Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
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AUSTRALIA

Date - December 2017

Duration - 42 Days

Destinations
Perth - Rottnest Island - Rockingham - Penguin Island - Karakamia Sanctuary - Mount Augustus National Park - Karijini National Park - Exmouth - Cape Range National Park - Ningaloo Marine Park - Coral Bay - Carnarvon - Shark Bay - Francois Peron National Park - Denham - Kalbarri National Park - Geraldton - Cervantes - Nambung National Park - Yanchep National Park - The Vines - Mount Caroline Nature Reserve - Nangeen Hill Nature Reserve - Narembeen - Wadderin Wildlife Sanctuary - Hyden - Lake Magenta Nature Reserve - Fitzgerald River National Park - Cheynes Beach - Waychinicup National Park - Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve - Albany - Tone-Perup Nature Reserve - Wagin - Woodanilling - Dryandra Woodland - Boyagin Nature Reserve

Trip Overview

Having visited Australia for the first time the previous year, James and I returned for another extended tour less than twelve months later, this time to explore the west coast. I had actually been warned that having experienced just some of what this spectacular country has to offer once, I would want to keep returning and that is certainly the case. In fact, I have several additional trips planned, as it will take many months to discover the country properly and to see even a fraction of what I hope to, particularly in terms of the extraordinary scenery and exotic wildlife. I would again be travelling with my son James, who had only recently submitted his university application, and for me personally this tour would fulfil yet another lifetime ambition, as I have always loved cricket and grew up dreaming of attending an Ashes series in Australia. For those who are not aware, the Ashes are contested between England and Australia and our first destination Perth would be hosting the last test match to be played at the world famous WACA or Western Australian Cricket Association ground. Whilst it is not a great deal better now, the BBC coverage of sport used to be truly appalling, unless that is an event was being held in the United Kingdom and could therefore be covered easily and inexpensively. As such, England's overseas tours were not broadcast live until Sky provided ball by ball coverage of the test series against the West Indies in early 1990, which seems almost inconceivable to me now. Instead of watching their heroes compete abroad, entire generations of

English cricket fans grew up listening to their faraway exploits on the radio and Test Match Special remains one of my abiding childhood memories. Indeed, even now I will often listen to cricket as opposed to watching it and this iconic and quintessentially English radio phenomenon has provided me with a way of staying in touch with the cricket for more than 40 years, whether at work, walking my dog or even on family holidays. All children love Christmas, but I especially looked forward to it once every four years, not because of the occasion or festivities, but because Australia is almost half a day ahead of us and in the early hours, when everyone else was sleeping off their festive excesses, I would be listening to live commentary of the boxing day test match, played at the hugely imposing Melbourne Cricket Ground or the MCG as it is more commonly known. Even now the mere thought conjures magical memories and to a young boy it was barely imaginable that cricket was being played in the sunshine as I listened huddled beneath the covers on a dark and bitterly cold English winter's night. Sadly, after a brief period of almost unqualified success under the astute leadership of captain Michael Vaughan, during which the Ashes were regained for the first time in almost two decades and England rose to become the number one test nation in the world, their test match fortunes have been in decline and for years now the ECB have singularly failed to protect the first-class game in this country. The vast majority of resources, and basically more or less all international aspirations, have been almost entirely devoted to shorter versions of the game and the County Championship has been devalued to such an extent that it can no longer be relied upon to produce cricketers of sufficient quality to compete at test match level. County cricket has become almost a meaningless side show and as such England have been selecting mediocre batsmen with averages in the mid-thirties for some time now, none of whom have the technique or mental resolve necessary to excel in the exacting cauldron of test match cricket. Indeed, Ken Barrington was the last English batsman to retire with a test match average of more than 50 and Barrington played his final test almost 50 years ago in July 1968. With the proliferation of one-day cricket, not to mention the absurd and basically meaningless twenty-20 version of the game, many English batsmen have either forgotten or never learnt the art of playing a typically patient test match innings and in recent years have instead surrendered their wickets with an apparent nonchalance bordering on a downright dereliction of duty. I knew that we were likely to be hammered in this series, as Australia

currently have one of the best bowling attacks in the world, and we were already 2-0 down when James and I landed at Perth in time for day four of the 3rd test match of a five match campaign. In truth, I was not actually certain that the game would even last until day four, but this was the earliest that we could arrive due to my work commitments and I need not have worried, as Australian captain Steve Smith was helping himself to a massive 239 as we flew and in compiling a mammoth and ultimately match-winning score of 662 for 9 declared, Australia ensured that the game would progress beyond day three. I was therefore finally able to fulfil my boyhood ambition of watching an Ashes test match in Australia and was fortunate that, despite the inevitable result, James Anderson was again leading the English attack. Anderson is one of the leading exponents of swing bowling in world cricket today and it was a real privilege to watch him bowl a couple of typically skilful spells, during which he took four more wickets to add to his record haul. I have to admit that the remainder of what had been such a long held dream was not quite as magical and although we also returned for a couple of hours on day five, when England were batting to supposedly save the test, there was again not a great deal of resistance and we were really only there to witness Australia administer the last rites, at least in Ashes terms, as they took an unassailable 3-0 lead. England would go on to lose the series 4-0 and only a brilliant unbeaten 244 from former captain Alastair Cook, one of the few remaining batsman capable of applying himself to test match conditions, prevented a repeat of the humiliating 5-0 whitewash that England had suffered on their previous tour of Australia. However, it was still another sobering defeat and if we continue to prioritise limited overs cricket in this way, we may well end up as the best one-day team in the world, but we will barely be able to compete in the longer and far more eminent version of this beloved game. Whilst my belated introduction to cricket in the Antipodes had hardly gone as planned, at least things got off to a good start in terms of the wildlife, as our first ever quokka was very conveniently waiting for us outside a small bakery on Rottnest Island, where we stopped to purchase a hot chocolate and muffin for breakfast before cycling around what is a very pretty island. For those who are not aware, quokka are small and unfeasibly cute macropods that occur in low densities along the southwest coast of Australia and Rottnest Island is certainly one of the best locations to observe them. It is also a great destination to cycle and the 22 kilometre coastal round trip takes you down to the extreme west of the island and the New Zealand fur seal colony at Cathedral Rocks. We spent the best part of a day exploring Rottnest and the following morning drove south to visit two smaller islands out of Shoalwater Bay, Seal Island and Penguin Island. On the first we actually encountered a large number of Australian sea lions, and not the elephant seals that occasionally use this thin strip of land to breed and after which I guess the island must be named? Penguin Island is considerably larger and is home to a colony of little penguins or fairy penguins as they are sometimes known due to their diminutive physique. Only one penguin was actually visible during our short time on the island and the remainder were either out hunting at sea or well hidden in their sandy burrows. However, more than 30 species of birds have been recorded here and we observed plenty of terns, gulls, cormorants and pelicans on the short stroll along the boardwalk, as well as numerous skinks and geckos basking in the fierce afternoon sun. The entire area receives general protection as Shoalwater Islands Marine Park, although fishing and leisure activities are permitted, and on our boat journey between islands we were able to observe nesting ospreys with chicks and several common bottlenose dolphins, many of which breached beside our boat in familiar and exhilarating fashion. As is usually the case, I did not tarry long in the city and our last stop within the Perth region was at the Australian Wildlife Conservancy Karakamia Sanctuary, where we spent a successful afternoon and evening. During our few daylight hours we had good views of all three of the macropod species we were hoping to observe here, namely the western grey kangaroo, tammar wallaby and brush-tailed bettong or woylie as it is known locally. We also encountered a superb and very relaxed carpet python, which we were able to approach to within a couple of metres of, and during a relatively brief spotlighting session we added both southern brown bandicoot and common

brushtail possum to an impressive mammal list, certainly considering the fleeting nature of our visit. Given the important conservation work that the AWC are involved in, I had hoped to visit more of their sanctuaries, but they are mainly closed at this time of the year and I was never able to arrange the type of access that we would need to explore any of them even adequately. Instead, I based the majority of the tour around national parks and other public reserves and from Karakamia we made the 1,400 kilometre journey north to Mount Augustus National Park, where we were due to spend two nights. Obviously such a short period is not sufficient to do any major destination justice and at Mount Augustus we barely had time to explore the vast, imposing monolith, or inselberg to give it its precise geological name, for which the area is justly famed. At apparently two and half times the size of Uluru, or Ayers Rock as one

