



# Flies, Fires

# and Floods

**CAUTION  
FLOODING  
AHEAD**

Victorian High Country 28/12/2015 to 5/1/2016

We met at Milawa Caravan Park on December 28th in the afternoon, 5 vehicles comprising Brian, our trip leader, & Sharryn Harris in the Nissan Patrol, Matt Harris & Ally Smith in the Toyota Landcruiser, Ian & Tom Ferrett in the Nissan Navara, Duane, Tammy & Aidan Rieser in the FJ Cruiser & myself (Iainn) in the Prado. With three Toyotas and two Nissans, suffice to say there was the odd bit of rivalry and banter about vehicle performance, however in an act of God, my radio had decided to prevent me from having a transmission range of more than about 50 metres,

so the Nissan drivers were spared a portion of the polite comments, however I had to endure a few less than politically correct comments regarding Toyotas, without the opportunity of reply!

Milawa proved to be a good place to set out from, as it had a good Italian restaurant where we had dinner, which was over the road from the caravan park. We didn't have a lot of time there, but Milawa is also the home of Brown Brother wines and Milawa Mustards and the bakery wasn't bad either. This general area is well worth a look, for anyone looking to fill in a few days, and the caravan park there was quite reasonable if fairly small.



Tuesday 29th started with Matt and me heading back to Wangaratta to get fuel, as I hadn't filled up on the way in, and Matt needed a jerry can of diesel. Conveniently, none of the local garages were operating, but Wangaratta is only about 10 minutes away, so after a bit of a loop, we headed in there. By about 9.00 we were all on our way and heading up Snow Rd to Upper Carboor Rd and after a small detour to check we were actually on the right road, we headed up into the forests and aired down for the big adventure. Upper Carboor Rd was a good forestry road and eventually we came out on the bitumen again and headed down to Lake Buffalo for morning tea in the picnic area. The weather was looking good for the trip.

From Lake Buffalo, we headed up along Buffalo River Rd and onto Abbeyard Rd, and then onto Lake Cobbler. On the track up to Lake Cobbler, if you look over to the right, you can see a waterfall with a fair drop, but being by myself I didn't want to try and look and drive too much as this can result in a rapid unexpected descent off the track, so I only glimpsed the falls through the trees. The scenery in the high country is spectacular, and it was said on more than one occasion, that most of the people in this country would never get to experience the beauty of it, or the serenity. The

tracks in are reasonable, but I wouldn't head in alone due to the remoteness of some of the country, unless you are fully capable of fixing or recovering a vehicle by yourself. As a group it is a great chance to experience some of the best views and roads in this country.

Lake Cobbler is a man made lake that was dammed in the 1950's to provide a fire fighting reserve of water for the surrounding area. There were a few campers in ahead of us, but Brian headed up a closed off bit of track and found us a spot at the end which had some low ground near the lake's edge where we could pitch three tents, and Cobbler Heights about 30 metres up the hill where the other two could set up. Also not too far to the long drop facilities. An important selling point for the ladies. After setting up was done came one of the most important reasons for going a trip with a group - happy hour (or two) - so we could sit around and partake of nibblies and liquids and appreciate the fine place we were in.

Did I mention the flies - They think Aerogard is an appetizer and we were the main course. Yes high country is fly country - love them or hate them, they are there to share every moment with you. I still had the fly net for my hat from my WA trip, so I got some respite, but you can't eat or drink through a flyscreen. Well, not easily anyway!



## Trip report

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Tom was trying out his photography skills at sunset on Lake Cobbler, as was I, but his gear was a lot more sophisticated than my point and click. Nevertheless, it was a lovely place to spend a night and the sun setting across the marshlands and the mist on the water made for some good shots. Ian and Tom went off to check out the waterfall down a bush track and said it was a pretty long drop off.

On the next morning as we were packing up, Aidan managed to find a brown snake which was un-amused at our presence, and slid off into the bush. We packed up and left by about 8.30 and headed south on Lake Cobbler track to Speculation Rd and then up to Craig's Hut, which had a fair crowd. There must have been about 30 vehicles up there, but I did manage to take a couple of photos of the hut without anyone in the picture. Craig's Hut was built for the film "The Man from Snowy River", to resemble the original style huts of the alpine area, and though it seems a little more polished than some, it is a pretty good example for the region. The views from the surrounding cleared lands are spectacular.

We then headed south on Clear Hills Track to Bindaree Rd and Bluff Rd and up past Bluff Hut - we didn't stop as there were other cars in there and not a lot of room, so continued up the track and found a good camp spot on the ridge top at, I think, about 1600 metres, so we expected it to get cold, but it really didn't get too cold overnight, so proved a pretty good place to be. On the way up Ian 'Buckets' Ferrett noted a rattle in the car, which he stopped to check out. Several times. Eventually after many laps of the campsite roads with different people in the car, he concluded that there was in fact a rattle and that he could not be sure he'd found it. Tents were erected, wood collected and the obligatory campfire and happy hour ensued, with magnificent views from our high vantage point out across the Southern Alps.

