INTRODUCTION

In September 24 2018, 4 vehicles and 6 participants headed off for a 2 week trip in order to find and photograph one of Australia’s most spectacular and rarest parrots – the Princess Parrot (Polytelis alexandrae).

Preparations for this massive trip began 12 months earlier and involved extensive planning, research and discussion with experts. I must make mention of Ian May who greatly contributed his vast knowledge of the area for our preparations.

The trip centred on making our way to Jupiter Well in the Gibson Desert in WA.

PARTICIPANTS

Bernie Okeefe, Glen Pacey, Robert Shore, Bill Twiss, R.Bruce Richardson and David Adam.

Anyone who wants to visit this region must have a permit from the Central Land Council. Ring on 08 89501711 or email reception@ngaanyatjarra.org.au

Ask to talk to Sonsee!

This can be a very dangerous journey. PLEASE prepare properly. More said about this later.
The journey up

The Thunderbirds (which I named us all as we all had TW radios and needed call signs) left at different times in the days leading up to the trip. Glen had flown down to Melbourne on Friday morning to meet up with me. We had a 10 day Pass into the area so wanted the most of this time. There was little time for birding for Glen and I on our trip up from Melbourne to Alice Springs. Glen and I left from Melbourne about 2pm on the Friday and made our way to Patchewollop which was about 4.5 hours away. But we did manage to squeeze in a great view of Regent Parrots in North-west Victoria early next morning which we felt could be an omen for the trip! Thanks Jenn Stephens, a local birding legend in that area, for pointing us in the right direction.

We were also fortunate to see a Malleefowl in the township! Please see photo below! LOL!

Bill and David had similar success on their journey up to Alice Springs by photographing a pair of Chestnut-breasted Whitefaces around the Coober Pedy area (see photo below)
September 24 (Monday)

We all met up in Alice Springs to begin the journey. But before we left, we had information on a pair of Grey Honeyeaters around the Alice Springs area so we headed out and were fortunate to find the pair. David Adam got onto them first.

After collecting some final supplies, like meat, fresh vegies and ice, and visiting the Central Land Council to thank the person who made our application process so much easier, we headed off about midday.

We had discussed at length our proposed route and after talking to many experienced people like Ian May (who has vast experience in that country), we decided to take the safest route. It was basically to get to the Gary Junction Rd and follow the route via Papunya, Mt.Liebig, Kintore and Kiwirrkurra and then onto to Jupiter well.
This meant we head west along Namatjira Drive which is the bitumen road that takes you to places like Simpsons Gap and Ormingston Gorge.

You will have around 170 kms of bitumen heading towards Papunya when you strike the dirt road. It is another 60 kms or so to Papyuna and this road is the worst of the trip. Heavy gravel and much corrugation. We passed through the community of Papunya and decided to camp at a nice camp ground on the right called Kunparrka, (-23.202726, 131.678577) which is another 25km past Papunya. It is NOT signposted so please check the maps.me iphone application.

There is mobile phone reception at Papunya but this is the last chance to communicate with the rest of the world!

**September 25 (Tuesday)**

We left the campsite around 6.30am and began our journey to Jupiter Well.

Mt.Liebig was only around 20 kms away, which requires a small drive off the main road. We visited the site to top up on fuel but the shop was not open so we continued on.

NOTE: Fuel is available at most communities like Papunya, Mt.Liebig, Kintore and Kiwirrkurra but they are closed on weekends, and only have limited hours of operation during the day. Most close between 12-3 pm each day. **PLEASE BE AWARE OF THIS RESTRICTION**
The road had improved so average speeds were around 80 kms an hour although be careful of some soft sandy spots.

Also be aware that the leading car will create a dust storm for cars following so please keep a distance and rotate leaders. That is another reason why radios are so important to warn of road hazards because the cars behind cannot see.

We continued on to reach Kintore to fuel up which was another 250 kms away from our campsite. The road into Kintore is very poor and is 9 kms off the Gary Junction Rd.

We fueled up at Kintore at $2.00 a litre. When you find the General Store, they will explain the process. Easy!

The roads continue to improve.

Along this stretch, we found some great birds so please keep your eyes and ears open. We had small groups of Bourkes Parrot, Chiming Wedgebills and Black-breasted Buzzard. We also had some really cool reptiles on the road including Painted Dragon, Centralian Blue-tongue Lizard and Central Sand Monitor.
After fueling up at Kintore ($2.00 a litre for Diesel), we made our way to Kiwirrkurra (WA) which was another 189 kms away. Again roads were pretty good but I suspect they could change after indifferent weather. During this leg, we travelled over the state border from NT to WA. Again, please be aware of short parts of soft sand which can make your vehicle unstable.

