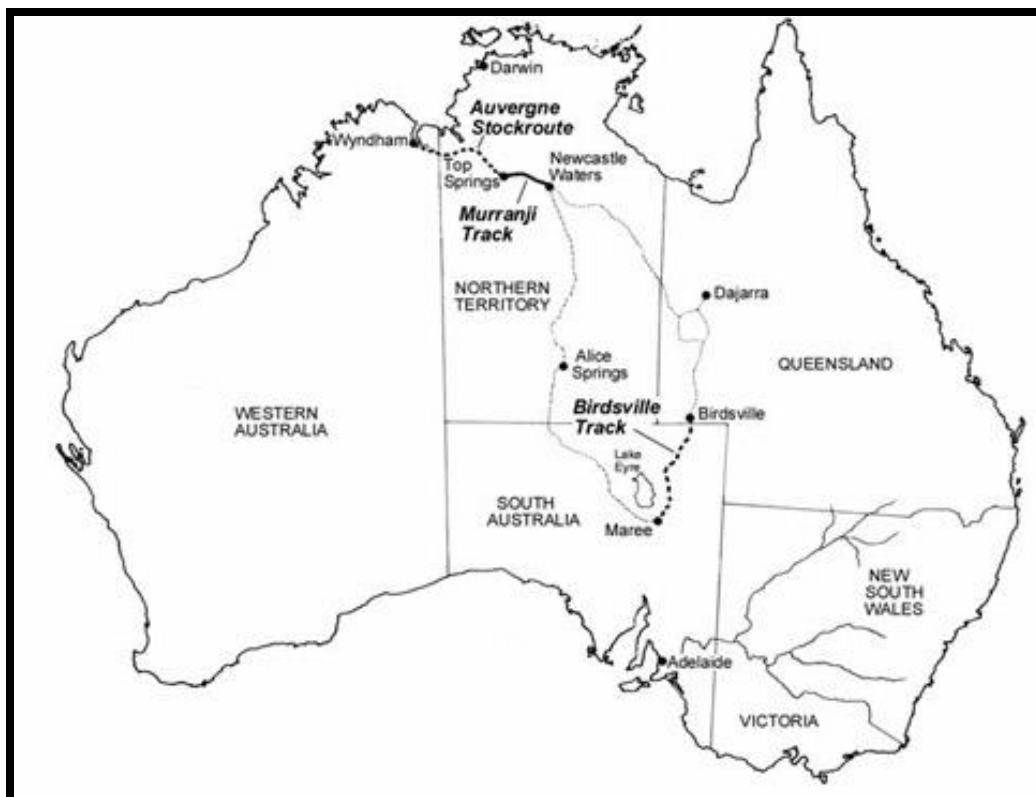


HSNT ANNUAL FIELD TRIP 28-30 JULY 2017:

THE MURRANJI TRACK

BY BEV PHELTS

The Murranyi Track, also known as the “Ghost Road of the Drovers”, was pioneered by the famous drover Nathaniel Buchanan in 1881, when he drove large mobs of cattle along it. At the time when Buchanan travelled the Murranyi Track, the Murranyi Waterhole was one of the vital sources of water. If it was dry, the cattle and horses faced a 110-mile dry stage before reaching the next water source. This route was considered horrendous and the worst stock route in the Territory. In one nightmare trip across the Track in 1905, one drover died and all but two stockmen deserted the boss drover. Also 800 cattle and 11 horses died. All together, approximately six people have died around the Murranyi Waterhole and about 12 others on the whole track while trying to cross it.¹



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock_route. Also read Darrell Lewis, *Report of the History and Historical Sites of the Murranyi Stockroute*, 1992 and the *The Murranyi Track: Ghost Road of the Drovers*, 2007.

1ST DAY - We were all meeting at the turnoff to Top Springs/Buchanan Road first thing Saturday morning 29th. My group had left Darwin early Friday morning and we drove the 650kms to Dunmarra to camp for the night.

Avid bird watchers, Brian and Lyn Reid had arrived early Friday afternoon and decided to partake in some bird watching at a nearby Dunmarra lagoon. They got quite settled in their positions around the lagoon and were having a wonderful time photographing the various birds until a herd of buffalo decided to join them. The "head male" thought that Brian and Lyn were worthy of human watching and decided to cross the lagoon to get a better look. Understandably, Brian and Lyn decided not to faceoff the big buff and they backed out real quick. But not before getting a photo!



