ROAMING THE GAMMONS

Exploring the desert mountains of the northern Flinders Ranges

by Grant Dixon

Australia is a predominantly arid continent and so contains a vast potential area for walking experiences quite different to those usually encountered by those of us resident in the temperate southeast.

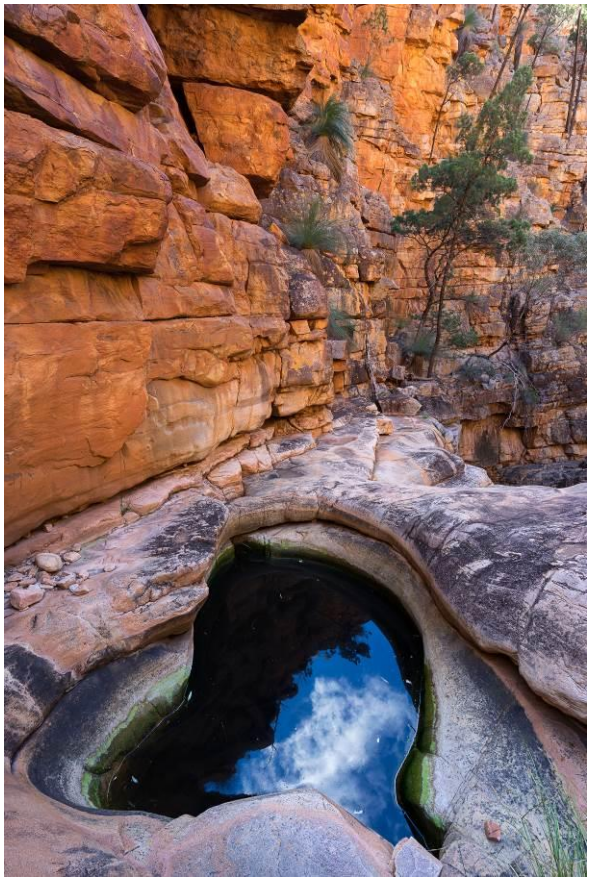
One such opportunity lies roughly 500 kilometres as the crow flies north of Adelaide: the Gammon Ranges. Lying at the northeastern end of the great sweep of folded mountains that comprise the Flinders Ranges, the Gammons are a high but substantially eroded plateau of flat-lying quartzite strata, where the highest summits rise to over 1000 metres above sea level. The range has been long-dissected, forming spectacular gorges, and this distinctive mountain landscape rises from low country surrounding the gleaming salt flats of Lake Frome.

1940s desert explorer Warren Bonython walked extensively in the region. "At their edge the slope", said Bonython, "which was gentle near the crest, progressively steepens and then changes dramatically into a precipice plunging down to a rock-strewn creek bed perhaps a thousand feet below".

The Gammons are dry. Walking here is totally reliant on finding and carrying water; any weight saving achieved by ditching items like tents (in favour of a very light fly in our case) is cancelled out by the need to carry water. And if you're a couple of keen photographers attracted to elevated (i.e. dry) campsites and sunset or dawn views, then the water load can be even more onerus; the end of the day means carrying it uphill.

But it was a fate Ian and I grudgingly accepted. Our initial ascent, in any case, was far worse. We staggered up the stony bed of Balcanoona Creek, carrying food for 11 days. And that was before then load of water; not knowing the state of even the first waterhole, we were carrying plenty as a contingency.

After coaxing my Subaru along the vehicular track to Loch Ness Well (the recent grading of the road helped), we set off for Bunyip Chasm, just a couple of hours of pain away. There, we dumped our heavy loads. Now unencumbered, we explored a dry narrow side-gorge, where – attesting to brief but furious storm water flows – there were occasional piles of jammed logs. They were helpful, though, allowing us to bypass a small waterfall and a jammed chockstone.



The stratified and jointed nature of the quartzite rock gives rise to many steps and ledges. These facilitated an easy scramble out of the first gorge, into an amphitheatre surrounded by soaring red cliffs. There, hanging part way up the eastern wall, was perhaps the Gammon's most dramatic slot canyon: Bunyip Chasm. We scrambled up to enter this cool and narrow defile. The vertical walls were barely three metres apart, and filtered sunlight highlighted their texture and accentuated their redness.

The next morning, we ascended a steep spur, the ground loose and shingly underfoot. Frequent pauses let us look back at yesterday's explorations and out over the rolling wooded foothills to the south. Reaching the edge of a deep cliff-girt gulch, we admired tilted slabs with well-preserved ripple marks, a graphic reminder that the original sediments were deposited in a shallow sea over 500 million years ago.

