

# SIMPSON MAGIC

Sand, spinifex and – despite a desert tourism boom – solitude

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES



*Life in the desert. Yellow-top daisies add a dash of colour to the rust-red slope of one of the Simpson's countless dunes. The Simpson, one of the world's great sand-ridge deserts, is among Australia's harshest. Waterless most of the time, it bursts into life after rare rains.*





**T**HE SALT LAKE glistened in the afternoon glare, surreal, disconcerting. Hours later, under the full moon, the stark expanse gleamed a dull silver. Camel pads disappeared across it into the gloom, and the howl of a dingo told of nocturnal wanderings. Utterly mysterious and forbidding, the pan overwhelmed me with its pristine lifelessness.

I was sitting alone beside one of a complex of dry salt lakes in the south-east corner of the Simpson Desert, a wilderness of sand ridges and many such lakes in Australia's arid heart.

I'd come to this spot while crossing the desert with two companions, Cal Purkis and Tiet Ho. Energetic and ebullient, Cal was a very Australian

extrovert; Tiet was steely, a reserved and poetic Vietnamese Australian. Looking back from the pan, I could just see them standing in the glow of our camp fire.

"Have a cooee, Tiet!" I heard Cal call out.

"Why?" Tiet asked quietly.

"It makes you feel good," Cal replied. His own cooees rang clear and sharp through the darkness.

Tiet wandered off into the night. Then, alone with his thoughts ... he cooeed!

We were a happy trio by then, brought together by the uncomplicated pleasures of camping and our joy in the desert. It was mid-July. Later that night the temperature plummeted to near freezing as usual, but we were

cosy in our swags and slept well.

Our journey had begun 10 days earlier at Old Andado, 250 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs. From there our destination, the ruins of Annandale homestead, lay 320 km due east across the north of the desert. However, we would cover about 1000 km on tracks through its centre and south.

Another expedition was in the Simpson at the same time. Four South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) rangers and a volunteer group of Friends of the Simpson Desert Conservation Park were crossing the desert together to install facilities for visitors. Travelling in Cal's four-wheel-drive vehicle, I planned to document their work as well as the desert itself.

COVERING 170,000 sq. km, an area six times the size of Belgium, the Simpson is one of the world's great sand-ridge deserts. Aborigines lived in most of it for at least 5000 years, their nomadic lives materially harsh but spiritually rich. The first inland explorers skirted it, and its nature remained unknown to Europeans until geologist Cecil Madigan flew over it in 1929.

Madigan named the region after Adelaide philanthropist Allen Simpson, president of the South Australian branch of the Royal Geographical Soci-

ety of Australasia. Seven years later local bushman Ted Colson made the first recorded crossing by a European. Then, in 1939, Madigan led a scientific party on camels from Andado to Annandale.

Andado's original buildings are home to Molly Clark (Tribute, AG 20), who moved there with husband Malcolm ("Mac") in 1955. They built a new homestead in 1960 some 20 km west of the original, but after Mac's death and a series of other disasters, Molly returned to Old Andado to run



COURTESY: MORTLOCK LIBRARY, SA

**Local bushman** Edmund "Ted" Colson (left), born in 1881, left Blood Creek station on the Simpson's western margin in May 1936, aiming to cross the desert to Birdsville. He was accompanied by Aborigine Peter Ains and had five camels. Their successful crossing and return covered more than 900 km of unknown country and was the first recorded traverse of the desert by a European.



COURTESY: ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA, SA BRANCH

**Philanthropist and leading industrialist** Allen Simpson (above) financed the desert explorations of geologist Cecil Madigan (left), who named the desert after him. Madigan carried out the first general survey of the Simpson when he made nine flights over it in 1929. Ten years later, with nine men and 19 camels, he made a 33-day crossing that yielded valuable scientific information.



