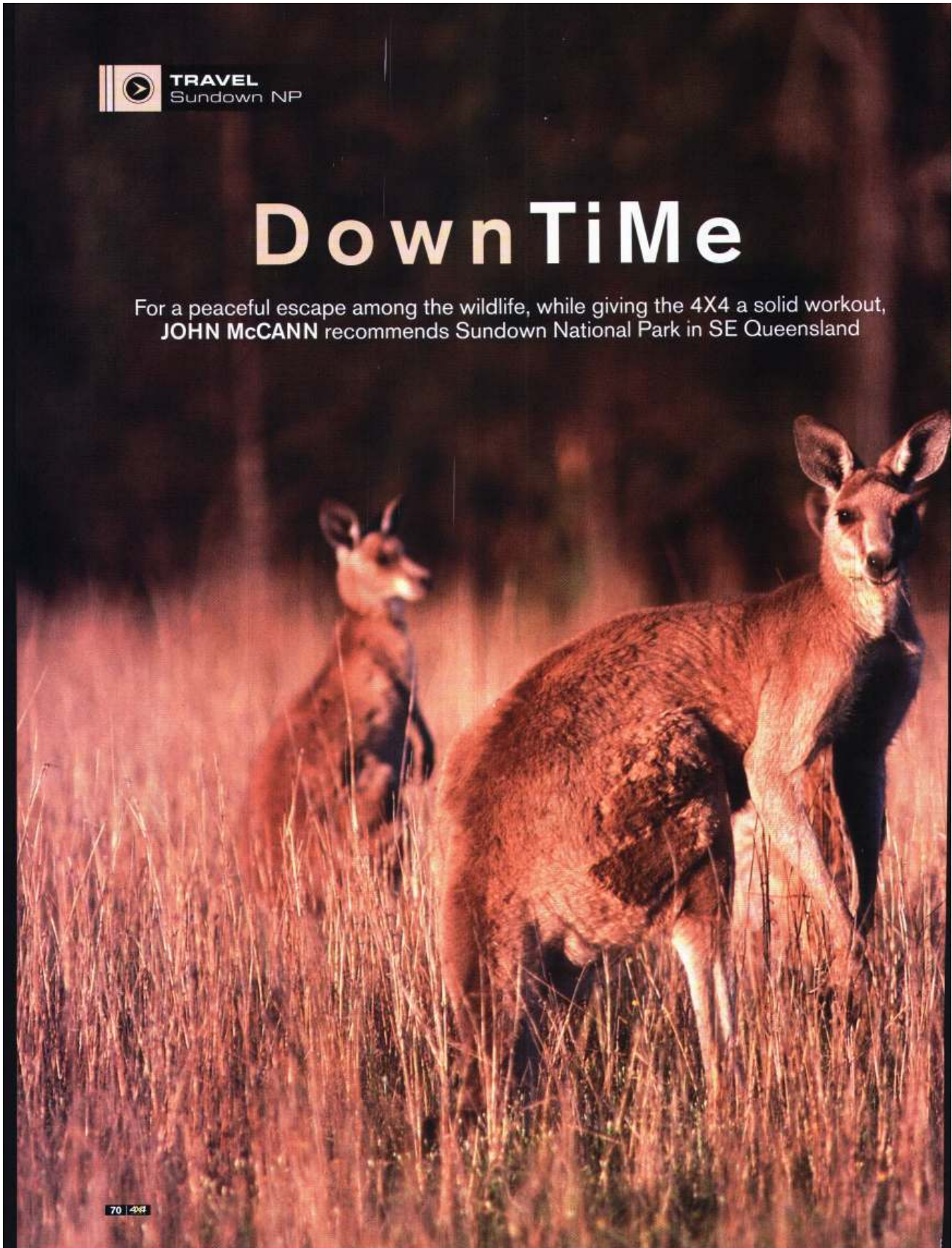


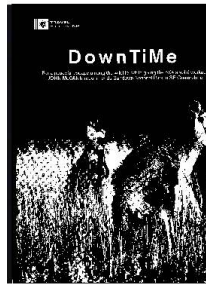


 **TRAVEL**
Sundown NP

DownTime

For a peaceful escape among the wildlife, while giving the 4X4 a solid workout,
JOHN McCANN recommends Sundown National Park in SE Queensland





PICS BY JOHN MCCANN

Pack the binoculars to get close to the locals

Sunlight was just beginning to pierce through the tips of the young cypress pines as I negotiated the steep, stony hill above the camping ground. Stopping to catch my breath for a few minutes beside an old barbed-wire fence, I slowly scanned the surrounding area with my binoculars in the hope of sighting some wildlife.

It didn't take very long for the first animal to appear. A large black male wallaroo hopping slowly down the hill towards the river seemed oblivious to my presence until it came to an abrupt halt within 10m of where I was standing.