We decided to fuel up gain at Kiwirrkurra ($2.50 a litre!!!) and then made our way to Jupiter Well which was another 136 kms away. The road was pretty good but there are some large patches of sand where we had to go into 4WD to get through. We also stopped at the site where John Weigel found the birds in 2014. We looked around for a short while. This was 35km from Jupiter Well.

We arrived at Jupiter Well with great excitement because we felt this was the ‘promised land’ and the heart of Princess Parrot country. We arrived at around 5pm and set up camp to launch our birding attack the following day. Jupiter Well is a BEAUTIFUL campsite, shaded in Desert Oaks and the well itself has wonderful fresh water (drinkable) that you pump out. We were finally here after such a long and sometimes tough journey!

WE WERE AT THE FAMOUS JUPITER WELL YAHOO!
**September 26 (Wednesday)**

Each night we had a team meeting to discuss our plans for the following day. Our plan for today was to drive west and check out the two sites that had Princess Parrot sightings from previous trips. These were at the 30km and 47km mark. We left on dawn and checked out both sites. Both sites appeared to be very barren with very few Desert Oak. We assumed the previous sightings must have been ‘fly overs’.

We decided to head back to camp and then begin to check out the East from the Well as the habitat looked great with many Desert Oaks in this area. We were very conscience of the advice we had been given that the parrots are most active for the first 3 hours of the morning. In fact, the best habitat we found was the area 20kms East of the Well which ultimately proved to be correct. Feral camels were common around the Jupiter Well area.

At 10am and at the 17km mark East of the well, we had our first sighting of the parrots. We flushed a group of 9-10 birds from a Desert Oak on the side of the road. Unfortunately, not all members of the party saw the birds and the photo I took was very poor. We attempted to relocate them but to no avail. There were mixed feelings as although we located the birds, not all members of the team manage to see them as they were in the back car.

The strategy we used was to drive slowly and listen for their calls.
We spent the morning continuing to search and found a number of cool reptiles at an abandoned series of huts at the 20km mark in the road. This included Western Netted Dragon and Central Military Dragon.

The rest of the day was spent around the campsite trying to keep cool. The temperature peaked at 38 degrees mid-afternoon. But there is plenty of shade at the Jupiter Well campground.

**September 27 (Thursday)**

In order to give the members who did not see the birds yesterday, it was felt that they should be the lead car for the day. We continued our search between the well and the 20km mark East again driving slowly and listening for their call. Around the 20km mark, we located a large pond off the road. Some of the
members decided to set up there for the afternoon to see if the parrots would come in for a drink.

The rest of us went back to the campsite for lunch. I was exhausted from the heat so decided to take a nap under a Desert Oak. Glen and Bruce were talking under the Desert Oaks near the tents when the call came out at around 1.30pm. Bruce yelled “WTF” and Glen yelled out “PRINCESS PARROTS”. A flock of around 25 birds had flown low down over our campsite heading South-west. Almost immediately, another group of about 12 birds did the same thing! I missed the event as I was snoozing but Glen and Bruce had excellent views. No photos as the cameras had been packed away. I immediately jumped in the car to go and inform the rest of the team who were back at the pond 20km away. But unfortunately the show was over for the rest of the day with no further sightings!

We spent the rest of the day cooling down around the campsite but had camera’s close by.

September 28 (Friday)

Up early again before dawn to prepare for another search in the Eastern area of Jupiter Well. The plan was again to drive slowly and listen. We felt reasonably confident as we knew the birds were in the area.

Not long had we begun when the lead car stopped at the 7km mark. On the sand dune were 6 Princess Parrots sitting in a dead tree! Immediately they flew off but low so we scrambled up and over the dune to the experience the
highlight of the trip. The 6 birds were sitting on low bushes feeding and calling. The cameras went into overdrive as we fired away. One group flew off and flew directly over our heads. Bruce and David managed some wonderful flight shots. The other group remained about 50 meters ahead of us in the bush but remained pretty well unconcerned with our presence. BINGO! Our dreams and aspirations had been fulfilled! There were lots of hugs and high fives during this memorable experience – one that I will treasure forever!
Photo: David Adam (flight shots of Princess Parrot)
After we calmed down, reality sunk in and we would now have to consider what our next move was. We had a meeting back at the campsite and decided we should make an early departure and head back to Alice Springs. The days were getting hotter and energy levels were low. So we decided to pack up and leave!

