

CHASING WATERFALLS

*Don't go chasing waterfalls,
Please stick to the rivers and the lakes like you're used to.
I know that you're gonna have it your way or nothing at all,
But I think you're moving too fast.*

TLC (1994): Waterfalls

Tropical deluges and steep terrain make North Queensland a waterfall-chaser's paradise. Just be prepared for some hard work. Oh, and stinging trees.

Words Madoc Sheehan

Photography Madoc Sheehan, Quinn Sheehan & Luen Warneke

Leeches in my eyeballs and undies. Silicone barbs of wait-a-while vine embedded in my flesh. Stinging-tree mishaps leading to months of recurring pain and discomfort. I'm in the midst of ignoring TLC's wise words, on another "my way or nothing at all" mission—chasing waterfalls in the wilds of North Queensland (NQ).

However, I'm starting to have doubts, and I wonder if I should have listened more carefully to TLC's classic R&B hit. Then again, "moving too fast" through dense, tropical jungle while searching for a mysterious waterfall is not only discouraged, but often impossible.

But there's another line in that song that comes to mind, too:

Dreams are hopeless aspirations in hopes of comin' true.

Believe in yourself, the rest is up to me and you.

Waterfalls—promises of beauty and wonder—can themselves become dreams, aspirations, encouragements to search. Have you ever looked across a valley and spotted a far-off cascade? Perhaps you've pored over satellite images looking for the fine white tendrils of an unknown waterfall?

As an aficionado of finding out what's around the corner, and of rugged adventure, for more than two decades I've been chasing dreamy waterfalls in North Queensland. And I've discovered that while the sacrifices are real, the rewards from both the journey and the destination easily outweigh any hardships. Self-belief, confidence, resilience, teamwork and bush skills are not only critical to success, but are also the long-term benefits.

In fact, chasing waterfalls has recently gained a cult-like status, supercharged by social media and amplified by influencers vying for the most likes on their butt-shot waterfall silhouettes. But it's not just for the experienced or the voyeur; everyone can chase waterfalls. It's even got its own hashtag (#chasingwaterfalls). Like any good cult, however, chasing likes can have tragic consequences; waterfalls can be dangerous places. Take, for instance, Windin Falls, where there's a popular and well-photographed infinity pool right on the very edge. In 2021, a Cairns woman was tragically swept away here, falling 40m to her death. I grimace when I see images of influencers looking for the perfect shot at the falls.

These locations are places to admire and enjoy, but also places to be respectful and humble. To truly (and safely) chase waterfalls, bush skills, perseverance and tenacity are required. Luck can help, too.

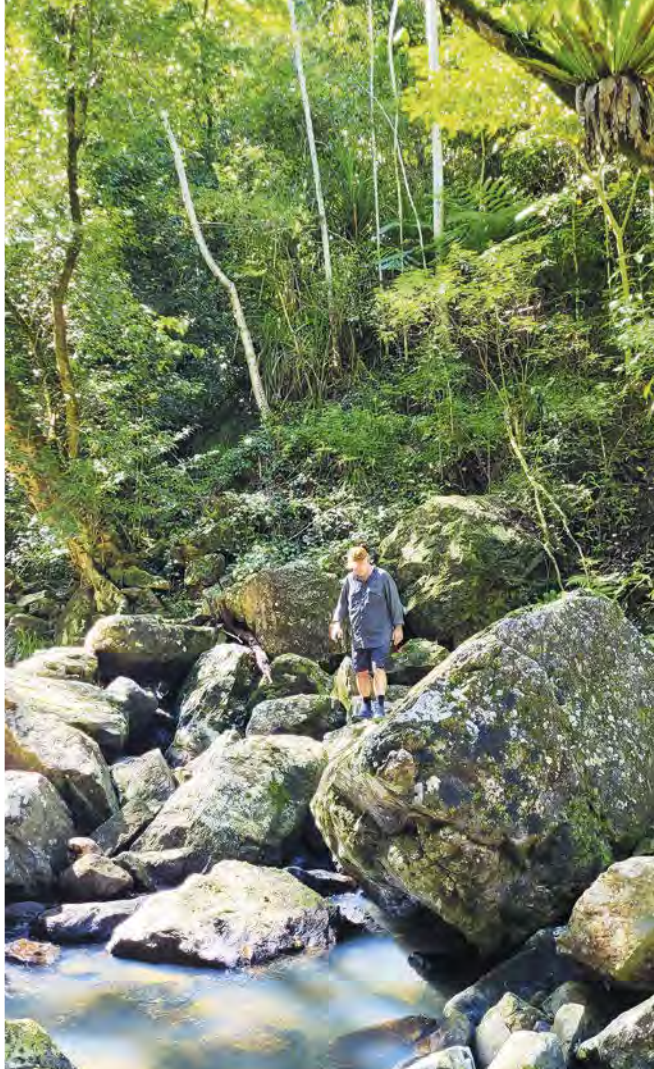
To get you in—or out of—the mood to chase your own waterfalls, here are the painful-but-rewarding tales of three amazing waterfall discoveries in Paluma Range and Girringun National Parks in North Queensland.



