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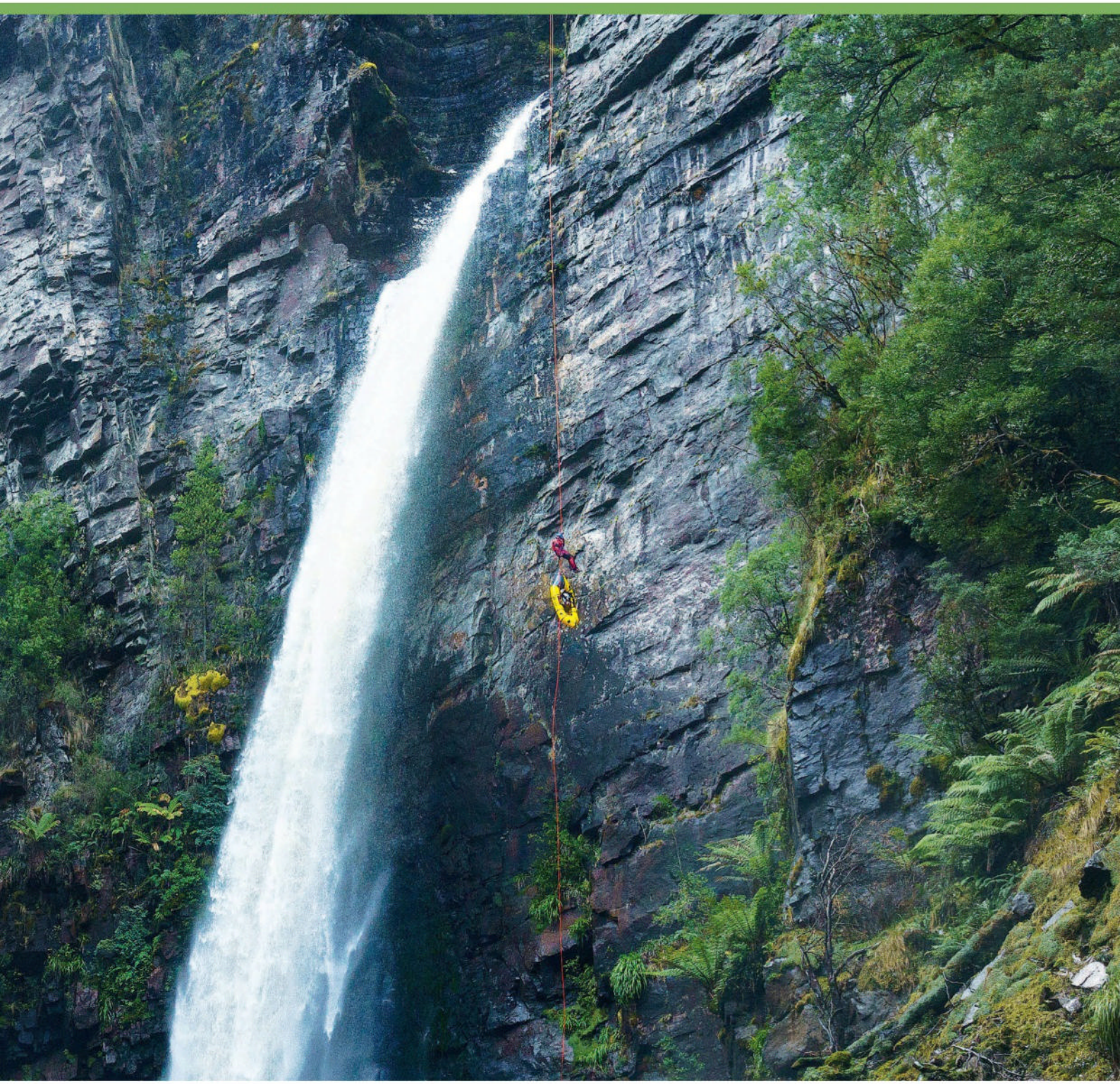

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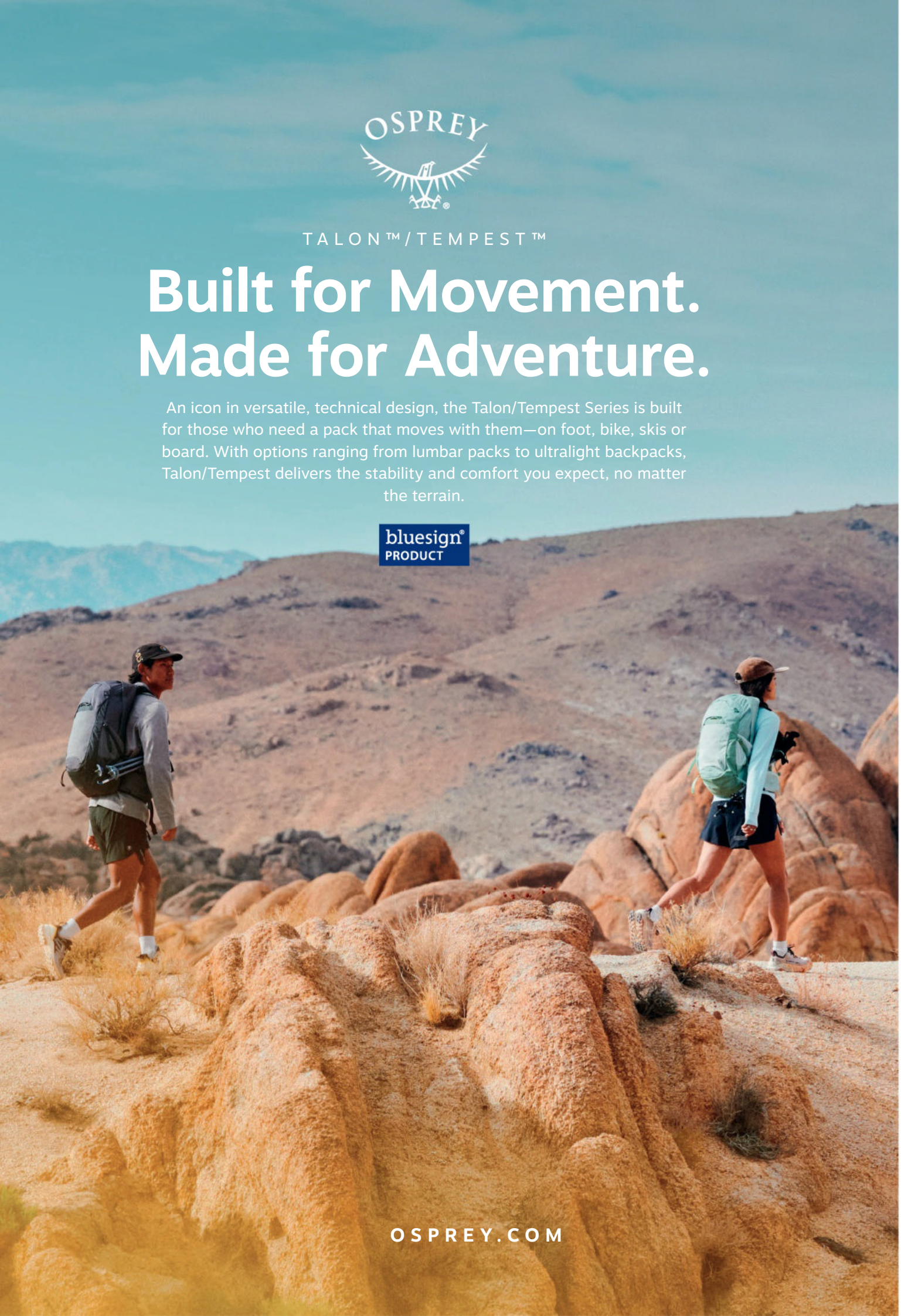
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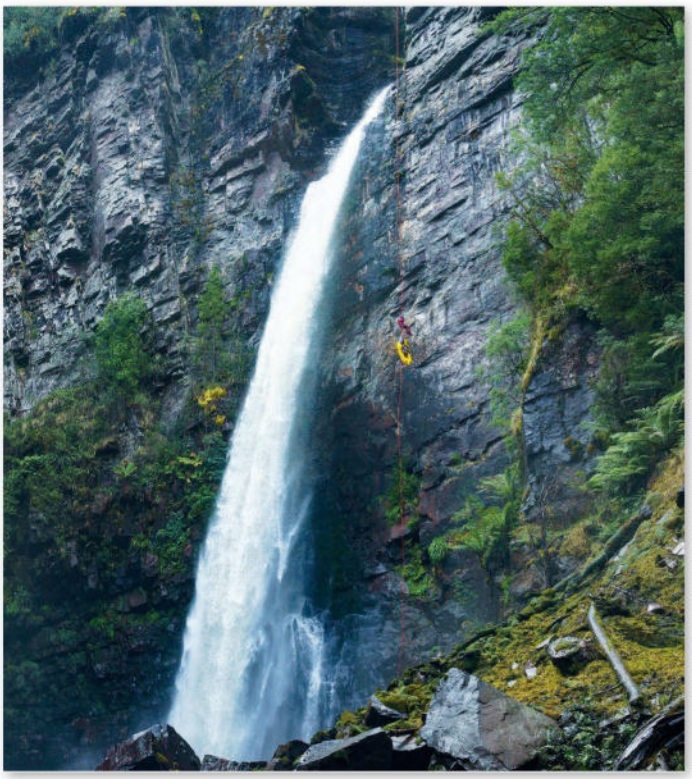

THE COVER SHOT

By Grant Dixon

Reynolds Falls on the Vale River issues from a slot canyon and falls free for more than 60m, one of the most spectacular settings of any waterfall in Tasmania. Since my first visit in the early 1980s, I have returned to the falls several times and explored its environs seeking imagery for conservation campaigns; despite advocacy by The Wilderness Society and others for more than forty years, the protection status of the entire catchment remains poor.

Upstream of the falls, the river flows through a deep and steep gorge. I had only poked around the edges of the inaccessible gorge on foot, but when, some ten years ago, Mark Oates shared his dream of a descent of the entire river using packrafts and canyoning gear, I was immediately hooked.

The journey itself would be challenging, and fulfilling if we pulled it off, but the free-hanging abseil beside the falls would clearly be a highlight. And indeed it was; we dangled next to the powerful stream at the falls' lip; standing beside its base, wind and spray buffeted us, and the roar was thunderous. In keeping with the spirit of our journey, and because it was bound to be photogenic, Mark undertook his abseil with his packraft inflated.

You can see more of Grant's imagery, and read about this trip down the Vale River, in the accompanying photo essay 'Unfinished Business' starting on p60.

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[*Letter of the Issue*]

GOING PRIVATE?

Dear James,

I am following on from the contributions in the recent edition on the over-development of walking tracks, and hut infrastructure privatisation. Combined with the current proposal by NSW National Parks to increase camping fees, I was struck by a worrying thought. These trends of increasing appeal to the masses, and increasing the profitability of our parks, make them ripe propositions to be sold and fully privatised. (I would argue that they are already partially privatised, given that all major projects are delivered by private contractors and not parks staff.) We only have to look at other public assets that followed the same path since the late 1980s—electricity supply, land and property information, ports, motorways, etc. Prior to the sale of these assets, there was a period of adding value to them to make them more appealing to buyers.

Now, I normally don't push a conspiracy theory, and, in fact, the last NSW state election was a resounding voice against further privatisation. However, many of these decisions appear to be made by senior bureaucrats who possess a corporate-management style focussed on brand development and marketing. If this trend isn't reversed, we're likely to face a point in our not-too-distant future when a perfect storm (government, management, willing buyers) aligns to begin the national parks' sell off. Certainly a travesty of their original intention as a natural asset for the nation and protection of our treasured flora and fauna.

I applaud *Wild*, and its contributors and readers, for leading the campaign on this, but warn things could get even worse if we don't all stay vigilant.

Chris Dewhurst
Faulconbridge, NSW

A PLEASANT AMBUSH

Hello James,

Normally, I'd skim straight past any editorial (life's too short for waffle), but credit where it's due—well, credit to Alexis … actually, credit to you. The heading stopped me cold. Dancing plague? "What the xxxx," I thought, "does that have to do with anything in *Wild*?"

So, I started reading … and was pleasantly ambushed. The waffle! Not the breakfast kind, but the kind made up of big words artfully circling around without landing anywhere. I was entertained. I smiled.

Then came the bit about your wife being right—again, entertaining. For the record, when I met my wife, my mates said, "She's the right one." Took me a few years to realise her first name is 'Always'. (Feel free to steal that, just don't tell my wife I said so.)

The YouTube rabbit holes, the scientific articles, the algebra (still no clue how to do algebra)—all a wonderful diversion. And then that final message: *Get your arse out in the wild and enjoy.*

Simple. Brilliant. Effective.

I may even read it again, which is saying something.

Thanks from a very amused and happy subscriber,

John O'Neill
Warriewood, NSW

CATERING TO A WIDE RANGE

Dear *Wild*,

I read the article "When Is a Trail No Longer Wild?" in your last issue with great interest, as it raises important questions about the future of our sport. An extreme answer might be that the presence of any trail detracts from the concept of wilderness. I have walked and run thousands of kilometres of trails in many countries over seventy years, from pedestrian 'highways' to barely discernible pads, and believe that each of these extremes have their place in an appropriate setting. Let me give some examples.

In the last decade, I have discovered and come to love Europe's Maritime Alps. They straddle the French-Italian border, and peter out as they approach the Mediterranean Sea. They are also close to large populations who look to them as a playground. I've had several multi-day walks there on well-marked and graded trails, enjoying magnificent scenery and knowing that at the end of the day, a warm and welcoming rifugio awaited me.

At almost the other extreme, last summer I walked on Tasmania's South Coast Track. The day from South Cape Rivulet to Granite Beach was a challenge for my octogenarian body, not so much aerobically but for the demands it placed on my agility and balance. The track was often steep, interlaced with a tangle of roots waiting to trip a wayward foot, with frequent deep, muddy sections and many fallen trees to negotiate.

Each of these trails offers very different experiences but, I contend, appropriate ones for the setting. To 'upgrade' the South Coast Track would, I believe, be a travesty. Unfortunately, this appears to be a risk, with the increasing commercialisation of outdoor activities. There needs to be a range of trails and settings that cater for the wide range of skills and expectations found in the outdoor community.

Rob Taylor
Brown Hill, VIC

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QUICK THOUGHT

On *Wild* #197's feature story 'The Best of Both Worlds' on bikerafting in Montenegro down the Tara River:

"I'd give my left nugnut to do this trip." EP

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My son five years ago embracing blasting winds on Bluff Mountain in NSW's Warrumbungles

YAY, THE WIND!

Recently, I had just forded the Snowy River in Kosciuszko NP on my way out for a few days of backcountry skiing—the river's frigid waters, despite being swollen with snowmelt, had thankfully remained just below testicle depth—when I got chatting with a woman about to ford back across the river. She'd only just braved the icy crossing in my direction less than half an hour earlier, so I asked why she was heading back so soon. The wind, she told me. I gathered it freaked her out.

Granted, it was a blustery day. But it was nowhere near as blustery as it would be three days later, when I could barely stay upright while walking across ridgelines or while transitioning for a ski descent off Carruthers. And that, in turn, was nowhere near as blustery as when I took my mate Jase out a few years back for his first backcountry trip to camp just beneath Mt Northcote; on that occasion, the winds, confirmed by the BOM station at nearby Thredbo, gusted at over 140km/h. At one point, I was literally picked up off my feet and thrown off the summit of Northcote.

But I love the wind. Really. Even when it's blasting. *Especially* when it's blasting. It's something—in the wake of that conversation I held by the banks of the Snowy—I reflected on for the days I was out on that ski trip. I was out solo, btw, so I had ample time to let thoughts rattle around in my head. One of my realisations was how important the wind is to so many adventures—yeah, I know, that's not truly groundbreaking—but the bigger realisation was just how little we tend to actually stop and give wind its proper consideration. We often—when regaling our friends with stories from our adventures—talk about the scenery encountered on a trip; how often do we stop to talk about the wind, unless it was roaring? Or unless we want to remark on the wind's absence, and the stillness of the air? No, we tell about stunning peaks or mirrored lakes. We tell them about the steepness of the climbs, or the toughness of the terrain. But do we mention the breeze that gently kissed our sweat-moistened skin on that hot day, a cooling breeze so delicious the pleasure it induced was palpable?

Unlike scenery, however, we can't see the wind. Wind is caused simply by differential heating of the planet; air pressure rises in one part and falls in another, causing air to rush about to try and equalise at scale. But this movement of air has such an impact on our lives that we need a slew of ways to describe it. And while we maybe don't have for wind quite the forty words for snow Inuit people reputedly do, there are a lot. There are blasts, breezes, cyclones, gales, gusts, wafts and zephyrs. There are headwinds. Tailwinds. Anabatic and katabatic winds. Onshorers and offshorers. Nor'easters and sou'westers. Freemantle Doctors and Southerly Busters. Whirlwinds and willy willies and twisters. Puffs of wind can come and go. Days can be blustery or blowy; gales can buffet us or batter us.

Outdoors, of course, the effects of wind are all amplified. This is a good thing. For me at least; I know others, many others, especially in alpine environments, find strong winds unnerving. But I love them. Always have. Even before I began adventuring.

Perhaps this became apparent in my early years of high school. I hated English as a subject back then (an irony given I have for decades made a living from words). In particular, I hated Shakespeare. But there was one line that stuck with me. It was from *King Lear,* Act III, Scene II, when King Lear himself was mentally cracking up: *Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!*

I loved this line at the time, and I still quote it today. One of the people I have quoted it to is my son. He is twelve now, but when he was younger, I wanted to inculcate him with the joys of strong winds, in part so he would never be put off adventuring just because it was blowing. So if the winds were raging or cracking their cheeks, we would head to nearby Bald Hill at Illawarra's Stanwell Tops, and while everyone else either curled up indoors or stayed huddled in their vehicles, we would run around in circles on the grass, buffeted by blasts strong enough to make our steps falter, and shout, "Yay, the wind!" I believe, of life's lessons, this is one of the more important ones. Especially if you're heading for a lifetime of adventure.

JAMES MCCORMACK

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GALLERY

Abseiling Crystal Brook Falls, in Victoria's Mt Buffalo NP, is a full-on day out. These low, late-summer flows tamed the beast, and other than a stuck rope, we enjoyed a relatively calm day by Crystal Brook's standards. As we descended further into the depths of the gorge, we kept tabs on the several groups of nearby climbers scaling the dramatic cliffs. Even our climbers' route back to the car was an adventure of its own.

by RYAN HANSEN

Sony A7R II, 16-35mm f4, 1/250s, f5, ISO 1250

I took this photo just before entering the Franklin River's Great Ravine, the final flat water before the obstacles ahead. There are always mixed feelings at these points of an adventure; you're trying to take in the scenery and the stillness, but knowing that challenges are soon to come. A contrast of beauty and the beast.

by HAMISH LOCKETT

Sony A7R IV, 24-70mm f2.8, 1/800s, f5.6, ISO 1250

(Words by *Wild*'s Editor, James McCormack.) Simple. Abstract. Flowing. There are so many elements to love in this beautiful, curvaceous still life, a moment frozen both in time and in literal ice. Craig Fardell, who has contributed so many images to *Wild* over the years, found beauty everywhere, not just in grand landscapes but particularly in details and in natural rhythms and in geometries. Sadly, he passed away in June this year, but starting on p82, you can find one last photo essay showing a selection of his works.

by CRAIG FARDELL

Canon 6D Mk2, 24-105mm fL4, 1/160s, f10, ISO 800

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[MEGAN HOLBECK]

THE CAMPGROUND IS FULLY BOOKED

Changes in NSW national parks are set to make campsites more expensive and less accessible.

I've spent months of my life camping, maybe years if you add it up. In single nights and weekends, week-long chunks and longer stints. Sometimes, when things were busy or hard, it was years between camps. Each time, after a night or two under the stars, came the realisation: I've really missed this.

My parents started us early, taking young twins and a toddler on forays around the NSW South Coast. Their stories are mostly about how much I screamed. Of campsites emptying overnight, friends' tents vanishing as I howled. The photos are of brown canvas tents, Holdens and Stubbies shorts, the three girls with matching helmets of blonde hair.

I eventually stopped screaming and set off on my own, and camping became about travel and adventure: across the Australian Alps and coast, New Zealand and Europe. Walking and climbing and paddling and just staying, in the rain, snow and sun, in pub gardens and wild mountains and under moons so bright they cast shadows.

Our kids have been camping since they were tiny. Some of these stories also involve sleepless nights, little eyes puffed shut by allergies, and pushing prams around in the dark. But most are about adventures: swimming in freezing rivers and seas, walks and whales and snakes and rockpools. The photos are of hammocks and picnic dinners, of friends and family, of fires and sunsets and strange sand creations.

For a while, we camped on demand. With a big, new mortgage to pay, we put our house on Airbnb and headed down to Gippsland's gorgeous (and free!) Bear Gully campsite. Each time we loaded the car, we wondered whether it was worth it. The answer was always yes, at least until we had to unpack.

Last month, three generations of the family went camping at Jervis Bay—twelve of us in two camper trailers and three tents. We swam, ran, volleyballed, walked, talked and cooked; saw bandicoots and kangaroos, orchids and ruined lighthouses.

Green Patch had hot showers and firewood and all types of campers. There were sites crammed with well-behaved backpackers, toddlers making random dashes for the ocean, retirees' tidy set-ups with doormats outside every entrance. From the posh to the not, the young to the old, we all shared the same toilet block and dodgy, lukewarm showers, stopping for chats on the way to the beach.

> "SUPPORTED CAMPING CHANGES THE FOCUS OF NATIONAL PARKS **FROM PROTECTION TO PROFIT.**"

It was a leveller, a way to remember the ground we shared, no matter where we'd come from or were returning to. How lucky we are to have nature around us, and not just to visit, but to live in for a while. That this is where we all come from, in the evolutionary equivalent of last week, and where we have spent the vast majority of our shared history. And that we're lucky enough to be a part of it still, even if we forget.

But a couple of recently proposed changes to NSW national-park fees and policies are going to make camping trips both less accessible and more expensive. The first is about 'standardising' the pricing structure at campsites based on demand and facilities (such as tables and toilets), with the rates at some campsites set to more than double in school holidays.

The other is a trial of 'supported camping'. This basically means that commercial operators will get first dibs on a proportion of the sites in 23 national parks across the state. These private businesses can then put caravans and tents on these public spaces and rent them out at commercial rates, as well as to provide gear, 'food offerings' and who knows what else. Many of the details are still unknown, but the expression-of-interest process (hosted on the interestingly named website buy.nsw.gov.au) finished at the end of October 2025, with licences to be awarded in February next year.

I'm all for encouraging people to get into nature, but this seems more about taming it, giving 'exclusive' rights to those who can afford it (and, by reducing the available public sites, excluding those who can't), as well as allowing businesses to profit from our precious public areas.

'Supported camping' not only introduces a class system into our national parks, it changes the focus of them from protection to profit. It's a slippery slope, too: Changes in use alter expectations about services, access and behaviour. The crazy thing is that the profit from developing (and degrading) our national parks—public land deemed most worthy of protection—goes to private companies, while funding for conservation and biodiversity programs is seriously underfunded.

The world doesn't need more taming. Instead, we need to value and protect nature, and remember our place in it.


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[TIM MACARTNEY-SNAPE]

REST WISELY

Finding the right place to take a break is an effort worth taking.

Two long and hard days crossing over a high and technical pass, with a couple of dozen people whose safety I was ultimately responsible for, had left me feeling a little busted; I was keen to find an early camp where we could all rest and recover.

Coming off the chaotic jumble of the glacier, meandering down through ancient moraines and boulder fields, I'd already passed up two possibilities. Both were flat and well supplied with water, but neither had lived up to my, some would say, fussy standards. One had too much bare, muddy soil exposed, and the other—an expansive snooker-table-flat grassy, glacial terrace—was exposed to the anabatic winds that would inevitably develop as the fine day warmed. It was our first sunny day since the beginning of the trip ten days before, and I longed just to lie down on some dry grass and let the sun warm my skin.

Finally, I came around a bend to see a fold in the grassy slope below. A bowl-shaped area of relative flatness, perched above a steep drop to the bed of the valley below presented itself. I cast my eyes around, counting possible tent sites between the patches of dwarf rhododendron, boulders and a clear-water brook that gurgled merrily through. Though the sites were randomly spread out, there was space for all our tents. To the east, the valley dropped steeply, meaning that despite the six-and-a-half-thousand-metre peaks beyond the end of the valley, we would enjoy early-morning sun. The view was classically 'perfect high-Himalayan valley': Elegant peaks lined the horizon; opposite soared giant buttresses topped by fluted ridges of dazzling whiteness; and below cascaded a glacial river with its omnipresent background roar.

It was the perfect campsite.

I dumped my pack, slumped down on a patch of grass and pulled the rim of my hat over my eyes, knowing that the others, who would be straggling in soon, would welcome seeing my prostrated body with great relief.

Whenever or wherever I'm away from the 'built' world and planning to lay my body down to rest, I spend considerable, some would say an inordinate, effort seeking out the right place. And not just a place to camp, even a place to have a mid-day break.

> **"A PLACE OF REST SHOULD FEEL RIGHT,** AND TO GET 'THE FEEL' **TAKES BOTH ANALYSIS AND CONTEMPLATION."**

I'm naturally an optimist, but I've learned to caution my optimism when encountering a seemingly perfect place until careful assessment can rule out most potential negatives: wind, shade, sun, aspect, flatness, prickliness, rockfall, avalanche, or other hazards such as a bull-ants' nest, a dead 'hanger' in the tree shading the spot or, God forbid, in less pristine places, smell, where someone lazily chose to leave a calling card and didn't cover it up. Even a piece of litter or an old fireplace not naturalised can spoil the feel. Forgive me for uttering a little homily here, but "Do unto others as they would do unto you." There's nothing more off-putting to me than seeing evidence of a previous visitor's wanton disregard for those who may come after them. Why can't everyone simply have the good manners to leave a place with as little trace of prior use as possible for others to enjoy?

All these factors, along with additional minor considerations, may be approved individually yet are ultimately influenced by the broader context in what could be described as something akin to Feng Shui—the harmonious balance of various elements that together contribute to a place's overall atmosphere. A place of rest should feel right, and to get 'the feel' takes both analysis and contemplation, an engagement between two opposites in our minds. After all, what is the point of going to all the effort of 'getting away from it all' if when you do get away, you spend your resting moments in places that don't feel right? On almost all excursions into the outdoors—at least the ones that aren't epic trials of suffering, like trying to achieve some arbitrary, self-imposed FKT (*Ed: Fastest Known Time*)—you spend at least half the time at rest.

As I look back on past adventures, the moments that stand out are overwhelmingly the difficult epics, along with the magical places I've chosen to rest. But while the epics often evolved from chains of random, unplanned events, my choice of memorable places has been precisely the opposite.

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[DAN SLATER]

WHAT'S COOKING?

Delving into the environmental friendliness of camp meals.

Surprisingly, one thing I haven't yet covered in this column is food, specifically the ethicality of the options available to the average outdoor adventurer. Firstly, I'll put my hand up and admit that menu planning and shopping is my least favourite part of any expedition. For me, avoiding this chore ranks considerably higher in importance than eating a tasty meal at the end of the day.

I've heard it said that "Camping is no reason to eat badly," and "There's little else to do in the evenings except make a delicious meal." To both of those I say, "I agree!" and "Have at it!" But personally, I can't be bothered. Sorry. I once made three identical baguettes for an overnight canyon trip and it didn't bother me one bit, at least until I dropped one in the dirt, but then that could happen with any meal.

But the focus of this issue's column isn't about taste per se, although it's not irrelevant. Instead, I'll be adhering to the original, overarching purpose of my column—examining environmental friendliness—and will offer a brief investigation into the most popular, currently available brands, looking at things like organic growing methods, plant-based ingredients, free range and/or cruelty-free meat, etc. I have tried to minimise references to taste, nutritional benefits and dietary options.

The #1 environmentally friendly choice is home dehydrating, because you can source whatever organic, free-range food you like. It weighs very little and tastes exactly as good as your cooking skills. It's either relatively cheap, or has a low carbon footprint if you shop at farmers' markets, but not both. I tried it many years ago on the Overland Track, and it worked a treat. In fact, so successful was it that I've never done it again. It's just too much work.

One method beloved of US thru-hikers is cold soaking, whereby you douse regular dehydrated or freeze-dried food in cold water throughout the day, avoiding both the extra weight and carbon release associated with a stove and fuel. By evening, dinner is rehydrated and ready to eat. I may not be a foodie, but a cold meal after a long day, possibly in the rain, does not appeal to me.

That leaves us with the most popular option—the packet meal.

New Zealand's freeze-dried Back Country and Outdoor Gourmet are the same company, the latter carrying fancier recipes and a higher price tag. Unfortunately, there's little information on their websites except the usual dietary requirements, etc. The four-year shelf life could be considered an environmental plus.

> "I'LL ADMIT MENU PLANNING AND SHOPPING IS **MY LEAST FAVOURITE PART OF ANY EXPEDITION."**

Campers Pantry is based in Tasmania and is also freeze-dried. For Aussies, that means less fuel used to reach our mouths (NZ readers can say the same about the Kiwi brands listed here), and only Aussie ingredients are used. Double win, for Aussies anyway. CP's list of values includes "ethical sourcing" (no details), minimising waste, and working with organisations like Loaves & Fishes Tasmania, the state's free-emergency-food provider, and the Endeavour Foundation, which supports employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

I can say from experience that Tassie brand Strive is one of the tastier options out there, but their website gives nothing away when it comes to ethics or sourcing.

