

Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Conservation Park



Healthy Parks
Healthy People



Government
of South Australia



Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Conservation Park

Located in the driest region of Australia, the Simpson Desert is one of the world's best examples of dunal desert, a sea of parallel red sand ridges ranging from red to white, covering a total area of 170 000 square kilometres. The Simpson Desert lies across the boundaries of South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. The South Australian section is divided into three protected areas, Simpson Desert Conservation Park, Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Witjira National Park.

The Simpson Desert Conservation Park was originally proclaimed as a national park in 1967, but changed to conservation park classification in 1972. The regional reserve was established in 1988, linking the conservation park with Witjira National Park. The enormous size of the parks (the regional reserve covers 29 191 sq km, the conservation park, 6 881 sq km) allows a wide cross-section of diverse flora, fauna and sand ridge formations to be protected.

The sand dunes stretch over hundreds of kilometres - the towering crests and vast, flat valleys (or swales) between them seem endless. The sheer magnitude of the endless landscape inspires a wide range of emotions in visitors - some are overwhelmed by the seemingly repetitiveness of the desert while others marvel at the ever-changing environment.

There are several routes through the parks, allowing visitors to cross the desert by four-wheel drive while camping in the true outback of Australia. The most enjoyable times to visit the Simpson Desert are autumn, winter and spring. **Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Conservation Park are closed annually between 1 December and 15 March.** This closure is to ensure public safety as temperatures can exceed 50°. A breakdown during this time could be fatal.

Heritage

Aboriginal culture and heritage

Most Simpson Desert Aboriginal groups in the nineteenth century were concentrated around the watercourses on the desert boundaries. Prior to this time, the Wangkangurru actually lived in the desert; and to the west of their traditional boundary the Lower Southern Arrernte lived on the edge and partly in the desert. Family groups were generally concentrated around native wells, or 'Mikiri' which provided the only permanent source of water.

In good seasons they could spread out away from these sites, taking advantage of groundwater and the flush of new life that rain brings to the desert.

Aboriginal groups living in this area were hunters and gatherers, but they also traded extensively with groups to the north and south. Ground-edge axes from quarries in Queensland were traded, as were sandstone grinding stones and ochre from the North Flinders Ranges. Some stone implements and workings can be seen in the park, but are not common. All Aboriginal sites are protected, so please do not disturb them.

European settlement brought about the decline of Aboriginal occupation of the desert. White settlers introduced influenza to the Aboriginal groups, decimating the population. Groups were displaced as pastoral properties took over their land, while other Aboriginal people were attracted to work on properties and to towns and communities.



Central Bearded Dragon
Pogona vitticeps

Exploration

The first European to see the grandeur of the Simpson Desert was the explorer Charles Sturt in 1845, but the desert was not fully recognised and named until the 1930s when another explorer and geologist, Cecil Thomas Madigan, named it after Allen Simpson, the sponsor of his subsequent expedition and then president of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch). The explorers who came after Sturt, mainly government surveyors, named a number of the familiar landmarks in the area.

Notable among the early surveyors was Augustus Poeppel who surveyed the junction of the borders of Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia in 1880. The original peg marking Poeppel Corner was removed to Adelaide for preservation in 1962 by Dr Reg Sprigg and now forms part of the History Trust of South Australia's Historic Relics Collection. On 25 August 1968, Bill Haylock of the SA Geodetic Survey placed the current steel and concrete post to mark Poeppel Corner. In 1989, the Friends of the Simpson Desert Parks erected a red gum replica of the original peg near the corner post.

The first successful European crossing of the desert was in 1936 and is credited to E. A. Colson, who, with Peter Ains (an Aboriginal companion) and five camels, travelled from Mount Etingambra eastwards via Poeppel Corner to Birdsville. Geologist Reg Sprigg and his family completed the first motorised crossing in 1962, with Dr Sprigg's Geosurveys of Australia company.

In 1963, the French Petroleum Company was contracted to conduct seismic surveys and explore for oil and gas deposits. These workers spent months at a time in the desert, building what are now known as the French and QAA lines, Rig Road and other tracks, thus opening up the desert for other explorers, pastoralists and tourists to follow.