of Australia's foremost landmarks was formerly known, Mount Augustus is a spectacular natural attraction in its own right and we spent much of our brief stay driving the 49 kilometre loop road that surrounds the massif, partly because we were looking for wildlife and could not devote more or less a full day on the tempting trek to the summit. Although I had hired a four-wheel drive for the trip, an off-road vehicle is not generally necessary here, at least not when the road is as dry as it was during our visit. In fact, it was so hot and arid in places that whilst the driving conditions were often a great deal more forgiving than could have been the case, finding animals was not particularly easy and our long drives and extended hikes yielded just three mammals, all of which were observed in low densities. In addition to a few red kangaroos and common wallaroos, we saw one young, undernourished dingo, as well as a few rodents that we were not able to identify whilst spotlighting. Feral cats were sadly far more common and their presence, in combination with an almost complete absence of small mammals at many destinations, would become an increasingly disappointing theme as our tour progressed. From Mount Augustus we continued north to Karijini National Park, where we would spend four nights, including Christmas. To avoid a horrendous detour of around 800 kilometres to the tarmac of the Coastal Highway to the west, I drove straight across the Outback on the minor country roads and dirt tracks, which I could probably have managed in a standard two-wheel drive at this time of year. However, our off-road vehicle certainly made things easier and it was still a long and challenging drive on often corrugated and uneven ground. In places the surface just falls away, but it is impossible to spot these dips at either distance or speed and you therefore need to drive fairly cautiously, which is fine when you are exploring and looking for wildlife as we always are. In all the 400 or so kilometre journey took more than fourteen hours, although that was with plenty of stops to admire the remote rugged scenery, as well as the substantial lizards that lie sunning themselves along the edge of the sandy tracks. As is the case across much of Western Australia, or indeed across most of the country, the landscapes at Karijini are simply breathtaking and the area is famous for its magnificent gorges and alluring emerald swimming holes, particularly during the extreme heat of the summer months, when temperatures regularly exceed 40°C. Sadly, bush fires had ravaged part of the region and several hikes and gorges were inaccessible during our stay, whilst a lack of seasonal rain also meant that some of the other pools were not as clear and inviting as they would be after the pending summer rains, which normally arrive in December and continue

spasmodically until well into March. Having said that, I expect that Karijini must be ravishing in all conditions, as apparently we were not visiting at the optimum time and yet I still found the park utterly enthralling. The contrast between the characteristic iron-rich crimson soil of the Outback and the dazzling azure Pilbara sky is further enhanced by the vibrant imposing gorges and the complimentary hues of the rock strata reflecting in the deep, shimmering pools below. All of our hikes were memorable in one way or another and we found some fabulous swimming spots despite the various restrictions. Again wildlife was scarce, at least in terms of mammals, as we encountered a relatively large number of reptiles and several birds, including our first emus, but basically the same three mammal species that we had already observed at Mount Augustus. There were three different dingoes on this occasion, but they

were still outnumbered by feral cats and we had no success at all in terms of small mammals, perhaps not surprisingly given the number of wild felines. From Karijini we headed more or less directly west across the parched Outback to Exmouth, which is situated at almost the tip of the North West Cape and is as far north as we would reach on this trip. Apart from the fact that they are both unquestionably spellbinding, Exmouth, and indeed many other beguiling destinations along Australia's astoundingly beautiful Ningaloo Coast, is practically the polar opposite of Karijini, with the baked red soil and searing heat giving way to an aquatic paradise and some of the best marine wildlife highlights on the planet. Whale sharks congregate in large numbers here between March and September and humpback whales migrate through these waters between roughly June and October. Although our visit would sadly

not coincide with either highlight, there was still more than enough to explore, as the Ningaloo Reef stretches some 260 kilometres from just beyond Exmouth on the cape all the way south to Red Bluff, which is apparently a surfing hotspot. As such, I had arranged a packed programme, with James assessing the diving options from the famous Exmouth Navy Pier, which is considered to be one of the top dive sites on the continent, principally because it has been closed to the general public for the last 50 years or so and has consequently received an adequate level of protection. Whilst I searched further inland, James took two separate dives, during which he encountered an extensive variety of marine life, including several sharks, rays and turtles, as well as the legendary Big Friendly Grouper or BFG, as this huge and entirely docile leviathan is also known. Whilst James can undoubtedly testify to the creature's genial and inquisitive nature, he can also confirm its rather obvious lack of spatial awareness, as at one point towards the end of his second dive, he turned slowly and discovered its massive face more or less pressed up against his mask. It must have been quite a surprise to suddenly find 900 pounds of curious fish staring back at you and I am only sorry that he had not taken a camera and was not able to get a photograph of this endearing and celebrated fish. In addition to his individual dives, James and I shared a couple of extended snorkelling tours, one of which was at Coral Bay, where the spectacular Ningaloo Reef is relatively close to shore and the clear water was alive with an incredible variety of dazzling tropical fish. Over the course of both cruises we were able to observe most of the creatures that James had encountered whilst diving, although sadly no BFG of course, and turtles were particularly common. We were fortunate enough to spend time with all three of the turtle species that visit the area to nest during the summer months, so green, loggerhead and hawksbill turtles, and on one special evening we visited the Jurabi Turtle Centre to watch a green turtle laying her eggs on the beach. It is always a tremendous privilege to share such a natural and intimate event with an animal and it is particularly poignant to watch these majestic creatures slowly return to the sea and their solitary existence when their work is complete. This is obviously a highlight of any tour and Ningaloo produced several moments that neither of us will forget. For James I know that the diving was definitely a highpoint as well and for us both our microlight safaris were as memorable as you would expect given the astonishing beauty of this unparalleled stretch of coastline. Each of our flights were an hour long and we flew at the same time to ensure that neither of us would miss anything, as these are not purely scenic flights, although the scenery is certainly staggering, and we were also expecting to see a variety of marine wildlife. During their respective seasons, whale sharks and humpback whales are routinely observed from the air and Ningaloo is also home to both manta ray species, although reef rays are more common than the bigger oceanic rays and they mainly congregate during the winter months from May to September. At that time of year it is actually possible to swim with all three of these magnificent creatures and spotter planes are used to find them for the tourist boats. We were therefore hopeful that a manta ray might be possible, or maybe a tiger shark or dugong, and our guides had informed us that they have experienced some extraordinary sightings from the air, including tiger sharks attacking a variety of prey and in turn being attacked and killed by pods of orcas. They have even witnessed these supreme predators hunting and ultimately feeding on humpback whale calves, which must have been as disturbing as it was compelling, even that far removed in the air. In many ways marine activity can actually be more impressive from above, as it is generally easier to follow animals and respond to


Micro

activity as it occurs from the air, than it is in a vessel at sea level. Needless to say, we were not disappointed and whilst we would have to wait a few days to see a dugong, our aerial tour featured superb views of dozens of turtles and sharks, including several impressive tiger sharks, as well as a superlative reef manta ray, with a wing span of maybe four or five metres. We were even able to witness an actual shark attack, as a pair of tiger sharks attempted to exhaust an unfortunate turtle by constantly swimming around it and taking opportunities to suddenly dart in and attack. I have to admit that we watched the event unfold in both horror and fascination and whilst the assault would have probably continued for some time, and it would not have been possible for us to stay until the bitter end, the poor turtle was clearly injured and would have almost certainly eventually succumbed. As we flew on, the turtle was still fighting desperately to face its deadly foes head on and although we were both aware that it had been a real privilege to observe such rare natural behaviour, the experience was as raw as it was rewarding, particularly having swum alongside so many turtles and having watched that mother tenderly burying her eggs the previous evening. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the captivating marine wildlife and exciting watersports on offer here, many visitors to Ningaloo do not look a great deal further than the idyllic turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean. However, there is a great deal more to discover inland and we devoted part of our stay to Cape Range National Park, principally in search of the black-footed rock wallabies that occur there. We were able to find these cute little macropods fairly easily, generally sheltering in the shade of the rocky cliffs, but we quickly discovered that Cape Range has far more to offer than this one species and ultimately we spent almost as much time here as we did on the water. Apart from several excursions along the one coastal road that runs directly through the park, we largely explored on foot and the hikes at Mandu Mandu Gorge and Yardie Creek Gorge are particularly scenic and productive. At one stage I was photographing a wallaroo from the top of the sheer cliffs at Yardie Creek, as distinctive rays were swimming in the crystal clear waters below, and on another occasion we followed a huge red kangaroo through one of the canyons for more than two hours, just walking quietly beside the largest and most powerful of all kangaroo species. Emus were also fairly common in and around the park and on one of our spotlighting sessions we almost tripped over our first echidna of the tour, not actually within Cape Range, but towards the naval communication station to the extreme north of the peninsula. The only other new mammal was a rabbit, but rather depressingly they were not the only invasive species observed at Exmouth and we again spotted several feral cats, both in and beyond the national park. A couple of dingo sightings were far more welcome, as was a radiant barn owl on our final night walk. Excluding the cats, we only encountered five different mammals during our entire visit, but I still definitely intend to return during the optimum winter months, when the marine activity is almost unparalleled in terms of the large iconic species that can be viewed at close quarters, without, it should be added, disturbing them. As always, it is essential that people research wildlife operators before they travel and only book trips with ethical companies who understand that their activities should never distress an animal or influence its natural behaviour, as opposed to the many operators and guides who clearly exploit wildlife for commercial gain. This would be perfectly illustrated at one of the sites we were now travelling south to, where basically unregulated commercial interests have been allowed to severely impact the local dolphin population for generations. Even now misguided tourists are permitted to feed Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins and although we were obviously not visiting to do so, the sight of hundreds of tourists lined up in the shallows to watch supposedly wild creatures

