

# on a desert



**MAIN PHOTOGRAPH** A DESERT TRANSFORMED. **FROM LEFT** A LONG WAY FROM THE WATER, A UTE PARKED AT CLUBHOUSE OF THE LAKE EYRE YACHT CLUB IN MARREE; HUW KINGSTON PADDLING IN THE DESERT.

## PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON

In the heart of Australia's desert region, the rivers of the vast Lake Eyre basin often run dry but earlier this year the weather gods of northern Queensland delivered a rare gift. Two separate major rain events filled thirsty riverbeds, sending floodwaters flowing towards Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre, the lowest point in the country. Never one to shy from adventure, HUW KINGSTON was more than ready for a desert river journey.

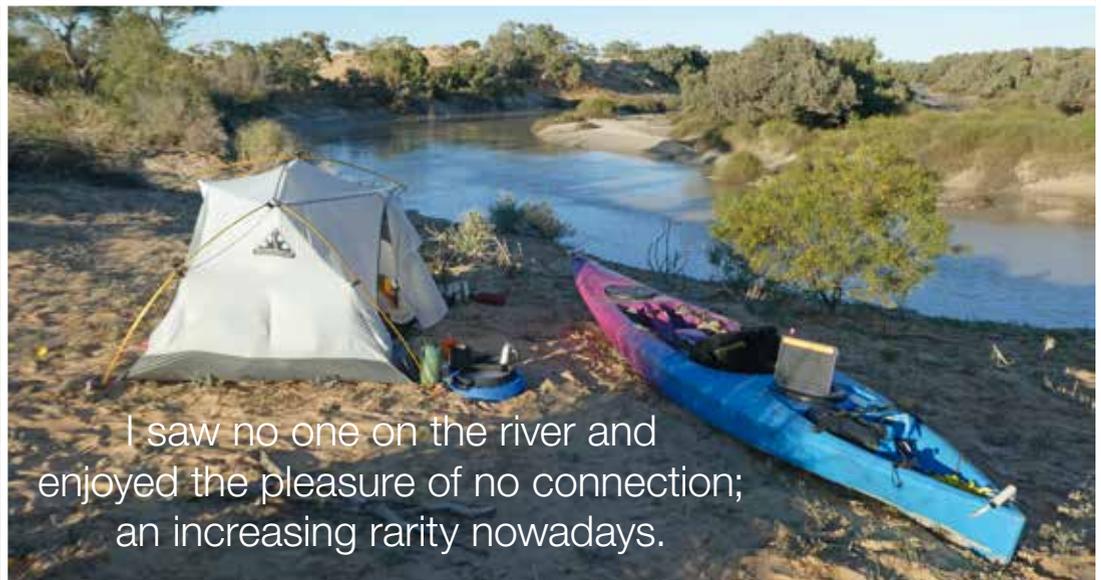
**M**Y FOOT AGAIN SANK into the mud; mud that in a few weeks would desiccate to sand again. Trying to avoid losing a shoe to suction, I spied a crab, the size of a mini donut perhaps. Like so much of this country, the Inland Freshwater Crab can sit out a dry spell, in its case for up to six years, buried deep, a metre or more into the riverbank, waiting...

I too had been waiting some years for this. Two separate massive rain events early in 2019 had hit northern Queensland

and, over the following months, the floodwaters soaked southward for thousands of kilometres. All these watery tentacles ultimately lead to Lake Eyre, Australia's lowest point and largest lake. Kati Thanda, as it is known to the Arabana traditional owners, rarely holds water; the desert drinking up any flow as it heads toward the lake.

From the east coast I watched the gauges enviously; the rivers were flowing. But alas I couldn't just go west. I'd thrown my hat into the ring as a candidate in the federal election, on a platform of action on the climate emergency and including deep

# river



I saw no one on the river and enjoyed the pleasure of no connection; an increasing rarity nowadays.

FROM LEFT THE WATER BROUGHT ABUNDANT BIRDLIFE SUCH AS SPOONBILLS; CAMP ABOVE THE RIVER

concern for the Murray-Darling; a waterway in some peril. Cry me a river indeed.

With the election campaign out of the way, I reckoned a desert river journey was still a possibility before all was dry again; a desert campaign of sorts. It seemed a perfect way to reset my compass. I drove west, crossing the ailing Murray at Mildura and on into South Australia. I drove north, passing the clubhouse of the Lake Eyre Yacht Club in Marree, a long way from any water.

