

Hunting emu

Words and photos: Fiona Harper

in Yaegl Country

Fiona Harper explores the 32km Yuraygir Coastal Walk.



Formerly widespread in north-eastern New South Wales, coastal emus are now almost extinct and listed as endangered.

It's hard to believe that a native bird which stands almost two metres tall could almost disappear, but that's what's been happening as these flightless birds fall prey to domestic animals and road traffic, amongst other hazards.

Moves are afoot to protect those that still survive. NSW Parks and Wildlife are talking with Aboriginal communities on Yaegl traditional homelands, using Elders' knowledge to help with the emus' preservation. The coastal emu footprint has been adopted as the symbol for the recently opened Yuraygir Coastal Walk, which crosses through these same traditional lands.

I'm fortunate to share a yarn around a campfire at Sandon River Campground, midway through our walk, with Yaegl Elder Ron Heron, who grew up nearby on an island on the Sandon River. Highly respected, with a couple of archaeology degrees under his belt, Uncle Ron tells a story of Emu Men who would show themselves on the beach or around the campsite, changing from human to emu according to traditional legends.

Main Photo: Sections of the trail take hikers across long stretches of sandy beach.

1: Hikers on Yuraygir Coastal Walk (YCW) follow the trail of the coastal emu.



"This place has always been a camping area, for thousands of years," Uncle Ron says, gazing across the flames at the multitude of pitched tents belonging to weekend campers. "It's good to see the tradition continue," he enthuses, noting that ancient middens are buried beneath the entire campground.

From his bag he pulls out a sample of stone tool relics, telling us that many of these stone axe heads and knives were produced in the 'axe factory' nearby on Plover Island. Next morning, after extracting ourselves from our tents, we swing by the factory, which is really a miniature quarry, as our trek continues.

Crossing Sandon River by kayak, thoughtfully provided by the campsite manager, and heading south, we're about one third of the way into the 32km Yuraygir Coastal Walk. The trail skims along broad stretches of glorious beach between Angourie in the north and Red Rock campground in the south.

Just 20 minutes' drive to the trail head at Angourie, Riverside Calypso Caravan Park at Yamba is a good place to start. Though the walk can be tackled in either direction, it's best to walk southwards to avoid walking into the sun. The terrain varies from beach sand to rocky outcrops on headlands through to coastal forest and low lying scrublands. The level of difficulty is rated easy to moderate, so it's feasible for people with moderate fitness to complete the walk over four days. The

toughest part is the necessity to carry a fully laden backpack as there is no portage service on offer.

Well-tended campsites are dotted all along the trail, some with toilets and fireplaces like those at Sandon River, others merely offering a picnic table and space to pitch a tent on a grassy shaded spot. Mostly passing through Yuraygir National Park, teeny coastal villages like Woolli and Minnie Water allow walkers to stock up on provisions if required. For hot and sweaty trekkers, caravan park showers at these two towns are a tempting luxury. Though, with such clean, unpolluted beaches at hand, a salt water swim and body surf is a rather more satisfying end to a long day on the trail. There are also a couple of freshwater streams around Diggers Camp with pipes jutting out of the dunes at head height to provide an open air fresh water rinse.

Rain does its best to dampen our enthusiasm during one overnight stop. It lasts long enough for a pool of water to collect near my head, just beyond my flimsy tent wall, at 5am. Having hung my entire weekend wardrobe out to air overnight, rather lazily I decide to roll over and go back to sleep rather than retrieve the soaking clothes and boots. By 7am when I wake again, the sun is out, the sky is clear, and the ocean beyond the dunes beckons to shake off early morning sluggishness. And my clothes and boots are starting to dry.

Back on the trail again, rain showers are interspersed with intense sunshine. We spot plenty of grey kangaroos both in the coastal scrub and on the beach, but the elusive coastal emu proves, well, elusive. A couple of Park Rangers, Mark and Damian, join us on the trail, pointing out native flora and the ongoing battle to contain noxious weeds such as the pesky bitou bush. At certain times during the year they even go so far as to spray this weed by chopper in an endeavour to prevent it taking over the native bush.

