

# Outback and red - but green all over

---

By **NICOLAS ROTHWELL**

THEAUSTRALIAN

12:00AM JUNE 19, 2010 •  NO COMMENTS

THE land is green, the creeks are full, the parrots in their bright flocks flash by.

It's a vivid scene where quiet should reign - for this is a remote dunefield in the deep, trackless Simpson Desert.

The red heart is wearing lush new clothes.

Over the past two years, strong, persistent rainfalls, both in the centre of the continent and in the northern savanna country, have gradually transformed the look of the arid inland. Lake Eyre North is full of water once again, the Todd River in Alice Springs has flowed five times in as many months, wild flowers - white, blue, yellow - have carpeted the western desert plains. And visitors, both the curious and the investigative, have come to the centre of the Simpson - the tall sand dunes near the border of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Queensland that make up, to this day, the nation's last frontier.

Here, on the crest of a sand ridge beside the wide Plenty River's waterholes, sits artist Jo Bertini, sketching the growth of young spinifex grasses and the deep-blue storm clouds in the desert skies.

Bertini, a landscape painter, portraitist, teacher and frequent inland adventurer, makes a point of travelling through the red heart each winter season, walking with the camel strings of Australian Desert Expeditions on their eco-surveys. She has never seen the Simpson's dunes so thickly clothed in green.

Flash floods have been pouring down the desert river channels. The claypan landscape between the dunes has been carved out afresh. As far as the eye can see, green plants cover over the red sand. The lie of the dunes is broken by canegrass and low, twisted, dense-leaved trees.

"It's a classic boom-and-bust system out here," says archeologist Mike Smith, the National Museum's deserts expert. "And it's boomtime now. You see how vegetated the desert is; there's

this wonderful flush of fresh growth.

"This is the time of fertility," Smith says. "Rain and fire are the twin drivers of the desert - in the sand dune country their actions control everything."



Australian artist Jo Bertini takes a break from sketching the Simpson Desert. Picture: Adam Knott