

EXPLORING WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Part 1: Kalumburu Monastery, Far North Kimberley

“Western Australia was our dream — to see the wonderful wildflowers and explore the vast state in search of new species of stingless bees.” Les Dollin tells the story of his 1985 journey with Anne — on native bee safari in Western Australia...

THE beautiful nineteenth century Spanish Benedictine monastery of New Norcia near Perth was an unusual place to start a bee safari.

However, New Norcia was the home of Father Seraphim Sanz who had spent most of his working life at Kalumburu, a Benedictine mission for the Aboriginals in the far north Kimberley. He inspired us with so many stories of native bees that I nearly fell off my chair with excitement!

Father Seraphim said the Aboriginals used to speak of two types of bees at Kalumburu known as ‘adawal’ and ‘wuna’ and that there were five nests of adawal in the brick monastery building there. Other nests were in the paperbark trees by the river.

These nests were an important part of the staple diet of the local tribes. The Aboriginals had trained their dogs to sniff out bee nests for them. The whole colony was considered to be one creature in Aboriginal folk lore

and the Aboriginals would eat the whole nest. Once a bee nest had been found in an old human skull. “None deterred, the Aboriginals collected the honey and ate it anyway,” said Father Seraphim.

We headed north through the wonderful wildflowers on the coast. However, stingless bees were nowhere to be found; so we pressed further north into the Hamersley Ranges — iron ore country. The Hamersley Ranges have some of the most beautiful country I have ever seen — with rolling plains of native grasses like fields of wheat, a cobalt blue sky and iron-red soil — a photographer’s delight.

“*While Anne pored over her first WA sample of stingless bees, I spent the afternoon licking my wounds!*”

Here looking up at a date palm by a waterhole we at last saw clouds of native stingless bees around the flowering fronds. Anne said, “Just nip up there and get a sample, Les.”

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Fully extended, our extension ladder just made it to the base of the palm leaves and I had to force my head, body and then the net up through a jungle of incredibly spiky leaves. While Anne pored over her first Western Australian sample of stingless bees, I spent the afternoon licking my wounds!

Gibb River Beef Road which wound eastwards from Derby through the giant, grotesque boab trees. We came across an old abandoned police station where we found our first Western Australian stingless bee nest in the old stone wall. We would have liked to photograph the internal structures of this nest as it

was a species which we had not recorded before. However, they were nesting inside an historic building. So we just took a small sample of workers and left the bees to continue to guard the old police station.

Onward we went, turning onto an even more remote track which meandered northwards through forests of palm trees to Kalumburu. At Drysdale station as we stopped to buy fuel, I noticed native bees flying around the pump. So when we camped that evening by the Drysdale River we put up a special trap for flying insects, lent to

us by the Macleay Museum, Sydney University.

The next morning we were disappointed to find only a few tiny speck-like insects in our jar. However, we were later told by the museum that our catch included a new genus of wasp! What a find! Maybe we should have specialised in wasps.

AT LAST after a journey of four weeks and nearly 6,000 km we rolled into Kalumburu. This Catholic Mission for the Aboriginals was first established in 1908 and the monastery buildings at Kalumburu were constructed in the 1930s. So this remote area is of great historic interest. During World War II a RAAF base was established near the mission buildings. In 1943 a Japanese bombing raid completely missed the military establishment but sadly destroyed some mission buildings, killing Father Thomas Gil, an Aboriginal woman and two boys.

We presented our letter of introduction from Father Seraphim of New Norcia to Father McPhie and Father Saunders of the Kalumburu Monastery. Sure enough we soon found two nests right at the front of the monastery building with the

bees' little heads peering out at us from their little tunnel entrances. The excitement grew.

We were now at the beautiful mission Father Seraphim had told us about, surrounded by history and evidence of native bees. We discovered later that these small stingless bees belonged to a species called *Trigona mellipes* which had been lost for one hundred years. These bees look much like *T. carbonaria* bees of the eastern states but their nests are irregular and tiny (about the size of a man's fist) and they build a small entrance tunnel. The full story of *Trigona mellipes* will be featured in a future issue of *Aussie Bee Bulletin*.

However, being on the road for so long living on canned food and dry biscuits does have its effects. With all my senses sharpened for the hunt, I smelt the aroma of freshly baked bread. So leaving the "find of the century" I followed the scent around the monastery building and found a nun working in a wonderful old bakehouse. She was baking huge loaves of bread with the consistency of a cake and about 60 cm long. Anne has known me to return from a "bee hunt" with some strange things but never before with


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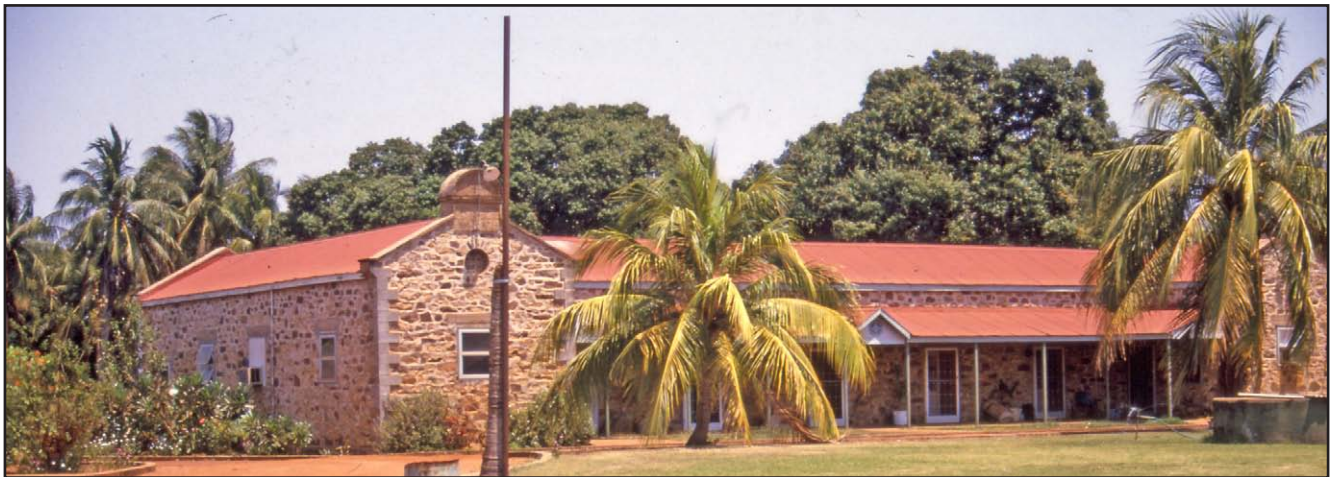
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a fresh loaf of bread!

Kalumburu had been all that Father Seraphim had promised. Yet, our journey was far from over. Hundreds more kilometres of corrugated road and many new opportunities still awaited us as we continued our native bee safari through the Kimberley and eastwards into the Northern Territory.

 In Issue 4 of *Aussie Bee Bulletin*, join us as we continue our journey, discovering an early Aboriginal hunting ground where native bees were owned and "farmed" by Aboriginal tribesmen.



The beautiful old Benedictine monastery built at Kalumburu on the far north coast of the Kimberley, WA, home to the Catholic priests serving this remote Aboriginal community and several *Trigona mellipes* nests.

Visit the Aussie Bee Website Facebook Page to see more photos of this safari.

Click on the album called 'On Native Bee Safari - WA part 1':

www.facebook.com/aussiebeewebsite?sk=photos

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