The North Queensland Naturalist

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The Rock Paintings Of Cairns Area, North Queensland

By NORMAN B. TINDALE,
Ethnologist, South Australian Museum

Mr. Douglas Seaton, through Dr. H. Flecker, has submitted for examination a most interesting series of rock painting records from the Cairns district.

His finds were made near Bridle Creek on the northern slopes of Bare Hill; at Silver Valley; at Long Gully on the east bank of the Walsh River; in the Watsonville area, particularly on the North East and Western sides of Lion Mountain; at Picnic Cave; near Balanaing Rock; and at Cave Hill. Mr. Seaton was directed to the Lion Mountain galleries by Mr. S. E. Stephens.

There are so many painted figures in these caves that it is not possible at one time to show figures of all of them, but it is felt that some preliminary details of the more typical ones should be published.

The material examined consists of sketches made in the field, of about 250 paintings; some of these were supplied in copies that had been duplicated by blue printing. Others had been retraced in coloured crayons by Mr. Seaton from his own field sketches.

The majority (85 per cent) of the paintings are in red ochre and of these 75 per cent are in solid colour. A dozen pictures are in yellow, while there are four in which the red is surrounded by white and two in which a white figure is outlined in red; in one instance the white is a fill-in of spots. Except in two paintings from No. 1 Gallery near Bridle Creek, yellow designs are independent of the red ones, in the exceptions these are red figures of human beings outlined in yellow.

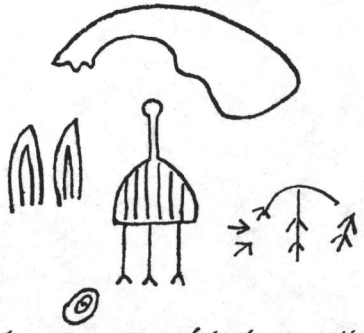
Animal and man figures predominate in the copies submitted for study, most of them are very simple. Complex designs are relatively few; one or two seem to be pictures of shields bearing designs. These shields are similar to, although less well drawn than ones found by Mr. D. G. Sanderson, painted in a rockshelter at Mt. Elliot Natural Park (Mankind v.4, 1951, p.294). Tracks, whether of man or animal, are relatively uncommon as compared with cave painting displays in other parts of Australia. A notable exception is at Long Gully, on the Walsh River, where there is a remarkable red painting of what seems to be the front view of a young cassowary, showing the immature plumage. On one side of it there are grouped several series of tracks, presumably of the same species of bird. It will be noticed that this bird appears to have a third leg.

In several instances at Bridle Creek there are mammal, human, and large bird paintings shown in silhouette, the colour outlining the animals in each case being a reddish ochre different to that in general use for the solid figure paintings in the cave. In three instances there are superimpositions hinting that these silhouettes may be later than the solid red ochre figures.

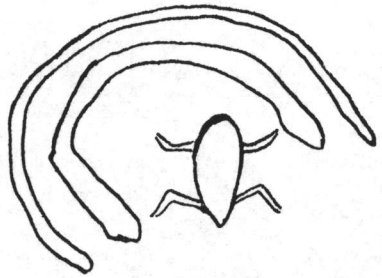
Interpretation of rock paintings is often subjective, and paintings casually in juxta-position can be falsely read as depicting a connected story. Although the great bulk of the pictures appear convincingly to represent isolated figures, the two following may be linked narrative paintings:—

(1) Group of four figures presumably men, holding up a kangaroo which is much larger than the men. (Bridle Creek).

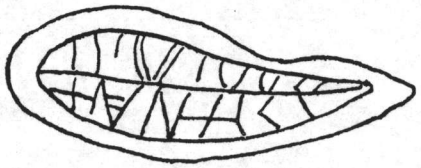
(2) Person within a double semi-circular figure; in Central Australia such a



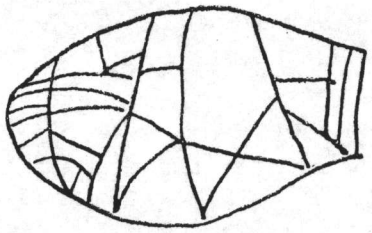
Long Gully Watsonville



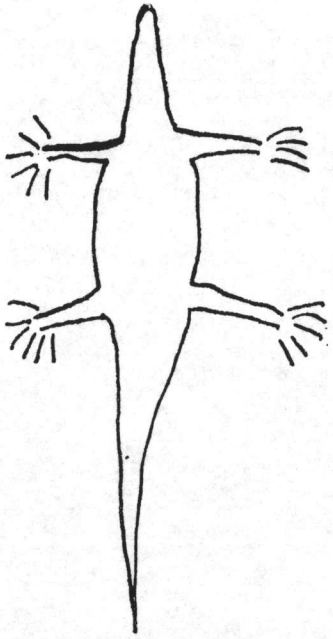
Bare Hill
No 1 Gallery.