being handfed, was as depressing as it is inexcusable in these so called enlightened times. The resort in question is called Monkey Mia and in many ways the most disheartening aspect of the entire shameful affair, apart of course from its damaging effect on the dolphins themselves, is that it is situated in Shark Bay, one of the most ravishingly beautiful and environmentally significant regions on earth. There is absolutely no excuse for exploiting wildlife here, as the area abounds with natural highlights and altogether more ethical opportunities, as James and I would go on to demonstrate during our four-night stay, particularly concerning dolphins and the responsible ways in which these graceful and intelligent creatures can be enjoyed. Like so many in this vast sprawling land, the transfer south was another long one and it took most of the day to traverse the 700 or so kilometres to Shark Bay, where we immediately began searching Francois Peron National Park for bilby, a small mammal introduced to the reserve in 1997 for conservation purposes. Easily recognised by its large distinct ears, its actual common name is the greater bilby, which was originally used to distinguish it from the only other bilby species, the rather obviously named lesser bilby. Unfortunately, the slighter of the two has not survived the ecological devastation that successive generations of largely apathetic Australians have wreaked on this bountiful

land since it was colonised by the British in 1788. The lesser bilby is thought to have become the extinct bilby during the 1950s and although there may have been other contributory factors, it is believed that the introduction of invasive predators, namely the domestic cat and red fox, was probably responsible for its entirely untimely demise, as the indigenous wildlife did not evolve with these deadly species and therefore have no defence against them. To its eternal shame, the bilby was not alone and for a country that now considers itself to be so progressive, Australia has one of the worst conservation records on the planet. Around 35% of all mammal extinctions in the past 200 years or so have occurred in Australia and even now many species barely cling to existence, often in tiny, fragmented populations. Whilst cruelty is pervasive across much of society, and of course commercialism and outright greed will always remain significant factors in the destruction of both animals and plants, indifference is of even greater concern and can be far more damaging. As is evident from the horrific number of animals Australians leave dead on their roads every day, indifference can take many forms,

from not holding governments accountable for the crimes being committed in the name of their citizens to overlooking the immoral practices being perpetrated throughout so many communities on a daily basis. As I will go on to discuss in greater depth, millions of kangaroos and wallabies are slaughtered each year with barely a blink of a collective eye and appalling cruelty is inflicted upon those creatures that find themselves on the continent entirely by human design, which of course the majority of people are willing to overlook or even encourage given the detrimental environmental impact of most invasive species. I have witnessed both adults and children laughing and joking as they play cricket and golf with live cane toads and even now when you drive across Australia, you will see mutilated cats and foxes hanging from fence posts, as if the barbaric sight might somehow deter other unwelcome visitors. The reality is that another fox will probably replace the previous occupant within days and it is equally well known that dingoes suppress both fox and cat populations in the areas where they are permitted to exist in relative peace. However, these striking and

resourceful dogs, which have roamed Australia for thousands of years and are not known to have caused a single extinction, have suffered more than most and it is a sad but undeniable fact that many Australians are simply incapable of coexisting with their fellow creatures. To be fair, this is the case across much of the world and nothing appears to have been learnt on a global scale. Instead, we look to individuals and small organisations to stem the tide, both figuratively, and in the case of the Bramble Cay melomys, literally. For those who are unaware, which is almost certainly everyone, this rodent has the dubious distinction of being the first mammal lost to climate change, as rising sea levels have wiped out the vegetation, and thus its food supply, on the tiny atoll on which it lived within the northern extremities of the Great Barrier Reef. Despite the admittedly insurmountable environmental issues regarding its home territory, this was an extinction that could so easily have been avoided, as scientists were aware of the deteriorating situation on Bramble Cay following studies there over several years and had agreed a national recovery plan for the species back in 2008. However, they singularly failed to act on their own policy and instead of collecting individuals for a breeding programme when they next visited the island in 2009, they delayed for several years until they ‘suddenly’ discovered in 2016 that it was too late and that their inexcusable paralysis had cost a creature its place on earth. If this reminds you somewhat of the situation with the Tasmanian tiger, which was afforded official protection 59 days before the solitary surviving specimen died in captivity, then it should, as the entire sorry affair is symptomatic of the Australian government’s abject failure to protect its threatened species. To make matters worse, the demise of this hapless animal was not an isolated event by any means and just a year after the government had devised a rescue plan for the doomed rodent of Bramble Cay, they did exactly the same thing for the Christmas Island pipistrelle, which had been obviously and irrevocably declining towards extinction for a number of years. Again it was decided that all surviving bats would be collected to form an intensive breeding programme and again it was decided too late, as echolocation confirmed that by this late stage there was only one bat remaining and that another species had been lost as a direct consequence of our inability to act when necessary. Perhaps these are just rats and bats to most people, but they remain important as part of larger, highly complex ecosystems and the Bramble Cay melomys just happened to be the only mammal endemic to the entire Great Barrier Reef. Similarly, the Christmas Island pipistrelle is the third mammal extinction on that one island and the only other two endemic mammal species are either critically endangered, in the case of the Christmas Island flying fox or already extinct, in the very likely case of the Christmas Island shrew. Thankfully, the Australian government has stepped in to save the day and has implemented a two stage recovery programme for an animal that has not been observed since 1985, so just the 35 years too late this time. Let’s hope they are able to act

a little more decisively where their citizens are concerned, as global warming should be feared here more than anywhere else perhaps, given that 85% of the country live within 50 kilometres of the coast and that this figure increases to almost 99% of the population in Tasmania. Considering that there are thought to be in the region of between twelve and fifteen million cats and foxes in the country, as well as perhaps 200 million cane toads and a host of other invasive species, the ecology of Australia has been permanently transformed and many mammal species can now only survive within fenced reserves or on islands, where invasive predators have either never reached or been eradicated. There are several of these island sanctuaries within Shark Bay, including the Bernier and Dorre Islands Nature Reserve and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy sanctuary on Faure Island. Unless you are volunteering at any of these projects, they are not currently accessible to the public, but Dirk Hartog Island is and I was very much hoping to spend a couple of days there during our visit to Shark Bay. Whilst the initiative is still in its early stages, the island is home to the Return to 1616 Ecological Restoration Project and, as the rather unwieldy title suggests, the intention is to restore the island to the pristine natural state that the Dutch trader Dirk Hartog discovered it in when he first landed there in October 1616. In the intervening years, eleven species disappeared from the island, ten mammals and one bird, and they will all be reintroduced during the course of a project that officially commenced in 2012 and is likely to take a further twelve years to complete. In addition, two endangered wallabies will be released on what will hopefully become a biological ark, the banded hare wallaby and rufous hare wallaby. Thousands of goats,

Dirk Hartog Extinct and Introduced Species
Western Quoll or Chuditch (Dasyurus geoffroii)
Brush-tailed Mulgara (Dasycercus blythi)
Dibbler (Parantechinus apicalis)
Western Barred Bandicoot (Perameles bougainville)
Burrowing Bettong or Boodie (Bettongia lesueur)
Brush-tailed Bettong or Woylie (Bettongia penicillata)
Greater Stick-nest Rat (Leporillus conditor)
Desert Mouse (Pseudomys desertor)
Shark Bay Mouse or Djoongari (Pseudomys fieldi)
Heath Mouse (Pseudomys shortridgei)
Western grasswren (Amytornis textilis)

Banded Hare Wallaby (Lagostrophus fasciatus)
Rufous Hare Wallaby (Lagorchestes hirsutus)

sheep and cats have already been eradicated from the island, which is now believed to be entirely free of any invasive species for the first time since human settlement, and shortly before our visit twelve of each wallaby were released into their new home, where their numbers will be allowed to increase without the threat of predation until the first quolls are eventually reintroduced. I was hoping to be able to check on their progress during my stay, but given how difficult my supposed four-wheel drive hire vehicle was finding the soft sand of the national park, where we got stuck on two occasions even with the tyres deflated, I was not convinced that it was robust enough to handle the far more testing conditions on Dirk Hartog, where there were not likely to be any other visitors to tow us out if we got into trouble. In addition, the weather was extremely unpredictable during the first two days of our stay and we had a

couple of boat activities either cancelled or delayed by high winds, which the car ferry to the island was not able to operate in. We consequently made the very tough decision to stay on the mainland and although we were both disappointed, this would give us more chance to search for a bilby, which was one of our main targets, and we knew that we were likely to encounter banded hare wallabies later in the tour. As such, it did not make any sense to risk so much for one possible sighting, particularly given that Dirk Hartog is 80 kilometres long and we had no real idea where the wallabies had even been released. Instead, we will return when we have more time and can do the destination and that exciting mammal list justice. Given their scarcity and the limited opportunities we had available to

search, finding a bilby was always going to be unlikely and we were not ultimately successful, despite making a great deal of effort each evening. We were, however, far more hopeful regarding another of our principal targets, the dugong, as Shark Bay supports the largest seagrass beds in the world and these exceedingly gentle sea cows can be observed feeding in these waters throughout the year. Ultimately our optimism proved to be well founded, as we encountered what are hugely impressive marine mammals on each of our boat tours, often in fairly large numbers and on a couple of occasions very close to our vessel. Photography was not easy given the amount of time the dugong spend feeding on the seabed, they tend to come up to breathe every two to three minutes, but the views were superb in generally good weather and I was also informed that they are regularly spotted by groups diving or snorkelling, although we would not have time for either here. Instead we spent much of our stay on or above the water and all of our tours proved to be productive in one way or another. In addition to the dugongs and several almost equally imposing eagle rays, dolphins, various sharks, and both green and loggerhead turtles were all routinely encountered and at one stage we had a sea snake swimming directly alongside our boat. Back on dry land snakes and other reptiles were also common, including a fabulous woma python, and of the many birds observed along the coast and further inland, white-bellied sea eagles and wedge-tailed eagles were undoubtedly the most

