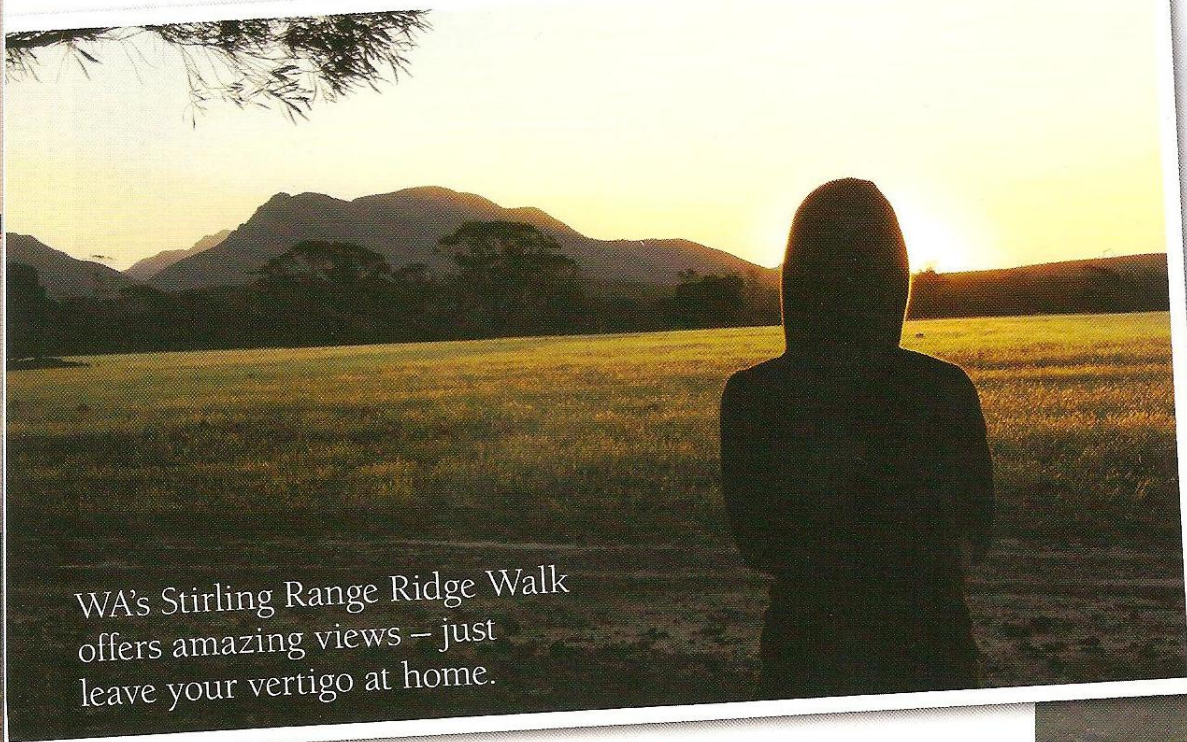


WORDS_DAWN GREEN

PHOTOS_SIMON GREEN



WA's Stirling Range Ridge Walk offers amazing views – just leave your vertigo at home.

The long way down


Western Australia is a relatively flat state, yet its highest mountains in the south are as awe-inspiring as any in the world. Stirling Range National Park stretches for 65km and thrusts out of the surrounding flat plains like islands in a vast ocean. And indeed, more than 1000 million years ago, a shallow sea did cover the region. Located 400km south of Perth, the range is characterised by rugged peaks, stark cliff faces and abundant flowering plants. And through this magnificent wilderness the Stirling Range Ridge Walk winds its way.

Described as WA's most challenging walk, it is not for the faint-hearted. "I've completed the hike eight out of 11 attempts," said Brian, manager of Stirling Range Retreat. He shared tales of holing up in caves in white-out conditions and tents blowing away in storms, causing a chill to go up my spine. However, my husband, Simon, was intrigued and couldn't wait to hit the trail.