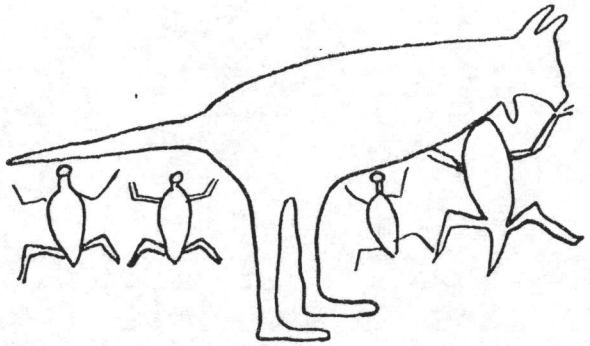
Lion Mt Watsonville



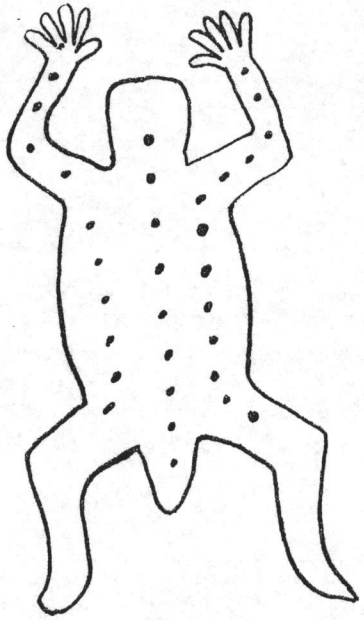
Picnic Cave Watsonville



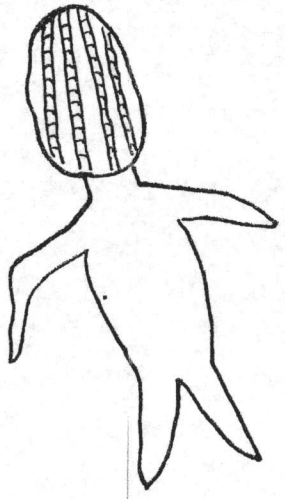
Cave Hill Watsonville



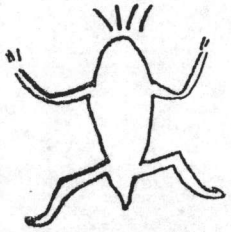
Bare Hill No 3 Gallery.



Bare Hill No 1 Gallery



Hill Top Silver Valley



No 1 Gallery.

figure commonly represents a camp with a man or a woman in it. (Bridle Creek).

There is one figure at Silver Valley, in the Hill Top gallery on the east side, which may represent a man with a ceremonial headdress. Mr. Seaton has depicted the head part and the body in different ochres, hence there is a distinct chance they are accidental superimpositions of separate man and shield paintings.

Viewing the collection of paintings as a whole, it seems evident that they are the artistic efforts of individual painters, each making his own simple picture without regard to others. In this sense they are far removed from the complex drawings of the aborigines of Central Australia and of the northern coasts of Australia. They show a general familiar relationship with the simpler drawings of caves and shelters in southern Australia.

From the theoretical point of view it is of considerable interest to note that these drawings all come from within the area where Tindale and Birdsell (Records of the South Australian Museum, Adelaide, v.7, 1941, pp.1-9) and Birdsell (Records of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, v.2, 1949, pp.105-122), have indicated the presence of a nuclear population of the Barrinean peoples, of negritic stock, only partly modified by physical contacts with true Australians of the Murrayian type. Since the Barrinean negritic peoples were probably the first to populate Australia, it is possible that the rock paintings discovered by Mr. Seaton give us a relatively unaltered glimpse of the artistic capabilities and achievements of the negrito peoples who first populated Australia, since there is no evidence of the prior presence of Australoids in the Cairns rainforest areas. His discovery, therefore, may be of fundamental importance in our efforts to understand the origins and cultural developments of the peoples of Australia. The presence of shield designs, like those recorded from Mt. Elliot, link the paintings with the material culture of the present-day Barrineans. In the case of Mr. Sanderson's discovery, the country near Townsville where they were found is occupied by members of the Bindal tribe, who are very typical Australians of the Murrayian type. They do not use the large tree-buttress shield, suggesting that in that area the negritos have been displaced, leaving the rockpaintings as the principal evidence of their former presence.

