

Outback Encounters

Small endangered marsupials, fossilised kangaroos and the largest dinosaurs that roamed Gondwanaland are some of the treasures revealed on an Outback Queensland road trip.

WORDS: FIONA HARPER

Descending towards Charleville, Queensland's Outback stretches beneath our wings like a Ben Shearer painting from his Cooper's Creek period. Dirt roads cross the red earth in a mishmash of shortcuts that run hither and thither across paddocks stretching all the way to the horizon.

Out here, on the fringes of the Strzelecki Desert, everything is oversized. Stations like Plevna Downs, which at 112,000 hectares is almost twice the size of Singapore, was the former stomping ground for Australia's largest dinosaurs.

"You don't have a bulbar," observes Monique Johnson from the Cosmos Centre & Observatory after I've picked up a 4WD from Avis at Charleville Airport.

"Do I need one?" I ask innocently.

"I wouldn't recommend you drive before 10am or after 4pm," she says sagely. "That's when kangaroos are most active."

After an intriguing insight into astronomy at the Cosmos Centre, I head westbound on the Natural Sciences Loop and the Warrego Way to find roadkill my relentless companion. As distance markers pass rapidly by, I count corpses to pass the time. On one 10 kilometre stretch, the sum reaches 60 before I give it away. Emus aplenty graze roadside on fresh tufts of grass, the result of recent rain. However, their Coat of Arms brothers don't fare so well. Kangaroo carcasses lay strewn across the asphalt like over-imbibed racegoers after Race 7 on Melbourne Cup Day. Opportunistic vultures rise resentfully as I barrel down the bitumen.

They can afford to be picky, so abundant is the feast.

By the time I encounter my first 54-wheeled triple-trailer road train the Diamantina Development Road has whittled down to little more than a single lane of pock-marked tar in places.

I'm bound for Eromanga, 300 kilometres west of Charleville, whose main claim to fame was once as Australia's furthest town from the sea. That was until Sandy Mackenzie made a discovery that would put Eromanga on the world map, changing his family's lives forever. Not to mention blowing the minds of scientists across the globe. But more on that later.

First, I've a date with three-year-old Sarah, the poster child for the Save the Bilby Fund, newly headquartered at the Charleville Bilby Experience. Bred in captivity and listed as endangered in Queensland and vulnerable nationally, Sarah and her roommate Tonka carry a heavy burden. Their population has been decimated by cats, rabbits and foxes with as few as 500 wild bilbies estimated to remain in Queensland. The scale of feral cat devastation is staggering: every 24 hours 20 million

feral cats kill approximately 75 million native Australian animals. Every single day.

Which is where the Bilby Fence comes in. Camp Bilby takes centre stage in the Currawinya National Park with an electrified predator-proof 25 square kilometre fence erected in 2003 to provide a 'wild' enclosure where bilbies can live and breed in safety. A new and improved bilby enclosure will roll out the red carpet for its big-eared residents in 2018.

Thanks to the tireless work of Frank Manthey and Peter McRae, otherwise known as the Bilby Brothers, the bilby is honoured as the only Australian animal with its own national day (the second Sunday in September is National Bilby Day). You can help the bilby assume its rightful place at Easter by purchasing Fyna Foods' Pink Lady Easter Bilbies, which raised \$46,000 last year for the Save the Bilby Fund. Bilby survival relies on a hot dry climate not dependent upon rain – something the Outback has an abundance of.

The same year the first residents were welcomed to Camp Bilby, not far away a curious 14-year-old Sandy Mackenzie was re-writing history books. While mustering sheep on Plevna Downs, a rock caught Sandy's attention. Later, his parents Robyn and Stuart Mackenzie asked Queensland Museum staff to take a look.