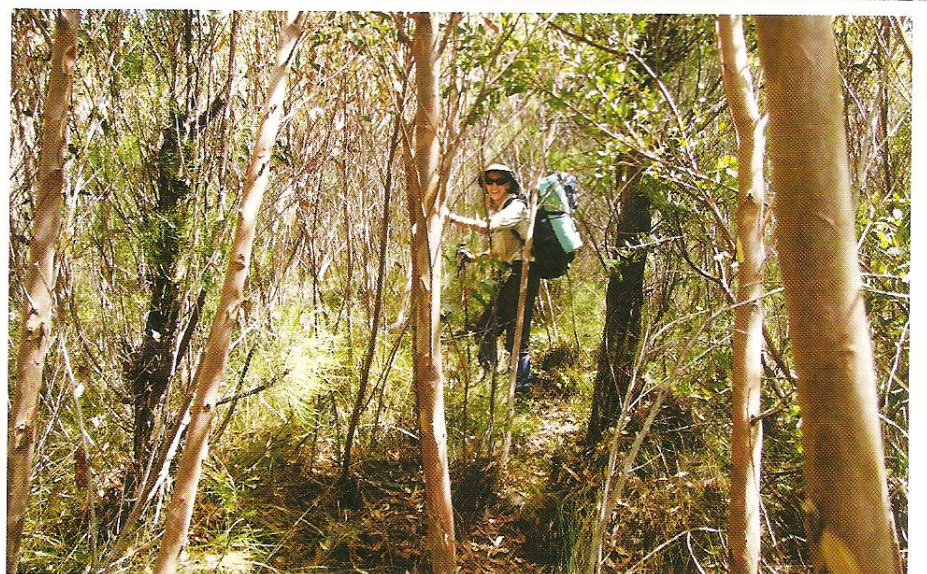
Up and up

From the Ellen Peak starting point, the track follows a boundary fence, where the mountains await tantalisingly just out of reach. A Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) sign states you are entering a wilderness area. As with most of this track, finding the trail and following it proved to be a challenge. The track heads up the north arm until eventually you are rewarded with a rest at the base of Ellen Peak (1012m). Here there is an option of scaling the peak and signing the visitor book on the top.

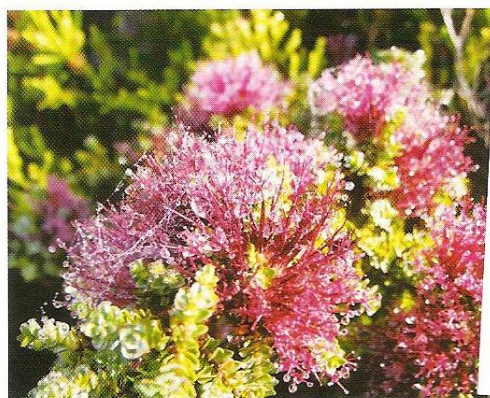
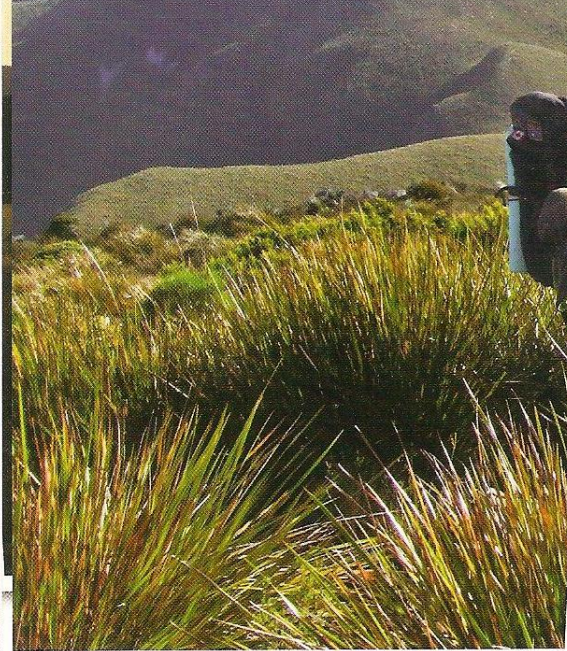
Keep an eye out for wedge-tailed eagles soaring overhead – we spotted four, checking out the visitors to their domain. You will pass by the first camping cave and then forge your way through tall reeds, reminiscent of jungle travel. Exhausted, we chose to camp the first night in a grove of she-oaks under Pyungoorup Peak. This is wilderness camping so there are no toilets or running water. You may have night



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Sunset silhouette before the start of the hike. Lunch break on top of the world. Bush-bashing is a common theme on the track. Ancient rocks and a grass tree.



“Here we witnessed the clouds moving in rapidly, shrouding the peaks in their ghostly veils.”



visitors – curious tamar wallabies sniffed around our tent, so keep food out of reach.