Radix is a younger, NZ freeze-dried brand. They boast zero food waste and zero artificial ingredients. They received a packaging-design award for minimising waste, and have energy-efficient buildings that use renewable energy. 100% plant-based, and gluten- and GMO-free. Not yet organic, but they're working on it. They aim to produce a nutritionally complete diet with a lower environmental footprint than typically achieved by cooking at home.

Three Capes Gear & Gourmet from, you guessed it, Tasmania, is the tastiest camping food I've ever had. They craft their recipes from a combination of home- and custom-dehydrated, vacuum-sealed, and third-party freeze-dried ingredients. These are all locally sourced, but there's no word on organic or free-range provenance.

I'm sure the Real Meals (NZ, freeze-dried) team are good people, but they should tell us how. There's no enviro-info on their website aside from boasting membership of the Soft Plastic Recycling Scheme. (*Ed: Their site, however, does have an excellent explanation that decodes dozens of food-additive numbers.*)

Aussie-based Offgrid Provisions don't do freeze-dried meals; their food is cooked and then simply sealed in a long-life pouch. Their site details their commitment to regenerative farming, and they're partnered with 1% For The Planet and OzHarvest.

Patagonia Provisions: Move over you lot and see how it's done. Organic and free-range is just the start! Responsibly harvested seafood; regeneratively harvested grains; 1% For The Planet; they even do organic beer! The ingredients in their lager are "grown in ways that improve soil health, minimise erosion, preserve biodiversity and protect waterways." You're practically an environmental superhero just for drinking it!

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GREEN PAGES

A selection of environmental news briefs from around the country.
EDITED BY BECCA BRADY

Bush Heritage's James Smith and Timberscope's Rod Brindley examining a new AI-powered trap. Credit: Grassland Films

AI'S HAND-Y SOLUTION

New technologies are assisting in the fight against Australia's feral cats.

On isolated islands surrounded by clear blue water, high in the fragile alpine country, and among the rolling red sand dunes of Australia's vast inland deserts, new AI-powered technology is being deployed in the fight to save Australia's precious wildlife.

It's a project led by Bush Heritage Australia in partnership with tech provider eVorta and First Nations business Timberscope. The focus: the devastating impacts of feral cats on Australia's native wildlife and biodiversity. Already, there are promising signs that they could be game-changers.

The Humane Animal Net Device (HAND), developed by Timberscope, is a soft net trap combined with a new high-tech camera that uses AI image recognition for identifying feral cats and triggering a remote capture mechanism. Once a cat is caught, the trap sends real-time alerts via satellite or 5G connection to a mobile app. In June 2025, the first feral cat was successfully captured by a HAND trap at Bush Heritage Australia's Naree Reserve on Budjiti Country in New South Wales.

James Smith, a senior ecologist at Bush Heritage, said, "With this new HAND trap, we'll save thousands of hours that have previously been spent driving to and checking traps. They can now be deployed and sit there running on solar power, even in really remote areas, and we'll receive live updates of what is happening in the field straight to our phones via an app, so we know when we've caught a cat or need to do maintenance."

The new camera technology integrated with the HAND trap will also alleviate many problems existing motion-sensor cameras have. James explained that remote motion-sensor cameras have remained relatively unchanged for years: "What was considered state of the art a while ago is now the equivalent of a horse and cart compared to the technology we could be using."

"eVorta's new camera is incredibly customisable and it uses thermal technology to identify animals based on temperature, not just movement. It's a 'smart' camera … so will ignore false triggers that would traditionally fill up our SD cards with images of things like waving grass. Coupled with the HAND trap, the AI ensures that we only ever catch the species we want to."

In addition to the HAND trap, Bush Heritage and eVorta are developing the Cat Audio Deterrent—a customisable device designed to create an invisible barrier for cats around ecologically sensitive areas. By emitting high-frequency sounds audible to cats but not to most native animals, cats will be forced to avoid key habitats such as nesting sites or gaps in predator-exclusion fences.

Eliminating the feral cat problem in Australia is a long way off. But for people like James and others in the conservation sector, these new technologies could be a huge advantage—enabling them to work smarter and more efficiently with the limited resources they have.

LEAH SJERP, Bush Heritage Australia

> **"WE'LL SAVE THOUSANDS OF HOURS THAT HAVE PREVIOUSLY BEEN SPENT DRIVING TO AND CHECKING TRAPS."**

LEARN MORE

Feral cats are widely considered to be one of the most successful and damaging invasive species in Australia. Scientific analysis shows they occur across 99.8 per cent of the country, and each year they kill over 1.5 billion native animals. So far, they have contributed to the extinction of 27 species in Australia.

Discover more about the project at: **bushheritage.org.au**

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GREEN PAGES

JOIN THE WILDLIFE WALL

Australia's federal environment laws are about to be rewritten—this moment will shape how nature is protected for decades. Environmental Justice Australia's new Wildlife Wall initiative is bringing people together to remind parliament that Australians expect strong laws that actually protect the places, plants and animals we love. Upload a photo or artwork of your favourite threatened species and a short message about why it matters to you. These will be delivered to key decision-makers as the reforms are debated.

"We must seize this chance," says EJA's co-CEO, Nicola Rivers, "to create good laws that ensure healthy forests, clean air and climate stability. No more tepid fixes—we need enforceable protections now."

Support the call for strong national standards, an end to deforestation and climate damage, and an independent watchdog to enforce the laws! Go to **envirojustice.org.au/wildlifewall** to get involved.

Environmental Justice Australia

NEST GUARDIANS

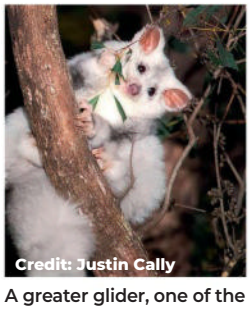

Credit: Bev McLachlan

Gureng Gureng country

In October and November every year, just south of Queensland's Agnes Waters, the remote sands of Wreck Rock come alive as loggerhead turtles return to nest. Volunteers spend all night patrolling the 22km beach, tagging adult turtles, monitoring their nesting and the hatching of newborn turtles, and trying to keep the ever-increasing number of foxes and goannas from destroying the nests during the eight-week incubation period. A special feature of this beach is that four species of turtle have been recorded nesting here, quite a rarity. Loggerheads, greens and flatbacks frequent this area and other locations along the Queensland coast and Barrier Reef Islands. But Wreck Rock is the only significant nesting site in Australia where the huge, rare leatherback turtle has been recorded in any significant numbers. Certified volunteers can join the conservation efforts, while donations help fund essential equipment and research. To get involved, go to **turtlecare.org.au**

BEV MCLACHLAN, Turtle Care Volunteers Queensland Inc

STRONGER PROTECTIONS FOR THREATENED SPECIES


Credit: Justin Cally

A greater glider, one of the many species to benefit

When the Federal Court recently ruled in favour of the Wilderness Society, it marked a significant step for nature. The Environment Minister Murray Watt conceded he had failed to make mandatory recovery plans for key threatened species—including the ghost bat, greater glider and red goshawk—and agreed to court orders to fix the breach by July 2026.

This matters. Without recovery plans, many species are left to quietly slip toward extinction—no strategy, no safety net. This outcome confirms governments can be held to account when they fail to uphold their legal duties to nature. Every species has a name, a story, and a home—and deserves more than to become a forgotten file on a minister's desk.

To find out more, go to: **wilderness.org.au/savewildlife**

RHIANNON CUNNINGHAM, The Wilderness Society

PLANNING LAWS UNDER PRESSURE

In October, new planning laws proposed by NSW Labor threatened to overturn environmental-protection safeguards that would have applied to all development statewide. NSW Premier Chris Minns marketed the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment Bill 2025* as a reform to address the housing crisis. Only after the Environmental Defenders Office—along with other NGOs, such as Lock the Gate Alliance, the Nature Conservation Council, and the Total Environment Centre—raised red flags, did the government move its own amendment to exclude mining and other fossil-fuel projects.

The power of environmental advocacy to prevent environmental protections being wound back remains uncertain. The proposed changes brought to bear important media pressure, but the Environmental Defenders Office has stated that, although the risk posed by the legislation is now reduced, environmental considerations have still been weakened, and the risk of potential corruption remains.

To read the EDO's assessment of the changes, go to: **tinyurl.com/edo-2025-nsw-planning-update** You can also read parliamentary proceedings about this in Hansard: **tinyurl.com/Environmental-Planning**

CATHERINE REYNOLDS

Credit: Catherine Reynolds

GOT ANY GREEN NEWS?

Engaging in an environmental campaign that *Wild* readers should know about? Send a paragraph explaining what's happening and why it's important to **editor@wild.com.au**

I'm gliding into a greater future, thanks to the Wilderness Society.

Hollow there :) I'm one of Australia's endangered greater gliders. Recently, the Wilderness Society took the Environment Minister to court, and now we have a draft recovery plan to help save us from extinction.

But we're not the only species they're fighting for. Find out how this win helps other threatened native animals at:

wilderness.org.au/courtcase

Image: Justin Cally | *Petauroides volans*, Kulin nation

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PARKS: WHERE FREEDOM LIVED

Victoria's Labor government recently fronted a trade-union delegate conference not to discuss labour rights, but instead to back the whims of hunting groups and arms lobbyists who want to hunt in national parks.

Words & Photography *SARAH REES*

When you were a child, did you ever imagine a national park could be a place of conflict, a battleground over land, law, and guns? Chances are you tumbled out of the car, finally free from the seatbelt and the smell of a hot car and sandwiches gone soft, and stood for a moment in awe. The air felt cleaner, the light brighter, and that first deep breath was freedom itself. You forgot the long drive and bolted toward the trailhead, the rope swing, the promise of adventure.

National parks were where freedom lived, not where it was threatened. The idea these sanctuaries could become arenas of conflict, or worse, places shadowed by firearms, never crossed our young minds. Yet in Victoria in 2025, under an Allan Labor Government and a national gun lobby determined to redraw the boundaries of safety and sanctuary, the very freedoms Australians have long believed were ours are now in jeopardy.

THE NEW BATTLEFIELD

The threat became tangible just months ago when Victoria's Minister for Environment and Outdoor Recreation addressed Electrical Trade Union delegates in Melbourne. Between speeches on labour rights, delegates browsed displays of precision guns, .308 hunting rigs, and sniper-style rifles. Beneath the bright red "W" of Winchester, men posed with high-powered weapons; women were almost entirely absent.

> "THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE ITS CHOICE. IT IS NOT BACKING PARKS; IT IS BACKING BARRELS."

In this unlikely setting, Minister Steve Dimopoulos announced his government's support for expanding recreational shooting access, including in national parks. His department even helped fund the event; the Victorian Fisheries Authority exhibited beside handgun giant Beretta. It left many wondering why taxpayers were underwriting what looked more like a gun fair than a union conference, especially when the Allan government was making massive cuts to Fisheries Officers, removing 73 of them and replacing them with 36 'Engagement' Officers, focussed predominantly on community education, not enforcement.

The symbolism was stark. One weapon on display, the Steyr HS .50 M1, is built to pierce armour. Are families now meant to pack hi-vis and kevlar before heading into the bush? Guns have re-entered public life not as tools but as political totems, and with ministerial blessing. The government has made its choice. It is not backing parks; it is backing barrels.

THE MYTH OF PEST CONTROL

The gun lobby insists this is all about pest management. Experts disagree. Jack Gough of the Invasive Species Council says the shooting lobby has blocked effective deer control for decades. Wiradjuri academic Richard Swain adds that many recreational hunters ignore multiple deer just to shoot one for a trophy photo. This is not pest control; it is sport masquerading as management. (*Ed's note: And the hunters simply have no desire to eradicate every last feral deer; if they did so, they'd have no 'sport' to pursue.*)

The data tells the truth. A 2022 Frontier Economics report found that deer numbers and distribution have exploded, with more than a million animals across Victoria. Hunters claim greater park access will solve the problem, but departmental reporting says otherwise. The Arthur Rylah Institute's 2023 statewide deer survey revealed far higher numbers in state forests and logged landscapes than in national parks. The Victorian Deer Control Community Network confirms the same: Deer densities are lowest where land protections are strongest.

So why weaken the very system that works? Why hand over the quietest corners of our parks to shooters when science says it's not where the problem is?

OLD GHOSTS IN NEW CLOTHES

This new mentality echoes the old Acclimatisation Society, those colonial gentlemen who once imported deer, foxes, and rabbits to remake Australia in Europe's image. Labor's actions betray that same colonial impulse, to reassert dominion over land, life, and the natural order.

Even now, reports circulate of hunters illegally releasing invasive species to expand their shooting grounds. The result is ecological chaos. The reduction in native biodiversity caused by sambar deer has been formally listed as a Potentially Threatening Process under Victoria's *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* since 2007, yet not a single Action Statement has been written or implemented. In that time, millions of public dollars have been funnelled into shooting programs that have sustained, rather than reduced, deer numbers. Reclassifying deer from a prized-game species to a declared pest is the vital step the government continues to avoid.

Where should Victoria's government place its efforts? On hunters' rights? Or saving this by creating the Great Forest NP?

THE NUMBERS GAME

For all the talk of economic benefits, the numbers tell a different story. A State Forests Visitation report produced in 2024 for the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action found that more than 16 million people visited Victoria's forests last year, contributing $2.6 billion to the economy. Most came for low-impact recreation such as walking, camping, trail running, and bird-watching; only a tiny fraction came for recreational hunting.

Yet this minority wields disproportionate political influence. Under the Allan Government, shooters' interests outweigh those of millions of families, bushwalkers, and conservation volunteers whose activities align with the *National Parks Act*'s founding purpose of protection and enjoyment.

When Minister Dimopoulos announced a handful of new reserves in western Victoria, it sounded like progress … until the fine print revealed plans to amend the *National Parks Act* to permit hunting, setting a precedent that threatens every park. Among those at risk are Errinundra and Snowy River NPs, whose wild heart may now echo not with lyrebirds but with gunfire.

THE SILENCE OF THE FORESTS

Meanwhile, Labor's silence on the Great Forest NP is deafening. Once a flagship commitment, the 355,000ha reserve was to be a legacy, a bold step beyond the logging era, a gift to future generations. It was shaped by years of collaboration between conservationists, industry, scientists, and community. It was a compromise that worked. But compromise has no currency in an age where politics serves the loudest lobbies, not those with the longest vision or public promise.

Today, with logs once again entering Victorian mills, trucked in from Tasmania or cut from newly bulldozed, controversial firebreaks inside national parks, the culture of park reverence is eroding. The Parks Victoria board now includes a former logging executive, and its new CEO is a career forester. When the agency charged with protection is led by those who view forests as resources, logging inside national parks is no longer unthinkable, it is imminent.

FREEDOM AND ITS OPPOSITE

There is now an added danger, one measured not in lost biodiversity but in human lives. In September 2024, a man was shot dead during a hunting trip in Gippsland. In 2020, a couple were killed after a confrontation when a hunter encroached on their campsite. In April 2021, another man died in Alpine NP after being shot while hunting. In July 2010, a hunter was killed near Tallangatta. And in April 2008, a man hiking in the Yarra Ranges NP was, according to his wife, shot by deer hunters. Each tragedy leaves a ripple of grief through families and communities, but also a chilling question: How can we claim our national parks are safe when guns and hikers share the same trails?

This is the quiet unravelling of freedom. National parks are not commodities; they are covenants, social contracts between generations. And in truth, this is about more than conservation. It is about the kind of country we wish to be. Do we want to live in a society that sees the wild as something to dominate, or as something to belong to? The Great Forest NP would declare, once and for all, that belonging wins.

More than anything, it would affirm that national parks are vital spaces in a secular age, where freedom is found not in the act of taking, but in care and restoration.

WHERE FREEDOM LIVES STILL

Perhaps it is time to remember that child, the one who stepped from the car, breathed in the mountain air, and felt something shift inside. That child understood something simple and profound: Freedom is not a weapon to wield, but a wonder to protect.

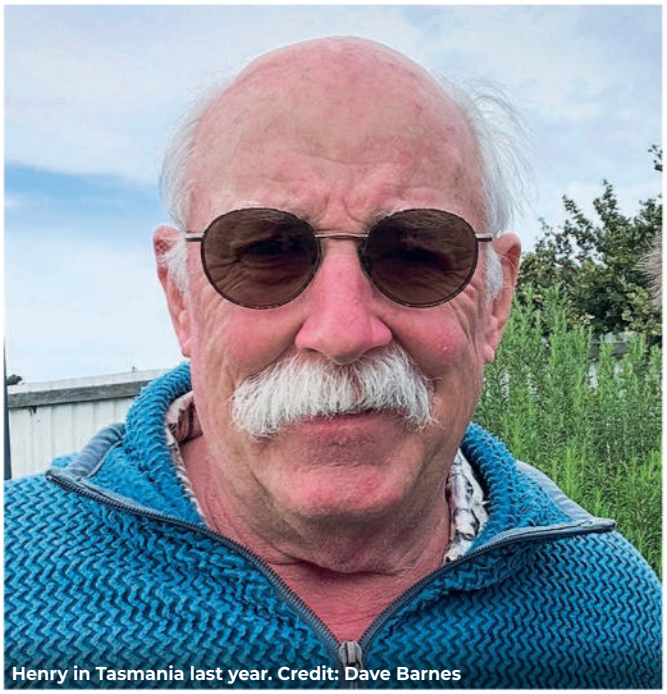
National parks are not battlefields. They are places where we remember what it means to be human; small, grateful, and free. If we allow them to be diminished, we surrender that freedom forever. So let us stand once more for the forests, for the parks, and for that child within us who still believes that true freedom is found in the life force of nature, not the echo of gunfire. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Sarah Rees is the Business Development Manager, and a founding member, of the Working Group for the GFNP.

A LIVING LEGACY: HENRY BARBER TOURS AUSTRALIA

Henry Barber revolutionised Australian climbing back in the '70s. Last year he returned, and continued to spread his message of respect and the power of community.

Words *DAVE BARNES*



Henry in Tasmania last year. Credit: Dave Barnes

We first met at the home of John Middendorf. John—a climbing legend and gear developer who among other things, invented the portaledge, and who had written for *Wild* mag as recently as Issue #192, Winter 2024—passed unexpectedly last year, and when Henry Barber visited from the US, he'd made sure to catch up with the Middendorf family in Tasmania. Henry, like John was, is a climbing legend; in Australia, he is most renowned for a whirlwind visit back in the '70s during which he revolutionised climbing in the country. Henry and John were close friends, and his death had impacted Henry as deeply as it did many of us. This is the Henry I want to share with you—not just the *Hot Henry* known for his daring climbs, but the thoughtful, reflective Henry who has left a lasting impression on climbing communities worldwide.

"To climb really well, you need a community." This was a key lesson Henry shared with me. For Henry, Australia is more than just a place where he climbs—it's part of his community. On his recent visit, he spent as much time reconnecting with old friends and making new ones as he did sharing his remarkable story, a story rich with grit, growth, and generosity.

FROM NORTHEASTERN AMERICA TO THE WORLD

Henry hails from the Northeast of the United States. A child of the Baby Boomer generation, he grew up loving baseball and, like many of us, often feeling like a bit of a dag. At school, Henry was bullied, and didn't quite fit the mould of the typical neighbourhood kid. He was a deep thinker, quiet, and a little different.

One day, on a walk with his father at a nearby mountain, Henry spotted climbers descending a peak. Something about what he saw called to him. He knew immediately: "That's for me." His parents soon enrolled him in a mountaineering school, the very same where John Middendorf learned his craft. There, Henry and John forged a lifelong friendship, a bond that brought him to John's home on his recent visit.

A CLIMBING LEGEND

Henry is known around the world for his climbing feats, especially throughout the 1970s. During that decade, he climbed voraciously—spending more than 300 days a year on rocks across every continent, establishing first ascents and pushing climbing to new heights.

In the United States, he achieved the second ascent of *Foops* (24), at the time the hardest route in the country. In 1973, he made waves in Yosemite, shaking its foundations with solo climbs of the *Stech Salathe* (trad; 15 pitches; 19) on Sentinel Rock in an astonishing two and a half hours, and freeing aid lines like *Butterballs* (23). Henry was brash and confident but also thoughtful—a young man quickly growing up in a demanding world. His contemporaries often reacted with a mix of awe and jealousy, resulting in a 'tall-poppy syndrome'. This may explain why Henry valued visiting other countries.

His climbing résumé extends to bold routes in the UK (roped and solo), trad climbing in Dresden, Germany, misadventures in Africa, and breaking conventions in Russia by climbing independently, defying established rules. All these experiences culminated in Henry's memorable visit to Australia in 1975.

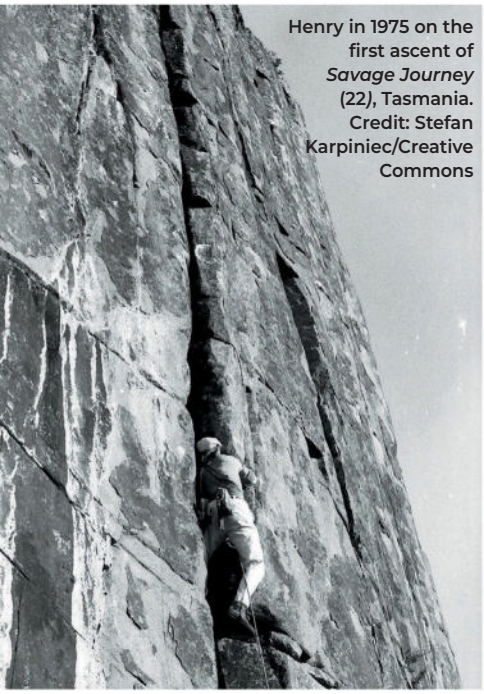
THE 'HOT HENRY' TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

Henry's impact on Australian climbing culture cannot be overstated. On his 'Hot Henry' tour (44 days in total, climbing in 27 locations, travelling nearly 10,000km nationwide), he raised climbing grades from 22 to 24, repeating Oz's hardest routes and establishing classic climbs still revered today. He climbed with new partners eager to watch the master, though most struggled to keep pace with him.

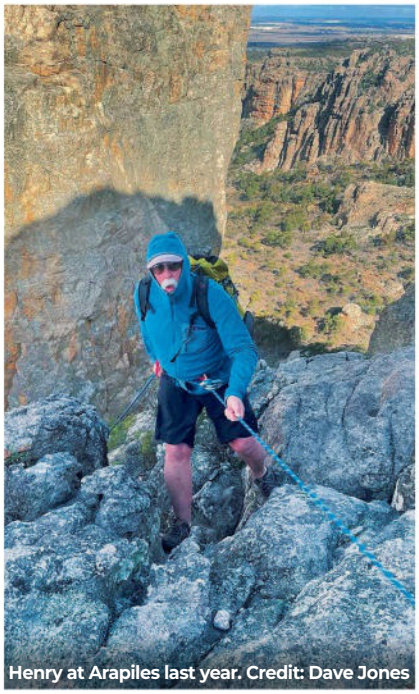
Climbing standards in Australia soared. Beyond this, Henry introduced some practical innovations: White pants became a fashion statement; chalk was adopted widely to improve grip. His influence is felt in the very fabric of Australian climbing, inspiring generations to push boundaries and dream at large.

CLEAN CLIMBING AND A MINIMALIST PHILOSOPHY

Henry is renowned as a 'clean climber'. He climbs using gear but always with minimal impact, using the least amount of equipment possible to protect the rock and the climb's natural state. As Henry puts it, "It's not what you did, but how you did it."



Henry in 1975 on the first ascent of *Savage Journey* (22), Tasmania. Credit: Stefan Karpiniec/Creative Commons



Henry at Arapiles last year. Credit: Dave Jones

> **"HENRY BARBER'S STORY IS ONE OF COURAGE—**NOT JUST THE COURAGE TO CLIMB DANGEROUS ROUTES BUT THE COURAGE **TO GROW, TO LISTEN, AND TO CONTRIBUTE TO COMMUNITY."**

On his recent trip to Australia, he travelled light, carrying only his swami belt, some gear, chalk bag, and boots. "The simplicity of kit is important," he explains. "Only take what you need. Being a minimalist makes you feel free. It gives me what I need, and that freedom is what I want."

This minimalist approach isn't just about gear; it connects to his deeper love of people and community. In his early years, Henry admits, his brash ego sometimes got in the way of genuine connection. Over time, through business and experience, he learned the value of listening, of truly engaging with others.

A COMMUNITY OF HUMILITY AND EXPERIENCE

His recent visit to Tasmania highlighted for Henry the strength found in community. "There is a huge amount of humility here," he says, reflecting on friends like Neil Smith (who rescued Paul Pritchard), Gerry Narkowicz (a Pentecostal pastor); Humzoo (an archaeologist); and Ben Maddison (a history teacher). "Intelligence plus energy, a very diverse group of people. Honourable and humble men. The more I learnt about these men, the more it made sense."

Henry believes that climbing is as much about people as it is about routes and grades. "To climb well, you need a community," he says—a reminder that the spirit of climbing extends beyond individual achievement. Henry made sure to connect with climbers, and roped up at Bruny Island—Tasmania, Arapiles—Victoria, and Frog Buttress—Queensland.

PROTECTING ACCESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

After fifty years of travelling and climbing worldwide, Henry has witnessed changes—some encouraging, some troubling. He was particularly interested in recent discussions around access to Mt Arapiles and the Grampians. In Tasmania, he was concerned about the closure of Hillwood by the landholder due to poor visitor behaviour.

"Hillwood has been closed by the landholder because people leave their mess behind," Henry laments. "What the hell? Climbers trying to leave a legacy but instead leaving someone's property in a mess."

Henry urges us all to think about the legacy we leave through our climbing and outdoor adventures. "When you go to a crag, you consume the crag. I want to leave it as it was. I have no interest in leaving a bunch of draws everywhere. One cliff developed like a gym is okay, but all cliffs like that would be terrible."

He views this issue through a business lens as well. "If you don't protect the supplier, you won't secure your goods for future sale. In climbing, if we don't protect and respect the landholder, we will lose access to the crag."

A MESSAGE FOR TODAY'S CLIMBERS

Henry shares these thoughts not just in talks, but on the rock with those who climb alongside him. He doesn't want the climbing community to be blighted by consumerism or short-term gain. Instead, he encourages choices that conserve the environment and that preserve fresh experiences for future generations.

Hot Henry shines a light on the best in us—and on the work we still need to do. He doesn't need to force his point; wisdom flows naturally through his reflections and our shared experience of climbing. Australia was better for Henry's contributions in '75, and we are wiser today from the lifetime of passion he brings. His legacy keeps the fire in the belly burning bright for all of us.

CLOSING REFLECTION

Henry Barber's story is one of courage—not just the courage to climb dangerous routes but the courage to grow, to listen, and to contribute to community. His journey from a bullied schoolboy to an international climbing legend reminds us that our greatest achievements are not measured in grades or first ascents alone, but in the connections we build and the respect we show—to each other and the natural world.

As we think about our own challenges, let Henry's story inspire us to stand on our own 'Thank God ledges', to pause, breathe, and find the courage to move forward—not alone but as part of a wider community that supports and sustains us. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Dave is a Tasmanian who loves adventure, has a thing for instant coffee, and finds a fireplace solves all problems.

10 TIPS

FOR STARTING A PAINTING PRACTICE ON YOUR ADVENTURES

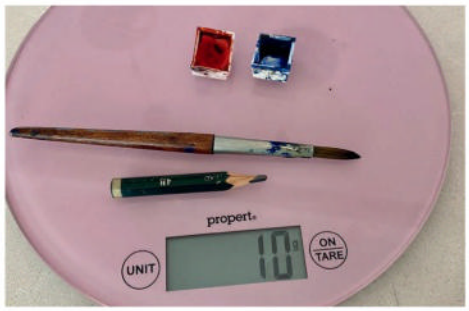
By **TANYA LAKE**

Painting in nature, or 'plein air', has had a profound impact on the way I spend time in nature or go on adventures. It has made me observe my surrounds in a different way, and has helped me develop a new mindfulness. Previously, I rarely stopped to truly experience a vista over time, to note the way that light changes, shadows lengthen, and how creatures and people come and go. Rocks become burnt umber. Trees create opposing shadows of darkened cobalt. There are pattern changes in colour. To stop and sketch offers a different approach to moving through nature. It is now part of my practice, and, as a trekker or cyclist, is a wonderful way to mark a halfway point, to have a view to arrive at, to rest, and to truly take it all in.

Even if you think you can't draw, it does not matter. Like handwriting, everyone has their own distinctive mark. You'll be surprised by what you might achieve.

(*Please note I am not affiliated with any brands; I simply mention here what has worked well for me.*)

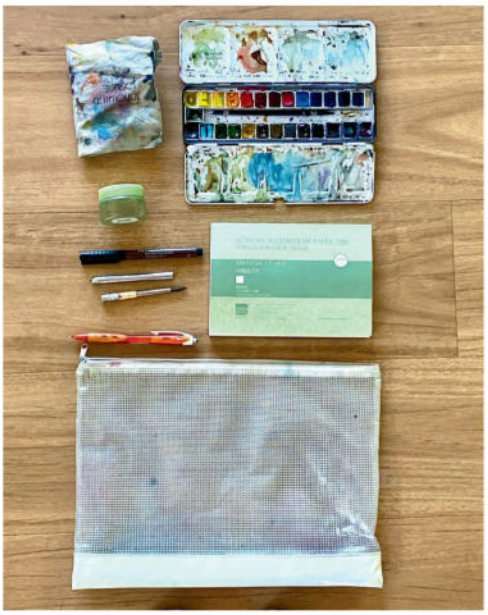
#1 Watercolour is the best option for adventurers. As a medium, watercolour painting is a perfect match for hiking. The materials are super lightweight—you can start with as little as 10g worth of gear; they're fuss-free—you don't even have to clean your brush; and they're simple, compact and toxin free.



