

Skye Shelton could just make out the dingo's silhouette against the darkening sky at the top of a Simpson Desert sand dune. She could see another one a bit further along. They were both thin and mangy. She knew a third one, fatter and healthier-looking, would be nearby. Skye shivered and pulled her jacket tighter – the temperature was dropping fast, and based on the past two nights stranded in the desert she knew the mercury would likely sink to near zero.

Quietly, the young mum got up from her seat near the small fire and went to the camper trailer to check on her children. She counted four sleeping heads and was comforted by their deep breathing. Her identical twins, Cooper and Oliver, aged five, were in sleeping bags on the stretchers near the door while her two older boys, Seth, 14, and Cory, 12, were towards the back.

She returned to the campfire where her husband, Steve, and two good Samaritan travellers who'd stopped to help, Rick Shea and Hazel Sleep, were all sitting in a tight circle. Dingoes are shy and rarely attack people. But for Skye, who was watching them come closer every night, circling the camp, they felt increasingly bold. Her family had been stuck in the desert for three days now, with limited means of communication, low food supplies and crucially, as of that Sunday evening, only 10 litres of water. The nearest help was about two days' drive away. At that moment, in the eerie silence and bitter cold of the inky night in the middle of nowhere, Skye wondered if help would ever arrive.

As they waited and hoped, their experience brought into sharp focus questions about remote outback travel. If you head into one of the driest, most rugged environments in the world, you have to accept the risks and plan for the worst. The Sheltons thought they'd done just that. But if you still run into trouble, who will rescue you?

The Simpson Desert covers 175,000 sq km and contains more than 1100 long, parallel sand dunes running roughly north to south. It's an unforgiving landscape. In 2008, the South Australian government closed the desert to tourists from December to March following a number of deaths and near misses. The Outback is a dangerous place for the unprepared and unlucky: a few weeks ago the bodies of four people, including two boys aged three and 12, were found near their broken-down vehicle north of Alice Springs. In remote WA in the past month, two solo travellers have succumbed to exposure and dehydration.

The Simpson Desert is bookended at one end by the Mt Dare Hotel in South Australia and at the other by the tiny community of Birdsville, Queensland. Between them is 477km of sandy terrain that lures thousands of four-wheel-driving enthusiasts each year.

Towards the tail end of the tourist season, on Wednesday, September 5, the Sheltons – mum Skye, 34, dad Steve, 35, and the four boys left the Mt Dare Hotel to drive through the desert on the final leg of their four-week holiday. So far, their trip had taken them from their home at Ripley, near Ipswich, to Mount Isa, Darwin, Daly Waters, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Uluru. After crossing the Simpson to Birdsville, they planned to head home.

The Sheltons knew the desert driving would be slow going. On a map the Mt Dare Hotel to Birdsville leg looks like it could be done in a day but there's no bitumen road cleaving the sand dunes. A good day's progress is about 100km, with a top speed of about 20km/h. Towing a camper trailer, as the Sheltons were, slows things to about 12km/h. And desert driving is brutal on vehicles. Fine red sand can block air filters and choke engines; suspensions can be wrecked and tyres destroyed.

When the Sheltons left the Mt Dare Hotel they had enough food and plenty of water for the four-day crossing to Birdsville, with plans to arrive late Saturday or early Sunday. Temperatures had been warm, and a couple of 35-degree days were on the way. But their 1998 Nissan Patrol GU had been running well and they'd already covered more than 9000km on this trip, largely without incident. "It was virtually a brand-new engine, with only 40,000km on it,"

says Steve, a boilermaker and car enthusiast. On the Friday they were tackling the sand dunes by 7am, making a beeline towards Birdsville, when it became clear they had a problem. "The engine would rev really high," Skye says. "And it would just turn off," Steve continues. "If you held it at really high revs we made it over, like, four dunes max. But it was going to blow the engine up."

With a couple of days of desert driving still ahead of them, fear set in. They decided to push the car as far as they could. Finally, at the crest of a dune, the vehicle stalled and wouldn't start again. The Sheltons were alone, about 270km west of Birdsville, on the French Line – the most direct route – in the middle of nowhere, with no means of getting out and only a UHF line-of-sight radio capable of communicating a few kilometres at most in this undulating terrain.

For a few moments after the engine sputtered to a stop, everyone in the car fell silent. Steve got out to lift the bonnet. Skye reached for the radio, her anxiety rising as she sent out desperate pleas to any nearby travellers for the next hour or so. "I'm on the radio, 'Can anyone hear me, we're in trouble'. And then nothing. And then again. And nothing. I was panicking like crazy," she says. Eventually, a response. "We heard Rick's voice and I started crying. He was like an angel, he said, 'Yes, I can hear you,'" Skye smiles.

About 20 minutes later, Rick Shea and Hazel Sleep appeared over the crest of the dune in their 2008 Nissan Patrol. Rick [the writer's father] and his partner Hazel were on their way back to Rockhampton after driving the famed Canning Stock Route in Western Australia. On that trip the aerial on their long range HF radio, which was capable of communicating over thousands of kilometres, had been damaged, so he'd fashioned

Middle of nowhere:
a drone's view of the
breakdown site