

Expeditions

ETHABUKA and GAP HOLE

Bush Science in Action

Once again Outback Travel Australia helped two senior archaeologists make a highly significant discovery in the Outback. We and Land Rover were delighted to set up this archaeological expedition and we felt privileged to be present when such an important historic find was made. The team also visited a Sydney University research group, studying marsupials in this remote area.

"Where's June?" someone asked.

"She was clambering over the rocks back at the western end of the gorge," said Mike. "Maybe she's discovered something."

The 'June' in question is Dr June Ross, an archaeologist with the University of New England whose speciality is ancient Aboriginal art. 'Mike' is Dr Mike Smith, senior archaeologist at the National Museum in Canberra. Our little party was camped at the edge of Gap Hole in the Toomba Range, close to the Queensland-Northern Territory border.

As we walked back to June's last noted position we spotted her standing in front of what seemed to be a flat section of unremarkable rock. Compared with the extensively carved slabs around it this rock face seemed singularly undecorated.

"Do you see it?" she asked, barely able to contain her excitement.



"See what?" we chorused, squinting as one into the glare of the setting sun behind the gorge wall.

"An archaic face," June pointed. "I've found something quite extraordinary!"

By moving around, so the reflected sunlight fell obliquely across the rock slab we could just make out fine depressions in the stone. June, who knew exactly what she was looking at, pointed out the features of this ancient carving.

"You see the eyes here," she said. "And this oval is the mouth; and you can see these long head decorations..."

As she talked, the face became recognisable at last, but how had she spotted it? Clearly, June was interested in why such an ideal flat slab face appeared to have no decoration on it, when all the surrounding rocks were liberally incised with concentric circles, animal shapes and symbols. These more recent carvings showed up as contrasting lines on old surfaces, but the archaic face June had found was sufficiently old for the carved portions to have weathered almost to obscurity.

So how archaic is it, we wondered.

"Difficult to date accurately, without specific testing of this site, but similar carvings are estimated to be around 25,000 years old." said June.

We know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but June's discovery was no Michelangelo-style heroic sculpture. Cut into the hard rock was a dial that only another archaic face (or an archaeologist) could love. June recorded it like this:

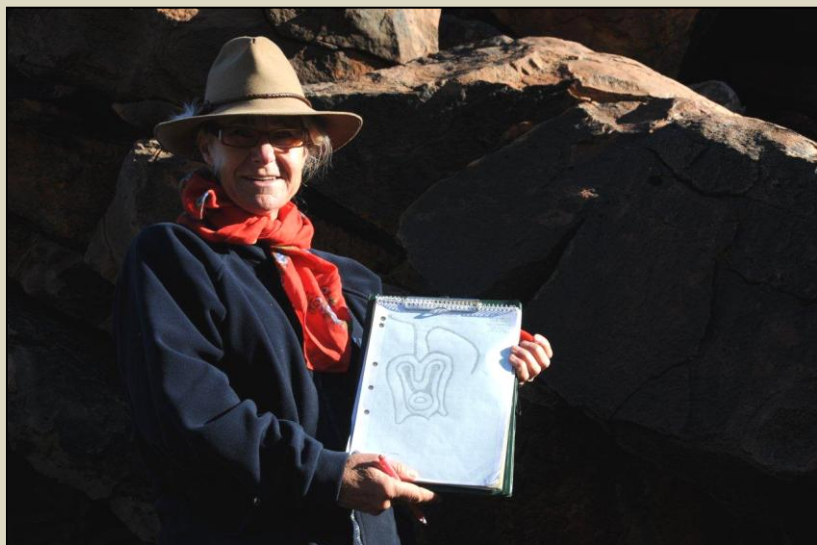
"Its features include a full-frontal perspective; pit eyes enclosed by an outline; a circular mouth area with an expressionless, oval shaped mouth ; a heart-shaped head; a nose incorporated in the outline; antennae-like head appendages and intaglio areas forming bas relief .

By moving around, so the reflected sunlight fell obliquely across the rock slab we could just make out fine depressions in the stone.



“The size of this engraving falls within the average range for other known archaic faces - 420 mm high and 270 mm wide, including antennae.

“Each archaic face recorded to date includes some unique features: in this case an outline that forms a jowl or hair-line around the chin region of the face.”