An HB pencil, a watercolour brush, and two pans of colour come to just 10g. (Oops, I forgot the paper!)

#2 Proper watercolour paper is key. Look for 100% cotton and avoid anything with cellulose in it. One hundred per cent cotton buys you time and quality, such as being able to blot off a mistake with a paper towel and having colours blend well. An economical way is to buy a large sheet of Arches watercolour paper from an art-supplies shop. Go for 180g or 300g thick, preferably cold pressed, and cut it into smaller pieces. Keep it stored in a zip-lock bag with a moisture-absorbing pouch.

Watercolour paper can degrade over time, so not buying a lot is a good incentive to use it as you go. A budget option is to look for the reasonably priced Chinese brand Bao Hong online.



My current kit (Clockwise from top left): A cafe napkin, Windsor and Newton watercolour paint kit, 100% cotton paper pad, lightweight zipper pouch, pacer pencil, Rosemary & Co travel brush, Faber-Castell sepia pen, and a small water container

#3 Try sketching for two minutes. Simply use watercolour paper, a charcoal pencil, a paint brush and water. The water will dissolve the charcoal into a wash, so don't get too hung up on the original drawing; the aim is to use it to create areas of dark and light. You can add in details with a normal pencil. Make sure to leave untouched areas of white.

#4 You don't need loads of colour to add colour. A mini set of high-quality watercolour paints is ideal, such as Windsor and Newton, (or the student version, which is Cotman). Other reputable brands include Sennelier, Schmincke, Daniel Smith, and Art Philosophy. Use the lid to mix the paints and to keep the paint gunk for greys, tones and shades.

A good budget option is to buy the tiny pan colours individually; they are about as big as a thumbnail (I get one any time I travel, such as a fantastic indigo from Sennelier that I bought in France). You only need a small amount, and it's incredible how long they will last. Alternatively, you could buy the tubes of paint, and squeeze them into a small palette. They will dry out, which is fine because you will reactivate them with water. You can start with as little as two to three colours—for example, yellow ochre, burnt sienna and ultramarine blue—and carry them in a matchbox or tiny tin, using the lid to mix them. An interesting black can be created out of blue, red and brown.

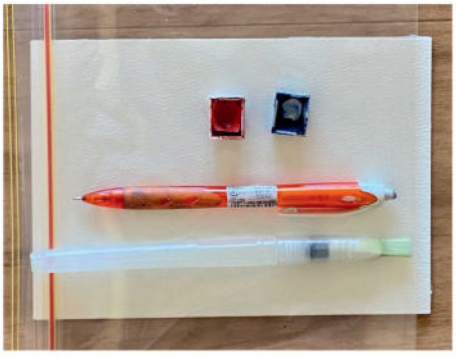
A place and date gives context

Try painting the same scene over different days. It's a good learning experiment

#5 Experiment with colours. Start by having your colours pre-mixed and ready. Then try painting the sky in clear water then dropping in a line of blue across the top, then some tan across the horizon line. Watch as the colours mix themselves. This is the fantastic (and occasionally frustrating) beauty of watercolour! Try it again with different shades of green or brown in the foliage. Some colours granulate while others remain smooth. Some are transparent and others opaque. You will soon get to know them like old friends. Try less watery brushstrokes and more creamy textures. You'll be amazed by what transpires.

A handy tip is to jot down the colour names in ink when you set up your kit

#6 Think about portability. When you're hiking/cycling/paddling, compact packability is important. A Size 6 round Rosemary & Co watercolour travel brush is ideal, but it's more expensive because it packs in half. Another option is simply a mini-sized watercolour brush (just make sure the brush isn't squashed). A small makeup or specimen container makes for a perfect mini water container. You can also use a collapsible camping bowl or cup. Even cheaper still is a plastic brush where you can fill the body with water.



An ultralight kit with water inside the brush

#7 Adding in other mediums can be helpful. Faber-Castell's Artist Fineliner pen or Uniball's Rollerball pen can be handy for adding in a few fine details at the end. You can even add a dash of white in gouache to really bring out the highlights, even if purists say to avoid white. Just be sure not to mix the gouache with the watercolours; always add it at the end and use a different brush.

#8 Be aware that most watercolours dry lighter. When wet, watercolours will be a little darker than once they've finally dried. If so, you can do a 'second pass' on top, and a third if time permits. However, the phrase "Don't fiddle!" is handy to keep in mind. Often the first stroke is the best, and mistakes can be incorporated as 'happy accidents'.

#9 Dry your gear. Thankfully, this is easy, even if you're out bush overnight. Just dry off the brush with a towel when you're done, and let your work dry before you store it back in your kit (a moisture sachet and a zip-lock bag can help it remain dry).

#10 It sounds obvious, but practise and enjoy! While not everything will be a masterpiece, all your works can be part of the learning experience. Don't forget to name and date each sketch: It will become a wonderful way of recalling your travels and adventures. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Tanya Lake lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches. While she adores painting and hiking in nature as much as possible, the truth is she spends most of her time fossicking in the pantry for chocolate. You can view more of her work at **tanyalakeart.com**

GETTING INTO PACKRAFTING

with Hamish Lockett

Packrafting in Frenchmans Cap NP. Credit: Hamish Lockett

Wild places can be seen in a number of ways. But, says Wild Earth Ambassador Hamish Lockett, slowly drifting down pine-lined rivers or charging through raging ravines is hard to beat, especially when it's in a raft that fits in your backpack. Here are Hamish's tips to help you start off.

I've always craved the feeling of remote places. For me, diving into the world of packrafting was a way for me to visit places in a new light. The beauty of these little rafts is how versatile they are. You can be rafting a Grade 4 river, or you can just meander into your favourite lake and go for a paddle at sunset after dinner.

Packrafts are especially great in Tasmania (where I live). There are so many places that are difficult to access, but with a raft that only weighs a few kilograms, you can carry it just about anywhere. I've done trips into Frenchmans Cap via my raft, and also blown it up in alpine lakes in remote Tasmania paddling through the turning fagus trees. (*Ed: Check out Grant Dixon's photo essay starting p60 for another example of epic Tassie packrafting.*)

Still, at the beginning of my packrafting journey, it was a scary thought to be carrying an enormous pack up steep hills, crashing through rapids and braving the icy cold waters. But what I know now is that it's something worth experiencing. Here are some tips if you, too, want to find yourself packrafting on the rivers.

ASSEMBLE YOUR SETUP

Once you realise you're keen to get into packrafting, assembling good gear is crucial, especially if you want to do more remote trips. If halfway through a week-long remote trip you get a big puncture or a bunch of wet gear, it can quickly spell disaster—have the right kit. I remember in the early days, I lost a shoe within an hour of a three-day trip. Getting snagged in rivers can quickly strip you of gear; my wetsuit booties were an easy victim, and I had a cold foot in a sock because of it.

Raft-kit essentials:

- Raft (many options depending on trip) and paddle
- Inflation method (bag or pump)
- Dry suit or wetsuit
- Throw bag
- PFD & whistle
- River knife
- Water shoes
- Helmet

Repair-kit essentials:

- Raft repair tape
- Bonding glues
- UV bonding glues for fast action
- Heavy-duty stitching repair kits
- Patches

> "WITH A RAFT THAT ONLY WEIGHS A FEW KILOGRAMS, **YOU CAN CARRY IT JUST ABOUT ANYWHERE.**"

BUILD YOUR SKILLS

Being on the river is amazing when you're in control, but it's the opposite when you're out of control. When you fall out of your boat in a rapid, they call it a 'swim'; it's great at the beach, but not in a washing machine. Rivers, like backcountry snow or big waves, are a whole new world—an environment that works in a unique way and that has to be understood. There are plenty of ways to eliminate or at least prepare for this, and the best way is to learn from others. Join a uni club or Facebook group, or do a packrafting-related course. Be keen to learn from them, and then hone your skills. This will teach you how to paddle, identify hazards, use safety signals, know rapid grades, and so much more.

WEATHER AND WATER

Rivers, as with many outdoor sports' playgrounds, work best when the conditions are right. Too much water/flow and you're in a raging torrent. Too little and you're on a hike. Finding the sweet spot is key, and it varies a lot depending on the river. Like a surf spot—some need high tide, some low, etc—rivers are similar. This can be monitored by checking river-level and flow charts, monitoring rainfall, checking dam releases, and the list goes on. It's especially important to check this information for multi-day trips, as weather can change dramatically and therefore change your trip. If in remote areas, having offline communication is handy to check in and assess changing conditions.

+++++

The possibilities of packrafting are endless, and it lets you get your fix of nature in so many ways. On some rivers, you can feel like you're in a kayak charging rapids beneath towering cliffs, and on others you can feel like you're in a water park, floating down on a blow-up lilo about to fall asleep under the blazing sun. It's a special experience, packrafting, and an amazing way to visit the wilds. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Hamish is a Wild Earth Ambassador who fell in love with photography in his home state of Tasmania. When not adventuring, he guides groups along the Overland Track.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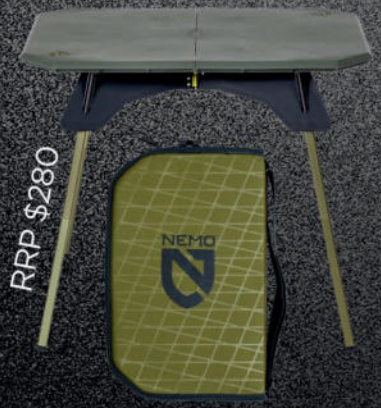

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SCAN HERE

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

After decades of many, many tramps in New Zealand's South Island, Ryan Hansen figured it was time to check out the North. And what he found in the Ruahine Forest Park convinced him that North Island walking deserves more accolades.

Words & Photography **Ryan Hansen**

So much—almost too much—green! Martine enjoying the forest in the final day's misty weather


Ruahine FP

I've lost count of how many summer bushwalking holidays I've spent in New Zealand. Definitely more than eight. Ten? A dozen, maybe? (I'm 28, by the way, so whatever the exact number, it's a mighty high ratio). I don't say this to boast—I'm fortunate to have had these opportunities, especially as a child and teenager—but to show how entrenched the Land of the Long White Cloud is in my family's history and tradition. I fondly recall my first multi-day bushwalk there as a five-year-old—the St James Walkway—shared with my toy tiger, Tigie, who popped his head out the top of my school-bag-come-backpack, just as excited as I was to see this new land. I'll forever remember pausing along the way, and being surprised by a friendly couple who brought out a scrumptious platter of fresh fruit from their nearby home.

Yep, New Zealand is ingrained in who I am and who we are as a family. And while I won't send you to sleep reading about all these formative adventures, there is one other trip that deserves special mention: In January 2020, I proposed to Martine while bushwalking in Kahurangi NP. Fortunately, she said, "Yes!". It would've made for an awkward subsequent month travelling there if she hadn't! (*Ed's note: You can read about this trip, and see proposal pics in 'The Long & Narrow Path to Engagement Peak' in* Wild *#179.*)

But for all these years exploring NZ's ruggedly mountainous regions on foot, predominantly with my parents Nikki and Steve, these wanderings have been on only one of its islands: the South.

In January, 2025, it was high time for something a little different: four weeks to see what NZ's North Island has to offer in the bushwalking department.

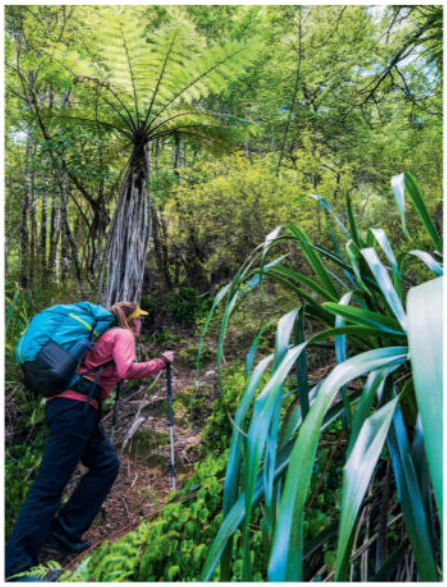
AFTER TEN EARLIER DAYS OF WALKING across two separate exploits in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka Ranges, my parents Nikki and Steve—who'd joined us for this family hiking spree—seized their well-earned opportunity to recuperate with some luxury accommodation and sensationally hoppy NZ craft brews. But not before we conned them into being a taxi service and depositing Martine and I at the end of Wakarara Road for a mish in the northern reaches of Ruahine Forest Park.

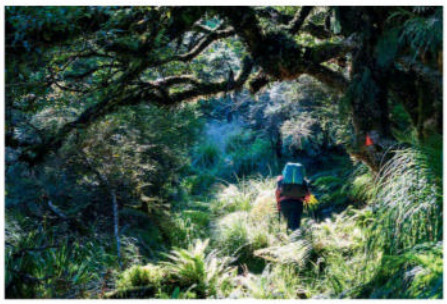
Setting off along the pebbly corridor of the Makaroro River—with four days of supplies and the only expressed goal being to climb a mountain to, you know, see some things—the excitement tingles began fizzing. If you have a quick geez of NZ Topo, you'll immediately understand why: The Ruahines are a rabbit warren of walking tracks and backcountry huts, the kind of place where there's, not one, but many lifetimes of adventurous possibilities. What would the next 96 hours throw our way?

"THERE WERE ALMOST TOO MANY VIBRANT SHADES OF GREEN FOR OUR EYES AND BRAINS TO COMPUTE."

I don't normally do this, but given there were still widespread track and road closures from 2023's destructive Cyclone Gabrielle and I wanted reassurance there was still a semblance of a track, I broke my own rules—I read a snippet of an online trip report. In a nutshell, I like to keep each trip as much of a surprise as possible. Admittedly, I do usually skim through a few photos to get a rough idea though. Anyway, I read Peter Laurenson's *Wilderlife* blog and he described the start of the Colenso Spur Track like this: "It's normal for the initial sections above rivers to be steep, but the base of Colenso Spur ... is a small cliff ... [T]wo hands were required often during the first hour of climbing."

Ok, people's perceptions of what constitutes a "cliff" and "requiring two hands" can vary substantially, but Peter's credentials as a New Zealand Alpine Club member and Editor of Federated Mountain Clubs' *Backcountry* Magazine probably should've





prompted us to give more credence to his words. Because, as it turned out, it was a literal cliff. After looking up the side stream but not finding anything super obvious there, then back-tracking to the initial spot and proclaiming "Surely that's not it!" for a second time, and after then having another crack at approaching from the side creek, we realised that the rock face we'd twice discounted was indeed the cliff. Oh well, at least our alternate approach was less involved! And immediately after gaining the spur, the mixture of old painted tin lids and newer orange plastic triangles indicated the well-defined way ahead.

For the next several hours, we Oohed! and Aahed! our way up the spur, admiring the picturesque rainforest setting. To Kiwis, I guess this is just an everyday patch of uninspiring, 'normal' bush, but to us foreigners it had an appeal to itself. There were almost too many vibrant shades of green for our eyes and brains to compute. The majestic native flora—a myriad of it, from towering trees to strappy grasses to delicate ferns—stole our collective focus. The trees in particular—laden with mosses, lichens and ferns—were dazzling in their form and character, and it was easy to envision them as Tolkien's humanoid Ents. If these trees could talk, I wondered what tales they'd tell.

"Are these rimu?" I asked Martine, marvelling at the grand trees. Neither of us are au fait with NZ botany, but we later wondered on Day Three's descent of Totara Spur if these larger trees on Colenso Spur could possibly also be the native totara. Knowing us, they're probably neither. (If you're more knowledgeable, please enlighten us!)

Not unlike the trails we'd encountered on our prior exploits in the Kaimanawas and Kawekas, the Colenso Spur Track was, to me, ideal. I often find myself dissociated from

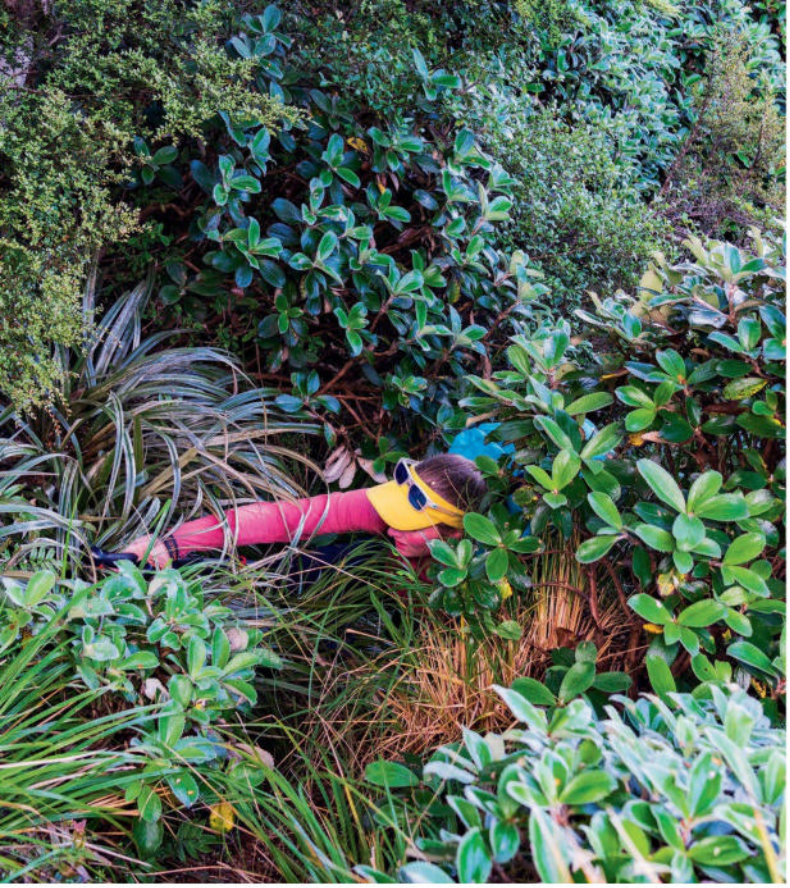
IMAGES - COCKWISE FROM LEFT

Day One's pebbly jaunt along the Makaroro River

Rainforest goodness on the way up Colenso Spur

Happy ferns

Ents? What stories do you have to tell?



my surrounds when walking on overly constructed trails, but feeling the mud, feeling the tree roots, feeling the leaves crunch beneath my feet here was, to use a cliché, grounding. While being obvious enough to follow, the trail wasn't an eyesore, and it blended into the environment. With the exception of the orange markers, it felt as close to natural as possible. I was grateful that instead of a metal staircase, or concrete or compacted-gravel steps (which might have been expected given this area sees an average rainfall of about five metres), there was mire, sticks and defiant plants to grapple with. Even so, each step was still a productive one, taking us higher and further into the hills.

As I paused to photograph Martine emerging from the final slippery, abrasive tunnel of shrubbery, I came to a devastating realisation: The path had laid claim to my brand-new merino buff (we had literally detoured to buy it for this walk). Damn. But as we soon topped out on Te Atua Mahuru (which I believe translates to 'God of spring' in Māori), all feelings of despair were erased. In a complete sensory overload, the tufted slopes and narrow ridgeline beckoning us towards Maroparea's striking tarns—sharply juxtaposed with cavernous valleys and spiny ranges—briefly ignited in a golden blaze. Does it get any better than this?

> "PERHAPS IN SOME SMALL BUT MEANINGFUL WAY, **THE RUAHINES WOULD BESTOW US WITH A TOKEN OF WISDOM** TO TAKE AWAY FROM OUR TIME HERE."

'RUAHINE', THE NAME OF BOTH a local Māori leader's granddaughter and of the forest park we were walking in, is said to mean 'wise woman' in the native tongue. Perhaps, we hoped, in some small but meaningful way, the Ruahines would bestow us with a token of wisdom to take away from our time here.

By Day Two's dawn, we'd already gained some knowledge to take with us, although it was not a lesson of the kind we'd wanted: Fatigue is cumulative. Yesterday's 1,000m climb—tacked on to substantial earlier walks with small rest windows—had depleted our energy reserves. Should we take an easier and shorter loop via Sparrowhawk Biv? Or tackle the lethargy head-on with a longer and more involved northern circuit? Call it resolve, call it stupidity—even put it down to sunshine-induced hormones—but we went with the latter.

What followed was a day of dramatic ridgetop walking, some of the best we've yet experienced. It was also a day of dualities. Easygoing footpads through expansive alpine grasslands vs mentally taxing non-tracks through swathes of speargrass. Densely vegetated gullies vs starkly bare scree slopes. Broad, tarn-studded hillsides vs narrow, serrated ridgelines. I lost count of the ups and downs, literal and metaphorical, as well as the number of photos captured; the scenery was, for lack of a better word, breathtaking. Nested in a depression along the range, an impressively deep, rich-blue tarn bordered by a cobbled beach was a notable highlight.

Speaking of pictures, Martine cracked it at one point: "You and your [expletive] camera. No more photos!" She angrily stormed off up the slippery scree, cursing all the more as she soon slid back down, boots topped up with gravel. I hopelessly tried to stifle a chuckle. I was, however, better behaved afterwards.

IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

There's a track there somewhere ... Martine emerging from the foliage before Te Atua Mahuru

Picture-perfect campsite at the tarns near Maroparea

Sensory overload

Martine descending towards the surprising lake-sized tarn on Day Two

Speargrass—it's no fun being spiked by these suckers

Day Two was full of dramatic ridgetop walking

PITCHED AMONG THE COUNTLESS TARNS of the Tupari tops, a typically atmospheric NZ sunset segued into a restful sleep. With another mostly sunny day's weather on the cards for Day Three, we braced ourselves for the physicality ahead: a 700m descent of Totara Spur, followed by a 600m ascent to Parks Peak Hut. Would the lure of a night in a hut be enough to energise our weary bodies?

It didn't need to: Either side of the Makaroro River were mesmerising forests, varied in appearance and personality. The soft, tender undergrowth was an emerald sea beneath the dense canopy of stoic giants, and together they provided a balm which penetrated deep into our bones. For Martine, this wasn't surprising; she has a well-established fondness for ferns. But even I found myself entranced by their soothing appeal, too.

Upper Makaroro Hut, quaint and orange, was tucked away on a bench above the river. It presented the perfect lunch spot, and

> **"THE RUAHINES REMINDED US** THAT AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH IS VIABLE ... **THERE CAN ALSO BE OLD-SCHOOL, NATURAL TRACKS, TOO."**

we refuelled with scroggin, crackers and tuna. Meanwhile, we were entertained by the hut's logbook, and the accounts in it of prized phio (blue duck) sightings and wild descents of the gorge began inspiring ideas of returning via Barlow Hut. But after some more deliberation (*Ed: Wisdom, perhaps?*), Parks Peak Hut won out.

I'm sure Barlow would've been equally amazing, but as the drizzle set in outside, a cosy evening spent by the fire in the alpine cottage that is Parks Peak Hut was pure bliss. And as we remarked on how wonderful this six-bunk 'standard' hut is—not only in terms of its structural design but also its feel, and all for the miserly price of $10 per person—and reflected on the character of the tracks we'd traversed, the Ruahines' message to us came into focus.

It's been written about previously in *Wild* (for example, Rebecca Burton's 'When Is A Trail No Longer Wild?' in Issue #196, and going back a little further, by James McCormack in both his Editor's Letter in #194 and in his two-part 'Luxury Lodges' exposé), but infrastructure in Australian national parks has in recent years taken a noted change in trajectory. Most, if not all, new walking tracks are now heavily constructed (some describe them as being 'over-engineered'), and while they're more resistant to nature's erosive forces and the impacts of human foot traffic, they're unnatural and expensive to make. So too the majority of campsites and walking accommodation.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Day Two's lunch spot, over-looking the way ahead to the Tupari tops

Is there ever a dull patch of NZ forest?

Hi there, 'lil fungi

Upper Makaroro Hut

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Martine wandering among the giants on Day Three

Drizzle on the final stretch to Parks Peak Hut

No caption required

The blissful alpine cottage of Parks Peak Hut

The effects are manifold: fewer new walking tracks, increased costs (potentially exclusively so) carried down to park users, and an experience that's more disconnected from the environment. There's a growing sense that the focus of our national parks is shifting towards money-making rather than recreation and conservation.

The Ruahines, however, reminded us that an alternative approach is viable. There can be constructed, manicured trails with fancy upmarket accommodation for the masses (NZ's Great Walks being a prime example). But there can also be old-school, natural tracks with minimal infrastructure that enable self-reliant walkers to do their thing, too. These don't have to be mutually exclusive options. We can have both.

OUR FINAL MORNING WAS A MISTY ONE, and it seemed fitting to experience in such conditions the final stretch of sublime forest, dripping with moisture. Descending the steep Sentry Box Track to our pick-up, reminiscing on the last three-and-a-bit days, we were left with no doubts: The North Island's walking deserves more accolades. Our time in the Ruahines had been perfect.

But the Ruahine Tales don't end there. Straddling the fence stile to complete our walk, having thankfully avoided an encounter with a hormone-ravaged bull, an energetic ping of the phone signified a message about our imminent pick-up.

Or not. The Nikki and Steve Taxi Service was delayed. Where Google Maps said there was a bridge, Cyclone Gabrielle begged to differ. It was time to settle in for another cuppa. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Educator, photographer and outdoor enthusiast Ryan Hansen relishes any opportunity to be in the bush, even if it means navigating cyclone-ravaged roads to get there.

