

THE DESERT COMES ALIVE

Twin organic cattle operations in Central Australia are working with nature instead of against it.

Words & Photography: Jessica Howard
Cartography: Greg Franco





Willy Brown lurches through thigh-high buffel grass with steps as long as his legs. “See there,” he points to a shorter feathery patch waving in the breeze. “Cooch—cattle love it—very sweet.” A few more strides. He plunges his hand into the dense greenery and presents a tuft of stalks topped with seeds like rain drops on a spider’s web—native millet. “Cattle really like to browse,” he says, “and if they’ve got a few different varieties of pastures they do a lot better.”

This bovine buffet is deep inside the boundary of *Napperby*, one of four properties in the *Narwietooma* aggregation, 200 km north west of Alice Springs. Along with his wife Amanda, Willy manages the swathe of pastoral leases spanning 1.1 million ha (11,082 sq km) for Hewitt Foods, the world’s largest supplier of organic red meat. “I’m not a local to the Alice Springs area, but a few blokes have told me that it doesn’t get much better than this,” he says, referring to the string of good seasons that’s left parts of Central Australia resembling the lush east coast.

The aggregation stretches from the rocky West MacDonnell Ranges with its mix of creek flats and flood out areas—to downs flats where native grasses flourish. It carries 35,000 head of mostly Santa Gertrudis-cross and grey Brahman cows—in enormous paddocks up to 1200 sq km. “We’re trying to be as sustainable as we can,” Willy says, “and stock our paddocks accordingly so cattle can graze for a full year without worrying about the feed.

“In this area, cattle aren’t really lacking in a lot of vitamins and minerals. Because we don’t have the big rainfalls, grass doesn’t grow as big and as rank, and it holds onto its nutrients.” And so organic grazing is a natural fit—cattle mostly have everything they need

in the paddock without supplementation, while lower rainfall means parasites aren’t an issue.


There are subtle differences in the landscape too, if you’re in tune with it. “You see all the different types of marsupials at night time and a lot of birdlife and goannas,” Willy says. “That’s because the country’s not getting degraded and there’s good cover, so native animals can coexist with cattle.”

The operation is committed to low-stress stock handling techniques—and much of the twice-yearly mustering is done on horses and motorbikes. “Quiet cattle are fat cattle,” Willy says. When young animals are removed from their mothers they undergo a training process that involves yard work, long paddock walks and a trip on a road train. “Once they’ve been part of that they’re calm and come off the trucks and can go straight onto feed. They’re in a good frame of mind and can start putting kilos on straight away.”

