

Backblock touring

There's some pretty amazing country in the northwest of New South Wales, and Sturt National Park is a true outback destination

Story and photography by JOHN FORD



A rare sight – sunset reflections over Lake Pinaroo.

IN THE early morning light, a mob of emus strolled towards me as I walked the shore of Lake Pinaroo. They had seen me, of course, but seemed indifferent to my intrusion. As they wandered closer I knelt on the ground and started clicking away with my camera, which aroused the leading bird's attention. Not wanting to startle him, I kept perfectly still and he ventured to within a couple of metres before deciding I was of no interest and headed off in search of better pickings.

We had come to Lake Pinaroo in Sturt

National Park on our journey to explore the backblocks of NSW. Like much of the country, the region was benefitting from the recent floods that had brought the land back to life – and water to the lake. Sturt National Park, in the northwest Corner Country, is generally a dry, dusty landscape that deserves to be numbered among our true outback destinations.

Named after Charles Sturt who explored the area on his 1844-46 expedition, the area was occupied and widely used by the Karenggapa Aboriginal people before gold

prospectors and then pastoralists settled in the 1870s. With an area of 325,329 hectares it is one of the largest wildlife refuges in NSW, with a variety of landforms, plants and animals.

Formed in 1972, the park has distinct areas based around the three main properties that went to make up the reserve – Olive Downs, Mt Wood and Fort Grey. Right on the southern border is the iconic mining town of Tibooburra, which often appears on our nightly news as the hottest place in NSW. The town offers refuelling and

supplies, as well as two welcoming hotels.

National park headquarters is in Tibooburra, and its displays gave us a feel for the history of the region while we organised the required visitor and camping permits. Good maps are on hand to help locate the main highlights of the park and head ranger Ingrid gave us an outline of the things we should see on our visit.

Many visitors will take advantage of the commercial caravan parks in Tibooburra as a base and take day trips into the park, but we chose a mixture of Tibooburra hospital-

ity and park camping. The roads are well signposted and, while dirt, are suitable for most vehicles although the surface conditions can be corrugated, and just a few millimetres of rain will see roads closed.

For those wanting to stay in the park but close to civilisation, the Dead Horse Gully campsite, about 2km out of Tibooburra, provides gas barbecues and long-drop toilets but little in the way of shade. The nearby Golden Gully Mining Site is a tribute to the area's mining past, with an open-air display of machinery and mining technology.

Olive Downs, once under the control of cattle king Sir Sidney Kidman, is the central section of the park and is a 110km round trip from Tibooburra. Highlights include the Jump-up country, the arid landscape and the old buildings. Jump-ups rise as flat-topped mesas and cuestas from the surrounding plains to a height of 150 metres. The exposed colours on the long, steep rises were a spectacular sight. The drive into Olive Downs affords several views of the hills and there is a lookout with a wide view of the landscape. Along the way we ►



Mt Wood preserves pastoral history.



Many red kangaroos call Sturt home.

► found remnants of the country's pastoral history, including earth tanks that attract a variety of wildlife. You can take advantage of a bird hide at South Myers tank if birding is your passion.

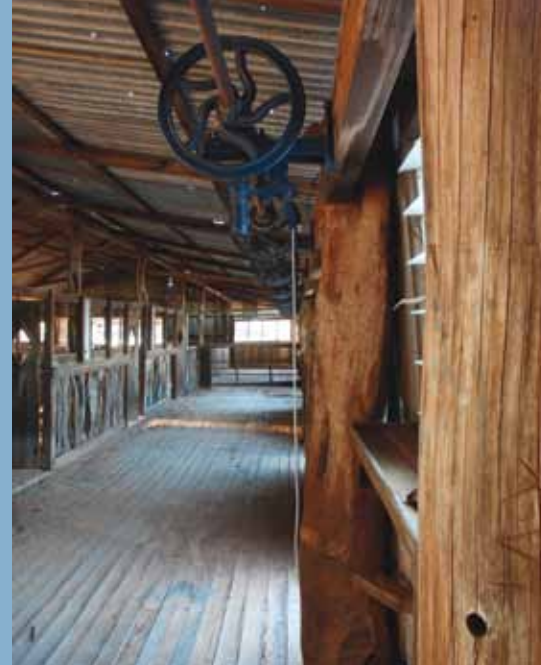
There is little left of the old Mt King homestead, which is a short detour from the track. An old steel water tank and some foundations reminded us of what would have been pretty hard living in its day.

