

BABY STEPS

Sue Farley



PHOTO BY SUE FARLEY



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FLINDERS BEACH, ON THE NORTH-WEST SIDE of Cape York in northern Queensland, is not an easy place to get to. It's a dusty 800km drive north from Cairns to Weipa, another 70km by red dusty road out to Mapoon, then 14km by 4WD along the beach from Cullen Point to Janie Creek. Flinders Beach stretches south from there to the mouth of the Pennefather River – a wild open west coast beach backed by ever-shifting sand dunes, lean, mean coastal bush and pandanus palms, opening on to the top end of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Every year female Flatback, Olive Ridley and Hawksbill turtles come to Flinders to lay their eggs. They arrive in the evening, often with the full moon, and flap their way up the beach above the high tide mark. There, they dig a big wide hole with their front flippers, slapping sand across the beach as they work, oblivious to everything around them. We watched by the light of the moon. Once cosy in their sand hole they use their back flippers to dig the egg chamber, a much deeper and more defined space dug into the wet sand below. This done, they begin laying. No messing around tidying the bedclothes or preparing the baby things, just straight into it.

At this point we were able to turn our torches on and watch closely as, once they start laying, nothing disturbs them from their maternal trance. Depending on the breed of turtle they will lay from 50 to 120 eggs – quite round and white, slightly bigger than a golf ball and with a soft leathery shell that doesn't break easily. Newly-laid they have a warm, rubbery feel, like a freshly baked apple.

As meticulously as they dug their hole, they fill it in, turn towards the sea and flap their way back down to the water, leaving their tell-tale tracks behind them. That is the sum total of time the mother turtles put into their babies; they will never see them again.

Which is part of the problem. Around 55 days later the eggs are ready to hatch, if they haven't been dug up by dingoes, feral dogs or wild pigs in the meantime. They hatch at night and, like their mothers before them, instinctively turn towards the sea and start flapping their way down to the water. These tiny turtles must make their run to the sea without getting eaten by dingoes or pigs, crocodiles roaming the wet sand, or sharks patrolling just offshore in the breaking waves. Once in the open sea, the babies then have to avoid every pelagic predator known to man, and keep themselves safe from entanglement in long-lines and fishing nets, of which the Gulf of Carpentaria has many.

The saddest part of this story is that only one turtle in 1000 makes it to adulthood to begin breeding, at between 30 and 50 years old. The Turtle Rescue Camp at Janie Creek, where we were based, has been set up to improve this statistic and takes paying guests keen to help.

Early each morning we crossed Janie Creek by dinghy and headed along Flinders Beach in grunty old Landrovers, watching for the skittery tracks of tiny hatchlings that had emerged overnight. Each hatched nest was dug out by Lawry, one of the local indigenous guides, to check survival rates and to see if the nests had been predated. We searched for new nests that had

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Julia Miller

been laid during the night, tagged them, laid a pest-excluding device if possible, and took a GPS coordinate. And we would also count the number of nests that had been dug up by predators during the night.

Each evening we crossed the creek again and did the same four-hour return trip, 24km each way on soft sand in low ratio, graunching our way through the moonlit night. This time we looked for adult turtle tracks heading up into the dunes, hoping to find turtles actually laying, which we often did. After the turtle had covered her newly-laid eggs, Lawry would tag and measure her, mark the nest and cover it if a pest excluder was available. Some nights we would see seven or eight new nests and one or two turtles actually laying. And sometimes we'd see a dingo, standing up in the dunes, out of the headlights, just waiting till we passed before continuing his foraging. Lawry showed us fishing nets with the remains of tangled turtles that had died before being washed ashore, and other turtles with great chunks taken out of their hard shells by hungry crocs. The highs and lows of this work were extreme.

Back at camp we lived well. No swimming, because of the local wildlife, but we had a canvas bucket shower, a designer composting bush toilet and the best home-cooked food north of the Pennefather River. Tents were fly-, snake- and sandfly-proof and a comfortably sturdy fence kept out the crocodiles and pigs. No five-star hotel was going to bring us this close to nature.

The Janie Creek camp, which is Aboriginal owned and operated, closes for the wet season but will start work again this autumn.

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Columnar, I am gaining instead of just an observer passing through. In sharing my skills, I am gaining knowledge, learning about their culture, sharing their homes, their food – and forging new friendships. I've achieved an intimacy rarely experienced in my often superficial world of travel journalism.