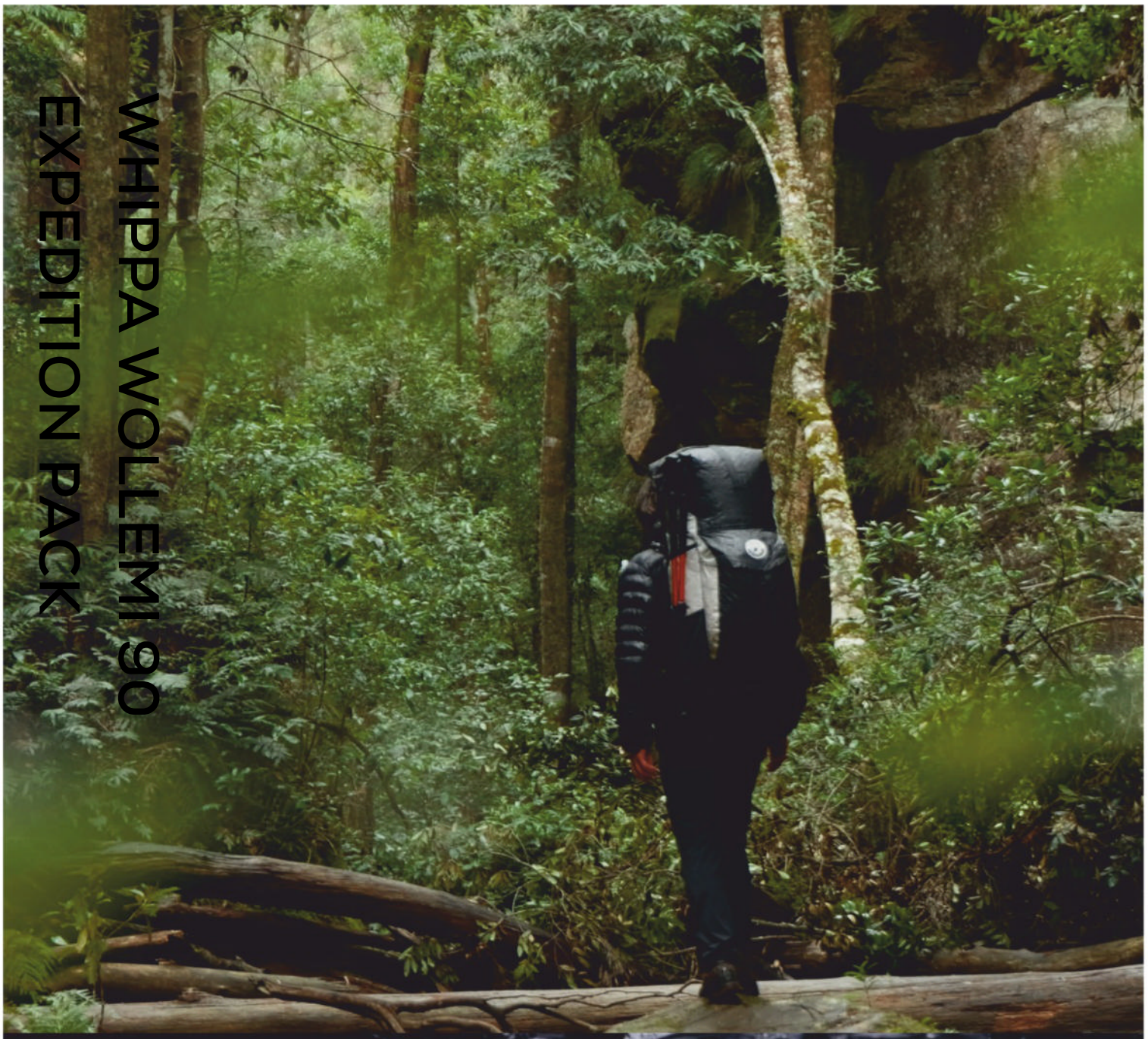


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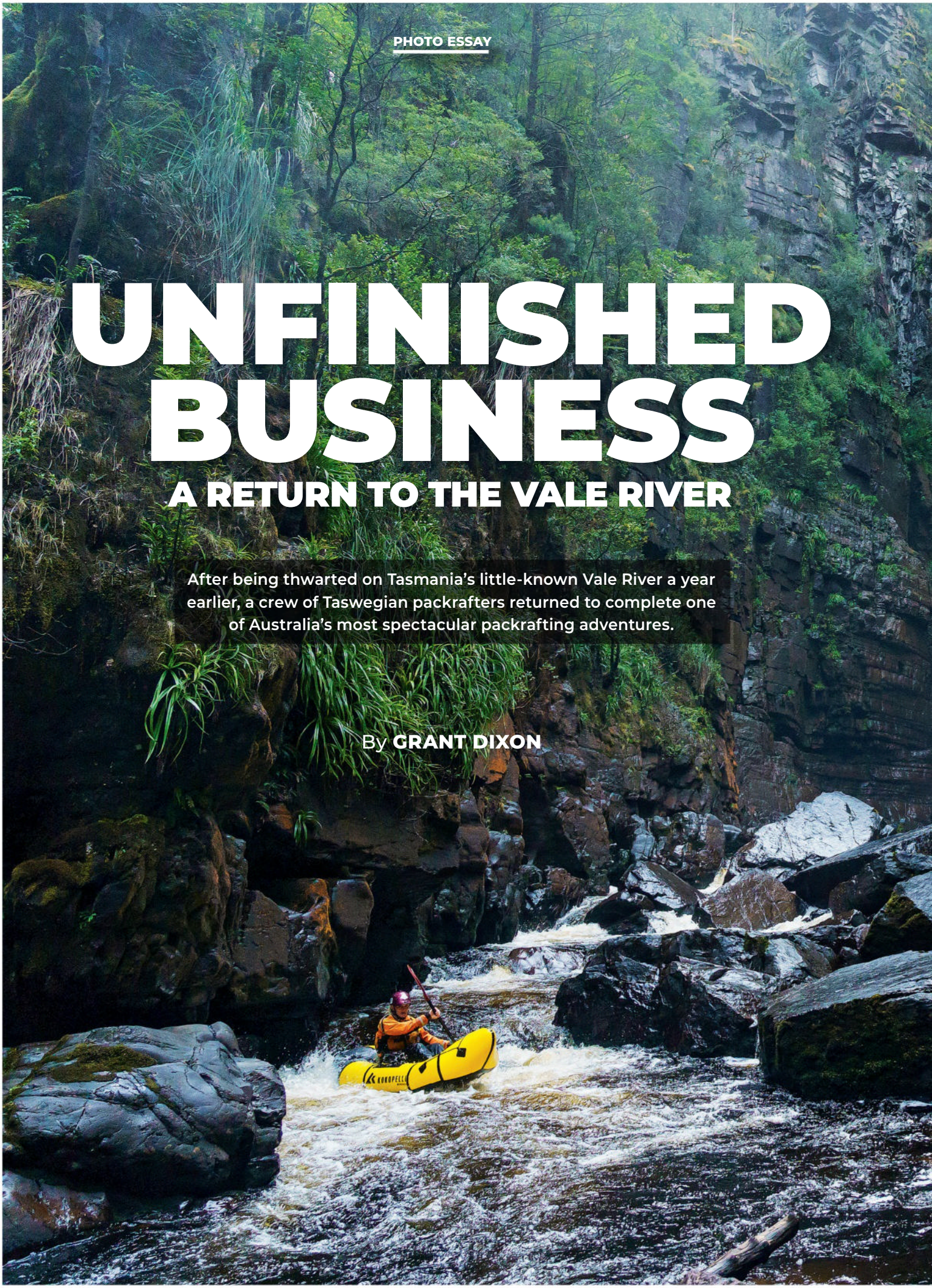
PHOTO ESSAY

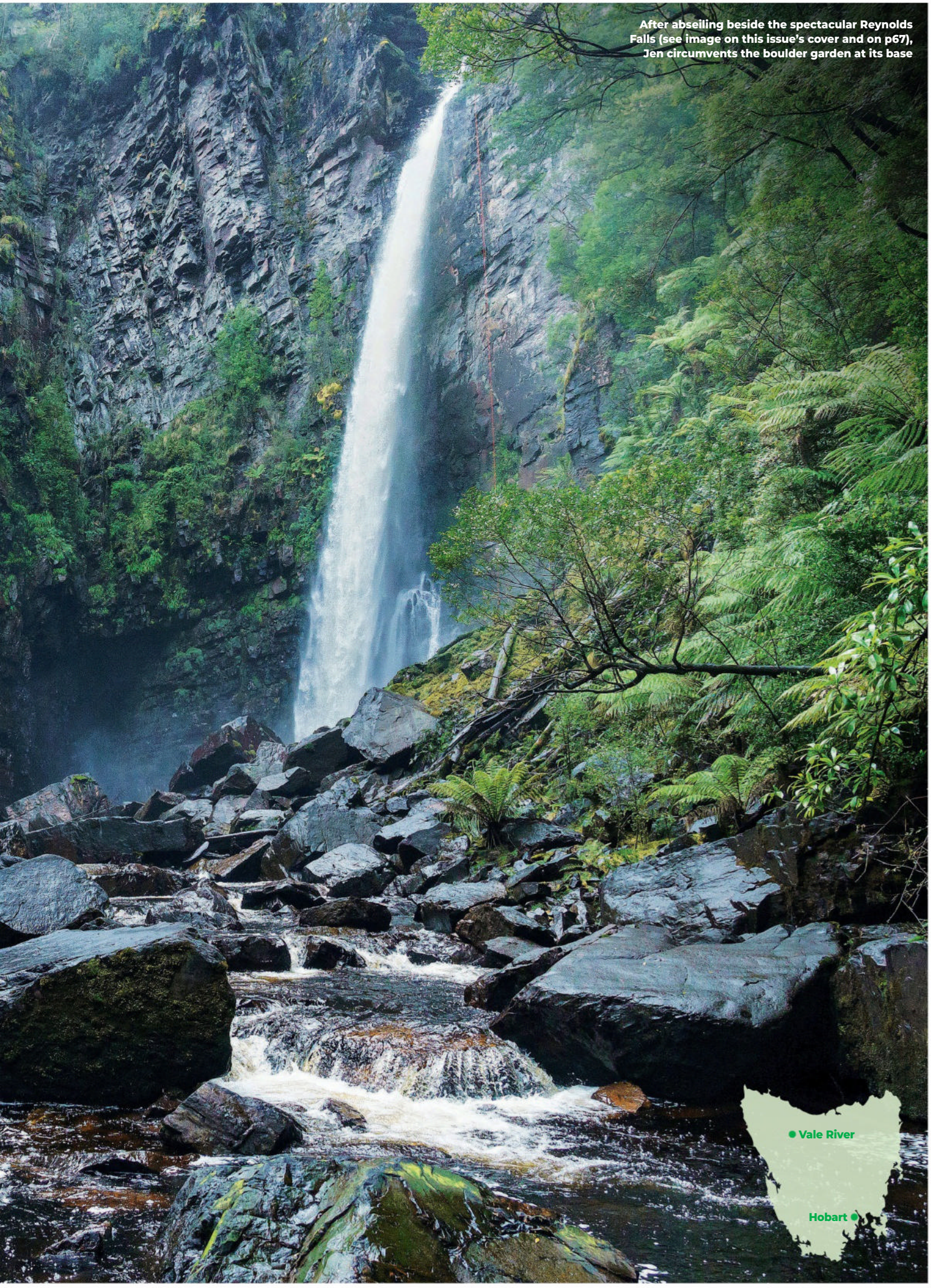
UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A RETURN TO THE VALE RIVER

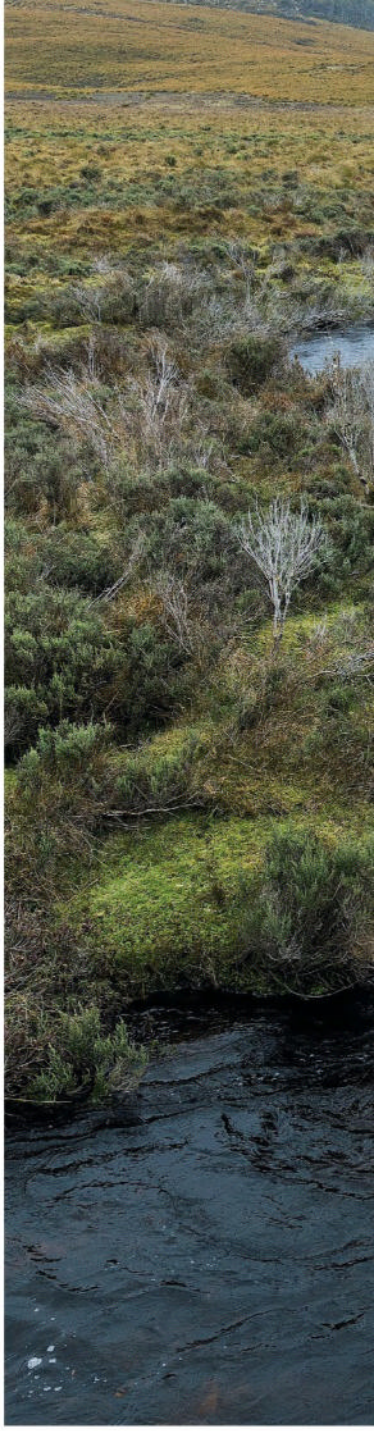
After being thwarted on Tasmania's little-known Vale River a year earlier, a crew of Taswegian packrafters returned to complete one of Australia's most spectacular packrafting adventures.

By **GRANT DIXON**





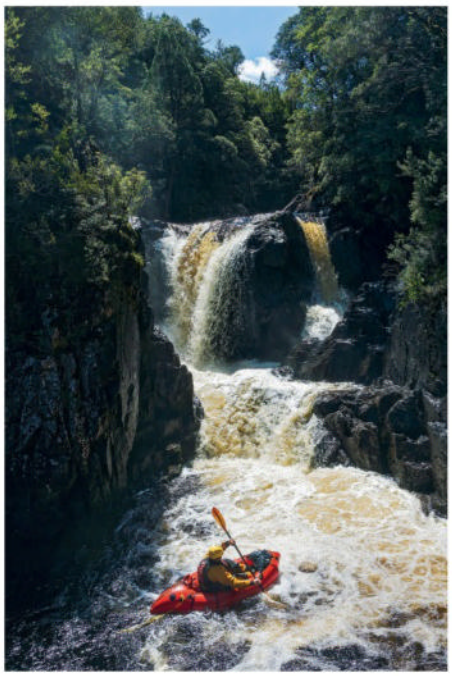
After abseiling beside the spectacular Reynolds Falls (see image on this issue's cover and on p67), Jen circumvents the boulder garden at its base



DURING SPRING 2023, INSPIRED by a long-standing idea of Mark Oates', I joined Mark, Jen Oates and Nick Hancock in an attempt to descend the steep valley of the Vale River in northwest Tasmania. With Mark and Nick due at work on Monday morning, we knew the four-day timing would be tight, but the combination of an appropriate weather forecast and our rare collective availability meant we decided to give it a go regardless. We started on a creek draining a grassy highland valley—the fresh snow on the ranges was a bit intimidating—but by Day Two, when we reached the gorge proper, the water levels had dropped to near-perfect. We carried both packrafting and canyoning gear, and we saw some stunning country, but in the end, we didn't have enough time to make it all the way. It meant we had to exit the gorge midway, resulting in some serious Type II 'fun' on very steep and scrubby slopes. It also meant we had unfinished business that would gnaw away at us over the next twelve months.

In spring 2024, with more time available and now better-informed, Mark, Jen and I returned to the Vale River for another multifaceted adventure. The thru-trip required a combination of appropriate weather (for river levels) and significant rope, rafting and scrambling skills. Over a straight-line distance of just 12km (of course, there are many wiggles, so the river journey is longer), the Vale loses almost 600m of elevation, with a peak gradient of more than 100m/km. It was therefore no surprise there were many waterfalls and short portages, along with a couple of big portages. And towards the end, after the technical difficulties were over, the trip kept on giving, with a big tear and riverside repair job on one raft, followed by a challenging 18km lake paddle with strong headwinds and breaking waves to reach the road.

It's a trip that, to be at all safe—a highly relative term in this country—conditions and water levels have to be just right. But when they are, the Vale River offers one of Australia's most spectacular packrafting adventures.



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP (ALL IMAGES FROM 2023 TRIP)

With snow dusting the surrounding hills, Jen and Mark negotiate the meandering highland stream that is the Vale River head-waters at the start of our 2023 attempt. The water level needs to be just right: Too low exposes the rafts to the sharp limestone bedrock; too high and the downstream gorge is unpaddleable

Nick checks out a double-drop waterfall in the early part of the gorge. We didn't make it too much further than this due to lack of time in 2023

Beyond its highland valley headwaters, the Vale River flows beneath overhanging rainforest

Immersed in spray, Mark undertakes our first portage in 2023, bypassing the 15m waterfall at the start of the Vale River gorge

(ALL SUBSEQUENT IMAGES ARE FROM 2024 TRIP)

IMAGE - OPPOSITE PAGE

The Vale River gorge contains numerous waterfalls which must be lined, portaged, or (by Mark anyway) sometimes paddled

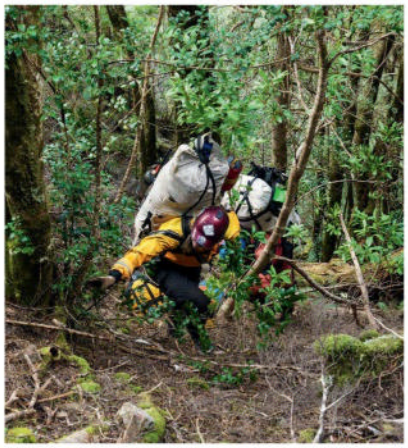
IMAGES THIS PAGE - TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

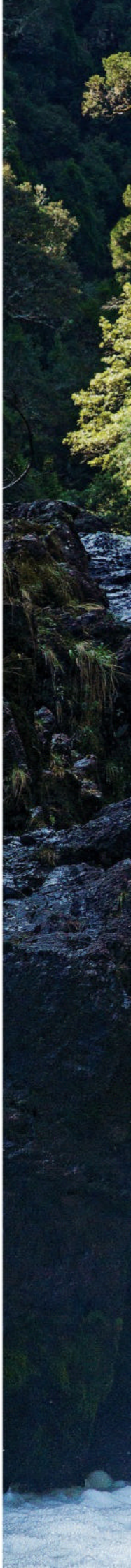
Mark and Jen engaging in the first round of pass-the-packraft as we enter the gorge again in 2024, bypassing the same waterfall as on p62

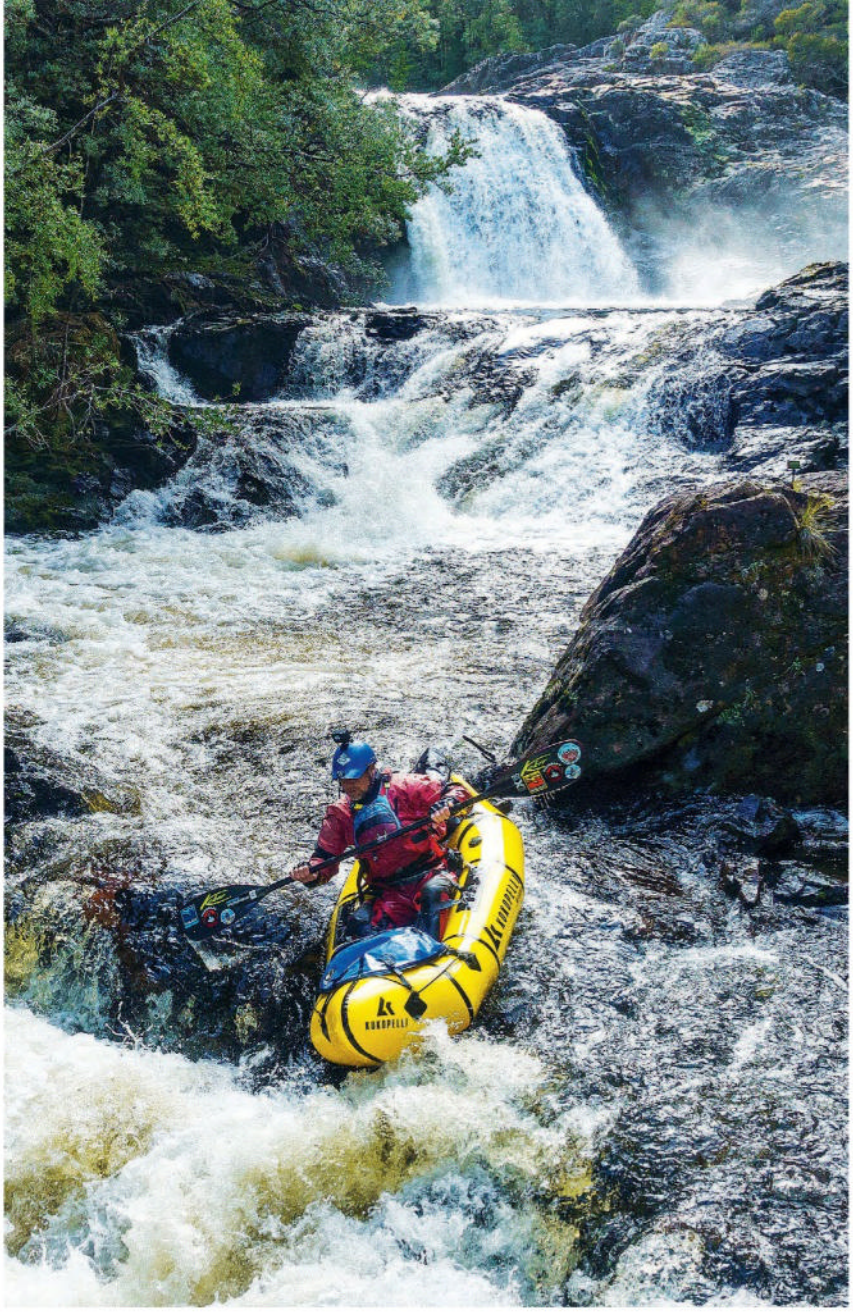
Deep in its gorge, the Vale River traverses a smooth-sided, meandering canyon for perhaps 200m, with at least two waterfalls. With no safe way to abseil into the canyon, a time-consuming and very steep portage—lugging around heavy and ungainly packs laden with rafting and canyoning gear—was necessary

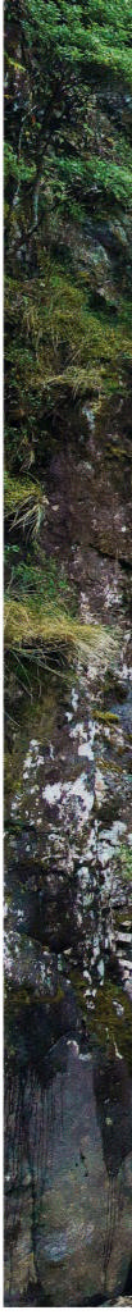
After re-entering the river following the big portage, and with darkness looming, the top of a riverside bluff offered the only option for a rough camp on our second night in 2024

Mark shooting a rapid deep in the Vale River gorge









IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Mark shooting yet another rapid

Paddling between bluffs deep in the Vale River gorge

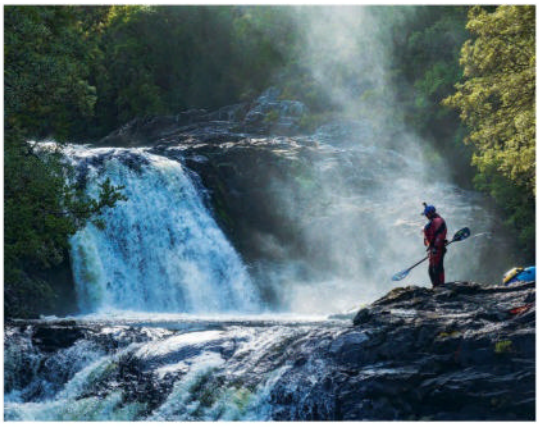
After an altercation with a sharp riverbank snag, Mark refreshes his sewing skills on the frigid second-last day of our adventure

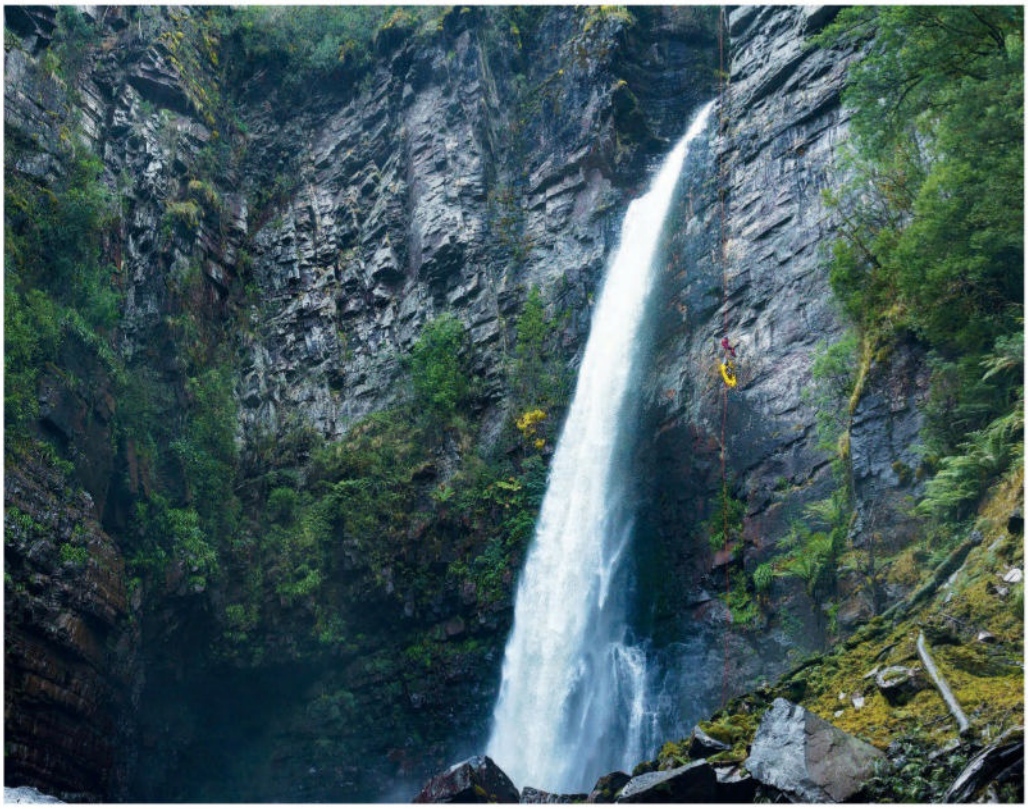
Well-known to backcountry bushwalkers, Reynolds Falls issues from the mouth of a slot canyon. Our 80m rope, carried for this purpose, was just long enough for Mark and his packraft to reach its base

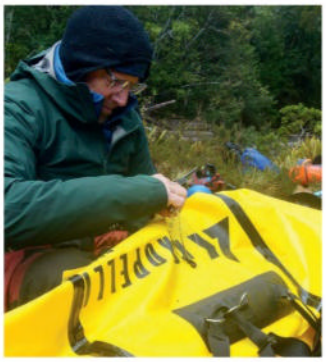
Grant bobs in the plunge pool at the base of Reynolds Falls, a spectacular location despite the pummelling by spray from the falls. Credit: Mark Oates

Mark taking in the atmosphere and checks out the next rapid below one of the numerous waterfalls in the Vale River gorge

Jen and Mark enjoying a stress-free drift through beautiful rainforest after exiting the main Vale River gorge, and before the slot canyon that heralds Reynolds Falls







CONTRIBUTOR: Long-time *Wild* contributor Grant Dixon is a Tasmanian-based nature photographer, earth scientist and wilderness advocate. He dabbles in a range of rope, paddle and ski-based activities in order to explore wild places.

DAISETSUZAN NATIONAL PARK: HIKING THE VOLCANIC HEART OF HOKKAIDO

WORDS AND IMAGES BY: **BRENDAN REEVES**

The pressures of everyday life, running a business and long-haul flights feel far away stepping into the volcanic heart of Hokkaido, Japan. I had come in search of stillness and immersion, a walk lasting more than a day and free from tents and ration packs. A walk where I could carry nothing more than a small daypack and finish each hiking day with a good meal, a decent place to sleep, and the luxury of bathing. In short, I didn't want to have to think too much.

Japan's northern mountains are modest in elevation, compared to the Himalayas or the Alps. The drama of the Daisetsuzan National Park is not in lofty summits seen from below, but in what happens once you step inside the range itself.

Daisetsuzan, which means the 'great snow mountains', is actually a cluster of volcanoes built over millions of years of fire and eruption, their layers of ash and lava stacked like pages in a long geological book. From the base at 200 metres above sea level to the high plateau around 1600 metres, the land tells its story in ridges, craters, fumaroles, and mineral-painted slopes. It's alive and breathing, and you can see it and sense it once you're there.

It is a place where snow lingers into summer, where pika, the tiny alpine lagomorph mammal that survived the last Ice Age squeaks from the rocks, a place where every step reminds you that this land is restless. It's really something to be experienced for yourself, and is a manageable hike for most hikers of reasonable fitness.

For three days, guided by Aya, a local mountain guide, I walked across this volcanic cluster. Aya's knowledge went far beyond navigation: She translated signs, identified alpine flowers, and explained the geology. On offer was something quite rare these days—relief from decision-making and a chance to walk with unburdened attention. How often do we get a chance to do that?

DAY ONE. TOKACHIDAKE'S VOLCANIC SPINE

From Furano, it was an hour's drive to the Tokachidake trailhead. The climb began steeply, flowers bright against black soil, until we reached the ridge where clouds drifted in and butterflies wove between us. Ahead, Aya pointed out two possible summits—Furano-dake or Tokachi-dake. Clearer weather drew us along the ridge towards Tokachi; it was as simple a decision as that.

Here the mountain showed its character. Steam puffed from vents; slopes were streaked red, yellow, and grey; and craters were carved into its flanks. At over 2,000 metres, the summit was wreathed in cloud, but that only deepened the sense of mystery. We paused and ate *onigiri*, a simple but perfect hiking lunch, and watched the wind carry sulphur-filled mist across the ridgeline.

On the descent, we crossed sandy ridges and crater bowls before reaching Ryounkaku Lodge. This family-run lodge is more than a place to sleep; it's part of this land's history. The owner's grandfather once mapped these trails by hand. From the lodge's windows, I saw the volcanic arc stretching into the distance. And in the mineral-rich onsen, I felt the ache of the day's 11.6 kilometre walk dissolve into warmth. It felt great.

Hiker's Note on Tokachidake:
Medium to hard, steep early sections, loose volcanic footing, exposed ridge. Distance: 11.6 km return. Highlights: ridge walk, active vents, mid-mountain craters.

DAY TWO. ASAHIDAKE, SUMMIT OF FIRE

With muscles still a bit achy from the first day, riding the ropeway was welcome, and it lifted us to the 1,600 metre plateau below Asahidake. This is Hokkaido's highest peak (2,291 metres) and, in geological terms, its youngest, an active volcano still shaping itself. Even here, at the ropeway's end, the drama was close: fumaroles hissed, alpine flowers were scattered in the ash, and clouds rolled over ridges.

We climbed slowly, pausing to breathe in both silence and oxygen mixed with the sulphur. At the summit,

"THE LAND TELLS ITS STORY IN RIDGES, CRATERS, FUMAROLES, AND MINERAL-PAINTED SLOPES. IT'S ALIVE AND BREATHING AND YOU CAN SEE IT AND SENSE IT ONCE YOU'RE THERE."

clouds swirled and parted in sudden moments, revealing a panorama of not one mountain but many. From here you see the truth of Daisetsuzan, a collection of volcanic cones, layered plateaus, and calderas born from ancient fire.

That night we stayed in Sounkyo Onsen, a larger resort town set deep in a gorge. My room looked across the valley, but what captivated me even more was the rooftop onsen—an open-air pool on the fifth floor—where I soaked while clouds curled through the canyon.

Hiker's Note on Asahidake

Easy to medium; ropeway access to 1600m plateau, summit climb more demanding but not technical. Distance: 5 km return from the ropeway. Highlights: summit views, fumaroles, alpine flora.

DAY THREE. KURODAKE AND OHACHI CRATER

At dawn we rode the first ropeway from Sounkyo, the valley below filled with inversion clouds. A chairlift carried us to 1,500 metres, where we entered dwarf pine and *sasa* grass before ascending to Kurodake summit (1,984 metres) as a sidestop to Ohachi Crater. Though modest in height (at 2,000 metres, lower than Australia's Kosciuszko), the sense of scale here really was incredible, and we stopped to marvel at it.

Kurodake stands on the plateau built from ancient lava, ash, and stone, a foundation for the entire volcanic range. Descending slightly, we reached a volcanic plateau and the rim of the Ohachi Caldera, a vast bowl with streaked mineral walls and a river bubbling from its floor. Snow still lingered in gullies even in late summer. Here, too, we heard the high-pitched call of the pika, descendants of the Ice Age, living fossils clinging to rocky slopes.