memorable. For all our success on land and sea, as is so often the case in areas of extreme natural beauty, the best way to really appreciate Shark Bay is from the air and we enjoyed a breathtaking 90-minute Cessna flight over much of the bay and adjacent coastline. Although an enclosed aircraft can never offer the same exhilarating experience as a microlight, the views were still utterly spectacular and again surprisingly productive in terms of dugong, shark, turtle and ray sightings. With its irresistible turquoise waters and idyllic white sandy beaches, Francois Peron National Park is particularly dazzling and we visited the park on several occasions during the day, in addition to our basically ineffective nocturnal bilby forays. In part we were hoping to see a thorny devil, as these amazing reptiles are reasonably common at Francois Peron, and whilst we were once again not successful with what is considered to be another fairly elusive species, the national park did provide one unforgettable moment, as well as some perspective regarding the dolphins being handfed at Monkey Mia. What most tourists do not realise when they are paying for the privilege of feeding these cute wild animals, is that they are altering the natural behaviour of the dolphins involved and that this has resulted in far higher infant mortality rates. At one stage during the 1980s, when the feeding was completely unregulated and at its most intense, a staggering 90% of dolphin calves were not surviving to adulthood, so the tourists were effectively killing the baby dolphins as they fed their mothers. Although the feeding has been considerably reduced and is now supervised by a national park ranger, the infant mortality rate at Monkey Mia, and at almost every other destination where wild dolphins are fed, remains higher than in the wild. Unfortunately, commercial interests and burgeoning profits generally take precedence over the welfare of wildlife and the resort at Monkey Mia, which is one of several operated by the RAC, attracts more than 100,000 visitors every year and makes millions of dollars. Unless it occurs on a national scale, the practice is therefore very unlikely to be outlawed in this part of the world and it is up to future guests to boycott this type of harmful activity and look for more natural ways in which a huge variety of wildlife can be harmlessly enjoyed. In this region for example, dolphins are known to hydroplane, an ingenious system of hunting in the shallows that was first filmed by the BBC in Shark Bay back in 2006, as part of the ground breaking documentary series Planet Earth. Narrated by the doyen of wildlife filmmaking David Attenborough, the unique footage revealed these ingenious and resourceful creatures propelling themselves at great speed with their tails and then using their momentum to hydroplane or float into just a few centimetres of water to catch the fish that had previously been just beyond their reach. It was an amazing spectacle and before we travelled I did some research in terms of the best areas to hopefully catch a glimpse of this rare behaviour. I am not certain that I really expected us to be successful, but apparently the activity is observed reasonably regularly here and I was informed by a local guide that we had a decent chance if we were prepared to be patient and spend some time driving the beach road at Francois Peron. As it was, James and I were treated to an

extraordinary and unforgettable display at our very first attempt, with a mother hydroplaning for almost an hour, as her young calf watched at distance and then tried to mimic her actions and follow her in to the beach. The action was not restricted to just the one spot and we followed the mother and young up and back down the coast for probably two or three kilometres over the course of the entire magical episode. Needless to say, this is the way that most large animals should be observed, as the dolphins were either completely unaware of our presence, or at least not disturbed by it, and we were consequently able to savour an entirely natural experience, as opposed to standing in the water with another 150 people to see a wild animal being handed a dead fish. By way of

celebration, and when the dolphins had finally departed, James and I selected an appropriately magnificent setting and plunged into the refreshing lapping waters of the Indian Ocean, where we swam among the different rays and sharks that occur here and contemplated not very much at all. We were both already aware that although we would still be travelling along the coast for some time, most of our activities would now be inland and that we would be largely looking for a different set of animals in very different conditions. That said, we would not actually be turning our back on paradise just yet, as our next destination was Kalbarri National Park, with its dramatic sea cliffs and spectacular gorge, cut out over eons by the eternal Murchison River. Unfortunately, as is often the case on a tour of this kind, when you need to cover a great deal of ground to reach specific destinations, it is not always possible to devote as much time as you would like to each area and we did not have anywhere near long enough to do Kalbarri justice. As such, we did not encounter a great deal of wildlife, two echidnas on night walks, as well as a few rabbits and the ubiquitous feral cats, but the hikes and vistas were both exceptional and we spent all of our time pounding the astounding gorge trails or trekking the equally humbling coastal paths. Following a brief break at Geraldton to firstly find and then photograph the resident Australian sea lions, we travelled further south back towards Perth on Indian Ocean Drive, stopping for two nights at Nambung National Park. Its popular

beaches aside, and perhaps its ancient Stromatolites or ‘living fossils’ at Lake Thetis, Nambung is largely famous for The Pinnacles, an otherworldly area of desert featuring literally thousands of weathered limestone structures, all of different shapes and sizes. Even today scientists cannot agree on how exactly these haunting columns were formed, but the overall effect is mesmerising and somehow resembles a surreal cross between a stark lunar landscape and an evocative war cemetery. Although we did visit Lake Thetis briefly, most of our time was spent either walking or driving the short trail and track at Pinnacles, including at night, when we saw our first red fox of the tour. Whilst I obviously recognise their catastrophic ecological impact on the country and sincerely wish they had never been introduced, I struggle to comprehend the unbridled hatred that so many Australians feel for foxes, as if they blame the creatures

themselves for simply trying to endure in the hostile environment to which they were so idiotically introduced. If I am honest, and no doubt partly because they have always been so persecuted in my own country, where they do actually belong, I admire the way in which foxes are able to adapt and survive and would suggest that Australians need to accept some personal responsibility regarding what is undoubtedly a shameful history of wildlife cruelty, exploitation and sheer indifference, a history that sadly continues to this day. Every year the citizens of what is supposed to be one of the most civilised nations in the world, stand by and do absolutely

nothing as millions of kangaroos and wallabies are killed in what is the largest commercial slaughter of land-based wildlife on the planet. If a massacre of this kind took place in Africa or Asia, a watching world would rightly condemn those responsible, but Australians let it occur with barely a murmur and continue to vote for the governments that actively support and even subsidise the carnage, all in the name of cheap meat and leather goods. Many excuses are made and lies told in an attempt to justify the outrage and perhaps the most derisory is that kangaroo numbers need to be culled in order to protect the environment, an environment they have evolved in peerless harmony with over millions of years. It is amazing in fact that kangaroos managed to survive at all without us butchering them indiscriminately during that time and it is no doubt a mere coincidence that the previous two hundred or so years of ecological calamity that has blighted this extraordinary continent, just happens to coincide with the exact period that Europeans have lived there. The reality is of course very different and by overgrazing and farming in such unsustainable densities, farmers have destroyed vast swathes of the country in a biological blink of an eye. As the following extract from an Australian Wildlife Protection Council article makes abundantly clear, people have been aware of the real issues involved for generations, but it is far easier to blame a creature with no voice or rights, than to look to your own ruinous and ultimately untenable practices: '*By the 1850s the kangaroo had become a scapegoat for land mismanagement. It was seen as one more problem facing man on the land. But, unlike many other environmental and economic problems facing these folk, the kangaroo could be dealt with by the age old expedient method of extermination'*. Over the years I have learnt to largely disregard any so called evidence submitted by farmers, the majority of whom will kill absolutely anything if they feel that it will protect or increase their profits and often even if they know that it will not. Whilst this is not an issue that exists only in Australia, and there are obviously many farmers who do care about the land and the