Another archaic face was found in this region by Mike Morwood, in the late 1970s at Carbine Creek, northeast of the Toomba Range, near the township of Dajarra. Although simpler in form than June's 'find', the Carbine Creek archaic face shares some characteristic features, indicating that the Gap Hole find is not an isolated occurrence, nor are these aberrant examples of 'archaic faces'.

The big questions that arise from this latest find are: who did the carving and for what purpose?

Dr June Ross told us that this discovery and the one at nearby Carbine Creek have complicated the archaic face picture somewhat:

“Earlier archaic face discoveries suggested that they marked out zones of travel in the western areas of Australia's vast arid zone, but archaic faces at the eastern extremity indicate shared aspects of a common visual vocabulary spanning the entire breadth of the arid zone – more than 2000 kilometres – and across what today are marked cultural blocs.

“Another striking factor is that many of the archaic faces we know of occur on or near the Tropic of Capricorn (the Calvert Ranges, Durba Hills, Cleland Hills and Toomba Range), or north of the Tropic (the Dampier Archipelago, and at Jalijbang and Carbine Creek), suggesting a territory limited by the monsoon rainfall zone of the desert.”

Gap Hole's creek-fed rock waterhole is said to provide reliable water in all but the driest times, but when we visited it was completely dry.



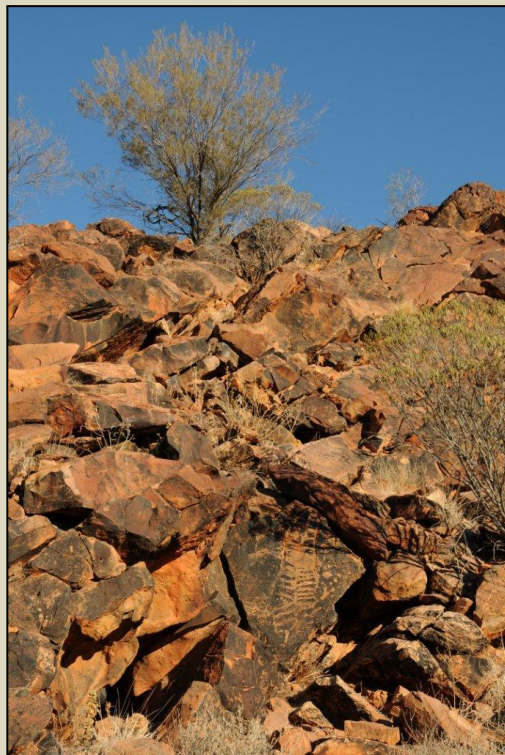
The deeply scoured creek channel cuts a prominent gap through low sandstone and quartzite ridges, making Gap Hole visible from a long way off.

The rock art at Gap Hole is dominated by dozens of engravings on both sides of the gorge entrance, with smaller clusters of motifs along both sides of the creek bed. Concentric circles are the predominant shapes and while many are weathered and obviously very old, others have been reworked several times, up to the recent past.

Older motifs include small carvings of quadrupeds, lizards and panels of pecked pits, but variants of circles, arcs, carvings of tracks, meandering lines, ferns and grids are the more common recent engravings.

There is a rocky outcrop on the eastern approach to Gap Hole that is also extensively carved. Most of the engravings are on the eastern face, suggesting that this might have been a preparatory site for initiates, or a camp for those not involved in the rites, hidden from the main sites at Gap Hole. There are signs of semi-permanent water on this side of the outcrop.

The other rock engravings at Gap Hole certainly looked a lot more recent, or at least had been refreshed over the years. We've been to many Aboriginal rock art sites, but we've never seen such a concentration of engravings as the ones at Gap Hole.



Unfortunately, they'll remain hidden from public view for the foreseeable future, because it's unlikely that the property owners - Bush Heritage - will encourage tourism at the site. We were there with senior scientists and didn't exactly score the red-carpet treatment.

Bush Heritage is a national non-profit organisation that aims to protect some of Australia's unique animals and plants and their habitats, by acquiring and managing land of outstanding conservation value, or by working in partnership with other landowners.

When we arrived at Craven's Peak, after visiting Gap Hole, management was in its early days and the 'conservation' theme was being pursued to the letter. We had to camp in the debris at the back of the farm sheds, rather than in a paddock or on the shallow dunes adjacent to the homestead.

