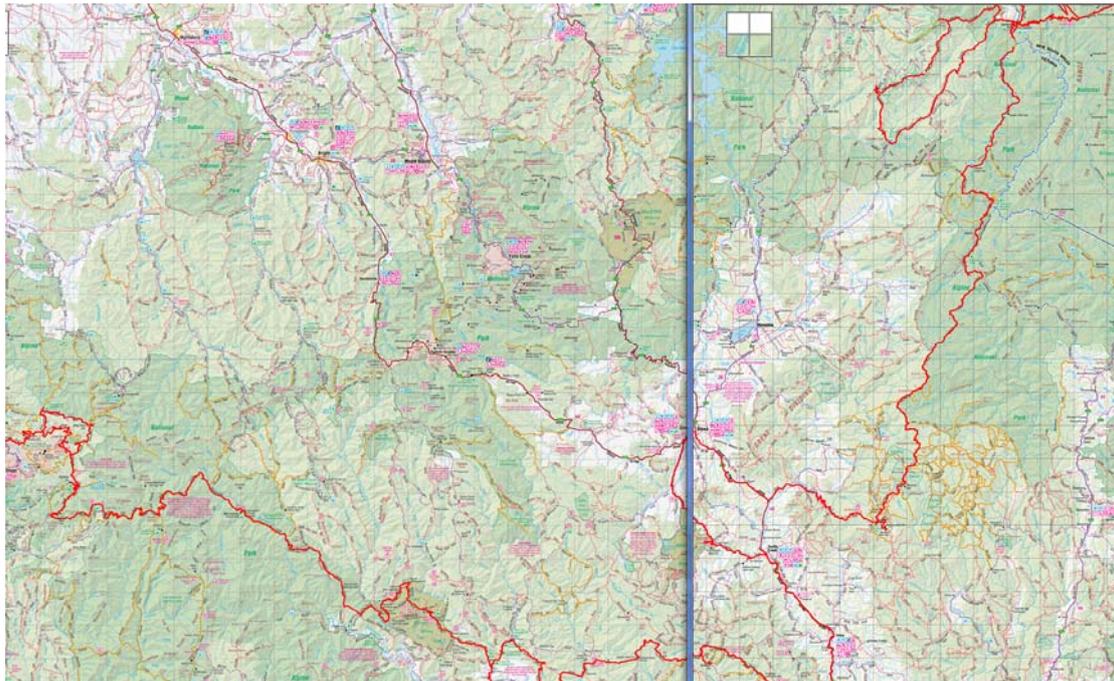


High Country/Australian Alps Overlander Forum Gathering Words and Photos - Richard Windeyer

Prologue

Towards the end of 2008 a couple of forum members suggested a forum gathering in the High Country/Australian Alps in late January.



At the peak of the Australian summer when the blistering heat can often make life unpleasant at sea level and as we have seen, cause absolute devastation, the temperature above 1,000 metres is very comfortable. The weather can change very quickly if a strong cold front comes in from the southern ocean and there can be snow at the high altitudes at this time of year.

It was agreed Dogman's Hut at Tom Groggin on the Murray River was the ideal location this time around.

Expressions of interest were called and a number of forumites accepted the invitation. As one of them had been into the area a number of times in previous years with Craig's Hut on the agenda and had never made it for one reason or another proposed an extended trip. The extended trip was to start from Mansfield near Craig's Hut and travel east across country through Wonnagatta Valley, Talbotville, Haunted Stream and Bentley's Plain to Dogman's Hut at Tom Groggin the week prior to the gathering. Day trips were planned from Tom Groggin.

Richard (richard), Chris (cewilson), Tim (Piston) and Mandy, Craig (Hotdog), Andrew (Wholehog), Bernie (Bluedog) and Phil M (philm) completed the extended trip whilst Clayton (98GU), father, brother and families, Phil S (Slowlux) and Greg (Joff) attended the gathering at Dogman's Hut.

Fri 16 Jan

A few eager travellers met in Wagga Wagga on Friday 16 January 2009 and accepted the overnight hospitality from Chris prior to setting off the next day through Albury, Wodonga and Benalla to Mansfield. Bernie and Andrew had spent the evening camped on the King River. Tim had stayed with friends whilst Phil had travelled from Melbourne.

