

Northern Territory, Australia, June 2008

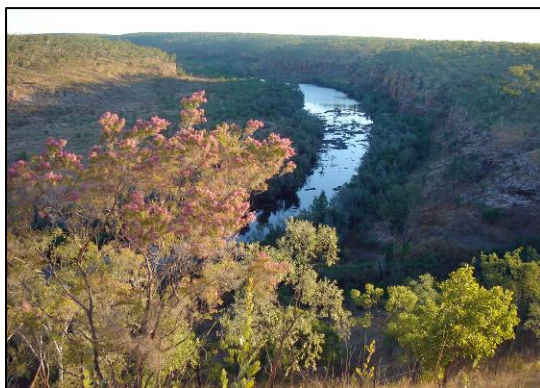


Pungalina Safari

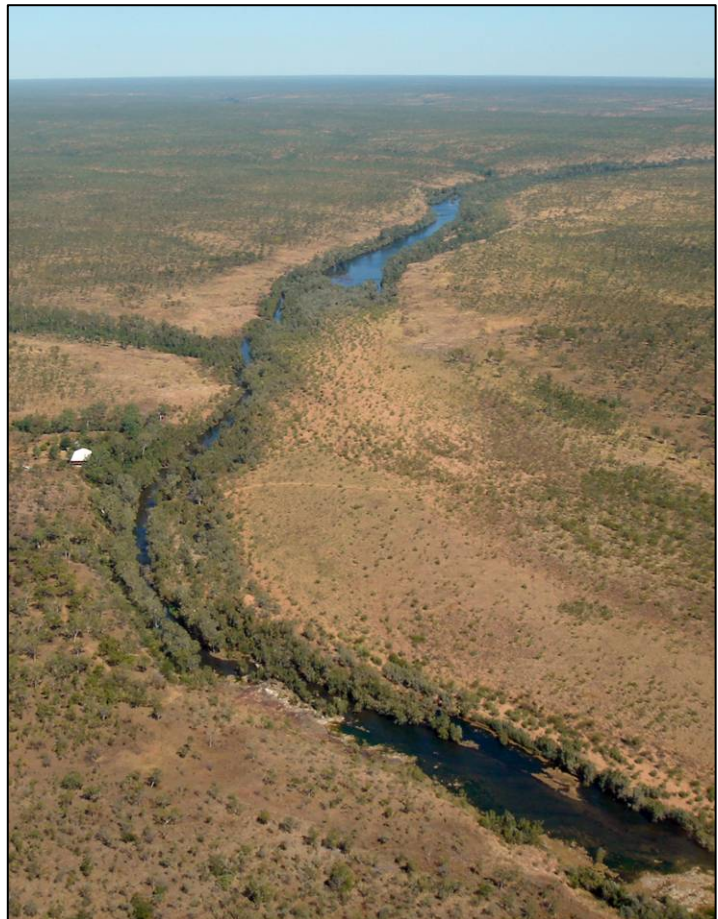
Jon Coe

Pungalina Woodlands

Half a million acres,
leased Aboriginal land,
tropical dry forest and savannah,
cabbage gum, woolly butt,
stringy bark, bloodwood.



Pink fringe myrtle
and golden senna
on stony ground.



Spiral pandanus and white ghost gum
on moist ground.

Spear grass, waist high,
tawny gold with sun behind it,
russet with sun behind you.



Three emus, a pair of bustards and
flocks of green, red-winged parrots
and pink and grey galahs.

Sandy tracks, red or white, true and fast;
stony tracks, jagged dolomite or
red and black river stones,
toss us about,
threaten tire and axle;
stones and needle pointed spinifex grass
discourage walking.

Brown mosaic landscapes,
blackened tree trunks,
new green leaves,
some with red petioles,
seasonal burns after the wet,
block serious fires during the dry.



Feral Cattle

Red and wary,
watch from shade
of white ghost gums
as we drive the woodlands.

One big bullock
stands broadside and fit,
despite poor provender
of ancient soils;
grass is tall but
nutrition is short.

