

An Anglers

An aerial photograph of a coastal area. A vibrant turquoise river flows from the top right towards the bottom left. On the left side, there is a sandy beach with gentle waves lapping at the shore. A long, narrow breakwater made of rocks extends from the beach into the river. The surrounding land is covered in dense green vegetation and some rocky outcrops. The sky is clear and blue.

Surf beaches, a beautiful river and lots of fish, the Northern NSW town of Woolli has it all.

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Woolli looks spectacular from the air.

Paradise

Fishermen tend to exaggerate. Everyone knows that. So when Stan at the Wooli Bait & Tackle shop says: "At the breakwall, you'll always get a feed," we don't take the "always" too literally.

But after two casts, two immediate bites and two nice cobia hauled onto the rocks in mere minutes, we look at each other in amazement. Stan sure knows what he's talking about. Either that or we're just incredibly lucky. Even I, the non-fishing wife of an occasional recreational fisherman, am mightily impressed.

Having just arrived for a weekend

getaway in the Northern NSW coastal village of Wooli, we had stopped in at Stan Young's shop for bait. By the time we left, we knew exactly where to find the best local fishing spots.

The popular breakwall at the mouth of the Wooli Wooli River recommended by Stan is a pleasant 2km drive along the narrow isthmus that houses the stretched-out village of Wooli. Driving slowly and with our windows down to take in the sights, sounds and smells of this beautiful environment, we are on the lookout for the endangered coastal emu. Only ▶



Solitary Resort.



Catching Fizz off the rocks.

▶ about 100 of them are left and they live in this region. Instead, we see a little girl on a pink bicycle trailing her mum and dad on mountain bikes on the path beside the road. Smiling and waving at us, the girl looks like she's having the time of her life. We resolve to bring our bicycles the next time so we, too, can enjoy the flat, quiet roads and cycle paths of Woolli by bike.

To our left we see dunes, but the ocean is so close we can smell it. Perched in the tree tops – even the leafless ones blackened by a bush fire years ago – we see scores of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. Flying from tree to tree, they're a magnificent sight, while their loud, primitive screeches are like something from Jurassic Park. I later learn this area is also home to the vulnerable Glossy Black Cockatoo, a slightly smaller species with striking red panels in its tail feathers.

Reaching the end of the road, past the Marine Rescue base, we park the car and stroll around to take in the scenery. Across the river lies the southern section of Yuraygir National Park. Imposing multi-coloured sand cliffs on the river's edge obscure the view to the expanses of untouched nature behind it. This part of the park can only be reached by boat or a 3-hour walk over rock platforms, beach and walking tracks from Pebbly Beach Camping Ground further south.

North of Woolli are the more accessible parts of Yuraygir National Park. Its total length of 65km makes this the longest stretch of undeveloped coastline in New South Wales. This is exactly what attracts us to Woolli. No industry, no high-rises, no big commercial developments and no traffic lights.

Gazetted in 1980, Yuraygir National Park features isolated beaches, rocky cliffs and headlands and sprawling forests,

heaths and wetlands teeming with birds and wildlife. For visitors, there's a variety of walking tracks, lookout points, camping grounds and of course the Woolli Woolli River, 34km long but navigable for 20km. Woolli is one of only a few scattered villages enveloped by the national park, adding to the overall feeling of seclusion, even though it's only 50km from the city of Grafton.

Back on that northern breakwall, after those successful first few casts, I decide to leave my fisherman husband to his own devices and take my camping chair and book to the other side of the rock wall. Still within earshot in case of another big catch, I'm now settled into a nice rocky cove at the start of the beach, protected from the wind. With my feet buried in the crispy sand, I can see all the way to Wilsons Headland, 7km away on the northern end of Woolli Beach.

