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HOW TO FIND YOUR OWN

BLACK OPAL

HERE ARE THE INSIDER TIPS TO NOODLING FOR BLACK OPAL: WHERE TO GO, HOW TO DO IT, AND WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR GEM ONCE YOU'VE FOUND IT.



A black opal nobby – unfortunately split by a jackhammer.

1. Typical mining scene. // 2. Noodling – fun for all ages. // 3. Vehicles come here to die. // 4. Noodlers on the Mulga mullock dumps.



Black opal – a kaleidoscope of stunning colour on a black background – is the rarest and most valuable form of opal in the world. This most vibrant of gemstones may seem out of reach but the truth is anyone with a bit of patience, and a bit of know-how, has the opportunity to find their fortune among the white dust of the opal fields.

Opal is Australia’s national gemstone and can be found throughout the outback from south-west Queensland through to Coober Pedy in South Australia, but black opal is found only around Lightning Ridge in north-west New South Wales.

Black refers to the body, or background, of the opal over which a rainbow of colours and patterns can occur. The black background lends vibrancy to the colours, which may be any spectrum of the rainbow. Generally purples and blues are the least

‘valuable’ colours with red being the most sought-after, however, valuing an opal is only as easy as stapling jelly to a wall. Size, shape, patterns, whether the stone is rough or cut, and personal taste play a part. And an opal cannot just be held – it must be moved to reveal the dance of colours; catching firelight in one direction, or phosphorescence on a dark ocean in another. The best stones can attract up to \$15,000 a carat.

TIP #1: There are five carats in one gram. So I’ll let you do the sums, and read on for how to find your own.

READY ...

Before you go racing through the scrub in search of opal, it pays to spend some time doing research. The first point of call for newcomers is the Lightning Ridge Visitor Information Centre, where the friendly staff can equip you with maps to orientate yourself on the

fields – and maps come in handy in a place where wiry dirt roads seem to appear and disappear at will. There is a fossicking heap onsite so you can practice your noodling (opal speak for fossicking) before you set off. The Australian Opal Centre is the next spot to put on your list. Here you can learn everything about opal and discover the great secret of these fields – that it is possible to find black opal as a fossil. The area around Lightning Ridge was once on the shores of an inland sea in the time of dinosaurs, so not only do you have the chance to find black opal but you could find a black opal dinosaur! There are plenty of dino bones on display along with opalised plants, molluscs, and shark’s teeth. Imagine going home with a bone from a flying pterosaur– or imagine the anguish if you threw one out before you knew what it was. Armed with all this information, you’re nearly ready to noodle – but wait.

TIP #2: Go to the pub. Nothing quite beats hanging with the locals at one of the hotels (in town or on the Sheeppyard-Glengarry-Grawin fields) to find the real inside information.

TIP #3: Have a tub. For a true Lighting Ridge experience, head over to the artesian baths, soak in the 40-degree water and keep your ears open. Many miners and professional noodlers gather here for a chat – and you may find that hot tip that leads to your fortune.

