

## THE TURTLE HUNTERS

By NORMAN W. CALDWELL

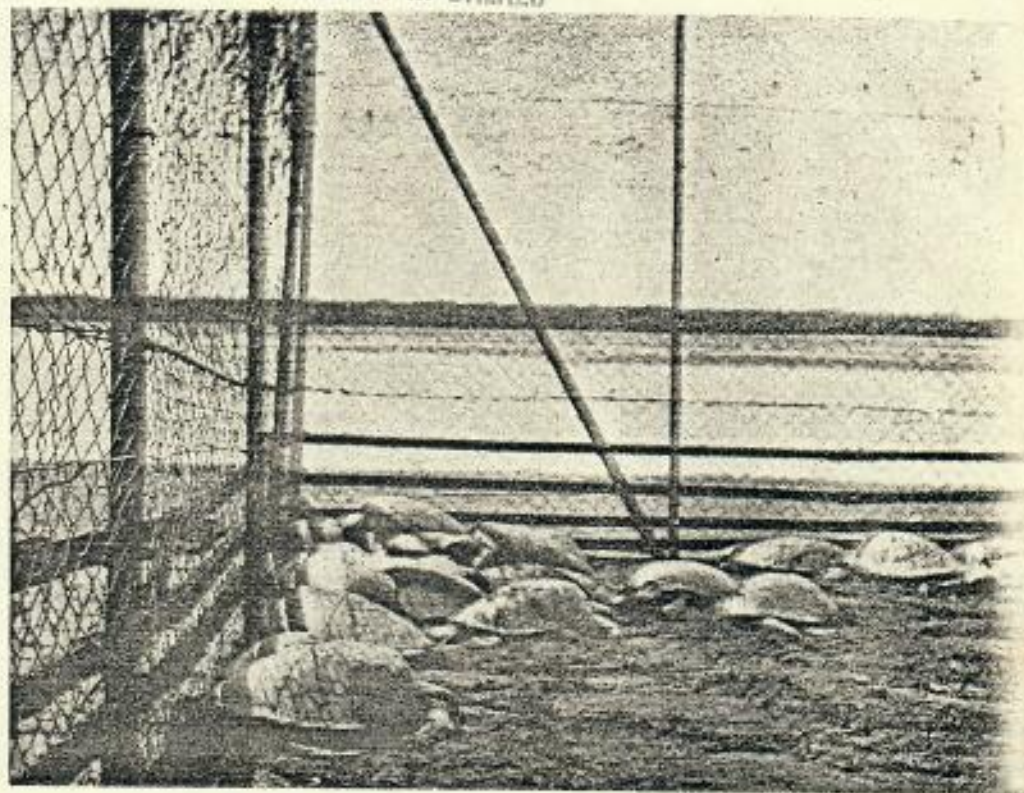
SEVERAL months ago I was invited by a Sydney syndicate to help form a company for canning turtle soup in Western Australia. After studying a rough draft prospectus I turned the offer down. I realized that with the rising cost of material, freight, labour, etc., there would be one outcome: the venture would not pay.

However, meeting these men reminded me of an adventure three of us had amongst turtles. Ever been Cossack way? It's a creek town of limited dimensions, and despite the savage willy-willies which have battered the coastline, it still hangs together as a distributing centre for wool and many other products.

I had seen turtle swimming up the Great Barrier Reef way, and had had an occasional feed from one, but the idea of making soup from the flesh was far from my thoughts, until I received a telegram from Captain Tommy Turner, chief of the Australian Canning Company, Cossack, Nor'-west Australia, offering me the factory manager's job. At the time I was busy catching sharks for their by-products, from an island base, yet not too busy to refuse an opportunity to see what the Golden West looked like at close quarters.

Anyway I left Bowen, North Queensland, early one Monday morning for the long overland journey to Perth. Tommy Turner met me at the city station. He was no stranger to me. I knew him of old. We'd worked together in charge of Marine Industries Ltd, N.S.W. A short square-shouldered bronze-faced man, his keen deep-set eyes seemed to absorb one at a glance. He began his career in Nor'-west Australia on a sheep station, then gold mining called, before the sea's spell got him.

