

# HIGH JINX IN THE VICTORIAN HIGH COUNTRY

28th February—13th March 2009

by Linda Hayward



After almost a year of waiting, two pre-trip meetings at Dave & Chris Read's house, and the worry about Dave having to cancel the trip due to the appalling fires that had swept through Victoria, we were finally on our way. We met up with Dave & Chris, Keith Thompson and Mike Ford at the traditional LRRSA meeting place for easterly trips, the Tailem Bend servo.

The first day was spent travelling to Echuca for an overnight stop and rendezvous with Neil & Kay Cunningham at the Riverlander Caravan Park. Dave broke the journey with an interesting stop at Lake Boga, home to the Catalina Flying Boats during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The Lake currently has no water, however, there is a museum to look round although we arrived a bit late in the day to do so.

Another transit day followed and another rendezvous arranged at Myrtleford with John Drummond. John was travelling up from Canberra with his good friend

Tony Fitzgerald who was joining us for the fortnight. Again Dave excelled on the interest front with a lunch stop at Glenrowan, famed for its association with Ned Kelly. The meet up with John & Tony didn't quite come off as planned, but we did all eventually find our way to the pleasant and well equipped Omeo Caravan Park and our first night in the High Country proper.

Dave was forced to call a rest day for the next day as he needed to reorganize the trip itinerary. This was very much a feature of Dave's trip as long suffering Dave was already on the third draft having had to remain flexible depending on which areas were open and safely accessible to us following the recent devastating fires. It was Dave's ability and enthusiasm to do this which made the trip possible, and a great success.

Peter & I decided to take the opportunity to drive up to Mt Hotham summit and back via the Dinner Plain track, an easy dirt track and our 1<sup>st</sup> taste of High

Country offroading. Then it was back to camp and a group meeting for Dave to unveil his latest plans for us.

The first day proper of the trip dawned to grey skies, light rain and Mike in a very brightly coloured waterproof jacket which gave us endless opportunity for jokes at his expense throughout the fortnight. All six vehicles headed out towards the Cassilis Historic Area to tour some of the abandoned gold mining areas. Unfortunately, we were thwarted by locked gates over previously accessible land, closed tracks and a particularly steep climb made impossibly slippery by the rain. Dave made two attempts to get up but after a couple of reverse stall starts decided it wasn't safe. Every cloud has a silver lining and this one found us all enjoying coffees, pastries and cookies from the excellent Swifts Creek bakery at a local reserve, which, much to my delight, had a large flock of Gang-Gang Cockatoos feeding on pepper trees. We headed off again, this time successfully, to look at Mt

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Delusion Hut before returning to Omeo.



Next up was a day trip to the Haunted Stream, famous for 54 crossings of the stream in the one trip. John was keen to confirm this but had to give up counting when he ran out of fingers and toes. Dave was concerned that Neil & Kay's Freelander might struggle with some of the entry and exit angles to the stream, so Neil decided to travel with Mike with a view to doing the trip himself later in the week if it looked ok. He & Kay were not planning to travel on the planned overnight trip that week as Kay was recovering from spinal surgery and this trip was a bit of trial and error to find out what she could and could not do.

It turned out to be an entertaining but not too technically difficult drive, weaving in and out of the stream which hadn't been swollen by the previous day's rain, so no wading aprons required. The stream itself was set deep in a valley surrounded by trees one of which we heard spontaneously cracking and falling which kept us alert to the risk of others falling. Neil & Kay did return later in the week to successfully repeat the route in their vehicle.

Apart from Neil & Kay we all set

off the following day for a two night trip to Tom Groggin Station.

This was pure 4WD with only a short stretch of bitumen to just above Omeo then the possibilities were endless. Dave chose to take us through forests on a variety of dirt tracks from the well maintained, often used to the rough, seldom used types. It was on one of the seldom used types where Dave discovered his chain saw could have done with sharpening, as a tree had come down across the track and his saw struggled to cope. So a happy half hour was spent sawing, chopping and kicking the way through.