Lunch on the Katherine River, Low Level on the way to Dunmarra. Julie Mastin, Janie Mason & Ruth Kerr



Big boy coming over to join Brian & Lyn.
Photograph courtesy Brian Reid

Most of the group spent the night at Dunmarra while others camped in the nearby bush.



Camping at Dunmarra
Left: Jan Allen, Alan Mitchell & Craig Bellamy



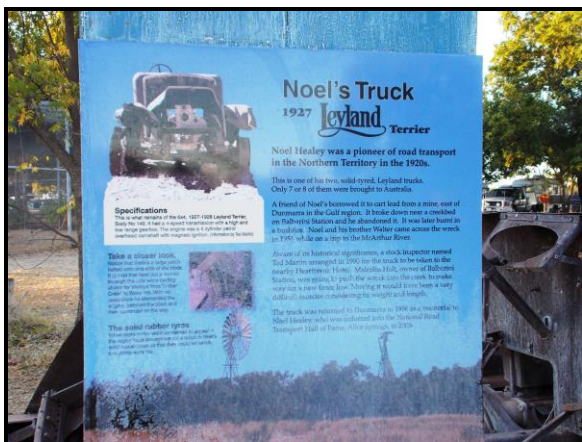
Janie Mason & our Queensland regular, Ruth Kerr



Janet Leather & Eddie Webber



Relaxing at Dunmarra - Brian & Lyn Reid, Fiona Scott & Rosemary Chalmers



Information on Noel Healy's old 1927 Leyland at Dunmarra



Remnants of Healy's Leyland



Some Dunmarra wonderful "junk"



Sign at Dunmarra Roadhouse

2nd Day - Saturday morning after meeting at the turn-off, we headed to Hidden Valley cattle station and further down stopped at Scobie's Rockhole. The Rockhole is actually a sink hole (Aboriginal well) and it became well known when drover, Dick Scobie started to use it.²



A group photo taken on the Buchanan Highway



We meet a road train on the Buchanan and our windows wound up so fast.

Photograph courtesy Jared Archibald



Scobie's Rockhole



A closer look at Scobie's Rockhole

Photograph courtesy Jared Archibald

² Dick Scobie 1917-2003, grew up on the Birdsville Track and worked at Hidden Valley Station, Cowarie Station, Miranda Station near Birdsville and for many years, went droving in the Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. He drove stock on the Murrnaji many times and believes that there are nine graves near the Murrnaji Waterhole and that the Waterhole was haunted.

Next stop was at the Murrnaji Waterhole.



Murrnaji Waterhole



A water trough at the Murrnaji Waterhole, Bev Phelts

At the Waterhole, Earl went in search of Scandrett's Tree which Scandrett had marked in 1926. Surveyor Scandrett had measured the Murrnaji Track in 1914. This was Earl's lucky third attempt at finding the tree.



The original windmill and tanks at the Murrnaji Waterhole are heritage listed and are still being used.



Scandrett's carved tree.
Photograph courtesy Craig Bellamy



Scandrett's carved tree.
Photograph courtesy Craig Bellamy



Another carved tree at Murrnaji Waterhole
Photograph courtesy Craig Bellamy

Next stop was at No: 11 and No: 12 Bores which are heritage listed.



No: 11 Bore	Jared Archibald climbing up No:11 Bore windmill tower
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Zillions of very old beer bottles scattered in the area.
Photograph courtesy Jared Archibald



The view from No:11 Bore windmill tower
Photograph courtesy Jared Archibald



Water tanks at No: 12 Bore. One tank in particular has a lot of graffiti scratched on it from past drivers. It was certainly worth the read!



No: 12 Bore scenic view

Lunch was at No: 13 Bore, Dungowan Station with herds of cattle intently watching!



Lunch at No:13 Bore.
Photograph courtesy Rosemary Chalmers

The following visits were to Pussycat (No:14) Bore and then to old Illawarra Station. A few of us attempted to find any remnants/footings of the old homestead while others took a dip in the creek. Some of us camped here for the night while others camped at Top Springs.