The population of Woolli swells from 500 to many thousands around Christmas and Easter, but during our visit the first weekend of summer, the beach is still surprisingly quiet. I watch a father and his young son build a large fort. Further up, an older couple, hand in hand, walk their golden retriever along the shoreline. Woolli is a pet-friendly village, with dogs on leash allowed on the beach and numerous pet-friendly accommodation options, although the National Park is off-limits to pets.

I'm snacking on fresh local plums and strawberries, which we picked up from the Kanga Farm Shop in the Pillar Valley on our way to Woolli this morning. Roadside signs alerted us to the farm and as we came up the driveway, a big "Sound horn now please" sign instructed us to announce ourselves. We were impressed with the huge selection of local fruit and veggies available, half of which hidden from view

in a cold storeroom. If we didn't plan on sampling the Woolli eateries, we would have stocked up on fresh ingredients here to cook our own meals, topped up with supplies from the Woolli General Store in town.

That afternoon, we stop for a late lunch at riverfront restaurant Waves at Woolli. Devouring our burgers, we decide to come back here in the morning to spend more time enjoying the sprawling view of the river over a coffee or two.

Leaving the restaurant, we wander over to the shop next door: Woolli Oyster Supply. It's more out of curiosity than anything else, as I don't eat shellfish, but I've heard these oysters are the best you'll find anywhere. Owner Kim Guinea is busy cleaning the shop, having sold nearly all the day's oysters.

Kim and her husband Ron have been farming oysters on the Woolli Woolli River for 10 years. It's labour-intensive work. "Oysters take three years to grow in the river before they can be harvested," Kim tells me, "but we have to go out to our leases every week to check on all the oysters and replace racks." Oysters are graded and moved around racks several times a year, and there are thousands of oysters out there in varying stages of maturity, so the work never stops for this oyster farming family.

Because the Woolli Woolli River and its surrounds lie within a National Park and part of the river's tributaries are within sanctuary zones of the Solitary Islands Marine Park, this is one of the cleanest rivers in all of NSW, giving the oysters a pure and natural salty taste with no hint of anything else. As a result, these succulent Woolli oysters are in high demand, not just by locals and visitors who keep coming back to the shop for more, but also at



Enjoy a feast of Wooli oysters



The town sits between the river and the sea.



The Beach at Wilson Headland.

the places Ron and Kim do wholesale business with: shops, restaurants, clubs and fishing co-ops around the region.

After a relaxing morning and a filling lunch, we're keen to stretch our legs. We decide on a short walk at Wilsons Headland in Yuraygir National Park, roughly halfway between Wooli and the even smaller holiday village of Minnie Water further north. Leaving Wooli, we're so engrossed in our game of trying to spot the endangered coastal emu that we miss the turn-off into Diggers Camp Road. When we see the brilliant azure-blue Lake Hiawatha on our right, we know we need to turn back. Four kilometres up that unsealed but 2WD accessible road is Wilsons Headland picnic area, where we park the car.

There's no one around but we quickly find the sign directing us to the start of the track. From here it's 500m to Wilsons Headland Lookout and 2km to Boorkoom Campground. We walk across wonderful boardwalk sections, admire the wildflowers around us and before long, we are rewarded with spectacular ocean views. Peering down the stairs that lead to Wooli Beach, we spend some time on the lookout platform, then wander up the steps to the top of the headland for an even better view.

This track is a small but popular section of the 65km Yuraygir Coastal Walk, a relatively new walking route linking the coastal villages of Angourie at the northern end of the national park to Red Rock in the south. The endangered coastal emu that we're hoping to spot was chosen as the walk's emblem, with all signposts and track markers featuring its footprint.

The route is broken up into four daily sections, ranging from 14 to 18km, requiring 5-8 hours of walking per day.

Most walkers use a support vehicle to take their belongings to their next overnight stop, so they only need to carry a day pack. River crossings in certain sections also need to be arranged in advance. It's a walk that needs some preparation, but by all accounts, the beauty, diversity and wildlife of this stunning coastal environment make the effort more than worthwhile.