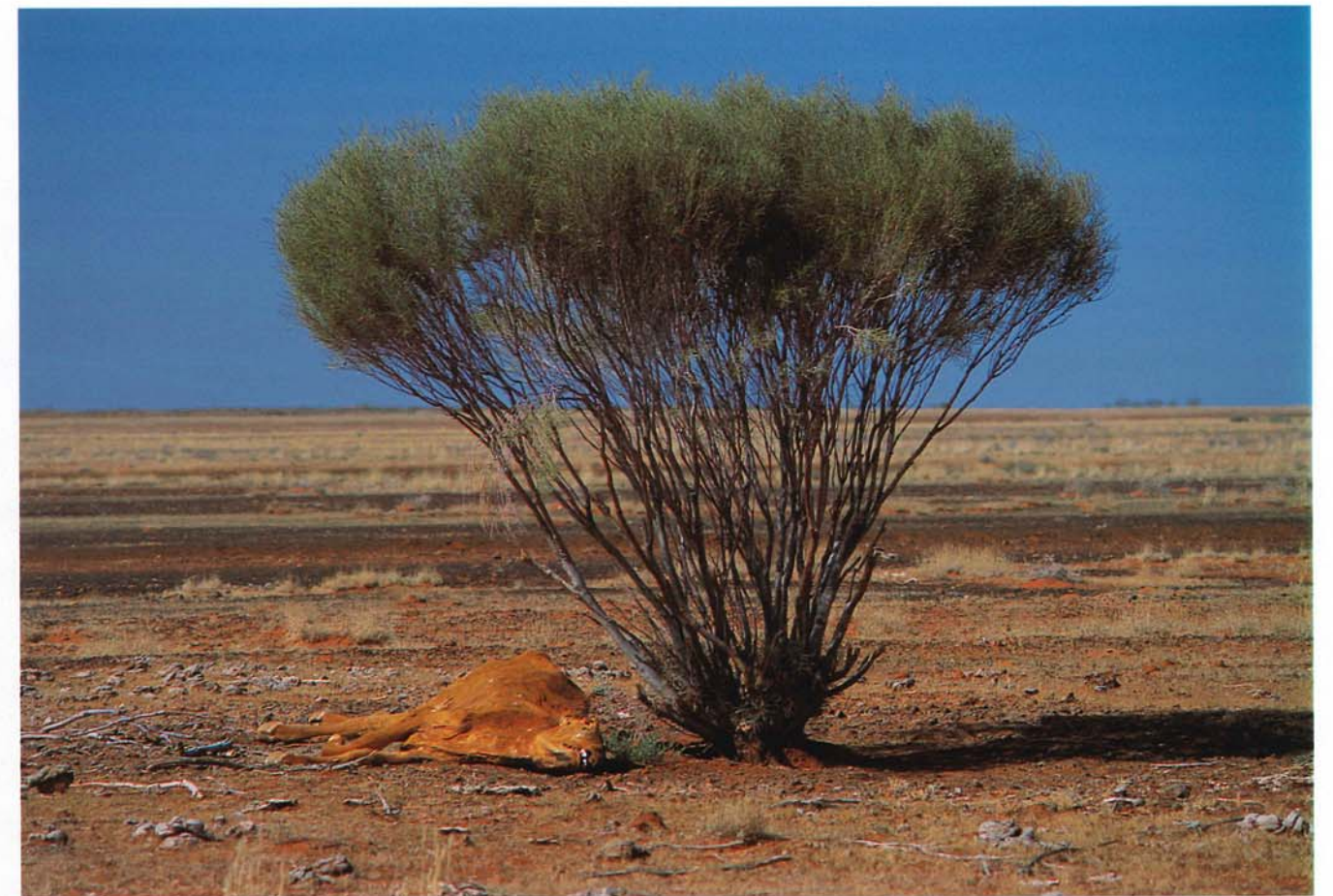
COURTESY: SIR RUSSEL MADIGAN

**Camped beside a dry salt lake in the Simpson's south-east corner, self-styled "T and T" (transport and tucker) man Cal Purkis, 60, prepares an evening meal and companion Tiet Ho relaxes while writer Ed Stokes explores the area. Creeks that flow after heavy rain cut into the desert's margins but lose themselves in the interior, either absorbed by the sandy terrain or evaporated by the 50°C-plus summer heat. Mineral salts left by this evaporation form the whitish crust on salt lakes like this. Keenly aware of the desert's aridity, Ed, Cal and Tiet carefully conserved their water while crossing the Simpson from Old Andado in the west to Annandale in the east.**





PETER McNEILL



*It's tough out there. A beast lies dead amid the harshness of the gibber country fringing the Simpson south of Old Andado. Although the desert has slightly less rain (130 mm annually) than the surrounding area, it looked better vegetated to Ed Stokes and his companions during their crossing, probably because outside its boundaries cattle significantly inhibit regrowth.*

*Molly Clark (opposite above) came to the Simpson area with husband "Mac" in 1955. They lived at Old Andado (opposite) and later at Andado, a homestead they built 20 km west of the original. Despite the isolation, the Clarks raised three children on the cattle property. Today Molly is back at Old Andado, built in 1922, maintaining it as a memorial to the hardships of pioneer life and running it as a low-key tourist attraction. The 3042 ha Mac Clark (Acacia Peuce) Conservation Reserve, 30 km to the north, preserves a stand of rare waddy-wood trees.*

the homestead as a living museum of the pioneering era.

Her face tells of hardship, and her quiet manner camouflages an iron spirit. Despite, or perhaps because of, her years on the edge of the Simpson, she remains indefatigable.

"You live with the desert. You're always aware it's out there. It's just a matter of adapting and living with nature," she said when we dropped by. But though content amid the cherished relics that clutter her coolibah-timbered home, Molly seemed thoughtful as she contemplated the phone, her link with the outside world – and with tourists wishing to stay at Old Andado.

"Telephones! Selfishly, for myself, I'd say tourism out here is bad," she reflected. "But I like the fact that city people get pleasure from the desert country and old homesteads like this."

