



CAPE YORK WILDERNESS

by Dr Anne Dollin
Australian Native Bee Research Centre
November 2011

Reprinted from *Aussie Bee Bulletin*, Issue 2, May 1997

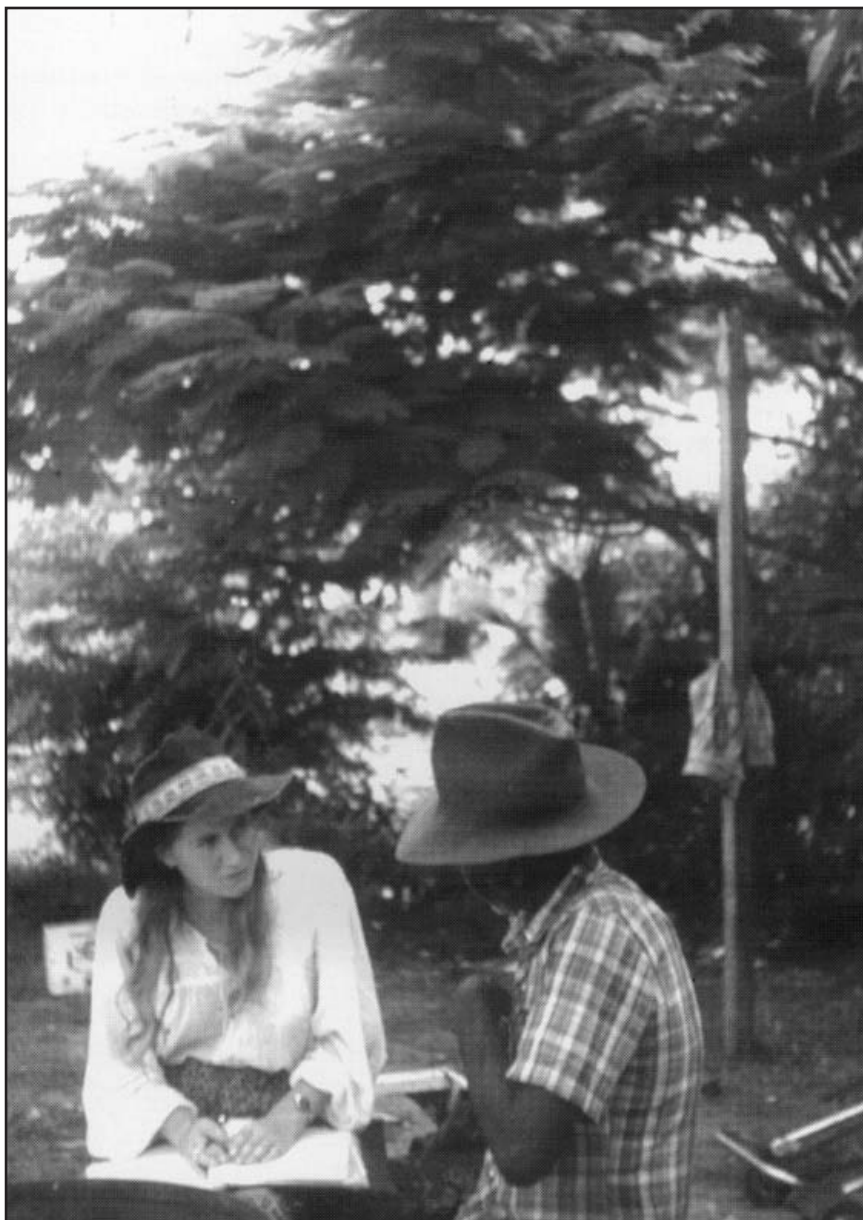
Part 2: Thursday Island and Old Mapoon

WE had read of a beautiful small stripy stingless bee on Cape York from the genus *Austroplebeia* — but how could we find it?

We travelled up to the very tip of Cape York through deep gullies of rainforest. We camped on the beautiful peaceful shores of Punsand Bay with its aqua waters. We searched the forests and woodlands. Finally by chance Les spotted an unusual tiny bee in a spider web. With great excitement we studied it under the microscope. Yes, there it was — the small *Austroplebeia* with many colourful yellow stripes which we had been looking for.

So the hunt was on! We knew its nest was unlikely to be far away so we searched every tree in the area in great detail. Finally our efforts were rewarded. Les found a tiny nest with a resinous entrance tunnel in a spindly dead tree only 16 cm (6 inches) wide. With great care we examined the tiny nest. The whole nest was only 14 cm long and 14 cm wide. It was tucked in between two sections of a live termite nest which was also

Anne asking an Aboriginal man at Old Mapoon for information on native bees



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sharing the tree hollow! The bees had merely sealed the termites out with a 2 mm thick resinous sealing layer (batumen). Inside the small cavity remaining, the bees had built a 3 cm wide creamy-yellow brood comb and some clusters of tiny honey and pollen pots. Another rare species of *Austroplebeia* had been located for our planned scientific revision of the whole group!

Eager to find more unusual nests of the tiny *T. clypearis* we headed across to Thursday Island in Torres Strait. A small ferry regularly did the two hour crossing between Bamaga and Thursday Island but we were warned that the crossing could be quite a rough one! In due course we boarded the small boat for the journey. As luck would have it, up came the wind and the waves. Les, who at the best of times is a great believer in "Terra Firma", soon turned a delightful shade of green. He was most relieved when the little ferry finally berthed at the Thursday Island wharf. The prospects of yet another bee hunt however, soon perked up our reluctant sailor.

As in Bamaga, the miniature *Trigona clypearis* bees were everywhere to be found on Thursday Island — in the window sills of the rectory and in the key holes of the state school classrooms. Les soon noticed a more unusual nest however, 10 metres up in the branches of a huge living tree in the main street. Not to be put off by the public situation, Les scrambled up into the tree branches leaving his "blushing bride" gazing up at him

from the street. The new nest had yellow, red, blue and white paint daubed around its entrance — it was *Trigona hockingsi*. This nest had obviously discovered the wonders of wet paint as a nest-building resin substitute.

While Les was busily collecting samples of bees and nest measurement statistics up in the tree, a chap passing by began to take a great deal of unwelcome interest in me standing in the street below. As I determinedly brushed off the fellow's advances I wondered what he would have said if he had known my husband was sitting in the tree directly over his head!

With his bag brimming with Torres Strait bee samples Les survived

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the return journey to Bamaga and we began to consider the arduous journey home. We wanted to investigate the bees on the west coast of the Cape so we arranged to visit an old Aboriginal settlement there called Old Mapoon. Yet more dusty corrugated roads stretched before us which deteriorated the further we went. At last the road disappeared altogether and we realised the last part of the journey

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must be performed by driving along the long beach front.

We located an old Aboriginal who revealed the location of two more nests nearby in a very large tree — more samples to add to our collection. After a satisfying day we took a walk along the beautiful water front. There to my delight and amazement was a magnificent spiral conch shell. It was nearly 40 cm long, not currently occupied and in nearly perfect condition — just washed up on the beach that day. We valued our prize even more when we were later told of the four metre salt water crocodile which regularly patrols that beach!

Finally our exciting honeymoon was coming to an end. We packed our precious shell carefully amongst the bee equipment, specimens and data records filling the back of our "mobile native bee laboratory".

We had had more than the usual amount of honey in our honeymoon! 

**Read Part 1 of our Cape York Wilderness Safari
in [Aussie Bee Online Article 16](#).**

**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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