

Opening the heart  
of the **Gascoyne** and **Murchison**

More people are discovering the natural wonders and history of the Gascoyne and Murchison, thanks to the development of three self-drive trails. The Gascoyne Murchison

Outback Pathways traverse existing roads and are complemented by an extensive series of interpretive signage and a guidebook. The trails stretch from Geraldton in the west to Sandstone in the east and north to Exmouth.



Together, the three outback pathways—the Wool Wagon Pathway, the Miners Pathway and the Kingsford Smith Mail Run—traverse sweeping plains, stunning ranges, towering mounts, riverbeds, creeks and streams. They take visitors past ghost towns, heritage trails and areas of incredible natural beauty. But, more than all of this, the outback pathways open visitors' eyes to the wonders of the ancient landscape.

Instead of simply speeding by in a car, visitors are encouraged to stop and read the interpretive signs to discover

more about the area in which they are travelling. They may be driving over an ancient seabed, where fossilised sea shells imprisoned in the rocks provide clues to other ages. Or maybe they're following an old stock track, once frequented by Afghan teamsters and their camels, or by Aboriginal drovers with flocks of sheep. Perhaps they're at the desolate remains of a former gold rush centre, rusty machinery and aging artefacts the only clues of a once-bustling township. Or maybe they are at a site of Aboriginal significance—the subject of Dreamtime tales.



### Project beginnings

The Gascoyne Murchison Outback Pathways project arose from the sweeping goals of the Gascoyne Murchison Strategy, which was aimed at improving the economic, environmental and social fabric of the region. It worked to improve opportunities for a dwindling population of Gascoyne and Murchison residents, many of whom were struggling to stay financially afloat due to the perils of drought and the difficulties of maintaining profitable station leases. Tourism was deemed a key to this aim. Tourism could encourage economic development and structural change in the region while at the same time supporting sustainable land use and thus helping to protect the environment.

And so the idea for the pathways was born. Self-drive trails were considered a way to link regional centres and existing tourism products. They would not only help to lure people through the region, but encourage them to stay longer. This, in turn, would encourage the development of further tourism product, bringing even more visitors and resulting in an upward spiral of economic growth.

### Wool Wagon Pathway

The Wool Wagon Pathway begins in Geraldton and travels east to Yalgoo and north via the Murchison Settlement and Gascoyne Junction to Exmouth. It focuses on the pastoral industry and its pioneers, who settled the area more than a century ago.

After Geraldton, the first town one encounters on the Wool Wagon Pathway is Mullewa, one of the first townships to develop in the Murchison. This once-thriving settlement arose as

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**Main** Carnarvon-Mullewa Road, near the Murchison Wool Wagon pathway.

*Photo – David Bettini*

**Inset** London Bridge has long been a favoured picnic spot in Sandstone. Today it also features interpretive Outback Pathways signage.

**Left** A four-wheel-drive is dwarfed by a soaring cliff face in Kennedy Range National Park.

*Photos – Samille Mitchell*



**Top** Wildflowers adorn a Murchison roadside near Mullewa.

**Above** The Yalgoo Chapel is one of the many attractive buildings designed by Monsignor Hawes.

*Photos – Samille Mitchell*

a stop-off point for early pastoralists travelling from the inland Murchison to the port in Geraldton. These pastoralists would load their bales of wool and journey with donkey, horse, bullock or camel on dusty outback highways to Mullewa. Today, visitors to the region will find a much quieter rural township, renowned for its Indigenous culture and spectacular spring displays of wildflowers. Mullewa is also the former home of Reverend Monsignor Hawes, a remarkable man known for designing architectural gems across the Mid West in the early 1900s.

Continuing along the Wool Wagon Pathway, visitors will find the tiny settlement of Pindar. In its heyday, Pindar was the crossroads for the railway line—which travelled east to Cue and Meekatharra and west to Geraldton—and the trail extending north into the heart of the Murchison. Today, however, only a few heritage-listed buildings remain.



From Pindar, Outback Pathways travellers can head east to Yalgoo to the start of the Miners Pathway or north to the Murchison Settlement on the Wool Wagon Pathway. The Murchison Settlement is a tiny outback post renowned as the only shire in the country without a single township. But that is no wonder when you consider that just 150 people in 69 dwellings are spread throughout the 43,800-square-kilometre shire.

