



Day 1
Wednesday, 9th February
Territory Wildlife Park & Riyala

Began the day really well in warmth both emotional and physical. John's mobile was a half hour early, and everyone was on time, but according to him they were all late. A good beginning.

Deposited gear at Riyala, then off to the wildlife park, which we covered very comprehensively. This Park is about 1000 acres, under the direction of the NT Government's National Park. From wedge-tailed eagles to Gouldian finches Lizards, snakes, frogs and arachnids were all examined and photographed in their natural habitat. Expert commentary from the three intrepid guides and the keepers at the Park made the trip very informative. The raptor show impressed with the accuracy and response of the birds, especially the osprey's fishing technique. The shows were timed to coincide with our arrival at each spot and certainly increased our awareness of the danger that some of the environment is facing.

The Billabong with Pelicans and crocodiles, the aquarium, the aviaries, the nocturnal house all provided us with fascinating insights, Some of us saw our first cane toad, but fortunately in captivity.

A delicious lunch at the cafeteria revived us for the afternoon. We returned to Riyala at 16.30, had a quick cup of tea, then off for a walk with Ian on the property to Elizabeth River, the boundary of the property. This stroll included good information on land management, and rehabilitation of the land after the removal of the feral cats and pigs.

Two frogs and a whip snake – where else but in the ladies loo, livened up an enjoyable evening. Dinner allowed us to become a little more acquainted with each other and included a description of whistle-cocking and circumcision.
Signed *The CHATS*



Day 2
Thursday, 10th February
Litchfield National Park

4:57am at Riyala; close enough to my usual 6:30 start of a Sydney day – I dress and wander out of my container - converted cabin. No signs of life from fellow humans but creepy crawlies abound, and an industrious rooster (?) is already announcing the approach of morning far, far way.

In the Ladies' a tiny tree frog nearly jumped out of its skin when I startled him at the basin, and his larger green cousin buries its head under the rim of the toilet bowl, as if to shield itself from the light.

A cloud of winged insects shrouds the fluoro tube in the kitchen – a dash to, it seems, as are visible and voices of human are speaking in full volume, chasing away the whispering dawn. John's cooking the porridge. (MT – Darter No. 1).

After a excellent breakfast, a large stick insect was found and displayed and photographed and generally tormented for quite some time before the vehicle was packed and ready to go. everything on the bench below is dusted with a layer of their dead. A large centipede nudged the toe of my sandals and I did the tree frog leap. In the fridge a pale yellow moth stirs – does it like it there or should I rescue it from the cold? I decide to let nature runs its course and close the door.

All around me mysterious sounds reminds me that I am not alone, and occasionally an odd human-form emerges from a cabin and sleepwalks to the loo. It is too dark and quiet for 7:30am (Sydney time) so I invite Eva Cassidy to my breakfast – her voice emerges from my iPod mini, defying Death that robs her from us, too soon, and she keeps me company.

I look up and suddenly the sky is backlighting the forms of trees and birders are flashing lights into the still dark branches searching for the origin of bird calls. Lights are rimming cabin doors one by one as people begins to prepare for the start of the day. Soon the green of the grass and the reds and yellow of tropical blooms

We headed towards Batchelor described by a bachelor as an aboriginal university town and plantation of tea, sandalwood, mangoes and other exotic timbers. We passed Rum Jungle on the way to Litchfield. An excellent morning tea was head at the Magnetic and Cathedral Termite mounts, and entertained by Tata Dragons.



Day 3
Friday, 11th February
Pine Creek – Edith Falls

The day began with the Singing sirens outside Ian's door. After breakfast, we went to the Pine Creek lookout over the town, saw the Enterprise pit (aka a big hole in the ground) filled with deep turquoise water. Also, many deep mine shafts and native passion-fruit vines with very pretty flowers and fruits.

Next, we arrived at Gun Alley, Earl Gano's place. Earl is a Canadian who left the minus 40 degree temperatures of Alberta for here!! Something of the sublime to the ridiculous, he has been here for 35 years and is an amazing character. Although he is now not in the best of health, he still managed to entertain us for several hours, starting with his in depth expose of the late nineteenth century ore crusher which he has lovingly restored, even making his own new rivets.

