



Mountains of discovery

Thirty years of exploring the MacDonnell Ranges

Note: As few geographical features in this area are named on the maps, unofficial names in this article are in inverted commas on first use.

Imagine the bones of a high mountain range where 330 million years of erosion have laid bare the Earth's ancient paroxysms. Yet the result is beautiful rather than brutal for the clear light's angles add a palette of rusty red and burnt orange, deepest blue and misty mauve, and the vigour of life softens the shattered rock. Uncharted routes cross these ranges, unexplored canyons crease their flanks and unexpected springs lie like hidden crystals in their gorges.

In 1980 I received an invitation which was to have a significant impact on my bushwalking life, when Canberra Bushwalking Club members Frank and Joan Rigby asked me to join them on a trip to the West MacDonnell Ranges. The Rigbys had done several exploratory walks along the Chewings Range with the Sydney Bushwalkers; indeed, Frank had published a book, *The MacDonnell Ranges*, with photos by Henry Gold, about their exploits amongst the beauty and fragility of these desert ranges. Never having been to the Centre, I jumped at the chance, and so began an abiding interest which has led me to many unforgettable walks and some significant discoveries.

August–September, 1980 – Mt Giles; Hugh Gorge: *Private trip: Frank and Joan Rigby (leaders), John Altman, Meg McKone, Meg Boyd (Week 1).* On this trip, Frank and Joan set a pattern which was to stand me in good stead for the future – divide a fortnight into two separate walks, restocking with food between each one, and build in base camps which enable the party to explore routes and gorges which would be difficult to negotiate with a heavy load. This time the Rigbys had chosen two of the most scenic areas – Serpentine Gorge to Ormiston Gorge, climbing Mt Giles on the way, and a trip further east around Hugh Gorge and Brinkley Bluff, finishing at Standley Chasm.

The water in Serpentine Gorge looked cold, grey and uninviting as we began the climb over the top of the eastern side of the canyon. As we descended to the tree-lined creek bed on the other side, we surprised a small mob of brumbies digging for water in the sand. We had a 'dry' camp in the Alice Valley when a few spots of rain caused Frank to remark, 'On any two week period in the MacDonnell Ranges, it can rain', an observation which I have had confirmed many times.

Next morning the shadowy mauve hills of the Chewings Range beckoned us on and we were soon setting up camp at beautiful Giles Yard Springs and admiring the large pool at the base of the waterfall. Above the falls is a swampy area full of ferns, followed by a series of climbs, pools and narrow gorges, until a high cliff forces the explorer out onto the eastern spur. We also

climbed to the top of the Chewings Range, stopping to admire the Upper Springs on the way, where several pools and a small water-filled canyon lie cradled in the bedrock about two thirds of the way up the mountain. The top of the Range gives unparalleled views to the east, where a narrow line of steep mountain tops leads the way to a great curving wall, its base scalloped with eroded bands of rock as it swells out into a double spine on its march towards Alice Springs. We continued west along the rocky, spinifex-clad tops, sometimes rounded, sometimes knife-edged, for several kilometres, until we stopped, amazed, at an extraordinary chasm which dropped sharply on the northern side of the Range to the plains beneath. Great red ramparts leaped up out of the depths of this amphitheatre, in the middle of which a canyon cut a sinuous path to its narrow opening. Was it possible to gain access to the canyon? Here lay a challenge that was to occupy several future trips.

A highlight of the walk was the night spent on the summit of Mt Giles, at 1389 metres the second highest peak in the West MacDonnells. The view across Ormiston Pound to Mt Sonder, the 'Red Wall' at the northern end of the Pound and the scalloped 'North-South Ridge' which joins the Red Wall to the Giles massif is remarkable at any time of day. At sunset with the shadows highlighting every undulation and the colours glowing all shades of red and blue, it was unforgettable. Then as the sun sank we looked to the east to see a full moon rising over the ranges. The early morning view was similarly spectacular, with the colours accentuating the golden hues of the spectrum.

We descended the steep rocky spur off the southern side of Mt Giles to pick up the rest of our food and made our way into the eastern end of Ormiston Pound. It was a hot, dry afternoon as we traversed all the ups and downs

View east along the Chewings Range from above Giles Yard Springs



beneath the North–South Ridge until we reached the north-east corner of the Red Wall and found a steep route onto its summit. We were very thirsty by now and as Joan, Meg and I set up camp between rocks and spinifex, Frank and John descended some distance to collect water from the creek below. Next morning it was a long, tough trudge along the 10 kilometres of the Red Wall with a scary descent to Bowmans Gap. When our taxi picked us up from Ormiston Gorge, we appreciated the driver's thoughtfulness in bringing us out a bag of fresh fruit along with our food for the next stage.

We set out from Boggy Hole Bore, where the Hugh River crosses the road, for the (dare I say it?) rather boring crossing of the Alice Valley. It took us two days to reach Hugh Gorge, a long, spectacular, red-walled gorge which is now one of the highlights of the Larapinta Trail. After making base camp on a sandy bank overhung with river red gums, we explored upstream past what is now called Hugh Junction and beyond, swimming 'Hypothermia Pool', where I was seriously concerned that I might freeze to death. Then we continued further through more pools and up a few climbs until we reached a bend in the river with an amphitheatre full of macrozamia. Joan had brought a plastic lilo which we used to explore the narrow, S-shaped canyon into which the river drops from the plains above. Closer to camp, we also explored a tributary on the western side of Hugh Gorge, following upstream past many little drops and dry plunge pools until we reached the tops.