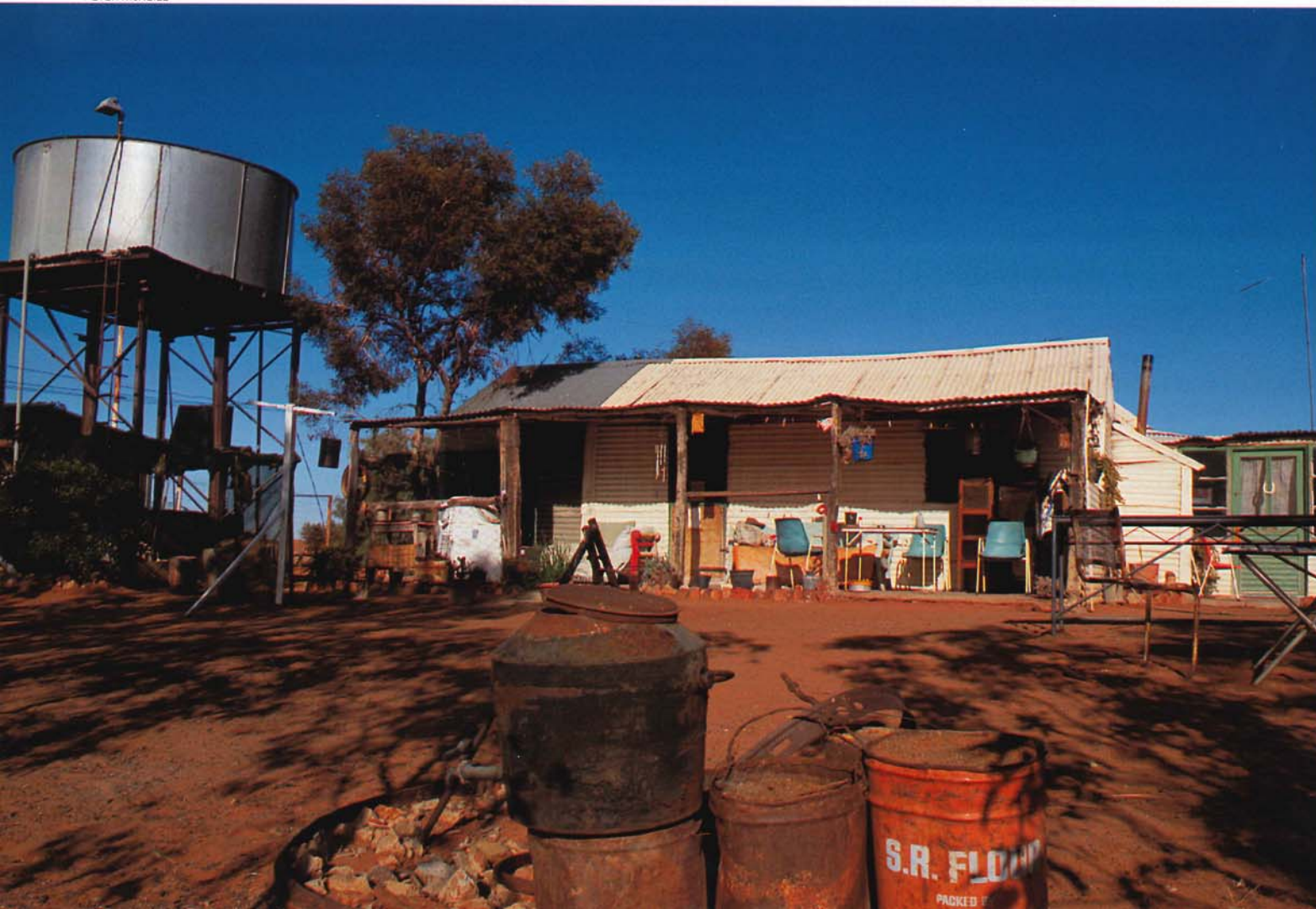
For 20 years after Madigan's expedition the Simpson remained remote and inaccessible. Then, during the 1960s and '70s, oil companies probed it, leaving a network of tracks that finally made access possible. When

the 4WD recreational boom of the 1980s arrived, desert tourism was set to escalate.

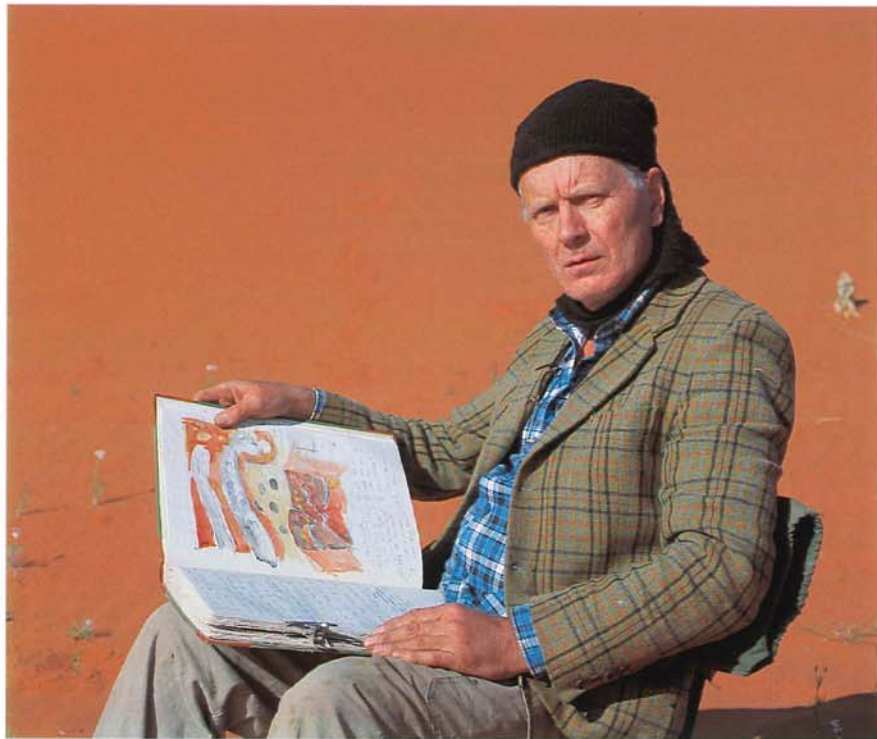
Molly's dilemma highlighted a central question. Was tourism destroying the very wilderness that most desert travellers, ourselves included, sought?

CAL, TIET AND I drove south from Old Andado towards Mt Dare. Molly had told us about an artist camped along our route, and, 40 km from the homestead, tell-tale vehicle tracks led off across a sand ridge. Cooking pots, books, botanical specimens and paints lay strewn around. Tall and dishevelled, John Wolseley strode across to meet us.

John has been painting central Australia for 16 years. When we met, he was refining a series of works narrating the desert's ecology. Captivated by the wild country around him, he expounded on its artistic appeal. "You're reduced to basic elements – wind, sand and gibber," he said. "Even here, on the edge of the Simpson, you can actually see the desert's basic structures."