I learned the story of his English-Australian company, whose turtle soup factory was at Cossack. I gathered that the waters of the Nor'-west were the home of green turtle, that the factory could



Turtles in pen at Cossack

absorb double the number of turtle then being captured, that the soup was destined to become famous the world over. Yes, we also talked a lot regarding the working of the factory. He told me of a net he'd bought in London, built on shark-meshing lines, also the plan he'd formed for it to catch turtles. The set-up sounded good to me, and as I'd had a long experience of handling similar massive nets shark fishing in New South Wales waters, I reasoned that if we were successful the captured turtles would keep the cannery hands extremely busy. Several days later we shipped some cannery gear to Cossack by the T.S. Steamer *Kalinda*, then boarded the weekly plane to that port. However, I found that the landing strip at Roebourne was our aerial destination, a car taking us to Cossack. I "signed on" with Dave Stone of the Weld Hotel as guest. The hotel, a long rambling one-storied wooden structure, suited me well.

Cossack is built near the southern bank of a fairly wide creek which runs inland about one mile. The creek rises and falls eighteen feet. It is thickly populated by fish, a nice edible variety. Dense clumps of green-leaved mangrove trees fence the opposite banks of the creek. Near the stone-walled jetty (used mostly then by sea-going lighters which carried shell, turtle soup, baled wool and other goods to the occasional Perth-Singapore steamers anchored in the roadstead, was the turtle-holding pen, facing the factory. It was a large wired-in, mud-floored enclosure. In it turtles were held until required by the factory. It flooded with every tide, and on the ebb carried just sufficient water to give the shellbacks coolness from the

sunshine. Away on the mud-flats inland, often swept by very high tides and left encrusted with salt, dozens of kangaroos played or hunted. Mirages were plentiful there, and several times I thought the flats had collected the ocean waves, but as I walked towards them they disappeared and I found them behind me. Small creeks, mangrove-fringed, toured through the high sandhills topdressing the foreshore and filled billabongs in which swam snakes, large and small. Several miles inland, I heard, gold mines prospered, while our nearest town was Roebourne.

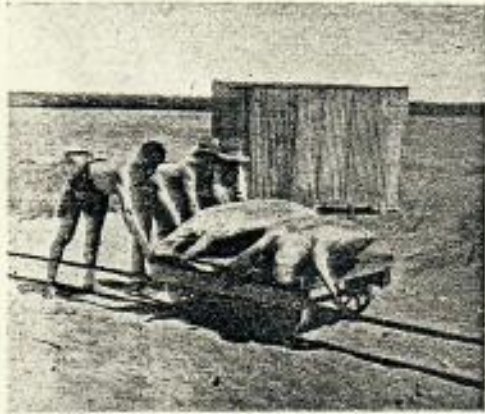
THE cannery, I found, was situated near the creek and had solid walls of stone, concrete floors, massive sliding doors and heavy machinery. Its strength had been tested by some of the fiercest storms swept in from the Indian Ocean. Near the western end of the cannery was the old Cossack lock-up. I found the cells open and empty, excepting for some enormous cockroaches, which had forsaken their habitat, the yards-wide underground water tank of cement.

Captain Turner introduced me to the engineer supervising the plant, Ernie Cooke. I liked him at sight, especially when I learned he was an ex-digger of World War 1. Slow-speaking, solid, he wasted few words on trivialities. One thing he did not tell me was that he carried a legacy of his overseas experiences in his broad hairy chest, a piece of shrapnel. Then I discovered Marko, a Greek lad who was one of the turtle "strippers." He stripped the shell and plastron of its green flesh, cut off and cleaned the flippers, and also saw that the thirteen thin plates of veneer adorning a green turtle's upper



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shell were loosened by steam heat and pulled off. These, if cooked, give the soup a bitter flavour, although the solid shell itself adds value to the soup. But what attracted me to the lad was his swimming prowess. Each morning before dawn lightened the sky, Marko and brother Toni, if the pen was flooded, would search for and capture the turtles needed at the factory that day.



Taking turtles to pen.

I've a reason for mentioning Ernie Cooke and Marko because they feature in the story I have to tell. Fifty turtles per week was the input when I reached Cossack. The catchers received 10/- each for them. The catching location was the reefs surrounding the Flying Foam Islands, some thirty miles south. They were taken by hand. Watching from a small speedy launch, the men sought and selected a feeding turtle, then chased it to a standstill. When it lay exhausted on the reef, one of the men dived and secured the shellback. Later it became a member of the island's holding pen.