From Hugh Junction we headed east to the next north-south flowing creek. It contained a puddle surrounded by burnt vegetation, which disappointed Frank greatly. On a previous trip, the party had called it 'Beauty Pool' and camped there, but now it only provided an example of how drastically the natural world can change. Further on, the creek narrowed to a high-walled gorge filled with icy water which we negotiated without risk of collapse by using the lilo. We followed the southern side of the Chewings Range east to Stuart Pass below Brinkley Bluff, then climbed to the top of the 'Hogs Back' where we had our third high camp. Another ridge, bristling with vertical slivers of rock, took us to the top of Standley Chasm, the end of our journey. My sandshoe-clad feet were sore and my toes full of spinifex prickles for months afterwards, but I resolved to return, next time wearing boots.

Alas, another opportunity didn't arise for many years. In 1988, my husband Frank and I, on our way north to Kakadu, did a short walk through Ormiston Gorge. My heart leaped at the sight of the hills around Mt Giles, their red walls dominating the view from twelve kilometres across the Pound. There was lots of exploring to do.

6–15 July 1989 – Mt Sonder to Serpentine Gorge: *Private trip: Peter Conroy, Irene Davies, Meg McKone, Brian Palm.* Peter and Rene had already done a walk to Hugh Gorge when I met them in Alice Springs for our ten day trip from Redbank Gorge to Serpentine Gorge, with an exploratory foray to the north side of the Chewings Range along the way. We spent our first night in freezing wind on top of Mt Sonder (now forbidden as a campsite), cowering beneath the golden-tan tent which Peter had pinned flat to the ground. Next morning we set off down the long curving ridge beside Sonder's

eastern face, and after a long dry stretch across the plains made it to Ormiston Gorge just on dark. We didn't find Brian, who had come up from Melbourne to meet us, until the next morning.

Once through the Gorge, we climbed from Bowmans Gap onto the Red Wall, then, after several kilometres, dropped into the creek on its northern side. A pool barred our exit onto the northern plains, forcing us to float our packs through in plastic bags. We headed east until we rounded the corner for a view into the 'Mini Pound' on the eastern side of the North–South Ridge. The great red barrier of the Chewings Range, steeper and seemingly dryer on the northern side than on the southern, stretched off into the far distance. We headed for a few gorges, but despite the wet season they were too steep to hold accessible water. Had we walked several kilometres further east, we would have found the entrance to the chasm we'd seen from the top of the Range in 1980. Peter and Brian went looking for water, finding a single deep rock pool in one of the scallops of the North–South Ridge. We camped in a sandy creekbed with a magnificent view of Mt Giles glowing red in the setting sun.

It was my second ascent of Mt Giles, and by a different route, this time onto the North–South Ridge with its spectacular ramparts falling away into Ormiston Pound, then turning the corner and climbing a few bumps to the top. We descended a little east of the summit down a terrifyingly steep creek overhung by rotting rock bollards to the southern side of the Range. The weather was deteriorating as we camped beyond Giles Yard Springs, so we erected the golden tan, abdulled it so we could all fit in, then closed it off with Brian's fly on the open side and groundsheets over the ends. Though it was pouring with rain and freezing cold outside, we were warm and snug within.

Next day we walked partly on the rough road which made driving to the Springs possible and partly off track to camp below the narrow section of the Chewings Range, finding a gorge with water and an earthy bank to camp on. Close by were the remains of feral cattle and horses shot to protect the fragile environment of the National Park. An ascent of the peak above us proved to be highly significant, though I didn't realise it at the time. From the summit I saw the head of an attractive valley a little further east along the Range which the map showed was about three kilometres long – a possible candidate for an interesting gorge. The next day and a half were spent heading back across the Alice Valley to Serpentine Gorge.

My first two trips had provided the background and inspiration for two spectacular discoveries in the next decade – The Canyon of Defiance and Portals Canyon.

5–11 September 1991 – Giles area: *Private trip – Ormiston Gorge to Giles Yard Springs and above: Frank and Meg McKone, Frank and Joan Rigby.* The Rigbys had already done a four day walk near Standley Chasm before we headed out to Ormiston Gorge (where we dazzled the Ranger with our collective expertise!), with the aim of getting a closer look at the amphitheatre we had viewed from above in 1980. The wetter conditions that had begun with floods in 1988 had left plenty of water along our route to Giles Yard Springs, from which





we climbed the Range and walked west until we were looking down at our hidden chasm. We could see the white rocks at the bottom of the creek as it headed into a canyon and disappeared from sight around a huge red bulge in the cliffs, only to reappear before dropping to the plains below. The slopes down into the gorge looked impossibly steep and the step onto the plains might have an impassable drop. As we mused over a possible name, Frank Rigby suggested 'The Canyon of Defiance', a tribute to its seemingly impregnable nature.

We spent a lazy day at the Springs, swimming in the pool beneath the waterfall and vainly searching west along the range for a gorge with scoop holes cut into the bedrock that Frank had discovered on an SBW trip. Then we returned to Ormiston Gorge, already planning a trip to crack the route into the Canyon of Defiance.

5–18 July 1992 – Canyon of Defiance; Hugh Gorge:

Private trip: Meg McKone (leader), Frank McKone, Frank and Joan Rigby, Pat Miethke, Rene Lays. Needing to find a faster route into Giles Yard Springs, we started from the Ochre Pits and traversed the western arm of a two-pronged gap through the Heavitree Range. After camping at a pleasant sandy spot in the middle of this range, we continued across the Alice Valley, finding a welcome pool in a sandy creekbed a few hours further on. We took Pat and Rene up onto the Chewings Range to view the Canyon of Defiance from above, then moved into new territory, finding a route over the Range at a high saddle a few kilometres east of the Springs. Rene and Pat found a good route down a creek and at last we were on the northern side, walking westwards until we reached a creek bed with several pristine rock pools a short way upstream. It was the mouth of our canyon, a great place to camp for three nights while we attempted to find a way in.