The Aboriginal name for the range, *Koi Kyenunu-ruff*, means “mist moving around the mountains” – a frequently seen occurrence. Bluff Knoll (*Bular Mial*) is of great spiritual significance to the Aboriginal people of the area as it is home to a powerful ancestral being.

The first European to sight these mountains was British explorer Matthew Flinders from the bow of the *Investigator* as he sailed the largely unexplored south coastline in 1802. In the year 1835, the Stirling Range got its name after WA's first governor, Captain James Stirling. Recognising its uniqueness, in 1913 Stirling Range NP was formally gazetted as one of the state's first national parks.

Facing the fear

Throughout this hike, you are given the choice to summit peaks or to simply pass around them on your way east or west. The views are astonishing no matter which way you choose to go. The Three Arrows (*Mirlpunda*) now await your passage, so named as they resemble the quivers of arrows sunk deep into the ridge. A traverse across a narrow saddle with high rock walls completes the Third Arrow section and a side path leads to a rainwater barrel. Due to an increase in walkers, this is not a reliable source of water, so hikers are advised to carry an adequate supply. Here we witnessed the clouds moving in rapidly, shrouding the peaks in their ghostly veils.

Second Arrow is an easy climb and initially First Arrow seems to be straight

TOP: Glorious cloud-covered mountains.
 ABOVE LEFT: Dew-covered myrtle bush.
 ABOVE: Embracing the challenges ahead.

OTHER WALKS

Toolbrunup: 4km return, 3-4 hours, (1052m). Located 15km from Bluff Knoll, the path is marked by pegs. It does involve some scrambling over boulders but the rewards are waiting at the top, where you admire the breathtaking vistas.

Mt Trio: 2km return, 2-3 hours, (856m). A boardwalk leads from the car park to the steep trail. The three summits were burned in 1996 by a lightning strike but offer spectacular views from the top.

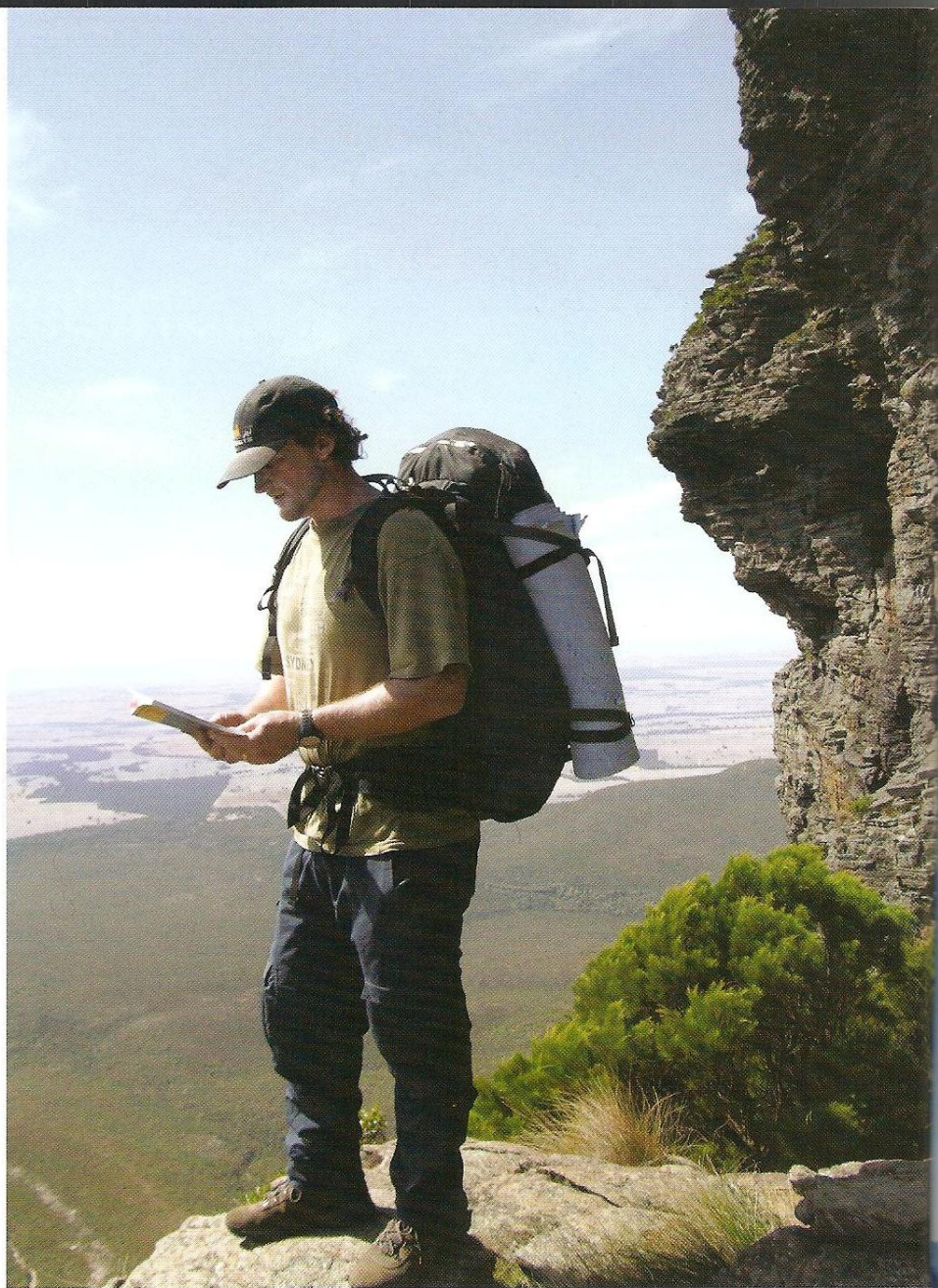
forward, but be warned – take extreme care in this section. The descent involves dropping down a series of rock ledges to the north of the peak. Cairns mark the seemingly impossible way down and passing a camping cave helps to reassure you are on the right track. Coming to terms with my fears, we moved at a snail's pace, slowly passing our heavy packs down to each other and pausing to rest. Imagine my relief when, after what felt like an eternity, we made it to the other side – we had shot the arrows, as Simon said with a smile.