Illawarra Station creek



Camp at Top Springs. From left: Craig Bellamy, Jan Allen, Alan & Rosemary Chalmers and Alan Mitchell

3rd Day - On Sunday our final day, we headed to Percy White's grave. His gravestone reads: "Percival Whight" drove with J H Dolley and died of malaria on 21 March 1931.



Percival Whight's grave



Our final stop was at Old Top Springs Store which had provided civilisation to drovers and others who crossed the Murrumbidgee. The old store is nothing but ruins but it can be seen that it has been used since it closed during the 1960s. At the time the store was operating, it was located at the junction of four stock routes. However, the development of the beef roads and the subsequent use of trucks to move stock made the store unviable. The owner, Thelma Hawke, relocated the store to a new site on the intersection of two major stock roads (the Buntine and the Buchanan). The Top Springs Roadhouse remains there today.



Old Top Springs Store, 1957
Photograph NT Library



Ruins of old Top Springs Store

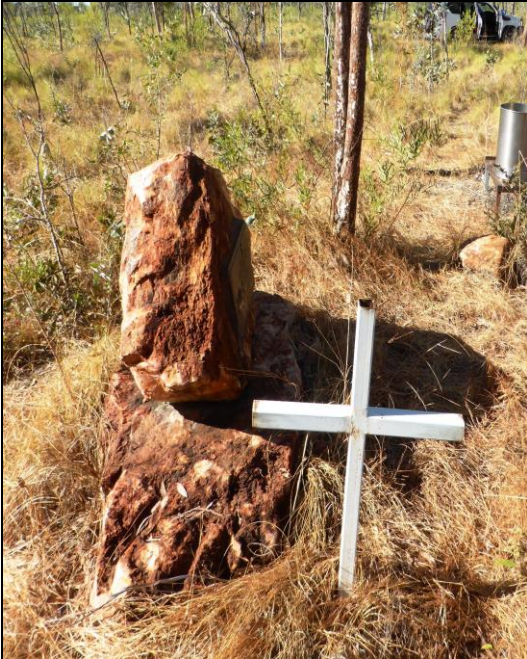


US Army 44 gallon drum



Tiled floor.





A sad reminder of how harsh the country is, was paying homage to “Little Boy Lost” – Clinton Liebelt. When eight year old Clinton disappeared from his parents Dunmarra Roadhouse in October 1993, it sparked the biggest manhunt in Territory history.

Clinton had set off on his motorbike to follow his father who was looking for a stray horse. Hundreds of people joined the search but it was to end in tragedy.

Photograph courtesy Craig Bellamy

The Murrniji Track was a brilliant trip and the Track not too rough. We saw abundant birdlife and wildlife including herds of cattle, pigs and buffalo. It must have been “baby season” as calves, piglets and baby buff were rife.



Thanks

Big thanks to Earl and Matthew James our wonderful guides – and who undertook two reccie runs to make sure our trip would be smooth sailing.

Participants

Earl James, Matthew James, Bev Phelts, Janie Mason, Ruth Kerr, Alan Mitchell, Eddie Webber, Janet Leather, Brian & Lyn Reid, Fiona Scott, Julie Mastin, Jan Allen, Craig Bellamy, Jarred Archibald, Rosemary & Alan Chalmers.

Mechanical problems - only one flat tyre!