First we tried the direct route up the creek but were stopped by a six metre drop. Next we climbed through cliffs on the western side of the gorge and walked along a flat ridge between the Canyon of Defiance and another gorge to the west. The slopes into our canyon were too dangerous to descend, though we could see a possibility on its eastern side. We spent some time exploring the gorge to the west, most of which is at a higher level than the Canyon of Defiance and ends in a waterfall, naming it 'Pats Canyon' for Pat who found

Sunrise on the cliffs at the mouth of the Canyon of Defiance



a way in via a ramp. We now had only one chance left. Ascending the slope to the east of our camp, we clambered up a steep gully and down an even steeper one to a side creek of the Canyon of Defiance, then descended to the main creekbed above the drop. A short way upstream we felt as if we were diving into the bowels of the earth, surrounded by glowing red and gold walls as we followed the canyon round the 'Big Red Bulge', straddling pools and wriggling up behind a chockstone until we reached a bowl full of rounded pebbles beneath an impassable drop. Though the canyon continued above us, we couldn't climb into it. Yet what we had discovered was spectacular enough to satisfy us, and the unsurpassed sunrises on the high entrance cliffs were an added bonus.

We returned to Ormiston Gorge via the North–South Ridge and part of the Red Wall, which we dropped off too soon, being forced to climb back up around a fall to reach the mouth of its north-flowing creek. Once through Bowmans Gap, we investigated the 'Canyon of the Thirteen Pools' (named by Dot Butler of Sydney Bushwalkers), then camped at a filthy pool in the Pound. I lost brownie points with Joan when I couldn't come at water whose boiling green froth pushed the lid off our billy.

We followed our successful trip to the Canyon of Defiance with five days in the Hugh Gorge area. Rene had brought her lilo to tackle Hypothermia Pool, but with two people sitting on it we sank up to our waists in the icy water and leaped off wordlessly and simultaneously. We reached the 'Macrozamia Amphitheatre' at the top end of Hugh Gorge via a high climb around the tops, only to find the upper creek was filled with dead cattle and horse dung. On our way east towards Brinkley Bluff, we found a welcome spring with room to camp on the south side of Paisley Bluff and named it 'Brumby Springs' on a later trip after spotting three feral horses nearby.

29 June – 13 July 1996 – Hugh Gorge area; Mt Giles

Canberra Bushwalking Club trip: Meg McKone (leader), Frank McKone, Rene Lays, John I'Ons, Douglas Wright, Margaret Cooper, Lynn Atkinson. Having found a way into the radiant beauty of the Canyon of Defiance, I felt the urge to explore some of the smaller features here and around Hugh Gorge. I also wanted to drive in closer so that we wouldn't have to spend a day at each end of a trip accessing the most interesting areas. We started with a five day trip to Hugh Gorge, being dropped off and picked up at Stuart Pass, thus avoiding two walks across the Alice Valley. Our first campsite was at Brumby Springs, which we used as a base camp to climb Brinkley Bluff, then we continued on to Hugh Gorge via some more northerly creeks than our previous routes. I think they now form part of the Larapinta Trail. The weather was so warm that John considered leaving his sleeping bag behind on the second walk, but changed his mind when I showed him the climatic graph on the map. The soles of Doug's boots fell off (boots often fall apart in the MacDonnells), and after a not very successful attempt to glue them back on, he spent the rest of the trip in his London moccasins.

The aim of the next walk was to fill in some of the gaps in the Canyon of Defiance area. Starting from the Ochre Pits, we carried six litres of water each with our

10 day packs to the campsite in the pass in the Heavitree Range – just as well, since the gorge was totally dry. It was just as well, too, that John hadn't left his sleeping bag behind, as 12 hours of rain brought a very cool change. At Giles Yard Springs we found a vehicle with a couple from the Central Australian Bushwalkers. Mark came with us the next day on a walk up to the top of the Range to look down into the Canyon of Defiance and to Pats Canyon beyond, which looked accessible from the tops via a scree slope to its west. It seemed that the Central Australian Bushwalkers were aware of the lower section of the Canyon of Defiance (which they called 'the other Giles Springs'), but hadn't seen it from above. Then Frank, Rene and I rested in camp (to repair a pulled muscle in my leg and cook Rene's pancake mix) while the rest of the party had a 10 hour day along the tops to Mt Giles and back. Another car drove in, this time with a generator and a chain saw. We were appalled that such a fragile area was so vulnerable to damage.

Using the saddle on the Chewings Range to cross over to the north side, we continued to the Canyon of Defiance. Both John and I had expected the other to bring a rope so that we could climb directly up the creek into the canyon and were forced to purchase a flimsy clothes line in Alice Springs. Nevertheless, John led the way up the out-of-balance climb, belaying everyone until Lynn froze. 'You can climb it, and you will!' finally ordered John, and up she went. We called it 'Crisis Rock', and returned from the canyon via the long route.

