#4. 2024

Mountain Journal

This is the annual Mountain Journal magazine. It is distributed through mountain and valley towns from Melbourne to Canberra each autumn. News, updates and stories are published on the website throughout the year.

Editor: Cam Walker

Design: Tess Sellar

Printed by Black Rainbow. https://blackrainbow.com.au/

Cover image: Carol Tonn

Thanks to Andy Hardy, Carol Tonn, Christa Treasure, Dave Dunlop, Elise Marcianti, Gil Paulsen, Hilary McAllister, Huw Kingston, James Worsfold, Jeffe Aronson, John Gertsakis, Kelly Van Den Berg, Lachlan Short, Liam Oakwood, Linda Groom, Marita Hills, Mick Webster, Ray Anderson, Richard Clarke, Shez Tedford, Stephen Curtain, Stephen Postle, Tabatha Badger, Tom Wainwright, William Jorgensen.

Mountain Journal

Edition 4. 2024.

E: cam.walker@foe.org.au

W: https://themountainjournal.com

Insta: @cam_walker_foe

Facebook: @mountainjournal

BOX 69, Dinner Plain, 3898, Victoria, Australia

If you would like to contribute a story or images for the website or next year's print edition, please get in touch.

All of Australia is indigenous land, and Mountain Journal acknowledges this fact.

The Australian Alps covers the traditional Country of the Bidawal, Monero-Ngarigo, Gunaikurnai, Jaithmathang, Taungurung, Mitambuta, Ngarigu-Currawong, Dhudhuroa, Waywurru, Wurundjeri and other peoples.

We use dual naming (Indigenous and European) of features like mountains or rivers where possible.

CONTENTS

Image: Richard Clarke.
Strumbo Range, NSW.

Introduction

What even happened last year? Another mild summer, no big fires, then truly dazzling amounts of autumn snow, a great start to winter, then, nothing. Rain and warm temps and misery and the snow pack was gone, not to return. An early end to the season in many places, especially the lower resorts. Then another mild summer as we headed into 2024 – a bit different to the El Niño scorcher we had been expecting.

Yes, this is the new reality. Climate systems turned on their heads. Wild floods up north, while more than 14 million hectares burnt across the Northern Territory just during our spring. Erratic winters and wild swings of weather. Buckle in, because it's not going back to 'normal' any time soon. Then there are the wars raging across many parts of the planet.

And yet, the world can still feel right. Those long autumn days and a slow wander across a snow plain, the light rich, the air cool, the distant peaks calling. We are blessed to live in a safe corner of the planet with beautiful hills and forests, rivers and high plains. The freedom and safety to explore. Let us be grateful, as we work for a better world for all.

It's time to listen to Traditional Owners: With the wonderful news that logging in native forests on public land in the east of Victoria ended on January 1, 2024, there is a huge opportunity to protect these forests for the long term. As the government considers what to do next, it is essential that environmentalists, recreationists and anyone with an interest in the high country listen carefully and respectfully to the wishes of Traditional Owners.

What do you reckon: this year's magazine has a number of longer stories. Please tell us what you think, and what you would like to see in next year's magazine.

News from Home

Environmental news from around Iutruwita/ Tasmania and the Australian Alps.

Are you suffering from shifting baseline syndrome?

How often do you see an image or vista like this when you're in the mountains? Whether you drive up from the valley towns through mile after mile of grey alpine ash trunks, or wander, ski or ride through the snow gum ghost forests of the high plains, you are witnessing a world that didn't exist a generation ago.

Whereas we would have had infrequent hot fire in the high country in the past, now we have fire on endless repeat. The forests get younger as we get older, yet this new reality of dead trees and thick regrowth becomes understood as being 'normal'. Many people don't recognise that what they see as they look out from a ski resort over burnt out hills is actually ecological collapse in real time.

Are we witnessing a deteriorating landscape and thinking it is 'normal' because we don't have a memory of what was here before?

As noted in the journal Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment,

With ongoing environmental degradation at local, regional, and global scales, people's accepted thresholds for environmental conditions are continually being lowered. In the absence of past information or experience with historical conditions, members of each new generation accept the situation in which they were raised as being normal. This psychological and sociological phenomenon is termed shifting baseline syndrome (SBS), which is increasingly recognized as one of the fundamental obstacles to addressing a wide range of today's global environmental issues.

The term was coined by Daniel Pauly in 1995, and is sometimes referred to as 'environmental generational amnesia'. Shifting Baseline Syndrome is 'a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to a lack of experience, memory and/ or knowledge of its past condition'. In this sense, what we consider to be a healthy environment now, past generations would consider to be degraded, and what we judge to be degraded now, the next generation may consider to be healthy or 'normal'.

As the forests go …

If you pay attention you start to see it everywhere in the mountains. Craig Hore, who is Ranger in Charge-Fire and Emergency Operations in the North East District for Parks Victoria reflects on the changes in the mountains:

Since the fires of 2002/3, the mountains of the mainland have been transformed. With ever more frequent fire and drier conditions, he doesn't feel that we can go back to what the Alps used to be like. In his early days as a Ranger, he could drive through older forests for hours. But now so much of the park has been badly impacted by fires and dominated by dead trees and regrowth. "I doubt we will ever see those old forests again."

We know what we need to do to regrow old forests – keep fires out as they recover. But that will only happen when enough people raise their voice and demand that state governments provide the resources to ensure there are sufficient fire fighting resources to protect these forests even in years like the Black Summer of 2019/20.

… so does the snow

It's the same with snow. We know that Australian snow pack has been in slow decline since at least 1957. We also know that lower elevation areas and resorts have already been adversely impacted and are increasingly marginal.

There is no doubt that human caused climate change is causing this loss. But there is often a belligerent denialism that is expressed by some within the ski industry and snow community whenever you point this out.

But anyone who is a bit older knows that things have changed in recent decades. From loss of spring skiing in lutruwita/ Tasmania, to shorter ski seasons, as happened in the winter of 2023, the reality is easy to see.

Many younger skiers and riders, who have grown up in a time of climate change, often think that erratic snow seasons, no snow on opening weekend, and reliance on human made snow is normal.

This makes me sad. We can't change the past. But we can educate ourselves about what came before, and work now to create the conditions that will see our grand kids inherit a world of old trees and deep winter snow.

Remember, action is always the antidote to despair.

https://themountainjournal.com/2023/04/25/giving-back-and-getting-involved-in-protecting-the-alps/

Image: Main Range, Snowy Mountains. Image: Rob Blakers.

Gunaikurnai to jointly manage the Alpine national park

In mid 2023, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) took on joint management of four new parks on their traditional land in eastern Victoria.

From early July 2023, the Avon Wilderness Park, Baw Baw National Park, Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park and the Alpine National Park on Gunaikurnai Country will be joint managed by GLaWAC and Parks Victoria. At the time, GLaWAC said:

'Country and Culture are significant pillars of the spiritual and lived strength that our members need and strive for.

'We recognise the knowledge, strength and resilience of our Ancestors, Elders, and Community – the driving force behind our decision making and our cultural lore.

We continue the long and hard fought path toward self-determination, realising the goals of the Gunaikurna Whole of Country Plan in honour of those who have come before and those who continue to make the aspirations of the Gunaikurnai heard.'

https://gunaikurnai.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Gunaikurnai-Whole-of-Country-Plan-ONLINE.pdf

Native forest logging ends in the Victorian high country!

On January 1, 2024, all native forest logging on public lands in the east of the state ended. This is a wonderful win for forests, animals, landscapes and the climate, and comes after decades of hard work by many thousands of people. This announcement covers 1.8 million hectares across eastern Victoria.

The Victorian high country – that section of the Great Dividing Range that starts in the mountain ash forests near Healesville and stretches up to the Snowy Mountains on the Victorian /NSW border is a beautiful and diverse part of the state. Rich in biodiversity and dramatic landscapes, the high country is also the starting point for many of our most important rivers.

From the mixed species forests of the foothills into the alpine ash, then snow gum, to the true alpine zones above treeline, there are multiple threats to the high country, including invasive species, climate change and logging.

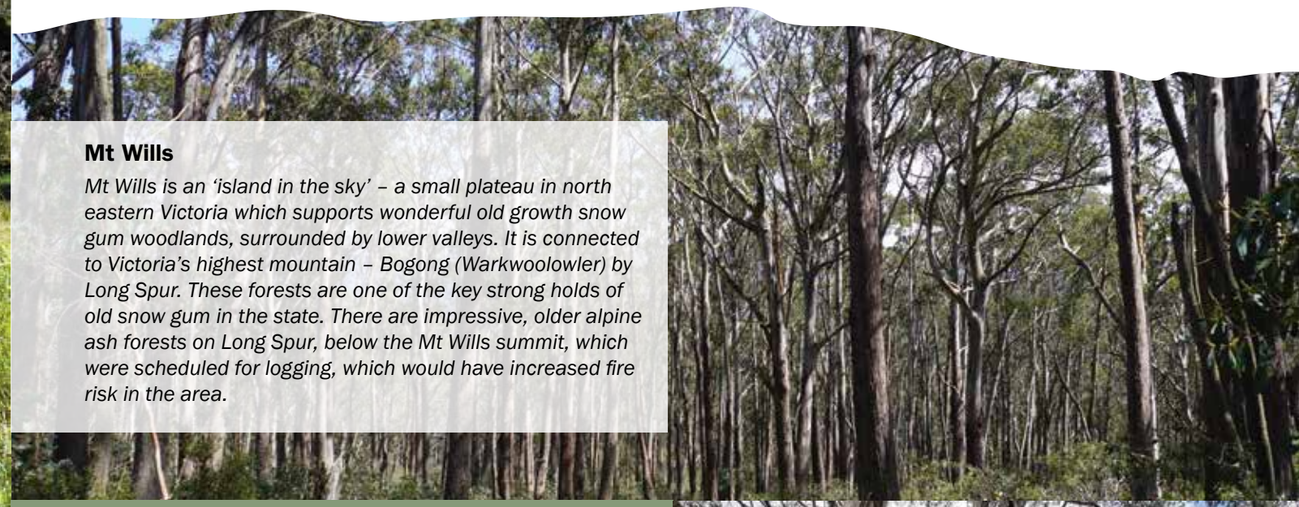
We acknowledge that these forests exist in the Cultural Landscapes of the unceded sovereign lands of Victorian Traditional Owners.

Now that clearfell logging has ended, there will be decades of work to be done to assist the forests as they recover. We also need to ensure that logging by other names does not continue, such as salvage logging. There will be a government process announced in 2024 which will outline how decision making about 'what next' will occur. We assume this will be through the creation of an 'eminent persons' panel who will make recommendations to government. We expect that there will be opportunities to engage with and express your views through that process.

https://www.melbournefoe.org.au/north_east_forests_saved_from_logging

https://themountainjournal.com/indigenous-land/traditional-owner-aspirations-for-the-vic-high-country/

Three areas of the VIC high country now safe from logging.



Mt Wills

Mt Wills is an 'island in the sky' – a small plateau in north eastern Victoria which supports wonderful old growth snow gum woodlands, surrounded by lower valleys. It is connected to Victoria's highest mountain – Bogong (Warkwoolowler) by Long Spur. These forests are one of the key strong holds of old snow gum in the state. There are impressive, older alpine ash forests on Long Spur, below the Mt Wills summit, which were scheduled for logging, which would have increased fire risk in the area.

Mt Stirling

Mt Stirling is a famous and popular spot for cross country skiing, walking, mountain bike riding, trail running, camping and four wheel drive touring and is next door to the Mt Buller ski resort. It had 11 areas of forest scheduled to be logged. Logging would have had dramatic impacts on recreation, as well as fragmenting the high elevation forests that circle the summit area of the mountain.

The Little Dargo

The Little Dargo river is a special, un roaded headwater area between the Dargo High Plains and the Alpine national park that contains old forests of mountain gum and recovering alpine ash. Unlike much of the surrounding area, it has only been lightly burnt in recent decades. Logging was planned for the entire area of the upper valley and would have devastated this fire refuge and the pristine Little Dargo river.

‘Long-unburnt stands of Snow gum are exceedingly rare in the Victorian Alps’

We know that snow gum forests are being badly impacted by increased fire activity – fires are becoming more frequent and intense, pushing many individual trees beyond their capacity to survive or resprout. Three researchers from Latrobe University looked at the areas in north eastern Victoria where snow gum forests are located and found that only 0.5% of these forests had remained unburnt since 1938, and 92% had been burnt at least once since 2000.

