



MURRAY RIVER TRAILS

Championing Environmental Flows with Tony Sharley

RELATED EXPERIENCES:

Murray River Safari

3 DAYS / 2 NIGHTS (SHARED)

Murray River Walk

4 DAYS / 3 NIGHTS (SHARED)

**CONSERVATION IN ACTION**

- Participate in citizen science programs to document vegetation and wildlife in the region
- Provide a financial contribution towards the Murray River Trails Fund, supporting the region's biodiversity and river floodplain health



The Murray-Darling Basin spans an area of one million square kilometres, and for owner and founder of Murray River Trails, Tony Sharley, its protection is crucial. "Having a basin like this is significant," he explains. "It is one-seventh the size of Australia, or four times the size of New Zealand, and if we protect it and ensure we get the flow regimes right, we have a resource that will attract people from all over to see it."

Overbank flows (small floods that feed forests and fill shallow lakes) trigger the regeneration of phytoplankton and zooplankton, which in turn initiates the breeding cycle in insects, frogs, fish and water birds and recharges groundwater systems. "It's a natural and vitally important cycle," Tony explains.

"But since the introduction of water storage systems and the growth of the irrigation industry, the overbank flows have dramatically decreased." Tony and his guides discuss the concept of river health throughout all tours, engaging guests with fascinating stories that capture the importance of preserving the environment.

"Most of the people who book with us love to learn and crave a greater depth of understanding," Tony explains. "The challenge is to help people understand why balanced water sharing is the key to the future of the basin, and why more water must return

to its environment."

Up until the 1920s, the rivers flowing in the Murray-Darling Basin were unregulated, so 90 percent of the water flowed out to sea covering floodplains and filling wetlands and creeks along the 2,500km plus journey. "This is an ephemeral river system that naturally flooded and dried, but today we have reversed the way the system works and only 10 percent of the water makes its way out to the sea," Tony explains.

"The other 90 percent is held up in dams and released slowly for irrigation and for small environmental purposes, and that's not enough to spill out onto the floodplains. Consequently, we don't get those triggering events as frequently – the flooding of dry ground that produces that smorgasbord of food that results in a natural breeding event."

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Discovering Native Plants with Andrew Walladge

RELATED EXPERIENCES:

Murray River Safari

3 DAYS / 2 NIGHTS (SHARED)

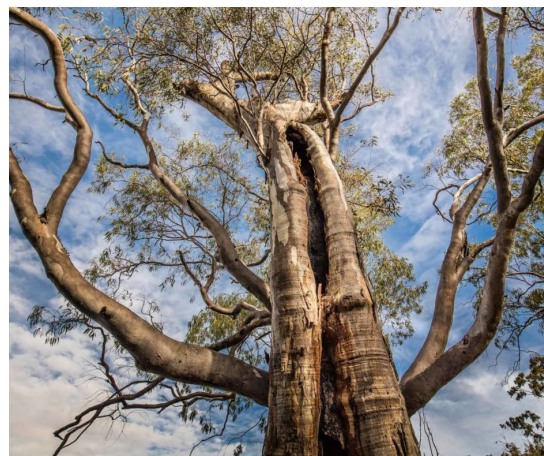
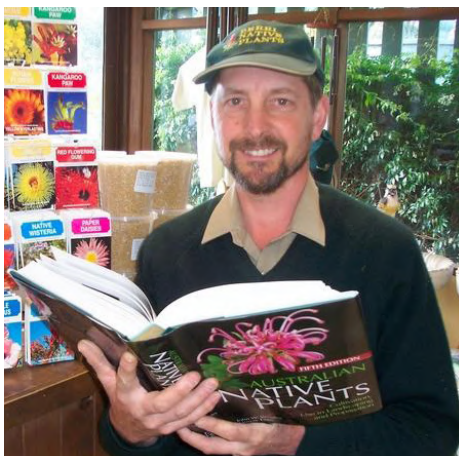
Murray River Walk

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For local native plant enthusiast and Murray River Trails guide, Andrew Walladge, going to work is essentially a fun day out. "Through guiding, I'm able to share my passion for Australian plants with people who are genuinely interested," he says. "It's such a joyful way to spend time."