Madoc and Quinn Sheehan at the point of no return on Flagstone creek, contemplating what wonders await them further downstream.
Credit: Luen Warneke



Girringun NP
Paluma
Range
NP



BIRDWING FALLS: GIRRINGUN NP

As Australia's highest single-drop waterfall, Wallaman Falls (268m) on Stoney Creek in Girringun National Park is a magnificent and awe-inspiring sight. It has great lookouts and a well-established tourist trail winding down to its base.

My first visit to the falls was more than twenty years ago. On that trip, I saw a silvery cascade high up in the catchment of a smaller creekline. It dropped dramatically through a hidden gorge before joining Stoney Creek a kilometre downstream. The suggestion of a waterfall, the possibility of another route down into Stoney Creek that might facilitate a loop circuit, the sense of mystery and adventure that emerged deep within my psyche combined to offer just the inspiration I needed to commence my journey of becoming a North Queensland waterfall chaser. Little did I know, however, that it would take more than a dozen visits over twenty years to find that mysterious waterfall.

The chase was on.

While the creekline was obvious on topographical maps, at ground level the rugged gorges and dense forest made things difficult. Cliffs are everywhere here; unseen dangers and hidden obstacles abound in the dense forest.

On my first attempt, I navigated down the creek's eastern side through thick rainforest and tangled vine thicket, before stumbling into an old drug lab, long since abandoned. Pots, plastic tubing, syringe kits and shade cloth lay strewn about the ground. I wondered if the lab I found was simply abandoned as police surveillance increased, or if the growers were worn down by relentless summer rains, eventually succumbing to the voracious appetites of the resident leeches. While shocked by such an unusual site and all the rubbish in this pristine and remote location, I also

quietly admired the effort required to try to grow dope in such an outrageous spot. Surely such ingenuity and resourcefulness could have been put to better use? Says me, wandering through the forest looking for a waterfall that may not even exist.

It seems North Queensland's state forests and national parks were popular sites for growing dope. The Townsville to Cairns region during the 1980s had Queensland's highest number of reported drug offences, second only to the Gold Coast. This led to a doubling of NQ's drug-enforcement officers throughout the 1980s. In one police bust, more than 100,000 plants were found growing in a forest reserve near Townsville. Worth millions of dollars, it would've taken them more than a week to burn that lot off. It's unclear from the historical record what impact that had on police-recreation-leave requests at the time.

On another trip, I attempted to get a better view of the cascades by navigating to the edge of the escarpment a few kilometres away. Lo and behold, there was a spectacular 80m waterfall just upstream of the cascades I'd seen from the Wallaman lookout, but completely hidden from that view. Directly opposite the exciting and mysterious waterfall was a rocky bluff with a potentially perfect view of the falls. My mission solidified. I had to reach that rocky bluff to see the falls in all their glory. But this meant finding another way in. And with each successive attempt blocked by cliffhines and impassable terrain, it took another four trips to find a walkable route into the falls.