Since 2000, the repeated incidence of bushfires has meant 30% of snow gum stands have now been burnt three, four or five (or more) times since 1938.

They found only three larger areas of old-growth snow gums had not burnt in 1939 or since; trees surrounding the historic chalet at Mount Buffalo, areas to the east and south of Mount Buller, and at Mt Nugong, in the Eastern Alps.

The authors say ‘long-unburnt forests provide inspiration, valuable habitat and multiple ecosystem services, yet many of their values can be lost in a single fire. Old-growth forests are therefore assets of exceptional natural and cultural significance worthy of active protection. We hope that by mapping the distribution of long-unburnt Snow gum stands in the Victorian Alps, we can better prepare for future fire events by prioritising their protection via pre-fire preparation or by the operational decisions made during bushfires’.

‘Long-unburnt stands of Snow gum (Eucalyptus pauciflora Sieber ex Spreng) are exceedingly rare in the Victorian Alps: implications for their conservation and management’. Authors: John W. Morgan, Michael Shackleton, Zac C. Walker.

https://www.melbournefoe.org.au/a_rescue_plan_for_the_snow_gum_forests

‘Fire regimes around Australia shifted abruptly 20 years ago’

Widespread wildfires in early 2016 caused enormous damage across large sections of the Tasmanian World Heritage Area, including significant vegetation which is not fire adapted, such as Pencil Pine forests.

At the time, and in follow up investigations, it became clear that increased fire risk due to climate change posed an existential threat to these vegetation types. Then additional research confirmed that there was a trend towards more extreme fire seasons in Tasmania. Some researchers suggested that we reached a ‘tipping point’ sometime around the year 2000 and that, since then, there has been an increase in the number of lightning-caused fires and an increase in the average size of the fires, “resulting in a marked increase in the area burnt”.

On the mainland, fires increased significantly from about the same time. There were major fires in the Victorian high country in 1998, 2002/3, 2006/7, 2013 and 2019/20. Fires are becoming more common and more intense across the Alps.

It turns out that something similar was happening right around the country. Fire regimes around Australia shifted abruptly 20 years ago.

A story by Roger Jones from Victoria University, published in The Conversation in 2023, says that ‘almost everywhere in Australia is now in a different fire climate than it was just 20 years ago, with falling relative humidity a key factor’.

Rather than a linear increase, fire regimes tracked along a similar line – and then suddenly jumped. For most states and territories, that happened around the year 2000.

There is no evidence for a long-term trend. Instead, the data shows a shift from one stable fire climate regime to another.

https://theconversation.com/fire-regimes-around-australia-shifted-abruptly-20-years-ago-and-falling-humidity-is-why-209689

https://themountainjournal.com/2023/09/12/fire-regimes-around-australia-shifted-abruptly-20-years-ago/

Tasmanian government pushes ahead with Tyndall Range proposal

Around the country, protected areas are being threatened by the prospect of commercial development within parks. One of the long running issues has been a proposal to build an ‘iconic’ walk in the Tyndall Range in western lutruwita/ Tasmania.

The Tyndalls are a spectacular range which are currently in a wild condition, with no roads or other infrastructure on the range itself. However in 2019, the Tasmanian Liberals announced a plan to commit “up to $20 million … to deliver our next iconic multi-day, hut-based walk which will enhance the visitor economy throughout the entire region”. According to the proponent, the proposal includes the option of “a private walking company .. investing in the development of private lodges similar to that of Three Capes Track”. A subsequent Feasibility Study concluded that the proposed walk was only feasible if the then-budget of $20 million was doubled, which the government duly did.

Recently it has been made clear that the government intends to proceed with this controversial project.

In late 2023, the Tasmanian National Parks Association (TNPA) reported that ‘planning for the Walk project is well advanced. The Parks and Wildlife Service envisage that a Reserve Activity Assessment (DPEMP) will be released for public comment early in 2024. It is then anticipated that a Development Application will go to West Coast Council in mid-2024, approvals be sorted by the end of 2024, and construction to start in 2025. Completion is planned in order to commence operation in 2029-30’.

Like other environmental groups, the TNPA ‘remains of the view that the Tyndall Range is an inappropriate location for the proposed walk development and that the expenditure of the $40 million budget on other options could have benefited West Coast tourism just as much, or more’.

While the walk route and proposal has been modified over time, the proposal still has two lodge sites proposed. Overnight capacity at the lodges will be 30 walkers. Platforms at the separate campsite will accommodate an additional 20 walkers.

Control of Kosciusko's feral horses makes progress

Untrampled tarn below Club Lake, Main Range, KNP. Image: Mike Bremers.

The summer of 2023/2024 has been an eventful time in the long campaign to remove feral horses from Kosciuszko National Park. Figures announced by the NSW government in January show that 3,530 feral horses have been removed from Kosciuszko since the Plan's commencement – by re-homing, removal to knackery, aerial and ground shooting, and shooting in yards. The biggest contributor to the removal total was ground shooting (1,022 horses) followed by re-homing (866 horses) and aerial shooting (822). The proportion of aerial shooting is likely to increase in coming months; the method was not approved by the NSW government until October 2023, after a consultation process.

The total of 3,530 animals removed since later 2021 is an interesting figure, given that brumby advocates have long claimed that there are no more than 3,000 horses in the Park, and visitors to the Park still report seeing large mobs of horses, with continuing and fresh damage to streams and wetlands.

A project by brumby advocates to do an aerial 'independent re-count' of horse numbers collapsed in early January, with the sudden withdrawal of the project's statistician, Claire Galea, and many supporters requesting the return of the donations to fund the project. The project has since been revived, though at time of writing (31 January) the actual re-count had not yet taken place. The Reclaim Kosci campaign published some commentary by ecologist Dr Don Fletcher on those parts of the project's methodology that have been made public. Major failures in the methodology include the limited area of coverage – only the untreed areas of some of the plains in northern Kosciuszko, and its lack of any validated way to estimate feral horses not seen at the time of the count.

The NSW government also announced, in their 29th January statement, that areas of Kosciuszko National Park that will be closed for aerial shooting of feral animals – deer, pigs, and horses. The southern section will be closed for most of March, and the northern section from 4th April to 4th October. In both cases, parts of the Australian Alps Walking Track will be closed. Bushwalkers appear to be accepting these closures as inconvenient but necessary. The prospect of 2025 being the year in which walkers will have a better chance of finding a dung-free campsite, and can start to see recovery of the alpine meadows and bogs, is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Linda Groom, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Reclaim Kosci Campaign, Invasive Species Council.

reclaimkosci.org.au

Damage to swampy area between Dead Horse Gap and Cascade hut. Image: Meg McKone.

Lake Pedder update

In 1972 the original Lake Pedder was flooded to create an auxiliary Hydro storage impoundment, sparking national outcry and international criticism. Since the controversial flooding, there have been growing calls to restore the original Lake. Hence the present-day human-made Pedder Impoundment is contained within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) boundaries, with the intent of eventual restoration. That time has come.

2024 is shaping up to be a pivotal year in determining Lake Pedder's future. A federal government decision will be made in the coming 12 to 18 months; to either set about planning the restoration of Lake Pedder or invest in massive high-risk dam works that will maintain the flooding of Pedder for another 40 to 50 years.

Two of the dams impounding Pedder, Edgar and Scotts Peak, are built on the Edgar fault line. An increasing understanding of seismicity in Australia means the high-risk dams require safety upgrades. At a cost to the public purse of well over $100m, the proposed works will lower the chances of dam failure in the event of an earthquake, but the dams will still be on the fault line.

There is a foolproof solution - remove the dams, dewater the Impoundment and restore the original iconic Lake Pedder, and the biodiverse-rich Serpentine Valley.

In 2024 a Federal referral under the national environment laws (the EPBC) will be required for the dam works to proceed. The Federal Environment Minister then has the power to initiate an investigation into the restoration of Lake Pedder - a more sensible long-term alternative to the dam works. This is also the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and Australia is yet to nominate a flagship project. Lake Pedder is perfect! Almost immediately after dewatering the impoundment, the revered beach will again be visible. Imagine our Federal Environment Minister standing on that glorious, pink quartzite beach under the mighty Frankland Range. It's possible.

The Restore Pedder crew have produced a 30-minute film on the present Lake Pedder saga. It features Bob Brown, Tabatha Badger, Christine Milne, Prof. Jamie Kirkpatrick, Rima Truchanas, Dr Kevin Keirnan and more! Head to the website to view the film, find out more about the campaign and discover how you can be part of reviving this wilderness gem.

https://lakepedder.org/

Native forest logging in mountain adjacent areas of lutruwita/ Tasmania

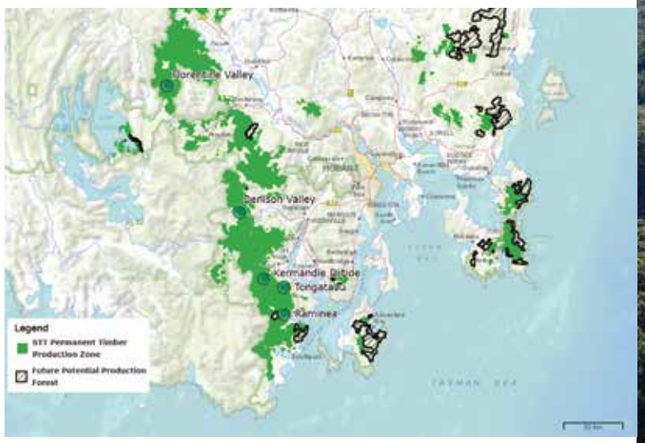
Liam Oakwood reports on logging in and around mountain ranges in southern lutruwita/ Tasmania. As he notes in this story: *In the shadow of the mountain ranges of the deep South a steady defence of life on Earth is being mounted.*

Many moons ago I was a whitewater guide in training on the wild rivers of lutruwita. One of our riverine classrooms was the Picton; rising from the Southern ranges, perched above the vast ocean at the bottom of the world, it flows North between the craggy peaks of the Hartz range and the eponymous Mt Picton. Young Huon pines fringe dark tannin stained pools and tumbling rapids plunge through the deep forest. We would drink straight from the river, absolved of the need to carry water by the rushing stream that was both our carriage and our sustenance.

On a river trip to Judbury down the Picton and Huon, we emerged from lush forest and floated around a bend to see a blasted clearfell on a hillside, machines still picking over the tangle of forest debris like great metallic insects.

Our instructors were seasoned local paddlers and told us of how the river had changed as logging tore through the valley. The rainfall response curve of the river sharpened. It would rise and fall more quickly after rain, leading to higher and stronger flood surges as water rushed from the newly barren hills.

The tale of the Picton, of devastating logging operations nestled against the edge of world heritage wilderness, is one still in evidence across the island. The forests of the so called 'Permanent Timber Production Zone' are often scarcely distinguishable from those across the world heritage border. Giant trees soar above fern gilt glades, broken tops create hollows that teem with flocks of critically endangered Swift Parrots. A multitude of life forms coalesce from leaf-tip to root bottom, enmeshed in ways not fully known to Western science.



These strongholds of life on the fringes of lutruwita's rugged mountains are under intensifying threat. LIDAR mapping techniques have been used to create a statewide canopy height map. Over the last year forestry coupes have been systematically appearing in some of the most significant remaining stands of mapped old growth. A giant log occupying a single truck trailer was spotted being hauled out one of these stands in the Florentine Valley, cradled between Mount Field and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. A series of actions by community groups delayed the loggers blades amidst the grove of giant trees, but many of the giants were lost. A single one of them would be a noteworthy destination in mainland forests.

This pressure on high value areas is an inevitability of the business model of Forestry Tasmania. They have nearly exhausted the areas available to them, with efforts to replace native forest with eucalypt plantations failing to keep up. The impact of the 2019 fires and increased demand from Victorian timber mills has only exacerbated this trend, and the industry continues to push for access to the 356,000 hectares of cynically renamed 'Future Potential Production Forests' that were briefly set aside as 'Future Reserves' following the 2012 forest peace deal.

Yet resistance is fertile. On multiple occasions when logging was discovered last year, forest activists of the Bob Brown Foundation and Grassroots Actions Network Tasmania rallied to launch stop work actions, carry out ecological surveys, seek legal intervention and shine a light on the destruction through old and new media.

A forest embassy in takayna, an ongoing blockade of Swift Parrot habitat in the South, and pending legal action testing legality of logging in a coupe on the Kermandie divide ring in the new year with renewed resolve.

In the shadow of the mountain ranges of the deep South a steady defence of life on Earth is being mounted.

