



This is the third in a series looking at the great outback tracks of South Australia and the first of a 2-part series on the Birdsville Track.

The outback means many things to many people, probably dependent on where you come from and previous experience. In South Australia, an outback trip is invariably a desert experience, travelling through areas having minimal rainfall. But when it does rain, watch out!

Torrential downpours often cause severe flooding and may close many of the normally dusty roads. These heavy rains most commonly occur in the summer as a result of monsoonal weather conditions experienced in the north-west of Western Australia or cyclonic conditions pushing down from northern Queensland.

## The best time to travel in the area

This is not a good time to travel in the area, not just because of the risk of rain, but also due to the extreme temperatures, often in the high 40's. Although these events can impact on travel in the area, the sight of a quick flowing Cooper Creek or Diamantina River is spectacular and provides some brilliant camping opportunities.

One of the best times to travel is in the winter following one of these rain events as the creeks often retain water well after the event, forming large waterholes and billabongs, flanked by magnificent trees – a campers dream.



The Birdsville Track is well travelled, being a supply route to the stations along the way and still fulfilling its original role as a major stock route, bringing animals from as far away as the Queensland Channel Country to markets in Adelaide.

The romance of the drover leisurely pushing a herd of cattle south is long since gone. Now a massive diesel powered monster will come rumbling down the track spewing masses of dust behind its multiple trailers. The road train rules!

## Condition of the track

Although dirt all the way from Marree to Birdsville, it is normally well maintained and can even be traversed in a well-prepared conventional vehicle. However, like all outback tracks, conditions can change quickly, especially after rain, and a 4WD is preferable if you find yourself in a “sticky” situation. Advice about vehicle preparation and gear to carry will be found in part 2 of this blog.

Having reached Birdsville, had the mandatory drink at the Birdsville Pub and seen the sights,



you do need an exit strategy. You could turn around and head back south and do it all again, and many people do. But there are a variety of other options if you have the luxury of time and these will also be covered in part 2.

## **The beginning**

Like many things, necessity drives invention, and the Birdsville Track is no exception. The large cattle stations stretching north of Marree and well into Queensland needed a way of getting stock to market. This was a time well before motor transport and the drover was king. The nearest railhead was initially at Port Augusta, and later Marree, a distance over 1000km shorter than moving stock to Brisbane.

But, no route existed through incredibly inhospitable terrain, requiring the crossing of three deserts – the Tirari Desert, east of Lake Eyre, Sturts Stony Desert that runs along the eastern edge of the Simpson Desert, and the Strezlecki Desert, sandwiched between the Simpson and Queensland. A route was surveyed in the early 1860's and stock started moving soon after, sometimes in mobs of over 1000 animals.

However, one enormous obstacle stood in the way of this venture being a success – water. Apart from the relatively rare flooding events that swelled otherwise dry creeks, there was no permanent water along the whole length of the track. Many deaths occurred, both human and animal, due to the harsh conditions and extreme isolation.

Blinding sandstorms lasting up to 5 days were not uncommon, especially in the Natterannie Sandhills area. Stock wandered aimlessly and with visibility non-existent, many were never seen again. Drivers were not spared, with many perishing in the desert whilst looking for the wandering stock. Especially in the sand hill country, every direction looked the same.

## **More on the history of the area**

Even relatively modern travellers have fallen foul of the conditions with the Page family of five perishing along the track when their vehicle broke down in 1963 and they attempted to walk for help.

Their graves stand forlornly near the track at Koonchera Dune (26 35 20S, 139 38 22E).

The South Australian Government, realising the economic importance of the track and wanting to encourage its use to bring stock into the southern markets, began a program of bore drilling, resulting in the Great Artesian Basin being tapped every 40-50km.

Many of these bores have now been capped, but some are controlled with valves and a certain amount of water flows freely producing mini-wetland ecosystems teeming with birdlife. Look out for these on your travels.

## **Once the track was established**

Once the track was established it also became the route for cameleers carrying supplies for stations along the track. The cameleers were commonly known as Afghans, however many came from India and Pakistan. They soon set up a significant community in Marree and what is known as Ghan Town still exists today, populated by many of the descendants of these amazing pioneers.



A mail contract was let in 1884, with mail and other supplies carried along the track in horse and buggy. But without a doubt, the most famous of the mailmen was Tom Kruse, immortalised in the 1954 documentary, “Back of Beyond”.

There is no better documentation of what life was like at the time and it is well worth getting a copy before you embark on your trip. If nothing else, you will certainly appreciate all the mod-cons today’s travellers enjoy. One of Tom’s mail trucks sits opposite the hotel at Marree, unfortunately, not in good condition.

## Getting There

The southern end of the track starts at Marree, some 700km north of Adelaide, requiring some time just to get there. For most, the outback starts north of Port Augusta, with the rugged and magnificent Flinders Ranges beckoning you to head north.

There are many things to captivate the traveller before arriving at Marree and these have been documented in the previous blog [“Oodnadatta Track Part 1 – Port Augusta to Lyndhurst”](#).