All the photographs, unless otherwise indicated, were provided by Bev Phelts

ITINERARY

Historical Society of the Northern Territory

Field Trip, July 2017 – Murrnaji Heritage Sites

DAY 1		
		Travel south down the Stuart Highway to Dunmarra Roadhouse. Camp the night. (640 kms)
DAY 2		
	Longitude 132.53.06	Head north about 10 kms to the Turn-off to Top Springs (Buchanan Highway). Turn left and proceed 52 kms to the turn-off to Hidden Valley cattle station on the right. Stop and wait for all vehicles.
1	Scobie's Rockhole – See Lewis page 160.	
	Lat: 16.41.05 Long: 132.53.08	100 metres past the turnoff to Hidden Valley, turn left onto bush track and proceed southwards through a gate marked "Drovers Bore". Follow the track, or the fence on the right, for about 1.2 kms to Scobie's Rockhole which is near the fence, a gate and a pumping station.
	<i>This is not a Heritage-listed site but it is undoubtedly listed by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority. It is a sink-hole commonly known as an Aboriginal well. It is not on the Murrnaji Track. Lewis says that the site is of no historic interest to Europeans as it was probably unknown to them until Dick Scobie started using it in 1945. In his book "The Murrnaji Track" Lewis says that there are vertical grooves in the side of the hole which local Aborigines said were created by the rubbing of the hair belts used to lower and raise wooden coolamons used to collect the water. However the grooves are very regular so there is some doubt about this explanation.</i>	
2	Murrnaji Waterhole – See Lewis pages 121 to 127.	
	Longitude 132.47.41	Return to Buchanan H'way. Proceed westerly about 13 kms to the railway line. Do not cross.
	Latitude 16.47.42	Turn left and follow the railway for 6 kms to another railway crossing. Cross the line.
	Bore- Lat: 16.50.27 Long: 132.48.18	Veer left and almost immediately pass through a gate onto Aboriginal Land. Follow a track south westerly for 5 kms to a bore and the Murrnaji Waterhole. There is an abandoned Aboriginal out-station visible on the left about 500 metres before the bore.
		There is no potable water at the bore except by digging at the over-flow drain. The bore, like all other bores along the

		Murrnaji Track, is used by neighbouring cattle stations. There are a number of marked trees in this area.
		<i>This is a heritage-listed site. It is described by a circle of 500 metres radius around a certain map grid co-ordinate. The site is on Aboriginal Freehold Land but the bore is used by the Murrnaji cattle station. The original tanks and windmill are still there. Lewis has provided a mud-map of the area that shows a number of waterholes. Scandrett's Tree is on one of the smaller ones. Scandrett was a surveyor who measured the Murrnaji Track in 1914 but unfortunately his records are currently unavailable.</i>
3	No. 11 Bore – See Lewis page 132.	
		Return to the railway and thence back to the Buchannan H'way
	Approx Longitude 132.33.28	Cross the Railway line and proceed westerly for about 25.5 kms to a bush track heading south.
		Turn left and follow the track south for about 1.5 kms to No. 11 Bore.
		<i>This is another heritage-listed site defined by a 500 m radius circle. Lewis provides a mud-map and describes the tanks etc as seen in 1992. Recent reconnaissance reveals that most has been destroyed since then. Not suitable for camping, no water, long grass. A windmill tower, a tank and an earthen turkey nest tank are visible. Other tanks have collapsed. Long grass makes exploration difficult. Not much to see – but worth a visit. This site is on Murrnaji Station.</i>
4	No.12 Bore – See Lewis page 134.	
	Longitude 132.20.04	Return to the Buchannan H'way and continue west for about 23.5 kms to a track on the left.
		Follow the track south for 1.75 kms to No 12 Bore.
		<i>This is also a heritage-listed site which is on Dungowan station. Lewis found the infrastructure to be in reasonable condition in 1992 but recent observation shows it now to be in the same condition as No.11 bore site. No water, no camping, long grass, some tanks collapsed. Others are OK. Windmill tower has collapsed.</i>
5.	Yellow Waterhole Bore – See Lewis page 138.	
	Longitude 132.14.50	Return to the Buchannan and head west for 9 kms to another track on the left. The entrance road to Dungowan homestead is on the north side of the road.

		Follow this track south to stock yards on the right (6 Km) which claim to be the Yellow Waterhole yards. <i>(There is nothing to be seen at the yards other than a small depression that may have been the original waterhole.)</i> Continue on through the gate at 6.6 km. and proceed to Yellow Waterhole Bore at 9 kms.
		<p>Lewis says nothing about a bore at this site. He simply remarks upon a string of water holes. It is probable that this bore may have been installed by the Government at a late stage of the Murrarji Track's history but this has not been confirmed. The windmill has gone but the remains of the footings are still there. There is a pumping station here together with a tank and a fairly old steel trough.</p> <p>NOTE: The Hundred Thou map (published in 1992) shows a track heading northwest for 13 kms from this bore following the waterholes to No 13 Bore. Lewis refers to them as 'a chain of small ephemeral waterholes'. He recommended that the waterholes be heritage-listed but there is no evidence that this has been done. They are recorded as protected sites by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority. Reconnaissance of the area failed to find the track.</p>
6.	No.13 Bore – See Lewis page 140.	
	Longitude 132.10.09	Return to the Buchanan and continue west about 8 kms to signpost indicating the track to No. 13 Bore.
		Turn left and proceed south along the track for about 1.25 kms to the Bore. Long grass, five tanks and a turkey nest.
		<i>This site has been heritage-listed but the infrastructure has suffered greatly since Lewis was there in 1992. The site is on Dungowan station.</i>
7	Scandrett's Jump-up Cairn – See Lewis page 144.	
	Approx Longitude 132.07.00	Return to the Buchanan and head west for about 6 kms to a road on southern side of the highway. Scandrett's jump-up cairn is somewhere about 500 metres due north. Reconnaissance failed to find it.
		<i>This is a heritage-listed place described once again by a massive circle. It is on Dungowan station. The cairn of rocks is significant because it was the marker that gave drovers travelling east to west an indication of where they could find the easiest way down from the plateau country to the broken headwaters of the Armstrong River below. Lewis says that Surveyor Scandrett was the first official to mention the cairn in 1914, though whether he built it or it predated his survey is unknown. Some</i>

