

# TROPICAL HIGH

ABUNDANT NATURAL WATERS, BLACK-SOIL PLAINS AND A QUALITY HERD PRODUCE TOP-CLASS CATTLE ON WROTHAM PARK.

STORY + PHOTOS **NATHAN DYER**



Wrotham Park crew  
(l-r) Jack Jones, Jack  
Fitzpatrick and Nick  
White lead a mob out  
of the weaner yards  
at sunset.



ABOVE: Wrotham Park has traditionally run a pure Brahman herd. OPPOSITE: Wrotham Park's stock camp pushes a mob into India Yards.

**T**HE RISING SUN casts long shadows across black soil plains below and a line of white cattle stands out boldly against a patch of waving orange grass as Jock Warriner flies overhead. The manager of 'Wrotham Park' is on his way by helicopter to the station's India Yards, where the stock camp has mustered a mob for processing. As the sun inches its way above the horizon, Jock passes over a dam where a flock of pelicans paddle on the dark blue water. Although much of Queensland is in the midst of crushing drought, the man-made and natural waters on the Consolidated Pastoral Company (CPC) property, 285 kilometres by road west of Cairns, are brimming with life.

"We've been very lucky this year," Jock says. "We've had 75 percent of our average annual rainfall, and all of our dams are full." With a carrying capacity of 39,000 adult equivalents, the 608,000-hectare property is running 41,000 head, including 23,000 breeders. The only spanner in the works so far is one many Queensland pastoralists would happily deal with: Cyclone Ita has put the mustering program back a week. "She only dropped 15 millimetres of rain here, but she dropped a heap of rain towards Mareeba," Jock says. "All the river systems came up and washed out access to a lot of the yards on the north side of the Mitchell River and we've got no road train access out to the west."

However, with the Burke Developmental Road to Normanton due to be reopened within the week, things will ramp up quickly. "Basically we start off with a stock camp

of six to eight people doing the heifers, then, once we start getting into the breeders, our stock camp will lift to about 12 staff, with a weaner camp and a stock camp," he says. "When the contractor comes in, he'll bring in another stock camp and another weaner camp, and that's when things get hectic."

Growing up on 'Newcastle Waters' with father Ken Warriner and mother Sally, Jock has beef in his blood. All four of his brothers have worked for CPC. His first job after school was on 'Nockatunga', near Thargomindah, where he worked in the stock camp for a year before joining Russell Pearson on 'Bull Creek' and 'Antion', near Cloncurry. The year spent with Russell provided Jock with a broad skill set. "You're a lot more versatile when you're working for a private operator because you do everything yourself," Jock says. "We did a lot of fencing, built a lot of trap yards, put a lot of waters in, and I spent two months on his stick rake [bulldozer], which is one of the worst jobs I've ever done." As a result, Jock encourages his own staff to work with contractors between mustering rounds. "I think that non-corporate experience creates a more rounded individual," he says. "When we bring them back in, they have a wider skill set and can contribute more."

After a year as head stockman on 'Carlton Hill', near Kununurra in 2001, Jock was forced to take six months off with a hand injury. Over the following few years he gained a Bachelor of Business from Bond University and travelled throughout America, Europe and Africa before returning to



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A road train waits to be loaded at Wrotham Park's weaner yards.

Australia in 2005. After dabbling in the tourism industry and a stint on the Central Ranges Pipeline (Dubbo to Tamworth), Jock rejoined CPC as overseer on Isis Downs and then as manager on Nockatunga in 2008.

Jock and wife Tania moved to Wrotham Park in late 2009. Last year he was made general manager of CPC's western operations, with responsibility for Argyle Downs and Carlton Hill in WA, and 'Auvergne', 'Newry' and 'Kirkimbie' in the Northern Territory. "It's a learning curve at the moment because obviously I live over here but the bulk of the properties are over there," says Jock of his new role. It also means he's often flying between stations, something he relishes. "To go from working cattle on the ground, to fixed-wing and helicopters is a great part of what I do," he says. "And now, with this new role, gaining the more commercial aspects of flying, that's one of the key reasons I really enjoy Wrotham Park."