We had time for further exploration, so I decided to check out a gorge two creeks to the east. In the four years since we had walked past it, an enormous amount of rock had fallen off the cliffs above, choking the creek with boulders twenty metres deep. 'Rockfall Gorge' seemed a suitable name. We also did some route-finding that would be useful on later trips, ascending Pats Canyon past a steep climb around a waterfall and out via the scree slope we had noticed from the tops to 'Termite Saddle' from which we could see Ormiston Gorge with Mt Sonder floating in deep blue shadows above it. It would be easy to gain the top of the Chewings Range from here. We ended our trip at the Ochre Pits, well pleased with our new discoveries.

3–15 July 1997 – Mt Zeil; Giles area: *CBC trip: Meg McKone (leader), Frank McKone, Eric and Pat Pickering, Mark Hopkins, Irene Davies, Ann Gibbs-Jordan, Paul Donohue.* Keen to climb Mt Zeil, at 1531 metres the highest peak west of the Great Divide, I had contacted the Central Australian Bushwalkers about the water situation on the mountain. 'Depends what you call water', I was told. It clearly wasn't a trip to tackle during a drought.

We were dropped off on the north side of Zeil and walked a few kilometres to the mouth of the main creek. Unlike so many gorges in the Chewings Range, there was no pool of water at its mouth, and we had to rock-hop upstream for 45 minutes before we found any. It was a long day climbing to the summit, and most of us only made it to a peak which gave us great views to Razorback, Sonder and the Chewings Range. I was on antibiotics for a throat and chest infection, and running on adrenalin. Mark and Rene went on to the summit and got back to camp just before dark.

In preparation for our 30 kilometre walk across to Redbank Gorge, Paul wasn't keen to spend an afternoon going back upstream to collect water, and his wineskin was leaking. Finally we loaded him up with our Sigg bottles and carried our own water in wineskins as we set off with about eight litres each for the crossing. Though we found a pool of reasonable water on the eastern side of Zeil, our camp in Crawford Creek was dry and the temperature below freezing. Next day, after crossing a lot of country devastated by cattle and camels, but with great views of the mountains around us, we camped at a big pool about five kilometres north of Redbank Gorge. We collected more water at the top of the Gorge before climbing over on the eastern side.

We started our second walk from the Ochre Pits, taking the usual route through to Giles Yard Springs where we found toilet paper strewn around. Wherever vehicles can drive, you find mess! I was keen to complete the high crossing along the Chewings Range, down to Termite Saddle and Pats Canyon and thence to the mouth of the Canyon of Defiance, but as we reached the top of the Range, the weather was turning with Zeil and then Sonder disappearing into a black cloud which soon engulfed us in squalls of sleet. On the way down the scree slope, Pat developed a very painful pulled muscle, and we only just made it to the campsite before mist settled over the tops. Next day, after a night of freezing gales, everyone was too tired to do anything much but potter up the gorge to the bottom of Crisis Rock.

I had planned to cross the Range at its low point and walk east to climb the Range further on to check out the tantalising valley that I'd spotted back in 1989, then continue on to Serpentine Gorge. However, with Pat's injury this was now out of the question. We followed the easiest route we could find back to the Heavitree Range, where Ann twisted her ankle and Frank carried her pack through the gorge. Next day, when we reached the Ochre Pits, we borrowed a tourist bus's satellite phone to ask our transport to pick us up a day early at the new location.

After a month's trip up north, Frank and I returned through Alice Springs to investigate other routes to Mt Zeil. As all the roads around the southern and western sides of Razorback bristled with *No Trespassing* signs, we decided to climb Razorback through the National

Approaching the southern face of Mt Zeil





Mountains of discovery – Meg McKone

Park, a 22 kilometre 10 hour return walk from Redbank Gorge. We found a deep pool of good water in a gorge on the south-east side of Razorback and a delightful ridge up to the summit with wonderful views across to Zeil. It looked a great route for a wet season.

1–10 July 1999 – Portals Canyon and Mt Giles area: *CBC trip: Meg McKone (leader), Frank McKone, Rod Peters, Grahame Muller, John Thwaite.* It was by now obvious that if I didn't dedicate the start of a trip to investigating the high valley in the Chewings Range east of the saddle, I would never get there. After five days in the East MacDonnells, Rod, Frank and I met the others and drove our own vehicles to the new locked gate at the edge of the National Park about 10 kilometres east of Giles Yard Springs. Heading north to the Chewings Range, we followed it east until we found a creek with water and a few small spots to camp.

We climbed up the creek and the ridge to its west to the top of the Range. Below us, a long, double-cliffed gorge flowed east then bent at right angles to exit on the northern side of the Range. Twin cliffs barred a drop inside the inner gorge, inspiring the name 'Portals Canyon'. The only way to get closer was to go back to the top of the creek and follow it down, which we did quite easily, descending a few minor drops, until we reached a large drop just before the Portals. To see main canyon, however, as with the Canyon of Defiance, we would have to explore upstream from the northern side. We spent two shortish days walking down the southern side of the Range to Ellery Creek and Fish Hole, then back up the northern side to the mouth of our gorge, where we found a lovely campsite with trees and flowering bushes, and a series of crystal clear pools

The inaccessible gorge at the top end of Portals Canyon



A swim through one of the slots in Portals Canyon



cut into the grey quartzite. The gorge soon narrowed to a deep, icy wade and then a short compulsory swim before a chockstone. Grahame and I were the only ones left by now and I didn't feel like climbing the chock with bare feet (having left my boots further back), so Grahame went on and returned about ten minutes later to report a slot canyon with more swims that opened out further on. It was obvious we would have to return with suitable footwear.