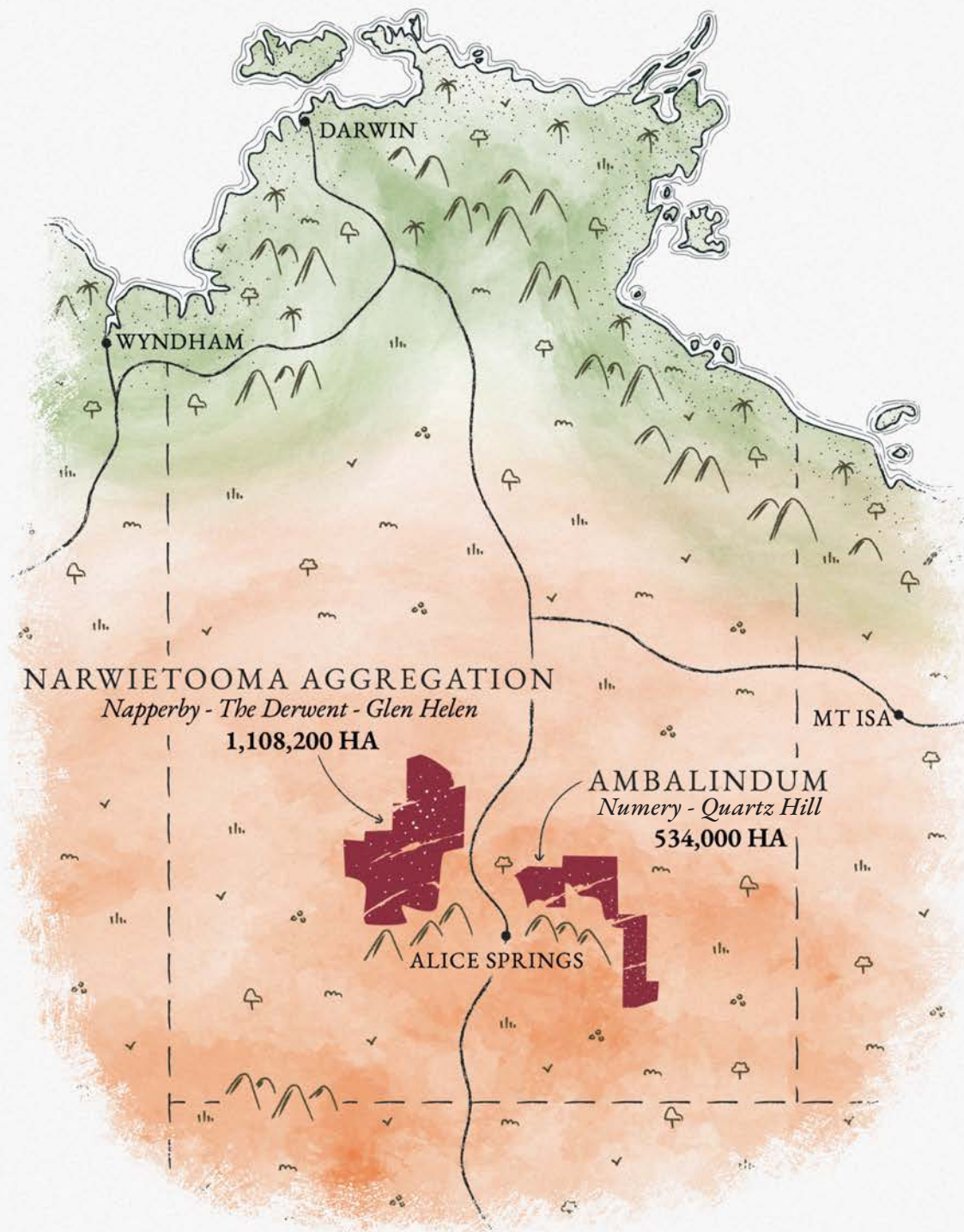
The stony tracks of *Napperby* give way to long stretches of red sand as we near *Narwietooma* homestead, where Mount Chapel looms over a vast paddock dotted with golden tussocks of Mitchell grass. At 1200 metres above sea level, it’s only slightly smaller than the Northern Territory’s highest peak, Mount Zeil—also on *Narwietooma*.

“I was pretty blown away by the view at first,” Amanda Brown says. She recalls feeling non-committal ahead of their job interview in late 2021—they were happy in WA, and in no hurry to move on. But as they flew into *Narwietooma*’s airstrip, something changed. “I was just so impressed with the beauty of the place.” It’s a long way from her Canadian upbringing in the suburbs of Calgary. “There couldn’t be a greater contrast in where I came from, to where I am now. But I wouldn’t change it for the world.” >>

Top: Summer, Amanda and Charlotte ride out into *Narwietooma*’s house paddock; *Bottom:* Amanda Brown and her husband Willy manage the aggregation—which is a long way from her native Canada; *Overleaf:* Willy in the foothills of the West MacDonnell Ranges facing the vast downs of *Narwietooma*.

A man wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and a tan cowboy hat stands with his back to the camera on a rocky outcrop. He is looking out over a vast, flat landscape of dry grass and scrub brush. In the distance, a range of low mountains is visible under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of vastness and quiet observation.

“A lot of country is still a
blank canvas here... and I like
seeing things moving forward.
It’s what gets me out of bed in
the morning.”



Above: The aggregations straddle Alice Springs, forming one of the largest organically certified land parcels in the world. *Right:* Narwietooma has a carrying capacity of around 35,000 head of cattle.