welfare of their animals, the vast majority do not and are clearly only interested in making as much money as possible, as easily and as quickly as possible. Instead of acting as custodians of the land with which they have been temporarily entrusted, and thereby developing better practices in order to coexist with the resident wildlife, farmers across the globe have been clinically and brutally exterminating wild animals for millennia, including the incalculable millions killed every year as they clear more land to make room for yet more crops and livestock, often illegally. In doing so they are often destroying their own livelihoods and those of future generations and during the last section of the trip we would witness the scale of the destruction wreaked on a first hand basis, when we spent much of our time in Western Australia's wheatbelt region. Here the intensive farming practices and uncompromising nature of those involved are clear for all to see and in many areas more or less no original forest or vegetation remains. Where it does, it clings to huge granite outcrops, which even the farmers have not found a way of destroying or profiting from. As if in some form of perverted joke or embarrassed afterthought, some have even been turned into nature reserves, rising like tiny islands in a vast barren sea of desolation. As Professor Corey Bradshaw describes in his 2012 paper, tellingly entitled 'Little left to lose: deforestation and forest degradation in Australia since European colonization', the destruction is almost complete: *'In some parts, the devastation is near total. For example, in the central part of the wheatbelt (the Avon Botanical District), over 93% of the original vegetation was cleared, with up to 97% of woodlands removed. In another one 680km² area near Kellerberrin, 93% of the vegetation had been removed since 1940'.* Much of the slaughter takes place at night in the outback, far away from sensitive or prying eyes, and the horrifying statistics that suggest around 1.5 million kangaroos are officially killed each year, do not include the hundreds of thousands of young, that are either left to die in their mother's pouches or bludgeoned to death by the hunters who have already shot their helpless and terrified parents. Often their skulls are smashed against a tree or with an iron bar and the slightly older joeys are simply disregarded and left to starve without their mother's milk. Thousands of wounded and maimed animals die in agony away from the smoke of the guns and again the official death figures do not include the countless kangaroos killed illegally, none of which are ever investigated or even publically acknowledged. It has been estimated that at least 31 million kangaroos have been killed by the commercial hunting industry during the past decade and that this bloody industry is now worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually. National and state governments are not only complicit in this monstrous crime, they are actively involved in what amounts to a fraudulent dissemination of the pseudo-science and disinformation employed to divert and mislead both their own citizens and the rest of the world. One of the many myths perpetuated by the government in defence of the hunting industry, is that kangaroos breed like rabbits and that their numbers have to be artificially controlled for their own wellbeing. The opposite is actually the case, as macropods are not quick breeders at all and give birth to a single young, unlike placental mammals, which have litters. Twins are exceptionally rare and it takes around a year for a young kangaroo to fully wean and considerably longer to reach sexual maturity, particularly during drought conditions when breeding will be biologically delayed. So we are basically talking about one young every year or so and the average juvenile mortality rate across the various kangaroo and wallaby species has been calculated at 73%, with, interestingly enough given the number of Australians who openly despise both creatures, red foxes being responsible for around half of all juvenile kangaroo deaths. This mortality figure rises to practically 100% during significant drought periods, which has been the case since the beginning of time and is why, when the first settlers arrived, they discovered a perfectly evolved ecological paradise, as opposed to the barren wasteland that we have been inevitably and irrevocably fashioning ever since. At a time of environmental crisis, when people like to feel at least as if they are doing something to help, perhaps the most disingenuous claim by the hunting industry and their corrupt government cronies, is that it is somehow environmentally friendly to butcher and eat millions of wild kangaroos. As much as they try to convince us that it is not the case, kangaroo numbers are in serious decline across their entire range and these native animals do not represent an inexhaustible commodity at our general disposal. Where they are removed from the wild, they are

only replaced by harmful domestic species or intensive agriculture, which of course eradicates the biodiversity of the entire area. This abhorrent ‘green’ smokescreen is intended purely to confuse and disguise the real issues of cruelty and profit, as well as the fact that thousands of hunters are damaging vulnerable native species right across the outback with their heavy vehicles and unrestricted access to even the most susceptible landscapes. As they kill and gut kangaroos in the shadows, they leave their bloody remains strewn across the bush, to feed and thereby increase the populations of literally millions of feral cats, foxes and pigs, the same invasive species that conservationists have spent billions of dollars attempting to eradicate. The situation would almost be laughable if it were not so reprehensible and the same politicians who are trying to convince everyone how ecologically sound and sustainable the hunting industry is, are also attempting to ship the meat all over the world, with the inescapable environmental consequences of this type of international operation. Meanwhile, the suffering continues and one of the real concerns is that kangaroo populations are being severely undermined at a genetic level, as we are all largely aware I think of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, a process that has allowed this robust species to endure in an overwhelmingly hostile landscape for millions of years. Sadly, this evolutionary survival of the fittest cannot take into account greedy men with spotlights and automatic weapons, as the largest animals produce the most meat and leather and are therefore automatically targeted by the hunters, which in turn will eventually result in genetically inferior populations. The situation is exacerbated during periods of drought, as only the strongest animals can survive these extreme conditions and they are again the first to be killed. Regrettably, for such supposedly intelligent and liberal citizens, there appears to be no collective will to stop the carnage and whenever I hear an Australian espousing how pleased they are at the death of a wicked red fox, I just nod my head and wonder what their excuse can be regarding the ruthless disposal of their own endemic kangaroos or indeed their own national identity. In addition to several groups of western grey kangaroos and our cheeky little fox, which popped up most unexpectedly just beyond the park, Nambung was not hugely productive and although most of our activities revealed a nice selection of reptiles, our only other significant sighting was of a typically bizarre looking tawny frogmouth. Before we moved further inland, we had one more stop on the coast, the west coast that is, as later on we would also visit a few destinations along Western Australia’s south coast. The state is actually vast, almost eleven times the size of the United Kingdom, and as we reached Yanchep National Park, we had come more or less full circle, as Yanchep is just over 40km north of our starting point in Perth. Our northern loop had already taken in more than 4,000 kilometres and some of the most remarkable landscapes on earth, and yet we had barely scratched the surface of this sprawling and genuinely astonishing land. Apart from the fact that I like to include as many reserves and wildlife areas on every trip as possible, the main reason for stopping at Yanchep was to see the small population of koalas, which I understood were introduced several decades ago, as these iconic Australian animals do not occur naturally in this region. However, I should have researched the subject in greater detail, as the koalas here are actually penned and although it was nice to see them again, they were clearly not wild. Yanchep though is pretty, particularly around Loch McNess, and we spent a pleasant afternoon photographing the exceedingly calm western grey kangaroos and a delightful array of colourful birds, most of which were equally relaxed among the many visitors on what was another glorious day. After a stop to overnight at a

country club in the suburbs of Perth, where we encountered several kangaroos sprawling within the luxurious grounds, our next major destination was roughly a 300 kilometre drive east through the wheatbelt region. On the way we would stop at Mount Caroline and Nangeen Hill, two of the rocky outcrops that I referred to previously, both of which have been allocated as unlikely nature reserves amid an overwhelming sea of agriculture. Wadderin Wildlife Sanctuary is an altogether more substantial affair and is highly unusual in that it was created by the local community to restore the wildlife that had been lost in what was once a bountiful area. The entire 420 hectare reserve has been fenced, to keep out the invasive predators that have been eradicated within, and to date eight species have been reintroduced, six mammals and two birds. One of the mammals is the banded hare wallaby, one of the two wallabies that I was hoping to see on Dirk Hartog Island. We were here to assist one of the sanctuary biologists with his regular surveys and our short stay would prove to be memorable for a variety of reasons, one of which was almost implausibly unlikely.

Wadderin Wildlife Sanctuary Reintroduced Species
Banded Hare Wallaby (Lagostrophus fasciatus)
Western Brush Wallaby (Macropus irma)
Brush-tailed Bettong or Woylie (Bettongia penicillata)
Southern Brown Bandicoot (Isoodon obesulus)
Common Brushtail Possum (Trichosurus vulpecula)
Red-tailed Phascogale (Phascogale calura)
Malleefowl (Leipoa ocellata)
Bush Stone-curlew (Burhinus grallarius)

You realise that you probably know someone fairly well when you instantly comprehend what they have done, without actually being there when it occurs. However, this reaches an entirely new level when that occurrence is perhaps the most improbable event imaginable and yet you still somehow know exactly what has taken place. This was the case when James and I arrived at our accommodation at Wadderin and I took the first bag in. Just as I was about to leave to help with the remaining luggage, I heard a muffled cry from outside and for some reason I immediately called to James...'You haven't just shut your nose in the car door have you?' I have no real idea why that was my first thought, but I instantly knew what had happened and sure enough, when I went back

outside I found James holding his nose, which he had cut when he had somehow closed the car door without first removing his actual head from the general vicinity. I am not sure whether he was more annoyed about his damaged nose, and any lasting effect the wound may have on his devastating good looks, or the fact that I had immediately understood that he had done something so almost impossibly stupid. Only a genuinely world class klutz could shut their own nose in a car door and for the duration of the trip, whenever James mentioned anything questionable that I had done, I would simply retort...'Nose in Door and Little White Dove', to the tune of the Johnny Preston classic 'Running Bear'. It is the equivalent of being given a Get Out of Jail Free card, or total immunity for any crime, and whilst my son is one of the most intelligent and articulate individuals I have known, he is also perhaps the only person I have ever met who is capable of closing a car door before he has fully extricated himself from the vehicle. I obviously did not inform the biologist of this sorry episode, as he was about to entrust us with some of the rarest animals in the country and I did not want him to think that we might end the day with several extinctions, all caused by my son. As it was, we managed to avoid any fatalities, although a rather overenthusiastic bettong did hit James straight in the head as it bounced its way to freedom after being released, and much of our work involved checking traps and weighing any generally mournful animals discovered within. In addition

to this motley selection of confined and fairly grumpy subjects, our daylight activities produced a few kangaroo and wallaroo sightings, as well as an echidna. I was also hoping that we might encounter a western brush wallaby, but they have not been reintroduced in large numbers and are consequently not seen that regularly. Fortunately, I had reasonable expectations for this species elsewhere and our main target at Wadderin was undoubtedly the nocturnal banded hare wallaby, which I had devoted two nights to search for. This ultimately proved to be a decent decision, as brush-tailed bettongs, southern brown bandicoots and common brushtail possums were all spotted on our first spotlighting session, but no wallabies. The situation had not improved the following evening and after two full circuits of the reserve we were still looking for our first wallaby and wondering if perhaps we should have attempted to

