



EAST

Sunrise creates a spectacular scene in the sand dunes of the eastern Simpson Desert.

THE DESERTS OF AUSTRALIA have no respect for political divisions; they, of course, follow geology. I consider the eastern desert regions to be those areas straddling the Queensland–Northern Territory border, the Queensland–South Australia border and the New South Wales–South Australia border. This vast region encompasses the eastern reaches of the Simpson Desert west of Boulia and Birdsville; the Sturt Stony Desert south and west of Innamincka and the Channel Country of New South Wales; and the Strzelecki Desert along the New South Wales–South Australia border, including the arid area that stretches south to the Flinders Ranges.

I enjoy finding out about the origins of the names of Australian places. Some desert names are a bit plain and lacking in imagination: Great Sandy, Little Sandy ... hmm, it's a desert, so it's going to be sandy! But most of the rest are named after prominent citizens who were associated with pioneering expeditions to these regions, either as participants, colleagues of participants, or sponsors.

The Simpson Desert was first explored by Charles Sturt, but it was named by explorer Cecil

Madigan after Alfred Allen Simpson, an Australian industrialist, philanthropist, geographer and one-time president of the South Australian branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia. Mr Simpson was also the owner of the Simpson washing-machine company. The Simpson Desert is known for its vast numbers of parallel sand dunes running for hundreds of kilometres in a mostly north–south orientation. If you follow the popular four-wheel-drive tracks from Birdsville to Mount Dare, you'll cross over 1400 such dunes along the way.

The first European to visit the Sturt Stony Desert was Charles Sturt, in 1844, and he named it after himself (he actually called it 'Sturt's Stony Desert'). It is in fact extremely stony, with the inter-dunal flats being covered with 'gibbers' – hard red rocks that must have made trekking on horseback a nightmare. These stones sit mostly on top of the underlying soil: it's just a single layer with fewer gibbers buried below. This has confused geologists, and there are various theories as to why these 'gibber plains' occur. According to conventional thinking, they were created



A startled flock of corellas erupts into the air in Diamantina National Park, Queensland.



by a combination of fragmentation, erosion and the continuous winds carrying away the lighter particles to accumulate in dunes. However, since the stones all appear to be much the same age, a newer theory has arisen, which suggests that they began as lava flows that gradually broke up and then the fragments ‘floated’ on the underlying soil as a result of frost and/or salt heave, a swelling of the soil that can lift stones to the surface.

The Strzelecki Desert was named after the Polish explorer Pawel Edmund Strzelecki by good old Charles Sturt, on his third and last major expedition, in 1844. Strzelecki had explored much of Australia’s south-east, particularly in the High Country of Victoria and New South Wales – he was the first to climb to Australia’s highest point, naming it Mount Kosciuszko after Polish national hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko. The Strzelecki Desert, like the Simpson, is characterised by long parallel dune systems and encompasses some very large dry lakes, such as 100-kilometre-long Lake Frome.

Residents of Windorah, Queensland, are benefiting from an experimental solar power array on the outskirts of town.



ABOVE Some of the east's most intensely red dunes are found at Windorah, Queensland.

LEFT Whistling plumed ducks take advantage of overflow water from a station tank in Diamantina National Park, Queensland.

The Cadelga Ruins, on the Cordillo Downs Road in South Australia, give a sense of the hardships endured by early settlers.





ABOVE Not far from the Walkers Crossing turn-off, about 100 kilometres south of Birdsville, the Birdsville Track has claimed another victim.

RIGHT Around an isolated homestead near Broken Hill in New South Wales, the Mundi Mundi Plains stretch to infinity.





Goanna tracks cross a bare sand dune in western Queensland.