Image: Liam Oakwood.

For Wild Places camp, 2023.
Image: Calumn Hockey.

Our mission is to make trail running a meaningful expression of environmental activism so that together, we can help our wild places survive and thrive.

For Wild Places

Hilary McAllister *describes the development and role of the trail running group For Wild Places.*

Activism and the outdoors are two pursuits that, in recent years, have evolved into a symbiotic relationship. As history would have us believe, activism is a pursuit of the immensely passionate. Dedicated souls who shun societal expectations, choosing to reside in remote, sometimes damp, forest camps, utilising our scarcest resource – time - to protect wild places under threat.

Growing up in an average, rural family, this path to activism felt out of reach to me, too extreme for my somewhat beige sensibility. But along with descriptors such as accident-prone, nomad and feminist, activist has made its way onto my bio and into my way of life.

Despite what the self-help industry would have you believe, this change in attitude and direction wasn't the result of an inspiring quote or epiphany. A series of seemingly innocuous opportunities led to a new life direction and the creation of For Wild Places.

Fast forward to 2020, when early whispers of coronavirus sent ripples through the events industry, and overnight, I became an unemployed events designer. Like many of us, I thought this COVID thing would blow over, so I saw this opportunity to take some time to reflect on my life. I felt disheartened by the wasteful nature of events and lived for weekends when I could escape the city and lose myself in nature.

I'd recently discovered the sport of trail running, something I'd been accidentally doing for years but was totally new to me as a form of organised recreation. Along the way, I discovered takayna Trail, an ultramarathon the Bob Brown Foundation organise to raise funds to protect Takayna/Tarkine from native forest logging. I'd always wanted to visit this stunning part of lutruwita, so I signed myself up for the 65 kilometre race and threw myself into training.

In a remote nook of Tasmania, a group of like-minded runners of all abilities and experiences came together to awkwardly touch elbows and run to save a rainforest. After decades of being crap at organised sports, I'd finally found my community; nature-loving, passionate, outdoors people who took on new challenges not because they wanted to conquer a mountain or assert dominance over nature, but because they wanted to be amongst it and protect it for generations to come.

I returned to Victoria into lockdown, feeling both buoyed by this collective experience and frustrated by the uncertainty ahead. But just a few weeks later, I was invited to join a group of takanya Trail runners, sponsors and organisers to see how we could grow this concept of sports activism. Fighting imposter syndrome, I threw myself into it, making up for my lack of experience in the trail and ultra world with enthusiasm and a willingness to help wherever possible.

Four years later, For Wild Places has grown into a community of over a thousand people, is a registered charity and has raised over $100k to support wild places under threat. Our mission is to make trail running a meaningful expression of environmental activism so that together, we can help our wild places survive and thrive. Over the years, this has evolved into hosting camps, ultramarathons and TRACTION (Trail Action) events. We interact with our growing community through a weekly newsletter, monthly Trail Chat and social media, where we platform people and campaigns that share our vision for a healthy, thriving future for all.

We work to stay resilient and optimistic and keep pushing forward each day, week, month and year. We need more funds, resources and time, but gradually, we are bringing more trail runners, skiers, hikers, bikers and climbers along with us. Along the way, I have learnt to embrace the activist side of myself, both in the traditional sense of physically standing up for what I believe in, and in the modern sense of quiet protest through divesting, engaging in politics and living by my values. Because there is an activist in all of us, and right now, our wild places need us to stand up for them - for our future and theirs.

https://www.forwildplaces.com/

Uncle Shane & Huw, Smoking Ceremony at Lake Mountain.

Around the campfire

Chats with mountain people

Uncle Shane Monk

Uncle Shane is a Taungurung Elder who is continuing the good work of his Mum – the late Aunty Judy Monk – working hard to protect and celebrate Taungurung Culture for future generations.

Where on Country is most special for you?

The Alpine High Country – I love Mt Stirling – it feels so special. Only 2% is resort country, the rest is bush. I love the twisted snow gums and being in the middle of nowhere where there are no lights and you can camp in peace with no one next to you. I like the history of cattlemen – love reading about how hard they had it. After working there for years though I know the damage the cattle have done. I hate the heat but it's much cooler up there and that's why our Ancestors would have liked it too.

https://wawabiik.com.au/a-yarn-with-taungurung-elder-uncle-shane

The Little Dargo: a natural and cultural treasure

The Little Dargo river is located on Gunaikurnai country just south of Mt Hotham and its headwater valley is a special, unroaded area that contains old forests of mountain gum and recovering alpine ash. Unlike much of the surrounding area, it has only been lightly burnt in recent decades. Over the past few years it has been the subject of a spirited campaign to halt large scale logging that had been planned for the upper reaches of the river.

The campaign to protect the Little Dargo has seen a collaboration between environmental activists and the Treasure family, who have grazed cattle on the Dargo High Plains since 1879. The Treasures have a connection to this country that stretches over 145 years, and which has included a number of business operations, including cattle grazing and running the local post offices when there were several thousand miners living in the area.

In the 19th century, the mail service was vital to miners and graziers who lived in the high country. Mail was carried on horseback from Harrietville to the township of Grant, via the settlement of Mayford and the Dargo High Plains. Mail was incredibly important in those days and provided a connection to home. In 1886, the mail run was done by Harry Treasure, who was 9 years old at the time. Harry would do a two day ride to Harrietville to collect the mail before returning to the high country to deliver it to the various post offices in the mountains. The route came to be known as The Mailman's Track. It continued to be used by the Treasures long after the mining days and the mail service was closed down, but fell into disuse in the latter part of the 20th century.

One section of the old Mailman's Track went from the 'Rock Alpine' building (a homestead and old post office on the Treasures property on the Dargo High Plains), down into the Little Dargo River, up onto the Kings Spur (now in the Alpine national park) and into the Dargo River before climbing to the St Bernard hospice, which was a popular hotel which was built in 1863 and burnt down in the fires of 1939. In recent times the area that the track passes through in the Upper Little Dargo has been threatened by logging.

Under the direction of the Treasures, a section of the Mailman's Track between the Rock Alpine homestead and Fred's Flat on the Little Dargo has been re opened. Fred's Flat is named after Fred Treasure, who died after he was injured while mustering cattle on the Dargo High Plains in 1921. He was only 17 years of age. As *Christa Treasure* notes, "when my father's elder brother died, the family named the pretty flat on the Little Dargo River in memory of Fred'. A plaque in memory of Fred was carried in and placed on a large rock outcrop on the flat during 2023.

This section of the Mailman's Track has been threatened by a series of logging coupes which would have dramatically impacted on this special area. Apart from its high conservation values, which include its intact forests of older mountain gum and alpine ash, its connection to the adjacent Alpine national park, and the presence of a type of rare native fish in the river, it has strong cultural connections for the Treasures.

Guided walk to the Little Dargo River. At the Treasure's home, Dargo High Plains.

Ray Anderson shows some skis that were made in the early 1900s from Alpine Ash at the Treasure's property on the Dargo High Plains. It turns out that the first ski factory in Victoria was a small shed among snow gums at about 1,400 m asl. It is still standing today.

The Treasures joined with environmental groups like Friends of the Earth (FoE) to defend this area from logging. As Christa Treasure says, "our aim is to stop the devastation by VicForests of the Little Dargo River Catchment. In this beautiful valley is one of the last stands of old Alpine Ash in the Timber Release Plan (TRP). The family has conserved this area for the last 140 years, it is our homeland".

"The Valley has been untouched by fire since 1921 and recently fire dribbled over the edge of the Long Spur, only in a few places. The Valley has been untouched and its creatures undisturbed since the mining days".

FoE has worked with the Treasures and other environmental groups to raise the profile of the Little Dargo. Now, with native logging in the east of the state ending on January 1, 2024, the Little Dargo is safe.

What happens next for the 1.8 million hectares of public land currently open to logging will be determined by a state government process. The Treasures will be pushing for the area to be protected due to its cultural values.

For further information, search for 'Save the Little Dargo facebook'.

Two-Hundred-Seventy-Nine Miles Above Lava No More...

'Maybe sometimes life on the edge helps us see the magic in the everyday. Whacks us and wakes us to the grace of how precious each moment really is'.

Many of you will know **Jeffe Aronson** *from the Friends of the Mitta group. Here he reflects on a life spent on many rivers, especially the famous Colorado as it passes through the Grand Canyon. Jeffe says 'there's been nearly sixty years of professional river guiding. The roar continues in the background, we listen to the echoes'.*

Funny to watch the progression, the old adrenaline rush slowly settling like after a flash flood. Cracks and ripples in mud, a footprint here and there. How the place keeps changing. The sheer massiveness of the river used to make my heart pound in my ears, gotta hit every hole and feel that energy. These days it kinda wraps around me like a blanket, still protecting me from that other, outside world, just different. In the old days I desperately needed our band of brothers and sisters, a tribe to belong to after escaping Chicago. Now I can just drift, finally able to just appreciate whatever floats by. In his later days, Drifter used to say; "The Colorado River through Grand Canyon is the best river trip anywhere, except for the rapids." Now I get it.

My young pards think me too conservative, call me "Mr. Safety" and smile. Then I climb into my well-worn but now seldom-seen kayak and boof some sweet drop and their heads crook ever so slightly, like confused puppies. Outside I'm fat, balding and slow. Inside I'm still that wild reckless bastard. We used to jump in above Hermit [1] with the peeps, cackling at how their eyes were about to be opened, or night float below mile 210. That was before all the best stuff was outlawed. Now I'm listening to their stories. Same story, different actors. I'm good with that. They don't need some pathetic old fucker taking air-time.

Work enough free trips, get along, bust your ass, maybe you make it through to the tailwaves and are welcomed into the fold. Share some beers in the shade of the Great Umbrella. You walk up the hillside to the scout, gnarled hands like tree limbs adorned with turquoise and silver point out the rocks and holes, share the grace and growling bellies in tense camaraderie. There were others who wanted it as bad as I did. Some of 'em were better boaters. Some were, well,

less cocky. Or prettier or more bronzed and muscled in the summer sun. But I led every hike because I just couldn't stay still in all that power. I devoured every bit of interp 'cause I groaned to know my lover better, inside and out. So them stories and my music, I guess that was part of what convinced 'em to let me in in spite of my, shall we say, idiot-syncrasies. Hell, any monkey can row a boat.

Mom sang with the USO during World War II. They'd motor her out into the Straights of Juan de Fuca to the warships returning from the Pacific, and she'd sing for the boys that made it home. She died young, so I borrowed her voice. She didn't need it any more anyway. It makes people feel good, slows 'em down a bit so they can have a look around. It's one of the reasons they keep me around. Maybe the only reason, come to think about it.

The crew can go have a bath, a beer, hang on the boats in the cool of the evening while I entertain. I don't mind a bit. It's good for my colleagues, good for the folks, keeps the callouses on my fingertips.

I've been watching crews for nearly fifty years. None of us are here because we fit in real well. Anti-authoritarian, smart, hard-working rogues, and damn proud of it. Talented misfits. Try keeping your cool for couple weeks, 24-7, when it's way over a hundred degrees, black rocks baking your brains out, some passenger keeps crapping in the pee bucket, some helpful cook with a good back just put both cast-iron dutch ovens in the same com-box, and Lava is tomorrow [2].

"How do you guys do it? Man, that's hard work!" But listen real good and you hear the tinge of envy. The part of 'em that hungers for whatever "it" is—the sharing of the sweat, backs groaning against the wind, boats reflected in the green water, sliver of sky shimmering in the heat, tired, crazed, exhilarated. It's an intimate secret, a sharing, a gift.

Crews come and go, binding with one another, building an unspoken creed, each clan speaking a language a little bit different from the others, a little bit the same, shaped by water flowing over boulders. You can't do this job without ego, but it's all about how it's managed. I know — I was there. We thought we were the shit for sure. Clients worshipped us — River Gods, class 5, couldn't miss, "Dude, nice line!" Out there I'm just another schmuck, but down here, I'm a river god. Figured it all out.

Now I get it. Everyone thinks they're the shit. It don't matter how we pull it off — whichever company, whichever equipment, whichever river, oar handle or motor cob, however we slice the freakin' tomatoes, thinkin' we invented it all. Wake the peeps at dawn with the recorder, paint the toenails, wear the sarong, tweet the whiskey bottle. We each must follow these ancient rituals in our turn, absolutely. I think it important, however, to try and remember our place in the progression. There's been maybe nearly sixty years of professional river guiding, give or take. The roar continues in the background, we listen to the echoes.