On we meandered, through light scrub cloaking the flat top of Steadman Ridge, trying not to let the extensive views distract us from our route-finding down into the headwaters of Shelf Chasm; a navigational error here could find us bluffed by the numerous clifflines. Funnelled into a narrow drainage line, we were soon scrambling down a series of dry waterfalls with the aforementioned cliffs now above and around us.

Down Shelf Chasm's namesake rock steps and pavements we descended, through bluffs and tors in its middle reaches. At one point an oval rock pool reflecting a cloud in the azure sky, a stark contrast with the glowing orange cliffs rising nearby.

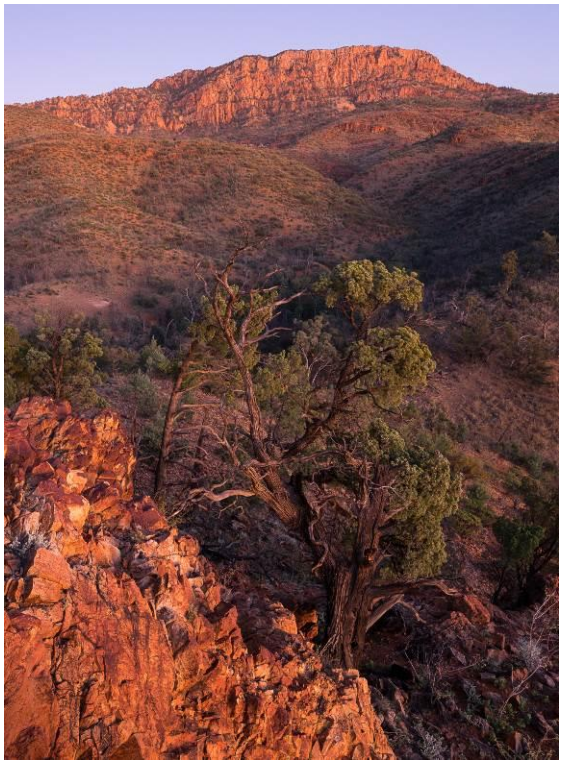
Later, we plodded down the rocky and tree-lined dry channels of Italowie Creek's North Branch. Approaching the confluence with the also-dry Wildflower Creek, we hoped for water; instead we found a small stagnant pool sheened with unattractive green algae. A more thorough search revealed a larger, clearer pool and we slept out nearby, under trees and a starry sky.

The clear night encouraged us to bumble up the nearest steep ridge in pre-dawn darkness, hopeful of a photogenic sunrise. We were not disappointed. There were good views across to the McKinlay range, where we hoped to be in a week or so; nearer at hand was the rampart of Cleft Peak, where we hoped to lay our sleeping bags that night.

But first we had to climb steeply out of the Wildflower Creek catchment. We crossed a narrow ridge and descended steeply to Rover Rockhole. The deep rock pool sits near the lip of a dry waterfall and access involved a scramble up this steep scarp. Here we cached much of our gear and loaded up with water for our planned high and dry camp on Cleft Peak.

It was a sweaty climb. Through waving grasstrees we passed, before connecting a narrow ridge and saddle at the head of the great cleft. From here, we tackled the peak's steep western flank. While Cleft Peak is far from the Gammon's highest point, it does provide one of its best views. We got there early, found bivouac sites amongst the summit rocks, and waited for sunset, whiling away the afternoon in shade. Eventually, the lowering sun accentuated the colouring of the orange cliffs around us, before dying to a magenta glow.

At dawn, scattered clouds provided a more subtle, filtered but equally photogenic light. But it was then back to Rover Rockhole, where full packs awaited, along with another ridge crossing. A steep descent then led us into the deep gorge of Italowie Creek's South Branch, where the stony bed wound upstream



beneath towering cliffs. Within an hour or so, we came upon a campsite, shaded by tall cliffs on all sides. And there was water, just a short distance up Fern Chasm. We resolved to explore this area the next day.

Fern Chasm is another true slot canyon. The ascent was made interesting by two short but very steep dry waterfalls. After overcoming these low grade rock-climbs with some effort, the chasm progressively opened out, and we commenced working our way up the western slopes. From there we scrambled through several broken clifflines before reaching a flat ridge crest. The view back down into the Italowie gorges was spectacular, but there were still more extensive views to come; we were approaching Prow Point, the high point of this part of the range.

The scrub became thick and scratchy as we circled south into the catchment of The Terraces, a gorge named for its gently stepped but extensive polished bedding plane rock surfaces. The area provided for easy ambling (apart from short scrambles at the ten or so small waterfalls of course) with many distractions for eye or camera.

We returned to Prow Point via The Terraces next morning, this time carrying full packs and water. We then headed north through more thick scrub across the plateau-like crest of the range, aiming for the national park's northern sector. Here the landscape was dominated by the elongate valley of Mainwater Pound, a feature enclosed by ridges of steeply-dipping rock strata. It was different from anything we had experienced thus far.