Last year Frank Shaford,
the steady Black owner
of neighbouring Seven Emus Station
and his Black drovers,
masters of their dying art,
mustered about four hundred head
out of Pungalina,
droving two days
to Seven Emus.

But too many cattle still
break down river banks,
even swimming the Calvert River
cross or not.

Dingos

Dingos keep wild pigs in check;
two dingos greet us at Pungalina airstrip,
Beau and her mother Skungi;
sire Lockie, who lives bush
but occasionally visits the camp,
comes by.



Pilot Keith

We flew with Keith Siler,
a proper pilot
in his proper Piper Chieftain,
up from Melbourne 2600 km,
a day and a half,
to Pungalina Station, Gulf Country,
Northern Territories.

In 4wd, Pungalina is 2 hours
from Hells Gate,
now deserted,
10 hours to Mt. Isa and
13 hours to Darwin;
Basic groceries are 200k away.

He Flew with Kingsford Smith

John Smith, now eighty-seven,
and life partner Val,
are celebrating their sixtieth
year together
exploring Pungalina
with us.

At age thirteen
young John and
a plane load of other kids
from the Wimmera,
North-eastern Victoria,
took a barn storming ride
with legendary Aussie aviator
Sir Charles Kingsford Smith,
making John an instant hero
to Pilot Keith.

John and Val, lifelong travellers,
see no reason
to stay home now.
If their bodies are slower,
their humour is quick and sure-footed.

John enjoys the co-pilot seat;
being the “senior aviator” aboard,
I think of him as Captain John.



John Smith

Manager Owen Davies

Arrived nine years ago.
Tall, quiet, fit,
a fair hand at everything
from hunt guide and mud brick architecture,
cattle to aircraft maintenance,
fencing and road building.

Owen began running Pungalina,
With Tony and Sandy Kirkhope
four years ago,
with son Rob helping now.

Current camp keepers Debra Strath
and Andrew Berthelsen,
with Pilot Keith's help,
provide tucker and tales
in abundance.