Our eyes locked for few moments but within seconds it turned to the left and bounded quickly away, leaving me that much richer for our brief encounter.

Whether you are looking for close-up interactions with native wildlife, tran-

quil bush camping or exciting off-road adventures in some of south-east Queensland's most rugged terrain, it's hard to go past Sundown National Park.

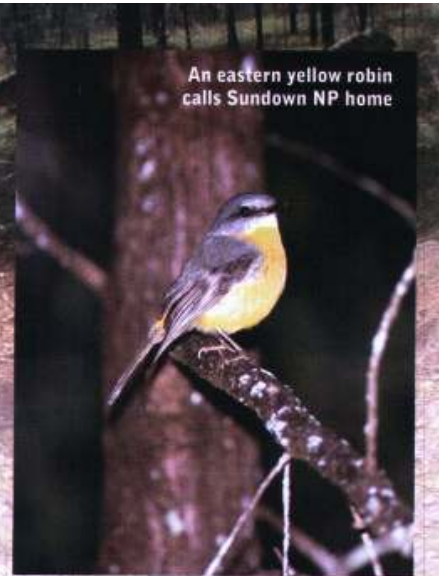
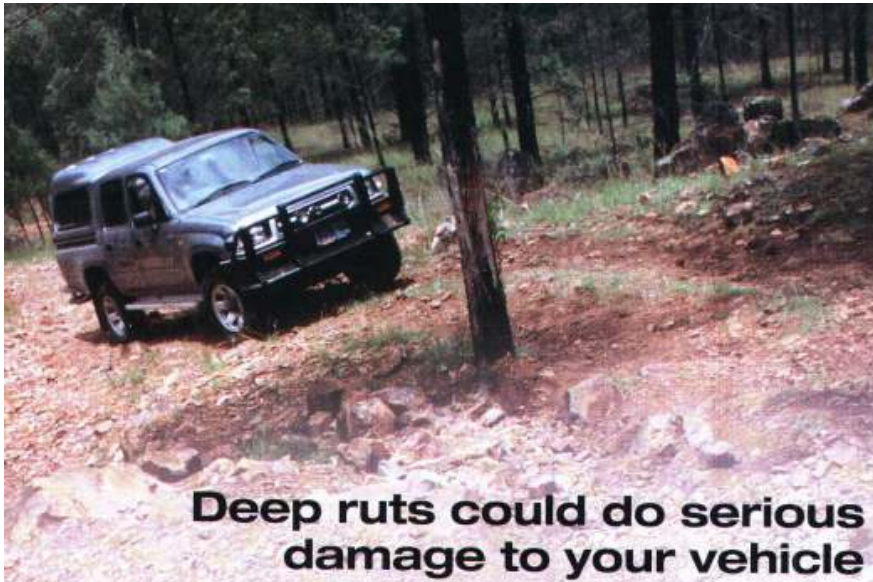
Situated on the Qld/NSW border 250km south-west of Brisbane, Sundown NP has been enticing visitors ever since the area was first gazetted a national park about 27 years ago. The 16,000ha park was formed after the Queensland government bought out the leases on three former uneconomical grazing properties that had been badly degraded by sheep for nearly 130 years.

When I first visited Sundown NP 23 years ago many of the steep slopes were devoid of vegetation, compared to the thick stands of ironbarks and cypress pine which cover much of the park today. Much of the credit for this change can be attributed to the dedication and hard work of the resident ranger.

There are two ways to reach Sundown NP. The first and most popular is the southern entrance, which is also accessible to conventional vehicles. Northern access, on the other hand, is via a rough, rocky 4X4 track that'll test the driving skills of even the most ardent off-road enthusiast.

Visitors approaching from the Brisbane side can reach Broadwater camping area at the southern end by turning off the New England Highway at Stanthorpe, onto the Texas-Glenlyon Dam road, and following it for 75km to the park boundary. If you're coming from NSW, turn left off the New England Highway onto the Bruxner Highway just north of Tenterfield, and follow it for about 47km until you see the turn-off to Sundown NP.

Broadwater would have to be one of the most thoughtfully set out campgrounds in Queensland, with each of the large



numbered sites having its own fireplace and being separated from adjoining sites by a low log fence. Firewood is provided near the central toilet and shower block.

Birdlife near the camping area is prolific and, with more than 120 species being so far identified, Sundown NP has become increasingly popular with bird watchers. The wide variety found in the park has a lot to do with its location making it a meeting point for coastal and inland species.

The park has only a couple of short hikes which start near the end of the camping area, heading up the Severn River Gorge. More adventurous hikers who have a topo map and compass – or a GPS – can venture much further afield and camp overnight in the park's more remote areas.

If you do decide to venture off the beaten track leave a note at the ranger's office describing your intended destination and approximate time of return.

This is important, especially if you are hiking alone as there is always the chance you could slip and injure yourself.