We descended an ephemeral creek to Yackie Waterhole, a large, shady pool in the depths of a spectacular gorge cut through the southern strike ridge. The gorge provides a gateway to the open woodland of the Pound floor beyond, and the bluffs above a viewpoint for photographers chasing evening and dawn light. The Pound area felt even drier than the range to the south; spinifex covered some of the flanking spurs. We spent a still and warm day here, seeking out small shady gorges after a few hours wandering the open woodland.

Back at Prow Point next morning, we then gained a few more scratches on the flanks of Four Winds Hill, and then more scrub slowed our progress into Streak Gorge. But our discomfort was worthwhile;

Junction Waterhole, one of the most reliable waterholes in the whole area, was large and deep, flanked by white ripple-marked terraces and overlooked by red cliffs and serried ranks of Cypress pines. There was a spacious campsite just downstream, too.

With a camp high on the Mt McKinlay range in mind, we headed downstream the next morning laden again with two days' water. Upslope views were limited; selecting the best ridge to exit the gorge was challenging. But once the choice was made, and the initial steep and loose bluff climbed, we were committed. Extensive views again developed as we slowly ascended an open ridge. Then, once we'd gained sufficient elevation, another scrubby sidle ensued, across the arms of Octopus Hill. Part way up the final haul up onto the McKinlay range, we paused for lunch. There was a view, but it was also a welcome opportunity to air my feet; they'd become abraded by sweat-soaked socks.

The summit of Mt McKinlay – which, back in the 1960s had been considered as a site for an astronomical observatory – was the highest of our trip. It was also, unfortunately, covered in abandoned junk from this era and an enormous cairn. Having been wandering this wild country for nine days now, we were in no mood for this. We returned to the ridge near Breaking Wave and found a bivouac site among low trees. This also had the benefit of providing shelter from the now gusty winds.

The following morning, from the lee shelter of Breaking Wave's uppermost cliffs, we watched the dawn glow evolve into day. Then, following a relaxed breakfast, we traversed a series of knolls along a skyline ridge curving eastwards before arriving abruptly atop the eastern face of Mt McKinlay Bluff, a kilometre-long, 200 metre-high cliff. It was spectacular.

After exploring the full length of this spectacular feature, we refocussed on the descent. Delicate down-climbing was followed by loose and marginall y less-steep scree, with the subsequent rocky creek bed also involving some scrambles. As the gradient declined, walking became easier. That is, until a large rocky knoll appeared to block the creek line ahead. But we were in luck. Through the knoll's flank, the stream had cut a short chasm; we continued through this. A pool within the chasm and grassy sandbank just beyond heralded this as the spot for our last camp.

The knoll isolated by the chasm provided good views back to Mt McKinlay Bluff and of nearby rocky slopes. It seemed ideal habitat for rock wallabies – they're known to inhabit the area – but, despite spending some hours pottering around there at dusk and dawn, I had a glimpse of just one.

The next morning, we left the wallabies to their knoll. Just a few hours easy rambling away, through open rolling country, was our car at the Loch Ness Well and the start of our long journey homeward.

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VULKATHUNHA - GAMMON RANGES NATIONAL PARK

The Adnyamathanha people are the local indigenous custodians and the national park is co-managed with them. All aspects of the range feature in their traditional Dreaming stories.

Pastoral activity in the region dates from the end of the 19th century, but the rugged nature of the range itself limited the depredations of cattle. The national park was declared in 1970, with additions in 1982. Feral goats remain a problem but currently numbers seem low thanks to a shooting program.

Walking information

Camping permits are required to undertake overnight bushwalks in Vulkathunha - Gammon Ranges National Park. Contact the ranger at Balcanoona Homestead (tel. 08 8648 4829) for details. Walking in the hot summer months should generally be avoided.

Access to water is crucial to walking in this arid area. Throughout the range there are about ten known waterholes of documented reliability. Once several have been visited, some inference can be made regarding the likelihood of water at others

There is also good walking in the privately-owned Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, immediately northeast of the national park, but this is an even drier area.

Maps and guides

The Landsmap 1:50,000 *Illinawortina* and *Nepabunna* topopgraphic maps cover the entire route of the walk described here. If you can find a copy, the out-of-print *Walking Guide to the Northern Flinders Ranges* by Adrian Heard provides detailed information on many walking routes throughout the area. John Chapman's *Bushwalking in Australia* (2003) contains a guide to a shorter circuit than that described here, exploring the gorges in the Italowie catchment.

Access

The Gammon Ranges are located some 630 km by road north of Adelaide. Driving from Adelaide takes a full day and involves a fair amount of unsurfaced roads. 2WD cars can get close to the range but access to Grindells Hut and Loch Ness Well beyond is likely to require a 4WD vehicle.