A break at Isongerup Peak is suggested, providing the weather is good, as it is quite exposed. Here the jagged peaks previously climbed can be admired and Bluff Knoll lies in the distance to the west. The hardest climbing is now over, but on the Stirling Range Ridge Walk the challenges never end. Here we discovered the joys of getting up close and personal with nature, as we pushed through thickets of prickly hakea bushes that strove to reach out and scratch us. Simply following the elusive track proved difficult too. Our foam sleeping rolls attached to our packs soon became shredded due to all the bush-bashing and I found myself picking up pieces of blue foam from previous hikers, like following bread crumbs in a fairy tale. But it was all part of the adventure and despite the distant views of farmer's paddocks, this area felt very wild and remote.

Beating the Bluff

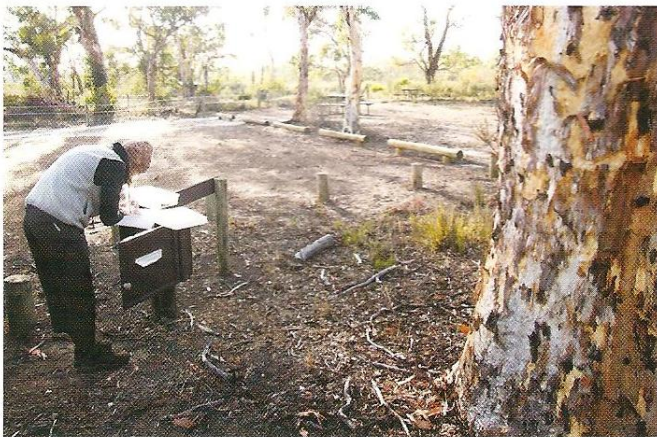
Stirling Range is recognised internationally as one of the world's top 34 hotspots for biodiversity and it is easy to understand why as you hike the Stirling Range Ridge Walk. The number and beauty of the wildflowers is staggering, with 1500 species packed within its boundaries. More species occur in the Stirling Range than in the entire British Isles and 87 plant species occur nowhere else on Earth.

There is a choice of wilderness campsites




ABOVE: Reading the guide book to plan our next move.

RIGHT: The views back to the east.
BELOW: Registering at the ranger station, Bluff Knoll.