<< Willy saw the appeal of taking on such a big job. “A lot of country is still a blank canvas here,” he says. “So there’s a lot of improvements on infrastructure [to be done], putting in new waters and opening up the property so we can graze it and it can become more productive. I like seeing things moving forward. It’s what gets me out of bed in the morning.”

There are 22 full-time staff across the aggregation—stationhands, bore-runners, machine operators, a pilot and a cook—most of whom have worked together, or for Willy and Amanda before. “Willy has a fantastic reputation of being able to teach young people, and enjoys mentoring them,” Amanda says. “He works his staff really hard, but he does it with a lot of reward as well.” At communal meals, Willy is often surrounded by stockmen trading stories and the odd joke.

“We spend a lot of time with the crew, so there’s no us and them,” Amanda says. “We eat every meal with them, have beers with them at the end of the day, go to the same social events together.” Next year, *Narwietooma* aims to host its own campdraft—a sport many of the team compete in.

For the first time, there are more women than men—a happy accident according to Amanda. One of them, Charlotte, spent last season as a jillaroo before transitioning to governess this year for Willy and Amanda’s five-year-old daughter Eva. “They go riding horses together and have a beautiful relationship.”

On the first night of the season, a line of white Toyota Landcruiser traybacks is parked in a staggered row under a ghost gum near the kitchen, and a circle of young men and women has formed. Willy is alternating between catching up with his crew and working the BBQ—which he somehow manages without overcooking the thick rib fillets (unforgivable in these parts). The chatter is punctuated with laughter—some have driven thousands of kilometres and you can tell

they’re happy to be back. They’re mates. “Oh they really are,” Amanda agrees, “and that’s so important. Because this is such an isolated environment where everybody works so hard, it’s really important to foster that team spirit.”

Narwietooma is 150 km due west from *Ambalindum*, a smaller aggregation of pastoral leases on the other side of Alice Springs also owned by Hewitt Foods. I make the hour-long flight a day earlier in a Cessna 172, piloted by manager Craig Cook. Our journey hugs ranges so grand from the ground, but 6000 feet up resemble camouflage wrinkles. Mulga forests appear like spindly waves—their growth following the contours of the land. “Really I just don’t think you can beat an aerial perspective,” Craig says, “especially in the cattle industry because there are so many things you can see from the air very quickly.”

Craig has been flying for 20 years, and spends a lot of time in the air—as you might expect in a place where properties are the size of small European countries. The *Ambalindum* aggregation includes outposts *Numery* and *Quartz Hill* which are 160 km and 80 km from the homestead respectively—trips that take three and one-and-a-half hours on internal roads (when conditions are good). Most of the time he flies at 1000 feet, just low enough for a bird’s eye view. “It does take a long time to get from A to B because of the hills and the rocky roads. So the plane is a really good way to check on cattle, and on waters.”

Craig and his wife Sarah have managed *Ambalindum* since August 2022. They were both schooled in Alice Springs, but spent years working away in animal nutrition and public policy, before returning to pastoral stations a decade ago. “I think no country compares to it,” he says. “as far inputs, and ease of mustering. I think this is some of the best country in Australia.” >>

Top: Flocks of noisy galahs are particularly active in the mornings and afternoons around the yards at *Narwietooma*; *Bottom:* Willy Brown checks a solar pump near the homestead—without the presence of surface water, the properties rely on underground bore water.



Left: Craig Cook pilots a Cessna 172 due west from *Ambalindum* to *Narwictooma*, as the West MacDonnell Ranges rise into view.

<< *Ambalindum* is 534,000 ha (5,340 sq km), with a carrying capacity of 26,000 head. Like *Narwietooma*, it's a breeder operation—that is, a nursery of sorts for the Hewitt enterprise—where animals are born and kept until they're six months old, before being weaned from their mothers and sent to eastern properties for fattening.