Facilities

The only services available between Oodnadatta and Birdsville, are at Mount Dare in Witjira National Park. In the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Conservation Park visitors may camp within 50 metres of public access tracks. The best places to camp are mostly located towards the swales in the central region where gidgee woodlands provide shade, shelter and soft ground for camping.

If you are travelling this area for the first time, it is recommended that you cross the reserves from west to east to take advantage of the gentler upsweep to most dunes. Reserves of fuel, water and food, as well as basic vehicle spare parts and recovery equipment, must be carried.

Things to do

The vast wilderness of the Simpson Desert allows visitors to explore the natural features of the extreme outback. Visitors can enjoy bushwalking, photography, birdwatching, camping, and of course, experiencing the challenge and enormity of the desert while crossing the innumerable dunes by four-wheel drive.

There are several sites of interest throughout the parks. The Lone Gum stands beside the Rig Road in the conservation park, a solitary coolibah (which these days is slowly being joined by its seedlings). The tree thrives, despite growing far from the nearest watercourse. It remains a mystery how the tree survives in this location.

The Approdinna Attora Knolls, in the conservation park, are rare gypsum outcrops that are very fragile and of great scientific importance. They appear, almost ghost-like, from amongst the red sand dunes. The unusual formations are also significant to local Aboriginal groups - please treat this area with the respect it deserves.

Poeppel Corner, first surveyed by Augustus Poeppel in 1880, is the junction of the South Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory borders. The original post is preserved in Adelaide, but a replica post stands near the survey post where visitors can stand in three states at once.

Flora

On the crests of the sand dunes small grasses and herbs, such as sandhill cane-grass thrive, while on the more stable sands *Triodia* species like lobed spinifex and other small grasses and shrubs dominate. These spinifex tussocks can often grow to form large donut-like shapes as the centre of the plant dies out, while new growth continues at the outer edges.

After rain the sand dunes can become covered in a veritable carpet of wildflowers, as the long dormant seeds of poached-egg daisies and fleshy groundsel spring into life.

The swales between the sand dunes collect more water and nutrients than the sand dunes and so can support larger shrubs such as eremophila, grevillea and acacias like mulga and gidgee – particularly around Poeppel Corner where low open woodlands of gidgee spread out to the horizon. The playa lakes in these swales also support small clumps of salt-tolerant samphire and other herbaceous plants around their periphery.

Fauna

You may be surprised to know that some 195 bird species have been recorded in the Simpson Desert. Common birds include crested pigeons and zebra finches, while galahs and corellas are often seen congregating away from the midday sun in a tree overlooking a waterhole. The desert is home to several species of birds of prey such as the mighty wedge-tailed eagle (often seen soaring on the desert thermals), as well as black kites, nankeen kestrels and brown falcons.



Wedge-tailed Eagle
Aquila audax

Look carefully for the eyrean grasswren on the slopes of sand dunes, scurrying from one sandhill cane-grass clump to another.

Following a good season, the Simpson Desert can become a birdwatcher's paradise as flocks of birds arrive to take advantage of the water and abundant food, particularly around the playa lakes and temporary waterholes. Watch out for waterbirds, chats and the rare Australian bustard.

To escape the searing heat of the day, many of the Simpson Desert's mammal inhabitants only come out at night. Small marsupials including dunnarts and ampurta come out to feast on insects, while dingoes are out searching for bigger prey such as rabbits. If you've got a good field guide handy, try

to identify the different tracks on the sand dunes in the morning. The desert is also home to feral animals including rabbits, camels, foxes and horses.

As you drive, remain on the lookout for some of the reptilian inhabitants of the desert. Australia's biggest lizard, the perentie, can be found out here as well as the more common sand goanna. Painted and central bearded dragons can be found sunning themselves next to the track, while the desert python (the woma) and smaller beaked geckos and desert skinks may be seen if you take the time to look.



Fat-tailed dunnart
Sminthopsis crassicaudata
Image courtesy of Lorraine Hancox

Desert Parks Pass

A Desert Parks Pass is required to enter and camp in the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve and Conservation Park. It is also required for access and camping in other Desert Parks including:

- Witjira National Park (short-term permits also available)
- Lake Eyre National Park (short-term entry permits also available)
- Wabma Kadarbu Conservation Park (camping not permitted)
- Tallaringa Conservation Park (short-term entry and overnight camping permits also available)
- Innamincka Regional Reserve (short-term entry and overnight camping permits also available)

- Coongie Lakes National Park (short-term entry and overnight camping permits also available).