GREAT MOUNTAIN WALKS

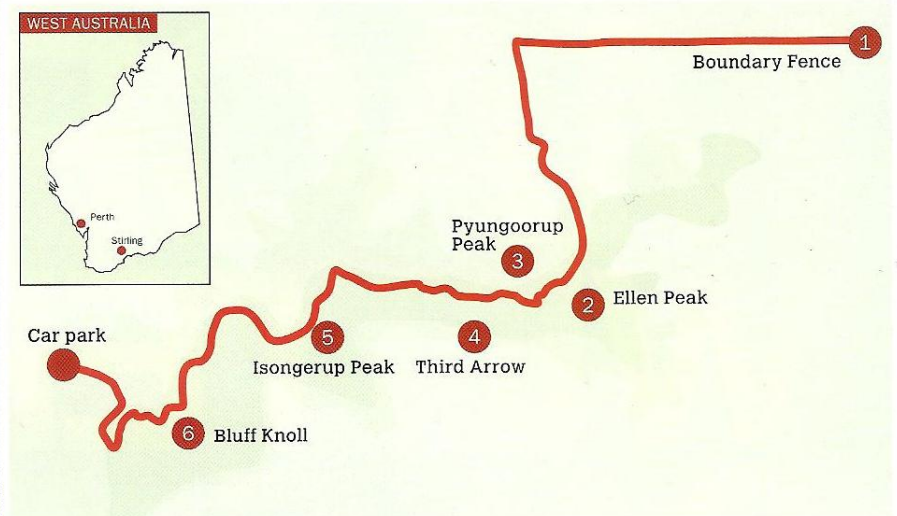
STIRLING RANGE RIDGE WALK, WA

between Isongerup and Bluff Knoll, located in thick scrub to offer protection from the prevailing winds for the second night on the track. You are now faced with your final hurdle on the trip – scrambling up East Peak. This does take considerable effort, but with plenty of small trees to help lever you up and such inspiring views to the east, before you know it you will reach the summit. From here the track follows the ridge to East Bluff, and then skirts around the aptly named Chasm – do not stray too close to the edge – and finally heads up the gentle slope to the summit of Bluff Knoll (1095m), the highest mountain in the Stirling Ranges. For us, after two and a half days alone in the wilderness, this was our first time seeing other people and we smelled pretty bad after no showers and lots of sweat! We hobbled our way down the well-worn track to the Bluff Knoll carpark, where Tony from Stirling Range Retreat collected us and drove us back to our car. We both sported sore, aching feet and felt bruised and bashed after the gruelling hike, but despite all that my spirits were soaring, just like the magnificent wedge-tailed eagles that accompanied us along the track. We were already planning our next hike in this most special part of the world. 

Walk notes

STIRLING RANGE RIDGE WALK

Time/Distance: 23km, 2-3 days | Degree: Moderate to difficult



- 1. Boundary fence to Ellen Peak – 11km, 5hr.** Steady uphill grind.
- 2. Ellen Peak to Pyungoorup Peak – 1km, 2hr.** A short section, traversing an exposed cliff.
- 3. Pyungoorup Peak to Third Arrow – 1km, 1hr.** Easy walking over Baker's Knob, with excellent views.
- 4. Third Arrow to Isongerup Peak – 2km, 3hr.** Challenging section, involving descent down rock ledges and along cliff faces.
- 5. Isongerup Peak to Bluff Knoll – 5km, 6.5hr.** Follow the ridges, through thickets of she-oaks and eucalypts, then a steep climb to East Peak to reach the summit of Bluff Knoll.
- 6. Bluff Knoll to carpark – 3km, 1hr.** Follow your tired feet down the well-marked track to the carpark.

NEED TO KNOW

How to get there

Take the Albany Highway south from Perth. Turn left at Cranbrook and follow Salt River Road. At the T-junction, turn right onto South Formby Road and then a left turn onto Chester Pass Road takes you to Bluff Knoll. The starting point is either Ellen Peak or Bluff Knoll and it is a one-way hike. A drop off/pick up service is offered by Stirling Range Retreat and it is a good place to camp before hitting the trail: 08 9827 9229

When to go

Springtime is the busiest season in the Stirlings, with multitudes of colourful wildflowers the main attraction. For more info visit www.dec.wa.gov.au or phone the park ranger on 08 9827 9278.

Maps

This guide book is a must-have: *Mountain Walks in the Stirling Range Part 2 – The Peaks to the West of Chester Pass* by AT Morphet.

What they don't tell you

Prepare for extreme mountain weather and carry wet weather gear, a first aid kit, rope, compass and a tent. Gaiters are handy for the overgrown trail and wrap up your foam sleeping roll to prevent rips.