Sat 17 Jan

A quick run on excellent bitumen roads found us in Mansfield at lunchtime on the Saturday where we had all arranged to meet. Mobile phones and the UHF radio had us in contact with each other and we gathered at the Information Centre prior to setting off. Tim was still at Alexander a fair way off so we set off. He advised us that he would catch us up later that evening.

We headed for Merrijig and Mount Stirling Road onto good dirt road arriving at Craig's hut early afternoon. The hut has been rebuilt again after the 2006 bushfires destroyed it.



It was originally built as a film set for the movie 'Man from Snowy River' and was just a front to which were added all the rooms. Whilst we were there a group of horse riders were having a rest from an arduous journey following the tracks and reliving the ways of the cattlemen who used to frequent the area.

Leaving the hut we headed up to the top of Mount Stirling then down the Monument Track passing King Hut on the way to Pineapple Flat where we set camp for the night. King Hut had also been destroyed by fire with only the chimney standing. Tim contacted us late afternoon and we guided him in to the camping area.

Sun 18 Jan



We awoke to a glorious day on Sunday and headed back to Craig's Hut as Tim had not had time to see it the previous afternoon. After a photo of us all in front of the hut we headed back down the Monument Track and Bindaree Road to Bindaree Hut. On the way we encountered a traveller heading the wrong way to Dago so we included him in our group to take him as far as Lovick's Hut. Bindaree Hut is a small hut not much bigger than a dog kennel but still sturdy enough to keep out the winter chill.

Turning onto Bluff Track we stopped to look at Bluff Hut and the magnificent view this location has to offer. Stopping at Lovick's Hut for a break and bid our tag along guests goodbye we found this hut had also been destroyed and was in the process of being rebuilt.

Late afternoon had us travelling along King Billy Track and then traversing the steep Zeka Spur down into Wonnangatta Valley which was our destination for the night. Wonnangatta Valley is one of the iconic 4WD locations in Australia.



A large open grassy valley closed at each end with steep walls. It was sweltering hot and we found a lovely pool of cool water where we all washed the dust off from the days journey.

Mon 19 Jan



On Monday after a tour of the valley taking in the location of the old homestead we headed for Hearne's Spur and arrived at the top after the very steep and dusty ascent. Chris had a drama on the way up when the shroud on his radiator became loose stopping the fan from

spinning and causing overheating problems. After waiting for the engine to cool down he gingerly nursed the vehicle to the top of the spur.

We travelled along the Cynthia Range Track and then down Station Track crossing the Wonnagatta River and arriving at our destination, Talbotville, early afternoon where we set camp on the bank of the Crooked River. A ranger paid us a visit late afternoon advising that in Victoria you were not allowed to camp less than 150m from the high water mark. As it was debatable where that was, he let us stay where we were. As it was a scorching hot day and we enjoyed the afternoon relaxing in a rock pool on the river.

Tue 20 Jan

Breaking camp Tuesday we headed for the numerous creek crossing on the Crooked River taking us through the old Hogtown site. We stopped off at the Good Hope Mine where Andrew and Bernie took the steep track to the mine head for look. The rest of us staying below and viewing the photos when they returned. There was the remains of an old steam tractor at the site and we wondered how they had got it up to the mine.

Ascending the steep Bulltown Spur track we emerged on the well graded and easy Macmillan's Road for the run to Grant at the top of the hill. Grant was also an old mining town with little left apart from a few markers showing the location of various buildings. We also stopped off at the cemetery and looked at some of the few remaining graves.



A quick run on the blacktop had us in Dargo for a counter lunch which we all enjoyed. After refuelling and topping up our supplies we headed for our camping destination that evening, somewhere along Haunted Stream.

We found our planned route Mount Steve Track closed so we took the Gidley and Orton Tracks. The tracks were quite overgrown and it was obvious they had not been used for some time however we persevered, initially not finding the going too difficult. The Orton Track was very steep and even though it was dry we were sliding down in Low Range 1st with the brakes on. A hairy experience but great fun and we were all relieved to arrive back on Mount Steve Track in one piece.