Then the excitement really began



with Mike managing to snap an axle clean through whilst attempting a steep loose climb which Keith had been up but everyone else went round. Luckily the diff wasn't damaged and Mike was able to limp on to the first nights camp at Wheeler's Hut, and took an easier route out and back to Omeo for repairs the next morning. Overnight temperatures at the camp fell dramatically leaving Dave's Landy refusing to start, the problem eventually being tracked down to frozen fuel in the filter and probably elsewhere. Also Keith's Defender was unhappy about starting, again most likely due to the fuel emulsifying as once warmed up it happily cooperated.

After a late start we all, (minus Mike) set off for Tom Groggin Station via Mt Pinnibar. This was a great days driving. Fantastic weather and real all terrain driving climbing up out of the forest onto the steep rocky slopes of Mt Pinnibar and back down onto the plains of Tom Groggin station. The scenery from Mt Pinnibar was breathtaking and included distant views of Mt Kosciuszko. Our camp for the night was Dogman's Hut which is next to the infant River Murray, and not far from the main

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ford of the Murray on the New South Wales / Victoria border. So before making camp we set off to play in the Murray and had a great time taking photos of each other bombing in and out of the river.

scrabbling about for jars of Vegemite in front of us as we negotiated the near vertical rocky slope.

Back in Omeo we were reunited

a Ranger Rover gearbox and Isuzu engine.

We changed location the following day, travelling cross country to Dargo and the Wonnangatta Caravan Park, taking in the Dog's Grave Monument. This interesting memorial whilst remembering the accidental poisoning of a drover's much loved dog, also stands as a tribute to the drovers and their working dogs that helped shape the High Country.

Our first welcome sight of Dargo was a newly slaughtered sheep being hung and cleaned by the side of the road and our second was the Range Rover Club of Victoria holding their annual get together out of Wonnangatta Caravan Park. This was their 'Blinman' with tag-a-longs out onto the surrounding tracks, but what was most striking was the lack of Range Rovers or indeed Land Rovers generally. There were two or three Disco 3s but mainly Toyotas and Nissans, and an Oka, and a good indication to me that the LRRSA decision to restrict membership to Land Rover owners only was the correct one.



It was another cold night, but Dave was ready this time and tucked his Landy into the bushes with blankets over her bonnet so we did not have a repeat of the previous morning's problems. We left Tom Groggin Station behind and headed out on the Davis Plain Track for a long drive back to Omeo via the Limestone Creek track. Apart from us almost losing a rear wheel because the wheel nuts had decided to come loose and fall off, (Peter was convinced the cold water of the River Murray the day before had contracted them) it was another brilliant day on the dirt. There was a bit of everything to test our driving skills including avoiding 60 or so cross country motorbike riders of all ages coming in the opposite direction. The roughness and steepness of the Limestone Creek track was well demonstrated when groceries found their way out of John's tray top onto the track, much to the surprise of Peter & I when we found John and Dave

with a happy Mike and his newly repaired Disco and a not so happy Neil & Kay who's previously quiet place on the camp site had been taken over by noisy Victorians enjoying a state-wide long weekend. Of interest on the now busy Camp Site was a friendly couple on a touring holiday from Tassie driving a Defender 110 with



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One of the other notable features of the Caravan Park, which was situated by the Wonnangatta River, were the numerous Duck-Billed Platypus resident and easily seen at dawn and dusk in the river. Peter, who was fly fishing in the river, was forced to keep moving spots to avoid the surfacing platypus, (he avoided the fish as well, unfortunately).

Dave declared a rest day for the next day, but then decided he wanted to reconnoitre the Blue Rag Range Track and asked if anyone would like to join him. Of course we wanted to join him, and what a great ridge top drive it turned out to be! A few tricky climbs on a wonderful ridge with fine views, and described on the Rooftop Map as 'one of the most spectacular ridgeline drives in Victoria'.

