



Ewen Bell goes a little

# wild with art

Mt Borradaile lies on the western edge of Arnhem Land, surrounded by luscious wetlands, wild animals and indigenous rock art dating back more than 10,000 years. It's also the location for Davidson's Safari Camp, a remote escape for couples who like a dash of culture with their adventure.



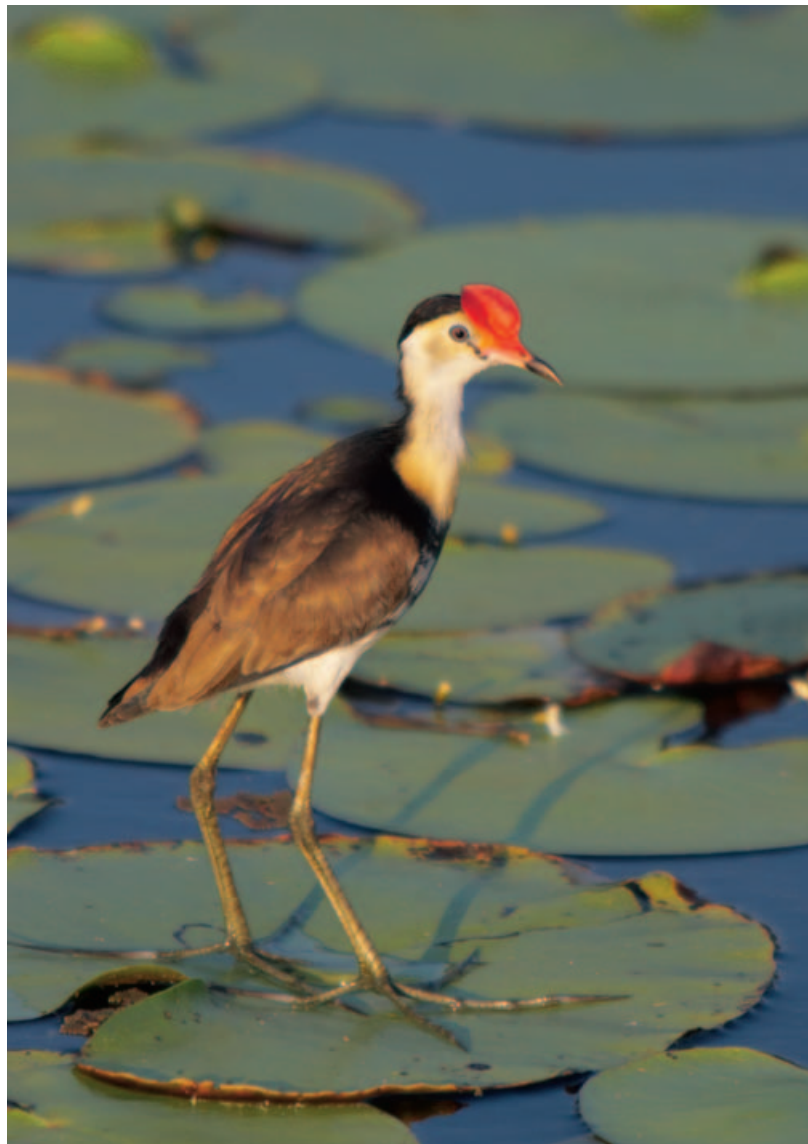
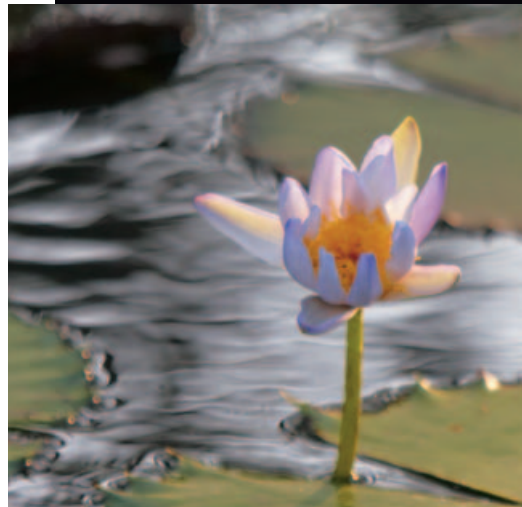
What I love about Arnhem Land is the ever-changing beauty of the landscape. In the wake of annual monsoonal floods the rivers swell to engulf vast plains, sending crocodiles in every direction for miles. At the end of the dry season rivers and lakes contract to form pools of muddy water and are besieged by birds, wallabies and reptiles.

Between these extremes the cycle of life and renewal is constant. Water lilies invade slow moving creeks with purple and white blooms. Gum trees burst open with the sweetness of flowers and fruit. Native grasses flourish, camouflaging the red earth with a carpet of green. Little wonder the traditional land owners were inspired to take up painting.