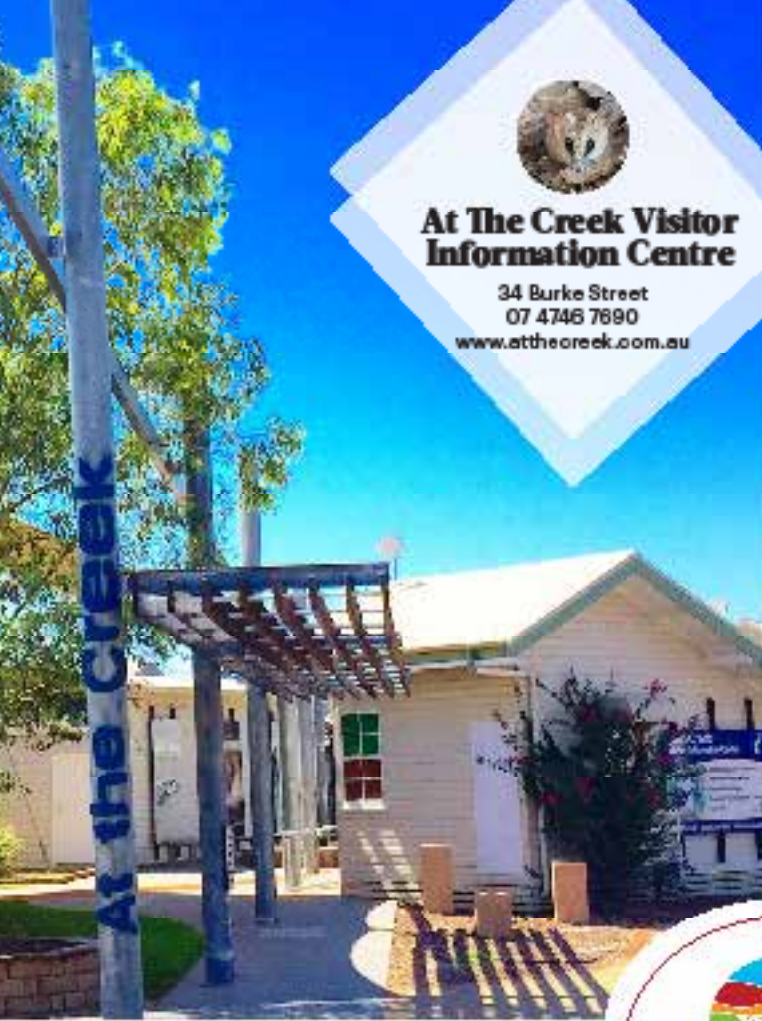
The information that came back was extraordinary: Sandy's 'rock' was identified as a 95 million-year-old fossilised Titanosaur bone — the first of its kind discovered in Australia. Further findings revealed Australia's largest dinosaur, affectionately named Cooper.

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Supported by not-for-profit Outback Gondwana Foundation Ltd and reliant upon funding, the Eromanga Natural History Museum (ENHM) is a working museum that coordinates annual digs on private property west of Eromanga. Travellers can join archaeologists and paleontologist on a rare adventure, participating in a Dinosaur Dig at a working archaeological site.

Robyn Mackenzie is the museum's Operations and Collections Manager. Her eyes twinkle as she recalls the mammoth change of direction life took after Sandy's discovery.

"I knew nothing about running a museum or prepping a dinosaur bone," she says. "There were moments during the six years when I was on my own with Cooper's ulna and thinking, 'I'm not qualified to do this!'" ▶



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With no formal training in archaeology, Robyn was mentored by technical experts from Queensland Museum (QM). Though even QM staff have been on a steep learning curve, having never worked on anything as large as Cooper before. There are now 70 dinosaur and megafauna sites coughing up their secrets. Like 100,000-year-old fossils from three-metre tall Procoptodon goliah, the forerunner to today's kangaroo, which provide important post-dinosaur extinction data.

"No-one could ever have predicted how our lives would change. Can you imagine the most random thing that could possibly happen, something that would take you down an unknown path? This is quite a rare opportunity that we were given. When we found those first pieces we were so excited!" says Robyn. "These discoveries are of international significance. We're seriously beginning to rewrite the history books on Australian dinosaur heritage."

Establishing the foundation, then the museum, which opened in 2017, followed by boutique Cooper's Country Lodge, has been a rewarding challenge. Though Robyn and Stuart still run their grazing property, Cooper and his ilk dominate their lives.

"One day, Stuart and I were walking down to the shed lab, when I said I want to dedicate the rest of my life to this project," Robyn reveals. She says that it felt like someone had handed

TOP TO BOTTOM, BELOW: DINOSAURS STILL WALK THE LAND AT EROMANGA NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM (ENHM); MEETING BILBIES IS PART OF THE CHARLEVILLE BILBY EXPERIENCE
 RIGHT: ADMIRING A MASSIVE DINOSAUR FOOT AT ENHM



