

# VOGUE

AUSTRALIA

“Now is the time for thoughtful fashion”

Guest editor

**EMMA WATSON**

Photographed by Peter Lindbergh

**MALALA**  
Nobel Peace Prize winner talks education

**CATE BLANCHETT**  
On the international refugee crisis

**TIM FLANNERY**  
Saving the Great Barrier Reef

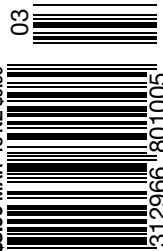
**JULIA ORMOND**  
Ten years of fighting slavery

**STELLA McCARTNEY**  
Pioneering sustainable style

**MAYE MUSK**  
The beauty of ageing

DESIGNING THE  
**FUTURE**

03



\$8.99 MAR '18 NZ \$9.99

9 312966 801005



# Rescue mission

South Australia's Arkaba, a former sheep station turned nature conservancy, is using tourism dollars to fund the ambitious restoration of a near-ruined outback landscape. By Mark Sariban.

| PHOTOGRAPHS DAVE WHEELER

The guide leading us along the dry creek bed stops and points ahead. A small group of kangaroos surrounds a puddle that's seeped up from the underground water table, taking turns to drink. One of the larger male roos decides he doesn't want to wait for his turn and tries to muscle in, sparking a fight with another male. They rear on their hind legs and box for a few moments before the matter is settled and they turn their backs on each other.

Our gaze turns to the wedge-tailed eagle soaring overhead on a thermal in the late-afternoon heat and then to what the eagle is eyeing off as a potential meal: a family of emus approaching the water hole. The two chicks – little bigger than domestic chickens at this stage, on long spindly legs – rush forward into the water, their much more cautious father (for it's the males who raise the kids) taking his time checking out the eucalypt-lined embankment and our small group of walkers before splaying his legs and flopping down into the mud to drink.

We're at Arkaba, a nature conservancy and tourism venture in South Australia's Flinders Ranges, on an ambling walk from the charming 1851 homestead along a dry creek to the former sheep station's shearing shed. It's a rugged, parched 160 square-kilometre property that takes in rolling (and at times roller-coasting) hills and the sheer formations of the Elder Range, just one of the mountain ranges that make up the Flinders. Acquired by Wild Bush Luxury, which also runs the Bamurru Plains wetlands retreat in the Northern Territory, Arkaba opened its doors to paying guests in 2009, with the last sheep taken off the property in 2013.

Sheep trails still crisscross the sparsely vegetated hills like fresh scars, a reminder of the havoc the animals played on an environment into which no hoofed animals had previously stepped. As I'm told several times during my stay here, no Australian native animal has hoofs.

"When I first came here, I didn't know where the road was," says general manager Brendon Bevan, an enthusiastic South African who's been running the property for the past eight years. "There was no

distinct edge where the vegetation started growing and the road was cleared. It was a moonscape. Bald. Now, with the sheep gone, it's not as good as it will be, but in a short amount of time it's really leapt at the opportunity to recover, having taken this pressure off."

This barren, sun-baked landscape is very much familiar, part of our national iconography in fact, so it comes as a shock to be told what I'm really looking at is a scene of environmental devastation, one that's only just begun to recover.

As he takes me around the massive property, Bevan often speaks in terms of pressure – pressure on native plants, pressure on the birds and the smaller marsupials and pressure on the water table, as well as the pressure that he and his staff are bringing to bear on non-native predators to help restore native animal populations. Returning this place to something resembling its pre-European-settlement days is an enormous task, especially given the state of the land after 150 years of sheep farming.

One of the biggest issues Arkaba faces is the sheer number of non-native predators and competitors for scarce resources – foxes, goats, rabbits and, of course, feral cats, the biggest threat to native wildlife after habitat removal.

"I refer to our non-native predators as poachers," says Bevan. "I was in anti-poaching units in South Africa for years and it's a very similar battle: with feral cats you're up against a very educated, formidable adversary you're trying to outwit and outsmart."

Alongside such steps as turning off the windmills – another outback icon with a hidden cost – to allow the water table to replenish and natural springs to re-emerge across the property, and clearing cover around water sources so feral cats can't ambush birds when they come to drink, Bevan and his team are continually applying that pressure to non-native predators, removing as many as they can through trapping and shooting. It's not pretty, indeed, several times Bevan tells me it's a horrible job, but one that's crucial for the recovery of the land and its wildlife. →

An 1856 stone shearing shed lies below the Elder Range; both are within the boundaries of Arkaba Conservancy in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia.



"I spent seven years of my life in Africa studying and preserving cats," he says, "and I've spent eight years in Australia doing exactly the opposite, but for good reason. A feral cat will kill from one or two animals up to 18 animals over a 24-hour period. Sixteen years of research will tell you we're losing anywhere between 60 and 80 million native animals a day to feral predators."