Good dirt road had us along Engineers Road and down to Dawson City which seemed like a good camp site. Whilst some of us waited there a few of the others scouted ahead to see if they could find a better camp site. After having no luck they returned and we set camp for the night. This is a lovely spot on Haunted Stream that easily accommodated us all although there are no facilities, only bush camping.



Wed 21 Jan

Wednesday morning we broke camp and followed the Haunted Stream Track across countless creek crossings arriving at the Dahlstrom Track.



Our maps showed us this was a short cut to the Great Alpine Road so we ventured down it only to be bailed up by a large tree across the track right at the creek crossing. With a bit of manoeuvring and directions from Phil M we all negotiated this obstacle and were on our way again. A quick run up the

Great Alpine Road had in Swifts Creek for lunch where most of us feasted on that great Aussie tradition, a pie with sauce.

After lunch we travelled out along Cassilis Road stopping off at the Cassilis Historic Area and the King Cassilis Mine where there are numerous mining relics from days gone by. We continued on to Omeo stopping off at the Oriental Mining Claims and marvelled at the amount of clay that had been blasted away from around the streams with the use of a large water gun to access the gold bearing overburden.

We strolled around Omeo before continuing back along the Great Alpine Way. Turning off on Bindi Road we headed along Nunning Road to Bentley's Plains which was our destination for the night. We stopped off along the way to look at the 'Washington' a huge steam driven winch that was used to haul timber from the surrounding gullies.

Passing Moscow Villa Hut on the way we reached Bentley's Plain late afternoon and set camp. A couple of the group walked back later to have a look at Moscow Villa Hut.



During the night a ferocious storm blew up throwing everything at us except snow and we had to batten down the hatches, but much to our relief we all survived.

Thur 22 Jan

On Thursday we awoke to a darkening sky and the threat of rain so we all packed up as fast as we could finishing just before it started bucketing down.

We headed back to Nunniong Road following it north, north east to Native Cat Track. It was obvious this track was not often used and although the area had been burnt out in 2006 the trees were showing signs of recovery with saplings well advanced.

Turning onto Limestone Creek and then McCarthy's Track which was damp and a bit slippery, we met a group of vehicles heading the other way on a narrow section of the track. We manoeuvred around each other before bidding farewell and a safe journey.



We turned onto Davies Plain Track when the weather closed in again with thick fog and misty rain. We had a quick stop at Davies Plain Hut but didn't stay long due to the inclement weather and then negotiated the two steep and slippery drops down to Buckwong

Creek. Phil S was monitoring the UHF radio channel we were using and came up from Dogman's Hut to meet us.

We headed down the track arriving at Dogman's Hut in time for a late lunch.

On arrival at Dogman's Hut the rest of us set camp with most putting up tents as we were using this location just outside the boundary fence of Tom Groggin Station, on the Murray River, as a base for the next couple of days.

Whilst setting up camp we had to batten down the hatches again when another heavy downpour drenched the campsite, however the storm passed as quickly as it arrived. We spent the afternoon in camp and on the Murray River.

Late afternoon Clayton and his group were monitored on the UHF and Bernie left to help with getting a small caravan across the Murray.

They set camp on the flat above the river and the evening was spent around the campfire with the usual tall stories being told.

Fri 23 Jan

Friday dawned fine and sunny and we had planned on a day trip to Davies Plain Hut. As most of us had been there the day before we called a lay day and it was each to do there own thing.

Chris and Richard headed for Thredbo, Phil S and Clayton headed up to Davies Plain Hut, Bernie, Andrew and Craig decided to do the Alpine Way loop and Phil M went trout fishing.



On our return we found quite a few additional campers had set camp up on the flat above the river bank. Everyone arrived back at camp at different times through the afternoon with most adjourning to the river to cool off. After the rain the previous day it had risen about 300mm and was flowing reasonably strongly.

The evening was spent around the camp fire again.