In addition to the cave paintings, Mr. Seaton found at Tjuken Bora ground, on Jordan Creek, in the Palmerston area, carvings on the bark of trees somewhat similar in design to the paintings, although sufficiently distinct to suggest the possibility that these contemporary designs were different to the earlier cave paintings. His tree bark carvings suggest the bora-circle and grave-marker designs common in New South Wales. In that area they are characteristic of the culture of the Southern Australoids or Murrayians.

Interference To Electric Supply Lines By Fruit Bats, Mynas, Etc.

By H. FLECKER, F.R.G.S.A.

The sight of fruit bats, mostly **Pteropus gouldi**, in various stages of dehydration and decomposition, dangling from high tension power lines is quite a familiar one in North Queensland, especially in Cairns, where they are generally known as "flying foxes." They are evidently electrocuted in their nocturnal excursions, for they are never seen to rest or roost on wires or similar objects of any kind, and from their position along the lines, as well as their variable postures when so trapped, it is quite clear that their progress has been arrested during actual flight, causing a short circuit. The passage of a powerful high tension current through their bodies causes involuntary contraction of the muscles which voluntary effort is powerless to relax. Some are noted with the thumbs at the extremities of their flying membranes clutching the wires on each side with the head dangling in between; others caught between thumb on one side and foot on the other, while all sorts of bizarre attitudes are noted in others. A few fall to the ground while still alive but severely shocked. Yet it has been shown that small cave-dwelling bats, even when blind, can fly briskly in and out of caves, in which light scarcely penetrates at all. Experimentally they have been shown to avoid all wires in such darkness, and this they do by emitting a high-pitched note, the echo of which is perceived after the manner of radar. Evidently the fruit bat has no such mechanism and stumbles directly against the high tension wires, upon which it perishes. Yet it is exceedingly rarely that any day flying or even night flying bird is so caught.

Much of the following information is supplied through the courtesy of Mr. Keith Downs, Secretary of the Cairns Regional Electricity Board.

Electrical engineers of the Cairns Regional Electricity Board in their ceaseless efforts to maintain continuity of electric supply, have to contend not only with ravages of storm and flood, but also with the aggravations of the above pests and "vermin." The extent of the nuisance may be guaged from the following figures: During the period November, 1951, to February, 1952, inclusive, in the Cairns District alone for the four months, twenty-three interruptions were due to the aerobatics of these winged mammals which, in their flight, struck low-tension service wires and caused them to be hit together, thus blowing the service fuses. The low tension lines, of 240 volts are one foot nine inches apart, whilst the high tension lines are separated by an interval of three feet six inches. There were, in addition, fifteen instances of the Pteropi fouling the mains and being electrocuted, but not causing any dislocation of supply.

As one might expect, it is during the mango season—mangos ripen mostly during the month of December and have only a short fruiting season—that the nuisance reaches its peak, and any services near mango trees—(**Mangifera indica**, an introduced species)—are almost sure to be affected. The average time of an interruption is approximately an hour, but if the trouble should occur after the householder has retired for the evening, then the power may be off for several hours. This mainly affects domestic refrigerators. The best means of minimising the trouble is to have fully insulated (that is rubber covered) active conductors, or to use service entry cables.

Although major outrages are fortunately rare, it was as recently as January of this year that flying foxes were suspected of fouling the high tension Caravonica-Redlynch circuit, causing extensive interruptions to consumers in that area. In that particular instance, however, the wires had sagged more than usual and the spacing between them had decreased. Generally speaking, the tensions and clearances in those important high tension lines are, thankfully, of sufficient magnitude to render them almost immune from the flying-fox nuisance.

The Common Myna, **Acridotheres tristis**, an introduced bird very common in North Queensland sometimes rest in large flocks upon the lines. It is usual for them to take off almost simultaneously and in doing so, by approximating the cables, cause a short circuit.

The Common Water Snake

Tropidonotus mairii

By JOHN McLOUGHLIN

HABITS AND HABITAT—This snake is found in low-lying, swampy areas, where it is mostly seen in the early morning or at dusk. When one is seen moving slowly through the swamps or poking its head under the moist bark of fallen trees, it is sure

evidence that it is searching for food, which consists of frogs. They are often seen lying on the roads in the evening, enjoying the warmth therein. When startled or caught, they display all the ferocity of a venomous snake, even to having mock venom glands which stand out prominently from the side of the head. They are hardy reptiles and easily kept in captivity. Being voracious eaters, they will devour up to six or eight medium sized frogs if given the chance. This gluttonous habit is very unhealthy and if allowed to continue will eventually kill the snake. It must be remembered of course that in its natural state, it is by no means an easy task for a snake to catch food. It may seize and devour a frog, but then it may be a day or so before it is able to procure another for instance. Thus, when captured and placed in a cage with about four or five frogs, it is sure to devour the lot, instinct warning that it may be a couple of days to the next meal. If given a heavy meal every day, the snake gradually becomes very sluggish until at last it enters a trance which may last as long as two days. At the end of the trance, the snake dies.