Once up top of the Jump-ups, it is a short

drive to the Olive Downs campsite, set in a clearing amongst low scrub a few kilometres from the station complex. We found the shaded cooking shelter a welcome place for lunch and cooked up some sausages, taking in the silence before heading on.

The shearers' quarters remain reasonably intact on the floodplain not far from the road, and we had a good look around while a dingo, keeping a safe distance from us, strolled across the hill from the creek. The Olive Downs homestead is closed to the public but there are good views and vantage points for photography from the hill a short climb in front of the house. From here it is not far back to the main road and a short excursion to the Dingo Fence at Warri Gate on the Queensland border, or a drive back to Tibooburra.

You can approach the Gorge Loop Road from either the Wanaaring Road or the Silver City Highway. Either way, it's a 100km round trip from Tibooburra through gibber plains and grasslands, and along 12 Mile Creek.



The cool interior of Mt Wood woolshed.

The gorge lookout had impressive views over the country and the creek.

There is a worthwhile detour to the old Horton Park outstation, with its small home and the remains of a hand-sawn constructed shearing shed. Mt Wood woolshed is accessible and intact, and its vast interior was a cool respite in the middle of the day. The corrugated iron building is a good example of rural architecture, and we enjoyed exploring and photographing. Mt Wood homestead and the shearing quarters can be booked for self-catered accommodation, with the homestead recently screened off from the viewing track to preserve the privacy of occupants.

Heading west towards Cameron Corner from Olive Downs, the four-wheel-drive Middle Road offers a variety of panoramic scenery across gibber plains and claypans, and through the sand hills of the eastern edge of the Strzelecki Desert.

Along the way are the ruins of Binerah Downs, Middle Bore and Bronco stock-

yards. Nearing the end of the road, we came to Lake Pinaroo, which had recently filled after many years drought so we decided to overnight at the nearby Fort Grey campground. After setting up camp, we drove back around the shore of the lake for stunning views of submerged, skeletal coolabaha as the sun descended. The campground at Fort Grey is behind a sandhill leading to the lake and it has the same cooking shelters and toilet facilities as the other park camps.

Charles Sturt built a stockade in this area, and named it "Fort Grey". The blazed "Sturt Tree" is still standing but was under water at the time of our visit. On an early morning walk to the lake we found the remains of the original Fort Grey homestead near an old windmill. Also out for a stroll were kangaroos, those inquisitive emus, lizards and acres of waterbirds. The sight of hundreds of dead trees reflected in the still water was eerie yet beautiful and we felt lucky to see the lake with water.

Lake Pinaroo was a stark contrast to the rest of Sturt National Park, and a reminder of the way the country changes with the cycles of drought and rain. The lake is an important Ramsar-recognised wetland and it brought home to us that Sturt has a lot to offer in this unique part of NSW.

The park is a true desert experience. The best time to visit is between April and October when the temperature is cooler. However, given the opportunity, I would love to get back there as soon as the country opens up after rain to experience the wildflowers, especially the Sturt desert pea said to flourish there in the right conditions.

FACT FILE

Sturt National Park is in the northwest corner of NSW. The hub of the park is Tibooburra, which is 323km north of Broken Hill on the partly sealed Silver City Highway. Broken Hill is 1100km west of Sydney. All roads in the park are dirt and are closed in wet weather. Camp areas in the park have picnic tables, electric barbecues and non-flush toilets. Entry is \$7 per car per day, and \$5 for adults, \$3 for children camp fees per night. Tibooburra has hotels, a service station, caravan parks and general stores. Travellers should carry adequate fresh water; fires are not permitted in the park. Contact NPWS Tibooburra (08) 8091 3308, www.environment.nsw.gov.au







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