The trail was busier here, it being the Obon holiday and Mountain Day, a national celebration of mountains. Yet even with company, the land's dramatic landscape was overwhelming. By the time we returned to the ropeway, clouds were lifting, and the volcanic cluster stretched away in ripples of ash-grey ridges.

Hiker's Note on Kurodake

Easy to medium; ropeway and chairlift assist, short but steep final ascent. Distance: ~4 km return. Highlights: caldera rim, inversion clouds, wildlife sightings (pika, chipmunks, deer).

THE HUMAN LAYER, FESTIVALS AND ART

Daisetsuzan's story is not only geological. In Furano, I got to experience the Hokkai Heso Matsuri (Belly Button Festival), where locals paint faces on their stomachs, a playful nod to Furano's place as Hokkaido's belly button or centre. It was loud, joyful and very special to be there to witness.

In Kamifurano, the Gotō Sumio Museum of Art displayed sweeping 17-metre Nihonga canvases of the Tokachidake Range. Gotō captured what words strain to explain properly: The weight and drama of these volcanic forms; the fleeting moods of cloud and light that we walked through.

Both the festival and art showed me that these mountains shape culture as much as they shape land, and that's extremely important. I recommend experiencing both these local cultural opportunities while there.

NOTES FOR HIKERS

WILDLIFE: Brown bears inhabit these ranges. Carry a bell to avoid surprise encounters, rent bear spray from MontBell shops (use only if charged), and never run. Back away slowly while speaking calmly

WEATHER: Conditions change rapidly. Cloud, rain, and sulphur fumes can disorient even experienced hikers. Dress for changeable conditions (not shorts and a t-shirt) and bring enough water, energy food and wet weather gear for worst-case scenarios.

TRANSPORT: Public transport links are irregular; self-driving or guided tours are the best options. Access via New Chitose Airport (2 hrs south of Furano) or Asahikawa Airport (1 hr from Furano).

GUIDES: Employing a local guide like Aya is highly recommended for safety and deepening your experience.

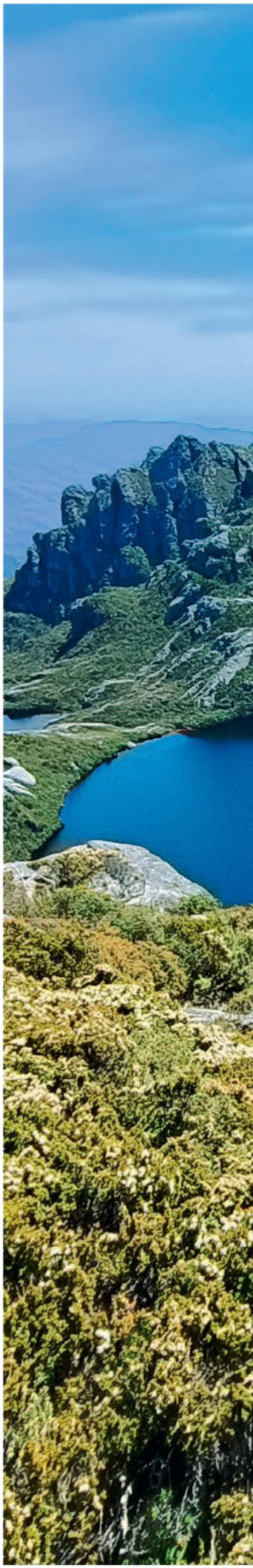
MORE INFO: Learn more at **geoat.go-hokkaido.com**

REWRITING THE STORY

A Mother-Daughter Traverse of Southwest Tasmania

Before moving to New Zealand, Victoria Bruce had a painful childhood in Tasmania. Now with a daughter of her own, she returned with her to Tassie, home of memories both light and dark, to create a new chapter in their shared lives.

Words **VICTORIA BRUCE**
Photography **VICTORIA & EMILIE BRUCE**



Somewhere near the plateau of Precipitous Bluff, sleet needled sideways through a wall of mist so thick I could barely see my daughter Emilie trudging ten paces ahead. Below us, the tea-coloured headwaters of the New River Lagoon lay buried beneath clouds, and behind us mist whipped across the undulating ridgelines of the Southern Ranges, wrapped in a dense, tangled mess of lacerating scrub. Below the hem of my bright-red raincoat, blood of a similar shade oozed from razor-thin lines on my thighs, mingling with raindrops to form a ghoulish watercolour mosaic. I was crying, noiselessly, the banshee scream of the wind tearing the sound from my mouth. But I wasn't crying because I was cold or sore or scared. I was crying because I was home.

Not the home of walls and doors and people who are supposed to keep you safe, but the kind of home that lives deep inside your body and breaks you open when you find it again. This wild, weathered landscape of button grass plains, dolerite cliffs, and tannin-infused creeks—this is all part of where I grew up. Tasmania, with all its beauty and brutality, is both the place I learned to love the bush and the place where my childhood came undone.

Before flying out to Tasmania, I stood shoulder to shoulder in New Zealand, where I now live, with other survivors and wept as the Prime Minister delivered a public apology on behalf of the state, acknowledging its failures to generations of foster children. Now, a month later, I was fighting through an impenetrable wall of subalpine scrub on a traverse of Southwest National Park, trying to piece together the final days of my lost childhood.

I returned to Tasmania not just to walk, but to speak. My debut memoir, *Adventures with Emilie*, had opened new worlds for us: libraries, festivals, bookshops. I'd fronted a series of author talks across the state, sharing the story of how my seven-year-old and I walked the length of Aotearoa New Zealand together, and why, as a single mother, I quit my job when the weight of repressed memories became too great to bear, spending the next six months wandering through thick forests, mountain ranges and wild rivers with my little daughter at my side. Because the real journey, the one I was still trying to map, was older, harder. One rooted in the tangled memories of my own girlhood, darkness entwined with beauty and joy.

Revisiting Tasmania was a way to reconnect with my childhood. To bring my daughter here to share some magic and adventure. To meet this place again on my own terms by venturing deep into the remote Southwest —into a world of storms and silence, where the only way out is through. To see if I could rewrite the story.

Victoria and Emilie Bruce traversing the Western Arthur Range on Day 20 of their 24-day Southwest Tasmanian epic

SOUTHERN RANGES

The plan, stitched together from our home on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island/Te Waipounamu, was an ambitious 250km route through the World Heritage Wilderness Area of Tasmania's Southwest National Park, connecting the Southern Ranges, and the South Coast and Port Davey Tracks, with a traverse of the Western Arthur Range.

And now here we were, crossing Australia's southernmost mountain range towards the remote and inspiring Precipitous Bluff. At times my stomach was a knot of exhilaration and nerves: from the flight, the weeks of talks and book events, the complicated logistics of organising a multi-week trek, and the reality of taking my ten-year-old into the wilds of my childhood ghosts.

Emilie was ahead, leaning into the wind, a picture of determination in bright-orange shorts. I kept thinking, she's the same age now as I was when everything fell apart. And yet her joy, her resilience and self-confidence are worlds apart from mine.

Two days earlier, we'd been looking down from Pindars Peak. The terrain of the Southern Ranges was rough and tangled with dense scoparia forests, the track a threadbare suggestion. And yet beauty and magic lay everywhere: The warm scent of eucalypts on the climb up to Moonlight Ridge; brightly coloured subalpine flowers scattered among emerald herbfields, softened by sweeping columns of mist off the Southern Ocean. Past the glistening mirrors of Pigsty Ponds and the warm, tadpole-speckled waters of Ooze Lake, we navigated to the rocky pillars of Pindars Peak, our progress observed by a flock of huge black cockatoos that emerged from the clouds, screeching like spectres.

After pausing to fill our water bottles from moss-filtered soaks, we plunged off the wind-whipped plateau of Pandani Knob, fighting through scoparia so dense it felt like battling spiky dragons. Emilie barrelled into it with fierce determination, only to cry out when the trail dissolved beneath us into a false lead that slid off the ridge's western side—nothing but madness and mayhem that way, warned my John Chapman guidebook.

Retracing our steps, panic gnawed at me as we found ourselves trapped in a maze of false leads, hemmed in on all sides by walls of prickly scrub. At last, asking the forest itself for guidance, I spotted a faint ghost-trail. Gravity and desperation worked in our favour as we slid into a dense grove of pandani, crawling between towering, clinging trunks. Emilie was close behind me, grumbling but still strong.

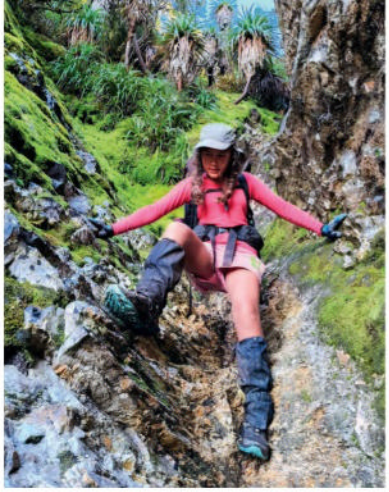
"It's pretty dry under the pandani, we could always bivvy out," I offered. "No way, I want to put up the tent! Ahh—I hate scoparia!" she yelled. Buoyed by her grit and determination, I shouldered on, a smile softening my face. And miraculously, Pandani Saddle revealed a soft, boggy clearing just wide enough for our little Tarptent.

The next morning, impossibly dense tunnels of wet scrub led us closer to the towering dolerite columns of Precipitous Bluff—rising 1,030m above sea level like some ancient fortress. We clawed up steep guts beside a waterfall, mist swirling around us, soaked through but warmed by exertion. I cursed as the wind howled; camping on an exposed 1,000m plateau in the full force of the Roaring Forties wasn't ideal, but the dense scoparia forests and boulder fields along Kameruka Moraine had refused to yield a flat space wide enough to squeeze our tent in. Then a particularly savage gust sent a misplaced hiking pole piercing through the fly like a sharpened pencil tearing paper. My stomach clenched as I patched the damage, silently begging the tent fabric to hold.

"THE CONTRAST HIT ME LIKE COLD WATER: SHE'S THE SAME AGE I WAS THEN, YET SHE IS RADIANT WHERE I WAS BREAKING."

A tear like that has a way of pulling memory through the seam. As I pressed the repair tape down, a different image rose with startling clarity: my mother driving away from our family home in Huonville. The long gravel driveway, the rise in the road, my brother in the back seat of the car. I stood there beside my father and watched them disappear. No explanation. No promise. Just the slow vanishing of the only softness I had.

That was the first time I understood how abruptly home could split. How the people meant to keep you safe could simply leave



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Soaking up the skyline before descending Precipitous Bluff to New River Lagoon

After many trips through NZ's Southern Alps, keen mountain goat Emilie had no problem downclimbing the Tilted Chasm in the Western Arthur Range

Mother-daughter mayhem somewhere in the depths of scoparia scrub in the Southern Ranges

Swapping mud and scratches for sandy beaches on the South Coast Track

you behind. The sound of the tent ripping sent my body straight back to that driveway—to the unbearable knowledge that someone could choose to go, and you could do nothing to stop it.

I worked the patch into the fly, trying to steady my breath. My nervous system still can't always tell the difference between a storm and a departure. When I looked up, the scene in front of me didn't match the panic inside. There was Emilie burrowed into her sleeping bag, unbothered, curls wild around her face, pastel-pink down jacket glowing in the gloom. She trusted the tent to hold. She trusted me to hold. The contrast hit me like cold water: She's the same age I was then, yet she is radiant where I was breaking.

+++++

My childhood in Tasmania held moments of magic between the darkness, the way light threads through the understorey, even as my family came apart at the seams. I grew up playing outdoors with my brother, having wondrous encounters with marsupials, frogs, birds and other wild creatures. I guess somewhere in my early development my body decided that nature was a safe place, away from the volatile simmering anger of my father and the quiet fear of my mother. No one was there to yell at us, to make us feel scared, small, powerless or humiliated. Lost in our own world, the world of our imagination, we could be king and queen of our peaceful green realm. It breaks my heart to revisit these tender scenes and to think we were just two little kids escaping the trauma of a homelife tainted by domestic violence.

Then my parents separated and my life fell apart. My brother and I were ripped apart too—my mother took him with her, while I was left behind. What followed was a blur of instability, emotional chaos, and an alcoholic father whose rage, despair, and trauma spilled into our everyday lives. Life disintegrated further as I found myself in foster care, shuttled between families who were not my own. But nature always offered me refuge; I sought out forests and creeks like some kids seek shelter in books. And as an adult with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (c-PTSD) shaping my inner world, nature became my sanctuary again. It's as though my stress-ravaged body intrinsically remembers the joy to be found in wild places. These are places to be soothed and healed by, where comfort is found in the indifference of tangled branches and leaves, the gentle swaying of tall trees. Or in this case, wind-whipped, thick and unyielding scrub. It was as though the physical pain of barrelling through this impenetrable jungle while being lashed in the face with salty squalls mirrored the turmoil I felt inside.

By morning, we had survived—tent and all. We rock hopped to the summit, the sun shining serenely out of a brilliant blue bowl of sky. All traces of the storm were swept away, and from the top, we were rewarded by a 360-degree panorama of sweeping coastline and mountain scenery. Stretching out before us was the curve of the South Coast Track and the hulk of the Ironbound Range. Beyond, an olive-green plateau of forest and buttongrass plains disappeared below the distant, jagged peaks of the Arthur Range.

> **“THE STONE AT THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART CRACKED OPEN** AND THE TEARS BEGAN TO FLOW FREELY AS I REALISED WHAT I’D BEEN SEEKING ALL ALONG—**SOME REMNANT OF THE WILD PLACE THAT HAD ONCE PROTECTED ME.”**

“We did it,” I said, squeezing Emilie. We’d traversed the Southern Ranges and summitted Precipitous Bluff. I whispered to the ocean of dark ridgelines and rugged peaks behind us: Thank you.

The 800m descent through the cliffs and gullies of Precipitous Bluff into the swampy headwaters of New River Lagoon was long and rough, annihilated in places by massive windfall. Huge eucalypts had crashed down the hillside, obliterating any sense of a trail. We hugged the back of a spur, reassured by glimpses of the silver lagoon through the canopy, until the forest swallowed us whole and left us floundering in damp undergrowth.

Then something magical happened—two ghostly grey lyrebirds darted from the shadows, long tail feathers whispering as they leapt into the higher branches. “Did you see that?” we mouthed at each other, frozen until the last flicker of movement vanished. From their direction came a golden glow shimmering through the trees. We had reached the edge of the forest and the sun-kissed expanse of New River Lagoon. Later that hot evening, I lay with the vestibule open, gazed up at stars through the canopy, listened to the sweet notes of nesting birds, remembered Emilie dancing naked in the lagoon like a swan with the sun behind her.

The next day, hours slipped into a meditative rhythm: wading through tea-coloured water with the warm sun on our backs, the lagoon stretched out ahead, Precipitous Bluff looming beyond the gum trees. Shags, swans, herons, and gulls wheeled overhead, the melodic call of a currawong echoed across the shallows.

My mind wandered back over the events of the past few months. It was hard to believe that barely a month earlier, I was in Wellington’s Parliament House, listening to the Prime Minister’s public apology to survivors of abuse in state institutions.

How did a little blonde girl from Tasmania end up in foster care in New Zealand, shuttled between over thirty foster homes and institutions, before being released at age sixteen and returning, full of pain and rage, to Australia’s shores? As hard as it was to go back there, refamiliarising myself with this lost chunk of my girlhood would give me the closure I needed to heal.

We lingered over lunch on a small golden beach, followed by a spot of naked sunbathing—until the ants grew too inquisitive for comfort. Back in the lagoon, a side creek opened suddenly into a dark underwater canyon of unknown depth. We bush-bashed upstream to find a raft of slimy logs, balanced across, then thrashed our way back through scrub to the shoreline. Our approach startled a giant sea eagle, and it lifted effortlessly into the sky on huge white wings, flapping lazily to the far side.

We sidled quietly past a committee of seagulls gathered on sandy islands beside two large, flat-bottomed dinghies—our passage across the deep mouth of the lagoon and the official start of the South Coast Track. After almost five hours of wading knee-deep, our legs were heavy with exhaustion. Yet the elation of swapping scoparia for golden sand carried us a further eight kilometres along the southern coastline. Emilie told stories to pass the time until we finally reached the quiet sanctuary of Tarua Beach. We mustered just enough energy to go for a float in the brilliant blue ocean, and to then rinse in the cold, dark creek, before we collapsed into the comfort of our tent with hot chocolate and Gingernuts while the surf droned outside.

SOUTH COAST TRACK

It might have been wiser to tackle the 20+ kilometre, 2,000m climb over the Ironbound Range while the weather held, but then we would have missed the rare gift of a beachside rest day. Emilie was first out of the tent, stepping into golden light spreading across smooth sand. The ocean lay turquoise and glassy. I promised myself a swim after coffee.

“Come play in the creek,” Emilie called. Together we found a freshwater yabby, which I chased around the shallows before scooping it into my mug. Its reddish carapace glistened, its stalked eyes looked faintly alarmed, and it raised one large claw in defiance. “Let’s pretend we’re marine biologists doing catch-and-release,” Emilie declared, cradling the cup. “We’ll call this one Lulu.” At her naming, Lulu flicked backwards into the brown creek.

The tide had washed sand into high, cliff-like piles along the creek, some connected to the mainland by narrow bridges. We collected pretty pebbles, shells and leaves to decorate our castles. The morning stretched lazily into midafternoon heat, with more swimming until hunger called us back to camp. There was something in this beachside bliss that recalled memories of running wild with my older brother in the sand dunes, followed by a deep ache in my guts. I turned my face into the breeze as tears ran down my cheeks. Grief for losing him, losing my childhood, yet gratitude for the sweet memory resurfacing.

I’d set the alarm for 5AM to get us up early and over the Ironbounds, but we woke to heavy raindrops hammering the fly.

On the beach, yesterday’s castles had been mostly swept away by tide and creek, except for one stubborn survivor. “That’s my castle!” crowed Emilie. Staunch, wrapped up in her wet-weather gear, I thought: “She’s a survivor.” We stormed past and into the scrub, climbing through wet eucalyptus. The track had become a stream of tannin-stained rainwater, cascading over curved stone. Vegetation tunnelled overhead, flowering shrubs bright against the grey. Tea trees bent in gusts of wind. I hoped we wouldn’t meet those gusts on the tops. The InReach forecast for 900m had shown 75kph gusts predicted for 7PM; it meant we needed to get over the Ironbound Range and down to the shelter of Louisa River.

Eight-hundred vertical metres up the waterlogged track, Emilie startled a small brown-and-orange frog that leapt from the muddy verge. Its call followed us, echoing like pebbles rattling in a tin. Delighted, I crouched low, deaf to Emilie’s impatient urging. Frogs have always been a kind of magic to me—the way they shape-shift from water-dwelling wiggly things into leaping, climbing creatures.

Emilie picking her way through a jumble of rocks and scrub towards Precipitous Bluff in the Southern Ranges

As a child, I learned to coax them from the creek near our house. I would lay slabs of bark along the banks, knowing the little creatures would shelter beneath. The next day, I'd return and gently lift the bark to uncover the dazed amphibians, their skin cool and soft against my hands. Sometimes I carried them home to populate my aquarium, where I watched them with a reverence that bordered on ritual. My brother wouldn't touch them, but by the time I was seven, I was an expert frog handler, careful always to wash my hands before and after. Visiting the frog population at the creek became a litmus test of my childhood world—if the frogs were there, everything was alright.

Days before commencing this epic trek, Emilie and I drove into the hills to visit the last house my family had lived in together. I wanted to show her the creek of my childhood, the place that had been my refuge when family life was falling apart. Another family lived in the house now, their own stories replacing ours. The three-acre block that once held ponies, chickens and a stubborn goat was carved into neat gardens and tidy paddocks. The driveway my mother and brother had disappeared over was now lined with neat rows of flowering shrubs. I felt nothing, only numbness, until I saw that the creek had vanished into a smear of dust. The surrounding bush that had been my sanctuary was fenced off or transformed into housing estates. Then the stone at the bottom of my heart cracked open and the tears began to flow freely as I realised what I'd been seeking all along—some remnant of the wild place that had once protected me. It was gone, and in its absence, I understood why I had brought Emilie with me into the deep wilderness of Tasmania's Southwest.

As subalpine scrub gave way to wind-shorn heath, mist poured in columns across the broad back of the Ironbound Range. Suddenly, it lifted, and the immensity of the Southwest landscape swirled into view. Louisa Bay appeared, so too buttongrass plains dotted with dark forest patches, Bathurst Harbour and the lands beyond. Behind us, Precipitous Bluff and the South Cape Range were gone, swallowed in mist.

Ahead, a strip of wooden boardwalk wove across fragile herbfields. Tiny flowers bent violently in the gusts. Emilie pointed to a strange glow in the sky—sunlight reflecting off the ocean far

below. By the time the sun dipped below the horizon, we were descending steep, rocky steps on the western side, heading toward a sheltering belt of tall trees flanking the dark, winding snake of the Louisa River and a flat spot to pitch our tent.

The next day the buttongrass plains glowed with pink and white swamp-heath blossoms. It was windy, but warm enough. We took off raincoats, laughing, only to throw them back on as another squall barged through. I strung wet clothes to the outside of my pack, earning Emilie's nickname: the wild washerwoman of the Southwest.

But the next few days held no heat to dry anything. Constantly wet boots and filthy damp socks took their toll as we battled the sweeping squalls past Point Eric and beyond, eventually staggering into Melaleuca, wet as rats, with broken feet.

MELALEUCA

I hadn't heard from my father in years. Then an old friend of his wrote to me on the eve of my Tasmanian author talk. She said she missed him, hoped he was well. I wrote back bluntly that I hadn't seen him in years, that growing up with him wasn't actually very nice.

Her reply hit me like a rock: *I'm sorry to hear that, Vicky. I know you often looked traumatised.*

Her words followed me through the scrub like a shadow. Out here, with wind and rain tearing across the moorlands, I kept hearing them. *I know you often looked traumatised.* As if my pain had been visible, obvious, and still nobody stepped in.

I shook my head in disbelief. If you all knew—why didn't anyone speak up? Why didn't anyone come to my rescue?

The questions pressed against me as hard as the rain. And maybe that's part of why I chose this route, this long, punishing line through the wild. Because there are no evasions here, no pretending. The wilderness shows you everything as it is—the weather, the land, the truth you carry inside your chest.

PORT DAVEY TRACK

It didn't take long to fall in love with the magic of the buttongrass plains and the dark waters of Melaleuca and Bathurst Harbour. We spent a night in the cold, fireless bushwalkers' hut, befriended spotted pademelons, wombats and orange-bellied parakeets, along with hikers waiting for their plane ride back to civilisation. We even had afternoon tea with Tony, grandson of naturalist and tin miner Deny King. Our resupply bucket arrived, but our clothes were still wet, our feet wrinkled and sore. The weather continued deteriorating, and I worried about boat crossings and river levels. Should we admit defeat and fly back to Hobart, seek drier adventures on the East Coast? But after investing so much, neither of us wanted the journey to end here.

Then fortune shifted. We were warmly adopted by an older couple who welcomed us aboard their beautiful wooden boat to

"AT TEN YEARS OLD, SHE WAS ALREADY LEARNING THE LESSON THAT HAD TAKEN ME DECADES TO CLAIM: SOMETIMES NO ONE COMES. SOMETIMES YOU MUST RESCUE YOURSELF."

shelter from the storm. After restoring us with roast chicken, real vegetables and fresh Tasmanian cherries—washed down with glasses of wine—we got a terrifying dinghy ride across the wind-whipped Bathurst Narrows to enter the wilderness of the Port Davey Track.

Our first challenge: the flooded Spring River.

Packs resupplied and heavy, hearts buoyed from a couple of days of warmth, friendship and company, we slipped and slid along the wet, muddy track, sidestepping the puddles and rivulets that slowly drained through quartz and peat toward the curling, brown snake of Spring River.

The track dipped into a scrubby gully where slimy trees leant across our path. Rain-swollen creeks filled our boots, until we finally gave up dodging them and just waded through. Then we reached it—the river out of its banks, flowing fast and dark through the scrub, thin tea tree arms swaying helplessly in its power.

No way across. No way to tell depth. No idea how long it would

take to drop. That's the thing about new country—I didn't know this river or the true scale of its catchment, only that the map showed it draining a lot of land.

Decision time: Sit tight for as long as it takes to recede? Or get creative? A low range paralleled the river upstream. If we left the track and climbed the ridgeline, we could follow it above the side creeks, rejoin the river higher up, find a crossing, and then pick up the Port Davey Track again on the far side. If it didn't work, I reassured Emilie, we could always backtrack and wait for the river to go down.

But heading off-track in Southwest Tassie is a commitment. The scrub was dense and spiked, the ground slick with slime. We climbed through the tangle, softened by moments of beauty—blossoms glowed on ridgetops, sunshine flashed between racing clouds, cicadas hummed in the humid air. Emilie found a puddle teeming with fat black tadpoles, and grinned at her discovery.

We were tired, scratched raw, but Emilie kept moving beside me with a resilience that amazed me. At ten years old, she was already learning the lesson that had taken me decades to claim: Sometimes no one comes. Sometimes you must rescue yourself.

From the ridge, we saw Bathurst Harbour spread below us, vast and shining, and new country unfolding—scrubby ridgelines, green plateaus, the curling snake of the river, the Port Davey Track faintly marked in quartz. Tiny birds chimed back and forth in the scrub, tea tree and banksia swayed with a dry whisper in the evening breeze.

We managed about six kilometres upstream before the ridgeline collapsed into gullies and bluffs. Time to check the river.

Our passage through thick undergrowth to the dark riverbank was stopped short in wonder: A huge spotted quoll clambered casually down a tree trunk, pausing long enough for its bright eyes to catch ours, before vanishing into the undergrowth.

Some kind of forest magic. A sign we'd come to the right place.

And then there it was—the tree itself, a giant fallen eucalypt sprouting a nursery of young saplings, spanning the river from bank to bank. Our salvation—our bridge across the Spring River.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Victoria celebrating the day after the storm on the summit of Precipitous Bluff

Surveying Pigsty Ponds in the Southern Ranges

Navigating the Tasmanian version of a swingbridge across the Louisa River on the South Coast Track

Emilie Bruce, The Scoparia-Bashing Warrior Princess, somewhere along Kameruka Moraine in the Southern Ranges

Seeking sunshine but finding storms and squalls at Louisa Bay off the South Coast Track

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Celebrating a successful traverse of the Western Arthur Range with a Real Meals berry smoothie

Surveying an off-track route down to the flooded Spring River on the Port Davey Track

Emilie amid the serrated ridgelines of the Western Arthurs

WESTERN ARTHURS

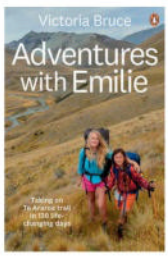
Gold-flecked tadpoles swam in the shallows of Haven Lake as Emilie and I sat naked on our tent platform, the afternoon sun soaking into our scratched and weary bodies. We had spent the past three days scrambling over rocky bluffs and squeezing through tunnels of roots and spiky vegetation to get here, but in that moment, all I felt was warmth and peace. The purity of sitting side by side with my daughter, our laughter carrying on the wind, was a reminder of how far we had come together. After weeks of storms, mud, and exhaustion, here was joy distilled—connection, tenderness, and the kind of bond I had once lost but now was carefully learning to rebuild.

The following day we traced the jagged spine of the ridgeline between Lake Cygnus and High Moor, eleven long hours of exposure and exhilaration—cliffs leaning overhead, air dropping away on either side, hands finding purchase on raw stone. Lake after lake glimmered below us like mirrors. Negotiating these mountains was a steady conversation with the land itself: Dolerite rising sheer; gullies thick with tangled scrub; sudden moments where muscle and nerve took over from thought. It was demanding, but we thrived in it—exhilarated by the space, the view, the raw feel of granite under our fingertips. By now, the scoparia scratches, the relentlessly tempestuous weather of the South Coast, and the boggy miles of Port Davey were etched into our muscles, and we moved through the high country with a kind of joy that comes only after struggle.

When we finally descended Moraine K to the Arthur Plains, my legs trembled with weariness, but my spirit felt light. Black cockatoos screeched overhead as we plunged through the mire back to the Huon campsite, hearts lifted by the sweep of buttongrass and the gift of safe passage.

The Western Arthurs were the climax of our twenty-four days in the Tasmanian wilderness, a place where hardship and tenderness met. Out here, I found the space to process old memories and the pain of losing my family so young, while showing my daughter a different way: that love can be steady, that resilience can carry you through storms, and that joy can be rediscovered in the wild. The space to walk this land again, not as the child who once lost everything, but as the mother of a strong, laughing girl at my side, together rewriting the story. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Victoria Bruce is the author of *Adventures with Emilie* and *Emilie Walks Te Araroa*. She and her daughter live on NZ's wild West Coast, where the mountains start at sea level and 'quality time' usually involves mud, mist and an optimistic sense of direction.