The Desert Parks Pass is valid for 12 months and is issued on a per vehicle basis. It includes the maps required to visit this area, information on the parks, and requirements for safe travel through the outback of South Australia.

Fees collected are used for conservation and to maintain and improve park facilities for your ongoing enjoyment.

Outback safety

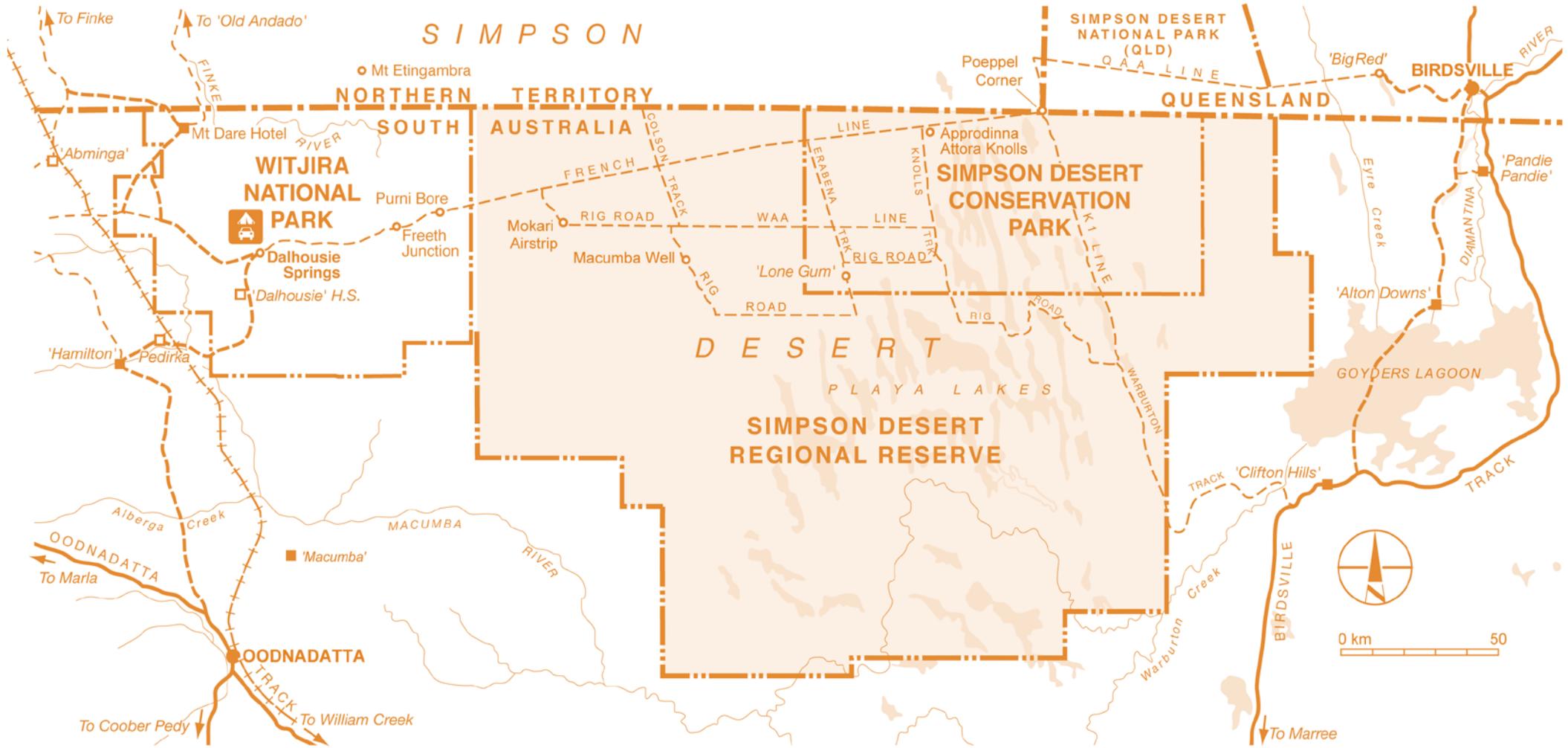
The outback of South Australia is a vast, wonderful and rewarding place to visit. To ensure that you get the best out of your experience it is important to obtain good advice and thoroughly prepare for your journey.