I remember when it first hit me. I went for a coffee at Macy's, someone saw my AzRA [3] ballcap, started some small talk

Image: Jeffe Aronson.

Image: Jeffe Aronson.

over a lattè about the best goddam trip on earth. Changed their lives it did, that river, that Canyon. Offhandedly I asked them who their guides were. "Um, was there a Jim or something?" I asked them what company they went with. They couldn't even remember that part.

What they DID remember with the clarity of heavenly vision was The Canyon. The River. Our Colorado. The dawns and sunsets setting the cliffs on fire, the sound of moving water, the cool morning breeze before the Great Oppressor hit the beach, the smell of the wet desert after a summer monsoon, the coffee call echoing, the shrill buzz of the summer cicadas, the trill of the canyon wren.

I'll take that with me, put it in my pocket. It wasn't about me, as much as I once needed to think it was. Stories are written about how lucky we are and all that. I get it and I feel it too. But deep down where we don't talk about it many of us do think it is maybe just a little tiny bit about us, don't we? I've seen some crazy shit over the years—pards screaming till dawn on some tiny beach about lost platoon buddies, a woman with cancer asking if we'd be okay if she died right then and there, hitting the stupid hole in Crystal [4] and by some miracle coming out upright, watching a five-ton motor rig flip with fifteen souls aboard. Folks need the extremes, it's why they're there, partly. Adds flavor. Wakes 'em up a bit after all the baloney out there. Hell, that's why I'm down there. Partly.

Maybe sometimes life on the edge helps us see the magic in the everyday. Whacks us and wakes us to the grace of how precious each moment really is. Trip of a lifetime, changed my life. It ain't about us.

Laying on my boat, gazing up at how the black cliffs shape and mould the starry sky a bit different at each camp, tomorrow's river known; the strokes and ferry angles, which cookies to keep handy on top of the side-box for lunch, where the parking beach is for the next hike, savoring every moment as if it were the last. Not getting all belly-achy at Hot Na Na [5] so I can eat my pancakes in peace. Watching the guests fussing with tents on night one, knowing how in exactly two days the magic will devour them and they won't even bother.

I'm slower, weaker of mind and sinew, guzzling the Gatorade and shading up a lot. This won't last much longer. "Might be the last trip" is no longer just a metaphor, but that's okay. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

Relentless as water flowing downhill past sandy beaches laden with memories, a story for each and every one, now kept to myself. An easing. Easing into the flatwater, sweeping the hikes now, letting others do the heavy lifting and not feeling too guilty.

Watching the universe turn purple with scotch in hand after an especially warm day, the latest in a fortunate life of thousands of especially warm days. Boat gently rocking, ripples slapping the sides, soft laughter somewhere off in the dunes, that "pop!-wheet!" sound from the boat next door which is nicely within reach. I know you feel it. You want it to last forever, don't you? Me too. It doesn't.

Rowing over a ton of boat and blood and bone through Bedrock [6], dragging that old strength out of some depth, the physical and mental whatever, is slowly but surely fading in the hot sun. Handing it over to some young buck just like someone handed it to me nearly a half-century ago. Or maybe it's taken. Both, probably. No matter. They want it, they deserve it, they'll have it. Agile, strong, quick, hungry. They don't care about how hard the work is any more than I did, how hot the desert gets, how much the upstream wind blows, how hard some people are to please. Maybe we bitch about it, but it's a bitch with a smirk. How many times have you heard someone say "Oh, man, the Grand Canyon? It's just a canal!"? But you just watch their face if someone offers them a job down there.

Marieke pulled into the Shady Ledges on the left below Son of Lava a couple years back, asking if they could share the shade with us for a bit, soak-in knowing Lava let them pass one more time. "Of course girlfriend, come on in!" I went about my business, napped a bit, sat up and noticed her

Image: Jeffe Aronson.

sitting on her boat strumming her guitar for some folks, so I strolled over. She'd just finished a song, looked up and said "I have one for you." Simple as that. So I sat down on the cool gray limestone and listened. It was a song about an old boatman, the river, saying goodbye. Choked me up, it did. I was glad I had on my sunglasses. Not self pity, no. The kind of grateful eye-welling that touched each of you the first time you came around that corner to the reflection pool at the end of Blacktail and felt it. Walk in beauty, baby. She finished, the final note, and we gazed at each other for a moment. My heart pounds just thinking about it.

I keep saying "Can't keep saving everybody else's asses plus my own when the shit hits the fan in Lava forever." It's probably annoying. I can tell you it annoys the hell out of me to hear myself say it. I don't want to be one of those boatmen who stayed on too long, retirement talk taboo, ignoring the head-shaking. I guess I'm really just trying to talk myself into it. Must this end? Really? So soon? I'm ready, but I'm not ready. I'll never be ready. I'll die inside when it happens, and it's happening as we speak. My world will shrink, I won't be part of the brotherhood any longer, won't hear the river behind everything I do and say. Oh, God, don't let it end. Oh, God, let it end gracefully, all at once. Drop dead right there on the edge of Lake Mead at Surprise. River gone, me gone. Sleep when you're dead and all that.

I got me a little life out there. Lucky to have a woman who foolishly loves my idiot ass, put some money away, built a wonderful home on a pristine little whitewater river at the bottom of the world. We have lots of wonderful friends, which having been there I can tell you is all you got left on your death bed. You can hear our little river from the deck, scotch or coffee in hand.

Like shoving off from shore after a scout, you gotta get into your boat, grab the oars and head off downstream, pretending you know what the hell you're doing, wherever it leads.

JEFFE ARONSON has been a paramedic, carpenter, owner operator of a natural food store, commercial property owner, founded a non-profit that initiated disabled river trips in the Grand Canyon, was executive director of another non-profit that created and co-managed a historic restoration of downtown Flagstaff Arizona, and is current founder and president of Friends of the Mitta, a local non-profit that is renowned for its environmental and whitewater related projects along the Mitta Mitta river. He and his wife Carrie designed, built, and live in a magical off grid, micro-hydro and solar powered dream home in Anglers Rest. He rowed whitewater dories in the Grand Canyon for 25 of his 47 year guiding career, as well as raft guided all over the world. Most recently he's taught swiftwater rescue here in Australia. Some of his many published stories can be read on his website river-god.com, and there are some great videos on his YouTube channel.

Friends of the Mitta. https://www.friendsofthemitta.org/

Colorado River Rapids are classified on the 1 through 10 using the Grand Canyon system.

[1] At certain water levels, Hermit Rapid contains the most towering waves in the entire canyon

[2] Lava Falls rapid is the biggest and scariest of all the rapids on the Colorado, rated as a "9" on the Grand Canyon scale.

[3] Arizona Raft Adventures (a guiding company)

[4] Crystal is one of the more infamous rapids of the Grand Canyon. It ranks between 7-10 on the Grand Canyon rapid scale.

[5] Hot Na Na is a campsite early in the Canyon

[6] Bedrock is a Class 7 rapid.

Kelly Van Den Berg. A life outdoors

I was born in the city but my parents moved to Gippsland when I was young. We lived in the Strzelecki hills. I grew up with horses. I fell in love with all the horse books like *The Silver Brumby*. My childhood revolved around reading those horse books focused on the high country. They captured the emotions about the landscape of the high country so well.

I would disappear into the bush every weekend with my horse and spend many hours out there. Building huts, playing in the rivers. I had my horse and my dog with me and I felt safe. I always had an interest in, and a love for, the outdoors.

At some point someone told me about the ACF Junior Club. I joined up and they would send resources on bird spotting and plants and animals. I loved all that stuff.

I went overseas on exchange to Canada and saw some of the big world outside Australia. I road tripped with my exchange family and visited places like the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains. I knew that I wanted to find out how to be out in those mountains.

Later I worked in Europe – I explored Spain and Morocco – spending time in the Atlas Mountains riding. I have been back there several times. The more I explored the more the door opened to possibility. In London I met people who were involved in mountaineering. I dabbled in that and then fell into surfing. Many people don't know about the surfing scene in the UK, but it has a strong culture and I would go surfing every chance I had. Once I came back to Australia I continued to follow my passion for surfing, mostly along the Bass coast. I went overseas and surfed in places like Indonesia and more and more embraced many kinds of adventure sports.

A surfing friend asked if I had been snow boarding. I had grown up in a working class family and we were not exposed to outdoors opportunities like snow boarding. My parents focused on the family and I had felt that going to the resort was something rich people did.

I had never really seen snow, but I went on a trip to Hotham with my friends. I hired a board, did the lessons and went 'wow. I cannot believe I have missed out on this until now'. I was so taken in by it. I went home and couldn't stop thinking about snow boarding.

I took the dive and bought a season pass. I went up every single weekend, camping in my car at JB Plain and ski bumming it. I did that for a few years.

Having friends deeply involved in surfing really set things off. Over time I met people who were going into the backcountry, which interested me. My life revolved around work, boarding and surfing. The mountains opened a whole new world and in summer I would go hiking. I knew of the inherent risks of the backcountry, and heard about avalanche safety courses. I did my AST1 with Dave Herring. I did it on snowshoes and it was an absolute sufferfest getting out to the sites, but I learnt to look at mountains differently.

I discovered that I liked the science around snow, and this led me towards education. I had studied as an equestrian coach after Europe and have been doing that for 25 years now. I have always been curious about learning new things and once I got to the snow I followed my interests into snow safety, understanding terrain, education.

I went back to Canada and visited places like Whitewater, Red Mountain and Nelson. I loved the sense of community in those towns and the relaxed vibe of the skiers and riders. I started touring and did multiple trips to Japan as well. About this time, I met Lisse through my friend Lillian, who was a ski guide who went on many amazing adventures and had a background in Canada. My connections kept getting deeper. Through Lisse I met Hagen, who ran Tirol Sports at Hotham. Over time I also discovered white water paddling. I felt comfortable being out of control and in turbulent water. It was David Chitty who introduced me to pack rafting, on the King River. Then Daniel Sherwin encouraged me to buy a packraft, and I paddled with him extensively. I have done some great trips with him, including our descent of the Dargo River from near Mt Hotham.

Then I met Paddy. He had many years of paddling experience, including in racing and being a professional rower. We spent lots of time on many rivers. I met Matthew Brookes, a school program manager with an outdoor education company and I started working with kids in outdoor ed and adventures and loved it.

I got involved in the second Victorian Backcountry Festival, and led some ‘Girls who Split’ tours with Lisse. At that point there weren’t many women in the backcountry on splitboards.

My journey continued. I met Glen at Hotham, who got me onto cross country skis, which I absolutely love. All of this continued to deepen my connection to the Hotham community – it is such an open and inclusive place. Hotham is – and will always be – my mountain. I looked into joining a lodge, and stayed at Aardvark and instantly felt welcomed into that family. It’s a mismash of outdoors people, with similar thinking, and I fitted in well. I had to wait three years but eventually bought a share and I spend a lot of time up there.

Community is very important to me. I felt embraced by the Hotham community, and that is part of the appeal of being up there.

Paddy and I were talking one time about ‘bucket lists’. The Yukon fascinates me. Almost on a whim, we decided to apply for a canoe race down the Yukon River, passing well north of the Arctic Circle. To our surprise, we were accepted the first time we applied and had only 8 months to train and learn new skills. That trip was a highlight of my life so far.

I kept learning new skills and extending my qualifications – including expedition first aid, swift water, and Ops 1 – very few people in Australia have that qualification.

Now we have set up our own outdoor business. There is clearly a demand for adult focused outdoor education and Paddy and I bring a range of experience and skills to this. There is a strong desire from people who are coming into outdoor adventure as adults rather than as teenagers and these people need the skills to be out there safely. We guide and teach skills like navigation. This is even more so after the covid years – lots of people want to get out and have adventures. We realised that no one else was offering this type of outdoor education focused on adults. Once we launched, our first course sold out in 2 hours!

Volunteering has also been important for me. I have been involved in Mountain Safety Collective (MSC) and the VIC Backcountry Festival. Its important to give back and share what you love with other people.

I feel like our new business venture – Gippsland Adventure Tours - is a culmination of all the skills and experience I have spent years gaining. I can offer skills to others so they can safely get outdoors. I can share my passion for adventure and feed people’s curiosity to learn new things.

https://gippslandadventuretours.com/

Paddling to Snowy Falls, Kosciuszko national park. Image: Linda Groom.

