

# EXPLORING WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by Les Dollin  
Australian Native Bee Research Centre

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## Part 2: An Old Native Bee Farming Area of the Aboriginals

*“We had been intrigued by tales that Aboriginals had used a form of farming to get honey from native stingless bees.” Les Dollin continues the story of his 1985 journey with Anne — on native bee safari in Western Australia...*

**L**EAVING the Kimberleys, we headed towards the Northern Territory and back onto the tarred roads.

Our day’s drive had been long and hot and at dusk we pulled into a small town looking forward to a nice dinner and a well-earned rest. That evening I yarned with an old bushman about our desire to find an Aboriginal native bee farming area. He told me that when he was a boy he had been shown such a site and if I promised not to disclose the location to anyone else he was willing to draw me a map. That was the good news. The bad news was that it was nearly a day’s trip back down the road we’d just travelled. However, the opportunity was not to be missed; so early the next morning we turned the truck around and set off west again.

The old chap’s map led us back to a very large cattle station on the edge of the Kimberleys with a manager’s residence a long way off the highway. On arriving we found one of the outback’s great treasures — a very quiet school horse used by the kids on the property. This placid

animal was not only “bomb-proof” but was fast asleep on the driveway to the homestead. We had to wake it up to get our truck through.

A big dusty stockman appeared out of the shade of the verandah. With his wide smile he greeted us. We asked him if we could camp on his place and look for native bees. “You can camp all you like”, he said. To reassure him, I told him I knew the rules about leaving gates as you find them. He said, “You won’t have to worry about gates here because we haven’t got any. In fact we haven’t

“*Logically, climbing trees at night with dangerous eye-spiking limbs everywhere is not a terribly good idea!*”

even got any fences! With two million acres, who needs them?”

As we followed our treasure map, all the clues were still there and finally we reached the remote part of the property we sought. Standing before us in the setting sun was the remains of a great Aboriginal hunting

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ground used for harvesting native bee honey. The trees were dead now but a number still had “scarfs” or cuts in them made by Aboriginal axes. With cameras and notebooks we eagerly walked amongst the ghosts of the past — the honey source of a community once was right here. We had found it!

WE photographed the old trees and documented the way Aboriginals long ago had milked the native bee honey out of the trees. The honey was prized as a food source by the Aboriginals. Great skill was needed not to flood the nest with honey or break into the pollen or brood. To get the honey from the tree they would scarf the soft paper bark timber with an axe and locate the honey pots. Then they would break up some of the pots by inserting a stick into the honey reserves. The honey would flow out and be caught in a vessel. After the honey

had drained, the hole was plugged up with mud. Some honey pots would have been left untouched even if a honey flow had been in progress at the time. The Aboriginals knew just when to enter the hunting area and when the nests could be revisited.

The ghosts of the past were not the

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only attractions of this remote area. From the activity on the flowers there were obviously some living nests still here too. The species of native bee (*Austroplebeia*) in this area though was extremely shy and hard to find. They pull back into their entrance if someone approaches the nest and all activity abruptly ceases until the danger is past. As well as this we had another problem to overcome. The forest of paperbarks we were in

looked the same in every direction, with long grass and no landmarks. To avoid getting lost, we decided to leave the truck motor running and always keep within earshot of its sound.

It was still very hot as night fell and we set up camp under the paperbarks. As I wandered amongst the closest paperbarks, I discovered that if I stood at the base of a tree and listened very carefully I could hear

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the bees humming. So up the tree I climbed, moving along the limbs as the faint hum grew louder and louder until finally I was right at the nest entrance. I used masking tape to mark the well-camouflaged nest so I could find it in the morning.

Logically, climbing trees at night with dangerous eye-spiking limbs everywhere is not a terribly good idea. It would be more sensible just to mark the base of the tree and come back in the morning. But no, not me — I was there amongst the nests which I'd taken so long to find. Before I knew it I was up the next tree and the next until I'd found and marked six nests.

With all the excitement I couldn't sleep and at daybreak I was out of the truck and up the trees to actually see the native bees. I was so thrilled to be there in the cool of the morning deep in the Kimberley forest surrounded by native bees that I had to drag poor Anne out of bed to share in my discoveries. I decided to try to find another nest without the markings to help me. Three hours later I realised just how difficult this shy species in the Kimberleys can be to find during the day.

After another long day taking samples and many photographs we had completed our mission. We had found the last of the bee colonies in this old Aboriginal native bee farm. Removing the tapes that were marking the nests, we left the bees to guard this old hunting ground where Aboriginals used to farm native bees for their prized honey. 

*One of the old paper-bark trees marked by Aboriginal axes as they farmed the prized honey from a nest of stingless bees.*

**Visit the Aussie Bee Website Facebook Page to see more photos of this safari.  
Click on the album called 'On Native Bee Safari - Western Australia Pt 2':  
[www.facebook.com/aussiebeewebsite/photos](http://www.facebook.com/aussiebeewebsite/photos)**

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