It was a slog heading further west to the Canyon of Defiance, though the north side of the Chewings Range looked spectacular, especially the peaks east of the saddle. We accessed the Canyon of Defiance via Crisis Rock this time, Grahame leading with a proper climbing rope. He thought it was Grade 7 or 8 due to being off-balance. Then in the afternoon we followed a trip up Rockfall Gorge with a climb of 'Toblerone Rock', a dark-brown triangular outcrop near its mouth. We climbed the Range via Pats Canyon and Termite Saddle, and headed east, finding just enough spots to camp at Upper Giles Springs, then spent a morning exploring both branches of the Upper Springs, which took us to a saddle overlooking the eastern side of the Canyon of Defiance. Grahame and I decided to have a go at descending, but a slip on loose pebbles quickly changed our minds. We had a fantastic eight and a half hour day walking along the tops over rounded peaks and knife-edged ridges to Mt Giles and back, my third ascent of this peak. Then another half day's walking took us down to Giles Yard Springs and back along the road to our cars.

After returning to Alice Springs, Frank and I joined Grahame and his wife Maureen on a joy flight over the

West MacDonnells. The isolated Peak 1179 metres on the north side of the Chewings Range appeared red, dry and inaccessible but Mt Razorback had a glint of water in a gorge on its north western side. Using Razorback as a route to Mt Zeil was looking more of a possibility.

19 August – 2 September 2000 – west of Ellery Creek (Portals Canyon); west of Hugh Gorge: *Coast and Mountain Walkers trip: Meg McKone (leader), Pat Miethke, Sue and Ian Olsen, Maggie and Bruce Baldwin, Maureen Monkley, John Horrocks, Derek Chilton.* The first week was devoted to exploring Portals Canyon and the surrounding area. A drop-off near Cumming Yard in the Alice Valley gave us a head start, despite the helicopter muster (the Alice Valley being a pastoral lease at that time) we had been warned about. Once past Fish Hole, full of water after recent floods, we had plenty of time to explore the gorges on the way to Portals. The first big open valley running west into the Range was pleasant enough, but unexceptional, so we moved on to 'Red Wall Gorge', finding a spot to camp with water in a little gorge further down the creek. It, too, was not exceptional apart from the huge rock walls at its entrance, but it gave us access to a steep spur leading to the top of the Range which was interestingly narrow and sinuous at this point.

We moved on to Portals campsite, and at last reached the bottom end of the inaccessible Upper Canyon which we had looked down upon in 1999. Portals is a stunningly beautiful and exciting canyon, with its dark, narrow compulsory swims, powdery white ghost gums and flowering shrubs, crystal clear cascades and pools, glowing orange rock walls and challenging climbs. As far as I know, we were the first non-indigenous people to explore it. Next day we found a route to the top of the Range on the eastern side of Portals Gorge and walked west along the tops until we joined up with our route from the previous year. We now had another high level route across the Range for future reference. We returned to meet our bus near Cumming Yard by following down Portals Creek, which is the same creek which holds Fish Hole.

The next week of the trip was totally new for all of us, exploring the country between Hugh Gorge and 'Mulga Creek', which cuts through the Range about 10 kms further west. Huge trees had been ripped off the banks of Hugh Gorge by the recent floods and dumped at the mouth – it would take the Gorge decades to recover. As we walked along the southern side of the Range, the first interesting gorge we saw had a triangular red hill near the top, so we called it 'Pyramid Gorge'. We continued on to a pleasant campsite on a long, grassy flat amongst callitris pines with a gorge upstream which broke into several tributaries. I called it 'Redback Gorge' in honour of the quickly demolished poisonous spider which crawled out of my pack harness after a free ride from home. The next major gorge was Mulga Gorge where we found a large, sheltered campsite a few kilometres upstream. Further up again was a small gorge with a drop and a permanent pool which can be climbed around on either side.

Walking up a side creek to the west of our camp, we reached a low saddle with views into the next creek and the precipitous cliffs above it. Pat and I decided to climb a steep spur to the top of the Range from here, in

the hope of seeing the isolated Peak 1179 metres and reached a high saddle with a wonderful view framed between two ridges. Later I wrote, 'Below us a white creek bed wound across the valley, a magical path to our 'Peak Alone', standing radiantly surrounded by shafts of sunlight which had just broken through the clouds. The mountain rose to form an almost perfect cone, its white quartz sides traced with rusty veins and dotted with native pines'. But we didn't get a chance to climb it on this trip.

We explored a few of the creeks and ridges further upstream, looking across a charming little valley which possibly had water and a campsite at its northern exit. As we headed back towards Hugh Gorge, we found a spot to camp near the entrance to Pyramid Gorge with water a few hundred metres on at the base of a waterfall. Climbing around the fall, we discovered another a gem, a weeping, mossy canyon which corkscrewed upwards, suggesting the name 'Spiral Canyon'. We were able to climb above it on its western side via a steep creek cut into bedrock, and found a huge red cave with an over-arching roof. Happy with our discoveries, we returned to the bus which met us along the rough road to Hugh Gorge.

15–28 July 2001 – Peak Alone; Portals Canyon: *CBC trip: Meg McKone (leader), Frank McKone, John and Margaret Cooper, Alan Davey, Allan Mikkelsen, Lynn Atkinson, Mark Hopkins, Warwick Blayden.* Mist blanketed the Chewings Range as we set off westwards from Hugh Gorge. It was just as well I'd walked this section the previous year or I'd have had no idea which creek was which. After we camped in intermittent rain a few nights in Mulga Creek, it cleared up enough to cross the Range, via the creek, spur and high saddle that Pat and I had explored the previous year, for our first ascent of Peak Alone. Our route up the southern side was extremely steep, but most of the rock was solid with good handholds. The view was magnificent – stretching from the mountains above Hugh Gorge in the east to Mt Zeil in the west, about 90 kilometres of the Chewings Range. On the way back to Hugh Gorge we checked out Spiral Canyon.

