



The sprawling Gawler Ranges are somewhat smaller and understated compared to the Flinders Ranges, their bigger and more popular sibling. But what they lack in ruggedness is more than made up for with picturesque rolling hills and magnificent ochre sunsets that you can have all to yourself at (almost) any time of year.



Blue sky and red dirt – a typical Gawler Ranges scene.

How to get there

The Gawler Ranges are located north of Minnipa at the very top of the Eyre Peninsula, signposted off the highway after a seven to eight-hour drive from Adelaide via Port Augusta and Kimba. Of course, access on the unsealed roads is more comfortable in a 4WD vehicle, but the family sedan will get around most of the park on the Old Paney Scenic Route without any trouble.

As long as you time your trip to avoid heavy rain, which turns the clay tracks in the park to slush, going in late winter or spring is a great time to see the area burst into colour with wildflowers and bird life.



While known as a 4WD destination, the family Commodore or soft-roader should have no problem in dry weather.

On the way in, it's worth stopping off at Pildappa Rock. This is an enormous granite outcrop with an interesting scramble to the top and great views to the North of the Gawler Ranges. Keep an eye out for what looks like mysterious rock ruins all around the northern boundary; these are the remains of gutters which were part of a water harvesting scheme in the 1920s. An alternative entry to the park is via Wudinna and the National Park Headquarters at Paney Homestead.



Pildappa – an unusual granite intrusion, worth a stop.

Heritage

The area has a rich pastoral heritage, with several pastoral stations amalgamating since the 1860s before finally being set aside as the Gawler Ranges National Park in 2002. The relatively recent declaration of the park is evident, with native vegetation and grasslands still regenerating after a few hundred years of grazing by sheep and kangaroos. The park is currently co-managed with the Gawler Ranges Aboriginal Corporation.



Encounter with Skippy...again – some would say there are now too many Kangaroos in the Gawlers.

The old Pondanna Outstation, located a short drive from Yardea Road on the Loop Track, is a substantially built stone house with plenty of interesting heritage. We had a good nose around the garden and sheds and spotted where the vegetable patch would have been. We also saw the well and underground water tank system, various agricultural implements and even the vintage (and possibly still in use) dunny.

There are information boards with details of the families who lived here and station life. It's fascinating to think about being here a hundred years ago when 'luxury' goods like soap and



leather boots were sold by a travelling pedlar who only visited a few times a year. The house has now been fully restored by the Friends of the Gawler Ranges and it's possible to book and stay here by contacting the Friends on 0437 586 725.



Pondanna Outstation – 50km to the nearest highway, imagine living here in the horse and cart days of 1849.

What to do

The park offers plenty of activities in the way of natural and geological heritage, and most of the points of interest are accessed on short walking trails.

- We visited the famous Organ Pipes one afternoon, but the sun had already gone behind the hills, so the lighting was very dull. Visit these ancient volcanic formations in the morning to see them in all their splendour.
- Explore for pools of water at Kolay Mirica Falls. This is accessed via a short walk from a car park near the Loop Track.
- Amble around the old ruins, water tanks and channels and discover artefacts from the Park's previous pastoral life.



Plenty of wildlife in the Ranges – Echidnas, Budgies, Kangaroos.

Wildlife spotting

- Take binoculars and try spotting the myriad threatened bird species living in the dense scrub and spikey bushes.
- Look out for lots of wildlife and the stampedes of kangaroos.
- Slowly cruise the red dirt roads throughout the park. Vehicle touring is at more of a gentle pace than serious low-range work, but some of the hill climbs might keep you on your toes.



Plenty of options for bushwalking to points and peaks of interest.

Informal bushwalking

- There aren't many N.P.W.S marked walking trails, but plenty of options exists for informal bushwalking around the park. Some of the small peaks make for good evening hikes after dinner, such as Mt Fairview. This can be accessed from the campground at Chillunie.
- Or just climb up a hill wherever you're camping to watch the sunset and perhaps stay a bit longer for an unhindered view of stars all the way to the horizon.



Pastel Sunset from Scrubby Peak Campground.



Where to camp

The SA National Parks and Wildlife Service provides a choice of six camping areas in the park, with varying levels of facilities such as toilets and fire pits, and you can book online [here](#). Three of the campgrounds are 2WD access (Scrubby Peak, Waganny and Yandinga), while the others are 4WD recommended (Chillunie, Mattera and Kolay Hut). All have separate fenced sites and are well organised and set apart, giving plenty of space to avoid the neighbours.



Fairly self-explanatory unless you've just decided to stay and have no phone coverage. On our trip we stayed for three nights, moving to a different campsite each night to keep it interesting. Scrubby Peak campsite was quiet and amongst dense mallee trees, Mattera was more open with plenty of space to run around, and Chillunie alongside a dry creek and plateau close to the base of Mt Fairview. Apart from the first night, we only saw a few other vehicles during the day and camped at night by ourselves, enjoying the breathtaking quiet and magnificent stars.

The late autumn weather – we went in May – was pleasant and cool. While there was absolutely no water around, the plains were greening up coming into winter. With a bit of imagination, they looked almost like a lush African savannah, complete with swathes of hopping kangaroos.



The Savannah – some parts of the Gawlers had a definite African Plains look about them.

Supplies & self-sufficiency

The park is fairly remote, so travellers should carry all required water, food, fuel, and firewood if visiting outside of the fire danger season. For more information on how to be self-sufficient when you camp, check out this article [here](#). A flat tire is more likely than an extreme bogging, so leave the winch and traction aids at home and go 'old school prepared' with a jack, two spare tires and [long-handled shovel](#).

The nearest town is Minnipa on the A1. This has a general store selling fuel and basic foodstuffs, or there is a supermarket 40km down the road at Wudinna.



Crossroads.

The appeal of the Gawler Ranges National Park lies in the solitude and quiet beauty of the landscape. You're also able to go at your own pace without the convoys and crowds like the other Ranges in South Australia. The Gawlers are 'out of the way', with enough heritage and natural wonders to make a visit well worthwhile.

Have you explored the Gawler Ranges?