In January 2021, with my son Quinn and his best buddy, we attempted to reach the bluff via the creek's western side. We followed a compass bearing, thrashed our way through dense rainforest, scrambled across side creeks, picked up leech hitchhikers and got hung up by the barbs of wait-a-while vine (*Ed: Also called*



**IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT,
TOP TO BOTTOM**

Peering over the edge of Birdwing Falls. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

The striking local that gave Birdwing Falls its name. Credit: Justin Harrison/Wikimedia Commons

Birdwing Falls from the base. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

Alistair Pritchard basking in the sublime beauty upstream of Birdwing Falls. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

Birdwing Falls from a sneaky lookout opposite. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

The first known picture of Niagara Falls for Father Hennepin's *Nouvelle Decouverte*, 1697

Tequendama Falls in Columbia (depicted in 1810), one of the largest waterfalls in the world



SOMETIMES WATERFALL-CHASING ADVENTURES TURN UP NOTHING. SOMETIMES YOU GET LUCKY. REAL LUCKY. ON THIS TRIP, OUR WATERFALL-CHASING LOTTERY TICKETS CAME UP AS MAJOR WINNERS."

lawyer vine, because it draws blood and doesn't let you go). We bushbashed along razorback ridges studded with massive old-growth giants dripping with epiphytic ferns and orchids. The gorge we crossed to get here had also stopped loggers in times past; the forest here was diverse, undisturbed and beautiful.

The tough vegetation reduced progress to less than 100m an hour. We got close to reaching the bluff, but ultimately gave up. Abandoning our initial objective, we returned to the road. But then we stumbled across a steep climbable gully plunging directly into our target creek, upstream of the mystery falls. To hell with it ... we gave it a shot ... and scrambled down the gully.

Sometimes waterfall-chasing adventures turn up nothing. Sometimes you get lucky. Real lucky. On this trip, our waterfall-chasing lottery tickets came up as major winners.

At the base of the gully, we popped out into a magnificent hidden scene. Ringed by massive, old, gnarled trees and tall palms dripping with ferns, two beautiful waterfalls framed the horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre in front of us. We felt like we'd found heaven, made even more beautiful because of its hidden and mysterious location. It was an unexpected, magical sight, an extraordinary result from our hard work. We all gasped. We were full of wonder and awe, overwhelmed by beauty, and deeply

grateful for our luck (and persistence) in finding this spot. We sat for a time, letting the scene penetrate our souls.

A short and easy rock-hop downstream led to the spectacular top of Birdwing Falls, nicknamed for the colourful butterflies that flittered about in front of us. Helped by the other NQ waterfall chasers (including Jack, Abby and Luen), we eventually found our way to the bottom of these falls.

On a later trip, I scrambled out to the rocky bluff I'd seen earlier. Although it had a decent view of Birdwing Falls, the precarious scramble over crumbling rock was less alluring. You can't win them all. Over time, the passage of feet has made the walk to the top of Birdwing Falls only an hour from the road. While still rough, chasing this set of waterfalls can now be enjoyed with relative ease.

SO WHAT IS IT ABOUT WATERFALLS that inspires and motivates us to seek them out? It seems such inclinations are not a recent phenomenon. Waterfalls have long inspired humans, and have been a popular subject for both poets and artists, especially during the Romantic Period in the early 1800s. The literary giants Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, both waxed lyrical about the beauty of England's Lake District waterfalls. Such was their love of finding such scenic wonders they were even referred to as "waterfall hunters". Being more romantic than most, and in the absence of social media, both wrote poetry describing the qualities of the waterfalls they chased.

Waterfalls even inspired some of our greatest minds, including that of Charles Darwin. Recalling his experiences of holidaying in Wales as a ten-year-old, Darwin described his pleasure in

chasing waterfalls. Furthermore, one of Darwin's great influences was Alexander von Humboldt, a polymath, widely considered to be the founder of modern geography. Humboldt encouraged the scientific study of waterfalls, recommending that aesthetics be included as an important component of waterfall science (then known as Cataractism). In fact, Humboldt is also considered to be a 'founding father' of environmentalism, and he viewed science and art as inextricable. Here's an example of his poetically infused writing:

"Every island and every rock is adorned with forest trees. A perpetual mist hovers over the watery mirror, and the summits of the lofty palms pierce through the clouds of vapoury spray. When the rays of the glowing evening sun are refracted in the humid atmosphere, an exquisite optical illusion is produced. Coloured bows appear, vanish and re-appear, while the ethereal picture dances, like an ignis fatuus, with every motion of the sportive breeze." Humboldt, 1814.

