

Walk from Parachilna Gorge to Mt Hopeless

Part three - Arkaroola to Mt Hopeless May 7 - 15, 2001

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There is what could be called an "unofficial extension" of the Heysen Trail, going from the northern end of the Heysen Trail at Parachilna Gorge, to Mt Hopeless.

The route is unmarked, and follows roughly the path taken by the Patron of the Friends, Warren Bonython AO, on his epic walk of the Flinders Ranges, which he and his companions completed in 1968, and is described in his book 'Walking the Flinders Ranges'. [Available from the Friends office]

In May 2000 a small group of experienced walkers from the Friends who had completed walking the Heysen Trail, and had thus walked from Crystal Brook to Parachilna Gorge, set out to set out to complete the emulation of Warren's walk, by walking on to Mt Hopeless.

Their walk was described in three articles published in Trailwalker.

At 9.55am on Monday 14th May 2001 six members of the Friends of the Heysen Trail reached the summit of Mt Hopeless (126 metres). In summary, the walk had started eight days before at Arkaroola, and had initially followed the Ridge Top Tour Track through the Sprigg family's spectacular Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary to Siller's Lookout and then continued on to Paralana Hot Springs. From here we climbed the granite escarpment onto the Mawson Plateau, camping for the third night at the beautiful Tee-Junction Waterhole, and continued across the Plateau to Hamilton Creek. We followed the Hamilton downstream past Con Bore, through Brindana Gorge, and left it just after the Terrapinna Waterhole. We then climbed one of the most northerly outcrops of the Flinders, Mt Babbage. Leaving the Flinders Ranges behind we started across the most southerly portion of the flat, arid, almost featureless plains, of the Strzelecki Desert past Twelve Springs and Bellinger Bore, where we topped up our water, crossed the old dog fence at Mt Yerila and then the electrified dog fence before reaching our final campsite on the Yerila Creek. We then continued across the gibber plains to our major objective, Mt Hopeless. From here we walked the remaining 14kms over undulating gibber to Mt Hopeless Station. The official trek finished on the Strzelecki Track at the Mt Hopeless Station turnoff on Tuesday 15th May, a total walk of approximately 122 km.

The idea for the trek was conceived when a group of walkers, who had recently completed the Heysen Trail at Parachilna, asked the obvious question, "Where to next?" "Follow in Warren Bonython's footsteps to Mt Hopeless, as described in his book Walking the Flinders Ranges," was the unanimous response of Les Skinner, Mark Darter and John Quinn. A small advertisement was placed in the Trailwalker. This received several positive enquiries and planning started.

The first walk from Parachilna to Angepena was undertaken in May 2000, and was completed in six days by nine walkers. The walk followed the Oratunga Creek to Moolooloo Station, through Patawarta Gap into the magnificent Narrina Pound, exiting the Pound east of Mt Hack through Main Gap, past the Angepena goldfields, camped on the fifth night at a lovely waterhole on Frome Creek, and the following day walked through Mudlapena Gap and then Angepena Gap to complete the 75km to Angepena Station.

The next section from Angepena to Arkaroola across the Gammon Ranges was accomplished in early October 2000 by nine walkers and took five days. The route from Angepena passed under Mt Serle to Owieandana Station. It then followed the boulder strewn Arcoona Creek, crossed the thick bush covered 1002m ridge to the Yackie waterhole (source of dubious drinking water) and then followed another boulder filled creek, the Bolla Bollana Creek, in the narrow Mainwater Pound to Mainwater Bore. Here we refilled from our water cache and then followed a track to camp for the last night at Oodnaminta Yards. We completed the 72km trek to Arkaroola about 11am the following morning. Again we had excellent weather, although it was perhaps on the warm side.

So to the last, longest and most isolated leg of our journey, Arkaroola to Mt Hopeless. This required careful and detailed planning, although information on this area was scant. The party, now reduced to six through two late withdrawals, set off from Adelaide in two vehicles about 5am on Sunday 6th May and rendezvoused at Port Wakefield. The party was Mark Darter and Les Skinner, joint leaders, Dennis Cowling, Norrie Hamilton, Gunther Schmitz and Geoff Wilson. After the compulsory stop at the Copley Bakery to sample their scrumptious pies, pasties and quandong tarts we reached Arkaroola about three o'clock. One vehicle went on to Paralana to make a water drop.