Continuing the journey north, travellers will pass two areas of natural beauty that are complemented by outback pathway interpretive signage. Errabiddy Bluff soars high above the surrounding plains. Its name is derived from the odd-looking rocks along its ridge: Errabiddy means 'mouth of bucked teeth' in the Indigenous language of the area. Bilung Pool is also of Aboriginal significance, and was an important meeting and camping

place for early Indigenous people. Its towering gums, small waterfall and pool make it a beautiful picnic spot today.

The next township on the Wool Wagon Pathway is Gascoyne Junction, well-known for its dinky-di Aussie pub. From here, travellers can join up with the Kingsford Smith Mail Run, heading east to Meekatharra or west to Carnarvon.

Pressing north along the Wool Wagon Pathway, travellers will find the magnificent Kennedy Range National Park, about 30 kilometres from Gascoyne Junction. Over the millennia, the natural forces of winds, rains and movement in the Earth's crust have combined to etch out valleys and push up a spectacular cliff face soaring up to 100 metres high. Today, the ancient landform stretches up to 25 kilometres wide and covers 75 kilometres in a north-south direction. Yet, 250 million years ago, the area was home to an



**Left** Peace Gorge in Meekatharra is a popular place to watch the sunset.

**Centre left** Yarding cattle at Bidgemia Station in the Gascoyne.

**Below** Meekatharra's wide main street greets travellers along the Outback Pathways.

*Photos – Samille Mitchell*

ancient seabed—one can still see life forms from another age imprisoned as fossils in the rocks here.

Many of the canyons of Kennedy Range are home to freshwater streams after rain, which pool to provide waterholes in the otherwise dry, inhospitable landscape. These pools must have been important water sources for the Indigenous people who inhabited the land from 20,000 years ago. It is believed that the Maia tribe inhabited land to the west of the range, while the Malgaru people inhabited land to the east. The range is home to about 100 sites of Aboriginal significance, including archaeological sites, ceremonial sites and sites of mythological importance. Indeed, the range plays an important part in the mythological history of the region. Indigenous people believe the Kennedy Range is inhabited and guarded by spirit beings such as the little people or big tall men and the rainbow serpent who occupies permanent springs and waterholes.



**Above** Rural scenes reflected at the old Big Bell townsite near Cue.

*Photo – Samille Mitchell*

Pressing still further north, through isolated station properties, travellers will eventually encounter Exmouth—gateway to the dazzling coral gardens of the Ningaloo Reef—on the coast.

### Miners Pathway

The Miners Pathway covers the Murchison townships of Yalgoo, Mount Magnet, Cue, Meekatharra, Sandstone and Paynes Find in a figure-of-eight journey through the region. It explores the legacy of the remarkable gold rush period and the booms and busts these towns have since experienced. The starting point of Yalgoo is just one of many examples of the waxing and waning fortunes of Murchison townships. This now-sleepy outback post was once a thriving settlement, complete with dozens of shops and businesses, several pubs and hundreds of residents. Outback pathways travellers can gain an insight into these heady days of the past with many of the charming heritage buildings still standing in Yalgoo today.

The story is similar in Cue, Mount Magnet, Sandstone, Meekatharra and Paynes Find—each having boomed and then declined, yet still clung to existence and transformed with the times. Some are now experiencing another mineral boom. Other towns born in the gold rush era were not so lucky. Outback Pathways interpretive signage at places like Lennonville tell of formerly bustling townships—places where only crumbling stone walls and forgotten artefacts remain today.

Cue is particularly fascinating, boasting an excellent line-up of historic buildings and nearby ghost towns, such as Day Dawn and Big Bell. It's interesting to read the interpretive signs at these places and wonder about the trials and tribulations of the lives once lived here.

The Miners Pathway also traverses a geologically fascinating region. It boasts some of the oldest rocks in the world. In fact, recent advances in rock-dating technology have revealed that greenstone rocks found in the Murchison are from 2.7 billion to more than 3.0 billion years old. Some rocks at Mount Narryer and in the Jack Hills, north-west of Meekatharra, contain grains of the mineral zircon that are more than 4.3 billion years old. These are the oldest mineral grains to have ever been found and are helping scientists to understand how planet Earth formed.