At one point we come across a lizard trail which shows gracefully curved lines etched into the soft white sand.

"Once you see things like this, you realise where Aboriginal art gets its inspiration from," Mark notes, pointing out the elegant sweeping line of a tail dragging across sand, edged by distinctly pronged footprints.

It's not the spoor we hoped to see, but spotting the rare coastal emu will have to wait for the next visit.

- 1: Beachside campground on YCW.
- 2: Hikers pause to admire the view, looking out for whales and dolphins.
- 3: Kangaroos graze on beachside dunes.
- 4: Hikers cross Sandon River in a canoe provided by Sandon River Campground's Park Ranger.
- 5: Stunning beaches provide opportunities to cool hikers' weary feet.

FACT FILE

Getting there

If you're walking from north to south (the recommended direction with the sun at your back), the Yuraygir Coastal Walk starts at the small beachside town of Angourie, 20 minutes' drive from Yamba. If walking from south to north, Coffs Harbour is approximately 35 minutes' drive from Red Rock campsite at the southern end of the track. Allow approximately four days to complete the 32km trek.

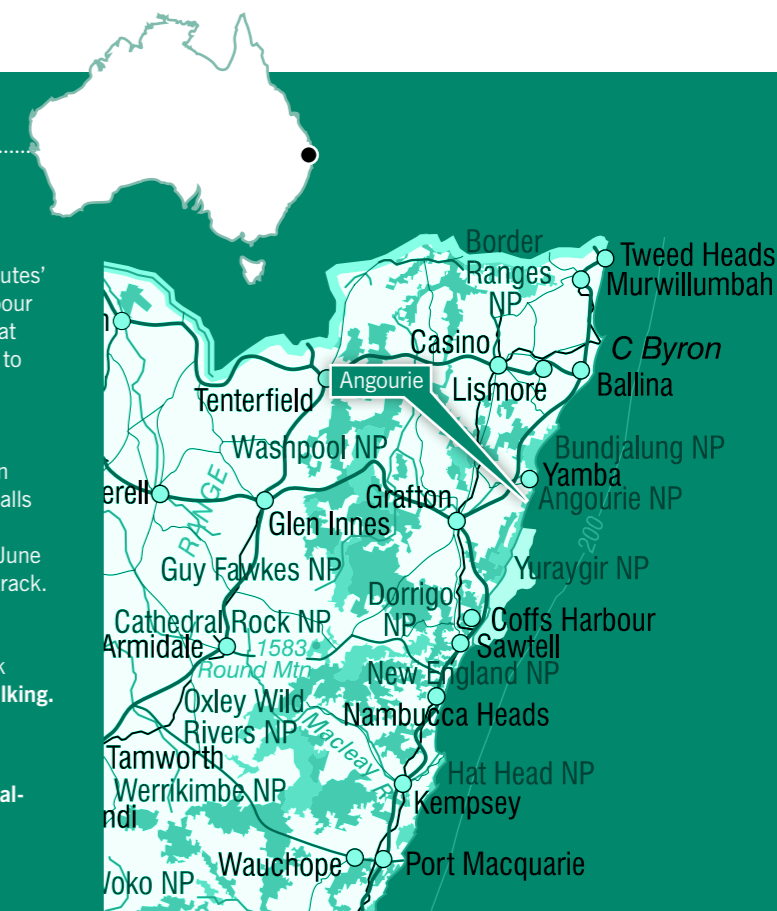
When to go

It's best to avoid the summer months when temperatures can rise into the mid - high 30s celcius. Highest rainfall usually falls between February and April, with lowest rainfall occurring in September. Migratory whales pass along the coast between June and October with plenty of vantage points from the walking track.

More information

NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Yuraygir Coastal Walk
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/NationalParks/parkWalking.aspx?id=N0040#YuraygirCoastalWalk>

Clarence River Tourism
<http://www.clarencetourism.com/about-the-clarence/national-parks/yuraygir/p/58>



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