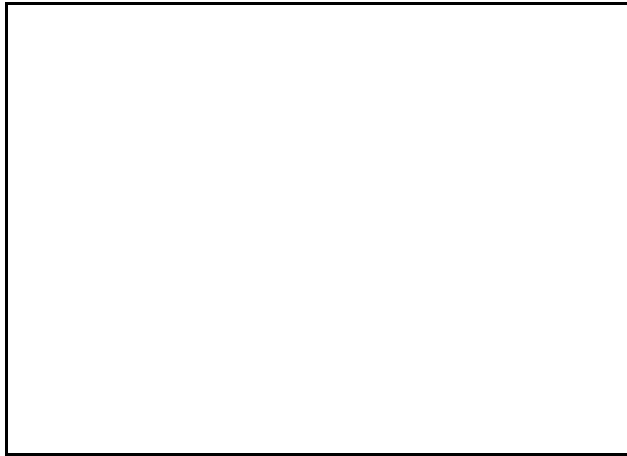
This steam driven engine is renowned for being a double acting camshaft driven engine with 5 stompers (Thank you Don) the most recent component being a 1902 steam vessel. Lego for big boys. They were all fascinated. He also filled us in about the gold rush of the 1870's and its social and economic repercussions.

After the engineering tutorial, Earl sat down with us and told us several amusing stories and recited some of his poems – as well as being very clever with things mechanical, he is also an historian and a poet, as yet unpublished. He also does an interesting line in chairs, this one being made of hessian, tree limbs and canvas – coming to Ikea soon! We then went on to the gold panning and everyone ended up with a few flakes in a little vial. By now it was lunchtime so we headed back.

A swim at Nitmiluk was next on the agenda, This was 60 ks east of Pine creek, and the name means 'cicada'. This park is owned by the Jawoyn people and is full of aromatic plants, trees and an amazing swimming lake surrounded by skyscraper high sandstone cliffs with two beautiful waterfalls.



As today was such an incredibly (for us anyway) hot day, the swimming was very welcome especially as some hardy souls as well as Mr.



The first swim of the day was at Buley Rockholes, where some of us enjoyed a thorough massage from the cascades.

On the way out, the support vehicle was well on the way when it received a call of distress. Suddenly "BANG!". A rear tire was destroyed on the bus and the support vehicle had to be recalled. There in the hot sun, the pit team with lots of advice and ably assisted by our SES volunteer, Jean, a rapid change was affected.

Two blue winged kookaburras at Wangi Falls wondered where we were. Quel horreur! We apologised to the kookaburras over an excellent lunch. They were gracious enough to pose for about half an hour for the most intrusive set of paparazzi. Mad dogs and Englishmen and the equally insane went out in the midday sun for a walk to the top.

Next stop Tolmer Falls – 15 minutes walk to a View of falls, enticing water and natural bridge. Swimming was out of the question so on we went for a look at the silver cycads.

Another 15 minute walk took us to Florence Falls where we saw a cute little rock wallaby on the way down. Some of us disappeared under the water fall, some fed "piranha and crayfish".

Ian counted TWELVE canetoads on the Stuart Highway on the way to Pine Creek. Fearless Leader saved the life of a yellow spotted monitor that was crossing the road but did not save any cane toads.

In the dark we groped our way through the Kakadu Gateway after battling the ferocious canine. Fearless Leader supervised the production of Vietnamese springrolls served with fine wine.

We celebrated the 42nd wedding anniversary of Anne and Gerald today. The D team decided to retire after one wife came to rip her husband's shirt and asked for his underpants. Some people do laundry at 10:43pm. (Darters 2, 3. & 4)



Morris and Mr. Miles went on a 2.6 k walk up a mountain to see the upper pool, well worth the walk. The trip home included the aromatic plant, *Pterocaulon*, some cypress wood, and a spinifex resin pod with a very informative explanation from Ian.