After being dropped off in Ellery Creek and spending a dewy night by a pool, we made our way past Fish

Peak Alone





Hole and up into the little gorge which runs off it to the west. A wedge-tail flying down the gorge dropped a joey it was carrying in its talons, but we weren't the first humans it had encountered that day. Alan, who was further ahead, had been brushed by its wing as it passed him and hurried back to us exclaiming, 'I've been touched by an eagle!' So it became 'Eagle Gorge'. We climbed up Portals Canyon again and managed to get right underneath the southern Portal by climbing over the top and scrambling back downstream down a hairy drop. Alan nearly came to grief on the way down and Lynn on the way back up when rocks they were hanging on to broke off. Lynn saved herself with a spectacular leap. At close quarters we could see that the southern portal is actually a rock chimney. I sprained my ankle on the way back to camp and spent the next day RICEing it. We crossed the Chewings Range at the low point, then, using Giles Yard Springs (looking in much better condition after two years of good rain and no vehicles) as a base, we explored a couple of gorges further west along the southern side of the Range without finding the Rigbys' scoopholes, then returned to the Ochre Pits.

1–14 August, 2004 – Mt Zeil; west of Hugh Gorge:

CMW trip: Meg McKone (leader), Lorraine Tomlins, Grahame Muller, John Grey, Michele Powell, Owen Kimberley, Geoff Vercoe (Week 1). After the floods of 2000 and 2001, a long dry spell had me wondering if a walk to Mt Zeil from Redbank Gorge would have to be changed to another in the Giles area, until heavy rains two months before the trip put Zeil back on the agenda. We found good water on both sides of Razorback, a lovely mountain to climb with amazing views. It still seemed a safe idea to carry four litres of water each across the hills, valleys and Tropic of Capricorn to the mouth of the main southward-running creek on Zeil, a route which John described as 'not a bad little workout'. We found only two receding pools further up the creek; if we'd been much later, they probably would have been dry and we would have lacked enough water to climb the mountain.

The 800 metre climb up the long spur to the summit was fairly straightforward. On top were a large cairn and a solar cell with an aerial, so John took the opportunity to phone his wife who was soon to have their first baby. The 360 degree view revealed a surprising number of mountains, not only along the Chewings Range to the south-east, but also heading westwards into the desert. On our return journey to Redbank Gorge, we took the attractive gorge which runs to the east of Razorback. Lorraine twisted her ankle, but had plenty of time to RICE it before we walked on to meet our bus at Redbank Gorge the next morning.

After a rest day at the mouth of Hugh Gorge, we set off westwards along the southern side of the Range, exploring 'S-Bend Gorge' immediately east of Pyramid Gorge. Ascending the ridge on the west side of Pyramid Gorge, we crossed the Range to the northern side, camping near a pool in 'Charming Valley', which I'd spotted from above in 2000. We followed around the north side of the Range to Peak Alone to walk up the creek on its eastern side until we found water and spots to camp. This time we climbed the peak via its eastern spur, then crossed the high saddle to camp in Mulga Creek, which we used as a base for some more

exploration of adjacent creeks. It took us six hours to reach 8 Mile Gap.

4–17 June, 2006 – Portals and Giles areas; Ellery Creek to Peak Alone: *CMW trip: Meg McKone (leader), Rene Lays, Irene Davies, Keith Thomas, John Booth, Marion Davies, Warwick Blayden, John Grey (Week 1), Richard (Min) Neville (Week 1).* It was time to put some of our best discoveries together into one walk. Starting from near Cumming Yard where the bus dropped us off, we walked to Fish Hole and then Portals Canyon in lovely sunny weather and a proliferation of flowers. After ascending Portals Canyon, we returned around the middle level of the gorge instead of down-climbing and swimming back through the icy water – a big improvement to the return route even though it did mean descending a very steep spur back to the campsite. Instead of keeping to the north side of the Range on our way to the Canyon of Defiance, we chose the high level route, climbing to the tops and walking west over two steep rises (and falls) before dropping down the ridge we had used in 1999 to the southern side of the Range. A few kilometres further on, we found a protected campsite under mulga trees near water in a little gorge, though Marion camped out in the open and awoke with frost on her tent.

We re-crossed the Range at the saddle, moving on to the Canyon of Defiance. Though we didn't climb Crisis Rock to access the canyon, we did rope down beside it on the return. John and Min went off to explore Pats Canyon in the afternoon and discovered an arch across the creekbed. On our return journey, John and Min left early to climb Mt Giles, while the rest of us followed an hour later up Pats Canyon and Termite Saddle to the top of the Range, where we saw two little figures in the distance hurrying to join us. Taking water from Giles Yard Springs, we walked out along the road for a few kilometres to shorten the next day when we met the bus near Cumming Yard for the next week's supplies.

Our second week included a new stretch – the south side of the Chewings Range from Ellery Creek to Mulga Creek, a slog of about 14 kilometres with heavy packs. We hoped to camp along the way, but any gorges with water lacked campsites and any spots suitable for camping lacked water, so it was a tired party which reached Mulga Gorge at 4 pm. Once again, we used this great campsite as a base, staying longer than first intended after Keith and Marion found the water at the mouth of Redback Gorge to be polluted by brumbies. Of course Peak Alone was on the agenda, and we descended it down the extremely steep north spur. As we walked around it on its western side, we found a big pool at the base of a granite outcrop, a water source that was marked on the new larger scale maps. Keith, John, Marion and I decided to return a different way over a high section of the Range, with Keith finding a way down through the cliffs into 'Killer Chasm' and then over several saddles until we finally reached Mulga Creek just on dusk. Over the next few days, we explored various creeks in the area, including 'Callitris Cascades' between Redback and Pyramid Gorges. Once again, we returned to 8 Mile Gap.