**A**s India Yards come into view, a cloud of dust rises from below. Head stockwoman Lani Hart and her crew have mustered 700 wet cows and their calves and have just arrived at the yards ahead of a dusty day of bang-tailing, branding, ear-tagging and weighing. It's a good-looking mob, reflecting CPC's reputation for building quality herds. Although historically running a pure Brahman herd, the company is currently trialling a number of crossbred options in a bid to lift the station's productivity. "At the end of last year we bought in 80 crossbred animals, 20 Brangus, 20 Ultra Blacks, and 40 Senepol and Senepol cross animals," Jock says. "Firstly, we're going to see if they survive, and secondly, we'll see if we can get an increased conception rate through our joining process."

The introduction of crossbred cattle could also increase diversity among Wrotham's progeny, with more animals likely to fall into the 'flat back' category, which attracts up to a 20c/kilogram premium at domestic saleyards, such as Roma. "That would allow more flexibility in who we sell to once we get the animals up to that 450 kilo weight range," Jock says. Even so, survival will remain the key focus of the Wrotham herd, and that means none of the breeding females and no more than 20% of the station's breeding bull population will be crossbred cattle. "Every year on the peninsula is a drought and every year is a flood; it's just how long's the drought and how long's the flood," Jock says. "By not retaining any of those crossbred females we know that our core herd will survive when we get the tough years."

On the ground, Lani is talking with her team, Jake Curran, Liam Chattington, Hamish Mort, Andrew O'Kane, Sheridan Lillyman, and her fiancé Todd Grace, whom she met at last year's Normanton Rodeo. Originally from NSW, Lani, who holds a Bachelor of Business from Sydney University's Orange (NSW) campus made the move to Wrotham in late 2010 after a two-year stint on Newcastle Waters. She was promoted to head stockwoman in 2012 and enjoys the autonomy of the role. "Being head stockwoman



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The stock camp takes a break; (l-r) Hamish Mort, Andrew O'Kane, Lani Hart, Todd Grace, Sheridan Lillyman and Liam Chattington; Jake Curran catches his ride for the day; contract pregnancy tester Sheridan Lillyman; weaner camp head stockman Callia Teseling (left) and Jack Jones; station hand Maitland Webb.

means I can work the cattle how I want to and in a way I know works," she says, standing in the shade of a tank stand. After the wet season break, Lani's looking forward to another mustering season. "I like the first round best, when all the cattle look well and the weaners are sappy and the horses are fresh," she says.

Young Jake Curran is also champing at the bit to get into the season. The 18-year-old, who grew up on his family's cattle property near Longreach, Qld, has returned for his second season on Wrotham and reckons the experience has been eye-opening. "Coming off a smaller place you don't realise the scale of operations out here," he says. "I like the challenge when you look at a big mob at the start of the day and you wonder how you're going to get through them all. Then, at the end of the day, you have and it's a good feeling to know you've achieved something." Having left school at 16, Jake's also keen to prove a point. "A lot of people from home didn't think I'd make it through my second season so I want to prove them wrong," he says, before climbing the rails and disappearing towards the drafting gate.

After looking over the mob, Jock makes his way back to the chopper and heads for the homestead, where the weaner camp is in full swing. On the way, he flies over the Mitchell River, where the waterholes are deep and clear. The Mitchell and Walsh rivers, which run through the heart of Wrotham and outstation 'Gamboola', along with the Lynd, which skims its western boundary, provide the property with year-round natural waters. Their rich black-soil flood plains produce top-quality feed, including native and introduced grass species such as eurocloa, river couch, bluegrass, Mitchell grass, black speargrass and large swathes of Indian grader grass.