Bush Heritage properties lock out all but scientific visitors, but when they were in private hands there was no 4x4 access either. Hopefully, when experience-based management has been established some access will be available for limited, controlled visitation.

Marsupial Research

En route to Gap Hole our little convoy stopped overnight close by a Sydney University research camp on Ethabuka Station. This group was headed by Professor Chris Dickman and Dr Glenda Wardle, with research assistants Bobby Tamayo and Aaron Greenville.



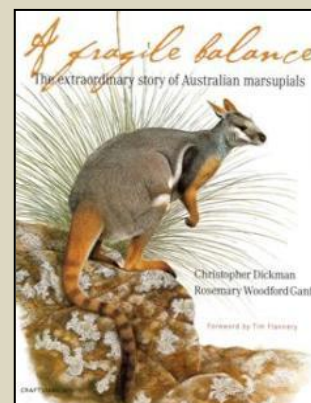
Chris Dickman is Professor in Terrestrial Ecology and Director of the Institute of Wildlife Research at the School of Biological Sciences, Sydney University, has won the prestigious Whitley Medal for his book '*A fragile balance: the extraordinary story of Australian marsupials.*'



Professor Chris Dickman has led research projects at Bush Heritage reserves Ethabuka and Craven's Peak for more than 20 years. The projects look at the effects of rainfall and fire on the diversity and abundance on mammals and reptiles in the spinifex grasslands in the Simpson Desert. One of the more recent projects looked at the effect of cattle on small mammals and reptiles, in the hope of improving management of cattle grazing on off-reserve areas.

We joined the research team on an early morning patrol of their overnight 'traps' that catch small marsupials. Each tiny animal was checked over and given a tiny ear or toe 'clip' to identify it if appears in a trap again. The team is establishing behaviour patterns for marsupials against predatorial and climatic conditions.

The senior academics were backed by a crew of graduate and undergraduate students, who seemed to be enjoying their time away from the halls of academia in busy Sydney.



Abudda Lakes

Our dune valley trek from Ethabuka Station to Craven's Peak Station ran past a totally unexpected mini-oasis in this arid country.



Ethabuka Spring explains the location of the nearby homestead, close to a perpetual water source that was obviously well-known to wandering Aboriginal people, judging by the numerous artefacts lying around, including grindstones and flint knives.

The spring water was piped into a shallow depression when Ethabuka was a cattle property and this pond is now the domain of wildlife. Noisy, squabbling finches warned us away as we approached and wading tracks in the mud showed that larger birds drop in as well.

Another feature on our topo map suggested a second water source, but Abudda Lakes turned out to be anything but. However, unlike nearly all the claypans we've come across, these dry lake beds were dotted with large stones and many of them bore Aboriginal engravings.

The carvings ranged from single and concentric circles to detailed track lines and pecked pits. Clearly, during wet seasons, there was sufficient water and game in this area to support wandering people.

Water sources and Aboriginal habitation evidence at Ethabuka, Abudda Lakes and Gap Hole mark out an historic desert route on the western edge of the Northern Simpson.



Land Rovers Aid Discovery

Our three-vehicle exploration convoy for what became the Archaic Face Discovery Expedition consisted of my hard-worked, long-serving Discovery 3 and press vehicles provided by Land Rover Australia: a Defender and a Range Rover Sport.

The two archaeologists started the trip in the Rangie, with some of their bulky gear stowed in the Defender, but after a few days they 'moved house' completely to the Defender.

"We love the car-like feel of the Range Rover," Mike Smith told me. "But June and I just can't come to grips with the comfort levels – it doesn't feel like a 'real' off-roader.

"We've become used to 'square-rigged' 4x4s over many years of bush travel and the Defender is more our scene!"



Our accompanying video crew, Robyne and Stan Gruzlewski, had no such hang-ups and gladly swapped from the undoubtedly capable, but somewhat agricultural, Defender to the more refined Rangie Sport.

All three Land Rover vehicles handled the demands of this sometimes trackless desert trek with ease. Conditions ranged from fast gravel roads between Bedourie and Etheabuka, and from Craven's Peak to Glenormiston, to sandy dune valleys, trackless grassland and steep nine-metre-high dune climbs between Gap Hole and Craven's Peak.