Andrew could talk plants all day... and he does when guiding, explaining that his previous work with State Flora has shaped him into someone who is passionate about sharing his love of plants with others. "Often our days start at sunrise, and then I'll stay up talking after dinner with interested guests," he says.

Over the course of the tour, guests will see about 30 species of native Australian plants in the Murray River floodplain, and what Andrew enjoys talking about most is the interconnection between the plants and the surrounding organisms.

"Once we get a high river on dry floodplains, the life cycle wheels are in motion," Andrew explains. "The microflora starts growing first, then the microorganisms that grow on the microflora come along, next it's the invertebrates, then the smaller bird species, then the raptors... it's a snowball that gets bigger and bigger."

The location of different plant species dictates their water needs, too. The River Red Gums are on the low-lying terraces needing regular watering, while the Black Box Woodlands are on higher terraces and are more drought tolerant." Discussing how pivotal each of these organisms are to one another provides guests with a deeper understanding of the region, and at the same time links in to how long it has been there in one form or another.

"Our guests are always taken aback when we encircle a large River Red Gum with outstretched arms to measure the girth."

"Our guests are always taken aback when we encircle a large River Red Gum with outstretched arms to measure the girth," Andrew says. "Approximately one-metre girth at chest height equals about 100 years of growth, and this is often an eye-opener for guests. We stand back after this activity and the unspoken sentiment is: we are nothing."

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Birdlife in a River Floodplain with Tony Sharley

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Owner and founder of Murray River Trails, Tony Sharley, never tires of seeing guests discover a destination through the presence of its birds. "We spend the bulk of our time in the Riverland Ramsar wetlands, which is home to more than 180 species of birds. We can see migratory water birds, local black swans, ducks, honeyeaters, and several species of parrots including the vulnerable Regent Parrot, and raptors including the Wedge-tailed Eagle," Tony says. "Two of our smallest birds, the Red-capped Robin and the Mistletoebird, are celebrated when sighted because of their brilliant red plumage."

Smaller birds are easy to see with good binoculars, but long-distance water birds are often difficult to identify, so Murray River Trails invested in a special Swarovski spotting scope in 2019 to help guests see them up close and clearly. "This single scope can magnify by up to 60 times," Tony says. "When we're out exploring, I set it up and focus it on a bird I've seen in the distance, and then everyone has an opportunity to take a look. Guests often experience a kind of awakening when they can see the bird's finer details."

Although birds can be admired year-round,

Tony explains that the Murray River Trails' touring season runs from March to November, with each month offering something unique.

"I really enjoy observing Blue-winged Shovelers and Pink-eared Ducks. They are such beautiful wetland birds that use their filter feeding bills to catch small aquatic plants and animals that live in the ephemeral lakes when they fill," Tony says.

"The Rainbow Bee-eaters are also fascinating and you can set your clock by them. They arrive from northern Australia in the first week of October and stay until the first week in April. They come here to breed and dig out tiny tunnels in the sandy cliffs found on either side of the river valley. They build their nests inside those tunnels."

For Tony, any bird sighting is exciting and he transmits that passion to anyone who visits. "Water birds are great indicators of river health and they are also incredibly graceful to watch," he says. "The reason we launched Murray River Safari in 2020 was to show visitors the mosaic of wetland and terrestrial habitats that are connected to Australia's largest river system."

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Learning about Native Fish with Kym Manning

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Deep in the Murray River channel between Kingston and Moorook in South Australia's Riverland, lies a fish hotel that weighs a whopping 10 tonnes, understood to be the biggest man-made structure found in the basin.

"I assembled it in my front yard," Murray River Trails guide and fishing enthusiast, Kym Manning, explains. "It was picked up by a 100-tonne crane so that it could be placed deep enough in the river to ensure it wouldn't disrupt any boats."

The enormous wood and iron structure is one of nearly 100 fish hotels that Kym has built and helped position in the Murray-Darling Basin including Lake Bonney – a freshwater lake fed by the Murray River – over the years, thanks to various fundraising efforts that have helped the concept catapult. "The hotels are structures made from River Red Gum and they're designed to shelter native fish, such as Murray Cod, Golden Perch and Silver Perch.

We hope that this helps facilitate the growth of their populations," Kym explains. "I also run the SA Carp Frenzy fishing competition targeting the pest species, European Carp, drawing over 800 fishermen to our small town every year. To date, we have removed almost 30,000 carp and raised \$70,000 from the proceeds, with 100 percent of the raised

funds donated back to community projects."