Mountain culture

Local is the New Black

Many winter enthusiasts love skiing and riding movies. Snow/ skiing/ boarding films have long been a staple part of mountain life, and many wait for the new season films – like the annual offering from Warren Miller.

The genre continues to evolve, with the rise of the backcountry film, and films with messages around climate change, diversity and other social and environmental issues.

In recent years there has been a counter point developing to the high carbon impact ‘helicopters and heroes’ approach of many earlier films. There has been a trend towards producing human powered access films, where skiers and riders have used public transport or push bikes to access amazing terrain. And more are using drones rather than helicopters for those aerial scenes that we all love.

Some of my favourites include *The Last Hill*, featuring an epic ride along the eastern side of the Sierra Mountains of California, and *Ice and Palms*, about two guys who bikepack across the European alps, skiing some iconic mountains along the way. More recently, neighbors Jeff Hashimoto and Langton Ernest-Beck dreamed up a summertime challenge: to climb the 100 highest mountains in Washington state in the USA, and link the peaks by bike. They didn’t make a film, but their website about the trip is fantastic.

https://themountainjournal.com/reviews/films/backcountry-ski-and-boarding-films/

Alpine Odyssey - The Film

This winter will see the film release of Huw Kingston’s Alpine Odyssey winter journey across the Alps (see the Offtrack section for his article), with screenings around the capital cities, the alpine resorts and towns and more. Alpine Odyssey (35 minutes) highlights the 700 kilometre journey, his four decade love affair with the Alps, the backcountry and resorts and also looks at the threats posed by climate change and feral fauna on this very unique 1% of our continent. Huw first skied the length of the Alps in 1997 and has witnessed the changes since.

Alpine Odyssey screenings will raise funds for both Protect Our Winters and Our Yarning. The latter, an Indigenous literacy project under the auspices of Save the Children, was the beneficiary (to the tune of $65,000) from Huw’s 2022 winter journey fundraising.

Film partners include The North Face, The Traverse Alpine Group, Thredbo, Mt Buller, Falls Creek Resort and Bright Brewery.

Details on screenings will be found on www.huwkingston.com

Heniiniiini'.
There is snow on the ground.

Winter Park Resort, located in the headwaters of the Colorado River in the USA, is famous for its powder.

In its Land Acknowledgement, Winter Park Resort says it *acknowledges and honors that the land on which we operate today is the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Nookhose'iinenno (Arapaho), Tsis tsis'tas (Cheyenne), and Nuuchu (Ute). We recognize and honor these Native Nations, their peoples, and their continued connection, as the original stewards of these lands and waters where we recreate today. We reaffirm and recognize that connection both through our words here and our actions.*

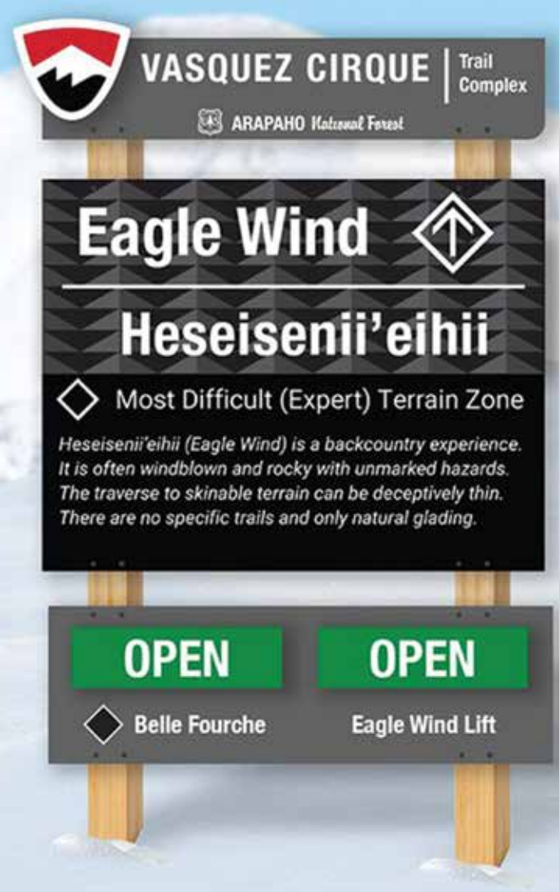
Four years ago, the resort began a partnership with Indigenous artists and the group Natives Outdoors to elevate the story of First Nations connection to the mountains, and explore the connections between people, place, and snow.

Among a range of initiatives, an art installation was created, called *There Is Snow On The Ground* which is the Arapaho translation of the word heniiniini. This multifaceted installation invites guests to reconsider their relationship to the mountain and recreation by acting as a catalyst for deeper (and often complicated) conversations about snow, land, ecosystems, and climate change.

For the 2024 season, the resort has started to include a translation in the Arapaho Language on the signs marking ski runs and trails.

https://www.winterparkresort.com/the-mountain/snow-on-the-ground

https://www.natives-outdoors.org/



Backcountry film festival

The Annual Backcountry Film Festival is put together by the Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA). In it's 19th year, it is being hosted in Melbourne in late April 2024 and features a collage of short documentaries and ski movies about the pursuit of objectives and ideals in the mountains, artistic vision, friendship, and how the snowsports community is adapting to a changing environment.

There will be a range of speakers from local backcountry groups and a couple of short locally made backcountry films, including 36oSouth. 'A team of 4 head into the Australian backcountry, looking for the steepest terrain the red continent has to offer – challenging popular beliefs of what skiing and snowboarding looks like in Australia'.

https://themountainjournal.com/backcountry-film-festival/

Winter Van Life

'Van life' might be a popular Instagram hashtag, but it hides the multitude of reasons why people spend winter in their vehicles. More and more people are choosing to spend their winters outside as they pursue their snow dream. For others it is a necessity as rents climb and erratic winter snow impacts on the availability of work. **James Worsfold** *delves into the issue.*

As the winter sun sets over the alps, you might expect the mountain carparks to become desolate.

Paying close attention, however, you may find evidence of life: the steam of a camping stove or an interior light beaming from behind a curtain. This is the habitat of the elusive winter van-lifer.

Seasoners, like myself, have chosen to spend the mountain winter in a van for a multitude of reasons.

Some are forced into the situation by hardship. Several of my friends, out of a resort job that included accommodation, were given no option but to sleep in their cars. Others have had the luxury of choice, embracing the lifestyle as an affordable and adventurous way to experience the Australian snow season.

Cost of living tends to play a big role in deciding to live the winter van-life. The enjoyment of winter work has become more difficult to weigh up against high rent, crowded staff accommodation, low wages and a lack of guaranteed working hours.

Bridie Rawson, a Jindabyne-based backcountry guide, said that living in her van gave her the freedom to volunteer and travel without having to worry about financial burdens.

Bridie also runs Tough Tits Co, a project for the advancement of women in the snowsports community. For her, living without the pressure of rent has enabled her to work less and devote more time to her community initiative.

"The overhead was too much for accommodation to balance out the two," she told me.

April Bright, an adventure guide and photographer, also chose to do a season in her van to make the most of winter experiences.

For most, a snow season requires a full-time wage to support high living costs, which usually means missing out on the good powder days in order to pay rent.

For April, being free of this financial burden gave her the opportunity to upskill, making the most of small windows of good conditions. "It was an investment into guiding work. I could go out and get the experience I needed," she told me.

Similarly, living in my van allowed me to enjoy more free days and still be able to stay afloat financially. Previously, I often had to tolerate poor conditions in the backcountry on my off-days (if I had the energy after a full week working on-snow). This season, however, I could pick my days and have more pleasant (and potentially safer) adventures.

Living in a van also provides a unique experience of mountain life. I was drawn to working a season by my love of the alpine environment, however, found myself in the midst of human-made development that I was trying to escape. Against the expanse of the mountains, the bustle of a ski resort can seem quite jarring.

To me, switching to a van meant living with the landscape, and others certainly shared this perspective. Bridie said she enjoyed connecting with wildlife and cooking amidst beautiful sunrises and sunsets:

"When you don't have a home," she told me, "you end up hanging out in the outdoors so much more."

Similarly, April found that spending the winter in her van was a simpler, more wholesome experience.

"It's really easy to do. It's a lot more uncomfortable, but there is a much greater reward," she said.

While we put in more effort to meet our basic needs such as getting warm, drying our gear and collecting water, we found ourselves worrying less about other issues in our lives.

Though living alone in a van can seem isolating, I felt more motivated to reach out to the mountain community, spending evenings at friends' places, sitting down at a pub to study or cooking dinner with fellow campers in a cattleman's hut. And with limited facilities on offer, fellow members of the van community soon find each other.

As many seasoners find it harder to keep up with the cost of living on the mountain, we may soon find the carparks more alive.

Australia’s southern most ski field

The Mt Mawson ski field in the Mt Field National Park is the southern most ski area in Australia. It’s a remarkable place, and while it’s of a low elevation, with very limited vertical terrain, and is subject to the notoriously fickle snow conditions to be found in Tasmania, it is a magical spot. It has several rope tows, and is a Club ski field composed of seven lodges, with no public accommodation. Its also a fairly solid 30 to 45 minute walk up the mountain from the car park to get to the ski field.

But like the surrounding ranges within the Mt Field national park, when its in condition, its truly fantastic.

It is a volunteer run mountain, managed by the Southern Tasmanian Ski Association. At the other Australian resorts, we get very used to having everything done for us. Mt Field is more like skiing was in Australia in the early days.

Public facilities are pretty basic: there is a simple visitors hut up on Tarn Shelf, the Ski Patrol have an unheated shipping container as their base, and there is a public shelter in the village.

When the snow is good, there is some fantastic touring out towards Mt Field West (although the access over the Rodway Range is mostly through boulderfields and can be hard and dangerous in certain conditions or sketchy snow cover). The whole place is deliriously pretty and incredibly wild. If you haven’t been there you should definitely add it to your skiers/ riders bucket list (with the suggestion you keep your options open and drop everything and get there when the snow is on).

http://mtmawson.info/

It can be done

Arapahoe Basin resort in Colorado is officially operating on 100 percent renewable electricity as of October 2023.

‘The ski area’s transition to 100 percent renewable electricity was made possible by onsite solar arrays, community solar farms, subscription-based utility programs, and Xcel Energy’s own clean energy transition’.

The renewable electricity will power Arapahoe Basin’s snowmaking efforts, chairlifts, buildings, and electric vehicle chargers.

Offtrack

Crossing the Australian Alps on foot

The Australian high country on the mainland stretches from the Central Highlands east of Melbourne almost all the way to Canberra. Adventurers have been traversing the Alps for many decades and it was inevitable that eventually a track would be created that followed the length of the mountains. What is now the Australian Alps Walking Track (AAWT) is an extension of the older Victorian Alpine Walking Track, which was established in the 1970s. The VAWT was the first stage in a plan to link the Australian Alps with a three-state trail. Continuing the Australian Alps Walking Track through Kosciuszko National Park (NSW) and Namadgi National Park (ACT) turned that dream into reality.

The AAWT is now Australia’s best known long distance mountain walking trail on the mainland. It is a 655 km route, starting at Walhalla in Victoria and running through to Tharwa in the ACT.

It is a difficult journey. Sections of the track are hard to navigate and the AAWT has a total elevation gain of 28,777 metres (to give a sense of this, Mt Everest is 8,848 metres high). Most individuals attempting the track take 30-40 days, and most groups take 50-60 days to complete it.

The fastest known times (FKT) for completion of the entire track under 4 categories are:

- Mixed-gender self supported team: 11 days 9 hours by John Riley, Kylie Salm and Phil Robinson on 26 November 2019.
- Male self supported: 10 days 23 hours 14 Minutes by Paul Cuthbert & Tom Bartlett on 26 January 2022.
- Male supported: 13 days 11 hours by Beau Miles on 17 March 2011.
- Female self supported: 24 days 0 hours by Emma Timmis on 17 April 2016.

Most people use food drops to allow them to resupply while on track, or have friends or family who will meet them enroute to help with resupplies. In late 2023, Monika Georgieva and Wesley Walsh took 19 days and 9.5 hours to do the first known unsupported (no food drops, no rest days, everything needed carried from the start) traverse of the AAWT, north bound from Walhalla.

Walkers can do the track in either direction, hence the common descriptions of NOBO – north bound and SOBO – south bound.

Of course, many people walk long distances through the high country following a range of routes beyond the AAWT – for instance the McMillans Walking Track, which is a 210 kilometre walk traversing the Victorian Alps from Cobungra (near Omeo) to Woods Point. But the AAWT has a real place in the culture of the Australian mountains.