		<i>documents refer to it as Scandrett's Jump-up Cairn but neither Lewis nor the Heritage Commission do so.</i>
8	Pussycat (N0.14) Bore – See Lewis page 146	
	Longitude 132.00.38	Continue for about 13 kms along the Buchanan, crossing the Armstrong River, to the track into Pussycat Bore which is visible on the northern side of the road. This is a very busy bore and stock yard. Very little of the original remains.
		<i>This is also a heritage-listed site but at least it has been surveyed and is described on a survey plan. Lewis says it is on Aboriginal Freehold land but I suspect it is not. The bore was put down in 1948 and the yards were constructed in 1958.</i>
9	Illawarra Homestead Site – See Lewis page 153	
	Longitude 131.51.30	Continue along the Buchanan for about 19 kms to a point about 500 metres before the Illawarra Creek. Here, a track on the southern side of the road leads to an Aboriginal community and the Old Top Springs site. On the northern side of the road a track leads to a perfect camping site 1.5 kms from the road on the banks of the creek where there is a large pool.
		Those who wish to camp may do so here. Others may wish to continue on for another 20 kms and camp at the Top Springs Roadhouse.
		<i>This is the site of the old Illawarra station homestead. Lewis says it was probably on the old Dry River Stockroute which came down from Katherine to meet the Murrumbidgee Stockroute at the Old Top Springs. The station was here during the first few years of the 20th Century but it no longer exists. There are supposed to be some flagstones somewhere that the locals say was the floor of a meat house and some rocks in a line about 25 metres long. Lewis also found some glass shards and some metal items such as horseshoes, nails and cartridge cases.</i>
DAY 3		
10	White's Grave – See Lewis page 162.	
		People camped on the Illawarra proceed into Top Springs Roadhouse to join those camped at the Roadhouse. Time to be agreed.
	Latitude 16.38.19	All to proceed west along the Buntine H'way, crossing the Armstrong River, for about 12 kms to Percy White's Grave which is right beside the road.
		<i>White was not a particularly important character. Some say he may have been a cook with a droving plant but no one really seems to know.</i>

	<i>He is just one of the many isolated graves in the Victoria River district. Original carving on tree is overgrown.</i>	
11	Old Top Springs	
	Latitude 16.37.06	Return along the Buntine H'way for about 3 kms to the turn-off to the Old Top Springs on the eastern side of the road.
	Lat: 146.37.03	Turn right and proceed north east along the track for about 4.5 kms to the remains of the Old Top Springs Roadhouse.
	Long: 131.49.57	There is one spot on this road that may be too rough for conventional vehicles. If so we will organise a ferry service to and from the site.
	<i>This was the watering hole that serviced the drovers after their perilous journey along the original Murrarji Track. The store here was at the junction of four stock-routes. It catered to the drovers and any stray travellers such as surveying parties until the 1960's. Around that time the beef roads of the Territory were being constructed and road transport saw the demise of the drover. Eventually Thelma Hawke, the proprietor, demanded a new site from the government and built a new roadhouse at the intersection of two major 'beef roads', the Buntine and the Buchanan Highways. There is not much left at this site but it is worth having a scratch around for souvenirs.</i>	
12	Return to Top Springs and head for Katherine and Darwin (650 kms).	