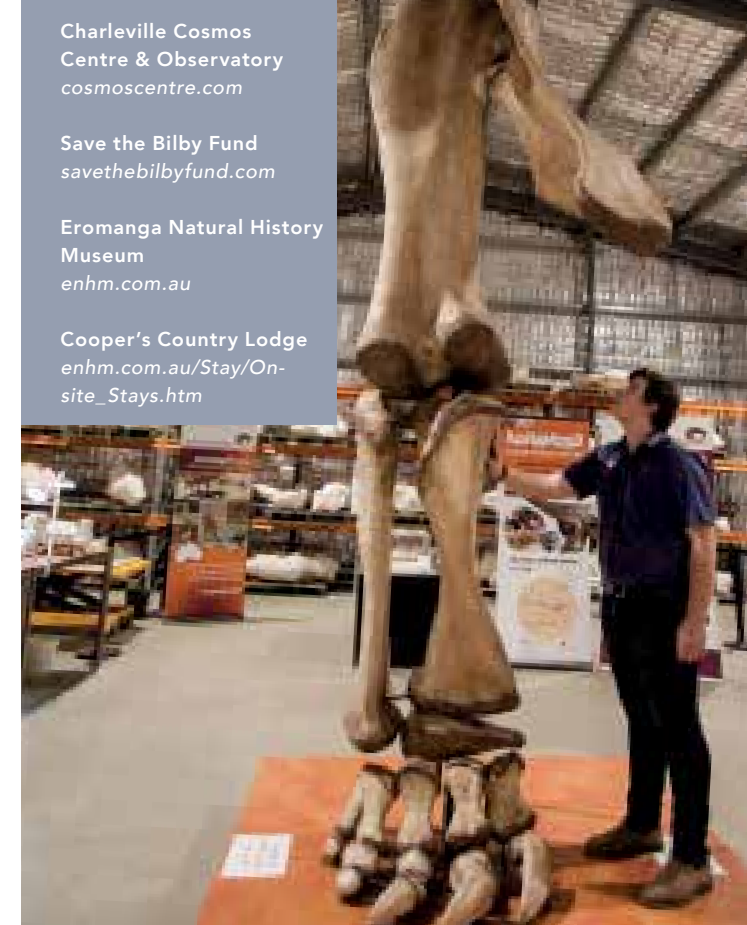
FACT FILE

Charleville Cosmos Centre & Observatory
cosmoscentre.com

Save the Bilby Fund
savethebilbyfund.com

Eromanga Natural History Museum
enhm.com.au

Cooper's Country Lodge
enhm.com.au/Stay/On-site_Stays.htm



her a really important package, the only one of its kind in the world, that needed to be preserved, protected and treasured.

Fourteen years later does she still feel that way?

Yes, she does. Despite the frustrations that come with being reliant upon funding, Robyn relishes the challenge. She's like a feisty, protective dog with a bone who understands when to stand firm and when to roll over. In this case the bones in her keeping are of an unfathomable age and are revered for the stories they are revealing.

With the latest exhibit ready to join the Holotype collection, it takes four museum staff to delicately move one half of Cooper's 95 million-year-old pelvis into place. It's about the size of a car bonnet. As its protective sheath is removed by those who have spent years prepping the fossil, the emotion in the room is palpable. Cooper lives on.

So too do Procoptodon goliah descendants, despite their propensity to stray too close to moving vehicles. **TB**

The writer was a guest of the Outback Queensland Tourism Association and Rex Airlines.

2018 NPA Cultural Festival

Keep the Flame of Culture Burning

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Careers Expo

Performances

Arts Exhibition

Fireworks

Arts and Crafts

Cultural Workshops

Float Parade

Kids Activities



Guest Appearance Christine Anu

Top 4 places to spot a dinosaur in Outback Queensland

Got a roaring interest for pre-historic animals? Love to learn about the ancient land they used to roam?

Then step foot into Outback Queensland, where your search for dinosaurs will lead you on a trail through the north and south pockets of the outback.

Outback Queensland is home to the Australian Dinosaur Trail, encompassing a triangular trail through the three outback towns of Winton, Richmond and Hughenden.

Along with discoveries in the south-west town of Eromanga, the outback provides plenty of opportunities to sink your claws into fascinating fossil collections.

Pack your bags and set out on the ultimate Jurassic adventure through these outback towns:

Winton

Start your dig for dinos with a visit to the Australian Age of Dinosaurs, where the world's largest collection of Australian dinosaur fossils is displayed in the Collection Room.



Assist with the fossil preparation process in the Dinosaur Laboratory before a trip to the Dinosaur Canyon, where life-size replicas transport you to an ancient world where these animals roamed the land.

Hughenden

Stop by Hughenden and say hi to 'Hughie', the seven-metre tall skeletal Muttaburrasaurus that resides at the Flinders Discovery Centre.



Take a stroll through town to spot more dinosaur sculptures that adorn the streets and public buildings.

Richmond

Switch from ancient land animals to marine reptiles in Richmond, 115km west of Hughenden.



Make Kronosaurus Korner your first stop, where you'll come across Australia's best-preserved dinosaur skeleton among the variety of marine fossils on display.

While here, it's mandatory to snap a picture with the giant blue reptile replica that stands in front of the museum.

Eromanga

Head down south to Eromanga, 1,060km east of Brisbane, where you'll discover Australia's largest dinosaur.



At the ripe old age of 95—98 million-years-old, titanosaur 'Cooper' calls the Eromanga Natural History Museum home.

Explore dinosaur fossils as well as a range of mega and micro fauna that was discovered near Eulo, 330km from Eromanga.

IMAGES COURTESY OF OUTBACK QUEENSLAND TOURISM ASSOCIATION

