

# Descending the Collie 2005

Macquarie Dictionary ...

**Descent:** (*noun*)

1. The act or an instance of descending.
2. A way down.
3. A downward incline or passage; a slope.

**Descend:** (*verb*)

1. To move from a higher to a lower place; come or go down.
2. To slope, extend, or incline downward.

Now from that you'd conclude that the Avon Descent is an inclining journey down the Avon River and the Collie Descent is an inclining journey down the Collie River, right?

And thinking in such nautical terms you'd think of descending these rivers in suitable paddle or power craft, right?

But before I go on, just keep in mind that there is another nautical definition of "descend" and another nautical craft capable of descending, namely a submarine!

Now read on ....

Despite our mishaps while descending the Avon River a couple of weeks ago, my son Jon and I were suitably chuffed to not only have finished, but to have come fourth in our class (plastic doubles).

So chuffed was Jon that he wanted more action, and so it was that we found ourselves on the banks of the Collie River last Saturday about to embark on the Collie Descent.

## A scenic doddle

The Collie Descent was inaugurated three years ago by a hearty band of locals who rightly decided that some Avon survivors may still want to make use of high water levels and the expensive kit and training they'd invested in.

So what better place to entice people than a 27km paddle down some of the most scenic river in the south-west.

Given the shortness of the course and the beautiful scenery, Jon and I had assumed the Collie Descent was a bit of a doddle.

Well, it isn't. And here's why ....

Still in its infancy, this year's Collie Descent attracted only a small field – about 25 paddlers in 18 different craft. (No power boats allowed in this one!)

We headed off in a "mass" start from the Harris River Winery and after about 100 metres of open water the fleet disappeared into



Competitors in the 2005 Collie Descent. 2005/08/20



the “ti-trees” as they are described on the course maps.

Unlike the Avon course, however, ti-trees actually make up the minority of trees spanning the Collie River. Most are paperbarks and gums of varying sizes.

So when you hit them, they don't often move, when you need to duck into a branch, it usually wallops you a lot harder than you expect, and if the branch needs to be ducked altogether, you'd bloody well better duck!

It's not a big river at this point, and with it spilling its banks it is sometimes hard to determine whether you were actually on the river or dodging the trees that normally line it. However, the race organisers had marked the best route with plastic tape, thank goodness, so for the most part we kept to the actual river course.

This formidable forest sorted out a few craft from the start and within 1500 metres we moved from second to first in our class as the two lads in the double kayak in front of us took a spill ducking under a branch.

We ducked and dodged, rammed and reversed our way through this maze for about five kilometres, losing our class lead when we took a wrong turn. But after about six kilometres we hit the outskirts of Collie and cleared the trees at last.



The first weir was a bit of a surprise, as our low-volume plastic double ploughed alarmingly deep into the downstream stopper, so deep the stopper crested across my brow (meaning the bow of the boat was about a metre underwater). Bugger!

We braced until the bow slowly surfaced like a Collins submarine then swept hard to avoid eddying out into a stricken single kayak paddler who had come to grief in front of us.



The trip through the Collie township was surprisingly fast and before we knew it we'd moved up another two or three boat places to about fifth position overall and were past the half-way point at the second weir.

This weir is made of steel posts with boards in between them, but because of the high water levels the boards had been removed between three sections. The drop was easily

managable, but the accelerating current and angle of approach made it hard to line up for a straight run. Glancing an unforgiving steel post in a swift current was not an option, although glance one we did. Bugger!

All I can say is thank goodness for the durability of plastic hulls. Having survived our scrape we continued on to the third weir, the only compulsory portage, where a toilet stop by Jon cost us a boat place.

Then it was on to The Chute. I'd seen photos of The Chute, a three metre drop next to a river gauging station. It looked not much worse than the bridge drop at Bell's on the Avon, which had never been a problem for us.

But as we approached it became clear that with the high water levels The Chute had transformed into an entirely different beast. At the bottom of the drop was a powerful stopper ... one capable of sucking you out of the cockpit! Bugger!!

I barely had time to tell Jon to get ready to brace when we were swallowed by The Beast - and I mean swallowed.

Now remember my references to the word "descent" and how it could be applied to submarines? Well, we crash dived into the boiling belly of The Beast.



***Up periscope! Being swallowed by The Beast!***

By the time the boat levelled out and began its slow ascent the bow was more than 1½ metres underwater and our heads were well below the surface.

As The Beast began its regurgitation the swirling currents sucked out one of my contact lenses and began turning the boat on its side. By the time we broke the surface we were already upside down.



*Where's the bloody boat?*



*Jon on his rock perch awaiting rescue*

As I exited the boat the current sucked off one of my rubber boots and I barely had a chance to draw breath before we disappeared into a second wave. I remember Jon crashing down on top of me and grabbing his paddle as it glanced off my leg. When I surfaced again, some 20 metres downstream, I was bracing against large subsurface rocks.

Glancing back I saw Jon scrambling onto a rock before I was swallowed by a third and then fourth wave. Bugger!