Right in the middle of this kaleidoscope of colour is Mt Borradaile. To the west is the great wilderness reserve of Kakadu and to the east is the endless horizon of the Arnhem plateau. Just getting there is a bit of an adventure, either with an experienced hand behind the wheel of a 4WD or an hour-long flight by small aircraft from Darwin. On arrival at Davidson's Camp you have all the basic necessities provided, including a personal guide assigned for the length of your stay and a maze of ancient galleries at your doorstep.

Mt Borradaile is home to sacred sites which have held significance for indigenous people as far back as the last ice-age. Visitors to Davidson's Camp gain unique access to the artwork and history of the area as a result of the camp owner, Max Davidson, having developed a close relationship with the Bunidj clan.

It takes several days to appreciate the depth of cultural artefacts at Mt Borradaile. With the help of guides and their 4WDs couples can explore short walks that lead into paperbark forests to emerge at sacred rocks covered in ochre and haematite artworks.



Keep an eye on the water and you'll notice their eyes gazing back at you.



One of the highlights is simply known as "Major Art", where hundreds of stories are painted one on top of the other like ancient wallpaper. Artists traditionally sign their work with a simple hand-stencil, but at this location the stencils are filled in with elaborate detail. It's more than a sacred site, it's a celebration of art.

With thousands of years to illustrate life in Arnhem Land very few subject matters have gone untouched. Names for other sites give a hint of the treasures to be explored, such as the Thylacine Cave, Beeswax Lady, Paperbark Beds, Catacombs, Emu Cave and so on.

The most famous exhibit at Mt Borradaile is Aburga, the fabled Rainbow Serpent painted six metres wide in soft ochre tones of yellow and white. Rainbow Serpents are one of the most important figures in traditional creation mythology, appearing in stories of how humans first appeared and the formation of rivers and mountains.

Through a deep knowledge of local customs shared by Max Davidson we also discover that the Aburga is a vengeful arbitrator of justice and once provoked can employ storms and floods to deliver punishment. Not far from the Rainbow Serpent are examples of Narmarrkon, the Lightning Man, who is drawn with stone axes at his knees and wrists with which he strikes thunder and lightning across the skies.

Such influential characters play out their drama in the Top End every year when the lightning storms in November bring notice of the impending wet season. Indigenous art is a living dialogue of life in Arnhem Land.

Not all of Mt Borradaile's wild creatures are found painted on the walls, some are still drifting around Cooper Creek. Afternoon cruises through the wetlands are a great tonic to the tropical heat, especially when enjoyed with some sparkling wine, a few canapés and the company of crocodiles. Keep an eye on the water and you'll notice their eyes gazing back at you.

Crocodiles glide along the surface to assess the boat load of bush-tucker, clearly afraid of nothing but the rainbow serpent himself. Once they tire of entertaining visitors the crocs submerge beneath the water lilies and silently disappear in search of barramundi.

Above the water it's a paradise for birds. The wetlands provide nutrients and nesting for millions of them, a blend of resident locals and exotic internationals. Brightly coloured Jacana walk across lily pads, Jabiru stalk through reeds and Kingfishers perch on branches – waiting to dive into a fish dinner.

Magpie Geese in particular are a favourite food for traditional landowners throughout the Top End, who only hunt them in the dry season when the birds have had a chance to fatten up on water-chestnuts. The sight of geese foraging the shallows in numbers is spectacular as the sun drops onto the horizon, bathing Mt Borradaile in hues of yellow and orange. A few thousand birds take flight for their overnight roosts, silhouetted above the floodplains.

The geese are done dining for the day, but back at Davidson's the cooking has just begun. The camp may not be luxurious but it is very civilised and the evening meal is no exception. The true remoteness of this wilderness escape is reflected in the tented-camp style. Permanent tents are open and breezy, and placed within easy access of the kitchen and its well chosen stock of wine.

When it's time for bed the generators go silent, the camp is immersed in darkness and the brilliant sky above our tent shimmers with stars. For a moment I thought I saw the shape of an emu up there, as though the ancient people of Mt Borradaile had gathered some white ochre and climbed up to the heavens.

Even in the depth of night there are stories to be shared in Arnhem Land. WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY EWEN BELL

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## fact file

**More information:** To discover more about the Top End and plan your journey visit [www.travelnt.com](http://www.travelnt.com). Permits are required to enter Arnhem Land and should be arranged before you travel.

**When to travel:** April has the coolest conditions and the rivers are at their highest levels, while the dry conditions in October offer the best opportunities for bird watchers. November to March are the wettest months and should be avoided by first-time travellers.

**Davidson's Camp:** Couples can get a three-day package for \$3,600 inclusive of flights from Darwin, guided tours, meals, accommodation and permits. Phone (08) 8927 5240 or go online to [www.arnhemland-safaris.com](http://www.arnhemland-safaris.com)

*The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism NT*