Viewed from above, the foresight of the station's founders is evident. "It looks like they picked the biggest patch of black soil in the peninsula and fenced it off and called it Wrotham Park," Jock says. However, some parts are more productive than others. "We've got some really productive country on the black soil, which is mainly in between the Mitchell and Walsh river systems, then we've got some fairly ordinary country, which we don't really utilise in the north and south." Of the 608,000ha, Jock estimates about 400,000ha are fully utilised.

Developed to provide beef to the Palmer River goldmines in the 1880s, Australian Agricultural Company (AACo) held the lease between 1943 and 2006, when managed investment company Great Southern took over. CPC purchased the property in 2009. Since taking over, CPC has invested in repairing damaged waters and developing fencing in some of the property's rougher sections in a bid to increase the carrying capacity.

**A**s he approaches the homestead, Jock circles the house yards, where the weaner camp is processing 500 cattle for two trucks due tomorrow. It's a welcome sight for the young manager, who has had a roller-coaster ride since taking the reins at Wrotham. "In my first year on the station we branded 18,000 head off 25,000 breeders, which was a great year," Jock says. "Then we had two of the toughest years that Queensland has seen." This year things are looking good, with Wrotham budgeted to turn off about 12,000 head, a 26% turn-off ratio on its starting herd. "It's more and more important in today's



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ABOVE: Wrotham Park head stockwoman Lani Hart. OPPOSITE: Maitland Webb drives a mob at sunset.

agriculture market to have those turn-off ratios high," Jock says. "With cash being at such a premium, declining property values and high debt levels, without a high turn-off it does make the industry very tough."

Of those 12,000, about 6000 steers will go to Comely Station, 130km south-west of Moura in the Bauhinia district of central Queensland. "As soon as they come off mum, and as soon as we've got six decks, they're gone," Jock says. Another 4000 cull-for-age cows, cull-for-age bulls, and non-producing females will go to domestic meatworks or saleyards, and the rest will enter the live-export trade.

Wrotham's location has helped the property reduce its reliance on the live-export trade since the introduction of weight restrictions and quotas by Indonesia. Situated 480km from the Karumba export yards, 600km from Townsville's meatworks and export port, and with the ability to truck cattle into the NT – spelling them on Newcastle Waters along the way – the station has access to eastern, northern and western markets.

Down at the yards, the metal drafting gate thunders as weaner camp head stockman Calla Teseling pushes cattle towards Jack Jones working the sticks. According to Calla, running the yards is challenging work. "But I like the constant need to be thinking ahead, working out what the repercussions of your actions will be," says the former South African, who moved to Australia when he was eight. For the rest of the mustering season, the 21-year-old and his team will be responsible for processing and trucking thousands

of animals. "It's really all about teamwork," Calla says. "If you don't work together and follow a plan, things don't go right."

Lending a hand in the yards is operations analyst for Wrotham Park and CPC's western properties, Tim Clay. Tim says getting into the yards is good for the mind. "Being able to get out of the office when you're getting a bit of cabin fever and do something physical is pretty important," says the 24-year-old who holds a Bachelor of Business and Farm Management from Geelong's Marcus Oldham College. In his role as operations analyst Tim keeps Jock informed of things such as stock movements, sales and any capital expenditure requests. Based at Wrotham, but often on the road with Jock, it's a good life, but a busy one. "It's definitely a single person's job," says Tim. "I'm on Wrotham Park about half the time, over in the Kimberley about 30% of the time and at our Brisbane support centre the rest of the time."