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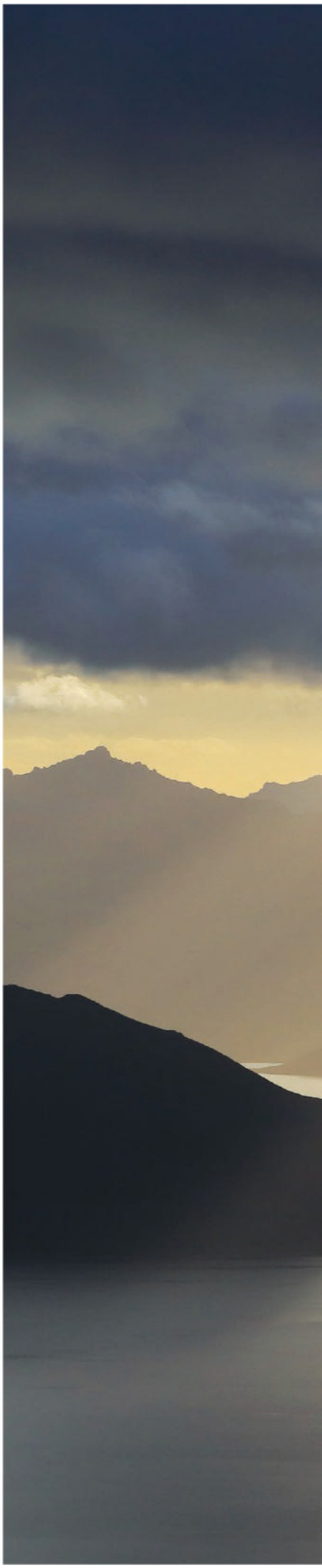
NATURAL FOCUS

A FINAL PHOTO ESSAY BY CRAIG FARDELL (1967 - 2025)

Few photographers have captured as many Australian wild places as Craig 'Caz' Fardell. And few have done it so beautifully. His outstanding imagery has been regularly gracing the pages of *Wild* Mag for fourteen years now, since Issue #122; sadly, with his passing in June this year at just age 58, these images—selected by *Wild* from his vast body of work—will be his final piece for the magazine.

Words by Craig's Partner **CHRIS ARMSTRONG**



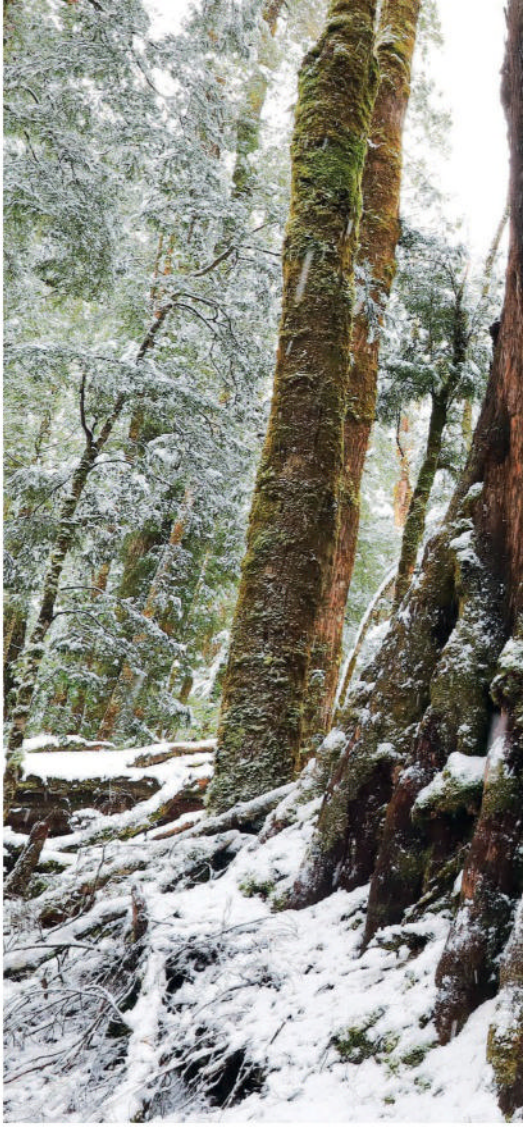
CRAIG'S ENERGY FOR PHOTOGRAPHY WAS UNENDING. No matter how arduous the day's adventure had been, Craig spent each evening continuing to explore around camp looking for the perfect angle, climbing to one high point or the next, running across bouldered peaks to catch the right light. Then, he was up before dawn to see what sunrise might bring. He would stand barefoot, midstream, in below-zero temperatures chasing his best shot. He would tromp about in the snow, hands unresponsive in the bitter wind. Or he'd scramble up trees. Or scamper along crumbling cliff edges.

The result is a photographic legacy of incredible depth and diversity, from grand landscapes to the detailed beauty within nature, wild adventure shots to intimate portraits of flora and fauna. This vast and detailed catalogue of Australian landscapes owes its beauty to his talent for composition but also his physical ability to pursue the perfect shot.

There are always two people in every picture, said photographer Ansel Adams. *The photographer and the viewer.*

Here, in every one of these photographs, Craig is present. I look up from my journalling while sitting in the tent and see him there, just out of frame. One of the tripod legs has been adjusted to accommodate the uneven terrain. His fingers are pink with cold, the backs of his hands scratched from pushing through some off-track scrub. He is there, scanning the horizon, waiting patiently for the perfect light. He will always be there.

One of Craig's favourite adventure playgrounds was Southwest National Park in Tasmania. It is full of opportunities for exploring remote pockets of country. We always had to camp high, and this picture shows why it's worth hauling that heavy pack up yet another steep mountain.



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Winter on the summit ridge of Mt Rufus, Tasmania

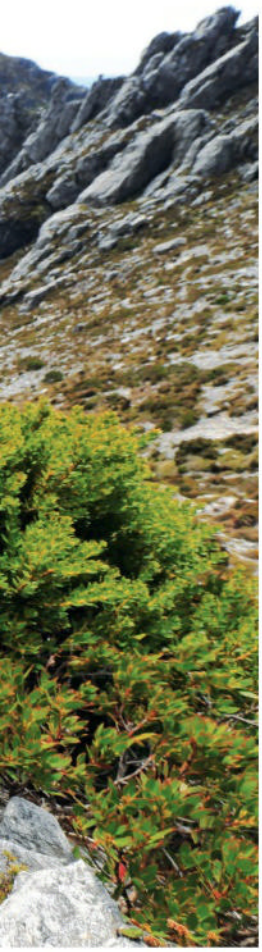
A snow-chasing trip on the Overland Track at Lake St Clair, Tasmania

Afterglow. Ghost gum and the Mt Giles massif

Lake Gwendolen below Frenchmans Cap, Tasmania

Dhilba Guuranda-Innes National Park, South Australia

Craig captured the Australian landscape with an honesty and naturalness that I recognise from being there when the shots were taken. Everything he did was in-camera. Apart from some basic developing adjustments, every published photo was one image, one moment, one shot. His physicality and love of being in nature was not suited to sitting at a computer stacking images or scrubbing out wayward branches. He was always about being in the landscape, exploring new angles, chasing light and epic views."



"There must be few Australian photographers who have catalogued as many Australian national parks as Craig, from little-known reserves to major locations across every state and territory. In the eighteen years we were together, we documented—in words and pictures—our journeys: hiking, canyoning, kayaking, rafting, and bike touring in Australia's remotest landscapes. The aim was always to celebrate this country's wild places and to inspire others to love the adventure potential of their own backyard."

IMAGES THIS PAGE - TOP TO BOTTOM

Xanthorrhoea forest, Barrington Tops National Park, NSW

Wilsons Promontory National Park, Victoria

Mt Gould from the Minotaur, Tasmania

Apsley Gorge, NSW. It took four attempts to photograph the full length of this gorge after overcoming rockfalls, a drowned camera and a flash flood. Fun times, good stories, epic location

"Craig was the finest outdoorsman I have ever met, the most uncanny natural navigator, and he possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of Australian adventure hotspots. He had a unique talent for creating amazing adventure trips into wild places, and his love of the Australian landscape was infectious. This passion was something that inspired those he worked with, and the many young guides he mentored, in his more than 35 years working in the outdoor industry."

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Summer scoparia, Mt Field National Park, Tasmania

Craig's enthusiasm for exploration was perfectly matched to Central Australia's open and vast landscape. In his short visits, he managed an inordinate number of adventures, hiking into every nook and cranny of country within sight, wandering up and over, around and through Ormiston Pound (pictured) to photograph it from every angle and in every light

Basden Falls, Barrington Tops National Park, NSW

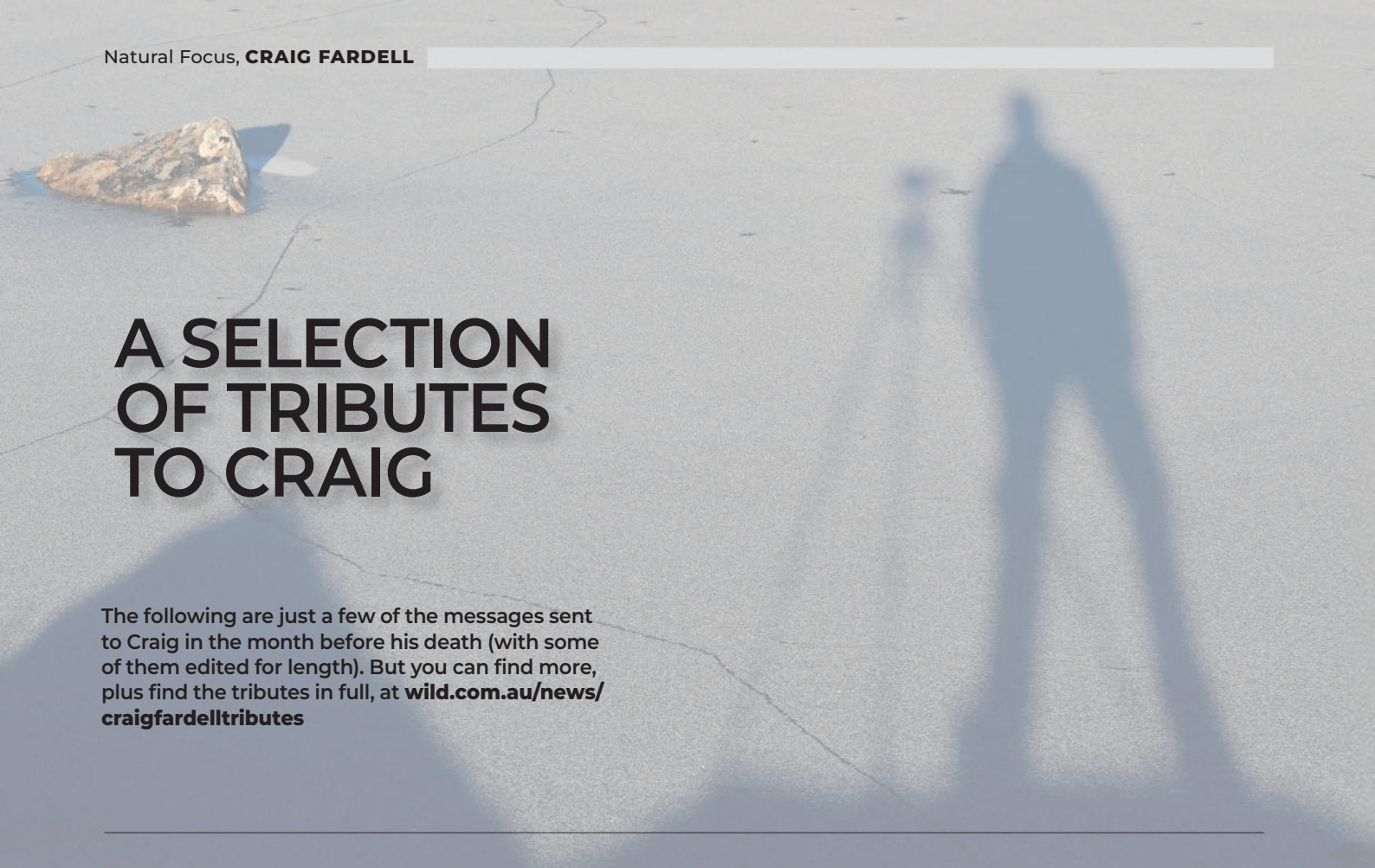
Four small images clockwise from top left: fern crozier; pandani frost; snow gum (Craig would always stop and look over this tree whenever we hiked into Mt Field NP in Tasmania. He would give it an affectionate pat, but it took five years before he finally felt he had captured its essence in this photo); button grass

MELANOMA KILLS

A life in the outdoors was the only life for Craig, but ultimately, it is likely to be what also led to his death. He had always been diligent with sun protection, always the safe one on the river; long sleeves, hat, sunscreen. By his actions, he encouraged those around him to do the same, but melanoma and Australia go together. The risks of a life in the outdoors are so often dramatised to be snake bite, hypothermia, accident or misadventure, heat exhaustion and dehydration, but the reality is sometimes less headline-catching. Almost 20,000 Australians every year will be diagnosed with a new melanoma. One person in Australia every 30 minutes.

Craig had one of the rare cases of melanoma in which the origin (on the skin) was never found. He had no abnormal freckle or mole. The first sign of his melanoma was a lump in his armpit; melanoma in the lymph nodes, already progressed. We cannot know if more sun protection, more regular skin checks or earlier intervention could have changed the outcome for Craig, but what I do know is that Craig continued to teach and lead those around him even while living with his cancer—encouraging connection to nature and adventure and living calmly, with humour and an inspiring positivity.

Sun protection. Regular skin checks. Early intervention. It is the best formula for a life in the outdoors. But, sometimes, it is also just the luck of the draw. In that case, the best advice comes from Craig. No regrets, he said. No regrets.



A SELECTION OF TRIBUTES TO CRAIG

The following are just a few of the messages sent to Craig in the month before his death (with some of them edited for length). But you can find more, plus find the tributes in full, at wild.com.au/news/craigfardelltributes

"We want you to know that you are very special to all of us, and we feel so privileged to have had your calming influence in our lives. We have so many good memories sharing laughs and adventures with you guys. And knowing that you had our backs when we were juggling a new family with business. We have always admired the life that you and Chrissy chose, following your passions and leaving a trail of kindness wherever you went."

Naomi Kilby, Barrington Outdoor Adventure Centre

"Just wanted to say those days rafting with you were some of the best days of my life, made all the more special by meeting you and hanging with you. You taught me so much just by being you. I'll treasure this 'til it's my time."

Rob Hales

"I, like all of our shared friends, have always held you in high regard, mate. Your adventurous nature has been well balanced by your humble, cruisy and calm demeanour. One of those blokes that you only hear good things about. You have lived life well Caz. Your memory will be held fondly."

Tony Broderick

"You have been a massive influence on me. I will be forever grateful for your kind words and guidance. I learnt an incredible amount from you, and continue to be inspired by how you chose to live and the adventures you have had along the way. Your love of the bush and appetite for adventure have always stood out even amongst my most adventurous and fun friends. I have nothing but fond memories of the time we have spent in the bush together. I have nothing but deep gratitude for the care and counsel you have selflessly given to me over the years. I hope you know that I love you Caz and that I think of you often. If there is an afterlife, I will look for your footsteps in a green valley somewhere, no doubt scoping out the next super cool mission."

Toby Waters

"You're an incredible human being, and without a doubt, the most respected person on the Nymbo."

Former guide Mel Nesbitt

"Hey Caz, you legend—I often think of you regularly whenever I am in the bush exploring. Not surprisingly, your deep connected energy with Mother Earth and your stoke to see the best of her whenever you can is inspiring, and such a truthful and beautiful way to live. Full respect to you and keep the stoke going."

Clayton Colmer

"Caz, I just want you to know that you have been one of the most influential people in my life. From you, I learnt raft guiding and leadership skills that I used throughout my life including running the rafting company in Canada. Your simple-living, calm, unflappable approach to things is something I have tried to emulate and will continue to strive for."

Brian Cork

"I've always looked up to you Caz, admired your love of the outdoors, your sense of adventure, your photos, your skills as an outdoorsman, your personality and sense of humour.

The places you and Chrissy have been together and explored together, captured and written about is next level. I remember saying to you that Point Lookout is one of my favourite places in the world—the only thing it lacked was a waterfall ... Of course, click into gear the Caz database of outdoor features and bang, "Yeah, if you just go down there, take the first left, go to you hit a creek, park there, walk down a bit, you'll find a waterfall." And of course we did.

Be certain, every time I look along the cliffs on that escarpment, I'll wonder if Caz is tucked up on some little ledge somewhere for an overnighter."

Pete Menzies

More of Craig's photographic work can be viewed on his and Chrissy's personal blog, **awildland.com.au**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HUMBLED AMONG GIANTS

Drew Jolowicz makes the pilgrimage to the birthplace of alpinism: Chamonix.

Words **DREW JOLOWICZ**
Photography **OLLY BOWMAN**

The towering peaks of the European Alps watch on as Drew makes the final push to the entry of what will be an unforgettable day on the Vallée Blanche

How do you even start to put a place like Chamonix into words? Should I even try? Sure, many have written about the mountains here before, although others prefer to let the peaks themselves tell the story, as they always have the final say. Mountains can't be conquered, but occasionally they let their guard down long enough for us to recreate in their presence. And at other times, well, those are the other times.

The European Alps, but in particular France's Chamonix Valley, had been a goal of mine for as long as I can remember. This year, for the first time, I was able to realise that ambition. The mountains here, widely considered the birthplace of modern alpinism, are some of the most revered in the world. The elevation difference between the town of Chamonix and the summit of nearby 4,805m Mont Blanc is greater than between Everest's basecamp and its summit. And ever since Mont Blanc's first successful ascent in 1786 by Jacques Belmat and Dr Michel Paccard, everything you could possibly want (and at times, not want) in terms of outdoor adventure is right here.

Adventurers from around the world converge on this corner of the Alps to enjoy some of the planet's most stunning yet demanding peaks. They can be climbed, jumped off or skied, and this is just in winter; myriad more options are available in the summer months. Chamonix is the ultimate proving ground for dopamine-fuelled adventure, a melting pot for alpine creativity.

I'll admit I was completely overwhelmed upon arriving in Cham. I could liken it to starting a giant jigsaw puzzle: Where do you even begin? Just like a puzzle, I thought it best to start in a corner to get my bearings. The terrain that's readily accessible from the valley is fantastic but mind boggling; it is preposterously steep, cliffs are everywhere, and it is easy to fly off the edge. Sadly, some do. Deaths are frequent.

That's the thing that makes a place like this so attractive yet dangerous at the same time. The access to steep couloirs, high-alpine faces and heavily glaciated terrain is some of the best in the world, and it attracts hordes of like-minded, adrenaline-seeking folk. This creates a level of hype I've not witnessed anywhere else. From my experience, if you want to add complexity to any alpine environment, just add people with differing goals, skill levels and attitudes towards risk.

The Vallée Blanche is a case in point. It is one of the most sought-after backcountry-ski descents in the world (if not *the* most sought after). In the right conditions, this vast expanse of crevasse-riddled, glaciated terrain is a skier's dream, yet on the wrong day, lives are tragically cut short every year.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Drew takes full advantage of 50cm+ of light, dry powder coating Petit Envers

Don't forget the crampons! Spiky tools are highly recommended for the walk down the famous arête that leads to a mind-blowing descent of Vallée Blanche

With the January sun so low in the sky, and with the town so deep in the valley, Chamonix remains in shade much of the day. Meanwhile, Drew chases sunlit powder high above

Columns of ice thousands of years old dominate the landscape as Drew descends though the serac fields of Grand Envers

It's skins on for a tour from Brevent up and over to Flégère

Piece by piece, I started small with shorter objectives, among them, the Vallée Blanche.

As long as I have been old enough to remember, this route had been on my bucket list, and I was fortunate that on this trip, good snow conditions—a January storm cleared cold, leaving a right-side-up snowpack—and an excellent weather window presented themselves. It was time to go.

I know I just eluded to the fact that extra humans carry extra risk, however this is meant in a much broader context. An experienced travel partner with an aligning mindset is critical for such a route.

Olly Bowman was the perfect partner. An experienced mountaineer, brilliant photographer and long-time resident of the Chamonix Valley, I felt assured in his presence that we could have a great day out on the Vallée Blanche. On rare occasions, a unique set of circumstances line up, and you find yourself in the right place at the right time. These are the moments of pure joy that exist between the harder times, the moments that fill up the cup.

On this memorable day, the Valle Blanche lived up to its name, caked in perfect white powder all the way down to the glacier. Choosing to traverse along the ridge to escape the masses, we descended down through the towering serac fields of Petit and Grand Envers. I'd studied countless photos and maps in the lead up to this trip, but nothing prepared me for the sheer scale and beauty of such a wild landscape.

We all have some form of internal bias when it comes to interpreting our surroundings, and I'm happy to admit that I was probably always going to look favourably upon this descent. It would have taken some exceptionally ordinary conditions, or a mishap, for me to come away thinking otherwise. Thankfully, neither occurred. Instead, skiing pristine powder through fields of glacial ice so rich in colour, ice that's thousands of years old, felt almost surreal. Being in the presence of such beauty is a memory that will stay with me for a very long time, hopefully forever.

+++++

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

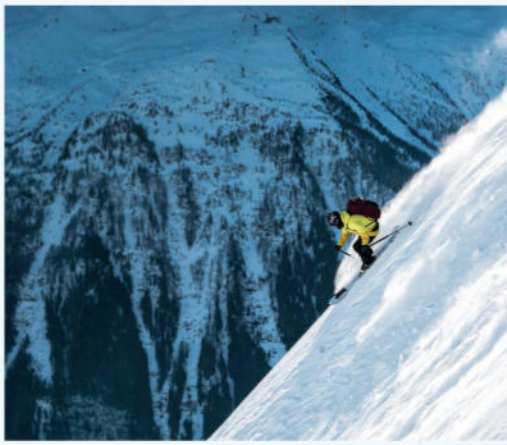
With confidence in the snowpack's stability, it's time to test out some of the steeper terrain options available

Under the watchful eye of the famed Aiguille du Midi (Southern Needle), Drew negotiates the famous arête leading to the Vallée Blanche

The contrasting balance between light and shade. If you look closely, you can see the Aiguille du Midi on the north-facing side of the Chamonix Valley

One element that makes Chamonix so attractive is its access to vast amounts of shorter touring objectives dotted all over the valley

Seemingly endless powder turns in the most surreal of landscapes. Sometimes everything just lines up



> “IT’S THE UNEASINESS THAT KEEPS ME ALERT, AND **CHAMONIX DEMANDS A SKI MOUNTAINEER’S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION** AND COMPLETE IMMERSION IN THE TASK AT HAND.”

I’ve always been an uncomfortable storyteller; it’s never come naturally. To me, actions hold more power than words. That said, as I’ve grown older, I’ve found fulfilment in reflecting upon moments through words. The narrative behind the decisions, the justification for the action. I’ve long respected the power of print, especially in an increasingly digital world. The art of a photographer’s images and the stories behind them, printed on actual paper in a format larger than a phone screen—these are the diaries of adventure, and alongside Olly I felt privileged to be able to create this diary in the birthplace of the extreme.

My passion for a very long time has been climbing up mountains and skiing back down them. Nothing more, and nothing less. That’s the real story to me, the one that makes the most sense in my mind. Everything else is just distraction and noise. From shorter tours on the sunny side of the valley above Brévent and Flégère, to skiing iconic big-mountain lines such as the Passerelle Couloir or tackling the numerous 4,000m peaks in and around the Mont Blanc Massif—it’s all here waiting.

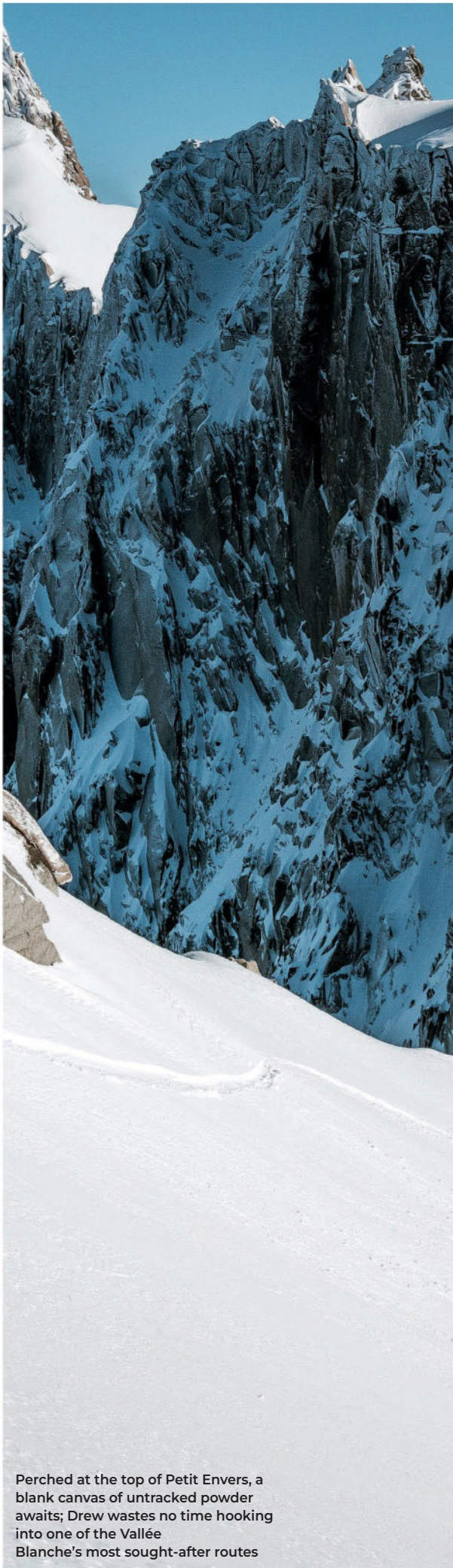
In general, in high peaks, I try to focus on the objective at hand, and on what can be achieved on any given day. Will the mountains let me in? Or will they shut me out? Is it one foot in front of the other on the way up? Or is it a left turn followed by a right turn on the descent? Is it vice versa? For me, this is how I simplify the process. If I looked at the final objective as a whole, I’d likely be overrun by anxiety and never set out in the first place. For me, I found this approach and mindset especially useful here in Chamonix, in some of the biggest terrain I’ve ever seen.

I’m immersed in the present in the mountains. It’s the only place where I feel completely at ease, all while feeling uneasy at the same time. This uneasiness keeps me alert, a necessity in Chamonix, which demands a ski mountaineer’s undivided attention and complete immersion in the task at hand.

Will I ever change? Probably not, although to be sure, priorities shift as you grow. I have a twelve-year-old daughter, Madi, and family commitments take priority; things like doing the school run, taking Madi to sport, and making sure I have enough work to put food on the table and pay the mortgage. All that day-to-day stuff, stuff that keeps me out of the mountains but that makes me appreciate the time I get in them all the more.

Being able to share this trip with my family made it all the more special; even though a place like Chamonix is on the upper end of wild, there is something here for everyone to enjoy. I had a hard time dragging Madi away from the climbing gym at Les Houches, and the Montenvers train trip up to view the Mer de Glace (which is sadly in retreat) is a shared memory that will last a lifetime. And, of course, I cannot not mention all the awesome skiing.

Adults often over complicate things, and sometimes kids have a way of summing up a place or situation far more succinctly. I’ll never forget something Madi said to me upon arriving in town. “Dad, the mountains here go straight up.” At the time, I’d been fumbling to find an apt description for our surroundings. When she said this, I thought to myself, “You’re right, Madi. They *do* go straight up.”



Perched at the top of Petit Envers, a blank canvas of untracked powder awaits; Drew wastes no time hooking into one of the Vallée Blanche’s most sought-after routes

The magnitude of the terrain here is hard to comprehend; a trusted guide or touring partner is a must

Yes, danger is ever present in such a wild place. Crevasses everywhere, both hidden and exposed, wait to swallow you up. As each day warms, the risk of serac falls increases, as does the likelihood of fragile snow bridges over crevasses collapsing under the weight of a skier's crossing. Again, this is why a travel partner experienced in crevasse rescue is essential, even though many choose to run the gauntlet solo.

Burned into my memory is the feeling I had when Olly and I arrived at the bottom of the Vallée Blanche. The descent from the top, from the Aiguille du Midi, is, at 23km, almost insanely long; it was lunchtime that day by the time we'd finished. The air was crisp and cold, maintaining the quality of the snow, yet in contrast I was hot and exhausted. Nonetheless, an immense amount of adrenaline flowed through my body; a lifelong dream had just been realised. A juxtaposition of sensations and emotions collided all at once.

But there was one feeling that seemed unambiguous, a feeling that summed up my time in Chamonix: a feeling of being humbled among giants. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Olly Bowman is a professional photographer based in the Chamonix Valley. For this story, he teamed up with Bright, Victoria-based free-skier and backcountry enthusiast Drew Jolowicz.

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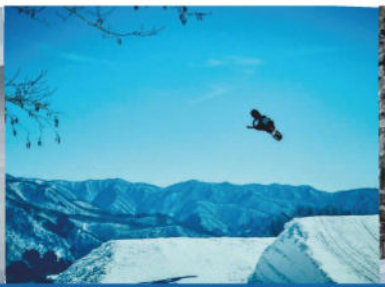

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IN SEARCH OF THE LOVERS OF THE SHADOWLAND

Prostanthera discolor **is one of Australia's most elusive plants, with only a single confirmed community in existence. A team set off into the wilds of NSW's Wollemi National Park to see if they could find another community of the plant that has not been confirmed since the 1980s.**

Words **JACK TALBERT**
Images **JAMIE LEPRE**

We are standing in Colin Gibson's botanical library. Plant samples surround us, running up the walls from floor to ceiling. And it's while we're taking in this testament to decades of specimen collection that Colin says something that, in hindsight, seems like a forewarning: "They are lovers of the shadowland."