Resources

https://theaustralianalpsnationalparks.org/experience/aawt/

https://fastestknowntime.com/route/australian-alps-walking-track

https://themountainjournal.com/tag/australian-alps-walking-track/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Alps_Walking_Track

The following are some reflections on recent journeys across the Alps, including trips along the AAWT.

There was something truly transformative about a solo journey and something remarkable about being immersed in the trails of the Aust Alps Track - it brought me back to my true self in a world that's so easy to feel lost and disconnected.

Elise Marcianti. Image: Max Reilly

A long walk for mental health

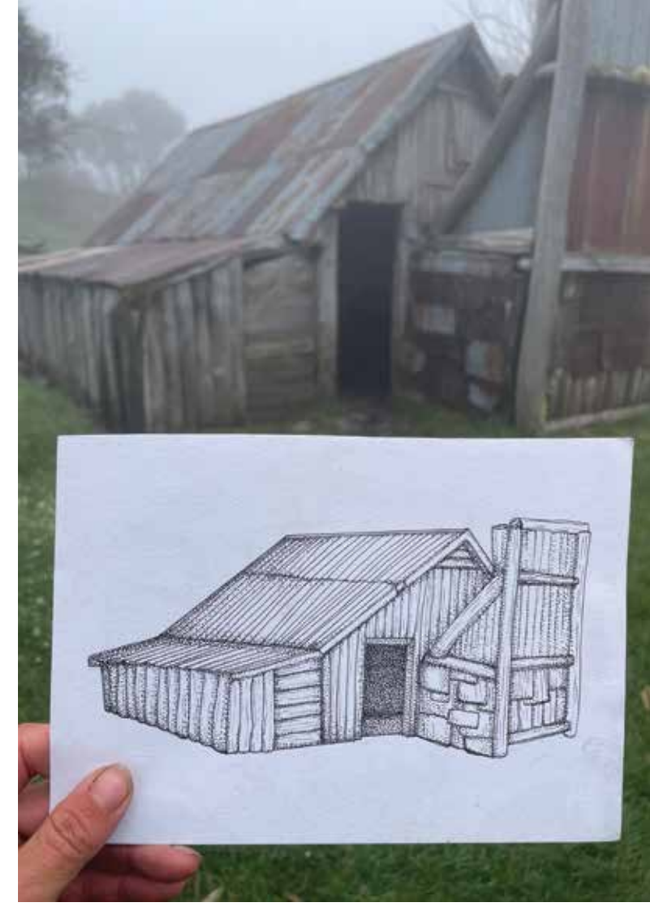
Many people walk or run sections of the track. **Elise Marcianti** reflects on a journey from Kosci to Bright along the Australian Alps Walking Track (AAWT).

I ventured off into the mountains the day after running an ultramarathon in Kosciuszko, undertaking a 16-day journey along the Australian Alps Walking track solo.

My legs were still achy as I nestled up in the hut hiding away from the rain and breathed a breath of relief into the still air that surrounded, and I felt at home. From the contagious buzz of an ultra-event to the silence amongst these vast plains I was struck by the space so quiet yet so full of vibrancy.

A mark of my progress was shown by each hut I passed, and I couldn't help but pull out my sketchbook capturing the marks left from the people who have trotted before me and appreciating the homeliness it will provide for the people still to come.

As I traversed through the trails heaving my pack up hills and hauling through hail and the heat, I grew fond of the solitude. Having not seen anyone for over 100 hours at a time I found a comfort within myself. It was challenging, and I'd never hiked that far before, but was comforted by the



ever changing yet familiar landscape and pepped up when I reached a food drop where chocolates, soup and fresh clothes were awaiting. Once I reached the summit of Mount Bogong, I knew I was on the home stretch and got to finish the hike along the backbone of Mount Feathertop, soaking in the last sunset of the hike.

There was something truly transformative about a solo journey and something remarkable about being immersed in the trails of the Aust Alps Track - it brought me back to my true self in a world that's so easy to feel lost and disconnected.

"I let nature hold me when my feet couldn't hold me any longer, I let it bathe me when I needed the past to be washed clean. I let it take me to the highest peaks to give me a new perspective and I let it take me into the valley to face life's lows. I let nature shape me like time shapes mountains and transform me like rivers do to rocks."

The hike was done to raise awareness for mental health with a campaign called Moving For The Mind raising awareness and funds for Eating Disorders Families Australia.

To support the cause you can make a donation at https://moving-for-the-mind.raisely.com/

https://www.instagram.com/elisemarcianti/

https://weareexplorers.co/moving-the-mind/

Photo credit to Max Reilly

Mountain High - An Alpine Odyssey

Huw Kingston's *winter crossing of the Australian Alps in 2022 included a visit to all ski resorts in Victoria and New South Wales. This trip went well beyond a normal traverse of the Alps because of the various diversions and variations to the route to get to the resorts, and its finish point at the abandoned ski resort of Mt Franklin, in the mountains west of Canberra.*

Mt Feathertop, perhaps the shapeliest of our alpine mountains, rose like an orca's fin above the maelstrom of a cloud sea that had been beneath us all day. The sky glowed orange, the sun now dived beneath the surface. The edge of the cloud lapped at the ridge I was sat upon, occasional silent waves crossing it before rolling back.

The curtains were closing on this most perfect of winter days. But I hadn't sat down for a rest and a view. I'd been climbing up Quartz Ridge, a route leading onto Mt Bogong, Victoria's highest peak. The south facing slope had seen little sun all day and, as I skied up an ever-steepening pinch, the surface was firm and getting firmer the higher I went. My skis were on edge, I was on edge. My gear was operating at its limit, my own skill too perhaps.

Once again I banged the metal edge of a ski into the ice. It held. I banged. It held again. And again. Then suddenly my bum hit the ice. I readied myself for a long slide down the luge run of an ice choked, rocky gully below. But the bum somehow held.

Looking down, I saw one of my skis hanging from its safety leash, having parted company with my boot and thus causing my fall. From this precarious position I had to remove both skis and drop neither, then slowly, carefully, turn to face inward, kicking small indentations into the ice for my boots and continue kicking those tiny steps until the angle eased and with it my worries.

I was a month into my Alpine Odyssey, a 700 kilometre winter traverse of the Australian Alps by ski and foot. A journey from the most southerly snows of Victoria north to the long-abandoned ski resort of Mt Franklin, in the mountains west of Canberra. It was a journey crossing Country of the Taungurung, Gurnaikurnai, Jaimathang, Mitambuta, Dhudhuroa, Ngarigo-Monero, Ngarigo-Currawong, Wongalu and Ngunnawal people.

25 years ago I'd completed a similar winter traverse and was keen to see what had changed, indeed how I might have changed. My wife Wendy and I drove from home to Mt Baw Baw in a Hyundai Ioniq electric vehicle, on loan to get me to the start line. We watched the battery level plummet on the steep, snowy climb to the resort. How would my own battery perform as it moved close to its seventh decade? Would my reputation as a reliable old diesel - some might say high emission old diesel – still hold as it had on so many long journeys?

My odyssey had an added twist. I diverted to ski at the dozen snow resorts dotted across our alpine country, celebrating the communities that live for the white stuff. It was a journey across country I had loved for decades. Whether endless descents on a resort day or earning my turns out in the backcountry. Living it up in lodges or camped high out on the range.

But with love comes concern and care. In recent years our alpine country and communities have been touched by Covid and in places torched by our blackest summer. Malaises impact these uplands that make up less than 1% of our continent. Threats from climate change, from feral fauna and flora and, in places, perhaps even suffocation from the many who seek to enjoy its charms and challenges.

Mt Bogong's traditional name is Warkwoolowler, 'the mountain where Aboriginal people collected the Bogong Moths.' For countless thousands of years before I carved turns down its flanks or held onto my tent in wild blizzards, our First Nations people gathered, in the alpine summer months, in great corroborees, to trade, share stories and feast upon the protein rich moths that smothered the high country.

The Bogong moth is rarely seen now. How long since they banged on the windows of my Snowy Mountains home? How long since lights were turned off at Parliament House in Canberra in an effort to lessen their suicidal tendencies?

At Lake Mountain, a cross country skiing resort close to Melbourne, Taungurung Elder, Uncle Shane, sent me on my way with a Smoking Ceremony and Welcome to Country. Uncle Shane taught much and offered strength for the challenges ahead. We discussed everything from the regathering of stories in the Alpine country, the links these stories have to mobs as far away as the Central Deserts, and the endless uses of a possum cloak.

Storytelling and the passing down of knowledge is important in all cultures. Our First Nations people have a complex and rich vein of stories linking them to the land, the oceans, the sky and to each other. Literacy is also so important in any nation for both economic and social wellbeing.

For these reasons my odyssey was raising funds for Our Yarning, a literacy project producing books for Indigenous Australian children, written by Indigenous authors, telling their stories, their way.

After enjoying fresh turns on the slopes of Baw Baw, I shouldered my pack, heavy with equipment and food, on a grey, blustery morning. In the wild wind, snow gums threw down strips of bark, like some too soon ticker tape parade. It was a long way to the finish line.

I knew those first weeks could be the toughest. Good initial skiing conditions were made marginal by heavy rain and too warm temperatures. Too often my skis were more crucifix on my back, not transport beneath my feet.

35 years of winter wanderings in the alps had shown me how the snowline was rising. Country that had been regularly snow covered, now stayed green. Rivers that flowed fast with the warmth and snowmelt of spring, now often flow fast all winter. The records this past half century confirm the trend. The alpine landscapes of Australia, where temperatures hover close to one side or the other of zero, a small change means the difference between freeze and thaw, snow and rain.

Thick bush did all it could to entangle my skis, and on numerous occasions I resorted to hands and knees or commando style crawling to push through. Son of a Bitch, Mt Buggery, Mt Despair, The Terrible Hollow, Horrible Gap, The Razor. Those names showed I was not the first to feel frustration in that country.

Another wet day. A slippery, fallen tree trunk, lubricated further by falling rain, offered a way across the swollen Black River. If I'd thought too long about crossing it, I'm sure I would have baulked and, inching across the log, legs shaking, wish I had. While respecting and dodging their many dangers, it is rivers that have most often caught me out. It can be too easy to underestimate the power of their flow, too easy to be foolish. During my 1997 traverse, the Big River, which is actually rather small, held me under for too long – far too long.

Adding to the challenge, I'd broken a rib during one particular after dark bush battle when I'd lost a thin track. Leeches marched into my tent on a couple of nights, enjoying their own feast after I'd finished my meagre dinners. I pushed hard on very long days, dawn until dark, keen to traverse the infamous Crosscut Saw before a forecast blizzard hit.

The Crosscut Saw, true to its name, is a series of rocky pinnacles joined by a very narrow ridge and is, undoubtedly, the most challenging winter ridge traverse in the Australian Alps. Narrow, exposed in parts, it required some thoughtful, icy manoeuvres.

Strangely, from the point where I had hit snow again, along King Billy, over Mt Howitt, right along the Crosscut Saw and onto Mt Speculation, fresh paw prints, dingo or wild dog, led me on. Why was such an animal following such a precise route, a very human recreational route over summits and along ridges?

If a dog had led me on in the wilderness, it was its mirror image, a god, who skied with me in the civilisation of Mt Buller resort - a Hindu sect, celebrating the centenary of its guru's birth, had taken icons to the snow (as well as Uluru, the Opera House, and the Barrier Reef). Somehow, I found myself skiing down a piste, nursing a gilded statuette in my arms as I turned this way and that.

Coming into the resorts offered comfort and contrast. Climbing hills is a lot easier from the seat of a chairlift. A soft bed in a warm room is so different to a sleeping mat in a wet tent, flicking a tap for water much quicker than melting snow on a little stove. A cold beer more enjoyable than frozen hands. I was well looked after, none more so than by The Astra in Falls Creek where Alpine Odyssey fundraising cocktails were on offer and a barber's chair tamed my locks, a massage table my leg muscles.

My arrival in Falls also coincided with the Kangaroo Hoppet. Attracting 1,000 skiers, the Hoppet is Australia's largest cross country ski race. Using lightweight racing skis, the 40 kilometres was the furthest I'd travelled in one day on my journey, in the shortest time, 2.5 hours, only to end up back where I started. True to its name, Falls also gave me the biggest tumble of my journey.

After two seasons wrecked by the pandemic, it was good to see the resorts cranking again, slopes alive to the laughter of skiers and boarders, snowballs thrown, toboggans slid. For me it was a chance to ski with old friends and new acquaintances.