A satisfactory diet which the writer has found very successful is two medium sized frogs every other day.

The aggressive nature of these snakes (freshly caught specimens) disappears very quickly and they become very docile even to the extent of eating out of one's hand. The writer has found that if a freshly captured snake is handled (at the moment of capture) very carefully, it will not even attempt to strike, but if a sudden move on the captor's part is made, the snake will attack instantly. When striking, it swings its head and neck swiftly away, then brings it sharply back, mouth wide open ready for the bite.

COLOUR—This snake has a very wide colour range, the most common being: upper surface black, extending as far as the coastals bordering the ventrals. Under surface, pale cream or white, the subcaudals being a darker shade, the sublingual and infralabials being the same colour as the ventrals. The upper part of the head is also black, except the supralabials and rostral, these being of a cream colour.

Another common phase is the grey upper surface as far as the ventrals. The under side is a yellow cream or a dirty white, with a band of black (about one-eighth of an inch wide) at the overlap of each ventral scale. The lower jaw and supralabials are pale yellow. The head is of a shade lighter grey than the back.

Another scarcer variety is orange or orange-brown in colour, these colours being on the back, and up as far as the base of the neck. The head is of a light grey, excluding the supralabials and rostral. These, together with the lower jaw, ventrals and subcaudals are of a light cream. These three varieties are the most common, although there is a light grey form with black flecks here and there along the back. The black flecks may be very profuse on some, and very widely spaced on others.

RECOGNITION—The head is distinct from the neck and is longer than broad, tapering towards the rostral. The body is of moderate length, the tail being rather short for the size of the snake, is circular and finely tapered. Owing to its wide colour range and fearless attitude when provoked, it is often mistaken for the Common Brown Snake, **Demansia textilis,** and the Black Snake, **Pseudechis porphyriacus,** but should be easily recognised by the head being distinct from the neck. Another most important point is that the Water Snake is quite harmless, possessing no poison fangs whatever, only very fine teeth which slope slightly backward in the mouth.

SCALATION—Frontal one and a half times as long as it is broad. The nasal is entire. Supralabials number six, the infralabials eight. The fourth, fifth and sixth supralabials enter the eye. The third, fourth and fifth infralabials touch the anterior sublingual, while the sixth, seventh and eighth infralabials touch the posterior sublinguals. The vertebral scale row is decidedly smaller than the coastal rows, touching the ventrals, but the costals gradually diminish in size as they approach the vertebral row. The coastal rows touching the vertebrals are the same size. The vertebral and coastal rows are very highly keeled.

Ventrals number 142 to 151, almost unnoticeably angulate and notched at each end. Subcaudals range from 42 to 68 and may be divided or single and divided, the single scale being sixth to eighth preanal. Anal is divided. Scale rows 15, 14, 15 very highly keeled.

SIZE AND DIMENSIONS—The size and dimensions are measured from a snake captured by the writer, reaching 3 feet 1 inch from rostral to the tip of the tail, an inch longer than the recorded size.

Length of tail 5½ inches.
Length of head 1¼ inches.
Width of head ¾ inch.
Diameter of body 1⅛ inch.

RANGE—It is found only in Eastern Australia, and is recorded as far south as Kempsey in New South Wales and as far north as Cape York. The writer thinks that it may also exist in the low lying regions of Papua.

The Boomerang

By J. H. WILLAMS, Mackay

The boomerang appears to have been discovered by accident. Black boys, seated round a camp fire, amuse themselves with the leaves of the brigalow-acacia, which resemble boomerangs. They give the leaves a flick with the finger and they start off to return like a boomerang.

The Egyptian and Assyrian boomerangs do not return.

The Australian boomerang is somewhat flat and slender, made from a hard and heavy wood, usually brigalow, **Acacia harpophylla,** or myall, **A. homalophylla.** One side only is slightly rounded.

The warped or toy boomerang is twisted by putting it in water, then heating it and bending the ends in opposite directions. The curve must be natural and lie in the wood itself.

To throw the boomerang, the native grips it firmly, runs a few paces with the concave side to the front. It is thrown in a straight line forward. Often it touches the ground ten or twelve paces from where it is thrown. It takes a horizontal position and starts off, spinning like a wheel. Rarely was a man killed by a boomerang; no accurate aim was possible with a returning boomerang.