We switch rooms, settling into lounge chairs as Col serves a pot of tea to myself and Max de Beer, a fellow ecologist. We're now in the living room, where the walls, like those in the botanical library, are again lined with specimens. In this case, though, the plants have been replaced by hanging, long-retired, hiking packs, a nod to Colin's lifelong passion for heading into the wilderness to see what he can find. The bags mounted proudly on the wall are steel-framed and canvas, dating well before my time, and are no longer used to carry anything apart from the stories that each could tell. But it's for one of those stories in particular that we are at Colin's house.

X marks the spot. Two markings made roughly four decades ago on an old topo map would guide us to our quarry. Or would they?


600
580
540
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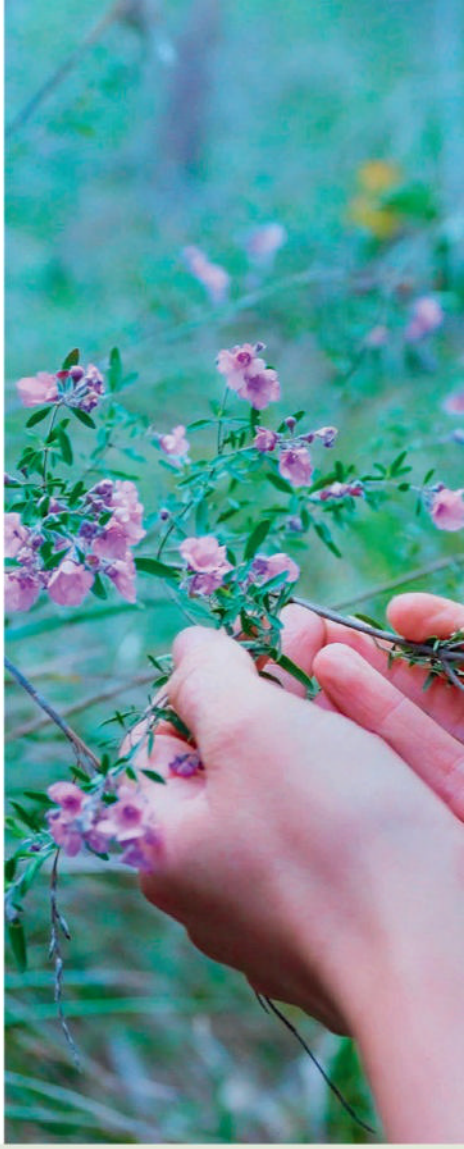
Wollemi NP



It was back in the '80s: NASAs Voyager 2 had captured the first images of Neptune's Rings, IBM just invented personal computers, Bob Hawke was in parliament, and Ken Done was making a splash with his colourful and bold oversized jumpers. Meanwhile, Colin Gibson and Robert Miller, two botanical powerhouses and friends, ventured into NSW's vast Wollemi National Park; there, they found one of the rarest mint bushes in Australia—*Prostanthera discolor*.

It was about this 1980s discovery—one that has not been repeated since—that we now wanted to pick Colin's and Rob's brains about. I was part of a team that had won a government contract, tasked with the aim of safeguarding species at risk of extinction. Near the top of the list was *Prostanthera discolor*. First described by European records in the 1800s, *P. discolor* has always been extremely limited in sightings, with the most recent within the deeper Wollemi being that by Colin and Robert in 1988. While researching the plant, we had stumbled upon a journal entry by Colin, in which he described the location he and Robert found the species. This location has become known as the Baerami Valley population of *Prostanthera discolor*.

To this day, Colin's notes on the species are the last known from the Baerami Valley. Our aim was to locate this disjunct population deep in the Wollemi, with the primary objective being to obtain a sample for propagation outside of its wild setting. If successful, this would ensure that any plants grown out of situ are as genetically diverse as they can be, enhancing their conservation prospects and further safeguarding this species.

We'd been given GPS coordinates of the plant's likely Baerami Valley location, and tasked to visit the site. But these coordinates were likely a 1980s record based on Colin's topo map, with the location potentially being off the mark by up to some 10km. And if our GPS point was wrong, which we suspected it might be after reading Col's old journal entry—the landscapes he described did not match the point we were given, nor the expected habitat of the species—then all we would be heading off on would be a wild goose chase through the Wollemi.

"IT'S MORE A TREASURE MAP THAN A TOPO MAP, WITH ITS NOT ONE BUT TWO HAND-ANNOTATED 'X MARKS THE SPOT' LOCATIONS FOR *P. DISCOLOR*."

So we kept digging. We called Col, emailed him for a few weeks, until he responded and invited us over. And as we are now discovering, the visit is well worth it.

While we pore over Col's original topo map— to Max and I, it's more a treasure map than a topo map, with its not one but two hand-annotated 'X marks the spot' locations for *P. discolor*—Colin and Robert exchange recollections:

"I don't know if you could say there was an abundance of this thing at any site."

"Small populations, very localised."

"They're very particular about where they grow. Often it's in hard-to-get-at places, in deep gullies, under cliffs."

Colin places the topo map aside, and Robert steps forward

with his own offering—a newspaper clipping. It's adorned in the happenings of the time, with advertisements from days when a whole BBQ chicken was $4.99. The newspaper opens to unveil the actual physical specimen of *Prostanthera discolor* they had collected nearly forty years prior in the Wollemi's Baerami Valley.

"The most distinguishing feature about the *Prostanthera discolor*," says Rob, "is the contracted inflorescence. As the name implies, you can clearly see it has discolorous leaves."

We're blown away; the sample is so well preserved. And it's taken from the exact spot we are soon heading to.

THE BAERAMI VALLEY IS NOT THE ONLY known location for *Prostanthera discolor*. There were thought to be a handful of other locations of the species, though over recent years, these sites have been resurveyed and unfortunately confirmed to only contain similar species within the *Prostanthera* genus. In fact, just one site has confirmed existence of *P. discolor*: Honeysuckle Creek, east of the town of Bylong and north of the Baerami Valley. The site is monitored by NPWS, and the population here seems to be in good health. However, it's not all good news. Having only one location of a plant species obviously places this plant at high risk of extinction; weed set, climate change, disease, or even a single event like extreme wildfire, could potentially wipe out the entire species.

The only other location that had not, because of its remoteness, been resurveyed is the one in the Baerami Valley discovered by Colin and Robert in the '80s. Engaging in that resurvey is essentially the task that lies before us. But before we head off on our search, we enlist the assistance of mapping guru Alex Pescud; perhaps his skills could help us hone where to target once we reach the two X's on Colin's map.

Onto a 3D image, Alex plots the records of the individuals of *P. discolor* at Honeysuckle Creek; being the only confirmed population of the species, it's a useful site to study and gain more of an understanding of the plant's growth habit. Once we see the 3D map, it is instantly plain as day: All *P. discolor*'s locations are on south-facing, lower-canyon slopes alongside minor waterways. This species is the shadow dweller Colin said it was.

IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

At Colin's house, poring over the original topographic map

Jack, Colin and Rob looking at the *Prostanthera discolor* sample obtained back in the '80s

Examining the original sample of *P. discolor* under a hand lens

Olivia at Honeysuckle Creek inspecting *Prostanthera discolor* in full bloom

The Honeysuckle Creek 3D render by Alex Pescud. Each purple dot repesents *P. discolor* locations, and vividly demonstrates how the plant likes to hide in the shadows of deep valleys

Max adding to his daily bird count

Setting off, excited to start the search; Liv, James and Jack head towards Baerami Creek

Colin's coining of *P. discolor* as "a lover of the shadowland" is a reference to George Althofer, an Australian botanist, author and poet born in 1903. Althofer had a special interest in the *Prostanthera* genus, a group of mint bushes. Of most relevance here is his book *Cradle of Incense: The Story of Australian Prostanthera*, which states our target species is a lover of coolness and moisture, and grows in deep gullies. The 'Cradle of Incense' referred to in the book's title is defined by Althofer as a 150km radius around the NSW town of Wellington, within which a disproportionate amount of the *Prostanthera* genus can be found.

Our pre-trip research also put us in touch with Jacob Ellis, a First Nations representative and local of the Baerami area. Jacob, taken by our mission to find this plant, offers to welcome us to walk on his Country. Using acacia smoke, he has a fire crackling, bubbling away and bathing us as he speaks to the significance of the area. Even the name Baerami holds significance. It likely comes from Baiame—in Aboriginal mythology, he created the land's rivers, mountains and forests, and established the laws and traditions for people, before returning to the sky, leaving his mark on the land. It is impossible to resist imagining the countless uses the fragrant mint bushes may have had for millennia of First Nations peoples. Our European understanding of the species is short, and profoundly touches on the gross reality that within just a few hundred years, we have managed to place *P. discolor*, and countless other species, at risk of extinction.

WITH OUR RESEARCH COMPLETE, we start our expedition with a search of the reference *P. discolor* population at Honeysuckle Creek. We confirm the species is flowering and is easily identifiable, with its deep-purple flowers standing out through the dense, green vegetation. And it is, as expected, within the shadows of small valleys. We conduct a check for its diagnostic features. Strongly aromatic: tick. Discolourous leaves: tick. Protracted inflorescence: tick. Prostrate anther: tick.

Target acquired. It's time to make tracks using our treasure map into the Baerami Valley.

This section of the Wollemi is a labyrinth, with canyons separated by towering walls of sandstone, scree slopes and heat haze. We are a team of four: Max, Olivia Gobran, James Lidsey and myself. We establish a basecamp, our home for the next three days as we journey into the shadowlands. The site is near a mark on Col's map showing where they'd camped forty years prior. They'd told us that native tussock grass was all they'd used back then for sleeping mats. We could see why; it was dominant around us. As we unload our ute-full of gear, their spartan approach to adventuring seems a good reminder that sometimes we can overdo it. On the flip side, it does mean we can eat well, and James serves up that evening an eggplant curry and naan that has a barn owl screeching for a taste.

"PURPLE FLOWERS TAUNT US AT EVERY TURN: IT SEEMS PURPLE IS IN VOGUE IN THE BAERAMI VALLEY. **BUT AS FOR OUR LOVER OF THE SHADOWLANDS? IT'S NOWHERE TO BE SEEN."**

We wake with the birds, and set off aiming for the pass between Gibber Peaks and Crypt Hill. As we get going, we see a little lorikeet; spotting a rarer bird like this seems a good omen.

Our progress is slowed by dense vegetation: walls of vine, spikes of acacia. Soon enough, we're over the saddle and being pulled down into the shadows towards Col's first *P. discolor* point. The excitement is building.

Max's pace increases as he descends into the gully. He is closely followed by James, who branches out in another direction. Olivia, sharp-eyed and determined, scans the lower slopes for any sign of our mint bush.

We are soon at the first X on Colin's treasure map.

"It surely can't be this easy," I say.

We fan out in silent anticipation, optimistic we'll soon be bagging a sample of this enigmatic plant.

Then James offers a suggestion: "Do we get tattoos on the drive back if we find it?"

"Sounds like a plan," Liv replies.

The stakes are raised, much to the concern of the ink-free Max and myself.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

James looking for a way up towards the summit of Crypt Hill

Day two along the top. Jack, James, Liv and Max on the way to the second validation point

One of the many 'ons-ens' within the Baerami Valley canyon system enjoyed by James

Jack showing that the Akubra is an underrated drinking vessel

Meanwhile, purple flowers taunt us at every turn: *Dampiera*, *Hardenbergia*, *Patersonia*, *Solanum*, *Indigophera*. It seems purple is in vogue this season in the Baerami Valley. But as for our lover of the shadowlands? It's nowhere to be seen.

After over an hour of searching in vain, we make the call to move on. The elephant in the room is that this area has evidence of recent severe fire. It's something none of us want to mention, as we know it means finding the plant is less likely due to the fire disturbance. But the evidence is clear. Rough-barked trees are scarred to the canopy, with some entirely consumed by fire, trunks that remain like tombstones. Devil's twine and coral pea smother much of the vegetation. The messy succession of regrowth occurring here, in what would otherwise have been ideal gully habitat, will likely not favour *Prostanthera*.

The species has existed for time unknown within the relative safety of moist canyons and valleys that afford protection from wildfire. Its habitat is an ecotone between dry rainforest and wet sclerophyll. These vegetation types have not evolved to burn, at least not to the severity of today's megafires. While little is known about *P. discolor*'s response to high-intensity fire, we do know that its related habitat does not have the resilience that drier systems have. It is highly likely that if this species is consumed by fire, its seed bank is scorched, and any remaining plants are then outcompeted by the more opportunistic and fire-tolerant species of acacia and myrtle.

This fruitless search costs us most of the morning. We now feel obligated to investigate the nearby highpoint of Crypt Hill—so named due to the presence of *P. cryptandroides*, another finding of Col's and Robert's way back when. But given this is a side mission, time does not allow for a long search, and we sample the nearest *Prostanthera* in hope. Alas, once back at the office, Max confirms under the microscope that the sample is not *P. discolor* or even *P. cryptandroides,* but is instead *P. prunelloides*.

We stop for lunch under a profusely flowering and fragrant *Commersonia* along Baerami Left Hand before continuing towards another canyon. It is here that our day is nearly brought to a sudden halt. A red-bellied black snake gets itself caught between our legs.

Max and I defy gravity, and levitate in panic.

We have been expecting our slithering friends. A previous attempt to locate *P. discolor* in this valley by the University of NSW was thwarted by an unbearable number of black and brown snakes, coupled with scorching temperatures. We've come prepared with snake-proof gaiters, though we have no desire to put them to the test. Luckily, we don't have to, and the red-bellied black makes its escape without incident into the pools of Baerami.

As the day is moving faster than we are, we adjust the planned route, and dismiss an attempt to summit Miller Peak (yes, it's named after Robert); instead, we push upstream into the canyon's lower reaches, the location of the second target point.

About halfway to the confluence we're aiming for, the sun disappears behind steep canyon walls. The habitat looks decent for *P. discolor*. In some areas, we find westringia patches, similar to the co-occurrence at Honeysuckle Creek. Again, specks of purple are prolific; false leads abound. With us running out of daylight, we decide against continuing to the target location, instead saving it for the next day. We jump boulders, slide down

The team atop Rowan Smith Hill taking in the views before dropping further into Wollemi NP

rocks, and make our way back to basecamp. Hiking boots are swapped for sandals, and we make our way to the rockpools for a pre-dinner swim.

After sunrise, we embark on our second and final chance to locate *P. discolor*. We opt for the high line, deviating from the route Colin and Robert took, and instead we roll the dice on dropping off the ridge and into a gully that will place us closer to the target point. Midway up, Max spots a brush-tailed rock wallaby on the prominent north-facing slope. It's a timely find, as Max soon has to turn back and make tracks for his next mission—surveying red-lored whistlers at Nombinnie Nature Reserve in central NSW.

From here, it's Olivia, James and myself. We enter terrain that's even more exposed, and cross a knife-edge ridgeline covered in wildflowers and chest-high *Stypandra* in full bloom. The scenery is unforgettable, looking into the shadows of the canyons from our highpoint. Scenes like this are a highlight of our job—hiking through wilderness well off the beaten track.

As we navigate the ridgeline, our eyes scan for the flashing shape of another rock wallaby. Although we see no more, there's an uncanny sensation of their presence; the shadows of the sandstone seem alive, and hidden just beyond our sight, the wallabies' eyes—which I suspect are glowing like those of the faceless, hooded Jawas in Star Wars—silently observe our every step.

The gully we gamble on for our descent into the target canyon is thick with myrtle and wattle. There is more post-fire regrowth, much of which is dead and matted together by the evil combination of devil's twine and coral pea. These signs of bushfire disturbance are especially unwelcome, given we're near Colin and Robert's second location, and given the effect of fire on *P. discolor*.

The canyon's naturally formed pools, coined 'onsens' by James, are a sound reward for the bushbashing it takes to drop down into the shadowland. Boots are off; the aeropress is out. We indulge in a late lunch swim and americano. Our spirits are high; we're no more than 200m from the second validation point.

The point itself is within the upstream armpit of the confluence of a short and sharp gully that drops into the main canyon system. A shadowland indeed. There are numerous positive signs, with the side gully looking very similar to the side tributaries of Honeysuckle Creek. Co-occurring species are present. It's time to fan out and to walk lines up and down at our final target point. And while fire regrowth and burnt trunks are omnipresent, we ignore these signs as we optimistically scour the area.

IN THE END, UNFORTUNATELY, we do not find *Prostanthera discolor* in the Baerami Valley. The area had been burnt too fiercely, too recently. If it weren't for this, I'm sure we would have found the elusive mint bush.

It is a hard thing to swallow when a trip is unsuccessful. With so much preparation, and the planning going so smoothly, we were perhaps overly optimistic that we would be successful.

Olivia puts it well. "Everything we were in control of went great, with the only thing we weren't in control of—the actual presence and persistence of *P. discolor*—evading us." With heads held less high, we realise we will not be finding the much-coveted mint bush this time; there will be no celebratory floral tattoos on the drive home.

We make our way downstream further into the canyon, eyes peeled for hopeful glimmers of purple on the creek banks. We make the most of the onsens with some afternoon-sun swims, hoping to raise spirits as we come to terms with the enigmatic plant no longer persisting in our target locations.

Though we didn't find *P. discolor*, our journey unveiled critical insights into the species' vulnerability to severe fires, and the precariousness of its habitat. It reinforced the urgency of conservation efforts, especially at Honeysuckle Creek, where the only known population remains.

When we notify Colin of the result, he responds with a line that could be a metaphor for life. "It's easier to find things," he says, "when you're not looking for them." **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Jack Talbert is an accredited biodiversity assessor, and is Director of Lodge Environmental. A 22-minute short film about the search for *P. discolor* is available on YouTube: **tinyurl.com/y8etx76y**

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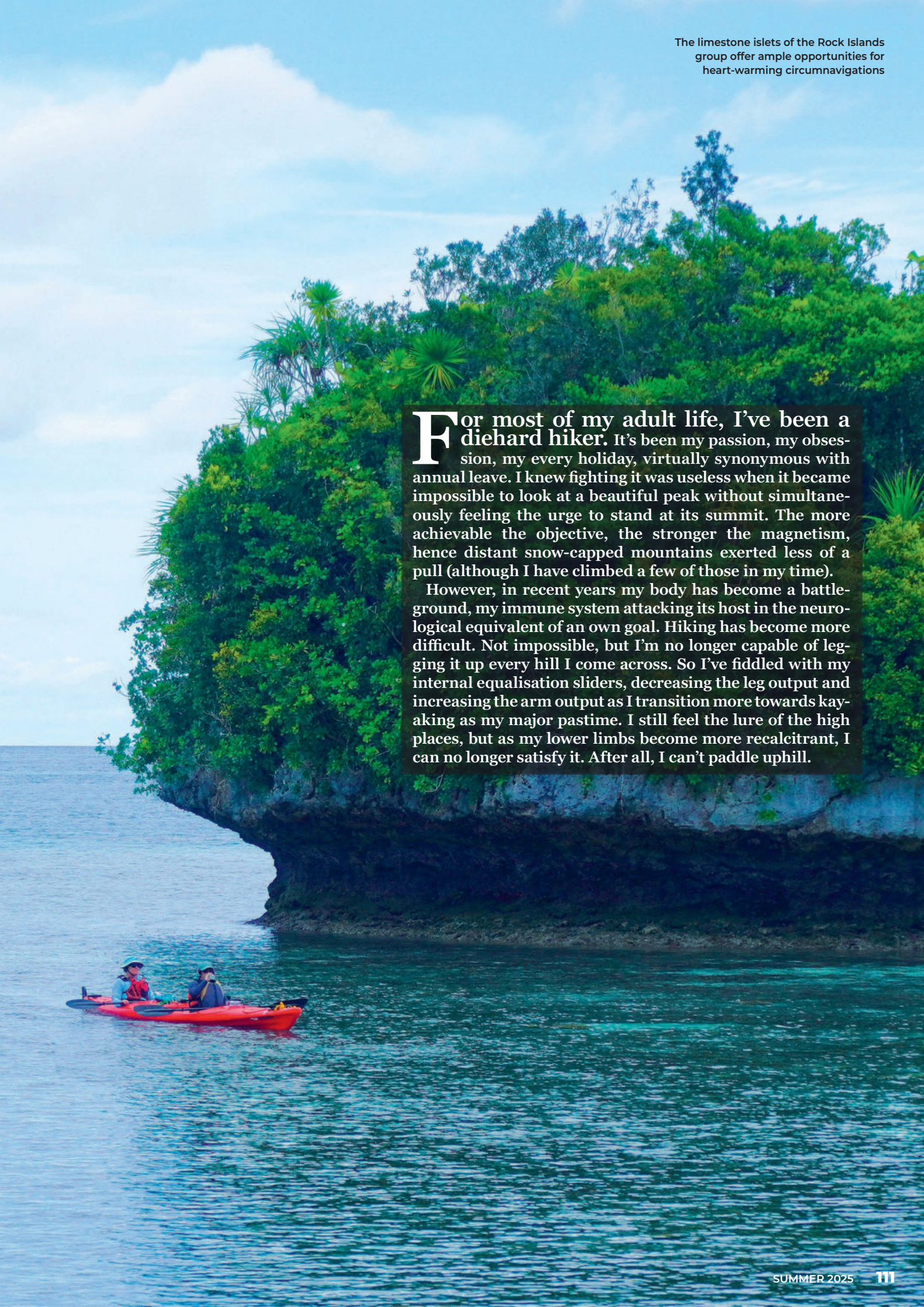
CIRCUMNAVIGATING LIFE

Diehard hiker Dan Slater has been transitioning towards a new obsession—paddling. And what better place to discover the kayaking equivalent of summit fever than Palau.

Words + Photography **DAN SLATER**



The limestone islets of the Rock Islands group offer ample opportunities for heart-warming circumnavigations

For most of my adult life, I've been a diehard hiker. It's been my passion, my obsession, my every holiday, virtually synonymous with annual leave. I knew fighting it was useless when it became impossible to look at a beautiful peak without simultaneously feeling the urge to stand at its summit. The more achievable the objective, the stronger the magnetism, hence distant snow-capped mountains exerted less of a pull (although I have climbed a few of those in my time).

However, in recent years my body has become a battleground, my immune system attacking its host in the neurological equivalent of an own goal. Hiking has become more difficult. Not impossible, but I'm no longer capable of legging it up every hill I come across. So I've fiddled with my internal equalisation sliders, decreasing the leg output and increasing the arm output as I transition more towards kayaking as my major pastime. I still feel the lure of the high places, but as my lower limbs become more recalcitrant, I can no longer satisfy it. After all, I can't paddle uphill.

"OH, REALLY? WHAT COUNTRY IS THAT IN THEN?" It's probably the most common response I get when I tell people I'm going to Palau. I can't blame them; the name sounds more like a piece of furniture, or the graphic-novel sound bubble that accompanies a hero punching a bad guy in the chops. More realistically, the small archipelagic nation is known for its involvement in the Pacific theatre during the late stages of WWII.

Before learning about Southern Sea Ventures' (SSV) week-long expedition-kayaking trip, my own personal knowledge was limited to Jellyfish Lake, a lagoon to which tourists travel from across the world in order to snorkel among floating, stingless blobs of goo. A pity then that the gelatinous population of the lake has, so to speak, fallen off a cliff in recent years. It may yet recover, but for now there's nothing worth seeing. They may as well change its name to 'Lake'. Theories for the decline include rising sea temperatures, excess sunscreen in the water from an estimated 100,000 swimmers a year, and (my own) an ill-advised deal with a visiting trifle magnate. The truth remains elusive, but fortunately there is plenty more to Palau than stingless blobs of goo.

After one night in Koror—a capital city the size of a small Australian rural town in which I experience Palau's #2 local cuisine (Spam fries—as delicious as they sound)—I'm raring to go. The country is comprised of a main body of volcanic basalt waving a fragmented tail of limestone islets, sharp and junglefied and beautiful. It's this complex, the Rock Islands, that the nine members of our group will be exploring along with SSV guides Chris (Australian) and Mac (Palauan).

Generally, I'm more of a DIY adventurer, but the logistics required to organise a trip of this length, in a country this remote, would result in a headache the size of Samoa (the American one). Having paddled with SSV before, I know they know their stuff.

Mac's morning TED Talks on every aspect of the country were as popular as sliced bread. Of which there was none

And they know that I know they know their stuff. And it's not only me—this is Bev's fifth outing with the company, and Leigh's and Geoff's tenth!

Five minutes' paddle from the jetty and we're straight into the intricate tracery of limestone that looked so captivating from the plane. Noodling around the first part of this rugged coastline, all scooped out bays and jagged headlands, I also explore the rudiments of Palauan pronunciation. For instance, Ngerchaol, a small island we pass, sounds like *nyer-ahl*. The more advanced Ngeruktabel and Oimadelchesuch will have to wait.

The Palauan government has established ten so-called Adventure Camps on various beaches throughout the Rock Islands. Due to the nature of karst geology—islands are formed by the slow erosion of an ancient, uplifted coral reef—the proportion of beach to coastline is extremely low, and the sight of a yellow sliver of sand is a rare one among the vertical limestone walls. Each camp has a large, sheltered area, picnic tables, flat ground for tents, long-drop toilets, and about a billion hermit crabs. [You think Sydney apartments are shoeboxes? Some of these guys are living in shells as tiny as 5mm across! Walking to the toilet in the night feels like an act of genocide.] You won't find these camps on any Palauan website, and you can't book them in advance, but that isn't a problem as it's only really multi-day kayaking groups that use them, and there are precious few of those.

OUR FIRST TWO NIGHTS ARE SPENT on Ulong. The country's easiest-to-pronounce island is shaped like a banana shot full of holes, and it was here that the East India Company's ship *The Antelope* foundered on a reef in 1783, her crew rescued by the local people. Unlike the two Jesuits who washed up on Sonsorol Island seventy years prior, only to be consumed by the residents (maybe with some fava beans and a nice chianti), the chief of Ulong helped his guests build a new vessel. He sent them away three months later with a smile and a wave, and also his son, Prince Lee Boo. Unfortunately, London did not agree with young master Boo, who died of smallpox before he'd even had the chance to become addicted to gin.

Our full day on Ulong is taken up by an exploration of its heart—a labyrinth of bays, lagoons, and channels. Each cliff wall is undercut by a couple of metres thanks to millennia of rising and falling tides and sea levels, making the smaller islets resemble giant, craggy mushrooms. Re-emerging into the ocean proper after a leisurely few hours of gliding over glassy lagoons and snorkelling among soft coral, we're met by significantly higher winds and choppier conditions. For some, battling our way back along the coast is a challenge, but for me at least, the youngest member of the group, it's more of a thrill.

After an uncertain start, the group dynamic is beginning to gel. I've deduced the nine of us cover all the personality types—the Mouse, the Grump, the Joker, the Medicine Cabinet, the

Idyllic Pacific Ocean camping. If only there wasn't so much sand ...

Arch enemies—the eroded limestone fashions a paddlers' playground

> **"FIVE MINUTES' PADDLE FROM THE JETTY** AND WE'RE STRAIGHT INTO THE INTRICATE TRACERY OF **LIMESTONE THAT LOOKED SO CAPTIVATING FROM THE PLANE."**

Lapsed Hippy (aka the Punk Drummer), the Underwater Talker, the Midlife Crisis, and the Queenslander. Oh, and the Undercover Journo (me). It's also on Ulong that Mac really starts to emerge from his shell, proving there's nothing he doesn't know about the geology, flora, fauna, history or culture of his country. He shows us the fearsome-yet-beautiful fish poison tree, takes us on a tour of the archaeological remains of Ulong village, points out the rusty-capped kingfisher and the megapode, and even swims out to spear us some exotic fish for dinner.

Then, in the morning, he pulls the end off what I'd thought was his personal poo-tube and fishes out a sheaf of beautiful maps.

"What do you guys know about ... human history?" he asks.

Evaluative glances pass between us as the question hangs there, aloof in the morning sun. We sense it's rhetorical, but we don't wish to imply ignorance by staying silent. Just as I'm about to say something wholly inappropriate, Mac proceeds to school us on the waves of human migration that populated Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. We walk away suitably upskilled.

Mac's morning talks slowly become something of a highlight—open questions used as a springboard from which to educate us on, eg the nation's strategic importance during the war, the intricacies of the three types of Palauan inter-tribal warfare, or the role of local quartzite quarries as the source of the giant stone currency of Yap, 2,000km to the east.

AT 7° NORTH OF THE EQUATOR, the current water temperature is around 27°C, while the air hovers around 21-23°C, year-round. [I immediately picture a group of bent, snow-haired Palauans sitting around an umukai earth oven, reminiscing about the fearsome cold snap of '57, when temperatures plummeted to 19°C.] June is something of a shoulder season. While intermittent cloud cover makes for more comfortable paddling, the islands are swept by frequent squalls, although miraculously only once or twice are we clipped by the corner of a passing shower.

We've just crossed the channel between Ulong and Ngebedangel on Day Three when one rather large cloud bursts. Fortunately, we're within lunging distance of a roomy cave with a tiny natural 'indoor' harbour—perfect parking for our kayaks. Chris and Mac throw together an early lunch while we watch the raindrops stippling the ocean outside.

"I wonder how many Japanese soldiers ate their lunch in this cave," ponders Chris.

The Pacific's most famous 'lost soldier' was Hiroo Onoda, who hid away in the Philippines until 1974, believing the war was still ongoing, but Palau had their own band of holdouts. Lt. Ei Yamaguchi and 32 compatriots only surrendered in early 1947, the last remnants of the 10,000 Japanese who died during the fierce battle of Peleliu.