Next morning, Thursday 31st, we continued east to Lovicks Hut, for a brief morning tea stop and a bit of a look around. This would have been our camping ground if we had made it the night before, but uncertain of travel time and if there would be space, we had opted for the ridge spot. Maybe next time. Then we headed off south along King Billy Track and onto Zeka Spur Track which took us down into Wonangatta Station, which opens out into a large grassy area, maybe 5 kilometres to the end around the corner, and

more than half a kilometre wide. This was originally farmland, and there are remains of the farm house, shed and cemetery and some of the orchard trees. Most of the better sites along the river we already filled, so Brian went off scouting for a better place and soon radioed back that they had found a site. We set up in amongst a grove of elms and acacias, which was nice and cool, on the banks of Conglomerate Creek, and there were slab seats around concrete campfire pits, and also a small cairn to a W.M Mortimer. There were no references to this W.M.Mortimer in the books, so at this point he was mystery. We got set for happy hour and I think Buckets went rattle hunting again. These Navaras seem very rattle prone....

I think it was on the track in that we had the camper trailer pillock behind us. He tailgated Matt up a very rough and rocky section with the trailer bouncing about four or five feet in the air. When we stopped for lunch he eventually went past us with no apparent regard for the trailer. Later on up the track we found him with the now single wheeled trailer, sans wheel bearing, stub axle brakes etc. So picture this. You are a single car, with almost no phone reception, no spares to fix a problem, broken down on a narrow and fairly remote track and it is New Year's Eve. He said he had greased the bearings before he went away, so couldn't understand it. Meanwhile, Matt who is a mechanic, is picking up bits of disintegrated wheel bearing, brake shoe and sundry parts and placing them on top of the stricken camper trailer. We made a couple of suggestions on how to fix the problem and left him to sort it out. If he'd had a bit more respect for us, we might have stayed, but tailgating up these roads is not conducive to forming good relationships.

About 8.00 the next morning, New Year's Day, a noisy old Landcruiser drove into our campsite and this old bloke got out and asked a couple of questions about when we got in, and then left again. Later in the day, we went for a walk to the old cemetery, where this old bloke was tending to the grass around the graves. I had a bit of a chat to him, and in the course of things, he mentioned that he had been coming up there since his retirement in 1989, and in recognition of his dedication to maintaining the site, the 'Friends of Wonangatta' had erected a cairn to him in his usual camping spot, so that is how we met Wallace Malcolm Mortimer 88 years and 9 months and still driving alone from Wangaratta to Wonangatta regularly to

tend to the maintenance of the site. He has written several books about Wonangatta and surrounds, and also his commentary on a double murder that took place there about a century ago, with his conclusion to who committed it. I bought all four of his books and he wrote a brief note inside the cover of one. I think almost everyone bought at least one of the books. We also invited him to happy hour that night which was a pleasure. One of the other pleasures for some was the addition of a hot shower, courtesy of Brian & Sharryn, though I must say I preferred the more traditional method of lying down in the creek and letting the water flow over me.

Later I was tending to the duties of nature, when a couple of kids came running past yelling about a bushfire. There had been a lot of wind and a few lightning strikes, one of which had managed to spark up in the next valley over. All the cars which had been pouring in all day long looking for campsites were now pouring back out again. We concluded that talking to Mr. Mortimer would be the best course of action as he was more familiar with things there than us, and after a brief discussion, he said he was not concerned and would not be going anywhere, so being almost nightfall, we opted to stay the night, with a watch and act scenario, having been told by Brian that three blasts on the horn was time to pack up and

go. The fire flared up a bit during the night, but didn't get any closer, and stayed probably three or four kilometres away. Part of the reason for staying was that we were in open country next to a river, and also that we didn't know exactly where the road ahead went or what we might be driving into, so better to stop the night and bail out in daylight when we could see a lot better. Also, the spotter plane had come over in a low pass, so the authorities were well aware of both the fire and the presence of a large number of campers in the area. Nevertheless, it was an uneasy night with most of us getting up at one time or another to check on the progress of the fire.