By now the sky was showing signs of heavy rain clouds, deep grey ones with ragged edges, and towering castles of shaving cream, the cumulus clouds, as well as two perfect rainbows and a very graceful jabiru which flew across the road. At dinner time, the lightning has started but as yet no rain, however we are hopeful for some rain within an hour (to quote Mr. Miles!)

**Some Haiku from Gubarra Walk
Fearless Leader**

I

Glistening sundews
Tiny carnivorous plants
Insect entrapment

II

Pink to vermilion
Bloodwoods colour the woodlands
Lifting our spirits.

III

Phoenaecian curves
Splayed at many angles
Swayed by strange forces

IV

Munbiniks aura
Adds light and shade to water
What colours our world?

V

Ochres on rock faces
Culture heritage explained
A blackboard lesson



**Day 4
Saturday, 12th February
Pine Creek to Coinda**

Last night we experienced our first “wet” in Kakadu. Around “turn-in” time, the heavens rumbled and opened. This morning it was fresh and cool.

We started off promptly at 9.00 am to give in the keys and pay for our accommodation at Ah Toy’s store, but alas the store was closed. There had been a death in the family so they had left town and the store would remain closed! A quick trip back to Earl’s place fixed that. The advantage of a small community that everyone knows everyone else. This was demonstrated when John went to make a purchase at the servo, to be

presented with his card he left there the day before. Some good news came for Ian (IG), a large federal funding has been approved for “frog watch”.

On our way to Mary River we spotted the hooded parrot, much to the delight of the bird watchers. We also stopped and saw the rare and endangered *Cyas conferta* cycad which grows in a very limited area in Kakadu. Once we crossed the Mary River we stopped at the Moline Rock pools, by this time it was very hot and humid again. We shared this beautiful spot with the local rangers’ 12 year old son’s birthday party. A spotted water monitor displayed himself beautifully for the photographers.

We passed through lush woodland until our lunchtime stop at Boulder Creek. We sheltered under the shade of the trees while we ate, then walked down for another swim. We negotiated the suspension bridge to get there, some with tentative steps and white knuckles, others with a dash of “daring do”. We were peacefully enjoying the area, when suddenly we were caught unexpectedly in a heavy downpour. No matter whether we sheltered in the water or under umbrellas, towels etc, we all managed to be totally drenched by the time we got back to the coach. We were admiring the waterfalls that now cascaded off the rocky hillside following the rainfall. A tree branch had also fallen onto the track no doubt from the turbulent conditions.

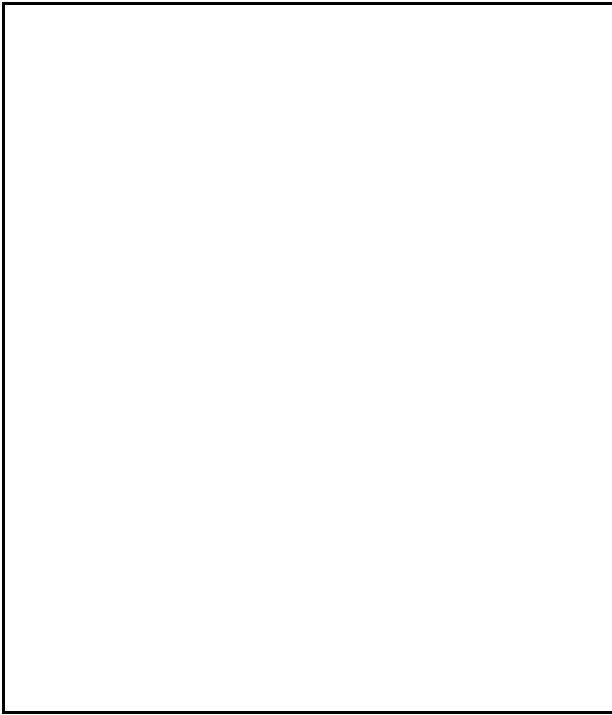
The last part of the trip was very subdued as we tried to dry off. Anytime we stopped for another photo stop, we stood pretending to be clotheslines, drying our clothes. We arrived at Coinda in sunshine, feeling satisfied we had another exciting day.