Back into lower country after linking the eight Victorian snow resorts, I pushed on toward Thredbo, the first of four in NSW. In the first days of spring, I sprung from one state to another across the metre wide Murray River, just starting out on its 2,500 kilometre journey to the sea.

At Thredbo it was so good to see Wendy again, the first time since Baw Baw. Fun too enjoying some thigh burning descents on its slopes, before leaving to ski to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko, our highest place. From here I could gaze north across The Main Range and way beyond to isolated Mt Jagungal. Up here the snow depths held up well - the mountains plastered in the white powder so many of us are addicted to, thick cornices rolling off the lee side of the mountains.

Camp that night looked across to Watsons Crags, a place offering some of Australia's steepest backcountry terrain. Always impressive, my thoughts were with the family and friends of a young backcountry skier who tragically lost his life there just two days before. Such incidents, fortunately rare in our backcountry, touch all of us who love skiing and boarding beyond the resorts. It is a very special outdoor activity but there is a thin line that we traverse with a mix of skill, experience, weather, snow conditions and luck. Occasionally it plays out the wrong way, very occasionally in tragedy.

Out across the infant Snowy River, to Charlotte Pass. In 1986, as a British backpacker fresh out of university, I found myself working a season at this little snowbound resort, one accessible only by oversnow transport or ski. It was where I learned to ski and where my passion for our alpine country began.

The rasp of a ski running across granulated snow, the muffled gurgle of a creek flowing beneath the snowpack, the dawn roar of the stove brewing the first coffee of the day, the sleepless torture of tent fabric flapping all night on a wild night, the satisfying click of ski boot into binding, the windless sound of nothing under a full moon, the clanking of a T-bar lift arcing around a bullwheel, heavy breathing behind an iced up neck warmer, the groan lifting heavy pack onto aching shoulders, the squeal of a pair of rosellas flashing past a mountain ash, the whoops of joy linking turns down a virgin slope, the tinkling of rime ice on a snow gum. This is the symphony of the snow.

From Guthega, a part of Perisher, my penultimate resort, I headed across The Rolling Grounds in foul conditions of blizzard and whiteout, where it becomes impossible to discern ground from sky. Such foul conditions are of course good conditions as, without snow, there are no snow sports. So, regardless of discomfort, I'd never complain.

Just on dark, soaked through and cold, I dropped down to an old stockman's hut and the good fortune of finding find three Brazilians inside with a fire roaring. Covid visa extensions had allowed Carlos, Felipe and Paulo to stay on in Australia, and they too had fallen quickly for the charms of our high country.

On the eastern flank of Mt Jagungal I removed my skis for the last time, coincidental to entering country burnt in those fiery months three summers ago. Then, as the sun lowered late one afternoon, renewal in the form of Selwyn Snow Resort. Brand new ski lifts, buildings and more, risen from the ashes of its total destruction by those fires.

I had skied at all eleven of the resorts I'd visited but, as I approached Selwyn, it seemed trite to seek out a patch of snow just to say I'd skied there. Far better to enjoy my turns under a blanket of snow, with lifts cranking and people enjoying it. Far better to wait until the winter of 2023, to celebrate Selwyn's reopening.

But standing in mid-September on those bare slopes, I did have to wonder about the rebuilding of a resort that sits low in altitude and further north than any other in Australia. Unless we can turn the tide, can any amount of snowmaking technology really outpace the rising temperatures?

I continued into the last days of my journey, on through the northern reaches of Kosciuszko national park, on toward the ACT. Blackened trees gave way to green ones. For half an hour I stopped, mesmerised, as a Lyre bird mimicked a rollcall of the birds I'd seen those past 50 days – currawong, rosella, kookaburra, raven.

At the Murrumbidgee River, I stared long and hard at the deep, fast flowing water. It was probably OK to get across. Probably. But that's the issue with river crossings, like a siren they entice you in. It was too close to the end of my journey to risk it, surely much better to take the long detour. I turned away, walked away. Then, hesitating, turned back to the river. Then away.

The trails those last days in the NSW alps were awash in the faeces of feral horses and at one place I counted 55 horses in my field of view.

Entering Wongalu and Ngunnawal Country, I walked in fresh snow across Murrays Gap and into the ACT. Here, in Namadgi National Park, the mountains of poo disappeared, no horses seen, the result of a successful control program that side of the border.

One final camp, my first and last in the ACT, before a day through the snow to Mt Franklin and a finish on the footprint of the old Canberra Ski Club chalet that had stood there. Our alpine country had more than nourished me again.

In 1997 I didn't see or speak to another soul for the first 18 days of my winter traverse. Finally, arriving at a snow clearing depot below Mt Hotham late into the night, I dropped in to use their phone. Classical music was playing and the road crew were glued to the TV. 'If you haven't seen anyone you wouldn't know about Princess Diana' said one burly bloke, can of VB in hand 'That's her funeral we're watching.'

25 years on, and the day after I finished my journey, the world was tuned into the burial of her mother-in-law. Soon after my own mother-in-law Eira, whose name means snow in Welsh, passed away. I can only hope that in another quarter of a century we will still be celebrating not lamenting the white, winter wonders of our highest country.

This article first appeared in The Weekend Australian Magazine and was the winner of the 2023 Australian Society of Travel Writers Award for Best Travel Story Over 1000 Words.

https://www.huwkingston.com/

The Hills Sisters ski the AAWT

Marita *and* **Angela Hills** *walked and skied the AAWT during the difficult winter of 2023.*

I learnt about the Australian Alps Walking Track after moving from QLD to live and work at the northern end of the track. My sister, Angela, then moved down a few years later. Over time we both wanted to complete the track which grew after being part of a snowshoe expedition across the Australian Alps but unfortunately had to pull out mainly due to Covid restrictions. As part of doing it we also wanted to show women in the backcountry as the majority of people we see in the backcountry are men including over this trip.

The preparation for the trip started a bit over a year before we departed. We hiked the Viking Circuit to get more familiar with that area. Next was route, food and gear planning. Campers Pantry sponsored us which helped with food and we were ambassadors for Tom's Outdoors where we got some gear. We had stashes at Fiddlers Green, Vallejo Gantner (VG) Hut at Macalister Springs near Mount Howitt, Barry Saddle, Derrick Hut, Mt Wills Hut, Buenba Flats, Dead Horse Gap, Kiandra and Oldfields Hut. They were put out over a couple of trips in the months prior and we did a test trip with our gear.

After some days exploring Walhalla we started the AAWT. Our first snow and ski was across the Baw Baw Plateau. After a few longer days we had a short day to our first stash at Fiddlers Green. The next day we headed down to Black River and to our surprise it had recently been flattened on top and chicken wire put on which made crossing a lot easier than expected. Our next challenge was Mt McDonald due to the patchy snow cover not been enough to ski. We kept potholing and trying to go on the side of the spur with less snow, which caused us to go 500 metres down the wrong spur when it divided. We got to camp in the dark which was a theme for the next two days. Even though the last stretch into VG Hut was challenging. It was our favourite day, with stunning views and some good ski runs.

After a rest day at VG Hut we left early for the Crosscut saw. We microspiked the whole way across and found one part a bit tricky to navigate around. Over the next few days we had a couple of dustings of snow and frozen shoes one morning. As we got closer to Hotham the snow was patchy so it was again on and off skis. One of our tent poles broke while setting up and given where it broke I had to swap two pole sections around to put the repair sleeve on. It held out until

Dead Horse Gap where I got a replacement pole. Crossing Big River was freezing and then Quartz Ridge (heading towards Mt Bogong) was more technical than expected, with our microspikes going on. The following day we found our stash at Mt Wills Hut had been tampered, with the lock busted. Thankfully nothing essential was taken.

We had heard varying stories about the next section until Buenba Flats. Over this part we saw heaps of animals, from a platypus, a wombat with a baby, emus, lyre birds and feral animals. As far as the bush goes it wasn't bad until after Buenba Flats. The stretch between Misery Trail and Dead Horse Creek was the worst, with fire regrowth and caused us to take half a day longer. At camp Angela realised that her Exped mat had come off her pack in the bush. Our Mum met us at the top of Bob's Ridge and we had 3 days rest in Jindabyne.

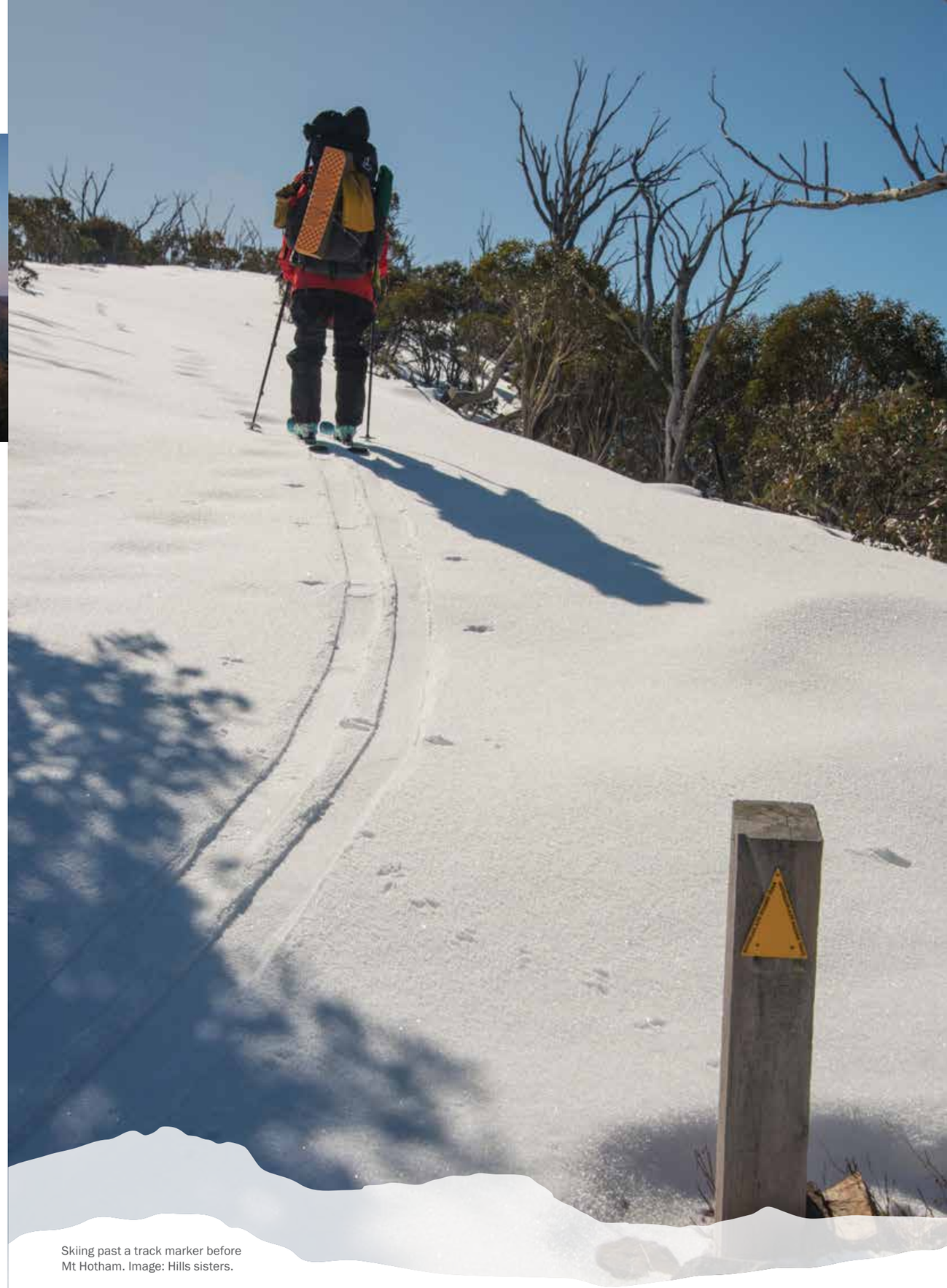
We had clear but windy weather heading over Mt Kosciuszko. The following day was a whiteout, so we headed low and lost the pole line after Seamans Hut but thankfully re-found it. The weather over the next few days was unpredictable. There wasn't much snow in this area when we did our test trip and the snowshoe expedition. Unfortunately there was even less snow now, which meant less snow skiing and some improvised grass skiing. We decided to have a weather/rest day at our stash and it actually snowed. We arrived at camp with no snow and ended up skiing out.