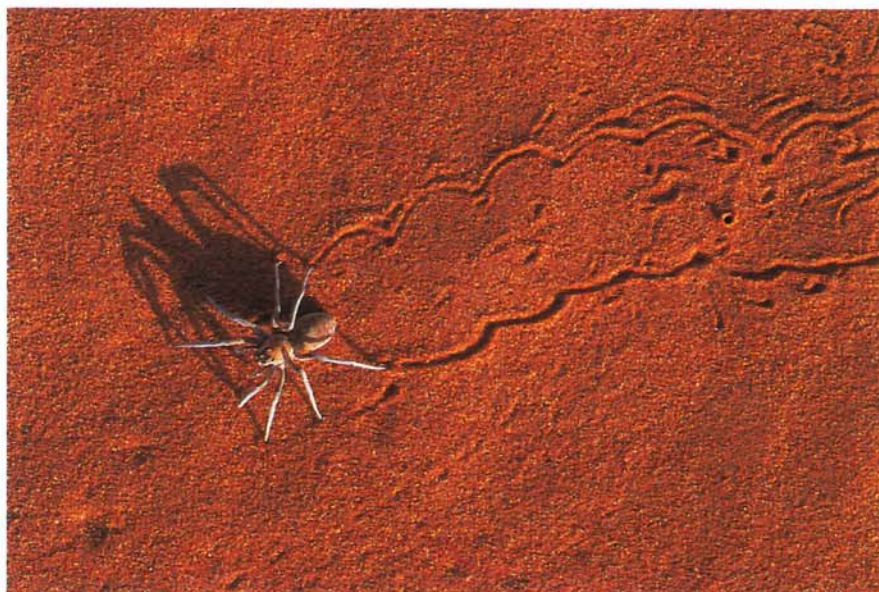
"For a painter this is extraordinary – a world stripped of all artifice or complications."

He pointed to some nearby tracks. "This dune may seem empty, but in fact it's a mass of life. For me these nocturnal tracks are a choreography, all these creatures' movements frozen in time. Drawing the tracks is a marvellous way of describing what's happening here."

We reached Mt Dare later that day. Expeditions crossing the Simpson mostly travel west to east because the sand ridges, steeper on their eastern sides, are easier to cross that way. Mt Dare, and Oodnadatta further south, are the last places where fuel, food and advice can be obtained along the desert's western edge. We checked our route with Phil and Rhonda Hellyer, who run the Mt Dare tourist homestead, then turned east.

We followed the scrubby, mud-caked channels of the Finke River (AG 21). In May 1989 widespread rains – 320 mm at Mt Dare alone – sent torrents racing down the dry watercourse. Inundated for three weeks, Mt Dare homestead had to be evacuated. The Simpson's average annual rainfall is just 130 mm, but, as Madigan – whose 1939 expedition was stranded by heavy rain – wryly observed, it is "ten inch or nothing country". The rare floods that reach

*Inspired by central Australia's landscapes, animals and flowers, artist John Wolseley (above) has been painting them for 16 years. When Ed, Cal and Tiet found him on the Simpson's western edge, he was depicting the desert's ecology. Here, seated below a sand ridge, he looks through his working sketches. Infectiously enthusiastic, John maintains that the Simpson should be called the Arrernte Desert out of respect for its original inhabitants. Tracks on the dunes (right) provide him with a fascinating record of the activities of the desert's creatures.*



PETER MCNEILL

*Steady breezes often obliterate the delicate tracks made by the Simpson's insects, like this busy desert spider (opposite). The thorny devil (right) can be found in a variety of habitats, from the sand and spinifex deserts of central Australia to the arid scrublands of southern WA. Despite its unflattering scientific name (MOLOCH HORRIDUS), this remarkable lizard is harmless and spends its day looking for ants, its sole food. It collects water on its skin and channels it to its mouth by capillary action. When threatened, it tucks its head under its body and presents the spiky hump on its neck to its attacker.*



JILLI LOCHMANN





**Gushing out of the desert** (opposite) at near boiling point, mineral-rich water rising 1400 m from the Great Artesian Basin has created an artificial wetland surrounded by tall reeds and acacia woodland at Purni Bore. Drilled in 1963 by the French Petroleum Company, the bore ran unchecked until 1987, when its flow was reduced to conserve the basin's water. Wind and waterbirds probably carried the seeds of much of the vegetation that has sprung up around the bore. The water's minerals create delicate and subtly tinted sedimentary structures.



**Cal negotiates a wash-out** (above) at the south-eastern end of the Rig Road. Originally clay-topped and graded, the Rig Road once enabled conventional vehicles to drive across the Simpson from Oodnadatta. These days, though, it is not maintained and is suitable for 4WD vehicles only. Megan Hunziker (left), one of the Friends of the Simpson Desert Conservation Park, catches up on some washing at Purni Bore. At a morning strategy meeting (below), Friends plan the work they will do on the tracks beyond Purni.



**Three generations** of outback transport (above) lie exposed to the elements at the tip at Mt Dare, the former homestead of Mt Dare station. The NPWS bought the property in 1985 and dedicated it as Witjira National Park. Since 1989 Mt Dare has catered for tourists, offering food, fuel, camping facilities and a limited repair and breakdown service.

**The spinifex pigeon** (left) is at home in spinifex scrub on the Simpson's northern fringes. Living mostly on seeds, it has a low metabolic rate that reduces its food and water requirements, an ideal adaptation to desert living.

the Simpson flow from more than 1.3 million sq. km of central Australia, but none of the streams that penetrate its margins reaches its heart.

Beyond the Finke's flood plain, parallel sand ridges marked the Simpson Desert proper. More than 1100 of them, some up to 200 km long, run north-north-west to south-south-east across

it. The dunes in the west are only about 15 metres high, and there are five or six per kilometre. Three hundred kilometres to the east, dunes as high as 40 m are separated by swales (inter-dune valleys) half a kilometre or more wide. Driven by the prevailing winds, the sand is gradually moving north from near the Lake Eyre basin.

**AT PURNI BORE**, one of six exploration wells in the southern Simpson, we caught up with the NPWS-Friends expedition, which had been there two days. Since the bore was drilled in 1963, its mineral-rich, artesian water has created a wetland that attracts waterbirds and tourists like a magnet.

