

Simpson Desert bursts with life

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Some of the heaviest rain in decades sees the Simpson seep into life and colour.

IT'S OUR SECOND DUNE crossing of the morning and there's something in the air, a faint line spanning the western sky. At the dune's crest it sharpens into focus. A huge flock of pelicans glides by, each arm of its V-formation dipping and rising in effortless unison.

For two days we've been trekking across gibber flats and slippery red dunes on the Simpson Desert's eastern fringes. Much of this far-western corner of Queensland is parched and silent after several drought years. But now, right on cue, a pelican welcoming committee is overhead. Below, we're confronted by a startling swathe of green growth, our first glimpse of the floodplain corridors that have burst into leaf along Eyre Creek in 2009 – one of the region's most bountiful flood years in more than three decades.

Within minutes our party – 20 camels, five cameleers, 13 trekkers and two birdos – is wading through knee-deep vegetation. Even roped together, the camels can't resist lunging mid-stride to grab big mouthfuls of tasty foliage. The air is fragrant with fresh, grassy and herbal aromas, and the chorus of bird coos and trills, chirrs and whistles grows stronger.

With a flurry of binoculars, notepads and GPS buttons being pushed, the 2009 Simpson Desert Ornithological Trek begins. Our leader is Andrew Harper, one of Australia's most accomplished desert explorers. Since 2007 he and a core group of historians, scientists and artists with an inland bent have been shaping Australian Desert Expeditions. This outfit brings together expert skills and public participation as a way of building desert knowledge. Their forte is travelling on foot into remote areas even four-wheel-drives can't reach.

That's where the camels come in. "We've got the ultimate off-road vehicles," explains Andrew. "We can go where we like – where the birds are, where the water takes us." The value of this intuitive strategy is borne out during the next 11 days as we tack across dunes and navigate through a maze of channels and coolibah-fringed billabongs. While our trusty camels do the hard yakka of load carrying, plant specimens are collected and our ornithologists Brian Laycock and Anthony Molyneux help us identify a remarkable 101 species of bird.

For Andrew, his low-tech approach honours the traditions of outback cameleering and 19th-century exploration. Walking with the camels exposes us to the rhythms of desert life and terrain in ways that no aerial- or vehicle-based

survey could possibly match. Add a thumping big flood to the equation and those rhythms beat louder still.

EARLY THIS YEAR, rain inundated Queensland's north-west and Gulf regions. In total, 17 million megalitres of water entered the State's western river systems leading to Lake Eyre. "Some locals say that in terms of duration and spread this is the biggest flood since 1974," Andrew says. Along the edge of the Simpson the waters spilled into floodplain corridors up to 15 km either side of Eyre Creek's main channel.

The result is a parallel landscape of parched dunes interspersed with lagoons and moats of dense vegetation. For days we wander through meadows of native chamomile, grasses and tall, purple-flowering cullen. The riot of plant life is matched by a nonstop flurry of birds – chats and finches, honeyeaters and trillers, noisy woodswallow gangs and swooping budgie mobs, doves, songlarks, cockatiels and more. Along the main creek, colonies of ibis and cormorants crowd the coolibah canopy, flotillas of ducks cruise its waters and native hens hoon along its banks.

Another 200-strong formation of pelicans sails into our airspace. It's heart-stopping – humbling, too, when we think how many might be refugees from dying rivers down south. No matter how footsore we may feel, these marvellous long-range aerialists are a reminder that our trek is but a fleeting snapshot of what's unfolding along 600 km of brimming channels and floodplains – an outback river system running wild and free.

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