A word here about bureaucracy. From this trip on, it has been necessary to obtain a permit to walk off-track in the West MacDonnells NP. Also, 8 Mile Gap

is part of Aboriginal freehold land, with permission needed (via the Central Land Council) to walk or drive through. Then in late 2009 we heard that the Draft Joint Management Plan was proposing to put huge areas of the West MacDonnells out of bounds to bushwalkers (a 30 kilometre section of the Chewings Range from Mulga Creek to the low point in the Range east of Mt Giles; the area around Giles Yard Springs; and the full extent of Red Wall on the north side of Ormiston Pound with its associated ridges, peaks and gorges). It now seems that protest correspondence from bushwalkers and their clubs has ameliorated this proposal considerably, but the final decisions are yet to be made.

27 July–7 August, 2008 – Ormiston Gorge to the Ochre Pits; Portals Canyon: *CBC trip: Meg McKone (leader), John and Margaret Cooper, Cynthia Burton, Chris Roper, Pat and Eric Pickering, John Thwaite, Steve Galliford (Week 1), Di Thompson (Week 2), Lorraine Tomlins (Week 2).* As the drought had stymied my original plan of climbing Mt Zeil, we turned to an area with more reliable water. Although we found a comfortable campsite with water in Bowmans Gap, the creek mouth on the north side of the Red Wall was totally dry – just as well we had carried extra water. We camped in a dry creekbed near views of the north side of the Chewings Range, which we reached the following morning. Though there was plenty of water at the mouth of the Canyon of Defiance, the campsite was dry and scratchy and the beautiful big gum tree which we had camped near so many times appeared dead. We explored the canyon, and reckoned that Pat and Eric, both in their mid seventies, must be the most senior entrants ever! The weather turned too hot to climb Mt Giles, so we crossed the Chewings Range at the saddle, camped at the desiccated new campground near Giles Yard Springs (a cool green oasis, but now out-of-bounds for camping and swimming) and then again in a dry creek bed in the Alice Valley before continuing to the Ochre Pits.

Since I was no longer able to find bus companies willing to drive across the Alice Valley, we started from Ellery Creek Big Hole and followed the Larapinta Trail across the Heavitree Range, pausing to admire 50 blue kilometres of the Chewings Range stretched across the northern horizon. We camped on the north side of Ellery Creek Big Hole before walking across the Alice Valley and up Ellery Creek to find Fish Hole absolutely dry. We didn't find water until Eagle Gorge, fortunately out of reach of feral horses and camels. Portals campsite was still beautiful, though we feared being trampled by the mob of brumbies that came in each night to drink at the lowest pool. We did Portals Canyon, which was dry in its central section (though the compulsory swims were still there and colder than ever), and a day trip to the top of the Range, hoping to descend further east at Red Wall Canyon, but as it looked nearly vertical at the top we backtracked. We returned the way we had come, with a below freezing night in Ellery Creek.

31 May–13 June, 2009 – Mt Zeil; east of Ellery Creek: *CBC trip: Meg McKone (leader), Mary Hoffmann, Ray Franzi, Drew Stones, Rupert Barnett (Week 1), Patrick McBride (Week 1), John Dobson (Week 1).* Just as another year of drought seemed to have dashed any chance of a Canberra Bushies trip to Mt Zeil, we arrived in Alice Springs to steady rain.

After a hasty rearrangement with the bus company, we were soon at Redbank Gorge, making our way to our first campsite on the south-eastern side of Razorback. Shock, horror! The pool at the mouth of the gorge was filthy with camel dung. We were saved by fresh rock pools a little higher up. Fortunately the camels hadn't got at any of the other water sources we were relying on for the trip.

Once again, it was a beautiful walk to Mt Zeil, the granite cliffs on its southern side looming ever closer. There is a great deal of variety, and I've never followed exactly the same route twice. This time, we had the benefit of pools of rainwater which had collected in rockholes. We camped under the cliffs in a shallow valley with water about 50 metres above in a creekbed, and climbed up the steep face to the summit on a beautiful clear day, skirting round the western end of the cliffs. On the return journey, we traversed a lowish ridge on the eastern side of Razorback which gave excellent views of Mt Sonder.

During our second week, we took a chance of finding water on a totally new route along the northern side of the Chewings Range from Ellery Creek to Peak Alone. There were a few pools of barely drinkable water in Fish Hole, but next morning only a kilometre up Ellery Creek we found pristine pools in a spectacular side creek which I learned later was Milton Park Gorge. As we followed east alongside the Range, first we had to climb up out of the valley of Ellery Creek, then negotiate the ups and downs as we crossed the creekbeds running off the Range. We found a pretty campsite and some decent water at one which we named 'Bent Gorge'. I was keen to explore 'Trident Gorge' a little further on. It showed three prongs on the map, though in reality there were four. We explored three of them and Drew ran up the fourth (one of the central prongs) which he declared the best, and we climbed to the top of the Range following an undulating arête until we could look into Bent Gorge.