The Desert Parks Pass contains detailed safety instructions, outback driving advice, vehicle and supply checklists as well as detailed maps for extended travel throughout Australia's unforgiving outback.

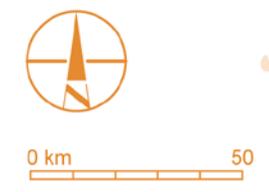
For shorter trips, pick up a *Remote Area Travel Information* brochure from Desert Parks Pass stockists, download it from www.parks.sa.gov.au or free-call the Desert Parks Hotline on 1800 816 078 to find out more.

Fire safety

- Wood fires are not permitted in the parks during the Fire Danger Season usually 1 November to 30 April. Please use liquid fuel or gas stoves only.
- On Total Fire Ban Days, all fires (liquid, gas and wood) are prohibited in the parks.
- Please do not collect firewood as fallen timber provides refuge for small animals. It is preferable you use a liquid fuel or gas stove.



- State boundary
- Park boundary
- Major unsealed road
- Minor unsealed road
- 4WD track
- Ghan railway (disused)
- River/creek
- Campground
- Homestead
- Ruin



Minimal impact

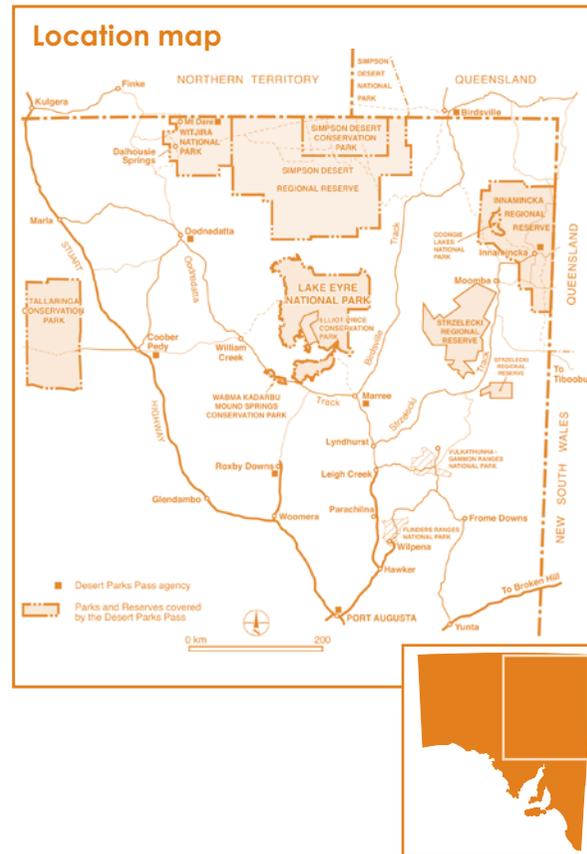
- Avoid washing close to water supplies, as even a small amount of soap or detergent will cause pollution.
- Bury toilet waste well away from water and burn toilet paper.
- Bag and carry out all rubbish.

The National Parks Code

Help protect your national parks by following these guidelines:

- Leave your pets at home.
- Take your rubbish with you.
- Observe fire restrictions, usually 1 November to 30 April. Check CFS Hotline 1300 362 361.
- Conserve native habitat by using liquid fuel or gas stoves.
- Respect geological, cultural and heritage sites.
- Keep wildlife wild. Do not feed or disturb animals or remove native plants.
- Keep to defined vehicle tracks and walking trails.
- Be considerate of other park users.

Thank you for leaving the bush in its natural state for the enjoyment of others.



For further information contact:

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Website www.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/

Desert Parks Hotline:

Free-call 1800 816 078
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Cover: Eyrean grasswren *Amytornis goyderi*
(Image courtesy of Lorraine Hancox)
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