



CAPE YORK WILDERNESS

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Part 1: In Search of the Miniature Bee, *Trigona clypearis*

OUR blue Landcruiser bedecked with shaving cream, paper streamers, old boots and tins after a country church wedding, we set off for the top of Australia – Cape York Peninsula.

The gear we had packed for our honeymoon included some unusual items: an extension ladder for examining nests high in trees, a microscope and a cylinder full of liquid nitrogen (boiling away at minus 195°C underneath our bed in the Landcruiser) for storing frozen bee samples -- for in addition to a sunny honeymoon holiday exploring the wilderness of Cape York, we were on a Native Bee Safari.

Leaving civilisation behind at Cairns, we ventured up the Peninsula Developmental Road. This further deteriorated into a deeply corrugated track which wound along the route of the telegraph line, between giant termite mounds and across innumerable rivers up to the little Aboriginal town of Bamaga on Cape York. "The Entrance to HELL -- get back if you can", proclaimed an encouraging handwritten sign as we headed off into the wilderness!

River crossings of all manner and form punctuated our journey -- with axle-deep mud, decaying log bridges (the odd log missing here and there to add to the challenge), deep sand or fast flowing



water to keep you entertained. It was a classic four wheel drive adventure. The ultimate challenge, however, was the crossing of the Jardine River.

Even in the dry season, the Jardine River, just 35 km south of Bamaga, was a wide, one metre deep, fast-flowing river. In 1983, the luxury of a little punt had just become available to carry the vehicles of the less adventurous across this famous barrier for the princely sum of \$20. Many marital battles then erupted on the banks of the Jardine as cautious wives and thrill-seeking husbands debated the relative merits of the challenging river crossing and the tame punt ride. As newlyweds, we too had our dispute here, but in our case it was the thrill-seeking wife who desired the river adventure!

To drive across a river such as this requires substantial preparation. A diesel motor such as ours requires a long air snorkel to draw in air from well above any possible water level. Tyres must be deflated, waterproof covers packed around the engine and openings such as fuel tanks and doors need to be sealed up. We watched with interest as many vehicles attempted the crossing -- and many failed, becoming stranded mid-river with waters swirling around the driver's feet and camping gear floating in the back of the vehicle!

Finally the thrill-seeking wife prevailed. A group of fellow Landcruiser travellers came to our aid and loaned us a snorkel and covers which fitted our vehicle. So with our vehicle trussed up like a Christmas turkey, we drove down into the swirling waters of the Mighty Jardine.

Across the river we drove, pushing a high bow-wave before us. Les said it felt so good he wanted to turn and keep driving up the river! Then through a heart-stopping very deep hole near the end and up the steep bank we drove, conquerors of the Jardine.

Our dripping vehicle on the other side seemed little the worse for its adventure. However, it cost us more to replace the differential oils which had become waterlogged than the little punt ride would have cost. So sanity prevailed on our return journey a month later and the Landcruiser took a sedate ride across the Jardine on the punt!

Meanwhile, however, we had many bees to find on the tip of Cape

“ *The Entrance to HELL – Get Back If You Can!* ”

York. Coming into Bamaga was like entering a foreign country. In 1983 very few white people lived in Bamaga and the population was almost entirely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. However, the miniature stingless bee *Trigona clypearis* was also a common resident of the buildings of Bamaga. This little bee builds tiny nests in any available crevice: hollow door frames, wall cavities, house piers, fence posts and monuments. It seals off a narrow space with a sheet of dark resin and wax, then fills it with its tiny brood combs and honey and pollen pots. In the Bamaga Department of

Aussie Bee Online

Article 16
November 2011



Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, these bees had built a nest in a door, happily flying out one hole if the door was open and out a different hole if the door was shut. Four other nests were using the keyholes of other office doors.

We wanted to get samples from a large group of nests for a special genetics study back at the University of NSW. We visited New Mapoon, an outlying community near Bamaga which consisted of a street of houses elevated for coolness on tall piers. We asked the help of an old white-haired Aboriginal who smilingly pointed out a tiny nest entrance at the base of one pier. The news spread fast and soon we had a team of helpers looking for nests right down the street, as well as a laughing crowd of children who followed our every step. In all we were shown 23 nests of *Trigona clypearis* in that row of 13 houses, ideal for the genetic study. We caught a number of bees from each nest and stored them in the bubbling liquid nitrogen for the long journey back to Sydney.

Our bee discoveries, however, were just beginning! 

**Read Part 2 of our Cape York Wilderness Safari
in [Aussie Bee Online Article 17](#).**

**And visit the Aussie Bee Website Facebook Page to see more photos of this safari.
Click on the album called ‘On Native Bee Safari - Cape York’:
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Page 2