Though the pool below the granite outcrop on the west side of Peak Alone was nearly dry, the rain had left several good pools in the rocks above. We climbed Peak Alone up the northern spur and explored the two gaps between the Peak and the Range. Next day we climbed over the high saddle to Mulga Creek. Drew and I walked upstream a few kilometres then headed up a creek to the tops, intending to explore another creek on the southern side, but we had left too late and followed the winding watershed back to camp instead. We finished the trip at 8 Mile Gap.

23–31 July, 2010 – Ellery Creek to Ormiston Gorge: *CMW trip: Meg McKone (leader), Bas and Hester Slade, Sara Maywood, Jeff Howard, Ian Armstrong, Ian Mellor, Kerri-Ann Smith.* This was the MacDonnells I never expected to see, with all the creeks flowing and a haze of green across a landscape dotted with flowers and birds. From Ellery Creek Big Hole we walked to Portals Canyon with its freezing swims. I left my wet gloves on and nearly fell off a hand traverse when my chilled arms went weak, but I was elated to still be capable of doing this wonderful canyon. We climbed to the top of the Range intending to descend to the southern side via 45 Degree Gorge, described by Glenn Tempest in *Wild*, but bad weather was heading our way and it wasn't a good time to explore a gorge that was already overflowing.





Sara and Jeff were suffering from debilitating blisters acquired before this trip, so we parted on the road into Giles Yard Springs (each party with a PLB). We had a marvellous day doing the high route from the Springs to the Canyon of Defiance, with views across to the unnamed Peak 1307 metres on the north-east corner of the Red Wall. I resolved to explore this usually dry area the following year while there was still water about. The Canyon of Defiance campsite was beautiful again with all the rain, and the big 'dead' gum tree was resprouting from its miraculous roots for the second time. The creek running north-east out of the Mini-Pound was actually flowing – if only we'd had a spare day to camp on that sandy tree-lined bank beside a large pool! There were more marvellous views across the Red Wall to Sonder and Zeil as we climbed to the North-South Ridge and found a route down into Ormiston Pound. Here we camped by water while the setting sun and storm clouds gave us half an hour of amazing light effects on Mt Giles and the surrounding ranges.

At Ormiston Creek, we came across a Volley print - Jeff's! He and Sara had camped at Bowmans Gap on the final night and swam right through Ormiston Gorge. The rest of us had to do a short swim and a difficult traverse above the swirling water to reach the Ghost Gum Track. We arrived soaked but elated at the roadhead.

7–16 August, 2011 – Ochre Pits to Ormiston Gorge: *CMW trip: Meg McKone (leader), Bas and Hester Slade, Henry Burmester, Lynn Atkinson, John L'Estrange.* Another wet summer made an attempt on Peak 1307 metres look like a good bet, from a base camp on its southern side in the Mini-Pound. Looking at the map more closely, I realised it was only 82 metres lower than Mt Giles, the second highest peak in the Chewings Range, but did not know anyone who had bothered to climb it – what a difference a name makes! A lovely, narrow, curving ridge led from a gap on its southern side to the rounded summit, from which a broad spur dropped gently down to the North-South Ridge. If we started from the Ochre Pits, we could do a detour to 45 Degree Gorge before crossing the Chewings Range and explore it too.

I hadn't counted on breaking my leg in New Zealand in February, and I had only six months to recover. If I hadn't been leading the walk I wouldn't have gone, but I had already built in two to three base camps and if necessary I could stay in camp while the others went exploring. This is what I did while the rest of the party went up 45 Degree Gorge which had plenty of pools,

attractive sections in bedrock, several climbs and some thick scrub.

At the Canyon of Defiance campsite, it became obvious that my original plan to take water from Pats Canyon, camp on top of Giles and walk along the North-South Ridge wasn't a goer, so while Bas, Hester and John set off for a day trip to Giles, Henry, Lynn (who had a crook knee) and I explored the gorge immediately to the east of Canyon of Defiance, finding a rather spectacular red pyramid within it. The others returned mid-afternoon having given up on reaching Giles about a kilometre from the summit. They were concerned about returning down Pats Canyon possibly in the dark, so Bas had found a route down a very steep spur off the north side of the Chewings Range and they returned across the 'plains'.

Though the creek in the Mini-Pound was no longer flowing, we found several large pools beside a beautiful campsite at the base of Peak 1307 metres and camped there for two nights. There was one step on the ridge above us which looked almost impossible to climb, but after one short rock climb and a very steep slope we gained the arête and followed it to the summit. The views over Ormiston Pound, Mt Sonder and Mt Zeil from this different angle were stupendous and the air was perfumed with the large, lemon-yellow flowers of red-budded mallees (*Eucalyptus pachyphylla*). We dropped down to the North-South Ridge and completed the circuit via creek beds and low ridges back to camp. A nocturnal visit from a fat little Spencers Burrowing Frog (doubtless full of water), which hopped up onto my groundsheet and was reluctant to leave, was the icing on a wonderful day's cake.

Now we had two days to return to Ormiston Gorge around the north side of the Red Wall. At the end of a long, hot trudge on Day Nine our spirits were lifted by the sight of three young dingo pups playing outside their den. After camping by some pools in the river bed north of Bowmans Gap, we continued on to the bus the next day.

Why do I continue to walk in this remote, semi-arid region? Even after 15 major trips totalling more than 27 weeks of walking, there are still areas to explore and for me nothing beats the exhilaration of genuine exploration in beautiful surroundings. The more time I spend in the MacDonnells, the more convinced I am that they offer some of the best bushwalking country on the mainland of Australia.

Meg McKone, 30/10/2011



The principal features at the western end of the Chewings Range



A view of the southern side of the Chewings Range from the pass three kilometres east of Eltery Creek Big Hole