Back at Wilsons Headland picnic area, several families seem to have appeared out of nowhere and filled the picnic tables with an amazing array of food. We feel like joining in, but instead drive back to Wooli and have a shower and a rest at our accommodation before dinner.

At the Wooli Hotel Motel, we order a cold beer and compare the menus of Emilio's Bistro and Real Pizza, both located within the pub. The bistro wins this time: the fisherman that threw his catches back this morning can't resist ordering the fisherman's basket.

After an amazingly deep sleep, we wake early to the calls of the first birds. Dawn is such a special time of day, but we're not normally awake for it. Quickly, we get dressed, walk to the river's edge, drag a canoe into the water and slowly paddle to the centre of the river. What follows is an almost spiritual experience. The stillness of the river, combined with the crisp morning air, softly rustling mangroves and treetops and the purity of the bird songs, amplified by the water, is simply magical.

Further up the river, all sorts of wildlife can be seen along the river banks, including kangaroos, black-necked storks, brolgas, parrots, kingfishers and, if you're lucky, the coastal emu. However, not having paid any attention to the tides, we now realise it's actually quite low and we should probably start heading back. We're

almost back to shore, when suddenly a giant creature jumps out of the water from beneath our canoe, flies through the air and crashes back into the river, getting us dripping wet and scaring the living daylight out of us. Watching it swim away, we recognise its shape and the elegant flapping of its wings and realise it was a big stingray we had disturbed in the sand.

After that coffee with a view we'd promised ourselves at Waves Restaurant, we follow another one of Stan Young's suggestions and head to the stretch of beach in front of the water tower. My fisherman happily spends a few more hours dangling a line in the beach gutter, while I walk back and forth between the river and the ocean and try out my new camera. I follow birds from tree to tree, take close-up shots of the gorgeous vegetation in the dunes, film my beach fisherman as he reels in a bream, and zoom in on a lone pelican gliding on the picturesque river. Wooli is the perfect destination for photographers. Its landscapes and wildlife are so photogenic that no great talent is needed to take fantastic photos (trust me, I know).

By late morning, the waterbirds are sharing the river with a few kayaks and canoes, fishermen in tinnies, swimmers and snorkellers. Another fisherman has joined mine on the beach. Conditions aren't the best for surfing here today, but there are popular surfing breaks at both ends of Wooli Beach and at Minnie Water.

Wooli is the gateway to the northern section of the Solitary Islands. The Solitary Islands Marine Park is a veritable underwater paradise and Wooli Dive Centre takes scuba divers out to the best locations, such as North Solitary Island and Pimpernel Rock. North Solitary has 43 species of coral and is home to the world's



Walking on the beach near Minnie Lagoon.

► densest known population of anemone and anemone fish (Nemo's cousins).

We decide to spend the afternoon exploring the more secluded beaches, coves and rock platforms at Diggers Camp and Minnie Water, both a short drive from Wooli. After a quick dip in the ocean at gorgeous Diggers Camp beach, we wash off the sand at the amazing fresh water shower coming down a tube straight from the rocks.

The plan was to go snorkelling at Minnie Water Lagoon, but it's a very high tide and we need to abandon those plans for now. Instead, we head over to Minnie Water General Store. A blackboard on the wall has yesterday's date followed by "Father emu plus 5 chicks outside Minnie Store." Disappointed we weren't here yesterday, we scan the area in case they're still around.

Hungry, we tuck into a good-sized meal of fish and chips on the shaded veranda before wandering over to the Angophora Grove Walk. Large sheets of bark of the huge Angophora costata trees line the track, which feels nice and soft underfoot. The newly revealed tree trunks have amazing pink and orange hues. This short track leads to Illaroo Camping Area, a popular National Parks camping ground. We meet a local couple in their late fifties who moved from Tweed Heads to quieter Minnie Water for its untouched natural beauty. They tell us that each morning, they walk from their home on the other side of the village to Illaroo and back, either via the beach, the track we just took, or Rocky Point Walk which runs between the two. The camera comes out and we're shown photos of dozens of their recent wildlife encounters. There are plenty of birds and kangaroos and, yes indeed, an emu family. We're slightly jealous.