get to Dirk Hartog Island after all. The answer would have almost certainly been no regardless of our success here, but thankfully our guide for the night drives knew a place that we could try on foot and almost immediately we came across four banded hare wallabies. There is just no substitute for local knowledge and although they did not hang around for long, we had excellent spotlight views and I managed to take a couple of reasonable reference shots. All in all our visit to Wadderin Wildlife Sanctuary was a tremendously rewarding one and I was delighted to support such an amazing community initiative. Everything that takes place here is done on a voluntary basis and I could not have been more impressed by the phenomenal effort that residents have gone to in order to try and restore the natural balance of their region. Nine kilometres of predator proof fencing has been erected for a start and the project is a fabulous example of what can be achieved on a local level by just a few enthusiastic and determined citizens. As we were due to depart, I knew that I would have liked to spend longer helping here and I very much hope that I get the opportunity to return at some stage. For now though, it was time to travel south to Fitzgerald River National Park and on the way we stopped at the remarkable Wave Rock near Hyden and very briefly at Lake Magenta Nature Reserve, more to check its location for future reference, than to

actually explore. Named after the major river that flows through it, Fitzgerald River National Park is situated on the rugged south coast and is one of the most important protected areas in Western Australia, largely in terms of its diverse flora, much of which has been destroyed elsewhere. More than 1,700 plant species have been recorded within its 330,000 hectares, including 75 found nowhere else on earth. One of these plants was likely to hold the key to our visit, as we were really here to try and photograph a honey possum, a tiny endearing marsupial that likes nothing better than to feed on the nectar and pollen of the banksia attenuate, or the candlestick banksia as it is more familiarly known. It will utilise other plants of course, but it does appear to have a particular predilection for banksias and I have often seen images of it feeding on this striking yellow candlestick variety, which were auspiciously abundant throughout certain sections of the park. Several of these promising areas were within easy reach of our historic Quaalup Homestead accommodation, which was constructed by cattle and sheep farmers back in 1858, and most of our initial forays were spent looking for both the honey possum and the western pygmy possum, which feeds on many of the same flowers. It has to be said that we were far more successful with the former than the latter, as we spotted several honey possums during our three-night stay, but did not have a single confirmed pygmy possum sighting. It was not for the lack of effort and at one stage we were both convinced that we had

indeed found one, but although the creature illuminated in our spotlight certainly did not appear to be a honey possum, we did not see it again and could not therefore be entirely sure. It almost definitely was a pygmy possum, but I have never seen the point of simply guessing in these situations or including an animal that you have not positively identified. Our search would instead go on, but we were still thrilled to have found and even photographed the honey possum and were equally pleased to discover the western brush wallabies that we had missed at Wadderin, although they were scarce even here and were observed in extremely low densities. Much of the park is not accessible to vehicles in order to protect a range of fragile and basically irreplaceable ecosystems, which obviously makes it more difficult to explore thoroughly, at least within the time constraints of a fixed tour. However, as you would imagine given the diverse vegetation, a great deal of wildlife occurs among the towering royal hakea that feature across much of the reserve and we were particularly successful with reptiles. In addition to several lizards, skinks and geckos, we encountered six different types of snake, including two highly venomous tiger snakes within perhaps a couple of hundred metres of each other on one drive. We also had a few unidentified small mammal sightings at night and I like to imagine that one may have even been a dibbler, a voracious little nocturnal carnivore that was believed to be extinct for around 80 years until a population was discovered just along the coast at Cheynes Beach in 1967. Additional colonies have been identified since, including on the Boullanger and Whitlock islands in Jurien Bay, but the dibbler remains endangered and is one of the species due to be released on Dirk Hartog Island. We would actually be heading to Cheynes Beach next, but before we departed the Fitzgerald River area, we had one very special treat remaining, a full day searching for killer whales and other marine wildlife in the deep feeding grounds of Bremer Canyon. There are actually two whale watching seasons around the national park and between roughly June to October hundreds of female southern right whales visit these temperate waters to give birth to their young. The action can be spectacular with the calves frolicking alongside their mothers and it is not unusual to see several whales each day and often very close to the shore. Special viewing platforms have been erected at Point Ann and although they were no use to us at this time of year, our visit did coincide with the killer whale season, when up to 150 orcas

gather to feast on squid and fish in the rich depths of Bremer Canyon, which lies around 70 kilometres offshore. Our trip was fairly early in the season, which runs from the beginning of January to around the end of April, but we were still treated to memorable views of these magnificent predators and these abundant waters also attract sperm, pilot and beaked whales, as well as several species of dolphin. Indeed, we encountered a massive pod of common bottlenose dolphins feeding on a bait ball, as well as short-beaked common dolphins and Australian sea lions. Occasionally male sperm whales are observed feeding together in large numbers here and I have watched the remarkable footage of more than 50 hunting at the same time and even breaching. Whilst we were not to experience quite that kind of once-in-a-lifetime display on our own voyage, our trip was certainly a rewarding one and I would very much like to return just slightly later in the year, as apparently sperm whale sightings are more regular around March. It may also be somewhat calmer then, as the sea was relatively heavy and a number of passengers were profoundly unwell. I have never struggled in that respect and have always enjoyed the motion of a rolling ship, but even I could tell that these conditions would have been fairly

testing for anyone not used to the ocean and they did make it difficult to take photographs. This was not a massive issue at our next few destinations, as we only had two days to explore the considerable area between Cheynes Beach and Albany and were not able to devote sufficient time to one single location to have any real success or need to take that many pictures. There are some areas at Cheynes Beach and the adjoining Waychinicup National Park that are known to be productive in terms of honey and pygmy possum sightings, but there were very few flowering banksias where we stopped to search and we consequently spent more time at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve, which is situated more or less exactly between Cheynes Beach and Albany. My main interest at Two Peoples Bay was the gilbert's potoroo, another Australian mammal considered extinct until a student involved in a quokka programme inadvertently trapped one here back in 1994. They had previously not been recorded since the 1870s and despite some breeding success in recent years, they remain the rarest marsupial on earth. There are now additional colonies on Bald Island, which is just off the coast at Cheynes Beach, on two further islands within the Recherche Archipelago and in a fenced reserve at Waychinicup, which is not accessible to the public. These insurance populations are vital to the continued survival of the potoroo, as was clearly demonstrated in 2015 when a bushfire destroyed 90% of their habitat at Two Peoples Bay and reduced the population there to just three, which probably would have been the death knell for the species. Thankfully the population is doing well on Bald Island, where there are now believed to be around 100 animals, and it is thought that this success may be due to the fact that there are no snakes on the island, whereby at the Waychinicup reserve back on the mainland, carpet pythons have been responsible for a marked decline in potoroo numbers. I am subsequently still working on access to Bald Island and was not able to organise anything for this particular trip, which basically meant that our chances of seeing one of a handful of existing potoroos at Two Peoples Bay was practically zero. So it proved sadly, but I had not travelled with any expectation regarding this rarest of all creatures and at least the reserve did produce a new mammal for the trip, in the form of a single western ringtail possum, which we would go on to see more of clambering around tress and roofs at night in Albany. A few Australian sea lions and white-bellied sea eagles on an enjoyable boat trip, that was more or less it for Albany, excluding the National Anzac Centre, which is well worth a visit. As many young boys do, I grew up loving the blood and glory of history and the daring deeds of brilliant leaders who gripped the world with their very will and shaped it to their purpose. Leaders and commanders who literally changed the map and for whom good and evil were concepts that did not apply in an age of blood and conquest, when the only purpose in life was to defeat your enemy. However, for me this romanticised version of warfare ends with the pointless bloodletting of the First World War, when the slaughter became industrialised and the youth of entire nations fell in the European mud. It is well documented that around twenty million people died during the Great War, but it is perhaps less well known that millions of horses and other animals died as well and that of the 136,000 horses that left Australia to play some enforced role or other in the hostilities, only one ever returned, partly due to the quarantine restrictions that