Wallowing at twilight in a steam-







PETER McNEILL

*Though rugged looking, the Simpson landscape is remarkably fragile, and thoughtless off-road driving leaves long-lasting scars (left). In sandy terrain, wheels damage underlying vegetation that may take years to recover. In the clay or gibber swales, tracks fill with sand and remain visible for decades. When explorers Warren Bonython and Charles McCubbin walked across the Simpson in 1973 (Tribute, AG 7), they had food airdropped to them rather than allow wheeled vehicles to damage the landscape. The NPWS and Friends erected barriers at key points, including Dalhousie Springs, Purni Bore and the Appodinna Attora Knolls, to keep tourists to designated areas. Ken Fielding (below), a member of the Friends group, tensions a fence at the knolls.*

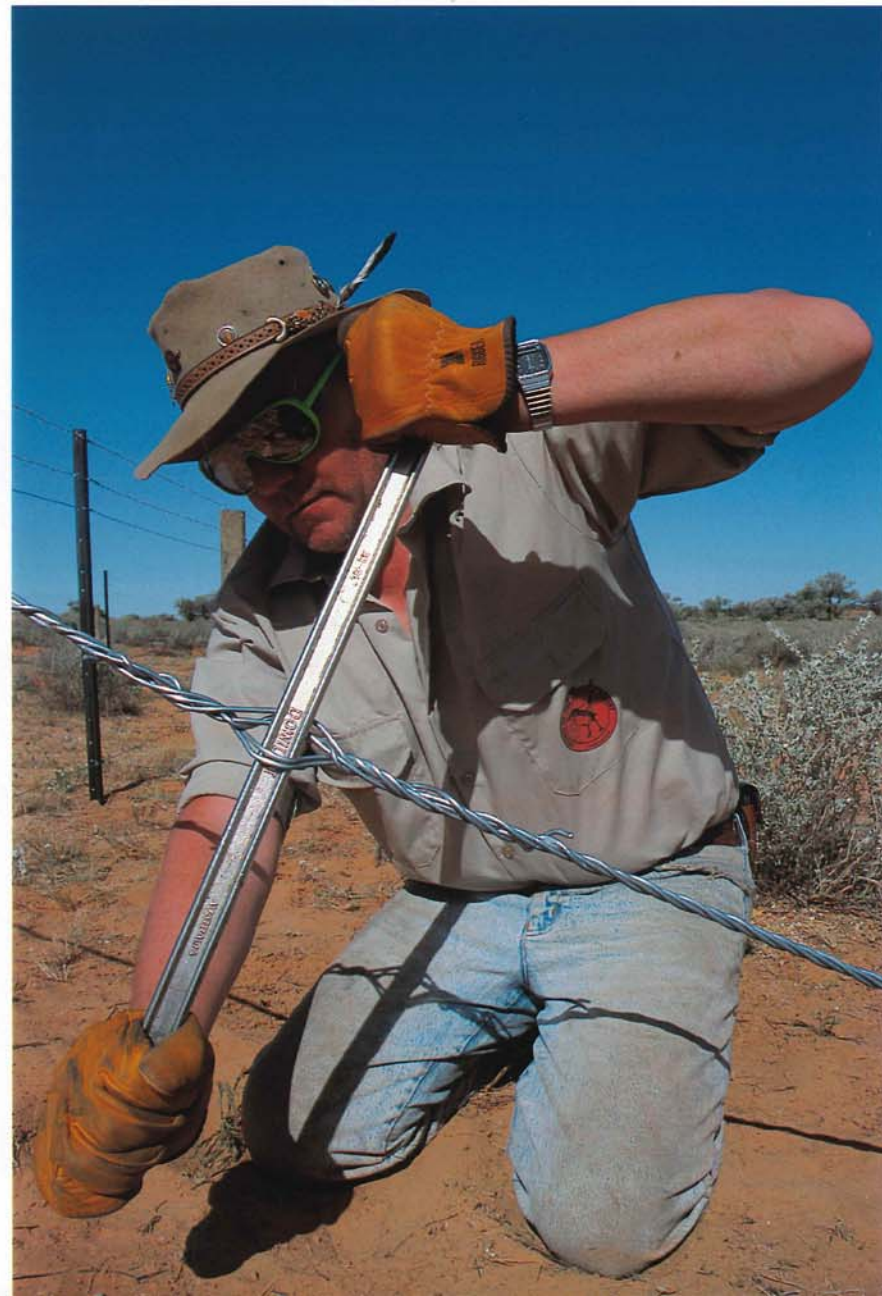
ing, reed-fringed pool, I thought about my companions. Tiet was an old friend, but I had only recently met Cal. Two more different people one could hardly imagine: Cal, 60, tall and outgoing, and Tiet, 34, slight and often introspective. But they were rubbing along well and, I sensed, beginning to appreciate one another.

Later I wandered over to the rangers' camp. Their vehicles were clustered below a sand ridge, its slope dimly lit by their fire. Rangers Brent Williams, Erik Dahl, Diana Papenfus and Terry Gregory were discussing their plans.

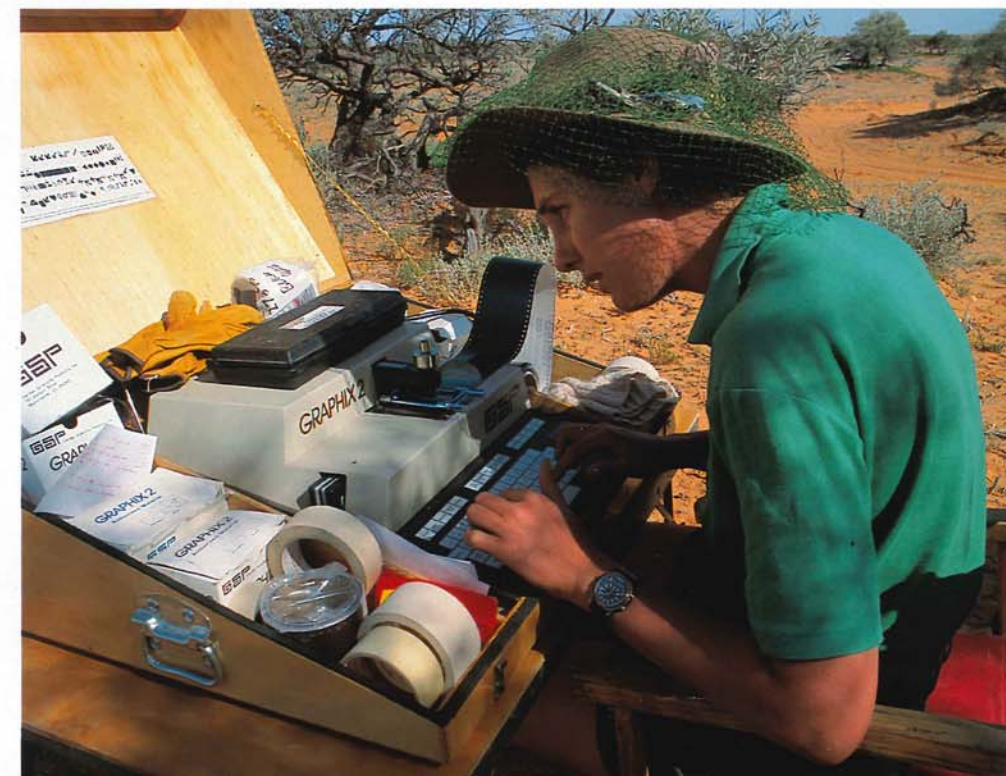
"Purni highlights our dilemma," Brent said. "Every tourist crossing the desert stops here. We'd prefer not to erect fences, but to protect environments like this we must."