Turtles are inoffensive, likeable creatures, bent on enjoying life like the rest of us, and penning them for long periods did not appeal to me. However, there was no other way of keeping them alive, especially as the Indian Ocean, including the waters surrounding the islands, is alive with sharks, monsters of almost incredible length and weight. But the turtle catchers were alive also to the danger from the brutes and took the risks they ran as portion of the day's work. No harpoons were used. Catching the shellbacks meant taking them alive—just man and turtle. Generally the man won.

One Friday, it was the 13th of course, Ernie Cooke, the Greek lad Marko, and I sailed the lugger *Calarmi* to the turtle islands, taking with us the great net. We had tested the latter in the Cossack roadstead waters and captured a number of sharks. Visiting the islands was a welcome project after the stifling heat of the cannery, and there was no forty-hour week then.

We reached our destination early the next day. Anchoring the *Calarmi* in deep water, we took stock of our surroundings. Half a mile away we noticed some of the

crew of a Japanese lugger diving for shell. They were workers, those fellows. The islands were overloaded with ironstone rock, that and sand. What landing beaches we saw were yellow shell grit. West of the islands, so Cooke explained, acres upon acres of reef bared their fangs at low tide. There was no sign of the turtle men, so assuming they were chasing shellbacks elsewhere, we manned the twelve-foot-long dinghy and went in search of the two. What submerged reef coral we noticed was dead. No colouring like that which gave enchantment to the Barrier Reefs, just a drab hue.

Fish were plentiful. We saw turtle too, in incredible numbers. Marko rowed, Ernie Cooke sat in the stern, and I was in the bows with my camera. Cooke advised a thorough search of the reefs while the tide ebbed. Here and there we noticed huge boulders of water-worn rock whose bulk churned the water into a bedlam of conflicting currents. Several dugong swam leisurely away as we neared them. It was a day of glassy calm. We travelled swiftly.

**S**UDDENLY I noticed the water ahead was changing colour, a deep bluish green. I wondered why? "Row that way, Marko," I instructed, pointing to where I wanted him to go. His strong arm muscles carried the dinghy along. Suddenly a cone-shaped opening appeared in the reef beneath us, one about thirty feet wide. It shelved slowly into depth, its centre being almost black. Sea grass climbed the walls aplenty. Then with wild gyrations, and leaving a bubbly wake, a frightened turtle came surging upwards. Its sudden appearance from the unknown depths suggested something to me as to the possibilities of the place.

I told my companions. The idea appealed. Hurriedly we rowed to where the *Calarmi* lay anchored and loaded the turtle net, anchors, etc., into the dinghy. An hour later we reached the mysterious hole again. There was still water covering the reef when we got busy with crowbars. A number of holes were driven into the cement-like sea floor. Into these we hammered long wooden stakes, the latter being part of the lugger's deck equipment for carrying turtles. This finished, over went the thousand-foot long net with its six-inch mesh. One end we fastened to a stake, and continued staking it until the reef opening was almost completely surrounded. From the air it would have looked like the figure 6 because the net continued across the reef until it came to an end. It was securely moored with double ropes to sixty-pound anchors. Tidal waters whirled over the reef again before our trap was finished.

I did not expect to capture anything until dusk, so we continued our exploration journey. Soon after, we saw the turtle men working. On the bows of the twenty-foot launch poised the diver, one hand pointing, while his mate nursed the

engine and steered. The chase was on, for spray winged the bows of the boat. We did not see the turtle being pursued, however.

Near the island's north end the water deepened somewhat at a place where sea grass grew richly. It was several feet high, but now swayed with tidal flow. There seemed to be feeding turtles everywhere. They loved the fresh green food and barely noticed our drifting dinghy.

Marko, his face wreathed in smiles, glanced my way hopefully. "Can I catch one?" he queried.

Cooke and I laughed. "Go ahead, lad," I told him. So, stripping, he waited his chance and dived. His first victim was not large, being but eighty pounds in weight. Taken by surprise it fought little and soon lay on its back in the dinghy. Marko was happy now. "More soon," he grinned. Soon turtle two, a larger one, thrashed its flippers helplessly as it joined its companion. The Greek lad certainly could swim and really enjoyed his under-sea tours.