The aggregation consists of granite mountainous country through the East MacDonnell Ranges down to desert sand plains, with alluvial flood plains between. Right now, there's grass everywhere—in many places the buffel is so tall, we struggle to spot cattle amongst it. “The energy of the bush at the moment is so strong and vibrant,” Sarah says. “We're seeing species I haven't seen for a long time, like black cockatoos, spinifex pigeons and lizards—so many lizards.” Central Australians work on a 10-year cycle of two years below average rainfall, two above, and six average. In other words: the good times never last, but neither do the bad.

“This district is known for its ability to regenerate after an extended dry period,” Sarah says, “and the year on year regeneration of the past few seasons has put so much [grass] seed back into the bank, which really holds us in good stead for the next dry time.”

Running a property of this size, with so many moving parts, is a delicate balancing act. “Getting road trains into this country can be a challenge,” Sarah says. “So you have to think of your movements and your mustering progress to make sure your cattle are exactly where they need to be, when they need to be there.”

“The waters can be very challenging [too],” Craig adds. “So having a really good understanding of the bores, the solar, the poly pipes, numbers of cattle on waters is important. We don't have a lot of artesian water. We have a lot of river channels, so the water here isn't unlimited, whereas artesian water pretty much is.” Like *Narwietooma*, watering points for cattle are monitored remotely, via around 90 *Farmbot* units positioned on

tanks. “It makes a huge difference,” he says. “Just this morning, I was looking on [the system] and I let the boreman know at *Quartz Hill* there's a tank on its way down, can you go and sort it out? We'd just dropped 700 cows into that paddock.”

There's a team of 17 at *Ambalindum* this year—from newly-graduated Kieran whose Mum drove him from Brisbane to start work, to experienced stockman Lachy who happens to be a trained opera singer, and Alan, a mechanic who brought his family and a caravan up from Melbourne on a working holiday of sorts. “We have a range of age groups and skill sets,” Sarah says, “but we think it's important to have those varieties, because you put those people together and often they come up with really great solutions to the challenges of the day.

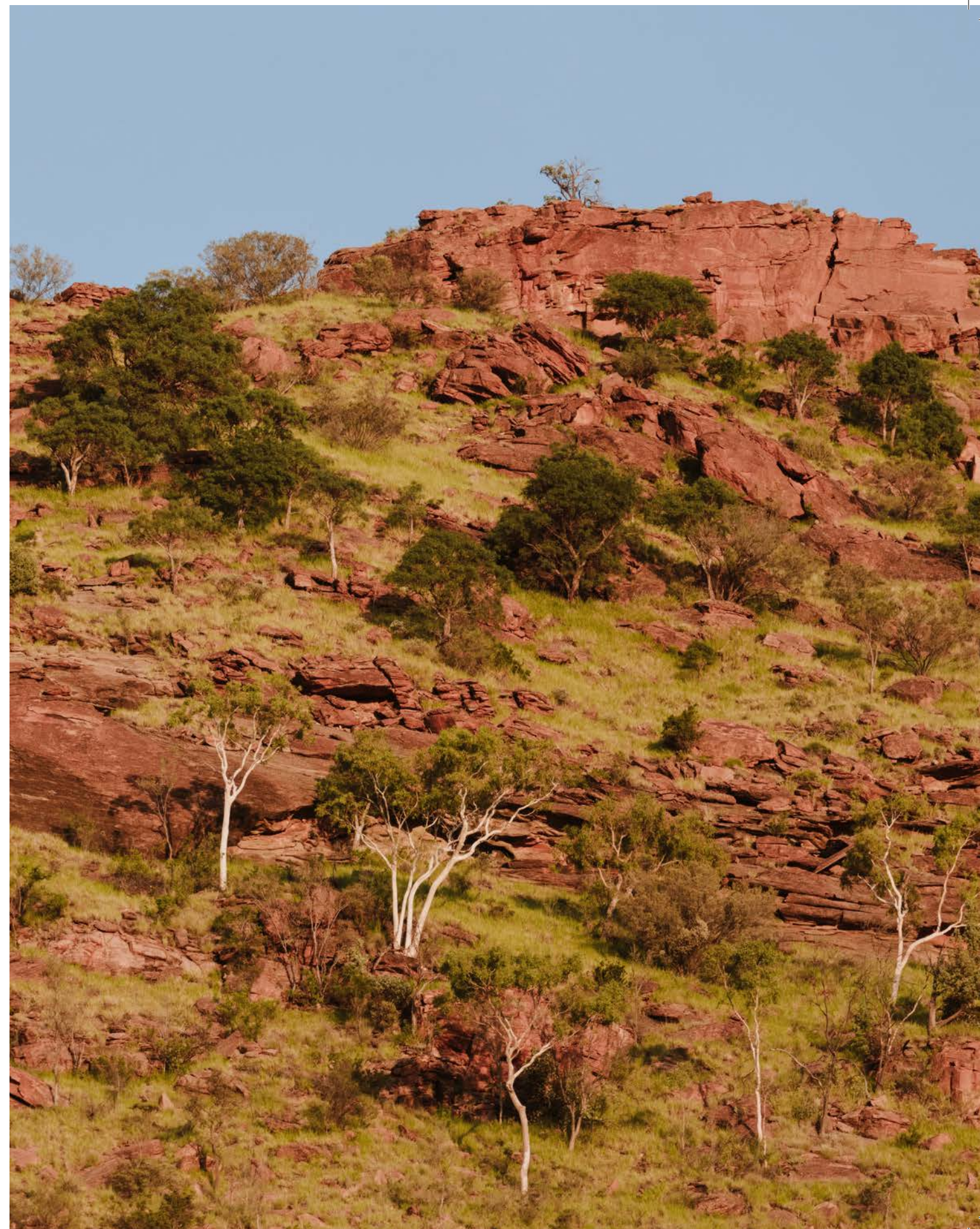
“Everyone brings something to the table.”