**Day 5
Sunday, 13th February
Coinda to Jabiru**

This morning Jean found a keelback snake – Ian was roused before his usual time, but charmed the snake into a pillowcase.

Later the snake was shown to us and released in the safety of the marsh close by the Cultural Centre.



Now we were privileged to hear from Patsy the details of the life of local clans and her family – she is a traditional landowner, and explained the differences between her childhood experiences and current life. Her sister Jessie was cooking buffalo nearby, and 2 children also came out to the area.

We began the day with a boat trip on Yellow Waters wetland, South Alligator River. Much to satisfy the birdwatchers, and botanists. Unusual birds were jacana, crimson finch, red winged parrots, lemon breasted flycatcher, yellow oriole, bee-eaters, and many more. One bird watcher was heard to remark “too much to watch here”. On a bank slept a large saltwater crocodile (rubber?? plastic??). Much of the plant life provides sustenance for aboriginal communities.



We proceeded to the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural centre where there is a very stimulating and educational display of the life of the local clans i.e. Murumburr/Bunity/Worgol/Balanda. The building resembles the shape of the body of the pig nosed freshwater turtle.

Before the arrival of the European settlers there were 200 aboriginal languages, now reduced to 50. At the entrance is a stone showing the traditional seasonal calendar.

The first industry in the area after crocodile hunting was buffalo shooting, the buffaloes introduced from Timor in the early 1830s. At one time there were 28,000 buffalo in Kakadu, wreaking severe environmental destruction, but few remain, thanks to culling.

Ian told us about the “Timor” pony, an animal descended from the horses used by Genghis Khan and which are now extinct in Mongolia.

We then went to Nourlangie Rock for lunch and next walked to the rock shelters and aboriginal art chambers. En route we were in several lookouts and Greg and Ian explained the methods for preserving rock art, and the varied methods of dating.

On the way to Jabiru Lodge we met an Aboriginal gentleman at the fuel stop who turned out to be Ian’s nephew, and from whom Jenny bought a very beautiful painting of a brolga.

All told, a wonderful day! Many thanks to John for making all these exciting and educational experiences possible.



Day 6
Monday, 14th February
Flights & Gunbalanya

Clear skies and a beautiful warm morning with everyone hanging around waiting for bread. But where is it? Oh its Valentine's Day...and where is Greg? And why is Fearless Leader so delayed...must be the text message he received wishing him happy Valentines Day from His Harem and now we know why Greg is missing. Lucky Jane!

On the bus to Jabiru Airport we saw lizards playing "beat the bus" while Ian told us about Uranium Mining issues and the Injalak Arts and Crafts Centre at Oenpelli / Gunbalanya in Arnhemland.

Step up here cried the chief pilot and show your true weight... Ian stop cheating, you're not 102 your 105 kg, that not years! We were allocated aircraft according to our accumulated weight... and watch it when you get on plane because if the heavy ones get on first at the front of the plane, the plane will nose dive!

Four planes, several Cessnas, one Airvan (the true Aussie plane) took off one by one for Gunbalanja, or Oenpeli, with various audio tidbits of information about this astounding land provided through earphones. First up we saw the big aqua hole with the sacred Rainbow Serpent sites behind. The yellow stockpile is sulphur not uranium (its black/green and not seen). One pit produces more energy than all the coal in Australia. But how safe is it?

The plane veered to the left to show us a natural arch or bridge set into the ongoing escarpments. We also saw the Alligator River running like a curling snake through endless green lush wetlands and the enormous, still, mangrove area dotted with magpie geese, and shining white egrets. No crocs. What's that? — A car abandoned in floodwaters. Thank goodness the Fearless Leader decided to fly rather than drive! The pilot said that the Red Billabong was as good as he had ever seen it. In the dry there would be no water at all. So much to look at the 19 minute plane ride flashed by quickly.