Sat 24 Jan



The plan for Saturday was to do a big loop heading along Tom Groggin Track to Buenba Flat then travel via Buenba Road to Mount Gibbo Track, Mt Anderson Track, Mount Pinnibar Track and then return to Dogman's Hut. There was some doubt as to whether the tracks would be dry enough but as

it was a beautiful day with a strong wind blowing we made the call to do this trip. The track was quite dry, but not dusty, to everyone's relief and an easy run had us at Buenba Flat for smoko.

We negotiated the tracks across the three peaks easily enough with a couple of steep climbs on the way where we admired the views from Mt Gibbo, Mt Anderson and Mt Pinnibar.



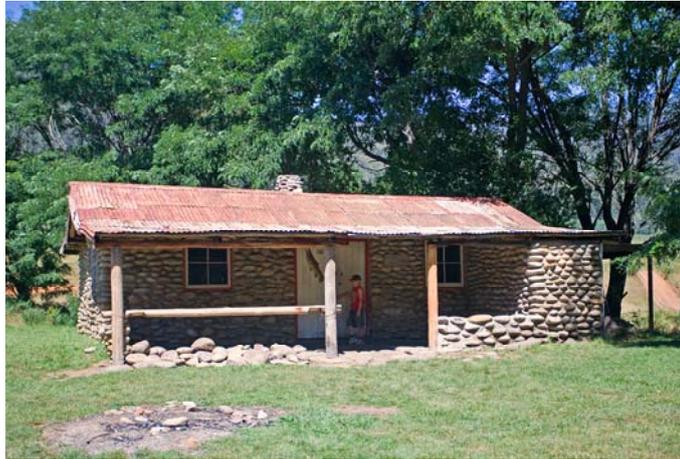
Along the Mt Gibbo Track we encountered a large fallen tree across the track however there was a side track with a ramp constructed of logs already in place. The ramp did require some maintenance to get the standard vehicles over and Andrew rebuilt the ramp. Sections of the track had white everlasting daisies along the side which looked like snow and the yellow everlasting daisies were a brilliant contrast.

Whilst we were away from camp Greg had arrived with his family and set up his camper trailer. This was a shakedown trip for his imminent journey around Australia for 12 months. We welcomed him and spent the rest of the afternoon on the river and the evening around the camp fire.

Sun 25 Jan

Sunday's trip was to cross the Murray and head for the Geehi Walls Trail swinging back home again via the Alpine Way. Bernie and Andrew had decided that they would do their own thing and climb Mt Kosciusko.

It was another great day as we headed up the Alpine Way turning off onto the Geehi Walls Trail. We stopped off at Geehi Hut and Keeble's Hut then crossing the Swampy Plains River for lunch at the Old Geehi Hut. A couple of us tried our luck with the fishing rod and although we spotted a few trout they refused to be tempted by the lures.



After lunch we continued along the track to major Clews Hut and whilst there were told by another group the track ahead was blocked by a fallen tree. We continued on and came across a large tree which had been felled by lightening however there was a bypass which was negotiable for everyone.

Whilst Phil S headed back to camp the rest of us headed on into Khancoban for a look around. This town was one of the centres of the Snowy Mountain Scheme in its construction days but is now only a sleepy village although it does support the power stations close by.

We called in at the Murray 1 power station on the way home and took the free tour of the power station where the guide gave a good explanation of the scheme and how it worked.

Arriving back at camp we all adjourned to the river where during the afternoon three snakes were observed swimming across the river, Tiger's and Brown's. This put everyone a little on edge and particularly the fellow who was within an arm span of one of them. This was our last night together which we again spent around the camp fire.

Mon 26 Jan



On Monday Bernie and Andrew were gone when we woke up, heading back to Queensland. Greg and Clayton were heading home through Cooma, Phil M was heading back to Melbourne, Phil S was heading for Dargo and the rest of us were heading for Talbingo. Richard had

decided to camp for the night at Talbingo rather than battle the end of school holidays/public holiday traffic back into Sydney.

Epilogue

A memorable trip with a great bunch of people and camaraderie and through another iconic 4WD area.

We travelled through a week earlier than the hot weather that was to cause absolute devastation to many small communities in Victoria and our well wishes to them in this time of grief and sorrow. One way to help the locals is that when the townships have been rebuilt support them with your custom as many of these towns survive on tourism.