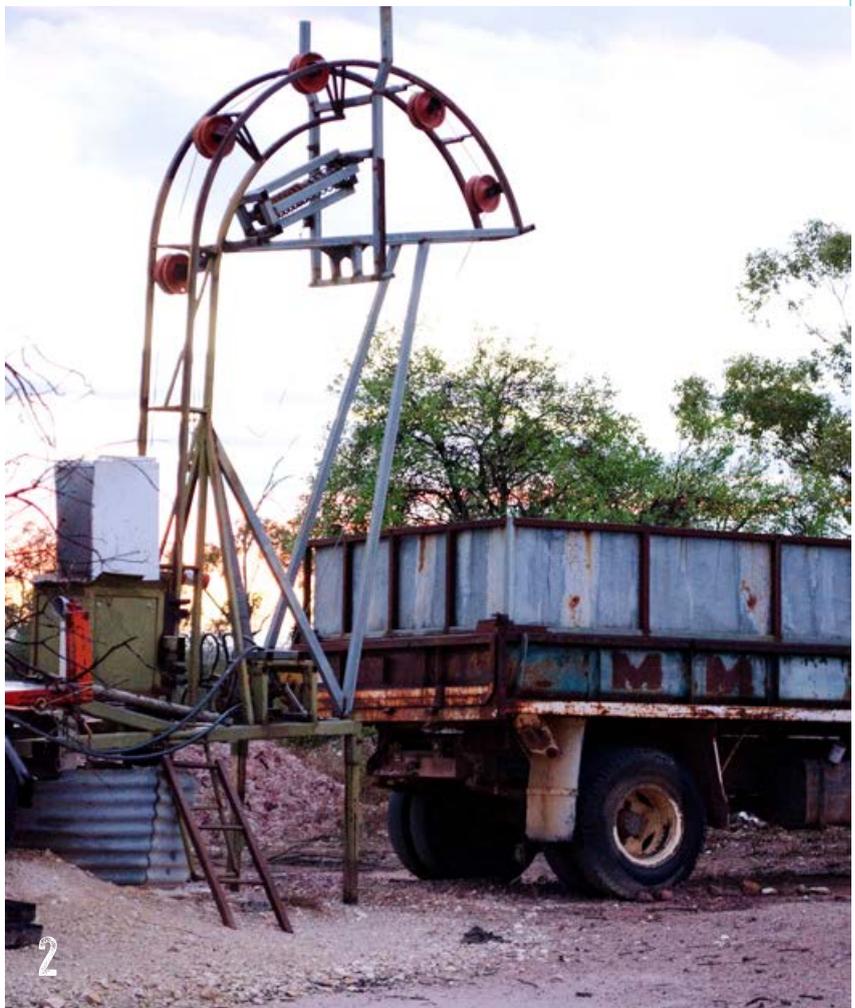
SET ...

Get some fossicking practice in town at the visitor's centre or one of the tourist sites such as the Walk-in Mine, and then you will be ready to do some serious noodling. But don't be a ratter. You can't just march onto any mullock heap and start noodling. Often the mullock heap will belong to a working claim and **(TIP #4)** you don't want a miner who has just spent six hours swinging on a jackhammer underground to surface and find you sifting through his dirt! Ask first.

There are some public places where opal is regularly found. Take a drive to the Sheeppyard-Glengarry-Grawin opal fields, about 80km west of the Ridge, and work your way to the Mulga mullock dumps. They are hard to miss, standing several stories high and covering an area similar in size to a football field. This is where the miners bring their unproductive dirt and dump it, and once it is dumped anyone can search for opal among it.

TIP # 5: Miners don't get everything.

1. Bore baths – source of good gossip.
2. Mining machinery.
3. Ratters – the most despised people on the opal fields.
4. One of the two Mulga mullock dumps.
5. Think safe – mine (and noodle) safe.
6. Mulga mullock dumps – can you find what the miners have missed?
7. A mine truck heading onto the Mulga dump.





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TIP #6: Watch the locals. If a truck dumps and the locals ignore it, there is probably a reason why. If, however, another truck turns up and suddenly people are getting out of their cars and hurrying behind it – well get in there with the melee.

If you see a truck dumping on a major road then it is also usually fine to noodle – just ask Jim. Jim’s Corner is on the way to the Sheeppark Inn. A truck broke down here once and dumped its load on the road. Jim came along and picked up a \$20,000 opal.

TIP #7: Look for parts of the road that are white. This usually means the road has been graded with opal dirt. If it has just rained then even better; the rain will wash the dirt and make spotting that opal even easier. You won’t be the only one walking along the road after rain.



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GO!

You don't need a fossicking licence at Lightning Ridge but you will need some very basic equipment. Grab a water spray bottle, a small garden trowel, a bucket (size depends on your time and ambitions), and a pair of end-cutter pliers. Keep the sun over your shoulder and look for the shiny, glassy bits among the white clay opal dirt. Spray the dirt with water. If you're finding potch – or common opal – you're getting close. Keep digging and looking. If you find a likely looking piece of rock, you can clip the edges.