Day 1 Arkaroola to Mt Gee, 13 km

In ideal weather and a temperature in the mid 20s, which was to continue for the remainder of the walk, we set off from Arkaroola Village up Wywhyana Creek, carrying ten days supply of food and two days' water. We then took the Ridge Top Track to our first camp near Mt Gee, crossing several steep ridges and then down into their consequent valleys. From the track we had magnificent views of the rugged mountainous terrain of this part of the Flinders. As we approached Mt Gee, our leaders decided it was shorter to leave the track and follow a creek which would lead us to our first campsite. This we soon found to be a taste of what was to come, climbing over and around monster boulders before we found a waterfall blocking our way, close to our projected campsite. This was passed on the right without too much effort. On reaching Camp One three intrepid peak baggers, Mark, Les and Gunther, set off almost immediately to climb the nearby Mt Painter. Taking the shortest route possible, they scrambled up the steep face over much loose rock to reach the summit, and were back within ninety minutes.

Day 2 Mt Gee to Paralana Hot Springs, 14.5 km

The route continued along, or rather up and down, the Ridge Top Track past the Armchair and other spectacular peaks, and about lunchtime we reached Sillers Lookout. From here we had superb views in all directions although much of the Mawson Plateau was obscured by a ridge coming off Freeling Heights. The steep and tortuous descent from Sillers to the Yudnamutana valley was down an old disused and badly washed out four wheel-drive mining track which was decidedly unstable underfoot. It was a relief to reach the valley floor and then follow the pleasant tree-lined creek to Paralana Hot Springs where we collected our water cache and made camp.

Day 3 Paralana to Tee-Junction Waterhole, 9 km

This was the day of the big ascent, a 520 metre climb of the granite escarpment to the Mawson Plateau. The first section along Paralana Creek proved a comfortable walk of about 3 km with long stretches of sandy riverbed until we branched north along a tributary at 489622. After another kilometre the climb started straight up the face of the escarpment, following a creek. A rock shelf loomed near the top and caused some concern. However, the 20-foot waterfall proved only a minor hindrance and we entered a flatter, semicircular area which today was coined Mark's paddock (486642). Here we had lunch, then climbed a short way onto the Mawson Plateau and followed a ridge along and then down to the mapped waterfall at 479667. This was comfortably negotiated to the right. The waterfall had scooped out a giant sump at its base and this contained crystal clear potable water. We then followed the creek down to Tee-Junction Waterhole and this campsite we ranked as one of, if not, the most beautiful in the whole Flinders Ranges with several tree lined rockpools filled with shimmering clear water. On the cliffs above a large wedge-tailed eagle watched our every move. We were well satisfied that one of our primary objectives had been achieved as planned.

Day 4 Tee-Junction to Hamilton Creek, 10 km

The Mawson Plateau is a large granite batholith and has a much more rounded topography when compared with the deeply incised and mountainous Mt Painter area. It is gently tilted to the north with the numerous creek systems oriented down this regional slope - we were on a downhill run or so we thought. We soon found out that nature had its own way of determining our passage. Just downstream from Tee-Junction the map is clearly marked "numerous rockholes." We can confirm this is no figment of a cartographer's imagination - it took nearly three hours to clamber through and around the numerous giant smooth sided washbowls and huge granite boulders which almost always filled the creek floor. This proved an extremely tiresome and, in some cases, difficult task. At one of these we topped up our water from a small but clear pool, the last we were to see for sometime (with the uncertainty of water sources we carried two days supply, where possible). Shortly, we left behind this difficult section (2km) of the creek and climbed up a tributary which joined the main stream by a waterfall (504692). Another two km of easier walking followed before we stopped for lunch (497705). Here we came across some footprints, apparently recent, in the soft sand of the creek bed - who did they belong to? We headed up another tributary and then followed several ridges, via knoll 624 (501716) and then along to knoll 568 (511732). Walking became progressively more tedious as wobbly granite slabs threatened to topple us into the abundant sharp pointed spinifex or porcupine grass. Fortunately, only one person slipped over and he was more concerned about puncturing his water containers than the numerous spines he kept removing from his extremities over the next few days. From the ridge, for the first time, we had an unhindered view of what lay ahead with the northeasterly trending tree lined Hamilton Creek in the foreground and Mt Babbage clearly recognisable in the middle distance. There was some debate as to whether or not we could see Mt Hopeless in the flat featureless

