

**Heart of the Nation** Photography Darren Clark

**R**ounding up a mob of cattle in a paddock sounds easy enough. But when that paddock is 30km wide and 30km long, even *finding* them can be a challenge. That's where helicopter mustering pilot Nick Dohnt comes in.

"Ringers on horses and motorbikes could spend two weeks just searching for the cattle," he says of these vast properties in the Barkly Tableland, west of Mount Isa. He simply climbs a few thousand feet and looks for the dust. Then he swoops down and drives the mob towards the blokes on the ground, which can take a dozen hours of low-level flying, in the "death zone" as it's known, where quick reactions, a cool head and superb piloting skills are called for. He's pictured chasing a breakaway, using the downwash to flick up dirt and turn the animal.

Dohnt, 25, grew up in Deniliquin in NSW's Riverina region, the eldest child of a builder and an aged-care worker, and he left home at 16 "looking for adventure". Boy, did he find it. He headed north, first to Katherine and then on to Cape York and the Gulf Country, working as a



**Barkly  
Tableland**

ringer. At 20 he became head stockman at a 4700 sq km station in the Barkly Tableland, with seven blokes under him. Dohnt was younger than all of them; it was a crash course in leadership skills, he says.

He's been heli-mustering for the past four years, and doesn't much miss the grunt work on the ground – riding rough horses, breathing in dust, getting kicked by cows. He enjoys flying over this epic landscape. Sadly, it's gripped by drought again after a poor wet season; good feed is thin on the ground, and graziers are selling off cattle en masse, which has driven down prices. It's going to be a very tough year.

Still, this country breeds resilience and resourcefulness. When photographer Darren Clark joined him, Dohnt had just refuelled from a barrel and was having trouble getting the chopper going again. "He took out a pair of pliers and started whacking the starter motor," says a clearly rattled Clark. A set of jump-leads connected to a 4WD finally got the rotors turning. "When stuff happens you've just got to improvise," shrugs Dohnt. "Out here you have to work with what you've got." **ROSS BILTON**