would not allow them back in the country. Sandy was the one fortunate animal to survive, thanks mainly to the dying wish of his owner Major General William Bridges, who was killed during the carnage of the Gallipoli campaign. No doubt his owner's rank had much to do with his survival, but Sandy did at least make it home and his story is one of thousands of evocative wartime tales told with great respect and sensitivity at the Anzac Centre. The last week or so of our tour would be far more focused, as we still had two significant destinations to explore and several mammals to hopefully find, including one of our main targets for the entire trip. The first was Tone-Perup Nature Reserve, a pretty and calming oasis that protects 56,000 hectares of forest and a number of rare and elusive species. I have to say that despite not being on the grand scale of some of the other more renowned locations that we visited, our stay at Perup was one of the most satisfying of the trip. There was always something special to watch and our not inconsiderable efforts were rewarded with a succession of exceptional encounters and two new species. The general ambiance was certainly not harmed by the fact that we were the only guests throughout our stay and it is also likely that we were more successful as a result. During the day we spent most of our time walking the various forest trails and at night we combined spotlighting walks with long sessions in the car, both on the road that runs directly past Perup and beyond. Whilst we are generally prepared to stop for any nice sightings, including the endearingly dopey brushtail possums that entertained each evening, by this late stage of the tour we were really searching for rare mammals and we had five main targets in mind. The western pygmy possum that we had missed elsewhere, either of two phascogale species found in the region, a western quoll, or chuditch as they are known locally, and a numbat, which now only occurs naturally in two tiny areas, both of which we would visit to improve our chances. There were other species that we would have been delighted to see of course, an antechinus or a dunnart for example, but these five were the most realistic in terms of possible new mammals and we already knew that we had a good chance of a red-tailed phascogale when we moved on. I had James to thank for the first of the five, as he really is exceptional with a spotlight and seems to have a knack of finding impossibly small creatures without the benefit of any eyeshine. On our previous Australia tour it was a feathertail glider at a prodigious height and on this occasion it was a brush-tailed phascogale, which he saw dart across a roof from behind, again without the assistance of eyeshine. My pictures unfortunately are not great, but to be fair, phascogales are incredibly fast and I only managed to get the one shot below, because it took refuge from our light for perhaps a millisecond before disappearing for good. We did hope that having seen one phascogale so early, James spotted this one within minutes of our first night walk, they may prove to be common here, but the opposite was actually the case and this was to be our only phascogale sighting of the tour, of either variety. Quolls were easier, here at least, as we saw eight in all during our three nights at Perup, mainly on the road from the car and then on foot as we followed a few of the more inquisitive and relaxed individuals. There are four quoll species in Australia and having seen three on our first visit in 2016, we were able to complete the full set with this western variety, which only occurs in the southwest corner of both the state and the country. While these were the only new mammals we would encounter at Perup, they were two of the five we had been hoping for and

we had a lot of other impressive sightings here as well, including our only other western brush wallabies of the trip and our first tammar wallabies since the AWC Karakamia Sanctuary at the very beginning of the tour, which did seem a very long time ago by now. Bettongs, bandicoots, ringtail possums and western grey kangaroos were all seen on our hikes and the abounding birdlife included black cockatoos, western corellas, scarlet robins, kookaburras, frogmouths, two different owls and even a few emus. However, it was not so much about what we saw at Perup and more about the way in which we saw it at what is an enchanting reserve, where you are surrounded by wildlife and constantly stopping to admire one splendid creature or another. I was actually

rather sad to move on, but also excited about exploring our final major destination and on the way I had arranged to meet some local conservationists, who were going to show us one of their community projects and hopefully a red-tailed phascogale. The Wagin Woodanilling Landcare Zone is responsible for this particular initiative and although I only occasionally mention them on these trip reports, I like to visit and support a variety of conservation projects during the course of my travels. Some are large well publicised projects, but the majority are small schemes like this one, with local people erecting nesting boxes for red-tailed phascogales. All are equally worthwhile and in addition to the donations that I make, I also try to encourage my guests to visit and support these initiatives during their own tours. It may seem like an insignificant thing, but even a small amount of money can go a long way, as per the lovely message that I received from Diana Blacklock some time after my actual visit:

Hi Jason

I had the privilege of meeting you and your son on a visit to Australian in Dec 2017. You come to Wagin to see a Red Tailed Phascogale, I was working with the local Landcare office at the time and I took you to a local landowners property. Although we didn't see any at the time you generously gave a $150 donation towards the conservation of the species. Since then I have continued to monitor the boxes and I wanted to show you the good work being done with your donation. The property is 5kms south of Wagin within the lake system and provides the perfect habitat for the RT Phascogales. It had 9 nesting boxes when we visited, with the majority of them needing replacing or repairing at the time. With the funds from your donation, the property owner and I removed the moth's cocoons infesting many of the boxes, did maintenance on existing ones and added several more to the site I am happy to report that over the past 18 months the majority of the boxes are being used regularly. Each time I inspect the site I always have the pleasure of seeing these adorable little critters, I have attached a photo and a short video link taken only the other week.

I can, therefore, say that the work done with your generous donation has been a success, thank you once again for your support and on-ground action to preserve native fauna and natural resources in Australia & on the planet :)

Thank you and Kind Regards

Diana Blacklock

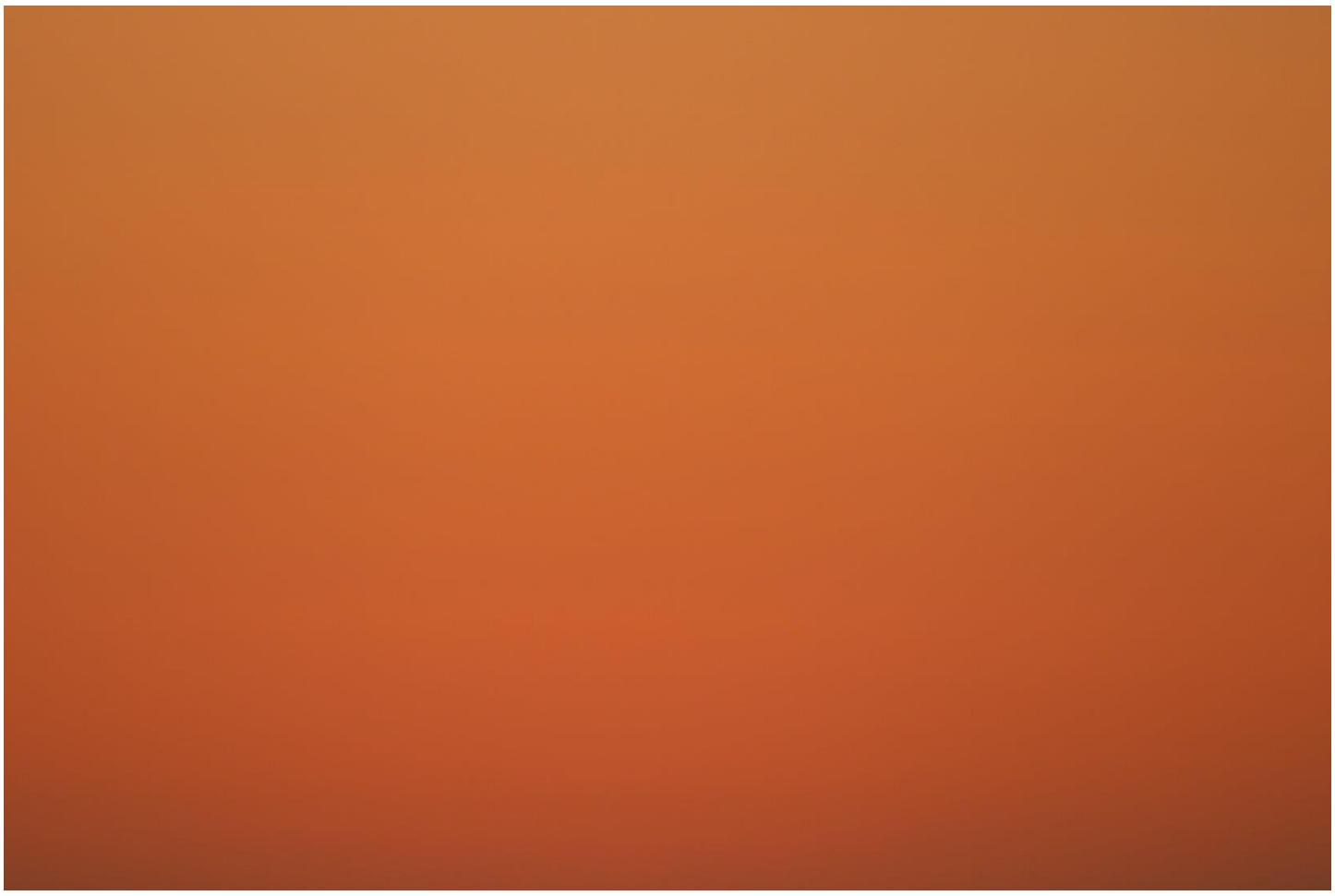
Although, as the email from Diana states, some of the nesting boxes were not in good condition and we did not actually see a phascogale, the far more important factor was that we were able to do some real good and support such a worthwhile cause, as these local community-based initiatives are tremendously important and are conserving wildlife all over the globe. Dryandra Woodland is also an extremely significant conservation area and that sanctuary, in combination with the nearby Boyagin Nature Reserve, would host the last four days of our mammoth adventure. Situated 170 kilometres to the north, at 28,000 hectares Dryandra is half the size of Perup, however, it is divided into several fragmented areas and feels even smaller as a result. That said, it still represents the largest surviving area of woodland in the western wheatbelt region and is considered to be the most reliable location to find a numbat, although Boyagin, another reserve built around an indestructible granite outcrop, also has a good reputation in this regard. Western