There is a myth that Thor's hammer returned to the hand of the thrower; it has been said that the boomerang has been found in South-eastern India; but it appears certain that it owes its origin to the love of fun inherent in the young Australian aboriginal, and that it was suggested by the action of falling leaves.

Birds Seen At Stuart (Townsville District)

March, 1952

By J. J. SELVAGE, Stuart

1. Diamond Dove, **Geopelia cuneata.** Many.
2. Crested Pigeon, **Ocyphaps lophotes.** Many.
3. Spur-winged Plover, **Lobibyx miles.** About 6 feeding in gaol paddock.
4. Red-capped Dotterel. **Charadrius ruficapillus.** A pair.
5. Southern Stone-curlew, **Burrhinus magnirostris.** Many crying during night.
6. Straw-necked Ibis, **Threskiornis spinicollis.** Large numbers.
7. White Ibis, **Threskiornis aethiopica.** Several.
8. White Egret, **Egretta alba.** One.
9. White-faced Heron, **Notophoyx novae hollandiae.** One.
10. White-necked Heron. **N. pacifica.** One.
11. Swamp Harrier, **Circus approximans.** One.
12. Fork-tailed Kite, **Milvus migrans.** Large numbers.
13. Square-tailed Kite, **Lophoictinia isura.** Several.
14. Rainbow Lorikeet, **Trichoglossus moluccanus.** Several.
15. Budgerygah, **Melopsittacus undulatus.** Several.

16. Cockatiel, **Leptolophus hollandicus.** Several.
17. Pale-headed Rosella. **Platycercus adscitus.** Several.
18. Blue-winged Kingfisher. **Dacelo leachi.** One pair and one young.
19. Forest Kingfisher, **Halcyon macleayi.** One.
20. Rainbow Bird. **Merops ornatus.** Several.
21. Koel. **Eudynamys orientalis.** Early in month heard calling.
22. Channelled - billed Cuckoo, **Scythrops novae hollandiae.** Several early in month.
23. Pheasant-Cuckoo, **Centropus phasianinus.** Several.
24. Magpie-lark, **Grallina cyanoleuca.** Several.
25. Black - faced Cuckoo - shrike, **Coracina novae-hollandiae.** Two.
26. Spotted Pardalote, **Pardalotus punctatus.** Several.
27. Spotted Bower Bird, **Chlamydera maculata.** One pair.
28. Red-backed Wren, **Malurus melanocephalus.** One small flock.
29. Crow, **Corvus cecilae.** Many.
30. Pied Butcher-bird. **Cracticus nigrogularis.** Pair.
31. Black-backed Magpie, **Gymnorhina tibicen.** Many.
32. Common Myna, **Acridotheres tristis.** Numerous.

North Queensland Naturalists' Club

Meets at School of Arts, Shields St., Cairns, usually on second Tuesday in each month, at 8 p.m.

MEETINGS:

13th March, 1952—Lecture illustrated by coloured films by Mr. Tuckfield, who toured the coast of West and North Australia in a motor launch starting from Perth, W.A., and had already reached Cairns.

Exhibits were photographs of a jelly fish taken by Mr. Lionel Law; larval forms of cestodes from snakes, etc.

8th April, 1952—Mr. C. Cantrill gave an interesting talk on aboriginal drawings in the Kimberleys of West Australia, based on a description by Mr. Frank Clune.

13th May, 1952—Owing to The Sunday Australian ceasing publication, it was announced that the North Queensland Register had agreed to publish Current Nature Topics supplied by the Club.

10th June, 1952—Mr. A. A. Read described a shell collecting trip to Port Douglas, giving useful information for others desiring to collect.

CLUB OUTINGS:

Excursion to Behana Creek led by Mr. Reg. Rudge, Joint Engineer to new water supply to the Mulgrave Shire and Cairns City Council, where works are proceeding. A good attendance, perfect weather, and much interesting material which was secured marked the occasion.

22nd June—To Mouth of Hartley Creek. The attendance was good, fine breezy weather prevailed, and those interested in the botanical and other features of the region were rewarded.

NEW MEMBERS ELECTED:

11th March: Mrs. Cynthia Aitken, Esplanade, Cairns.

8th July: Dr. Fred Bainbridge, 54 Gatton St., Cairns.
Mr. Walker, Kairi.
Miss E. M. Wall, 402 404 Pacific Highway, N. Hornsby, N.S.W.
Mr. Douglas Johnston, Machan's Beach.

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1. CHECK LIST OF NORTH QUEENSLAND ORCHIDS .. PRICE 1/-
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