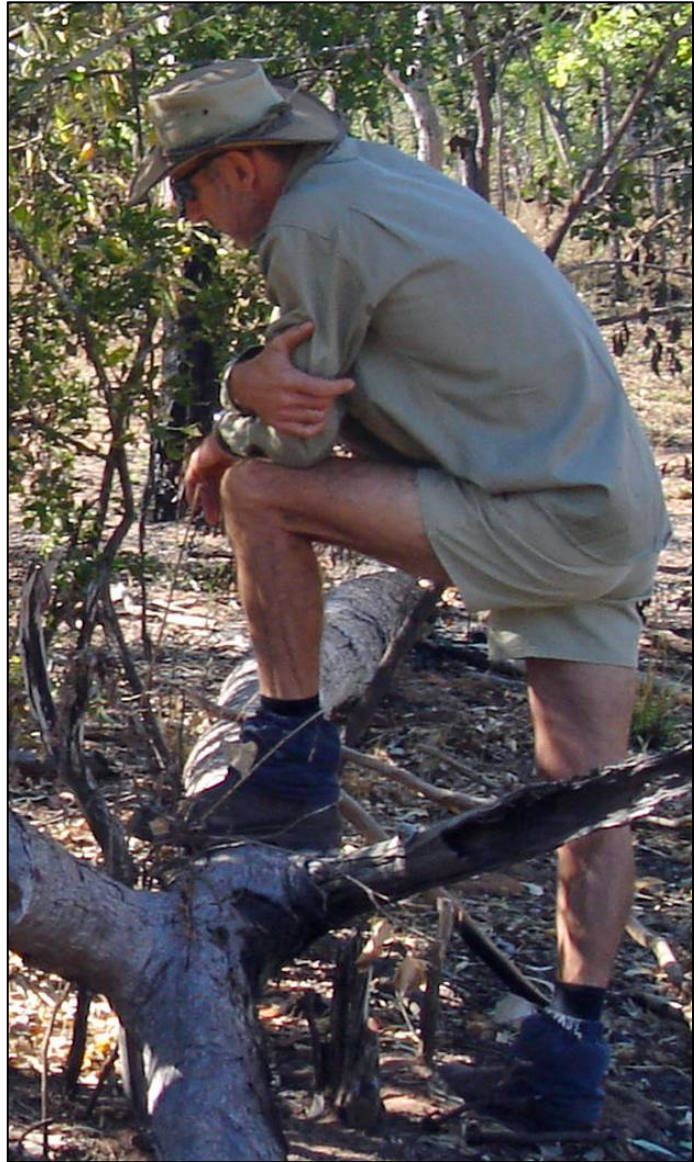
Modern Swagmen

John Keane and Rob Turton
dropped out of the sky at Pungalina
In a forty year old bubble Bell chopper
which saw service in Vietnam.

John learned to fly helicopters
when most blokes take up golf.
Dirt biker Rob's bionic body
has been rebuilt as often
as John's chopper.

Both men seek
the swagman's freedom,
follow their itch,
camp at remote coolabahs,
stations or pubs
from Normanton to Darwin or Birdsville.

They are as carefree
as Pilot Keith is careful,
yet all share passions and yarns
with Owen, Captain John and me
over campfires at Pungalina.



Owen Davies

Bubbling Springs

are small and fun
after a hot day
in the bush.

Using goggles in waist deep water
we observe small striped fish
and red claw yabbies
among underwater sand spouts,
where warm clear water rises
one thousand litres per second
the year around.

Pungalina Caves

Dolomite limestone 1500 million years old
and fossil stromatolites,
among the first oxygen producing organisms,
relics of shallow seas,
lies just below spear grass
on high stony ground.

Cluster figs hide cave openings,
crowd hot humid air
escaping ancient catacombs,
perhaps the oldest on earth;
or are these new caves in old rock?

Perhaps, preserved in flowstone
or deep dust, microfossils,
extinct but dateable species,
or isotopes
of known age will answer;
or perhaps not.

Traditional Owners fear these places
of darkness and death,
but below, in black sauna air,
Nick White, Paul Brooker
and other careful volunteers
survey each new passage and gallery,
bringing foreign light
and foreign footprints
where neither have ever been before.



Paperbark

A resurrection forest of
great paperbark trees
lines the Calvert River
at Middle Crossing.

Quietly sketching
this twisted chaos of white trunks,
I surprise two red-caped brolga cranes
in their stately progression to water.

Paperbarks lean or lay
aligned downstream,
toppled by annual floods
six meters deep
during the wet,
they re-root and regrow
during the dry,
only to re-toppled
in the catastrophe
of the next wet.

Massive logs and flood wrack
lodge in tree tops
four meters above
today's low water level.

The last two wets were light,
according to Owen,
In 2006 Calvert River
rose eighteen to thirty metres,
flooded machine shed and house,
camp, airstrip,
and much of Pungalina.

Owen and his family
were completely cut off
for months
in this vast Top End.



Landscape in Black and White

Canoeing black water of Lake Crocodilus,
paddles tangled with water weed,
we pass among bleached bones
of drowned upland forest.

Forest becomes lake,
Lake drying out
will become woodland.
Change comes fast
to the Gulf Country.

Indifferent slow pelicans,
fast flying cormorants and jetting teal,
all black and white,
circle in the sunset.

Snake-neck and head
of a darter emerges,
then retreats underwater.

Stately black swans
take slow flight,
white wingtips flashing
in the last evening light,
which also fires
the white head of a sea eagle
on her massive nest
of bleached sticks
atop a bleached tree
reflected in primordial waters.



Australia Wildlife Conservancy

Pungalina is being purchased
by the Australia Wildlife Conservancy,
putting Owens's job and home in doubt,
along with Pilot Keith's charters here.

Hopefully AWC will value and retain
present programs and management,
but nothing is certain at Pungalina,
nothing but the changing seasons,
the wet and the dry,
and the fires between.