I was at the oars when Cooke spotted an outside in turtles. He guessed its weight at 500 pounds. However, it did not wait to meet Marko. Another turtle with a beautiful black and yellow shell came swimming along. Cooke pointed it out to the Greek lad. "That cove's worth 10/- if you catch him," he said.

Marko rubbed his hands together. "I'll get him," he declared, before he dived. The turtle made no attempt to escape. It



The "catcher" holds the turtle by its front flippers.

came swimming towards the lad as if it was glad to meet him. Then came a vivid act of pantomime: The turtle whirled away like the wind, then turned, its mouth open, a mouth with a parrot-shaped beak. It had cruel sharpened ends. Suddenly it attacked, sailing at the swimmer like a whirling fury. The Greek sensed danger, became an eel in the water. We could sense his laughter as he sought an oppor-



Chasing a turtle, with the "catcher" poised ready to dive overboard.

tunity to secure a hold on the hawksbill's body. The latter collected a small fish in its stride, but swung viciously aside as the lad tried to make contact. The Greek boy was certainly quick. He beat the hawksbill to a possie, twisted his body and secured a hold on its front flippers.

A second later the turtle's top shell lay pressed against the lad's stomach, as, with his captive, he rose to the surface. How we cheered the breathless winner. Cooke was ready with a looped rope and hauled the turtle on board. Later a Japanese bought it for its lovely shell, so Marko got more than 10/-.

Thoroughly wound up now, the Greek thirsted for further conquests. The next two turtles he chased escaped. They were too fast, but he secured a small sunburst, so named from Nature's design of a rising sun on the shell. I have seen many such in Barrier Reef surroundings.

**WE** were still drifting over the reef where grass food grew lush. Suddenly Marko pointed to where a turtle lay feeding. It was a large fellow, a male whose weight held the grass down. Large barnacles clung like warts to its shell, a shell scored and torn at the edges.

"That cove's an old stager," I told my companions, "too old for soup making."

However, Marko decided to capture it, but changed his mind as he stood at the bows and looked at the sea. I heard the gasp he gave, noticed the horrified expression which swept over his face. "See, see!" he cried, pointing suddenly before he leapt inboard again, as he restrained his youthful enthusiasm. We looked and saw swimming slowly a hammerhead shark. Actually its size was hard to guess, but it threatened death to any feeding shellback or fish in the vicinity. We saw old man shellback

feeding contentedly in his sheltered possie, but the smelling power of the shark was strong. Swiftly, yet quietly, Cooke let the anchor seek the reef; the curtain was rising on an undersea drama.

On came the shark, slowly at first as if gathering in the scent of the turtle, then charging with savage fury. The ungainly and awkward "ancient one" stood no chance; neither, I think, did it realize its foe's presence before the monster's great head went into action. Crash! Vainly the turtle sought to escape, to rise in the water, but we saw a hind flipper had been injured. Its world dissolved into chaos as the three remaining flippers half turned it before the monster's hammer clouted the shell again. The latter buckled, and one of its thirteen plates was forced away before the poor brute was tossed on its back, where it lay kicking helplessly. Then with the same violent hostility another head attack flooded the depths blood crimson, a narrow cloud which drifted away with the tidal flow.

The shark made frantic attempts to come to actual grips with its prey, but its small underslung jaw failed to bite off a flipper. As food would not come easily more headwork became necessary. The turtle rolled hither and thither with each violent assault. One such attack broke the old fellow's neck. The head swung limply with glazed eyes. The prolonged hammering literally tore the upper shell apart, and soon a bowel length protruded, a grey tube, inches thick. This the shark rapidly seized and swallowed, a nasty sight.

However, Nemesis avenged that murder, and brought the final act of the tragedy to an end. We gasped our horror. My pulse rate quickened. Our dinghy was small, its planking thin, and here came a tiger shark, bulky and fierce, to join the feast. It

looked enormous, an aquatic wanderer from the Indian Ocean, which the harmless turtle's blood had called in to avenge its death. Too late the hammerhead sensed its company. Its hunger madness ebbed away as it sought escape. But the tiger was quick. It had gained sufficient sea room for the attack. We saw its great jaws strongly clamp over the hammerhead's tail. Then, when they opened again, the hammerhead, now minus his propelling gear, sank helplessly to the sea floor, its blood staining the water. The tiger shark did not attack a second time, but collected what remained of the mutilated turtle, and disappeared.