country beyond. We continued along the ridge and, with the afternoon wearing on, we dropped down off the ridge into a creek at about 518743. This creek turned out to be another steep sided gorge strewn with large boulders and rock steps. Thankfully, after a few hundred metres this joined Hamilton Creek at 518748 where we found a good campsite, some 2.5km short of our programmed destination. Thus ended what proved to be the longest and hardest day of our trek.

Day 5 Hamilton Creek to Con Bore, 15.5 km

Today, we found walking much easier along the wide, sandy Hamilton Creek. About 6km downstream we walked off the edge of the 50,000 series map to the 250,000 series, the only published map available for this far north area of the Flinders. Our esteemed leaders adjusted to this change of scale without batting an eyelid and continued to find our position with pin point accuracy. Early on, we came across an echidna, one of the few animals of any description we were to see during our walk. It had been more than 24 hours since we had last replenished our water supplies so we were fortunate to find a rockpool below the sheer cliff dropping off Mt Shanahan at approximately 555765, containing clear, potable water and populated by several small fish. Here we recharged our water bottles. A short distance downstream we left the creek and followed a little used 4WD track for a way then took to the higher ground and a straighter, undulating route parallel to the creek with reasonable walking till we found a pleasant sandy campsite in the early afternoon near Con Bore. We were now back on schedule.

Day 6 Con Bore to Mt Babbage, 14 km

This portion of Hamilton Creek proved to be one of the most picturesque sections of our walk. We passed numerous rock pools in the Brindana Gorge where a colony of yellow footed rock wallabies scampered across the cliff face. We continued on down the Hamilton and stopped at a large pool for lunch. One of our party couldn't resist the temptation for a swim and how refreshing it was! On we went down the now ever widening river until we reached the last low ridge of the Flinders through which the Hamilton had cut its path and created the impressive Terrapinna waterhole. Our intelligence suggested it wouldn't be full and easily passed. Wrong! It was full to the brim and thus we had to climb out of the gorge on the right to reach the far end. Here we had a long rest and as camping was not permitted in the vicinity of the waterhole we pressed on towards Mt Babbage for another half hour or so. We found a reasonably flat sandy campsite in one of several small gullies which incised its flanks. Thus ended a most satisfying day and to have bagged a few more kilometres was a bonus -well, a few less for the following day!

Day 7 Mt Babbage to Yerila Creek 17 km

We were away by seven o'clock, climbing one boulder strewn creek followed by yet another, our direct westerly oriented route taking us across the grain of the country. Eventually, one lead to a saddle just below the summit of Mt Babbage (322m). From here, we had our first clear view of the small conical hill, Mt Hopeless, some 20km to the north. Explorer Edward John Eyre, who had climbed it (and named it) in his expedition of 1840, had described it as a "haycock-like peak." To the southeast we could follow Hamilton Creek from Terrapinna eastwards along its tree-lined route past Moolawatana Station towards its discharge area into Lake Frome. Now receding into the southerly distance, the Mawson Plateau merged with Freeling Heights. After taking the customary summit photos we retraced our steps to the saddle, collected our packs and proceeded along the north ridge of Mt Babbage until it dropped down some 100 metres or so to the gibber plains which stretched into the far distance. This was one of the defining moments of our trek - we had reached the northern limit of the Flinders and were about to step onto the arid plains of the Strzelecki Desert. Mt Babbage is, in effect, one of the last and most northerly outcrops of the Flinders Ranges. From the ridge we had a good view of the way ahead - Twelve Springs was identified by a patch of rich green grass which contrasted with the yellows and ochres of the surrounding countryside and beyond was the flat-topped mesa of Mt Yerila. The spring was found to be a seepage rather than a mound spring and had been badly despoiled by local stock and, to put it mildly, only desperate walkers would use this water. Our inspection was closely watched by a huge bull who had been grazing by the spring and had reluctantly retreated a short distance as we approached. On we continued to Bellinger Bore (incorrectly located on the 250k map, its actual location is on the plain about 1km southwest from where it is marked on this map). This proved to be an excellent source of drinking water, although with a slight rotten eggs smell. The well itself was artesian, capped by well maintained control valves. We proceeded around the west flank of Mt Yerila (169m) where we crossed the old dog fence. And, as it was now late in the afternoon, our peak baggers decided to forego the climb of the mesa. On the north flank we crossed the new, electrified, dog fence before we reached a delightful camping spot on the surprisingly wide and sandy Yerila Creek at approximately GR719056. One more day was uppermost in our thoughts as we watched another beautiful sunset!