Through his guiding work with Murray River Trails, Kym is able to educate guests about the Murray River and the multitude of aspects that all play a role in the river's health. "What I like to do is pull up a root ball from the river, and from there we start a discussion about fish habitat and the destruction of the environment.

"It's about increasing awareness of how important underwater habitat is, and reminding people that it's not just about what you see above the water line."

I tell guests about how the paddle steamers pulled three million root balls out of the basin since they started trading along the river in the 1850s. And, I rationalise that if three million trees were chopped down, it wouldn't go unnoticed," Kym explains. "It's about increasing awareness of how important underwater habitat is, and reminding people that it's not just about what you see above the water line."

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Tasting Native Food with Andrew Fielke

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

Murray River Escapes including
Native Food Masterclass

3-7 DAYS (PRIVATE)



It's the sort of travel memory that lasts a lifetime. A fun day out exploring made all the more spectacular as the setting sun highlights ribbons of pinks and oranges across the sky. After all that exhilarating exercise, starting a meal with a superb entree of local Murray Cod baked with a crunchy Lemon Myrtle parmesan crust elevates the day to even further heights.

Gourmet native cuisine is part of any tour with Murray River Trails, with renowned chef and native food expert, Andrew Fielke, in charge of the culinary direction. "When I was training as a young chef in Europe, I was always amazed at how the French and Italians embraced their cuisine, so when I returned to Australia in 1985, moving into native food was a logical progression," he says.

Today Andrew's native food business involves buying and selling food from all over Australia, as well as working with tourism operators. "I remember going on one of the Murray River Trails first walks to suss out the landscape and then designed a menu that encapsulates their unique offering. I really enjoy developing meals that showcase a certain region, so you can actually taste the place," Andrew says.

"We started by collecting local Saltbush leaves and creating Saltbush

scrambled eggs, which is now a regular breakfast offering. Recently I developed a yabbie bisque for guests, a unique soup made from the shell of yabbies in the classic French style, but with the famed shellfish of our Australian waterways married with Asian flavours. Another meal guests enjoy on tour is our Massaman Thai curry, with locally bred slowly simmered beef and native aniseed used instead of star anise."

For those seeking a more personalised experience, a private Native Food Masterclass led by Andrew is also on offer. "I call it a show and tell, taste and smell," Andrew explains. "We crush, taste and smell a range of native ingredients and I talk about how they can be utilised in different ways. Then, I usually run through a simple cooking demonstration or get everyone involved in preparing a special menu using the ingredients we tasted. Sitting down to the meal at the end of it all is a huge highlight."

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The Geology of the Murray River Valley with Tony Sharley

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When owner and founder of Murray River Trails, Tony Sharley, first introduces the concept of geology to guests, he starts off by drawing a sketch in the sand. "I use my walking pole as a pen to draw a diagram," he explains.

"My first horizontal line is the river that started flowing 600,000 years ago. The next line above that represents beach sand at the base of the cliffs, that forms a spectacular mustard-coloured layer, a remnant of when the sea retreated about 2.3 million years ago. A rich red clay lies above that, formed at the base of a land-locked freshwater lake 700,000 years ago. And the top line represents pink-hued sands that were blown in off the continental shelf during two ice ages 12,000 and 40,000 years ago."

Tony says that once guests understand how the landscape was formed, they gain a newfound appreciation for the beautiful vistas they see whilst exploring. "It doesn't matter where we go, those layers are always on show and they are the building blocks for the stories I tell," he says.

Tony's stories keep coming, and he times them perfectly so that guests can truly appreciate their significance. "I tell the geology story on our

sunrise walk," he says. "As we near the top of the cliffs the sun begins to rise over the vast landscape illuminating the coloured cliffs with a shimmer of water running through it. A kookaburra might start calling, then we walk a bit further before we stop for coffee and tea, biscuits and a chat."

"It doesn't matter where we go, those layers are always on show and they are the building blocks for the stories I tell."

The river lies at the base of the spectacular coloured cliffs and slowly changes its course as it meanders through the valley, as it has for 600,000 years, cutting and filling its way through the sands, silts and clays of a broad floodplain up to 15 kilometres wide.

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