Desperately our young diver mastered his fear. His face had whitened by shock. "Never I swim here again," he cried, his voice high-pitched. Cooke and I agreed. Although we had witnessed this unusual bout in comparative safety, we were glad it was over.

**AFTER** collecting the anchor we sought for and spent the rest of the day with the turtle catchers. In all, they captured ten. We visited a number of reefs during the aquatic round-up. We watched two whales playing quietly in the deeper water. The turtle men told us some amusing stories, and some desperate ones, all unfortunately too lengthy to repeat here. We visited the net before sundown but found it empty.

The following day began warm and lovely, yet noisy with diving seabirds. After a fish breakfast Marko rowed the dinghy across the reef. The turtle men had laughed our shark net to scorn, preferring their "hand-picking" method to Captain Turner's. A gentle swell rose glassily in from the Indian Ocean. Again we saw turtle feeding. In the distance the sea was blue with depth, and several fleecy cloud patches slowly crossed the heavens. We also noticed a school of fish, acres in extent, leaping and splashing as they roamed the surface water.

The reef water was fairly shallow when we neared the net, or what we saw of it. It had collected drift weed by the ton, but how we shouted with excitement. Weed, turtles, sharks and large fish were thrown together in the bunt. Several of the net-holding stakes had snapped with the tidal strength and weight. The main net trap surrounding the reef, though weed-logged, held four turtles of varying sizes, also an enormous eel, and two sharks, one with a five-foot-long saw. It certainly was a triumph.

Mooring the dinghy, we got busy unloading the net. It was a terrific task, for the weed clung tightly to the stranded cotton mesh, a solid wall of green and brown. To leave the net in the water another day meant trouble, and the probable loss of net and gear. Rapidly we freed the turtles. They went into the dinghy, as did several nice trevally. Marko, with instructions to hurry back, took them

to the *Catarni*, leaving Cooke and me clearing the net of its burden. One shark was alive, a whaler. We cut it free, watching it struggle away to deeper water. I don't think it realized its freedom. The other monsters were dead. These we left on the reef for fish to eat. The eel had squirmed its portion of the net and seaweed into a ball. It was an enormous fellow, and gladly we gave it freedom. We hacked at the weed with knives, for time and tide wait for no man, let alone us.

Marko was soon back, and gladly we welcomed his help. As each yard of net became empty, the lad hauled and stowed it into the dinghy, but he had a full-time job bailing water, for the wet net carried gallons on board. Two-thirds of the bunt was in the dinghy by the time the tide swirled back.

Our hardest task began then, for, once free of the holding stakes, which we had pulled up, it was lifted by water flow and

started moving away. We threw over another anchor to hold the dinghy. But how we hauled at the squirming net! I forgot to mention that the latter had lashed to its top line about 150 five-inch glass floats. Weed came too in that mad rush, and soon the small boat wallowed on the sea. How our muscles ached! Times came when we moored the net to a thwart, but the speeding water race rolled it into a massive rope. This had to be partially unravelled, to allow it to spread over the other bunt in the boat. How we growled at that task!

However, an hour later found us laughing at the experience, as Marko and I, sitting across the wet set, slowly urged the heavily weighted dinghy to the nearest island beach. Here we finished clearing the net of rubbish, finally spreading it over the sand to dry. We were thankful, however, that no hammerhead shark took a fancy to the over-burdened dinghy and "butted in."

## A FOOT THROUGH FLINDERS CHASE KANGAROO ISLAND, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By R. M. ARNOTT-ROGERS

**T**HE western end of Kangaroo Island is bastioned by great limestone cliffs, rising to upwards of six hundred feet on the north-western section of the coast, with Cape Torrens, 725 feet, as its highest point. Torn and fretted by the wild storms which frequent this coast, they stand on a footing of ancient hard rock which forms long treacherous reefs: reefs which have been the wreckage of six known ships, and others suspected as having been lost hereabouts. This rugged seaboard is backed by a country so rough and densely scrub-covered that only those who go afoot or pass in small craft can hope to see the magnificent scenery of jagged rock and rolling breakers, of towering headlands and sand-duned bays.