The rangers and Friends had five main aims: remove litter; fence off fragile areas and build bird hides; erect "exclosures" to keep out feral animals and monitor the effect on vegetation; place route markers along the main tracks; and install two emergency radios. For this the rangers had brought four 4WDs and the Friends more than 40, together with tonnes of equipment.

Thirty kilometres east of Purni the two main tracks across the desert diverge. The French Line, once a seismic "shot line", runs east-north-east for 170 km, hammering directly across the sand ridges. The Rig Road, a clay-



*On garbage roster (above), rangers Brent Williams, left, and Erik Dahl compact some of the shredded tyres, tin cans and broken bottles that the NPWS and Friends collected during their Simpson expedition. At the end of the trip the NPWS's 6-tonne truck left the desert fully laden with their haul. Keeping an area as large and remote as the Simpson litter-free poses a major logistical problem for the service, evidenced by the great distance (3000 km) the rangers covered and the more than 1000 litres of fuel their four vehicles used. Ranger Diana Papenfus (right) prints signs and markers to inform and direct future desert tourists.*



topped track, winds more gently for 382 km through the central desert. We took the longer route, deviating from it to cover a broad swath. The rangers and Friends, with tasks to complete along both tracks, split up. We would rendezvous with some of them later.

Madigan's photographs show the Simpson largely as a windblown wasteland, but fertility, not barrenness, was my own main impression. Unusually heavy rain between 1973 and 1976 had transformed the landscape, establishing a new generation of shrubs and trees now grown to maturity: acacias, hakeas and grevilleas. Spinifex and cane grass grew thickly on the dune slopes and the swales. Recent showers had carpeted much of the desert with bright yellow daisies, jaunty billy buttons and mauve parakeelia.

The Simpson is home to some 180 bird, as many as 92 reptile and up to 44 native mammal species. There are also nine introduced mammal species, partly accounting for the extinction of 11 native mammals. We saw countless birds, especially birds of prey and cockatoos. There was evidence of other creatures everywhere – tracks, droppings and bleaching bones – but we sighted only dingoes and foxes lurking in the spinifex, and a small mob of camels. The shyer animals, we knew, generally avoid well-used vehicle tracks. Also, many creatures are nocturnal, their evolved response to the region's aridity.



THREE CAMPS beyond Purni, a tortuous track led to the Approdinna Attora Knolls, two low gypsum hills, where the rangers and Friends were already camped. When we arrived they were toiling in the midday heat, surveying vegetation, boring post holes, straining fence wire and making signs. The knolls, once important Aboriginal landmarks, had been much visited, and thoughtless driving had scarred their slopes. Now, in July 1992, fences and signs were being erected to prevent further damage.

"If some of the desert's beauty and serenity has made an impression, all these vehicles are a good thing," Hilda Hewitson, one of the Friends, told me. "But I think a lot of people are just here to say, 'I've crossed the desert; my vehicle has proved itself!'"

A short, determined woman of "indeterminate age" (as she put it), Hilda first visited the desert 15 years ago. In those days, meeting another vehicle was an event. Shaded by a bonsai-like gidgee tree, I was talking during an afternoon smoko with her and Ron Woods, 54, treasurer of the Adelaide-based Friends, who, with secretary Jenny McDonald, helped organise the expedition. (Sadly, Ron died shortly after the venture.)

Ron, fly-veiled and smartly turned out in khaki, said: "We're about minimising the impact of tourism, not restricting access unnecessarily. But areas like the knolls must be protected if our children's children are to be able to appreciate this wilderness."

Ron and Hilda lamented the incursion of ever more vehicles and the

**Desert hunters**, rarely seen because they are mostly active at night, include the mulgara (top), a carnivore that gets all the moisture it needs from its diet and conserves it by excreting highly concentrated urine. The bilby (centre) was once widespread across mainland Australia but is now confined to the deserts of the centre and north-west. It too survives on the moisture in the insects, larvae, seeds, bulbs, fruit and fungi it eats. The kowari (right) is an energetic digger that makes its own burrows or modifies those of other burrowing creatures.



WADE HUGHES



PHOTOS: JIRI LOCHMAN



PHOTOS: PETER McNEILL

resulting need to confine them to the main tracks. Later that day a convoy of 28 4WDs stopped at the knolls – for one hour.

We left the rangers and Friends at the knolls the next morning. Sixty kilometres to the south, we came to the dry salt lakes and camped early by a particularly striking one.

Ephemeral gems, these lakes fill during rare floods, then relentlessly evaporate to nothing. Nowhere did I sense the desert's awesome drying power more than there, for much more significant than its rainfall is the phenomenal evaporation of whatever rain does fall. Overheated in summer (the temperature can exceed 50°C), cloudless in winter, the desert has an annual evaporation rate of over 3 m.

