

# Andrew's AUSTRALIAN ADVENTURE

One of the high points on Mount Bogong.

**Teacher Andrew Hughes recounts the highs and lows of climbing the highest peaks in the eight states and territories, in eight months.**

**A**USTRALIA is the sixth largest country in the world if measured by land area, but only the 52nd by population. This makes us one of the least densely populated countries on Earth. Among the few territories below us on the list are Mongolia, Western Sahara and Greenland.

Outside the major cities, that makes many people think we are an "empty" country. Over the course of 219 days I explored some of this so-called "emptiness" by riding, paddling and walking via the highest mountain in each of the states and territories. The adventure traversed mountain ranges, tropical jungles, vast open plains, sandy deserts and wild seas. Along the way I met Australians from all corners of the country, and although sometimes there were no people and at other times many, I found that nowhere was really empty.

### Wettest place

The north of Australia has a much different climate to the south, just as the coastal areas differ from the vast inland. The highest mountain in Queensland is right up near Cairns poking out of the Atherton Tablelands. It is often covered in clouds that form over the coastal ranges and drop bucket-loads of rain. The small towns of Babinda and Tully compete each year for the Golden Boot Award for the wettest place in Australia. Babinda averages over 4m of rainfall every year. While I was in the area it rained solidly for six days, including the day I climbed the mountain. Leeches love the wet weather and our group of walkers was plucking them off by the minute.

**Activity:** Find out the average annual rainfall for your area and compare it to other places in Australia. Measure it against a wall to see the differences.

### Wild camels

Camels were first brought to Australia to carry supplies through inland Australia before there were roads, trucks and trains. Some of these early descendants decided they didn't fancy lugging heavy loads around the desert and went their own way. The wild camel population is estimated at around one million, with most of these calling the central Australian deserts home. The sheer number of animals mean they are an environmental concern, eating 80 per cent of available plant species and making a mess of water holes. In their search for water they even invade houses and rip up pipelines.



Andrew with a friendly camel in the Northern Territory. Photo by Nicola Pearce.

I started to see a lot of wild camels riding across the remote Great Central Rd from the WA goldfields to the Northern Territory. Sometimes there was just a lonely figure walking down the dirt road towards me, and other times there were herds of two dozen and more. Their huge saucer-shaped footprints could be seen crossing the roads everywhere.

**Question:** Governments are considering ways to reduce the population of camels, can you suggest how best to do this?



Andrew walking in the Katherine Gorge. Photo by Nicola Pearce.

### Lowest of the lows

Riding down the Oodnadatta Track in South Australia, one of the driest and most remote areas in Australia, it was surprising to see lots of tourists. Many were there to visit Lake Eyre (north and south) and take a scenic flight from Marree or William Creek. Lake Eyre had filled with water from rivers far to the north that experienced flooding rains earlier in the year. This unusual event attracted thousands of birds because Lake Eyre is normally bone dry.

**Question:** The water collected in Lake Eyre, which is simply enormous, can't go anywhere because it is the lowest point in Australia. It's a huge inland sink that is actually below sea level. If the water can't run out to the sea, how does Lake Eyre dry up?



The Oodnadatta Track in South Australia.

### Animals galore

Probably the best thing about riding a bike is that it's slow and quiet compared to driving a car. It gave me a chance to see animals as big as bold red kangaroos and as small as softly camouflaged geckos. Lizards along the road were especially common where



Andrew's bike in the Great Sandy Desert.

they came out to warm up under the sun. My favourite lizard was a bearded dragon I helped from the middle of the road (unfortunately lots get squashed because we don't see them) in NSW.



Bearded dragon.

**Question:** What types of lizards might you find in your school or backyard, and how can we make sure they can live there safely?



Andrew walking through the wettest part of Australia while climbing Mt Bartle Frere. Photo by Tim Trehearn.

### Highest mountains

Modern surveying techniques mean we know accurately how high mountains are. Reaching the loftiest one in each state and territory was a way to guide me around the country (I didn't climb the highest SA mountain because access is restricted. The substitute was St Mary's Peak in the Flinders Ranges).

**Activity:** Can you match the mountains to their homes from the list below?

- Mt Zeil** ..... VIC
- Mt Bogong** ..... ACT
- Mt Woodroffe** ..... WA
- Mt Ossa** ..... NT
- Mt Meharry** ..... SA
- Mt Kosciusko** ..... QLD
- Mt Bartle Frere** ..... NSW
- Mt Bimberi** ..... TAS

On a blank map of Australia mark these mountains with a cross and guess which order I climbed them, starting from Hobart.