Warren Bonython walks towards the summit of Mt Hopeless at the end of his epic walk in 1968. Photo from 'Walking the Flinders Ranges', by C Warren Bonython

Day 8 Yerila Creek to Mt Hopeless Station, 21 km

Although the red splashed clouds of the sunrise might have suggested otherwise the weather turned out to be perfect for our 'big' day - the ascent of Mt Hopeless and our longest walk. A pleasant breeze wafted in our faces as we climbed a forty metre ridge out of a tributary of the Yerila Creek, then set our compasses almost due north for Mt Hopeless. The numerous small hills and water courses meant we could only catch the occasional glimpse of our "mountain" as we walked over the firm gibber.

The summit cairn of Mt Hopeless was reached after a 7km walk shortly before 10 o'clock under a beautiful cloudless sky. Although we had achieved our main objective our feelings were strangely subdued, perhaps it was the thought of the remaining 14 km we still had to go. The small capsule containing Warren Bonython's note and those of other parties (surprisingly few) was found and we duly left our own messages. To the northeast across the undulating gibber plains we could just make out the tall radio mast located adjacent to Mt Hopeless Station which stands on the bank of a tree lined creek of the same name. Looking back to the south Mt Babbage and the hills behind effectively merged into one range. We set off down the north slope and made record progress across the treeless and shadeless gibber to Mt Hopeless Station where we found not a few bladders of water as we had hoped but a dray containing a drum of fresh water and an even bigger drum of washing water. Wow! This was typical of the wonderful help and advice we had received from

all the pastoralists whose properties we had crossed during our trek.

Day 9 Mt Hopeless Station to Strzelecki Track, 8 km

This was the first morning that dark threatening clouds had filled the western sky, but only a few spots of rain fell, and the clouds cleared by mid morning. This was our "spare" day, the day we had up our sleeve to cater for any eventuality that might cause us to miss our plane. To complete our trek we walked the 4 kilometres to the Strzelecki Track. On our way back we inspected Mt Hopeless "International" Airport and pronounced it in good condition. It was from here that we expected to fly out the following morning. About four o'clock that afternoon we heard a low flying aircraft and lo and behold it was Doug Sprigg from Arkaroola to pick us up. Astonishingly, he was armed with an icy cold "six pack" which, believe it or not, was consumed with relish. We had 20 minutes to pack. Easy! It then took 40 minutes to fly back over the route that had taken eight days to walk. That night we had a sumptuous barbecue at Arkaroola Village.

The following morning we set off for Adelaide and sure enough the weather changed. Dark rain bearing clouds covered the Gammons as we drove down to Copley for breakfast, but little fell on the road. From Port Pirie we had rain squalls all the way home. So ended our journey.

On behalf of all those who had the good fortune to take part in these walks we would like to sincerely thank Mark and Les for their leadership, route finding and organisation including countless faxes, emails and phone calls and to John Quinn whose knowledge of the area was invaluable. We would especially thank all the pastoralist families for their friendly help, advice and ready access to their land. And finally our thanks to the staff of Arkaroola Village who found none of our requests too outrageous and were happy to help in any way possible.

This walk must rank as one of Australia's great wilderness walks. We all felt privileged to have taken part. Where to next? Cameron Corner has been mentioned! Watch this space!



The notes left at the cairn by various walkers. Warren Bonython's from 1968 top left