Later I wandered off alone, crossing some salmon-pink ridges dotted with saltbush. Walking away from camp in the Simpson, I reflected, holds fewer risks than elsewhere in central Australia. The sand ridges are so geometrically ordered that it would be

**On the nose.** The Georgina gidgee, an acacia, gives off an unpleasant smell in wet or humid weather. Hence its common name – stinking wattle. Growing to 10 m, sometimes in dense stands, gidgees provide nesting places for eagles and strategic perches for other birds of prey, such as the brown falcon (inset). The barn owl (right) is a nomad whose population in the Simpson fluctuates considerably with the changing seasons.

difficult to get lost. Count the ridges. Turn. Count them on the way back. Find camp.

But that afternoon I was lost – in thought. Three weeks earlier I had flown from Britain to Australia, passing very close to where I now stood. Cocooned in a Qantas jetliner, seat-belted and with drink in hand, I had gazed down at the desert some 30,000 feet below as we sped eastwards. We had crossed it in just 20 minutes.

Continued on page 72



JIRI LOCHMAN



# Travelling the "Madigan Highway" by Ted Gray and Peter McNeill



PETER McNEILL

Caravans then and now. Vehicles (left) taking part in the 1992 re-enactment of Cecil Madigan's 1939 Simpson crossing halt on a 20 m high dune while Mark Amos, in the white troop-carrier at far left, searches for a way over. Pennants on radio aerials enable vehicles to be seen across rough terrain and help prevent dune-top collisions. Madigan's party (below) faced different problems. By the time they reached their Camp 10, their 19 camels were faltering from lack of green feed. But within 15 minutes of breaking camp the following morning, they descended into a swale filled with lush vegetation.

OF HIS 1939 CROSSING of the northern part of the Simpson, explorer-geologist Cecil Thomas Madigan wrote: "The success of an expedition depends primarily on the preliminary organisation."

The words proved just as relevant to the re-enactment of Madigan's venture by the Four Wheel Drive Owners Club of South Australia in July-August last year.

Trip leader Ian Spiller stressed before the event that all vehicles had to be in top condition, the spares list strictly adhered to and careful projections made for fuel, food and water. We knew it would be tough; we knew there were no tracks across the 706 sand ridges that Madigan counted; we knew we'd have to be self-reliant on the "Madigan Highway".

Madigan's party consisted of nine men, 19 camels and a dog; ours comprised 15 club members in eight vehicles. We left Old Andado on 29 July and headed north to Allua Soak, the site of Madigan's Camp 4. Although Madigan meticulously documented most of his journey, he apparently failed to record the star fixes



COURTESY: MORTLOCK LIBRARY, SA

he took at Camp 4 – where he made the crucial turn east – and several subsequent camps. Undeterred, our navigators Tom and Pam Demmler calculated the camps' most probable locations and, using satellite navigation, put us on track for Camp 11, the next point that Madigan recorded.

It lay beside a series of small claypans that probably saved his expedition, for by then the camels needed feed. Seven

days after setting out, we drove through a gap in the scrub – and there were the claypans. We were only 30 m north of them after driving 150 km over rough, irregular dunes!

From there it was a case of bumping our way east towards the Hay River, notching up about 30 km and 80 sand ridges daily. Further proof of our navigators' skills came when, with little trouble, we found the gum tree in the bed of the Hay

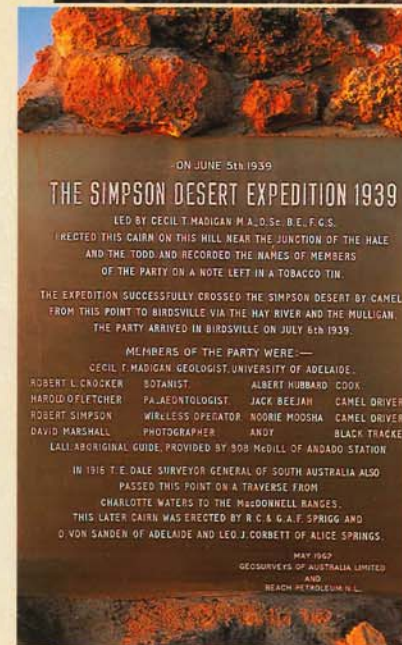
that Madigan blazed.

From there we crossed into Queensland and camped at Kuddaree Waterhole for a half-day rest and a decent bush shower, a fitting end to our desert crossing. We'd covered more than 400 km from Old Andado and were only about 150 km from Birdsville.

Ironically, it was on that final stretch that we had our only major breakdown, a broken trailing arm. Had this happened



PHOTOS: PETER McNEILL



By the mellow light of the setting sun (above), members of the Four Wheel Drive Owners Club of SA examine two cairns at The Twins, a pair of outcrops near the site of Madigan's Camp 2. Despite what the plaque says (left), Madigan found a cairn in place (right) in 1939, possibly left by surveyor Theodore Day 24 years earlier. "We pulled it down to search for any message left there, but found none," he wrote. "We left one of our own in a tin and rebuilt the cairn." Madigan is directly behind the cairn.



COURTESY: MORTLOCK LIBRARY, SA

anywhere else, it might have been serious, though not disastrous. As it was, Mark Amos, our mechanic, took the part 50 km to Birdsville in one of our other vehicles and had it welded.

Birdsville was the best thing we'd seen in three weeks. At the hotel we enjoyed long hot showers, food minus flies and a drink at the bar – under a fading photo of Madigan and his camels.



PETER McNEILL

Co-navigator Pam Demmler (left) checks the readout on the \$3000 satellite navigation system mounted in the vehicle she and husband Tom drove during the re-enactment of Madigan's expedition. The Demmlers used the device to check deviation from their planned course and succeeded in guiding the expedition to within 30 m of a goal after covering 150 km over unmapped terrain. An improvised shield between the instrument and the windshield protected it from the heat.