The first GO BUSH truckload rushed into town to prepare for the walk "straight up the mountain" to visit the art galleries. The second lot squashed into the 4 Wheel Drive surprised a huge flock of whistling duck and straw necked ibis. Brahman bulls, casually flicking their tails, curiously watched the tourists hoping they weren't expecting a beef dinner. Brown kites circling in the thermals, and Australian Kestrel and a Jabiru looking for lunch in the swamp were also seen. We passed a sacred men's ceremonial site, Arnakuluk, an impressive fortress of red rocks. In efforts to conserve space, we strategically placed our Fearless Leader outside the back 4WD door clinging onto the back door, allegedly to stabilize the vehicle...but then why did he get off just before the police station?

The Arts Centre was awesome. Too much choice. What to buy? Time for the first load to see the art galleries and sacred site? Men painting, women making baskets, carefree children, and dogs everywhere. About six of us stayed behind mingling with locals, talking about crafts, their paintings, lifestyles and reading various books.



The rest drove out to the bottom of the climb to see the galleries and sacred burial places. Anthony the Art Centre Manager told us it was the only Go Bush group to go out to the site. (The water always restricted access in the past).

Wilfred, the landowner from the place, and the only Aboriginal Guide for the area greeted us quietly but warmly. Lets go for some exercise!

He took us up in stages and then stopped surveyed the land and allowed everyone to quietly "breathe" the place. What was anticipated as a strenuous climb turned out to be steep but fairly easily conquered. We were awe struck at the first gallery.

Wilfred told us of stories connected to some of the paintings and thoughtfully said when he came alone he liked to think about life and get inspirations. It was a magical place looking out from a big cave with walls covered with all types of sea and river creatures...but no frog paintings.

Diary — 2005 Kakadu in the Wet Safari — 6

Namarrkurn, Lightning Man, was there with Mimi the spirits.

We moved along and saw three different species of bats...not paintings real ones swooping and swirling around us! (Well we didn't know the types but Ian identified them as the Ghost Bat, Common Sheath Tailed Bat, *Eptesicus sp.*, a little brown bat).

With a bit of trembling in his voice Wilfred pointed out the drawing of the evil one, Namarandi. Our children and even you people need to know about Namarandi who might catch you if you travel alone in the country. The paintings have been used to tell stories while sheltering in the cave. To Aboriginal people they are precious but not because they are works of art. They told about important life messages lessons to be learned.

The BBC came in the mid-1980s and a big corroboree was held to document and help people around the world to learn about their customs. The video is still available today.

We went to the next layer where we weren't allowed to take photos. Wilfred told us of custom burials and we saw some remains. He said today people have telephones and vehicles to get to a funeral but in days past they had message sticks and had to wait till people could come. The people from this area can still bury their people here if they so choose. Martin said he thought it was a lovely place to rest and indeed it was a very peaceful place. The view out over the dusty red roads, small buildings at Oenpelli and the endless green valley was stunning.

We left the site and by the next resting-place, when we counted numbers, Longnose, Fearless Leader and Carol and Fred were no longer to be found. Wilfred was concerned, couldn't find them but we carried on.



We passed by a wonderful small drawing of a woman with many string bags. This was Mother Creator. She walked all over the earth with different language groups in each bag which she placed all over land hence the many different

communities with a wide variety of language and customs. The Mother Creator was important to both men and women but Laura the German film maker who was doing a 30 minute documentary to accompany a Melbourne (starting in May for four months) exposition of women's weaving was particularly drawn to this piece of art.

Later we learned that Wilfred had drawn similar images.

On the way back Ian, Fearless Leader and others were waiting for us... good no one was lost. On the way down we saw several *Litoria dahlii*. These new hatchlings about 2 cm long, (they grow up to about 12 cm) made it difficult to believe they are the ones that can eat toads. Ian was surprised to see them frolicking in the water streams on the rocks as they are mainly found (and breed) in the flood plains and not known to be rock climbers.

We reunited with the others who had enjoyed trying to weave baskets, talking with painters, learning about legends and checking out the town shops. The others returned to the Art Centre viewed the paintings with knew knowledge about the stories behind the art and happily added to our purchases.