So in the morning we packed up pretty quickly and set off on the Wonangatta track, and across Humffray River to the Humffray River Track, with a number of wet crossings for the day, though nothing deeper than about a foot, so really just a chance to convert dirt to mud on the car. We climbed Harts Spur track to Cynthia Range Track along Wombats Spur. Some of the grades we went on were up to 28 degrees touching 30 degrees on the conservation humps. We avoided the Herne Spur Track, which we had been told reached 37 degrees in some places, but was a bit slippery too. Looking down it as we passed the top, I was quite happy to have missed out on it. We crossed the Wongungurra River and headed north into



## Trip report

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Talbotville, which is a large paddock, which once contained a gold mining town of some note, but is now the temporary home of a number of campers & 4wd'ers. Notably - us. We managed to get a fairly good spot by the river, after Buckets had spent a considerable time, to our consternation, attempting to sort out the previous occupants fridge problems, but eventually gave up and was rewarded with a few Crownies, and the welcome sight of the departing camper.

Again we had good fire pits, and a ready supply of bugs to keep Aidan amused, so we were all set again for happy hour. I think the light drizzle began sometime in the evening, and continued into the next morning, so we decided not to attempt wet tracks, but rather to head into Dargo about 33 kms away for a pub lunch and to stock up on a few supplies, just in case. There was some fierce pool table competition after lunch and a quiet tippie, but most of the time in Dargo, the drizzle had become a downpour, which followed us back to Talbotville, so we could do the gathering of bodies under various awnings - note to self, that an awning could be a good addition to the camping set-up, but others were willing to share as always. We heard the rain was to set in for a few days, so Brian decided that this was a good time to finish the trip up, and we would head out the next morning, as the tracks would not be much fun in the wet, and there was too much risk of both track damage and car damage.

Unfortunately for Buckets he had borrowed a tent from Ben Sweetnam, which proved to be a dry weather only tent, so when the rain got heavy, the water was both sides of the floor lining, which was OK for Buckets (Ian) on the camp stretcher, but not so good for Tom on the ground (now a river), so they decided to bail out (bad pun) that night and not wait for morning. So a very wet pack up and they headed out about 9.40pm with the intention of finding some dry accommodation along the way home. I got a couple of texts which I didn't pick up until the next morning. One was 40 minutes after they set off, from 13 kms up the road, which was wet, slippery and very foggy, and the second that they had finally found a motel at about 1.30am.

So not the best ending for their trip, and we have all nominated Ben, as the unwitting participant in our trip, for a shackle due to supplying faulty equipment!

Of special note also is Matt for moving his swag from the middle of the camp ground to a convenient spot next to a drainage channel which rapidly filled up, so the swag had to be moved again. In the process of moving, he had allowed a cargo strap to get wrapped around the wing mirror and then drag under the wheel, so as you make forward motion with the car, the strap tightens and then snaps the mirror hard against the bodywork, luckily without breaking it!



Also dobbed in (by Tammy) was Duane - for emptying the puddle on the awning - straight into Tammy's boots which she was about to put on.....

Ian (Buckets) might also get an honourable mention for the aforementioned rattle which had caused many stops, finally emerging from the back of the Navara with a wayward tent peg supposedly the culprit. Just couldn't peg that rattle down eh?

As for the rest of us. We headed out on the 4th of January along the Dargo High Plains Road and headed north to the Great Alpine Rd towards Mt Hotham. The ladies did some ringing around, and Ally managed to find us 4 motel rooms at Omeo, so we could get dry, so we stopped at Dinner Plains for a lunch of pies etc and a welcome cappuccino, and the weather continued to be pretty abysmal with torrential rain, so the motel was a welcome sight. Being the only single, it was fitting that my room was the only one with the spa bath! (it wasn't connected up, but its the thought that counts.)

Again we opted for a final pub dinner, followed by pool competition again for some. I ended up having a good conversation with a gentleman named Ken Connley who was a rodeo rider and stunt man, who had been in "The Man from Snowy River" and many other Aussie movies and is currently featured in one of the 4wd ads, so an interesting night. The night ended fairly early and I think we were all studying our eyelids by 10.00pm.

Next morning, Brian & Sharryn, the Riesers and I headed off up the Omeo Highway, whilst the youngsters were trying for a later checkout. They went back via the Omeo highway and Falls Creek & Mt Beauty. The older Harris's and the Riesers went back via Wodonga and up the Hume, and I went to Corryong for lunch and then on through Tumbarumba, stopping at the Museum, and on through Batlow to Tumut for the night and another pub dinner (better than my cooking), Next day I took to the dirt again to Wee Jasper which was a very pleasant scenic drive, and then on to Yass and up the Hume to home. I didn't get any wet weather until Goulburn, and after that it was torrential all the way home.

Glad I wasn't in a Nissan! All wheel drive Toyotas are much nicer in the wet...and as my radio was kaput for most of the trip, and I therefore had to endure a number of less than complimentary aspersions regarding Toyotas, without the ability to respond appropriately, this would be the perfect forum to make that response, were I less of a gentleman. Enough said.

Thanks again Brian for organizing and leading us on a memorable trip.