As midday approaches, Calla calls lunchtime and the team makes its way up to the staff kitchen. Inside, cook Sally Taylor has served up beef burgers fit for a king. The hungry workers line up, fill their plates, and begin wrestling with their colossal burgers. For Sally, happy faces at the table are reward for a hard morning's work. A former assistant manager at a Michelin-starred pub in the UK, Sally applied for the job of stock camp cook in 2011. Although that position was for three months, she decided to stay on for the year. After a car accident in 2012 that landed her in intensive care for 11 days, Jock and Tania sponsored her for Australian residency. Also injured in ▶





the accident was Sally's boyfriend, former head stockman James McManus. Now both recovered, Sally's in full swing as station cook and James has moved south to study at Marcus Oldham. "It's not easy, but if anything it's made us stronger," says Sally of the long-distance relationship. With a vegie patch bursting with tomatoes, lettuces, spring onions, green beans, zucchinis, pumpkins and melons, and a thriving herb garden, Sally loves the role.

Seated around two long kitchen tables, the Wrotham crew devour the burgers and talk about the upcoming Chillagoe Rodeo. For assistant manager Jack Fitzpatrick, the weekend is shaping up to be a real celebration. Fresh from flight training all morning, Jack's on track to be Australia's newest pilot come the weekend. A county lad who grew up on his family's property near Oberon, NSW, Jack came to Wrotham as a second-year ringer in 2012. Promoted to leading hand later that season, he was approached by Jock last year to take on the assistant management role. He admits he had no idea how busy it would be. "But I suppose you've got to sink or swim," he says with a grin. With Jock often away, effectively leaving him in charge, it's a big responsibility for the 25-year-old former carpenter, but one Jack takes on with typical outback humility. "I'm pretty lucky having Lani as head stockwoman; she's very good at her job and that's a big help," Jack says. "And Jock's a good mentor."

After lunch, the kitchen vacates in a flash. "Great burgers, Sal," calls out one of the stockmen as he disappears out the door. Tonight Sally will cook for 15 and she's already prepared meals for the eight staff on stock camp. "You have to be very organised to execute it well," she says of her role, as she heads into the meat room. ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Wrotham Park homestead; station hands Todd Grace and Andrew O'Kane; cook Sally Taylor serves (l-r) Nick White, Michael McAlpine and Tim Clay pancakes and ice cream for morning tea.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Jock and Tania Warriner; a flock of galahs flies over the weaner yards; a road train leaves Wrotham Park.

Later, out at India Yards, the day is drawing to a close and Lani and her team are climbing into a Mitsubishi Canter for the drive back to the stock camp. Once there, they grab towels and head to the Mitchell River for a bogey. Wading in with a bar of soap, ringer and contract pregnancy tester Sheridan Lillyman says the river beats a camp shower any day. "It also gives you a chance to relax and unwind," says the 22-year-old, as the dark water forms eddies around her ankles.

Back at the homestead, Calla and his crew are kicking back, enjoying a beer in the station's open-sided social club, The No

Dilly Inn. With talk focused on the Chillagoe Rodeo, they rib each other about their respective chances of getting 'lucky' over the weekend. Joining the crew for a beer, Tania Warriner smiles at the banter. "It's a bit like a Mills and Boon novel around here sometimes," she laughs. Married in 2012, Tania first met Jock on Carlton Hill, when she was travelling through the Kimberley. Eight years later, the young photographer and graphic designer came across Jock again, this time at Nockatunga while working on a book about the beef industry, and decided to stay. Soon after, Jock was transferred to Wrotham Park and the couple made the move north. "It's a great spot," Tania says. "You're only 100 nautical miles from Cairns International Airport and, being surrounded by privately operated stations, the sense of community out here is wonderful."

The next morning, drinking coffee on the back verandah of Wrotham's two-storey homestead and surrounded by more than a hectare of lawn and immaculate tropical gardens, Jock and Tania are talking of their shared love of flying. Fresh from doing circuits with a flight instructor, Tania is just weeks from completing her pilot training. "I absolutely love it," she says of her time spent in the Cessna 172. Although she and Jock are both passionate about flying, their reasons are completely different. "He loves the roar of the engine and how he can get around the different stations, whereas I love being able to see the country from above," she says. "I keep having these moments where I think, 'I can't believe I'm experiencing this'." Jock couldn't agree more. "I love everything about this place," he says, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