Here lies Flinders Chase, the second largest Wild Life Sanctuary of South Australia, taking in nearly all of the western end of Kangaroo Island, and covering some 211½ square miles in extent. This mostly virgin piece of country was originally selected for conservation as early as 1888, not only because of its position as part of an island and thus easily fenced and controlled, but because Kangaroo Island is also unique in being free from the two pests, rabbits and foxes. It is said that rabbits were at one time introduced but that they were exterminated by the goannas eating the litters in the nesting burrows.

The first move to have this area conserved was a representation to the Government in 1906, but it was not until 1919, after seven such deputations, that "An Act to establish a Reserve in Kangaroo Island . . . etc." was passed and the Flora and Fauna Board set up. The enactment

was for 194 square miles, and with boundary changes from time to time since, has increased to its present extent. The original scheme was for the setting aside of 1,000 square miles, but it is doubtful that this will ever be achieved. What was then thought to be almost useless land, is to-day being brought into production through our present knowledge of soils, but that is a story to itself.

From 1923 onwards many different birds and animals have been liberated in different parts of the Chase. Among those which have settled down and increased may be mentioned the Cape Barren geese and the Koalas. It is the policy of the Board to introduce birds, animals and reptiles which are in danger of extermination, two examples being the Mallee Hen and the Scrub Turkey. Of the indigenous species, there is a rare red-tailed black Cockatoo, which is found nowhere else in the state. So tame is the wild life that kangaroos will stand and stare and have become almost a pet in the Apiary, where they raid tents for paper, and goannas come for hand-outs, at meal times.

When I first heard of Flinders Chase, I could find out very little about it, and that little information was so varied as to produce such a muddled mental picture that I was intrigued. Few people, even among the islanders, know anything of the Chase. So during the Christmas holiday period of 1947-48, with seven members of the — then newly-formed — Adelaide Bushwalkers, I had my first view of the Chase. We covered the whole of the West Coast Road, opened up in 1946, from Rocky River Station to Cape Borda, taking brief glances at the mouths of the

rivers. From the mouth of the Ravine des Casoars we followed the cliff edge to Borda lighthouse. We also saw the coastline from Cape du Coudic to South-West River.

What was seen on that first trip so caught my interest that I planned to return equipped to photograph some of the unique features. This object was fulfilled through the enthusiastic help of Ray Farran and Tom Beesley. Farran, though unfamiliar with our Australian conditions, but whose previous experience out of doors in Rhodesia and England gave him quick adaptability, took over much of the leadership of the party. This left me free for the photography work. The others who contributed to the success of the venture were John Marsh, Howard Kirkbright, and Pauline McGowan. As not all could be in the Chase for the whole of the projected stay, trips of different lengths were arranged to fit in with the comings and goings of the various members.

**W**E made our base at Rocky River Station, the headquarters of the Chase and the home of the Ranger, Mr. H. Hansen. This was the nucleus of the project of forming the Wild Life Sanctuary, because it was on one of the two permanent rivers in the area, the other being Breakneck River. This part of the Chase, an area of 9,000 acres, was first owned by C. J. May, and the cottage kindly lent for our use by the Board was the original homestead. A regular bus service comes here twice a week, for Rocky River is now a Post Office and Telephone Exchange for the lighthouses and will be for the southern coast settlements when they are connected. The West Coast Road starts from here round the western end of the island about two to three miles back from the coast. Though so near, it is almost impossible to reach the sea, because of the thick scrub, except by the foot tracks cut alongside the rivers.

About two miles from Rocky River Station and off from the West Coast Road, in a wide valley between sandhills, is the Government Queen Bee Breeding Station, under the management of Mr J. F. Masterman. These Ligurian Bees were brought here by the Chamber of Commerce in 1884. The apiary was planned and started by Mr A. E. Ophel in 1943 (or early 1944).

Just west of the apiary in a bend of Rocky River, where there is a stretch of Manna Gums (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) and Pink Gums (*E. fasciculosa*) with patches of Water Gums (*E. ovata*). Here Koalas have been liberated and are on the increase. The first six were introduced in 1923 and a further group of six males and six mothers with cubs in 1925. To our surprise we found them quite noisy animals with loud growls and squeals, particularly at night, as I found camping near them for some days last December.