To reach the park's 4X4-only northern section, turn off the New England Highway at the village of Ballandean 20km south of Stanthorpe. The area around Ballandean is one of Queensland's largest wine producing areas and, if you have the time, it is well worth visiting a couple of these wineries.

The first 4km after leaving the highway takes you through picturesque vineyards along a narrow bitumen road before it ends at a cattle grid at the entrance to Ballandean Station. Settled back in 1840 by Robert Mackenzie, Ballandean was once one of the largest properties in the district. The western section now forms part of Sundown NP.

Once over the grid, the track heads straight until you reach a side track on the right with a sign to Sundown. From here, a reasonably good gravel track meanders through Ballandean for another 8km until it arrives at a closed gate which is the entrance to the national park.

After closing the gate behind you, fill out your self-registration permit for the

time you intend to camp here – the cost is \$4 per person a night.

Allow yourself around two hours to get down to Burrows Waterhole camping area from here. Don't make the mistake of trying to rush the journey as the track quickly deteriorates into a rocky trail with deep ruts in places where you could seriously damage your vehicle.

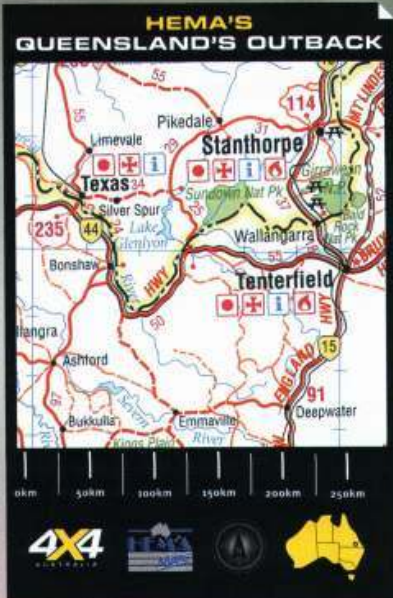
On some of the flat, open ridgetops the well formed track may encourage faster driving. However, it's easy to suddenly arrive at a sharp bend and find you're back on a rutted track, which in places is so tight, with a steep drop one side, it's too narrow for an oncoming vehicle to pass. Either vehicle will have to reverse back into one of the track's small cuttings.

Red Rock Gorge would have to be one of the most prominent features in the northern part of Sundown NP. Since the gorge turn-off is only 5km into the park, it's best visited on the way down to the camping area.

From a photographic point of view, mid to late afternoon is probably the best time for getting good pictures, as the



Sundown NP has become increasingly popular with bird watchers



sun bathes the striking orange-coloured cliffs with a golden glow. Don't forget to bring some binoculars, so you can check out some of the incredible birdlife that Sundown is famous for.

The last couple of kilometres down to Burrows Waterhole are very steep and should be negotiated with extreme care. Visitors can set up their tent at any of the shaded camping spots along the Severn River. While it's possible to get down to Burrows Waterhole towing an off-road camper-trailer, most people I've met who've done it say the drama and hassle involved just aren't worth the effort.

Nights along the river can be magical with thousands of stars filling the skies. The only sounds that you're likely to hear are the haunting calls from a boobook owl or a loud plopping noise in the water from a jumping fish. Be very careful walking around after dark – make sure you are carrying a torch.

When there's plenty of water in the river, this section of the Severn is

excellent for canoeing or just drifting along on a rubber mattress. Even though there are no designated walking trails, one can rock-hop down the river in the morning looking for wildlife.

While eastern grey kangaroos are fairly common near the camping ground, you have to travel further away from human activity to see species such as wallaroos and red-necked and swamp wallabies.

If there are too many people camping at Burrows Waterhole, drive back to Reedy Waterhole. To get there, head back up the main track for about 2km until you see the sign on the left pointing towards Reedy Waterhole. This camping area is a further 1.3km downhill towards the river. Don't attempt this track after heavy rain or when towing a camper-trailer, as it's extremely steep and can be very slippery in places.

While school holiday periods can be a bit busy, outside these times Sundown NP provides all you need for a peaceful bush escape from the rat race. **4x4**

FACT FILE

- **LOCATION:** Sundown National Park is located 250km southwest of Brisbane.
- **CAMPING:** Costs are \$4 per person a night. There is no need to book, except during the typically busy Easter and the Christmas/New Year holiday period.
You can camp in the park's remote northern section (4X4-only) or at Broadwater camping area (hot showers included) in the park's southern section.
- **MAIN ATTRACTIONS:** Rugged scenery and four-wheel driving, bird watching, bushwalking and camping.
- **CONTACTS:** Sundown NP ranger on 02 6737 5235. Queensland National Parks on 07 3227 8185 or check the web at www.env.qld.gov.au.
- **MAPS:** Hema's South East Queensland and Hema's Road Atlas adequately cover the area required.



Campers are very well catered for in the park