Waterfalls impact all our senses, drawing us psychologically to them. There are theories that the rumble of the cascading falls and the white tendrils of falling water are forms of auditory and visual white noise (*Ed: Yes, visual white noise is a thing; I looked it up!*) which, like a fan on a hot humid summer night, helps us relax. Others describe the release of negative ions that apparently wash away our negative thoughts. There's also something about water plunging down a waterfall that aligns with human spirituality, and some suggest that tumbling water being drawn inexorably out to sea reflects our own sense of the unstoppable journey of life.

CORKSCREW CANYON, GOLD CREEK: PALUMA RANGE NP

There are several historic tracks that head up the Paluma Range. For example, Bullocky Tom's Track ascends from sea level at Big Crystal Creek to Gold Falls on Gold Creek, at 900m of elevation. With middens and artwork evident, this Aboriginal track was used in the early 1900s to run supplies up to settlers and miners living in the rainforests at the top of the range. Tom's Track continues on from Gold Falls, eventually crossing Big Crystal Creek again, high up in the top of its catchment. At this crossing, there's another great waterfall, Crystal Falls, which tumbles 100m back down into Crystal Creek's deep canyon. Further downstream, Gold and Crystal Creeks meet, forming Big Crystal Creek.

In my first forays into the unknown here, my mate Andrew Samuel joined me to abseil a dozen or more waterfalls. Along the way, we were treated to beautiful creek scenery. Gold Creek, as we discovered, is shady and closed in, dense with a variety of ferns. These include huge king ferns, rare in this part of the park. Three-quarters of the way down Gold Creek is the magnificent Corkscrew Canyon, a narrow, twisting, fern-lined gorge. At the entrance to Corkscrew Canyon, a smaller side creek creates a



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delicate waterfall plunging onto the flat rocky platform. A perfect spot for lunch. At the end of the narrow canyon lies a larger twisting waterfall; a corkscrew of white foam silhouetted against the dark, green walls.

But let's return to the top of Gold Falls, from where I peered down through tall palms and massive rainforest trees covered in moss and ferns; another case of "what's just around the corner?" took hold. I was keen to see if I could find a walking and scrambling route from the bottom of the range on Big Crystal Creek, up to Corkscrew Canyon. If I could find a way through the challenging terrain, this amazing destination could make for an adventurous return day walk. But given the uncertainty—no one I knew had yet tried to bushwalk up Big Crystal Creek—it was time to enlist the help of fellow lovers of bush hardship, boulder scrambling, waterfall jumping and scrub bashing. So as families often do in times of need, my son stepped in and once again joined me.

The chase was on ... again.

It took us four attempts to work out the critical bypasses and swims around the major waterfall obstacles. With each attempt,



**IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT,
TOP TO BOTTOM**

Another local, this one on Crystal Creek. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

Corkscrew Falls on Gold Creek. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

Sam Noonan takes a well-earned break for lunch on an early descent of Gold Creek. Credit: Luen Warneke

Sam taking in the scene below Gold Falls. Credit: Luen Warneke

we got faster, learning the intricate details of where, and where not, to go. For example, the first waterfall could be scrambled with a short-but-difficult climb above a deep pool of clear, green water. Exhilarating stuff. However, on an attempted bypass of the second waterfall, we launched up the side of the gorge into stinging-tree land.

Stinging trees, or gympie-gympie, are common throughout Australia's tropical and subtropical rainforests, but unlike the 40m-tall giants you might come across in Southeast Queensland or NSW, North Queensland stinging trees are often ankle-to-waist high—a perfect height to inflict optimum damage to bare legs. Stinging trees love growing in disturbed spots, where extra sunlight penetrates through the canopy, making the sides of creeks a common location for encountering them.

Gympie-gympie trees are members of the stinging-nettle family (*Urticaceae*), but with far more bang for buck; if you haven't been stung by one, endeavour to keep it that way. The leaves are covered in fine silicone hairs, and brushing past a single leaf can not only be instantly accompanied by searing pain, it can leave a nasty set of glass-like filaments embedded in your skin. Rubbing the site of the sting causes these hairs to break and to release even more neurotoxins. While such toxins hold great potential as pain medication, they are also very complex. Even today, such compounds are not well-characterised. The toxins are also extremely robust, with century-old botanical specimens still able to sting. It is no surprise then that stings can last for many months, with pain

recurring after every swim or shower, or after being rubbed in the wrong spot. There are old tales of horses dying after bad stings.