If you have time at least stop and look at a few of these places. My top 5 are:

- Kanyaka Homestead
- Brachina Gorge
- A meal at the Prairie Hotel, Parachilna
- The Ochre Pits
- Farina

## Travelling the Birdsville Track

Today the track is wide and well maintained, but don’t be fooled. You will be travelling through the desert country with no natural water sources other than after rain. Much of the track has a gibber surface that can play havoc with tyres unless pressures are reduced. The seemingly good condition of the track can build up a false sense of security leading to increased speeds. A pot-hole, wandering animal or corrugations have led some to make sudden direction changes, unfortunately to their peril. So keep the speed down and enjoy the experience.

Even though the track is only 520km long, I suggest taking at least two days to take in the sights and appreciate the country. There are no towns along the way and Birdsville itself is only a small town with limited supplies. No big glitzy supermarkets here.

Self-sufficiency is the key, especially with food and water, although water supplies can be topped up at Birdsville. Fuel is available about half-way along the track at Mungerannie, with a couple of outlets at Birdsville.



## Things to See



The first distance shown is from Marree and the second from Birdsville.

### 0km/521km - Marree

The area around Marree, Lake Eyre and north is the traditional home of the Dieri people. Many are prominent residents of Marree and the Dieri Aboriginal Corporation operates a number of businesses in the town. The Marree Aboriginal School caters for the children of the area with modern facilities.

When first established, the town was known as Hergott Springs, but this soon changed to Marree and became an extremely important rail town when the narrow gauge Ghan train arrived in 1884. For a number of years, this was the railhead, with many hundreds of camels loaded up with supplies from the trains to be taken to the homesteads, some many kilometres away.

As stock started to come down the Birdsville Track, they were loaded onto trains for the trip to the markets in Adelaide. This was a bustling, busy centre until a new standard gauge railway bypassed the area in 1980.

Since that time, Marree has depended largely on tourism and is quite busy, especially in the cooler months as travellers pass through on their trips up the Birdsville Track, Oodnadatta Track or onto Lake Eyre.

### Whilst at Marree have a look at the following:

- the old mosque that sits alongside the road opposite the road house
- a couple of the old Ghan diesel locomotives that sit next to the old railway platform
- the Lake Eyre Sailing Club – just down the road from the roadhouse
- Ghan Town, where many of the descendants of the early pioneers live. This is in the area behind the roadhouse
- Tom Kruse's old mail truck that sits opposite the pub.
- The roadhouse boasts its own bakery and can provide basic supplies. Fuel is also available.

If you have time, take the 54km track, just outside of Marree, to Muloorina, a fabulous campsite on the edge of wetlands. There is then a 45km Public Access Route to the edge of



Lake Eyre. Muloorina is where Donald Campbell stayed whilst attempting his land speed records on Lake Eyre. The track to the lake is quite sandy, so a 4WD is recommended.

## **31km/490km - Lake Harry**

The site of a short-lived attempt to grow dates in the early years, now there is just the remains of a building and an old bore head. The bore provided plentiful water and together with the warm climate, it was believed the conditions were conducive to a good crop. The trees grew exceptionally well but there was one problem, the natural pollinators for date palms did not exist in this area. To overcome the problem, canals were dug along the sides of each row of palms and men in boats pollinated the flowers by hand. Although some dates did grow, this highly intensive process was not economic and the project was soon abandoned.

## **43km/478km - Dog Fence**

Reputed to be the longest fence in the world at over 5500km, it begins at the Great Australian Bight and weaves right up into Queensland. It was designed to protect sheep from attack by dingoes with the area south of the fence deemed suitable for sheep grazing and the area north being more suitable for cattle.

The fence is still maintained to this day by contractors, each of whom has a section to look after. It is illegal to travel along the maintenance track adjacent to the fence and potentially dangerous with traps and baits being laid by the contractors.

## **54km/467km - Clayton Wetlands**

Established by the nearby Clayton Station, this area results from a controlled release of bore water. The area has toilets, warm showers and even a “spa”, created by a large section of the water tank that can be filled with warm water from the bore. What a luxury in the bush. There are plenty of campsites along the wetland and bird watchers won't be disappointed.

## **124km/397km - Etadunna Station**

Signified by the large steel cross on the side of the track, Etadunna (pronounced “Eta-dinna”) is a large cattle station taking in a lot of land along the Cooper Creek. The cross is a reminder of the German missionaries who set up the Bethesda missionary station nearby at Lake Killalpaninna to try and convert the local Dieri aborigines to the Lutheran religion. Access to the remains of this settlement can be gained from the station homestead where a key providing access to the track can be hired.

Etadunna is also the access point to the Cooper Creek flood track. At times when the Cooper is in flood, the main Birdsville Track becomes impassable where the Cooper crosses, as water spreads out over the low-lying country either side of the main creek.

The track can be impassable for many months so an alternative track through Etadunna Station provides access to a deep but narrow section of Cooper Creek where a “ferry” is



operated by the South Australian Government.

This is a small raft that can only take one or two vehicles at a time and is powered by a couple of small outboard motors. This is a rare but amazing experience that last occurred in 2010.