We had been fortunate so far in the trip with the vehicles but this was about to change as the harsh conditions began to take a toll on the cars.

We made it to Kiwirrkurra about 136 kms away but the store was shut and would not re-open for another 2 hours so we decided to move on to fuel up at Kintore. I had already used 40 litres of the Diesel I brought so taking the chance to fuel up was a must. At Kintore, Bill and David noticed that their ‘roo’ bar had become very loose. Upon further investigation, it was actually broken on one of the brackets. With the help of Rob and Glen, the car had a temporary fix but this needed constant attention for the remainder of the trip. I scored my first flat tyre not long after so this needed changing. The goal was to get back to the bitumen ASAP but was still 500kms away. Without the mechanical expertise of Rob and Glen, we would probably still be there!

We were also surprised at how many fires were burning out in this area. They were a constant throughout the day and night. Some were extremely large.
But we made it to the bitumen about 11.30pm. At this point where the bitumen began, the team had to part company as David and Bill had to be back at Alice Springs by 8am the next morning to have their car fixed. Rob and Bruce decided to follow us to Ormiston Gorge to seek out Dusky Grasswren for Glen. But after a long day of driving and drama, we set up tents just off the road at 12.30am!

**September 29 (Saturday)**

Up at dawn to had 40 kms to Ormiston Gorge. It was not long before we got onto the Dusky Grasswren. There were other beautiful birds at the gorge including a pair of Spinifex Pigeons who ate the crumbs under our table at the café and one of my favourites, Rainbow Bee-eaters.
We finally made our way into Alice where it was time for a shower, shave, a bed and a nice cold beer! I decided to release the first photos of the parrot on Facebook and the response was enormous from the many people who had been following our trip and eager to hear the outcome.

**September 30 (Sunday)**

Off early to begin our trip home but there was an important detour to make. We said our goodbyes to Bruce and Rob and then departed.

One of the key targets on this trip for Glen and I was the Sandhill Grasswren and Thorny Devil so a trip to the Uluru area was needed. We arrived there late afternoon so decided to stay in Yulara the night. After searching at Ormiston Gorge for Long-nosed Dragon with no success, we were amazed to find this reptile in the Beer Garden happily feeding underneath the tables.

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**October 1 (Monday)**

We set off at dawn to a site near Yulara for Sandhill Grasswren. It was not long until we located them. They gave us incredible views! Now we were on our way HOME. A short way down the highway to Erldunda, we finally had the joy of finding my very first Thorny Devil. This was a dream I have had since childhood. I moved it off the road and took it to a sand dune some distance away. This event was no doubt one of the main highlights for me on the trip.
I hope you have found this report interesting and a useful planning resource for future trips.

Bernie OKeefe (BOK)

PS: A special THANKS to the team. You will remain in my heart forever!
Some other photos from the trip

Where is Glen Pacey? Chasing Princess Parrots on a sand dune!
Thunderbirds 1, 2, 3 and Troopi 1 in convoy. Thunderbirds are GO!
Team meeting which we held each evening to discuss tactics.

Fires very common on the journey. Why do people do this?
My great mate and travel companion Glen Pacey. You are like a brother mate!

Beautiful clean and drinkable water at the well at Jupiter Well.

Just over this dune we photographed the parrots
Car trouble on the way home with flat tyres and broken brackets. Thank God we had Glen Pacey and Robert Shore to resolve the problems.

These are the small bushes that the parrots were feeding on. Some research currently being done on their ID.
IMPORTANT - WHAT YOU MUST TAKE WITH YOU

1. Satellite Phone
2. Recovery gear
3. Two Way Radios (so important for constant communication while travelling difficult roads).
4. Extra fuel. I took 60 litres and needed 40 litres of this.
5. Hema ‘Great Desert Tracks’ atlas
6. Water although the well water is drinkable.
7. At least two spare tyres and a tyre repair kit.
8. Inverter to charge batteries in the car such as camera, phone, TW radios etc.
9. A POSITIVE ATTITUDE. Conditions are tough so people may lose focus and want to quit early.

Please feel free if you would like to discuss this trip more. You can email me on

b.okeefe@cccc.vic.edu.au