Anyway, on this day, I was out in front, and I got smashed. Again, to quote from TLC's 'Waterfalls':

My only bleedin' hope is for the folk who can't cope

Wit' such an endurin' pain

That it keeps 'em in the pourin' rain.

Here are some tactics to deal with gympie-gympie stings: miserable acceptance; extracting the filaments from your skin by applying tape or hair-waxing strips (it can be worthwhile carrying some in your first aid kit up here); or applying a dilute solution of hydrochloric acid to dissolve the fine hairs. Being a chemist, I've not tried the latter approach, but I've been grateful for the relief provided by using the tape method. Tearing clumps of body hair off my arms and legs feels like bliss compared to the searing pain of a stinging-tree encounter. In this case, the encounter with stinging trees kept me wide awake that night. Hefty doses of Panadol and Nurofen didn't even touch the sides.

We bailed on the stinging tree option that day, and instead swam across a big pool, scrambling up a small waterfall on the other side. A little further on, we successfully climbed up a dry side creek and over an adjacent ridge, bypassing a tall and impressive set of waterfalls. Eventually we worked out all the tricky bypasses, swims and scrambles, and whittled our trips down to an enjoyable six-hour-return adventurous bushwalk.

Another fantastic waterfall had been chased down.



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Quinn Sheehan looks on as Madoc descends the upper reaches of Flagstone Creek. Credit: Luen Warneke

The Wall of Waterfalls in full wet-season flow. Credit: Quinn Sheehan

Serene creek scenery on the way to the Wall of Waterfalls. Credit: Madoc Sheehan

“THEY SUCKED THE FEAR RIGHT OUT OF ME ... IT APPEARED THERE ARE THINGS WORSE THAN FALLING TO YOUR DEATH.”

CONTRIBUTOR: Madoc Sheehan is an NQ-based adventure junkie—highly proficient in blending bushwalking, climbing, paddling and riding with injuries, heat stroke and assaults by deadly plants and animals.

THE WALL OF WATERFALLS: GIRRINGUN NP

I talked earlier about Girringun National Park’s Stoney Creek, home to Wallaman Falls. Well, a few creeks over is Garrawalt Creek. It is an extraordinarily isolated and rugged creek, with more than its fair share of waterfalls. Satellite imagery—a chaser’s favourite tool—shows an enormous waterfall plunging off the escarpment into a massive pool. This is Garrawalt Falls.

Bushwalkers and local farmers know about these falls, and getting to the top of them over the course of two days is a semi-popular hike. Yet just downstream and around the corner from these falls is a spot where more than five separate falls plunge into a deep pool, a location affectionately called the Wall of Waterfalls. There is no track to the Wall of Waterfalls, and from any direction, getting there is a multi-day struggle. It is a waterfall-chaser’s dream fully realised.

The chase was on once more.

We came in on a side creek, choosing to canyon down Flagstone Creek to its junction with Garrawalt, and from there, ventured upstream to the Wall of Waterfalls.

To undertake such missions in relative safety, it’s critical to pick the right time. As such, we abseiled down Flagstone creek at the tail-end of the dry season, when water levels were at their lowest and the rocks at their driest. However, while water levels and rocks were good, November is also prime march-fly season. This, strangely, as I discovered, can have its benefits. At one point in the middle of a 140m abseil, I was tied into a single small fig tree on a vertical granite wall. With nowhere to go, and limited free movement, the exposure could have been all-consuming. Instead, I was thankful to be distracted from it by the swarms of march flies draining our blood. They sucked the fear right out of me, even while the twig we were attached to strained under its load. It appeared there are things worse than falling to your death.

Once safely down the main challenges, the fear had gone but the march flies remained, undeterred by repellent. But when darkness hit, the flies disappeared, allowing us to sleep out peacefully on a slab of rock halfway down Flagstone Creek.

Morning came on suddenly indeed. After a hasty breakfast, we continued down to the junction with Garrawalt Creek, then upstream to the Wall of Waterfalls. Literally immersed in a most majestic scene, the hardship made the destination all that much sweeter. Each of us smiled from ear to ear, lounging in the pool, admiring the heavenly waterfall scene in front of us, thankful that march flies can’t bite you if you are actually in the water. And thankful, too, that we had ignored TLC’s chorus of “Don’t go chasing waterfalls.” **W**

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