Before I leave, Sarah suggests we catch sunrise at *Quartz Hill*—meaning a steady drive from the homestead in darkness. “It'll be worth it,” she promises. She's a keen photographer, so I believe her.

It isn't quite 4:00 AM when we start out on the freshly graded road with soft sandy shoulders. The pupils of a hundred eyes reflect in our headlights as we slow to a crawl between them. Cows and calves are nestled together asleep on the road, and are slow to move away. The shroud of darkness makes it feel like we're driving in an endless tunnel, until finally Sarah stops. “Wind down your window,” she instructs. The organic warmth of pre-dawn rushes in, and the crackle of the bush fills the car.


Together we stand on a track so red it's like the earth is bleeding and watch as the whisper of day lingers on the horizon. A wall of ancient granite glows ahead of us like the extinguishment of a campfire is happening in reverse. Glow turns to fire as the Harts Ranges ignite before us. “I wish more people loved the bush like it deserves to be loved,” Sarah says later. “It's got so much to give and I just feel not enough people understand the beauty of our country.” Day is here, and the desert is alive. **B**

Right: Sunrise hits ancient granite mountains in the Harts Ranges at *Quartz Hill*, an outpost of *Ambalindum*. A string of good seasons has led to widespread regeneration of grasses, putting the operation in good stead for coming years.





Above: *Ambalindum* managers Craig and Sarah Cook are passionate advocates of young people experiencing station life. “You’re training them to look for solutions when there aren’t many options,” Sarah says; *Opposite top:* Cattle are corralled into smaller paddocks using spear traps, which are one-way gates that prevent them from leaving—a low-stress alternative to mustering; *Bottom:* Red ochre formations at a crossing of Tug Creek. The aggregation is home to a number of geologically significant sites.

A large flock of budgerigars is captured in flight over a dam in Central Australia. The birds, with their characteristic green and yellow plumage, are scattered across the sky and are also seen landing on the muddy banks of the dam. In the foreground, two brown cows are drinking water from the dam. The background features a lush green landscape with trees and a clear blue sky. The overall scene depicts a thriving budgerigar population in a natural setting.

Below: The budgerigar population is thriving in Central Australia after a boyant wet season. Thousands congregate at this dam at *Ambalindum*, as unbothered cattle drink nearby; *Overleaf:* Dawn breaks over *Quartz Hill* which is framed by an ancient mountain range.