The airstrip back was over the flood plains. We passed Mudjimberri (where Patsy was from), a buffalo / cattle farm and where Crocodile Dundee was filmed. The cloud shadows made interesting patterns on the rocks and some updrafts of clouds created a mildly bumpy ride. But where were Fearless Leader and Uncle Long Nose? We waited and waited and waited (OK. It was in a cool air-conditioned place for some but for others waiting for the plane, it was hot hot hot) ... Was the last plane coming? Some wondered and finally it came. We learned later that the pilot who was to return for Fearless Leader and the others, blacked out on the tarmac, hit his head and had to be taken to the hospital.)

FL rushed back to Jabiru to do the shopping, while some enjoyed a swim in the very hot public swimming pool with showers as hot as the pool... At last dusk came, dinner served and all went to bed wondering about tomorrow's expeditions.

Day 7 Tuesday, 15th February Guliyambi Cruise and Ubirr

An extra flight was organized for those wanting to look over the Kakadu plateau and Arnhemland This was an early departure for the willing while others had free time.

On return everyone piled into the bus for the 15 minute drive to the creek. Two boats waited to take us up the creek, cruising through weeping,

broadleaf and silver melaleucas into the billabong. On the trip the knowledgeable guides showed us baskets and water containers used by the locals of earlier times.

We then boarded a bus to take us to Ubirr where we had lunch at a sheltered picnic area where we were lucky to see a Short-eared Rock Wallaby hopping along the rock shelf. The galleries of art works at different levels were varied and partially explained by our able guides.



X-ray style paintings at Ubirr main gallery

The view from the escarpment was over the flood plains to Arnhemland. We hope the tadpoles at the top will survive the dry wet. A Sandstone Shrike-thrush was sighted together with a northern fantail and variegated wrens, and on the flat an euro was sighted.

On the boat return we sighted two sea eagles on a thermal above their nest plus an osprey, we were also shown fishing and hunting tools.

Back at the camp the alternative was a swim or a tour of the city centre.

After tea, due to a short shower burst, we bused out to where we caught the ferries to find snakes, as the rain had not been sufficient to encourage the frogs. Before we all walked too far to the water Ian suggested we stop and showed us what to do with our torches. It was then we saw two big reflecting lights which belonged to a croc. Knowing this it gave some people confidence to walk around on the edge. Greg was the first to find a file snake which became the most photographed snake. It was rather quiet so back into the bus, stopping occasionally to hear some frogs and for Greg to pop out and find another roadside snake, King Brown.



Day 8 Wednesday, 16th February Gubara, Bowali, Mamukala

Drove to Gubara Pools on the north side of Burrunggui (Nourlangie). A long walk to the junction of three streams; one pool with rapids and two monitors, another with a nice waterfall. We took with us Sebastian, son of Gordon who is the son of Bluey Ilkirr, a famous painter. Sebastian had a great time snorkeling and annoying the monitors. It was touching to see how our Fearless Leader and Intrepid Guides looked after and entertained him.

Everybody sat under the waterfall or shot the rapids. Found some black berries, a species of proteaceae, some large ancient trees from the Gondwana period and ancestors of eucalypts. Some orange pea flower, pink flowering gums, brown yellow and blue butterflies.

Back to the bus for morning tea and return, stopping to see some Leichhardt's Grasshoppers and Pom-Pom flowers (*Austramyrtilis magnifica*).

After lunch we visited Bowali Visitors' Centre where Greg had his headquarters until July last year when he retired. The bookshop was extremely well patronized causing delightful comments from the staff.

While at the centre, we watched a video starring our very own intrepid guides, "From the Heart" and the excellent library and nature displays were appreciated by all. The bushwalkers admired the bushwalking maps.

Greg explained the award winning design of the building which is in the shape of a rock shelf and its surrounds.

Onto Mamukala Wetlands where a wonderful artistic mural depicted the seasons in their glories with illustrations of wildlife and vegetation. Greg was proud to point out that his better half, Jane was the artist.

Many birds, wild pigs, wallabies and a crow with laryngitis were spotted.

Tonight we anticipate the 'party' designed by Fearless Leader with excitement. As well we expect to celebrate the birthday of our Intrepid Guide, Ian.



Day 9
Thursday, 19th February
Jabiru to Darwin

The day started with the usual affectionate harassing of Our Beloved Guide Ian, and because it was his 54th Birthday, much noisy singing of “Happy Birthday” at breakfast, especially from tiny Mary with the big voice!

