



PLENTY OF GARNETS AT FULLERTON RIVER

By Ken Ellis

In 2005 Julie and I were able to spend five great weeks fossicking around north Queensland but in 2006 we weren't so lucky as home and work commitments kept a reign on travel.

From early in 2007 we planned another trip up north and when the dry spell broke after Easter bringing the wet, cold weather, we started planning for an eight-week break hoping that sunny Queensland would get the blood circulating again.

September is our preferred time to head north, mainly because most holidaymakers are heading back south as the temperature rises and the humidity sets in. We don't mind the humidity and also find that getting accommodation at this time of the year is no problem.

The Cloncurry district is a fossicker's paradise and with nearly every known mineral hidden somewhere in the rugged hills, it's hard to decide where to start but we were only interested in the garnet deposit at Fullerton River.

We had booked two nights accommodation at the Gilbert Park caravan park and as usual we had an air-conditioned cabin to make life a bit more comfortable at that time of year. When we booked in at reception we told the

manager we intended going to Fullerton River early the next day and we would let them know when we returned.

After a good night's sleep we woke to a glorious sunny morning, packed the car with plenty of food and drinks and headed out east on the Flinders Highway as far as the Landsborough Highway where we then headed south for 50km to the Maranon Station turn-off.

DUST STARTED TO BLOW UP

I was driving Julie's new Commodore station wagon and as I turned off the bitumen onto the dirt track and dust started to billow up behind us, I could feel the tension in the air. I placated her by promising to wash and clean the car to showroom condition when we reached Cairns.

A kilometre from the highway we reached the first 'Garnet' sign showing the way and at 2km stopped at the first of five gates. Luckily I had a good gate opener on board until we reached a gate with a mob of cattle in the way and there was no way known my gate opener was getting out of the car.

At 8km we passed a windmill surrounded by cattle, kangaroos and hundreds of galahs and at 11km a creek crossing that was quite easy.

The author's garnet haul from one day at Fullerton River

We drove through another creek at 19km and at 22km reached a treed area which was obviously the camping area for those staying overnight. We had the place to ourselves and picked a nice shady spot for the day.

I had two mud maps with me but neither of them told me where to look for garnets, so I assumed the map indicating a hill was also telling me this would be a good place to start.

It was obvious that people had been scratching around at the base of the outcrop but there was no sign of any serious digging so I scrambled over the rocks and made my way uphill looking for signs of previous activity.

About halfway up I noticed where someone had dug under some big rocks and while searching through the discarded dirt, a glint of something caught my eye. I zeroed in on the spot and picked up a sliver of deep red. These were very old workings so I scouted around amongst the rocks and spotted more sites where digging had taken place. I assumed that the garnets were in the dirt around the rocks.

Eventually I came across several spots where people had been digging recently,

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Above: A bird's eye view of the Fullerton River camping site
Right: Hopefully everyone takes notice

and again they had been digging the dirt out from under the rocks, so I started to scratch through the mounds of discarded dirt and found several more slivers of nice red garnets.

THE TEMPERATURE WAS RISING RAPIDLY

By now the sun was high in the sky and the temperature was rising rapidly so I made my way back down the hill to get some sunscreen and digging gear.

When I reached the car there was no sign of Julie and I figured she must have gone for a walk so I gathered my tools, slapped some sunscreen on, grabbed a can of insect repellent and just as I was about to head back up the hill, Julie wandered into view and asked 'Is this what you're looking for?'

She showed me a handful of claret-red pieces of garnets and informed me that they were everywhere along the track. While she was telling me this, she bent down and picked up another chip right beside where I was standing!

I had to admit she had found more on the track than I'd found up the hill



but although she had plenty of colours, there were no cutters amongst them and I decided that virgin ground would still give me the best chance of finding a cutter so I set off back up the hill to do some serious digging.

The spot I picked was next to some old diggings showing a fair amount of dirt between the rocks, so I used my small gouging pick to break up a lot of the red dirt ready for sieving. By this time the sweat was freely flowing and the flies had found someone new to annoy.

The first dozen sieves of dirt produced nothing but dust and then I noticed

that the small black looking stones had a distinct garnet shape. When I held them up to the sun, they were a nice claret-red. From there on I started to get my eye in and apart from the occasional thin red pieces that were easy to distinguish, I picked out the garnets by their shape as well their darker colour.

STOPPED FOR A BREATH

Because I had only planned for one day at the garnet site, I stopped eyeing every stone to see if it had colour and just dropped everything that looked promising straight in my container. After a couple

of hours I stopped for a breather and being a lot higher than the surrounding countryside, I noticed a cloud of billowing dust headed our way and guessed we were about to have company.

By this stage I was rather peckish so I climbed back down the hill for some lunch and told Julie we were going to have some neighbours soon.

While we were having lunch a car with caravan in tow drove into the area and had soon set up a camp about 100metres away; they gave us a wave and as they were settling down for their lunch, I headed back up the hill to my mining site.

About half an hour later the new neighbours wandered up to the foot of the hill, introduced themselves as Kevin and Carol and informed me that they were new members of the Cairns Lapidary club and had no idea what to look for. In the spirit of neighbourliness, I invited them up to where I was working and showed them what I had found.

It didn't take them long to distinguish the garnets from the rubbish and soon they had some nice specimens; in fact I started to feel that they were actually finding better material than I was!

As the afternoon sun became hotter, the flies started to get more aggressive and I cursed the fact that I'd left my fly nets back at the cabin. They were no problem for Kevin and Carol however who had wide-brimmed hats with fine black netting totally covering their heads giving them the appearance of a pair of bee keepers.

While we were working, two more caravans drove into the camping area and they obviously knew what they were after as no sooner had they pulled up than they got out their shovels and sieves and headed up over the hill and out of sight.

COVERED IN SWEAT AND DUST

After six hours on the hill I'd had enough. I was covered in sweat and dust and the flies had won their battle for possession of the hill as far as I was concerned. I packed up my gear and made my way back down the hill for the last time.

Luckily I'd brought a big container of water with us and after a good clean up, I sat down with Julie for a relaxing cuppa and for the first time realised just how peaceful it was out there in the wilderness. The only sounds were the occasional squawk of a bird.



Kevin and Carol had returned to their camp by now and after we packed up we stopped at their van to say goodbye. Carol came out and showed us the garnets they had found and they looked rather impressive seeing as she had given them a good clean up.

We had been warned that the garnets from this site, although a beautiful deep claret-red, were prone to having dark spots in their centres and we noticed this with some of Carol's stones. That said, she also had some very nice clear ones as well.

Reluctantly we had to leave and as we headed back along the track to the highway, we hadn't travelled 500 metres before we saw the first of hundreds of 'roos we were to encounter. We reached the bitumen just on dusk and I wished we'd left an hour earlier because the next

Top: Julie specking garnets at the base of the hill

Above: Kevin and Carol showing the only effective way to dodge the flies at Fullerton River

50km were a nightmare with quite a few near misses. The 'roos played dodgem with us all the way back to Cloncurry.

Back at our cabin, while Julie was preparing dinner, I got some detergent and water and gave my container full of garnets a good clean. When I put some of the garnets on the glass of my torch I could see the beautiful claret red and kicked myself for pre-booking the next night's accommodation which ruled out another day digging at Fullerton River.