It is illegal to travel on this track other than when it is officially opened for use of the ferry. Large fines apply for travel on a closed road.

## **146km/375km - Cooper Creek crossing**

Other than on rare occasions, you won't see any water here, just a broad flood plain and a dip as the track crosses the main channel. Just to the south of the crossing and on the western side of the track sits the "Tom Brennan", a small boat used to carry people, supplies and stock across the creek when flooded.

Just another stark reminder of the difficulties experienced by early settlers and drovers living in this harsh environment.

## **150km/271km - Natterannie Sandhills**

An area on the track that caused great difficulties for travellers, drovers and the early mail contractors. Consistently moving fine white sand dunes, regularly whipped up into a dense, opaque cloud caused disorientation, disguised the track and led to the deaths of people and stock.

The perils of this area are well documented in the film "Back of Beyond" mentioned previously. No worries today as the track is wide, well formed and constantly maintained.

## **164km/357km - Mulka ruins**

George and Mabel Aiston established a store, roughly half way along the Birdsville Track in the early 1900's. Imagine the lonely existence at this time with very few people travelling the track. George, known as "Poddy", died in 1943 and Mabel continued to run the business until 1951, then well into her 70's.

The crumbling ruins of the store remain just off the western side of the track, not long before the track into Mulka Homestead.

## **206km/315km - Mungerannie**

The only settlement along the track, you will be greeted by a top outback pub, flanked by permanent wetlands fed by a controlled bore. Pub meals, snacks and a cold drink are always on offer, and camping along the wetlands makes a good break in your trip. Tyre repairs and basic mechanical assistance is also available.

## **242km/279km - Mirra Mitta Bore**

One of the bores drilled to provide water for drovers, this is now controlled but does



constantly flow into a small pond and into long channels to cool the water for stock.

## **288km/233km - Mt. Gason Bore**

Another controlled but usually flowing bore. Be very careful near the bore head as the water flowing out can be extremely hot.

## **315km/206km - Warburton Crossing (27 06 29S, 138 49 21E)**

This track leads to the Warburton Creek and on to the eastern edge of the Simpson Desert. It is often closed as even a small amount of rain or any significant flow of water in the Warburton makes the crossing impassable.

## **340km/181km - Inside Track (26 59 53S, 139 01 30E)**

The original route of the Birdsville Track followed the Warburton Creek and crossed it near Clifton Hills Station. However, the Warburton's wide flood plain resulted in the area becoming impassable, even after a little rain. This happened so often that a new route to the east was surveyed and a new road built, now known as the Outside Track.

The inside track can still be taken but, due to the factors mentioned above, is quite often closed. If open it provides an alternative route home for travellers returning along the Birdsville Track.

## **399km/122km - Walkers Crossing (26 52 15S, 139 32 08E)**

Another track that is subject to regular closure due to rain, it provides a route between Birdsville and Innamincka. The name comes from the point where the track crosses the Cooper. The channel here is deep and makes the crossing impassable if there is any significant water in the creek. This track also passes through major oil and gas fields and tracks go in all directions.

Travelling through the area can be a navigational nightmare as few of these tracks are on any map. If taking this option have the best maps you can, a reliable and accurate GPS and good navigational skills.

You are not looked on kindly if you drive into the middle of a mining camp or drilling operation.



## 512km/0km - Birdsville



One of the places many people want to tick off their “bucket list”, Birdsville is a true outback icon and a delightful place to spend a couple of days. Established in 1881, it sits beside a large billabong on the Diamantina River. Nestled near the borders of Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory, it was established as a point to collect tolls for the many cattle being moved out of Queensland to southern markets.

Apart from the obligatory drink at the Birdsville Pub, accompanied by the regular comings and goings of aircraft on the airfield just across the road, there are a number of things you should see before you leave:

### Visitor Information Centre

In the Community Centre and Library, get all the latest information, maps and “goss” from the locals to ensure you don’t miss out on anything.

### Birdsville Bakery

Try their famous camel pies plus many other delights. They also do a great breakfast.

### Big Red

Just 35km out of town is the famous and largest sand dune on the Simpson Desert. If you have a 4WD, give it a go. The view from the top is worth the effort, be it by vehicle or foot.

### Dingo Caves and Waddi Trees

This area to the north of town provides a magnificent lookout over the area and is the site of a group of Waddi trees, having some of the hardest wood of any trees in the world. See the Visitor Centre for exact details.

### Geothermal power station and bore

Just on the edge of town is a bore that has been supplying the town’s water for many years. Gushing from the earth at very high temperatures, it is run through cooling towers so that it can be piped around the town. The hot water is also used to run a power station that supplies some of the town’s electricity.





There is even a free “car-wash” that visitors are urged to use to remove dust, and sometimes mud, from vehicles rather than depositing this on the roads.

Mechanical and tyre repairs are available and spare parts can be flown in if required – at a cost!

***Having whet your appetite to take on this trek, check out part 2 for information on accommodation, preparation, facilities and general tips to make your trip safe and enjoyable.***