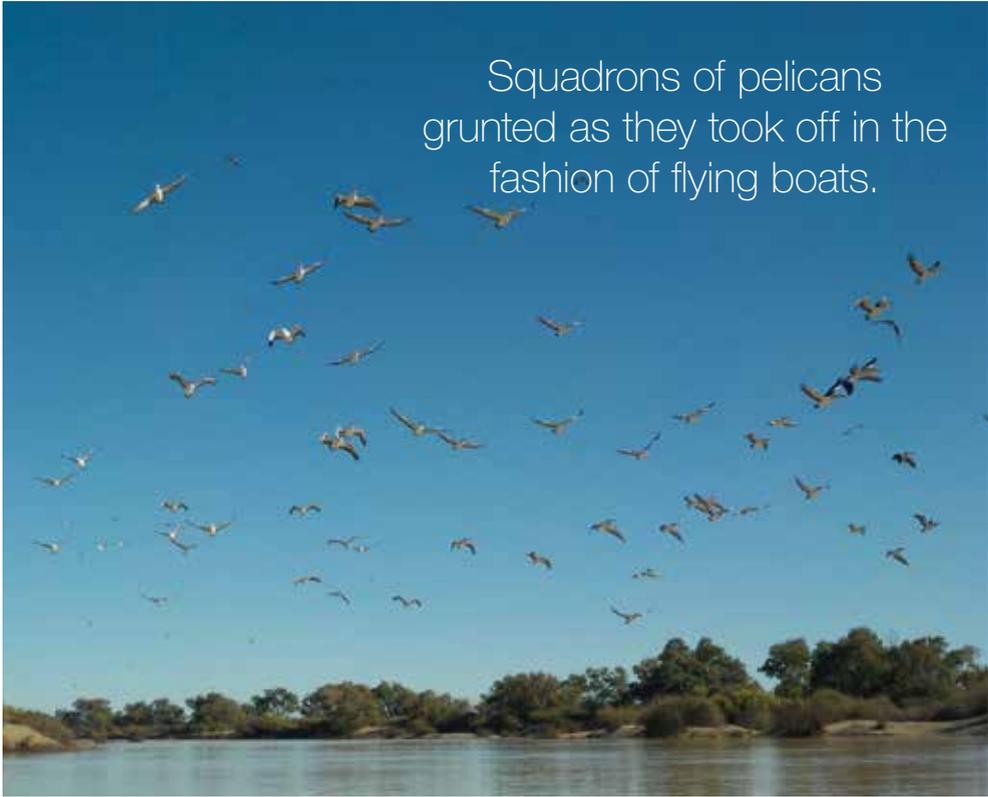
The major Lake Eyre basin rivers – the Warburton, Georgina, Eyre, Diamantina, Cooper, Thompson – that flow not out to sea but inland – are some of the few Australian rivers not touched by dams, weirs and flood control. Their integrity saved by the fact they rarely flow naturally.

I was woken by a rolling, whooshing sound, like that of a very fast train. Admittedly not a sound heard in Australia. By the time I peered out and up from the tent, I caught just the stragglers hanging onto a mammoth flock of low flying ibis.

Breaking a skin of ice that had formed across the water in the billy, I made the first coffee of the day and looked out on a fast-flowing river whose colour was no different to my milky brew.

I came to the river with a few ideas. With access points few and very far between, timing is everything. Too late and the water level drops before your eyes, leaving cloying mud and uncomfortable hauling of boat through shallow pools. Too early and there's not enough water to play on. After much prevarication I decided to paddle upriver from one of the few places accessible by my 4WD vehicle. After going against the flow for a week or so I'd then turn around and enjoy an easier run back downriver.

Paddling upstream is never easy and always slow. The trick is to keep wherever possible to the inside bends of the meandering river. Here the speed of the water is less. I found I was able to cover 15-20 kilometres each day, the slow speed allowing plenty of time to enjoy the river.



Squadrons of pelicans grunted as they took off in the fashion of flying boats.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT** FLOCK OF PELICANS TAKING FLIGHT; WATCHING YOU, WATCHING ME – DINGOS WERE A COMMON SIGHT ON THE BANKS; WEDGE TAIL WITH BLOODIED BEAK; FOLLOWING HIS KAYAKING ADVENTURE, HUW CYCLED 350 KILOMETRES THROUGH THE DESERT.

The bird life was incredible in its variety and mass. Squadrons of pelicans grunted as they took off in the fashion of flying boats. Kites whistled above flocks of squawking corellas, decorating riverside trees like white baubles. Herons naggled, bitterns chuckled, cormorants dived. Spoonbills looked so elegant save for their ridiculous bills.

But how do they all know? How do they know the river is flowing? How do they know when is the right time to arrive; allowing enough time for enough fish to breed and grow into worthwhile meals for everyone?

At one point I paddled past a pair of wedgetail eagles, fresh from a feed, blood dripping from their terrifying beaks.

Oblivious to everything, the fairy martins busied themselves building their own mini versions of Petra into and onto the sand cliffs.

It was easy to become lost in the life on the river, down below the level of the surrounding land. But camp each night would remind me exactly where I was. With the tent perched atop a dune, there was the desert stretching endlessly and silently away into more dunes and the gibber plains.

I saw no one on the river and enjoyed the pleasure of no connection; an increasing rarity nowadays. Indeed, I saw no sign of anyone aside from an occasional tourist plane showing off the green-tinged desert.

There were only feathers, not strands of torn plastic, caught in the lignum bushes or coolabah branches dipping into the water. How sadly rare is that?

If this sounds like a certain paradise, then of course the flies were there to spoil things. It is Australia after all. Despite it being winter, the off-season, with all that water and all that life around the season hardly mattered. The colder the morning the later the shift would start – sometimes I'd be through breakfast and a couple of brews before the forward guard arrived. But arrive they would.

A veil is useful but who hasn't forgotten its presence and brought food to mouth? On one occasion I smeared hummus all over the netting. The dingoes close to my camp howled in amusement. I remembered back many years to a journey down

a river on Cape York. I was sitting on the riverbank after dinner reading when I sensed there was something around. Slowly turning my head, I almost kissed a dingo overlooking my shoulder. How long he'd been reading with me I had no idea.

Eventually I turned around to go with the flow and paddle back down the river. Everything came up so quickly and I almost felt guilty for the ease with which ground was gained; my slow-motion journey now on fast forward back to my start point. The river was falling rapidly; well over a metre in the week I'd been away.

Like the campaign before it, the journey had been so worthwhile; lucky to paddle a desert river full of so much life.

I strapped the kayak to the roof of my ute and headed from the river to a desert road, an outback pub and a cold beer. Then, with a little time still up my sleeve, I followed that slow crawl upriver with a pub crawl of sorts. Swapping paddle for pedals, I cycled 350 kilometres through the desert to the next pub. Headwinds mirrored my earlier upstream battle but that's another story. **HL**

*Adventurer Huw Kingston is a travel writer and resident of Bundanoon. At the 2019 federal election, Huw ran as an independent candidate for the electorate of Hume.*