On a more sobering note we returned via an area that had been burnt in the recent fires. The amount and completeness of destruction was difficult to comprehend with kilometre after kilometre of blackened trees and nothing but bare soil on the ground. There were no houses in the area, but the effect on the

native wildlife must have been devastating.

During the fortnight we passed through many areas that were in different states of re-growth following fire. It brings home the reality of the long lasting environmental impact caused by fires to these remote areas, often not thought about when there is no human cost involved.

The next day was another challenging one with a climb up the Billy Goat Bluff Track. The

track climbs nearly 1200 vertical meters in 7km with a longest unbroken climb of 750m, mostly over rough and loose rock. Riding tail end our Defender 200Tdi couldn't quite find the grip or the power to get up a particularly steep loose section and needed extra help from John and a selection of straps. Once up the climb we arrived at The Pinnacles where a Fire Lookout is accessible and manned throughout the summer 24/7 by a warden who got us all to sign his visitor book.

The trek back via Castlehill Track was also good but the excitement didn't end there, and after a big day out we headed for the Dargo Hotel. Peter & I got lifts off Keith and Mike respectively so we could set up our rooftop tent and still go to the pub. Whilst travelling with Mike in his Disco on bitumen into Dargo, a Sambar Deer hind jumped from nowhere to land directly in the road a few metres ahead of us. Mike resisted the temptation to swerve which would have sent us into a gully, but unfortunately was unable to avoid hitting the deer. Sadly the impact injured but did not kill her; however a passing



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local was able to humanely destroy her after only a short delay. Mike's bull bar was pushed back with the impact, but he was able to straighten it and it is now known as a 'deer bar'.

The final two days of the trip were a return overnight trip to the Wonnangatta Valley and Station ruins. This valley is remote and with access only by 4WD via some steep descents. We started the first day with morning tea whilst messing about in the Wonnangatta River and taking photos of all the vehicles in one place – the middle of the river. It was then a long drive from Eaglevale on reasonably easy tracks and the promised steep descents into the delightful Valley. The whole area has some great camp sites, Dave chose a secluded wooded area and the valley echoed to the sound of Dingos howling overnight.

We explored the remains of the station homestead and cemetery the following morning; both are well interpreted by information boards, which make for interesting reading.

All good things must come to an end and trip broke up that morning at Wonnangatta with Neil & Kay heading cross country

towards Melbourne, and John & Tony towards Myrtleford. That left Dave & Chris, Mike, Keith and Peter & I heading back for a final night at Dargo. Light rain began at lunchtime and continued through the afternoon, but not enough to make the going too slippery fortunately. Once back at camp Keith and Mike made the decision to head back to Adelaide overnight as Keith's daughter was booked to have a caesarian the following morning, something which had been on his mind during the trip. I believe they got back about 8am - congratulations on your 4<sup>th</sup> granddaughter, Keith.

Dave & Chris were staying on at the Wonnangatta Caravan Park as they were expecting friends from the Overland Club at the weekend, (they were also looking forward to some well deserved time to themselves on the now deserted camp site) so the following morning Peter and I headed off to spend a night in the Wyperfeld National Park.

What is difficult to describe in a factual trip report is the daily UHF banter and jokes, tea and lunch break Landy chat and the general camaraderie. Peter and I can happily say we had the best time with a great group of people.

There is plenty to include which would probably only mean something to us – Chris's pink hat, Keith's leaking bladder, Kay's karaoke, Tony's cancer sticks, Peter's nuts and Mike's V8, but that's what a trip is all about.

I'm sure I speak for all of us in thanking Dave, with the support of Chris, for all the hard work he put into making the trip such a success and the expert way he led the trip – often under duress from the Channel 15 comedians. Put our name down for the next High Country trip, Dave.

**Linda Hayward**