Last night we farewelled Gordon and Sebastian who have at last managed to get home to Oenpelli. (We had a great time with Sebastian yesterday at the waterfalls and rock pools.) It was really good to meet them both and talk with them.

We took off for the South Alligator River flood plain and along the way saw a spectacular collection of lotus as well as graceful egrets and not very graceful magpie geese. (This is a rather subjective comment, some people may find geese exceedingly graceful). At a bridge over the South Alligator, there was a lot of fishy activity – mullet, as well as baby archer fish and lots of bubbles. Cec is very much into pristine freshwater creeks in which lurk 20 species of fish as well as salt and freshwater crocs.

We progressed on to the Monsoon Forest walk (Aurora Roadhouse) where we had tea under a huge banyan tree with some Firetail Black Cockatoos and trampoline spiders for company – well the consensus was that these were trampoline spiders. Along the walk, we found many orange-red berry bearing bushes, *Ganophyllum falcatum*, as well as the cheeky yam plant, *Amorphophallus*, the tuber or root of which has to be soaked in fresh water before consumption to remove the toxins. There were also generous quantities of “flying syringes” aka mosquitoes.

After a stop at the East branch of the West Alligator River (more pristine wetlands) and an unscheduled stop when the brakes started burning we stopped for lunch at the Bark Hut Inn. This included more enthusiastic singing and cake eating as John had prepared a Fire Hazard Fruit Cake decorated with lots of sparklers for IG!

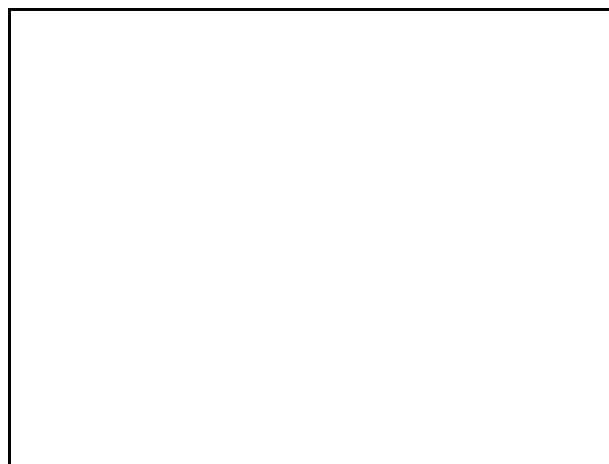
Later we arrived at “Window on the Wetlands” funded/sponsored by the Northern Territory Government, where there was an interesting expose of the failed rice growing scheme of the 1950s – most of the seeds were eaten by the progeny of the Magpie Geese amongst other problems for the scheme. This place provided an alternative view of life in the Wetlands, compared to the Bowali Centre.

On to Fogg Dam, (site of the former rice growing experiment) for a panoramic look at the wetlands, where the biomass is in the thousands per acre,

and the sky leaves you speechless (well, it worked for me anyway). It was here we had the group photos with IG doing a “Spiderman” on the tin roof to get a better picture. Also seen along the way, kingfisher, kite, Yellow Spotted Monitor. On to Harrison Dam hunting area – geese produce 16-18 eggs per clutch, wallaby and goanna.

Mangoland approaches – must be getting closer to Darwin – a small and very pretty diversion to Riyala (because of a lack of trousers or similar) and then back to the Big Smoke to be dropped at our accommodations, ready to be collected later for dinner.

The Party Bus rounded up the group, all rather glamorous looking now, and headed off to the Wharf – where, if you look over the edge, not only is the sea pale turquoise but there are many fish of many sizes hanging around for the odd discarded chip or two. Added to this, there was an amazing light show in the western sky to amuse us while we had dinner. It was a magical evening and only ended when we were hosed off the wharf and into the carpark by the staff. There were many goodbyes, ranging from the warmly polite right through to much tearful hugging of our much-admired IG and FL, not forgetting the pleasantly furry Cec!



Please can we start all over again tomorrow?? ☺

CREW