There are other scenic walks in Minnie Water, Wooli and Yuraygir National Park that we would love to explore as well, but our time has run out so we will have to leave them for our next visit. There's no doubt in our minds we'll be back. After all, we still have to spot that elusive coastal emu.



The rocky coast at Boorkoom.

FACT FILE

Location

Wooli is located south-east of Grafton on the Clarence Coast in Northern NSW. From the south, it's 36km from the Pacific Highway. From the north, it's 61km from the Highway via the Tucabia turnoff just past Tyndale, or 46km via the Tucabia turnoff at Ulmarra.

Facilities & Services

Wooli has a general store, service station, post office, real estate agent, hotel motel, bowling club, tennis courts, skate park, bait & tackle store, oyster shop, several restaurants and takeaways, two fishing charter companies, boat hire, scuba dive centre, boat ramps, foot/cycle paths, parks and picnic tables.

Boat & Tour Operators

Wooli Fishing Charters,
woolifishingcharters.com.au,
(02) 6649 7100

Wooli River Boat Hire & Eco Tours,
wooliriverboathire.com.au,
(02) 6649 7814 / 0439 409 909

Charon Fishing Charters,
(02) 6649 7554

Wooli Dive Centre, woolidive.com.au, (02) 6649 7100

Accommodation

A diverse range of accommodation options can be found at clarencetourism.com or wooli-minniewater.com.au, including:

Wooli Hotel Motel, 5 motel rooms,
(02) 6649 7532

Wooli River Lodges, 9 self-contained cabins, pool, free use of canoes,
wooliriverlodges.com.au, (02) 6649 7750

Wooli Holiday Units, 4 large units, free use of kayaks, wooliholidayunits.com.au,
1800 496 654

Wooli Serviced Apartments, 4 units, includes breakfast provisions,
wooliservicedapartments.com.au,
0427 774 022

Anniesescape Holiday Home, beachfront house, 4 bedrooms,
anniesescape.com, (02) 6628 3600

Clarence Holiday Coast Real Estate, booking site for 76 holiday homes in Wooli,
Minnie Water, Diggers Camp, awhimaway.com.au, (02) 6649 7000

Caravan Parks

Solitary Islands Marine Park Resort, large riverside park with 117 spacious powered sites, pool, mini golf, camp kitchen, restaurant and free use of kayaks and canoes. Rates start at \$29 per day.
solitaryislandsresort.com.au,
1800 003 031

Wooli Camping & Caravan Park, located in the centre of Wooli between river and ocean, with 20 powered sites, hot showers, camp kitchen and barbecues. Rates start at \$23 per day. (02) 6649 7671

Minnie Water Holiday Park, shady park in Minnie Water with 38 powered and 36 unpowered sites, pool, camp kitchen, general store and hot food takeaway. Rates start at \$26 per day.
minniewaterholidaypark.com.au,
(02) 6649 7693

Illaroo Campground, spacious beachfront National Parks campground 1km north of Minnie Water with 60 campsites, barbecues, toilets and drinking water. Fees: \$10/adult, \$5/child (5-15) per night. No bookings taken. nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/yuraygir-national-park/illaroo-campground/camping

Boorkoom Campground, secluded campground on Wilsons Headland with 10 small cliff-top campsites. Barbecues and toilets but no drinking water. Fees: \$10/adult, \$5/child (5-15) per night. No bookings taken. nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/yuraygir-national-park/boorkoom-campground/camping.

Useful websites

nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/yuraygir-national-park
mpa.nsw.gov.au/simp.html
clarencetourism.com
wooli-minniewater.com.au