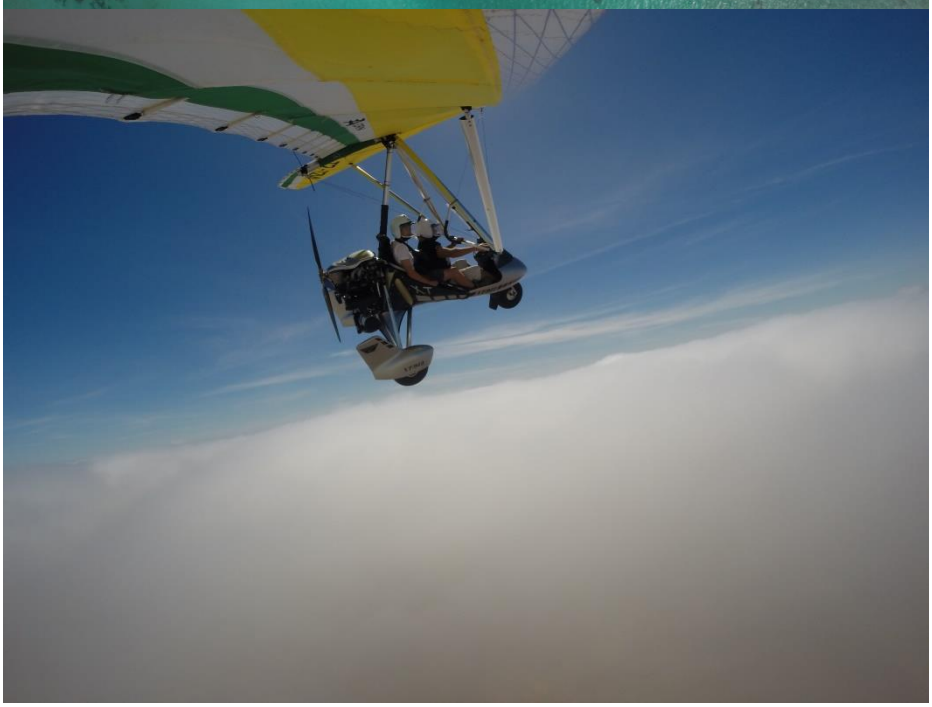
pygmy possums and red-tailed phascogales notwithstanding, neither of which we were destined to see, the numbat was the main reason that we were even in this part of the world, as I have always been fascinated by a creature so unlike any other marsupial, either visually or genetically. Strictly diurnal, which I believe is unique for a marsupial, and existing purely on a diet of termites, the numbat used to occur across much of Australia, but had disappeared from the vast majority of its former range by the 1970s. It remains in decline and endangered even today, but individuals from its two enduring strongholds at Perup and Dryandra have been moved to form insurance populations at fenced reserves, including the AWC Scotia and Yookamurra sanctuaries. Our initial plan was to search Dryandra for as long as our nerve held and to only try Boyagin if we were either really struggling or had experienced multiple sightings and wanted a change of scenery, particularly given that Dryandra is relatively small and we had four full days here. Whilst it is normal for us in any case, we also determined that we would be on the move before first light, as numbats begin foraging in the early morning and often rest for a few hours during the hottest part of the day, which was when we could also take a short break. As is so often the case, both theories were abandoned after one fruitless day and after two we were frantically searching everywhere and at every hour. To be

entirely fair, we were seeing a lot of wildlife, including multiple echidnas in habitat that is ideal for them, tammar wallabies, bettongs and, perhaps ominously, only the second red fox of the trip. However, for all our success elsewhere, our main quarry continued to elude us until well into our third day, by which point things were becoming a tad tense. Thankfully, we did not have to suffer the excruciating ignominy of searching desperately for a main target species on our final day and I eventually spotted one on the passenger side of the vehicle, roughly half way through yet another circuit. Having waited so long to see this iconic animal, and having missed a few species throughout the tour, it is difficult to convey just how relieved we both were and in all we would see three numbats, all at Dryandra and all in the searing afternoon heat. Our first encounter was unquestionably our best, not only because of the heady combination of unbridled elation and immense relief, but because the numbat was oblivious to our presence, or at least disinterested by it, and we were able to spend several thrilling minutes savouring this beautiful creature. It was certainly a positive way to finish what had been a difficult trip at times, as unlike our previous Australian expedition, where more or less everything that we attempted simply worked and we barely had to search for even some of the rarest species, we suffered a few setbacks on this tour and had to work incredibly hard for the main highlights that I have recorded here. Having said that, it had been an extraordinary year for us both and it is not often that you can say you have participated in wildlife tours in India, Madagascar, Mongolia, China and finally Australia within the same twelve months. Certainly our packed schedule has made my decision unbelievably difficult in terms of attempting to choose one annual highlight, as Madagascar always produces a succession of truly unique experiences and Mongolia is one of the places on earth where I feel most at peace. Despite the logistical problems encountered in the remote states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, India still conjured some of the very special moments that I have always loved her for and China just kept giving in terms of breathtaking diversity. As it is more or less impossible to choose between the animals themselves, or indeed between individual sightings, I have instead let a ten-year-old boy make the decision for me, as I have wanted to explore where wild camels roam for as long as I can remember, but when I was young, I did not realise that there were almost no truly wild camels living anywhere in the world. I have consequently been obsessed with seeing a Bactrian camel in the wild since I first learned of their existence and this schoolboy dream finally became a reality in Mongolia in July 2017, when James and I surprised an entirely free and truly wild herd of eight camels. Perhaps some people will be surprised to read this about camels, but this was one of the most significant and deeply satisfying wildlife experiences of my life and even now I get goose bumps thinking about the moment we went over that slight rise and eight camels were standing there staring at us. I am not sure to this day which of us was more surprised, but ultimately my decision for 2017 was probably far easier that I had initially imagined. Having said that, not all of our highlights have to be wildlife related and in addition to fulfilling another boyhood ambition by watching an Ashes test match in Australia, this tour did produce perhaps the greatest bungle ever observed between myself and James, when my eighteen-year-old son, who had only just submitted his university application, shut his own nose in a car door. I am sorry son, but some things in life are beyond riches or fame or even mammals and it is going to take a while I think to improve on that one. Altogether now...*On the bank, of the river, stood Running Bear...*

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Dingo	Canis dingo	Individuals at Mount Augustus and Exmouth and three separate sightings at Karijini.
2	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	One at night just beyond Nambung and one at Dryandra.
3	Western Quoll	Dasyurus geoffroii	Eight sightings over three nights at Perup.
4	Numbat	Myrmecobius fasciatus	Three encounters during the day at Dryandra.
5	Brush-tailed Phascogale	Phascogale tapoatafa	One at night at Perup.
6	Short-beaked Echidna	Tachyglossus aculeatus	Observed at Exmouth, Kalbarri, Wadderin, Dryandra and Boyagin.
7	Western Ringtail Possum	Pseudocheirus occidentalis	Low numbers at Two Peoples Bay, Albany and Perup.
8	Common Brushtail Possum	Trichosurus vulpecula	Relatively common at the AWC Karakamia Sanctuary, Wadderin, Perup and Dryandra.

9	Honey Possum	Tarsipes rostratus	Several individuals at Fitzgerald River.
10	Southern Brown Bandicoot	Isoodon obesulus	Seen in low numbers at Karakamia Sanctuary, Wadderin, Albany and Perup.
11	Brush-tailed Bettong	Bettongia penicillata	Initially observed at Karakamia Sanctuary and also at Wadderin, Perup and Dryandra.
12	Quokka	Setonix brachyurus	Regularly encountered on Rottnest Island.
13	Western Grey Kangaroo	Macropus fuliginosus	The most commonly observed macropod, occurring at several parks and reserves.
14	Common Wallaroo	Macropus robustus	Observed at Mount Augustus, Karijini, Cape Range and Wadderin.
15	Red Kangaroo	Macropus rufus	Low numbers encountered at Mount Augustus, Karijini and Cape Range.
16	Banded Hare Wallaby	Lagostrophus fasciatus	Group of four at night at Wadderin.
17	Tammar Wallaby	Macropus eugenii	Observed in low densities at Karakamia, Perup and Dryandra.
18	Western Brush Wallaby	Macropus irma	First encountered at Fitzgerald River with further sightings at Perup.
19	Black-footed Rock Wallaby	Petrogale lateralis	A small population easily observed within Cape Range.
20	Feral Goat	Capra hircus	A small herd at Francois Peron.
21	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	First observed at Exmouth and at a number of subsequent destinations.
22	Dugong	Dugong dugon	Encountered on several occasions at Shark Bay, including from the air.
23	Australian Sea Lion	Neophoca cinerea	Observed at several destinations.
24	New Zealand Fur Seal	Arctocephalus forsteri	Small colony on Rottnest Island.
25	Killer Whale	Orcinus orca	Several pods on the boat trip from Fitzgerald River to Bremer Canyon.
26	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis	Encountered on the boat tour to Bremer Canyon.
27	Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops aduncus	Commonly observed at Shark Bay.
28	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus	Low densities off Rockingham and a huge pod feeding at Bremer Canyon.






Australia
Cape York
Darwin
Kakadu
NORTHERN TERRITORY
Daintree
Great Barrier Reef
Cairns
Atherton
Broome
Indian Ocean
Karlamilyi
Alice Springs
Bladensburg
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Uluru
Simpson Desert
QUEENSLAND
Pacific Ocean
Carnarvon
Gibson Desert
Great Victoria Desert
Lake Eyre
Brisbane
Gold Coast
Lamington
Geraldton
Nullarbor
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
NEW SOUTH WALES
Perth
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