## **Up the creek ... with two paddles**

I was about 70 metres downstream from The Beast before I found myself out of its billowing bile and into swift, but rapid-free water.

It was then I heard a voice calling from the shore: "Over here, on this side. Come over to this side."

Thinking the voice was a rescuer and was directed at me I swam to the left-hand shore and scrambled up the steep bank carrying both our paddles. Alas, it turned out the voice was another stricken paddler and was directed to a rescuer in a play boat, not to me.

Now I found myself in thick bush with only one shoe, one contact lens, two paddles, no boat and my partner trapped on a rock on the other side of the river about 50 metres upstream. Bugger!

There was nothing for it but to plunge back into the icy waters and swim to the right-hand side. By the time I hobbled up to where Jon was he'd been rescued from his rock perch by a rope thrown from the shore.

Our boat had been trapped on the upstream side of some trees and Jon had returned to the water to free it. The only way he could do so was to push it back out into the current where it caught a big right-hand eddy and returned to the same group of trees, only now it was stuck on the downstream side.

My turn for boat rescue. Bugger. For the third time I entered the water and swam out on the eddy current to the boat, which I then towed about 30 metres to shore through a ti-tree thicket.

After Jon and I emptied and re-entered the kayak we faced another dilemma. The main current from The Beast cascaded into a large boulder and divided in two. On the left-hand side the channel was clear. (This was the side I'd been swept down on.) On the right-hand side the channel swept through dense ti-tree thickets and large banks of foam.

We had to cross the main current to get to the left-hand channel. This meant cutting into the current, leaning downstream to execute a brace-turn before sweeping hard to the left to avoid the boulder and get into the left-hand channel. It all turned to shit after the cut-in part when the boat was again



*Jon back on shore...*

*... but not me! Bugger!*

flipped like a coin and we had our second capsiz (in my case the fourth swim and in Jon's the third). Bugger!

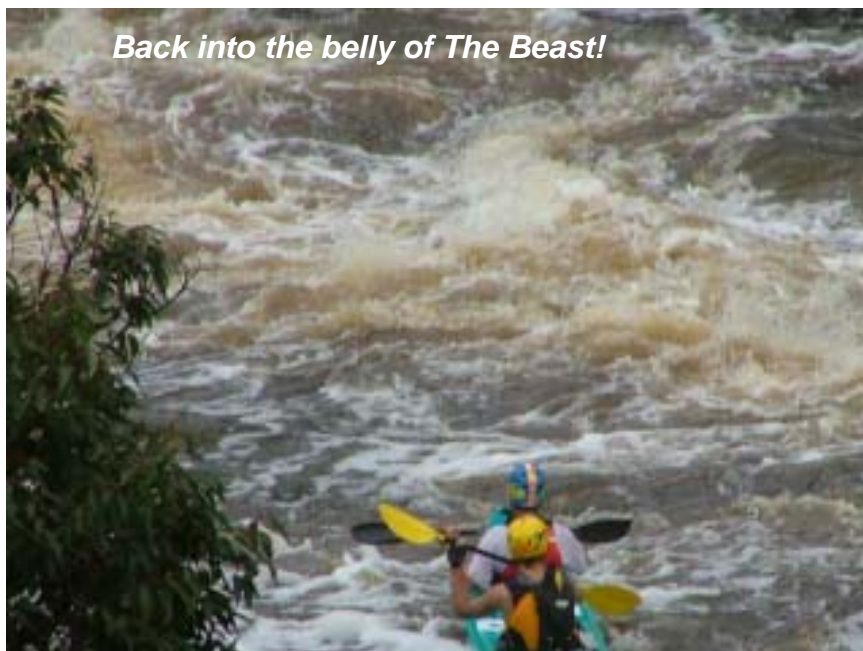
We were both swept down the right-hand channel, me into the ti-trees and Jon into rocks from which he could scramble to shore. As I fought against the current to avoid being sucked under the two-metre high bank of foam (you can't breath in foam, remember) our boat smashed into me from behind and began pushing me towards the thick tangle of ti-trees and the ominous foam bank.

For a few seconds it was an uncomfortable situation (as if being bashed around in nine degree water for the fourth time wasn't uncomfortable enough!). Bugger.

But fortunately the ti-tree trunks were strong enough to eventually hold the boat and give me some respite. After pulling the kayak free of the trees I scrambled to safety with the assistance of a rescuer in a play boat and we again emptied and re-entered our kayak.

The Beast had cost us about 40 minutes and we had now moved to last place. With the patient sweep boat crew alongside we swept down the last five kilometres and on to the finish line, where one of the playboat rescuers returned my missing rubber boot, which he'd miraculously found downstream from The Beast.

Apart from a disposable contact lens, some pride and our race position, we'd lost nothing. What we'd gained was a great adventure to recount and a sense of determination to come back and conquer The Beast next year!



*Back into the belly of The Beast!*



*Last in (the other one is the sweep boat)*