



Kangaroo Island, south-west of Adelaide, is the third largest island in Australia.

By Anthony Toole

TEN minutes after leaving the ferry at Penneshaw, we drove off the road onto the rough track that led to our Island Beach chalet, and spotted our

first wallaby, nibbling the sparse grass at the trackside. The chalet itself stood on steel piles above a small, scrub-covered rise, so that from its balcony we could gaze past similar, broadly spread dwellings to the white

sands and intense green waters of Eastern Cove. This was to be our spacious and very comfortable base for the next three days.

Kangaroo Island, to the south-west of Adelaide, is Australia's third largest

island, after Tasmania and Melville Island. It is 150 kilometres long and varies in width from 55 to 90 kilometres. Its population stands at 4500, one-third of which resides in Kingscote, with the rest scattered thinly. Half the land is agricultural. The other half is uncleared wilderness, and half of that is divided among national parks, conservation parks, and wildlife protection areas. Only 340 of the 1600 kilometres of roads on the island are surfaced.

The island was discovered and named by Captain Matthew Flinders, who mapped much of the northern coastline in 1802. Travelling east, he met a French ship captained by Nicolas Baudin, and

despite their countries being at war, they cordially exchanged maps and information. Baudin went on to map the whole of the island, with the result that the names of the bays, capes and headlands reflect both their English and French inspirations.

The slope behind our chalet was wild scrubland, and each evening, a small group of Tamar wallabies gathered there to dine on the vegetation. Elsewhere, we were frequently able to pause in our travels to observe representatives of the subspecies of western grey kangaroo from which the island derives its name.

There are no foxes or rabbits here, so the devastation caused by these non-native animals on the Australian mainland has been avoided, and the native species thrive. However, an unexpected problem has arisen because of the absence of major land predators. Koalas, that were extinct in South Australia, were introduced to Kangaroo Island in the 1920s. Their population has grown to the extent that they have destroyed large areas of the native vegetation that is their main food source.

We made our way west along the Hog Bay Road, pausing only to climb Prospect Hill, which Flinders had climbed with his botanist, Robert Brown, expecting to gauge the extent of the southern part of the island. Instead, he found himself on the neck of a narrow isthmus between what he named as Pennington Bay and Pelican Lagoon, the latter reflecting the abundance of the eponymous birds that are found everywhere here.

Kangaroo Island is an important conservation area, as it contains healthy populations of many birds that are in decline on the mainland.

Among the 250 recorded species are white-bellied sea eagles, wedge-tailed eagles, fairy terns, Pacific gulls, black-faced cormorants, western whip birds and pied oystercatchers.

The Australian pelicans are larger than their American counterparts, but they cannot dive, and are only able to feed on fish swimming near the surface. Beautiful blue fairy-wrens have little fear of humans and can be seen flitting around picnic sites. Endangered Cape Barren geese were introduced in the 1930s and are now thriving. There are also satisfying numbers of ground nesting birds, such as bush stone-curlews, that have benefited from the absence of predators. Numbers of elsewhere endangered species, such as glossy black cockatoos and hooded plovers are steady or even slowly increasing.

The same cannot be said for the little penguins, the smallest in the world. They can be seen near Penneshaw and Kingscote, returning to their burrows in the rocky coastline at dusk, after a day fishing at sea. They are in rapid decline as a result of predation by New Zealand fur seals.

We continued west along a road lined with mallee scrub, made up of eucalypt species on which several tree stems grow directly from the roots, to create a sanctuary for wildlife that, in most places, is virtually impenetrable to humans. The surfaced road took us south into the Flinders Chase National Park and on to Cape de Couedic, which is not quite the southernmost tip of the island. Here, we abandoned the car and followed a wooden boardwalk that descended gently across a limestone pavement, from the grikes of which grew colourful flowers,

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red succulents and thick, woody shrubs. On one of the clints, a heath goanna soaked up the sun. Quite rare on the mainland, this is Kangaroo Island's largest land predator.

The limestone steepened into a cliff, which rested on a broad, sloping expanse of metamorphic slabs across which lay dozens of New Zealand fur seals, many of them suckling their pups. We zig-zagged down steps onto the bedrock, from which we could look through the spectacle of Admiral's Arch.

The rock along this stretch of cliff consisted of aeolianite, in which wind-blown sand had been hardened by calcium carbonate percolating through from the limestone above. Erosion by wind and sea had created this huge archway, from the roof of which hung irregular growths made up of calcified plant roots. The sloping bedrock, on which the seals congregated, dated from the Cambrian period, 500 million years ago.

A short distance from the car park stood the Cape de Couedic lighthouse. Built in 1907, following several ship-

wrecks, this was the third lighthouse on Kangaroo Island. Its situation was so isolated that the building materials were winched up a still visible channel in the cliff face using a device known as a 'flying fox' powered by two horses. Stores for the lighthouse continued to be winched here every three months until an overland track was constructed during the 1930s. The first truck did not arrive until ten years later.

We followed a cliff-top road eastward to the aptly named Remarkable Rocks, a jumble of crazily shaped boulders up

to five metres tall, that were clearly visible from the Cape. They appeared to balance precariously on top of an enormous granite dome. Also laid down volcanically during the Cambrian, they had been fractured and eroded into caves and tunnels by wind and rain over the last 200 million years. Over many of the boulders and the supporting dome were vivid crusts of orange lichens.

The following day, we took the southerly of the two surfaced roads, past Murray Lagoon, the largest lake on the island. Evidence has been found here of Aboriginal

occupation perhaps 2500 years ago, though by the time Europeans arrived, these people had either died out or moved back onto the mainland. A second road led off from this to the visitor centre at Seal Bay, where we joined a guided party down to the beach to observe a colony of Australian sea lions.

Though these animals are about twice the size of the

New Zealand fur seals, their numbers are much lower. It is estimated that the number of fur seals on Kangaroo Island alone is double that of the world population of Australian sea lions.

This was the breeding sea-

son, and several large bulls guarded small groups of females that had recently given birth to pups. The females usually become fertile again for a period of 12-24 hours some 7-10 days after giving birth. Unlike the fur seals, these sea lions can use their flippers for walking and often migrate up to a kilometre inland to shelter from storms. There were many tracks through the dunes, and beside one of these lay the desiccated skeleton of a juvenile humpback whale that had washed ashore during a storm in 1984.

Before returning to our chalet for our last night, we ended our too brief exploration of Kangaroo Island with a visit to Vivonne Bay, a few kilometres to the west of Seal Bay. A strong, hot wind blew the sand about, so we sheltered among the dunes to enjoy a picnic. We then stepped back onto the beach, which curved in an unbroken line for ten kilometres. A small flock of terns rested near the water's edge, as did a couple of Pacific gulls. Apart from these, we had the entire beach to ourselves.

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The aptly named Remarkable Rocks on Kangaroo Island.



Remarkable Rocks' crazily shaped boulders are five metres tall. They were laid down volcanically during the Cambrian Period and have been fracturing and eroding ever since.

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