A DAY BEYOND the salt lakes we reached Warburton Creek, its clayey waters marking the desert's south-eastern boundary. We turned north, pushing into the desert again to rejoin the rangers and Friends. The barren, stony plains around the Warburton had depressed us, but driving towards Poepel (pronounced "pepple") Corner we marvelled at the yellow-top daisies and fresh herbage carpeting the swales.

Ironically, the Simpson is better vegetated today than much of the surrounding country, where rainfall is marginally higher. In South Australia and Queensland, four national parks and reserves cover most of the desert, and much of it in the Northern Territory is subject to Aboriginal land claims. In these areas, despite the ravages of rabbits, plants regenerate well after heavy rain. Beyond the desert proper, however, cattle stations exploit good seasons, largely preventing regrowth in country eaten out in dry times.

In 1880, surveyor Augustus Poeppel marked the intersection of the colonial borders of South Australia,

Queensland and the Northern Territory. Poeppel Corner lies 115 km south-east of the desert's geographical centre and 135 km west of Birdsville. Only a handful of Europeans visited the spot between 1880 and 1960. But logbooks there revealed some 500 visitors between 1978 and 1981, 2500 between 1985 and 1987 and over 400 in the first 15 days of July 1992! Brent Williams estimates that these days 2500 vehicles cross the desert annually.

When we arrived there for our last rendezvous with the rangers and Friends, the rangers were rolling a makeshift airstrip on a nearby salt lake to allow a technician to fly in to install an emergency transceiver. That evening a dingo sniffed haughtily at the runway before padding away. "My domain, not yours," it seemed to say.

The rangers and Friends had finished their work and achieved most of their objectives. Frequently visited sites had been protected with fences and signs, 222 unobtrusive route markers had been placed every 5 km along 1100 km of track, two emergency

Royal Flying Doctor Service transceivers had been installed for tourists rash enough to travel without their own, and a 6-tonne truck was fully loaded with rubbish. There was quiet satisfaction around the rangers' fire that night, and some weary bodies.

"Something of the wilderness must be kept. The level of development and access out here is as high as we want it now," Brent told me.

*Over the edge.* Cal prepares to drive down the side of a sand ridge near the Approddinna Attora Knolls. Dunes cover 73 per cent of the Simpson and are about 15 m high in the west and up to 40 m high in the east. They are steeper on their eastern sides, and their crests are usually more sparsely vegetated and thus less stable than their better-covered flanks. Prevailing winds are gradually driving their sands northwards from near the Lake Eyre basin. The colour of the sand varies, but is usually yellowish white near watercourses.



*Runway success* (above). Tiet, a poetic Vietnamese Australian with a talent for photography, was awed and excited by the Simpson's landscapes and considered the expedition a "great learning experience". One of the things he learnt was how to make an airstrip. Here, on a dry salt lake near Poeppel Corner, he rakes salt onto soft patches after a dozen 4WDs have driven back and forth to compact the crust. The strip was built to enable a technician to fly in and install an emergency radio transceiver. Rangers Diana Papenfus and Brent Williams (right) help mount the aerial on a mast. The equipment is solar powered and tuned permanently to two Royal Flying Doctor Service emergency channels. Although the NPWS installed two such radios on this expedition, it advises every tourist group to carry its own.







**This plaque** at Poeppel Corner marks the point where Queensland, SA and the NT meet. Augustus Poeppel surveyed the area in 1880, but his surveying chain was later found to have lengthened 2.5 cm through wear, making his results inaccurate. Lawrence Wells resurveyed the area in 1883 and found Poeppel's marker to be 300 m too far west.

PHOTOS: PETER MCNEILL



We were camped by some dunes riddled with rabbit warrens. He added thoughtfully: "Rabbits do far more damage to the desert's landscape than tourists, but even if we had unlimited funds we could never control rabbits with the methods available now."

With an operating budget that provides just eight field staff to cover the 8 million hectares in the State's desert parks, Brent and the other rangers knew that none of their recent tasks could have been completed without the Friends' cash, labour, vehicles and fuel. They had achieved in two weeks what would normally have taken 6–10 years.

Relaxing on our last evening together, Diana Papenfus, 35, a tall, striking and tireless ranger, precisely captured the Simpson's paradoxical extremes – and my own thoughts.

"Desert is barrenness, harshness, death. This isn't desert; this is paradise!" she said. "The Simpson's exciting and beautiful, like a many-faceted jewel."

Tourism had certainly brought some localised desecration to small parts of the desert, but for me its wilderness remained largely intact.

**TWELVE DAYS** after we'd set out, Annandale lay 170 km north-east along two tracks. A day beyond Poeppel Corner we farewelled the rangers and Friends near Eyre Creek and pushed on, following Eyre Creek's straggling box trees north-north-west and travelling very close to explorer Charles Sturt's September 1845 route (AG 7).

Annandale was established as a cattle station little more than a gener-

*A fitting climax to a Simpson crossing, Nappanerica Dune rises to 40 m and is probably the desert's highest. Dubbed "Big Red" by adventurer Denis Bartell, it can defeat even the most skilled driver. The NPWS advises visitors to take the graded detour to the north, though it's worth walking to the top of the dune for the view. The roadworks sign is unofficial, probably souvenired from elsewhere.*

ation after Sturt's expedition. It was abandoned a generation later, in 1915, having proved too small to be viable. Today a scattering of ruins speaks poignantly of its founders' dreams.

Thoughts flashed through my mind that night, like the shooting stars that blazed momentarily across the desert sky above the homestead's remains. For Sturt the Simpson had been a "gloomy and hopeless desert". For Madi-

gan it proved a "tough nut to crack". And for me?

I pictured again the colours and shapes of the wind-rippled sand ridges marked with tracks, and I felt the des-

ert's ethereal solitude. No other person would tread exactly where I had trodden. That, for me, was the essence of the Simpson. And that, surely, would never change.



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