

WA: SOUTHERN CROSS

Wet, wild, wonderful

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD finds treasures galore on display in the Goldfields

We leave just after 7am, head east, stop for pies at Bakers Hill and, at noon, roll into Southern Cross.

It's a bit like landing on the Moon — in a good way.

Southern Cross is as different from the metro area as you can get in a morning's drive — 370km from Perth down Great Eastern Highway, and you know you are somewhere completely different.

And it is a good moment to be here. The wildflower season in WA starts in the Pilbara, moves south, and has been surging through this latitude of the Goldfields and Wheatbelt. There are patches of yellow, orange, pink, white and blue wildflowers, from pompoms to leschenaultia — and cottage garden scenes where they are all prettily arranged together.

SOUTH TO MARVEL LOCH

A gravel road first takes us south to Marvel Loch for a quick look round. It was here at midday on "Friday the thirteenth" of November, 1914, that mine workers Frank Mazza, Michael O'Brien and P. Gorey fell into a shaft more than 60m deep. Their knocking was heard at 6pm and rescuers reckoned they were above the water line and had enough air



A classic Goldfields woodlands sunset. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield



A pretty-in-pink moment.



A splash of red lights the bush.



A fine way to experience 'the blues'.

to last a week. Fifty volunteers worked shifts to rescue them. By the Sunday they had dug 15m underground, and by Monday the three men had signalled they were all right. On Tuesday, the rescuers broke through to the cavern the men were trapped in and passed food and cigarettes.

Gorey had been killed instantly by the fall, and Mazza had pulled O'Brien from the rubble. They were rescued at 10pm that night and Frank

Mazza was awarded a Royal Humane Society of Australasia medal for bravery.

NORTH TO BULLFINCH

After driving back up to Southern Cross, we head on north the 36km to Bullfinch and on to the Mount Jackson Road. It all starts feeling even more "away from it all". Just 25km north of the town, the unsealed road has Lake Deborah West to the north and east, and Lake Baladjie to the south and west. It's a treat to be between these big salt lakes, and step out of the vehicle into the warm afternoon air. I feel both "way out there" and in the middle of it all.

Just 3km, and there's a left turn into Baladjie Lake Nature Reserve. It's only 3.30pm — the city seems even further behind. And along the 21km track through the reserve we come to the wildflowers we'd been hoping to see.

The warm afternoon reminds me that summer is knocking on the door and soon it will be hot out here, and that this is the moment to be here, on a red, sandy track, with the woodlands painted by last light, among the flowers, just as the flies are starting to get friendly (bring a hat with a net).

There's a movement and a young echidna scuffles towards bushes, curling as we approach, and freezing as we leave him alone.

People camp through here, on the flat, sandy land, in pretty spots.

We walk the lake edge to find a mulch of beetles dead in the tide line, a centipede corpse the

same colour as the wheat ear next to it, and emu footprints so deep and heavily embedded that you can see the pattern of the skin on the soles of their feet. They look for all the world like the dinosaur prints they pretty much are.

ON TO BALADJIE ROCK

Baladjie Rock is on the southern edge of the Baladjie salt lake, on an unsealed track off the Koorda Bullfinch Road, and with plenty of spots for camping, camper trailers and caravans.

And Baladjie Rock is a treat. A real treat. This is a big granite outcrop, sculpted by the elements, pockmarked with caves, with overhangs and fractures, peppered with ponds, fringed with sheoaks and alive with birds. It is a natural sculpture garden, with clean, smooth caves, overhangs that silhouette against the sky like portraits, with stripes down wave faces, from where the rainwater has run.

One cave looks like a small-bird butchery. There are bits of white-cheeked honeyeater and parrot-phenalia.

The word Baladjie is of Aboriginal origin but the meaning listed as unknown, though I do reflect upon the fact that in an indigenous dialect of the central Wheatbelt, the word "badjal" describes feathers being thrown around when a bird is plucked.

Friday was warm, last Saturday cool, and in the mid afternoon the first real drops of rain fell. We walked, happy to be wetted, on the rock, and then sat in a cave as it grew heavier.



Some of the distinctive shapes and stripes of Baladjie Rock.

See the full picture gallery at sevenwesttravelclub.com.au.