It may seem strange but this ancient, seemingly inhospitable earth is also home to the most delicate-looking wildflowers. In fact, the entire Outback Pathways region, particularly in the Murchison, periodically bursts into colour. In late winter and spring the normally red and gold landscape erupts into a dazzling sea of colour as the annual wildflower show commences. This year is shaping up to be particularly spectacular, thanks to early winter rains.

### Kingsford Smith Mail Run

The Kingsford Smith Mail Run, from Carnarvon to Meekatharra, follows

the tracks that Charles Kingsford Smith would have driven when he pioneered motor transport in the Gascoyne. Smithy, as he was known, arrived in 1924 fresh from a stint as a pilot for Australia's first commercial airline. He and his mate Keith Anderson bought a truck and set up a business as the Gascoyne Transport Company. One of the contracts he picked up was the mail run from Carnarvon to the Bangemall goldfields near Mount Augustus.

The trail begins on the coast in Carnarvon and heads east into an ancient inland landscape that was once home to an ocean. One interpretive sign along the trail tells of the weird and wonderful ocean creatures that once inhabited this now-dry landscape. If you fossick around here, you can even find fossils from this other age, imprisoned in the rocks.

The next town encountered is Gascoyne Junction—also the junction to the Wool Wagon Pathway. Nearby, you'll also find the mighty Gascoyne River. This river charges through the Gascoyne in times of flood and dries up almost totally during the dry summer months. Interpretive signage along the way tells of the important role this river and other water sources played in European and Aboriginal history, and its importance to local wildlife. It was named by early explorer George Grey on his treacherous journey of 1837.



**Left** The brooding beauty of Mount Augustus National Park.  
*Photo – Samille Mitchell*



**Below left** Yinnetharra Crossing, Gascoyne River.  
*Photo – David Bettini*

around the base of Mount Augustus. However, the artworks are very ancient and are thought to be pre-Dreamtime, so their meaning has been lost to time.

Nearby, Outback Pathways travellers will also find the cool, shady waters of Cattle Pool. This gum-lined riverway is rich in birdlife. In fact, birdlife is a big drawcard to visitors at many of the waterholes across the Gascoyne and Murchison. At least 279 bird species are known from the Carnarvon Basin alone. Of these, 162 species breed in the area. Just walk along a tree-lined waterway and you'll be enchanted by the symphony of sound. Budgerigars, finches, native pigeons, galahs, parrots, and even pelicans and swans inhabit some of the pools.

Back on the road, travellers will pass the Aboriginal community of Burringurrah, designed to help Indigenous people remain on the land that has nurtured them for millennia. Nearby interpretive signs point to gnamma holes—natural holes in the rocks (often enlarged by Aboriginal people) that contain fresh water. In an otherwise dry landscape, these sources of water were very important to Indigenous people of earlier times.

Continuing on, travellers press deeper into the heart of Western Australia, before eventually arriving in Meekatharra—the launching point to the Miners Pathway and a whole other world of adventure.

The Old Bangemall Inn on Cobra Station, 25 kilometres west of Mount Augustus, was the terminus for Smithy's mail run from Carnarvon. This oasis has provided food and accommodation for outback travellers since 1896 and is currently being revamped to improve its facilities. Bangemall Inn is an excellent base from which to experience the real Australian outback.

Continuing east, travellers will encounter the enormous hulk of Mount Augustus in the national park of the same name. This ancient landform soars 1105 metres above sea level and 715 metres above the surrounding plain. Though it is often referred to as a rock, Mount Augustus is, in fact, a sandstone and quartz massif with the rather unwieldy geological title of an

asymmetrical anticline. This refers to rock layers that were folded into an arch-like structure about 900 million years ago. Erosion of this anticline created the current form of Mount Augustus.

Mount Augustus is also known by the Aboriginal name, Burringurrah. Burringurrah was a boy who escaped the rigours of his tribal initiation, only to face the consequent wrath of his tribesmen, who speared him and clubbed him to death. The Wajarri people say the shape of the mount is the boy lying as he died on his belly with his left leg bent up, beside his body. The rock formations on the west of the rock show his wounds.

Mount Augustus and its surrounds are steeped in both Indigenous and European history. Aboriginal art adorns caves and rock walls at several points

Samille Mitchell is a freelance journalist and photographer specialising in travel and environment topics. She has recently written and photographed a 200-page guidebook on the Outback Pathways published by the Mid West Development Commission. The book is available from good bookshops, tourism information centres or you can order direct online from [www.naturebase.net](http://www.naturebase.net).