TIP #8: I really mean the edges. Two small opals are never as valuable as one big one – just ask any miner who has put a jackhammer through a good bit of colour.

TIP #9: Lick. You're not a true noodler until you've licked a stone or two to see its colour.

There are some safety issues you will need to be aware of. The mullock dumps are a moonscape and can get awfully hot in the middle of the day – take water for noodlers as well as opals. Dump trucks don't have to be registered on the opal fields, which means brakes are an optional extra. When not on the dumps be aware you are on working mining fields and don't put a leg down an open shaft – the fall is not so bad but the sudden stop can kill you.

1. Mullock heaps but don't be a ratter.

2. Fire in the opal.

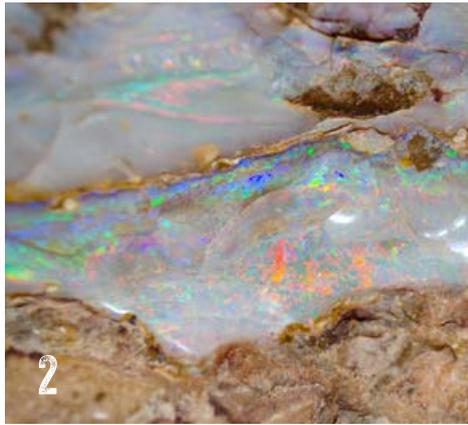
3. Opalised yabby button.

4. Leave the shafts to miners.

5. Not a million dollars but a start.

6. Spoils from an afternoon's noodling.

7. Sunset on the opal fields.





EUREKA!

You've found an opal – now what? Well, you can put it in your pocket and keep walking. Or maybe you want to get it valued – there are plenty of buyers advertising around the Ridge. Ask their opinion on its worth, but don't be afraid to haggle on price – it's almost expected. Another option is to have it cut or carved. Marg at Marg's Carvings has a knack for turning opal, even low-grade potch, into quite amazing pieces from koalas to whales and everything in between – limited only by your imagination.

TIP #10: Opal fever is a real thing. It's hard not to get excited when a flash of colour appears, and that can lead to a very serious addiction.



HOW TO SPEAK OPAL

As you travel around the Lightning Ridge fields in search of that elusive opal worth millions, you're going to hear all sorts of strange terms. Here's a list to help you out:

NOODLING: Fossicking for opal on the surface.

MULLOCK HEAP: Pile of discarded opal dirt from mining operations.

CLAIM: A 50m x 50m plot of ground registered to an opal miner. Only the registered miner can take opal from the claim.

RATTER: An opal thief; often descending into mines during the night and pinching opal that is not theirs. Mind you, ratters are also ones fossicking on private claims – make sure that's not you!

SHAFT: Circular hole (usually about a metre in diameter) allowing access to an underground opal mine. Many abandoned shafts are left open so watch where you walk.

SWINGERS: Swinging ladders suspended into a shaft from a fixed point on the surface – imagine climbing five stories of ladders that literally swing (insider tip: unless there are no alternatives avoid these at all costs).

BLOWERS: Large machines that suck (I know – it sounds Irish) dirt from an underground opal mine to the surface.

BALLROOM: A large area underground that has been completely mined out; often dangerous if not propped.

PROPS: Wooden poles (often cypress pine trunks) used to support the roof in an underground mine.

RUNNER: A person who will sell your opal for you (for a commission) if you wish to remain anonymous.

POTCH: Low-grade, or common, opal without gem colour.

BAR: A line of opal colour on background potch (or the place to go to drown your sorrows when you've not even found potch).

NOBBY: Opal around the town of Lightning Ridge is most often in nodules called nobbies. On the outer fields, such as Grawin, opal occurs in seams. Both can contain black opal.

ROUGH: Opal in its natural state that has not been cut or rubbed.

RUBS: An opal where the rough surface has been removed to reveal the colour.

CRAZED: An opal that develops cracks and lines is said to be crazed.

FIRE: The play of colour in an opal.

RUSH: What will happen when you tell everybody where you found your million dollar opal. 🤪