"Take the 400-odd foxes and 280-odd cats I've removed from Arkaba ... if we assume a conservative figure of five animals a day, removing 600-plus animals over eight years, it's knocking on the door of five million native animals we've saved. That's the bigger picture."

Besides Bevan's South African accent and the light-khaki shirts the guides wear, there's very much an air of an African safari to the Arkaba experience: guests are taken out in an open-air Land Cruiser with a raised tarpaulin canopy, binoculars at the ready to spot not lions and leopards but kangaroos, wallaroos, rock wallabies and emus amid the prickly acacia trees and spinifex tussocks springing back to life.

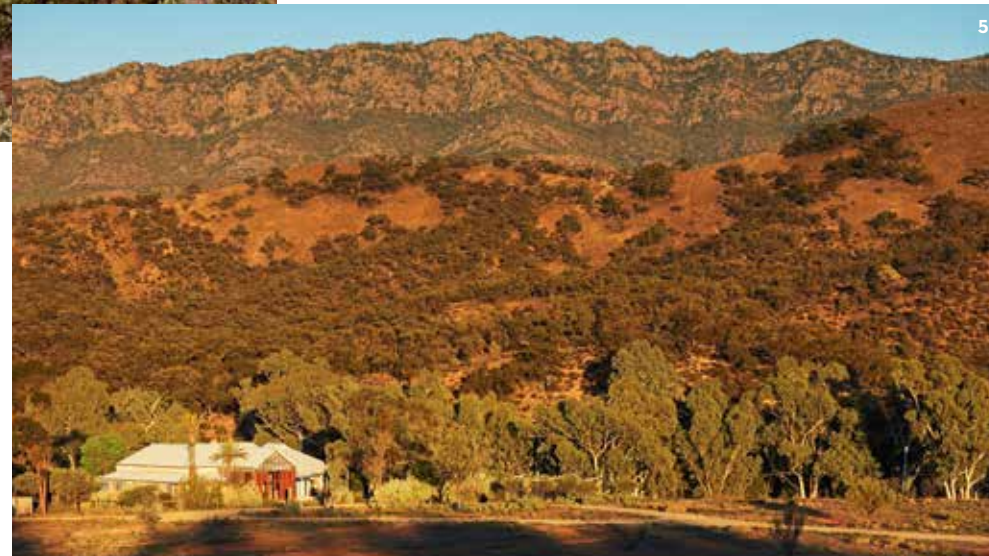
The bird population has bounced back to the extent I'm woken up at the homestead by a flock of pink galahs gathering in the tree outside my room – a dramatic improvement on when Bevan first arrived and found that the mornings were depressingly quiet. It's not just the birds that have returned to the property, says Bevan: "We've had our first western quoll since 1888 – it was a big day, very exciting – and now we're seeing small marsupials, stripe-faced dunnarts, fat-tailed dunnarts, little things most Australians have never heard of."

"It took me three years to see an echidna on Arkaba, then in the last walking season we encountered 67 in a seven-month season. We had an ageing population of echidnas, big ones with established defence mechanisms, solid spines on them. The next generation ... that little puggle, the moment he was denned, he was sniffed out and hammered. I'm not saying it's optimal yet, but it's bloody healthy now: we're seeing big ones, little ones, denned young in creek-bed embankments because they're not getting smashed by cats and foxes the moment they're out of the pouch. Bird life, reptiles like the gidgee skinks ... we've seen them come back in numbers. It's very rewarding."

Returning to the homestead in the early evening, we're greeted by a guide-turned-drinks waiter standing out front with a tray of chilled face towels and passionfruit daiquiris, having been alerted to our imminent arrival via short-wave radio. Dinner is being expertly prepared by one of the two resident chefs using South Australian produce and served under cover at a hefty glass-topped table at the back of the homestead. This is the luxe part of the Wild Bush Luxury experience, although you can also opt to do a four-day Arkaba Walk, which takes you from the nearby Wilpena Pound range across Arkaba's 26,000 hectares, staying overnight at two established camp sites in the hills.

With the dessert plates cleared and wine glasses refilled, we gaze out at the dozen or so kangaroos who've hopped over the courtyard fence to dine out on the green lawn of the small back garden. One by one my fellow guests retire for the evening and lights go off in the homestead. A blaze of stars fills the night sky and I step onto the lawn to take it all in. In the darkness I half-see, half-hear the roos around me, paying me no attention as they chomp on the grass. In the morning, a guide will sweep up the hundreds of dry roo droppings left on the lawn before guests appear for breakfast. And life at Arkaba will go on.

For details on Arkaba homestead stays, go to [www.arkabaconservancy.com](http://www.arkabaconservancy.com). And for more on the Arkaba Walk, go to [www.arkabawalk.com](http://www.arkabawalk.com). With thanks to South Australian Tourism Commission; [southaustralia.com](http://southaustralia.com).



"Our guests are not spectators on a bus: they are participants in a wonderful recovery story"  
– Arkaba's Brendon Bevan