From Kiandra we hut hopped across the High Plains area and kept our distance from some unhappy horses. We did a side trip up to Lego Land (granite rock formations situated in the Namadgi National Park) as I hadn't been up there since the fires. For our final night we camped on Mt Tennent with great sunset views. We spent our final sunrise at the summit before heading down to the visitor centre.

The week following we picked up our Kiandra stash. Angela then picked up stashes while I was working in WA. In November we collected the remaining stashes with our friends.

Since wrapping up the AAWT we are already thinking about future adventures, with the Aussie Top 10 during winter high on the list. There will eventually be a video and a more detailed blog from the AAWT shared on our social media.

Instagram: @maritahillsphotography and @adventuring_hills_sisters



Skiing past a track marker before Mt Hotham. Image: Hills sisters.

AAWT Track Angels - a solution to a long-distance problem!

Long distance walking tracks often attract kind souls who assist the walkers with food, water, beers, lifts, accommodation and other assistance. The 'Trail Angels' of the Pacific Crest Trail in the USA are famous for their kindness to hikers. **Mick Webster** *describes the Track Angels of the AAWT.*

For those who don't know, the Australian Alps Walking Track is the longest marked track specifically for walkers in Australia. It stretches more or less along the Great Dividing Range between Walhalla, 120 kilometres from Melbourne, to Tharwa on the outskirts of Canberra. Most people who complete the whole track walk at least 655 kilometres without any side-tracks to mountains, waterfalls and other features off the side of the track.

It's hard to estimate how many people walk the whole Track in one go - many thousands every year will complete sections, from one-day walks (sometimes without even realising they're on the Track!) up to several hundred kilometres over a week or more. A ball-park figure might be about 200 walkers (individuals, couples or groups) a year who complete the whole Track - probably a 50/50 split between NOBO (North-bound, starting at Walhalla) and SOBO (starting at Canberra). There is no formal registration system to walk the Track.

As the Track more or less follows the crest of the Australian Alps there are only two villages where people can restock their packs to any extent from a supermarket - the ski villages of Hotham at km 235 (from Walhalla), and Thredbo (km 450), so unless a walker is prepared to walk a marathon distance every day and basically live on fresh air and creek water, food either has to be restocked by a friend driving to meet the walker at road crossings, or food caches have to be hidden before-hand (and the empties collected after the walk).

Over a lifetime of bushwalking I've completed maybe 80% of the Track, my first overnight walk being in 1968 on what became a section on the Baw Baw plateau. The idea of creating a group of 'Track Angels' came to me in 2020, one of the many bright ideas I think we all had during our hermit-like existence during Covid lock-down. As a long-time New Zealand tramper I'd read about the Te Araroa Trail which snakes through the mountains for 3,000 kilometres, the whole length of the country, and saw the advertisement for "Trail Angels, ' a Facebook group of non-walkers offering to let walkers camp in their back paddocks, drive them into town to buy supplies and help in other ways'. So, it was a light-bulb moment - we might grizzle about Facebook but the platform really has an amazing ability to create social groups and link people who would otherwise never be connected. In half an hour the group was created and I had some members - now we have over 870 (around 90% are 'walkers' of various levels of planning, or maybe dreamers, and almost 100 actual Angels).

Image: Mick Webster

Once you have a group you have to make some rules - this is a developing project as I keep thinking of new ones! Basically Angels take all care and responsibility - we do not take the place of search and rescue groups, but we can give people lifts when they decide to abandon their walk. Angels have to be able to hide food drops and describe the location accurately to walkers, preferably by GPS, but it's up to walkers to pack their food securely, as it might be out in the open for up to several months.

Originally I imagined Angels main 'work' would be hiding food drops, but in my experience, and I think most others, the more common request we get is to either deliver walkers to the start or collect from the finish or a road-crossing somewhere along the Track. It's hard to know how many Angels actually get jobs, as arrangements between walkers and Angels are private, as are any negotiations about recompense for fuel, and other expenses. Some Angels seem to get many requests especially if they live near one end of the Track, or in one of the ski villages. But I haven't had any complaints from over-worked Angels! Many Angels are experienced walkers and most have walked parts, or even all of the Track and it's fun to help out people walking such a picturesque and iconic track!

More information

AAWT Track Angels Facebook group (870 members) - https://www.facebook.com/groups/347274313038238

Australian Alps Walking Track group (17,000 members) - https://www.facebook.com/groups/931225987016688

The centenary Perrins Bluff pilgrimage

Perrins Bluff is a remote peak in the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park in lutruwita/ Tasmania. **Tabatha Badger** *reflects on a journey to the mountain made by Florence Perrin in 1920.*

It has been four years since my wonderfully chaotic research project on Florence Perrin (1884-1952) began. Finally, the book on this forgotten Tasmanian bushwalker, botanist, and photographer, is set for print in spring 2024. So, this is a pertinent moment to share an epic off-track walk that shaped the project – the 2020 centenary Perrins Bluff pilgrimage.

Perrins Bluff is a remote peak in the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, only visible from one tiny stretch of the Overland Track. It was January 1920 when Florence Perrin, her husband George, and friend Charlie Macfarlane were guided to the region by legendary bushman Paddy Hartnett. Florence embarked on annual walking trips with Paddy and was the first female, since colonisation, to summit several peaks including Mount Ossa, the highest in Tasmania. But it was their 14-day expedition in 1920 that made a mark in Lutruwita/Tasmania's history, as the group summited the peak behind Ossa, then unambiguously called 'Mountain #2'. Paddy determined to change the nomenclature to Perrins Bluff, in honour of Florence.

Come December 2020, it seemed surreal that after months of anticipation in various forms of isolation, we were finally following the vibrant blaze of red waratahs into the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Our mission was to summit Perrins Bluff to mark the centenary. With just days to spare in the year, we ditched initial plans to follow Florence's precise 1920 route and took the most direct path. Our trio of female friends, Meahd, Lykke and myself, made a fitting composition on a trip for Florence, as she guided some of the first all-female botanic expeditions to Cradle Mountain.

Around Old Pelion Hut, where the 1920 Perrin cohort was based, we departed the track and entered the glorious scrub. We climbed onto a high plateau where the boggy ground held more leeches than water. In a tangle of ancient pencil pine, we pitched our tents. Under the guard of Mount Ossa, and with a view of Mount Oakleigh's distinctive spires, we relished in the lost virtue of solitude and felt like the only people on the planet.

As the sun rose, Mt Oakleigh and Pelion East protruded proudly over the delicate white veil of mist floating through the valley below our campsite. Off in the distance, the familiar silhouettes of Barn Bluff and Cradle Mountain caught the first sun of the day. That was our que to head off, in order to beat the forecast heat. Our route over Mount Thetis would offer no shade, nor water. Heading up the dolerite massif, we skirted the southern slopes of a smaller, but no less characteristic peak, Paddy's Nut. Why is it called Paddy's Nut? Did Paddy think you were nuts if you wanted to climb this little boulder? Perhaps Paddy himself was nuts for persistently failing to summit Mount Ossa from this route (spoiler, he and Florence were finally successful in 1920 from roughly the present tracked way). This naming conundrum entertained us until we reached the saddle of the Nut and Thetis. Here things got challenging; Boulders the size of large busses had to be navigated with wieldy packs. Below each of the enormous dolerite stones was an inescapable abyss. Carefully we clambered, swore, and

Tabatha looking at Pelion West.

questioned our sanity. But we were also humbled by the thought of Florence navigating such terrain in a long skirt! She is celebrated as being one of the first in Tasmania to walk with button-up skirt and trousers underneath.

Atop Thetis at last, we caught a first glimpse of our elusive goal, Perrins Bluff. Under endless blue skies and uninterrupted Mountain views, we felt spoilt and thought of Florence's quote from the day she had summited Perrins; *"Oh, our west coast is a wild a rugged place. How I love it. The Mountains just put their arm around me and when I am away too long, they pull and pull, until I must go back."*

Tomorrow, we planned to be atop Perrin's. But first, we had to get down the south-west side of Thetis. Sheer precipice greeted us. Shards of fine scree ran into more truck-sized boulders. There was one tiny scrubby crag, indeed this must be the 'route' down. *The Abels,* Tasmania's Mountain bible, states that descending Thetis with full packs should be undertaken by "experienced walkers only". Until this moment we had regarded ourselves as proficient in the bush, but this Mountain demanded a new level of respect.

Once at the end of the delicate rock scramble, we were greeted by the task of penetrating a Nothofagus gunnii (otherwise known as tanglefoot) and King Billy forest. Down on all fours, we wriggled ourselves through only to arrive at the campsite and find we were no longer alone – thousands upon thousands of ants were everywhere, and suddenly through everything. Tired as we were, the tents went up quickly and the tea was boiled, restoring some sanity. The tarn by camp mirrored Pelion West glowing red on sunset. This marked bedtime for the ants who had suddenly all disappeared. A tangible feeling of immense gratitude overwhelmed us that evening - simply existing in the presence of these sublime and untamed Mountains filled our souls with appreciation for the likes of Florence, and those she walked with, who advocated for this entire region of splendour to be proclaimed a National Park. How lucky we were - Everything had seemingly fallen perfectly into place to summit Perrins the following day.

But the mountain weather had other plans.

5am I woke to bitter winds that swept horizontal rain through the camp, which was engulfed by heavy fog. The large tarn was scarcely visible from our tent pitched just metres away from the water. We sat, waiting, wearing every piece of clothing that we had to stay warm. This was our only day to make the summit, and I needed visual navigation clues to safely lead the others. As the weather persisted in the next few hours, we blamed the bad omen that was 2020 as a whole.

We had little choice but to surrender our centenary summit mission. Meahd gently reminded us of our place in this wild land; "the mountain allows you up to the top". "And today she's not allowing us" concurred Lykke. Our disappointment was slightly eased recalling the Perrin's own 1920 woes. They retreated from summit attempts of Cradle Mountain, Barn Bluff, Pelion West, and Mount Ossa, before they finally achieved Perrins. They had 14 days, we had 4.

It felt like hours of walking through thick scrub, but we eventually, literally, stumbled onto a boardwalk section of the Overland Track. Approaching New Pelion Hut, the noise and bustle resembled peak season Everest Base Camp (so much for COVID isolation!). A Ranger was standing by. He took one glance at our sunburnt and leech-loved legs and shouted "Oh, you have NOT been on the Overland Track!". A short amount of banter was shared before we hightailed it out of the hut metropolis, in search of tranquillity for our final night.

At Lake Ayr we made camp. An appropriate location – after the Perrins returned from their summit, Paddy discovered his horse, Ned, was missing from their Old Pelion Hut base. After a stroll he found the beast grazing by Lake Ayr.

As the golden hour light ignited Mount Oakleigh a saturated orange, matching the flowering scoparia beside the Lake, we reflected on bushwalking, and how it has changed since Florence's time. Unlike the Perrin cohort, we didn't have a horse carrying 90 kilograms of canvas gear, nor could we light a fire for cooking and night-time warmth. Our comfort came in modern lightweight tents, specialty walking poles, down jackets and sleeping bags. Although, questionably, we may have carried the same weight in photography equipment as the Perrins did. While bushwalking adventure has significantly altered in appearance over the past hundred years, at its heart it has remained the same; it is the art of overcoming adversity in pursuit of a great goal and whether you achieve it or not, the memories made along the way are the greatest reward of all.

If you're interested in the book Florence Perrin, keep an eye on https://tabathabadgerphotography.com, in mid-2024, for release details.

Sunset at Lake Ayr.

Snow Camping at Cootapatamba Hut – A Photo Essay

The Main Range of the Snowy Mountains is a much loved, and much visited part of the Australian high country, in all seasons. Winter transforms it into a seasonal wilderness, swept by winds and exposed to the elements. **William Jørgensen** *describes a winter journey to the area around the Main Range, close to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko.*

We skied into the valley carrying full packs, dropping below the clouds to set up our basecamp and prepare for our morning mission to the summit of Kosciuszko. Blue skies greeted as the next day to our surprise, a contrast to the blizzard which blew through overnight.

Above: Our camp next to Cootapatamba Hut, one of the most iconic huts on the Main Range.

Below: A member of our group, Aidan Irrgang, setting up his camp the afternoon we arrived.

Above: The view from our tent we woke up to the next morning once the storm had passed. We didn't expect the skies to be so blue and the weather so calm.

Right: We opened up the tent flaps to enjoy the view while the morning was still fresh.

Below: Our crew (Daniel Jørgensen, Lisette Bannies and Aidan Irrgang) heading off towards Kosciuszko.