



Hunter gatherer Denise brings home the quintessential guide of Top End birds

Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow, dressed in camouflage, hides herself in the muddy Arnhem Land swamps, patiently waiting for her unsuspecting avian targets to approach. It's hot and it's humid for the adopted Kunwinjku "old woman" but her patience and determination are a suitable match as she reaches for her side-arm, binoculars, a wad of paper and writing tools to capture the image of yet another bird of the Top End.

Denise is a modern day hunter-gatherer, tracking birds of the Northern Territory to produce the most comprehensive field guide to birds of Australia's Top End. Her visionary approach incorporates her adopted family, the Kunwinjku people of north-west Arnhem Land and, in turn, has provided the Kunwinjku with a tourism industry, the Baby Dreaming Project.

"Baby Dreaming is the country of the Kunwinjku people 400km north-east of Darwin. It's beautiful country with sandstone escarpments and exotic birds. It's the edge of the floodplains," says Denise from her home outside of Darwin.

"It's called 'mother country' by the people who live in Arnhem Land because it's believed to be where Aboriginal people originated and is said to be a place of baby spirits. It's also a place of strong women."

Denise is a big picture person. On one hand she has accomplished a feat most authors only dream of achieving in a lifetime. On the other, she immerses herself in a community of people far removed from her non-indigenous heritage.

"I'm a chameleon in many ways," she says. "I have had a career path like a mad dog's dinner. I was a buffalo shooter, I was an alderman on Darwin City Council, I was biological consultant, I'm a guide, I write books, and I have been a parent, grandmother to lots of Aboriginal grand kids. I'm an 'old lady' to an Aboriginal clan.

Denise moved to Darwin after Cyclone Tracey. "When I came up here, I found myself immersed in wildlife. I went camping and buffalo shooting and discovered a new world."

In the early 1980's Denise began birdwatching tours attracting guests from around the world and around Australia. Today the demand continues.

"What I'm trying to do is have an approach that involves everybody. Here are a people with all this information and they've basically been ignored as tour guides. I think tourism has to change so that it actually fits itself around indigenous people and



their values rather than the other way around. The values of generosity, fairness, tolerance, honesty.

"Kunwinjku people are really happy just to be making some money from tourism. Some of those people will continue down this road, they will go into tourism in a big way. Many of them might want to go into sight-seeing tourism, others might want to continue on there education into other fields. But a lot will be prepared to just sit on their

country, where people are safe, and welcome visitors and make that little bit of extra money and concentrate on keeping their kids, their grandkids and their country safe.

"And as far as I'm concerned that's an achievement in itself because without that structure being intact, nothing is going to be safe." ●

Birds of Australia's Top End, New Holland, RRP \$29.95