An hour or so later, we glide into the beautiful turquoise lagoon at Ngchus, walled in by jungle. Wreckage from a Japanese Zero fighter plane—here a wing, there a fuselage—rests a few metres beneath the still surface. And beyond the camp shelter, wartime stores—thick-walled concrete bunkers with holes the size of sunfish blown through them—occupy the flat ground.

On tonight's menu—needlefish. These were traditionally caught using a palm-leaf kite trailing a sticky rope of collected spider web which dragged in the water, attracting and entrapping the curious surface swimmers. Ingenious. Mac's speargun is quicker, although on one occasion it takes him a couple of hours to return; when he does, though, it's with a bounteous catch dangling from his belt. Someone jokes that, having had no bites, he probably swam all the way back to the fish market at Koror so as not to disappoint us.

It's on Ngchus that Bede asks about my on/off limp, curiosity mixed with concern. I've been anticipating this and claim stiff limbs from a day in the saddle. He doesn't pursue it, which I appreciate, but the problem becomes more obvious as I pace the camp before dinner, left leg twitching every thirty seconds. I blame Restless Leg Syndrome, which is only half the truth, but evade further discussion as I hate admitting the existence of an enfeebling health issue, even to myself. The RLS is usually controlled by medication, but being out of my routine has caused missed doses. I'm lucky it hasn't so far broken out while in the kayak; such is the violence with which my legs sometimes spasm, I can imagine capsizing the thing by kicking it over from within.

> "I PICTURE A GROUP OF BENT, SNOW-HAIRED PALAUANS SITTING AROUND ... **REMINISCING ABOUT THE FEARSOME COLD SNAP OF '57, WHEN TEMPERATURES PLUMMETED TO 19°C.**"

OUR FREQUENT SNORKELLING STOPS ARE often rewarding, and visibility is usually very good. On one occasion (unfortunately shared with thrashing daytrippers in life jackets) we see giant clams, some as large as a metre across. Their mantles (ie their 'lips') glow vibrantly from the seabed—rich purple, taupe and deep rust, the hue determined by the algae that live on each one. Chris freedives down to an empty shell to recreate a classic Boys' Own Adventure image—a skin diver running out of air, one fin caught in the vice-like grip of a monstrous bivalve.

On other underwater excursions, I spot a flowery flounder glaring at us from the top of its head; a shoal of wonderfully named yellow-tailed fusiliers (I imagine a company of them charging the Russian guns at Balaclava); and pairs of surgeonfish whirling in circles nose-to-tail, like flashing Catherine wheels. However, nothing beats coming face-to-nose with a shiver of sharks just off the beach at Ngermeaus. Chumming the water with the day's fish guts, Mac lures eleven black-tipped reef sharks into our orbit, and we watch in awe as their perfect bodies slide around us, mouths slightly open in that semi-hungry/semi-gormless way they have.

Mac informs us that four of the sharks are pregnant females likely to give birth this very night, timing their expulsions with the full moon. We'd seen small packs of baby sharks patrolling the shallows each morning, last month's crop, most likely.

While the snorkelling is good, I'm never happier than when kayaking, alone or in perfect sync with a partner. From lagoon to rock arch, from overhang to leaning stack, the scenery is outstanding; the Rock Islands of Palau should be ranked right up alongside Ha Long Bay and Raja Ampat. By the end of the week, I am trying to cram in as much action as possible, all too aware of a future in which waking up on a deserted beach and jumping straight into a kayak will be a lot harder. On the other hand, I won't miss carrying around half the Gobi Desert in my boardshorts, or miss living a life of perpetual dampness. My phone has spent so much time in a bag of rice (in order to suck up moisture within the device) that it's developed a new warning: 'Rice detected in charging port'!

On the penultimate afternoon, as the rest of the group are setting up tents, I persuade Chris to accompany me to the outlying Beab Islands, a row of stacks two kilometres to the east. It feels great to really open the shoulders and plough toward a distant objective, focussed on my technique—core engaged, torso swivelling, feet securely braced. We thread a couple of the stacks and head straight home as Chris has to help prepare dinner.

It's a bonus paddle but I'm still thirsting for more, and after we disembark for the last time the following day, I slip out again, alone this time, unable to resist the small island opposite our camp. I cruise slowly around it, taking my time, gazing up at the sooty-headed terns and fruit bats, their leather wings flashing translucent as they glide before the setting sun.

As I round the final bluff to see my new friends cracking open a surprise bottle of wine, I feel a sudden rush, a dopamine high I last felt standing atop a high peak. In fact, the urge to encircle any kind of small island has had that familiar irresistibility. The realisation dawns—I've discovered the kayaking equivalent of summit fever! Islets, rock stacks, cays, skerries, atolls—circumnavigation is the new peak bagging, disobedient legs be damned! Life just took an upturn. **W**

IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

This hermit crab is at least 1,000 times bigger than the tiniest ones we found. Imagine one 1,000 times bigger again!

Needlefish—hard to spear and fillet, easy to eat for dinner

Exiting a small lagoon where Mac had previously made friends with a baby crocodile. Sadly, he was out that day

This is what it's all about—cruising the perfect blue from island to island

Rob guards the kayaks from the setting sun

Palau has strict environmental laws written into its constitution, along with official encouragement

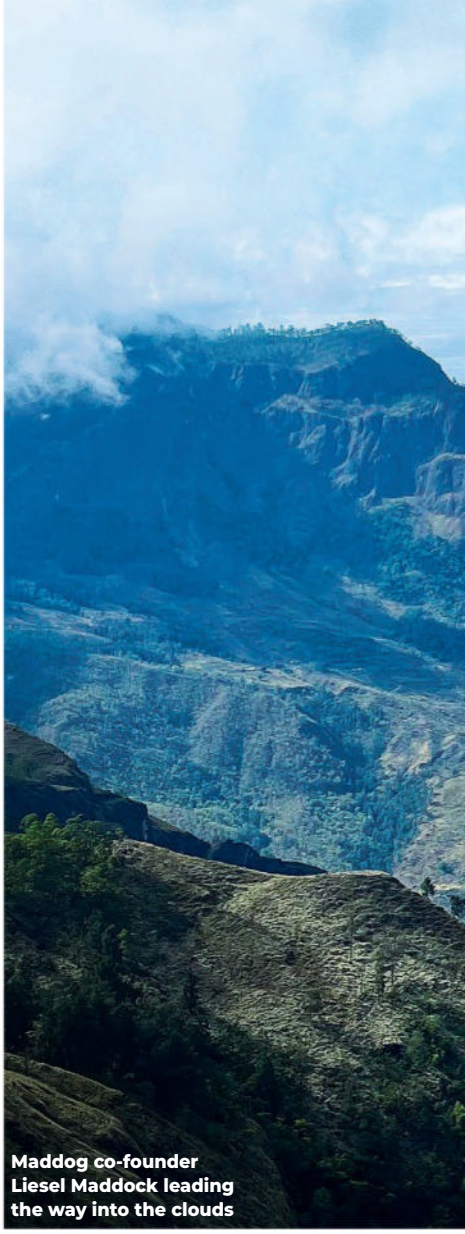
CONTRIBUTOR: Dan Slater, a lifelong bushwalker, is a fifteen-year veteran in the retail sector. He keeps forgetting, losing, breaking or drowning headlamps, and is thinking instead of mounting a candle on his head. Dan paddled in Palau as a guest of Southern Sea Ventures.

NO SURRENDER!

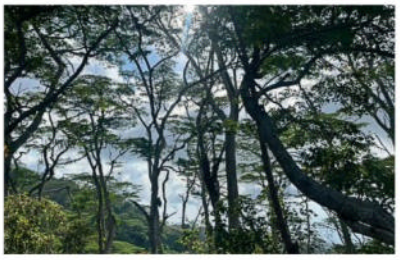
TIMOR-LESTE'S LA RENDE!

Given the fact Timor-Leste is one of Australia's closest neighbours, given the intertwining of our histories, and given the trekking there is so fantastic, it's time that this fabulous destination was on more adventurers' radars.

Words & Photography **JAYNE D'ARCY**



Maddog co-founder Liesel Maddock leading the way into the clouds



Life-changing. It's too often said and written. But while I'm putting one gaiter-covered leg in front of the other, and striding comfortably with fancy carbon hiking poles, something in me switches on. The narrow singletrack trails we're hiking have dry-season grasses bending over them, and there are protruding rocks in random places, so my eyes are busy flicking up from where I am to where I'm going. I try, as often as I can, to look up, because I can't believe what I'm seeing. At one point, I round a bend and the view of sharp mountains in the distance comes into focus. I do a double-take: I could be in the European Alps. I came here expecting heat and unforgiving terrain: Instead, I find amazement.

Sharing a coconut at a lunch stop

Dusty roads were a change from gnarly (but fun!) single-track out of Fatubessi

This is Timor-Leste (half the island of Timor; the other half is Indonesian West Timor), a country known for its recent independence, its coffee and its iridescent reefs (it's part of the Coral Triangle, whose waters are believed to be the most biodiverse on the planet). It's also known for its oil and gas fields. What Timor-Leste is not known for is the mountainous spine running along its interior. Nor is it known for the quality of its trekking: Its trails take you walking through coffee plantations, wading through rivers, and navigating along the island's raised backbone into fragile rainforest and down to waterfalls.

But it should be. I'm one in a group of eight hikers on the seven-day La Rende! Trek, Timor-Leste's own spectacular version of the legendary Kokoda Track. ('La Rende!' means 'No Surrender!' in the local Tetum language.) The walk—which links up historical military sites with points of natural beauty like the Dokomali waterfall and the country's highest peak, Tatamailau (Mt Ramelau)—is organised by Maddog Adventures, a young adventure-tour company that, although owned by Aussies Liesel and Sam Maddock, has a goal of promoting economic development in Timor-Leste's rural communities. The company is already looking ahead beyond the young nation's oil and gas revenues, because when that era ends, other income streams like tourism will become important. It's what's led Liesel and Sam to commence upskilling locals so they can manage, operate, and guide the trek, locals like guide Ollie Rangel, who is with us on the hike. And from each village along the route, locals are arranged to accompany trekkers and to share their stories and knowledge.

"LOCALS GO ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS: DRYING COFFEE ON TARPS, HEADING OUT TO FEED GOATS. **OLDER WOMEN CHAT AND CHEW BETEL NUT. KIDS AND LOCAL DOGS ARE CURIOUS."**

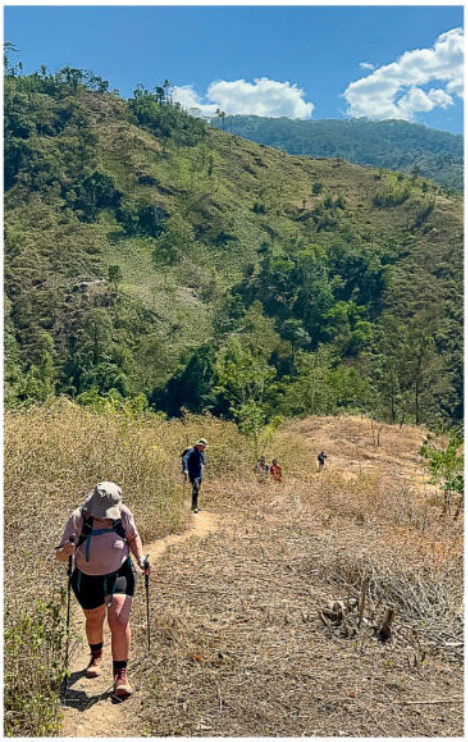
TIMOR-LESTE IS A COUNTRY with a long colonial past. Think hundreds of years of occupation by the Portuguese, then a brief period of independence in 1975, followed by the 1975-1999 occupation by Indonesia. Timorese resistance fighters and their supporters hid in these mountains, running an ultimately successful resistance effort against them. Australians did the same in WWII, finding vantage points from which to spy, and plan attacks, on the Japanese. No wonder this interior has a sense of intrigue to it. Few know—me included—about the Japanese occupation and Australian WWII effort here; learning about this history is partially why I'm on this hike.

Timor-Leste was a strategic spot in WWII—with its easy access route to Australia (it's an hour's flight from Darwin)—and our hike takes us in the footsteps of the Australian commandos of the 2/2 (pronounced 'second second') who arrived here to (unsuccessfully) stave off the Japanese over eighty years ago.

We begin with acclimatisation time in Dili. We stay at the Hotel Timor—one of the grander and central hotels in town. When its doormen swing open the glass doors for me, it's like stepping into a colonial world, with carved wood, aircon, and a cafe serving Portuguese tarts and espresso. Soon our accommodation will be a combination of tents and family-run guesthouses that may/may not even have electricity for fans. Some contrast.

We're mini-bussed high up the mountain behind Dili to the Dare Memorial Museum which commemorates the Australian commandos and Timorese *kriadu* (youth who willingly assisted the Australian soldiers). We watch a video with a voiceover from Kirsty Sword Gusmão, the Australian-born former First Lady of Timor-Leste, talking about the impact Australia had on the country in 1942. It's not glowing: After the Australians left, tens of thousands of Timorese, including current President José Ramos-Horta's family members, were killed by the Japanese for assisting them.

The next day, our group heads out under the hot sun on a 'Battlefields of Dili' walking tour. Guy Warnock, a historian and former Australian peacekeeping soldier who served in Timor-Leste, tells us the story of the 1942 landing of the small force of 300 Australian commandos with their Dutch allies. The 2/2



IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

Setting up camp in the centre of Asumanu village for our first night

Timorese guide Ollie Rangel taking us off-road along a unique treed hill-side ridge

Heading into Fatubessi via the bamboo bridge

Jayne at a traditional *uma adat* (sacred house)

Climbing back up towards lunch after a delicious dip in the river. We dried out in five minutes

were fresh from training at Victoria's Wilsons Promontory—today itself a prime hiking destination—and had arrived from neighbouring Dutch Timor ready to protect (neutral) Portuguese Timor's airfield from the Japanese. Much of today's Dili is built on an airstrip Australian commandos had tried to defend—and ultimately blew up—all those years ago. It's such an interesting walking tour, but the sun is already unbearable, and I'm wondering how I'll hike through it day after day.

But it's soon time. A 4WD convoy brings us to the one-kiosk village of Asumanu, having stopped already near bigger Bazartete to explore the scene of a WWII battle. There, Guy took us into the bush and showed us some remaining Australian-dug gun pits and the original gravesite of two Australians killed there (their bodies were repatriated).

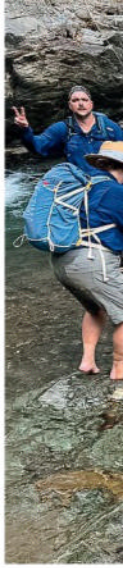
On the night before the trek commences, I'm getting school camp vibes as we blow up our mattresses and chuck them inside our tents. We're sleeping in a tiled, sheltered patio of a small central building in the village, and locals are going about their usual business around us: drying coffee on tarps, heading out to feed goats. The older women chat and chew betel nut, smiling when we catch their gaze. The kids and local dogs are curious.

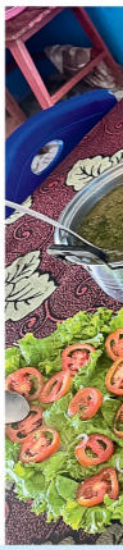
It's 25 years since the 1999 ballot for independence, yet the destruction wrought by the departing Indonesians and Indonesia-trained militia is still evident: Houses are basic, and sanitation is almost non-existent. The loo is a squat toilet with a *mandi* shower (a bucket and a tub of water) nearby; we share it with the village. It's all about hand sanitiser and trying to keep ourselves well. We sit down in a neighbouring family's home for a Timorese dinner—a variation of rice, two-minute noodles, vegetable and meat soup, fried fish, chicken, beans and greens—and watch the sun go down between trees in the distance. Tomorrow, it begins.

THERE'S NO RUSH ON THE FIRST MORNING and we leave after 9AM. Breakfast is local *paun* (bread roll) filled with fried eggs or our Dili-bought peanut butter and/or jam. Luckily for me and my minor coffee addiction, Maddog also runs coffee tours in-country, and they bring along plungers and a supply of top-notch coffee.

Our packs get tied onto the Troopy (you can carry your own pack, but I figure the hike will be hard enough) and we begin, with 12km to walk on our first day. Starting above 800m asl, we head down narrow trails to below 400m to our first river crossing, where we keep our feet dry by jumping from one large boulder to the next. We zip up from the river abruptly, scrambling at points, with shale splitting away from the contact with our feet, causing me to slip and slide. I grab onto branches and regularly need to abandon my hiking poles to get a better grip. The terrain levels out, and we have lunch in another family home, then climb back up to the 800m we started at and hit 1,300m. I'm







feeling satisfied to put to bed a great day of hiking. Up high in Timor-Leste's interior, it's cool enough to be comfortable.

Guy the historian is on the hike too, pointing out areas that featured in the stories he told us on the Battlefields of Dili tour. After a sleep interrupted by community karaoke, barking dogs, and—when the dogs finally exhausted themselves—roosters crowing, we walk to the crumbling former hospital in Hatolia. This is where WW2 Australian soldiers and kriadu would have walked to, transporting one of the commandos, Private Allan Hollow, who'd had his jaw blown off. Australian Dr Roger Dunkley fixed him up before he was evacuated from the country weeks later by an American flying boat.

Hatolia is also where, on 13 March 1942, Australian David Ross, the British Consul-General, met with the Aussie commandos holding a surrender demand from the Japanese. The initial reaction from the soldiers was reportedly, *Surrender? Surrender, be fucked!* (This is how the hike got its 'No Surrender!' name.) By then, there were 350 Australians in Timor—hardly enough to deflect or defeat 3,000 Japanese—but they caused mayhem when they could, waging a campaign of annoyance against the Japanese, and killing many, until departing (along with the 2/4 who followed them) without surrendering.

But it's not only military history that I'm learning about. As I hike, I discover a land of rust-coloured dirt with eucalypt forests, with exposed plains bisected by wide, rocky rivers reduced to streams, and, most striking of all, with shade trees for the coffee. Planted by the Portuguese who brought coffee to Timor, they've since grown so high that they barely do the job they're supposed to do: shade the coffee plants beneath them.

> **"WE WERE SUPPOSED TO APPROACH FROM THE OTHER WAY. HOWEVER, LIFE LESSON: GOING THE 'WRONG WAY' CAN ... BE BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL."**

As we walk along high ridges, we can see their photogenic waves of green in the valleys below.

ON DAY FOUR, WE ZIGZAG DOWN through the deep-green coffee plants to a wild, flowing river. Is there anything better on Earth? We reach the bank and debate taking off our boots to cross; we end up crossing, then stripping down to swim anyway. It's hot, and the water and small waterfall are beautifully refreshing. Minutes after we put our daypacks back on and resume hiking—another big ascent into a small village—our clothes are dry.

The Timorese we meet on our hike are welcoming and enthusiastic. Some want to chat; some are bemused when we pop up, one by one, from their backyards and onto the roads. Their dogs have usually raised the alarm already, but seeing hikers using local trails they've used for decades doesn't seem to surprise them.

At the morning briefings, I want to know two things: How many kilometres are we walking, and how much elevation are we gaining? But after Day One, I already know the answers: Firstly, between 12-23km, and secondly, probably lots. Many trail runners and other hikers have been taken on this route before, but

it's evolving: We walk mostly on singletrack and sometimes on dirt roads, taking *dalan quarte* ('short cut' in Tetum) if they look more fun. But the dirt roads are usually just fine for hiking, and we take advantage of being able to walk on them side-by-side, catching up with each other and absorbing the extraordinary landscapes together. Taking dalan quarte between road switchbacks becomes the norm; we disappear up off the road and into the bushes like any local would.

That's not all we do like the locals; we eat like them too. A keen snacker, when I walk into villages, I find the local kiosk and buy up its entire supply of Beng Bengs (chocolate and caramel wafers with crispy rice wrapped in chocolate) to eat and share. Our main meals, as well, are supplied by the villagers: We arrive in town, settle in and are soon sitting at a large table laid out with bean broths with meaty chunks, bottomless rice, and on a few days, enough instant noodles to feed us many times over. Each stop has a different version of *ai manas* (sour and spicy chilli sauce), and I love loading a few delicious spoons of the spicy stuff onto my plate and then enjoying its mouth-exploding effect.

After one lunch, the owners show us an eerie concrete bunker under their house used by the resistance movement to store documents during the Indonesian occupation. After being forewarned that the Indonesians were looking for them, the locals cleared it out, and when the bunker was discovered, it was empty.

We end up spending two nights in tents, three in guesthouses, and one—my favourite—in our sleeping bags on the top level of an *uma lulik* (traditional house). With a roof over us but open air on all sides, we—and the mountains we are yet to climb—are lit up by the full moon. To reach this magical spot, we take a dalan quarte which isn't actually a short cut. Instead, on a 'long cut' that I have no doubt will be added to future trips, we are taken around a mountaintop we were supposed to approach from the other way. However, life lesson: Going the 'wrong way' can result in stunning vistas and be better than the original (even if I nearly bonk and am convinced, as I shuffle along, that we are lost). We find a forest of ghostly white gum trees, then hike singletrack alongside a cliff face, before meeting the dusty road to our uma lulik.

But the intriguing and circuitous route seems emblematic of the intersecting tracks all over Timor-Leste: There's nothing linear. The tracks we take are like those the Australian WW2 commandos would have walked, and they're still frequently walked by locals.

IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

If you can't go over it, go down and around it. The slippery 'back way' of climbing Tatamailau

Valley views at sunset from the Catholic church high up in Hatolia

Hatolia's old hospital, where Australian WW2 soldiers were aided by Dr Roger Dunkley

Shoes on or off? Crossing one of the wild rivers of Timor-Leste

Meal time!

Another *uma adat*: Most villages we passed had one or two of these sacred houses

Moss on the trees as we hit the cloud line en route to Tatamailau, a highlight of the journey

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Dokomali waterfall and my private spa bath—a fitting finish for La Rende!

Tatamailau (Mt Ramelau) in the distance as we stride out for the last day; we'd conquered it in the fog and rain (and dark) the previous night

Heading down to Dokomali waterfall through terraced village gardens

ON OUR SECOND-LAST DAY, WE BUMP into traders with Timor ponies loaded up with produce; they're heading to markets in Atsabe, where we'd just walked from. This is the day I am most excited about, and most daunted by: Ahead lies a climb the back way up the sacred mountain of Tatamailau (Mt Ramelau). At 2,963m, it's Timor-Leste's tallest peak. The usual route is from a car park, up steps then a well-worn trail to the summit. But coming via Atsabe, as we do, is not only technically more difficult, at around 23km and 1,745m elevation for the day, it's longer and with more elevation overall.

We ascend tracks until we're in the cool clouds, just able to make out the mountains around us. It is raining but we march on, slipping on and climbing around large, sharp, dark-grey, limestone outcrops while we follow the disappearing trail, which at points seems to veer off up impassable peaks. Suddenly, our path meets up with the main trail heading up (or down) Tatamailau, but we arrive here hours later than expected. The choice is ours: Head downhill, without summiting; or hike up for about 45 minutes, then descend for about an hour and a half in the dark.

I put my hand up for the ascent. We all put our hands up. We've come so far, and everyone wants to go up, despite it being our fifth day and despite a few of us feeling worse for wear. But, in the spirit of La Rende!, none of us are surrendering.

When I reach the statue of Na'i Feto (Mary) at the top of Tatamailau, I am wet, and tired, and emotional. We are in the drizzle; there is no sunset, or even view, to speak of (hikers usually start before dawn to watch the sun rise over the clouds) but it still feels incredible to be here. That feeling I'd struck at the start, that thing that had 'switched on' when I was walking earlier, dissolves me completely, and I can't hold back my tears. I am rapt to have made it, and to have enjoyed the journey so much.

The descent is a quiet one. Our support vehicles meet us at the car park and drive us to our accommodation. We drink locally made sangria from porcelain cups, saying "Cheers!" to our efforts. But rather than end with a mountain high, we finish with a waterfall low on the hike the next day. We head downhill for 14km through farms and small villages on high plains to find another Timor-Leste highlight: the spectacular Dokomali waterfall. Away from the main pool, I find solitude in a smaller pool where water bubbles up. I giggle to myself at the thought of it: I'm in a bubbly natural spa, surrounded by towering cliffs and a majestic waterfall in the middle of Timor-Leste. And I walked here. It really is the unexpected in the unexplored, and, yes, it really is life changing. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Despite saying "never again" each time she checks out of a hostel, Jayne D'Arcy continues to book dorm beds. Her belief: Who needs a good sleep when you can spend the savings on a massage?

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THE
Wild
BUNCH

A quick lowdown on

5 OVERNIGHT BIKEPACKING ROUTES IN THE SYDNEY REGION

Words *Matthew Crompton*

BIKEPACKING AROUND SYDNEY OFFERS A RARE MIX of wild landscapes and easy access—if you know where to look. Within just an hour or two of the city, you can be pedalling firetrails through the UNESCO-listed gum forests of the Blue Mountains, tracing the Hawkesbury River's quiet bends, or winding through the lush rainforest of Royal National Park. The terrain shifts constantly, from sandstone ridges and towering cliffs to rainforest gullies and even a tunnel haunted by luminous glow worms. Official campsites and wild camps make it easy to turn a ride into an overnight adventure. Speaking of easy, another plus with bikepacking around Sydney is its accessibility via public transport; all the routes described below have roll-on-roll-off train access. It's not hard to feel like you're off the beaten track with these great routes, even when you're close to civilisation!

THE EASY

NARROW NECK

31KM (OUT & BACK); EASY

This short ride in the Blue Mountains is the perfect first-ride introduction to bikepacking. Combining manageable distance and vertical with some of the most jaw-dropping views imaginable, the route starts at Katoomba Station and heads downhill through the town before entering the main attraction: the fire trail out to the Narrow Neck Plateau. You test your legs and lungs on some steep climbs before hitting the skinny traverse of the 'narrow neck' itself, with 'wow' views of Lake Burragorang far below. The track finishes at the far end of the plateau, but the adventure doesn't have to: Find yourself a spot for a wild camp along the way, and settle in for the night before heading back.

THE CLASSIC

ANDERSONS AND THE OAKS FIRE TRAILS

60KM (ONE-WAY); MEDIUM

This fire trail route descending from Wentworth Falls to Glenbrook is a well-known Sydney classic, but what's not as well known is that the ride is most enjoyable as an overnighter. Stay in established campsites at the midway point or bottom, or choose your own adventure with a wild camp along the way. The ride is in two sections of fire trail—Andersons and the Oaks—with a bailout point at Woodford Station in between. Each section offers a mix of cruisy riding, a screaming descent, and a *looooong* climb to drain the legs. Be prepared. And if you're ready for extra spice, try out the singletrack section at the bottom of the Oaks, but be warned it's not known as 'pinch flat alley' for nothing!

THE CHALLENGING

HAWKESBURY & THE OLD GREAT NORTH ROAD

185KM (LOOP); HARD

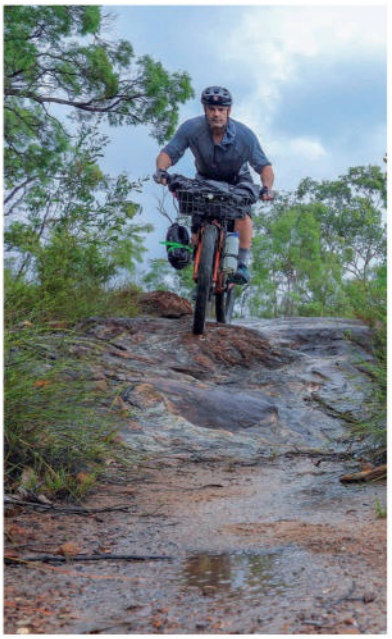
You'll want fat tyres for this tough multiday route in the Hawkesbury River region to Sydney's north. Like all the routes in this list, this one is easily accessible by train (in this case from Windsor Station). The start and end of the route offer pretty waterside riding and fun trips on the region's cable-operated river ferries, while the challenging middle section traverses the uber-rough Old Great North Road through the hinterland of Dharug and Yengo National Parks. For this section especially, a mountain bike is the tool for the job; a gravel bike won't cut it for the level of chunk involved. This is a remote section of trail, so be sure that your repair kit is well-stocked. From the top of the OGNR, it's a fantastic dirt-road descent back to the Hawkesbury River itself—stop for a beer at the Settler's Arms Inn in St Albans at the bottom.

THE AESTHETIC

LITHGOW TO NEWNES VIA THE GLOW WORM TUNNEL

101KM (LOOP); MEDIUM-HARD

A relentlessly pretty ride among the valleys and plateaus on the western edge of the Blue Mountains, this route starts from Lithgow and quickly moves onto dirt roads through Gardens of Stone and Wollemi National Parks. The end of the first day sees two tricky hike-a-bike sections bookending a journey through the 387m-long Glow Worm Tunnel, where the darkness is lit by



thousands of small glowing insects. The cliff-ringed campground at Newnes is a perfect spot for overnight stargazing, with the remnants of some old mining equipment to explore nearby. The second day takes you back to Lithgow via the beautiful Wolgan Valley (currently closed and under repair) followed by a section of rough forest roads—a stop at the significant Aboriginal cultural site of Maiyingu Marragu (Blackfellows Hand Cave) is highly recommended.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Approaching the Glow Worm Tunnel at Newnes

A rough descent on the Old Great North Road

Through the rainforest on Lady Carrington Drive in the Royal NP

Dramatic views from the eponymous Narrow Neck

Cliffside riding on Andersons Trail, Blue Mountains NP

THE SURPRISING

THE ROYAL RAMBLE

70KM (LOOP); MEDIUM-HARD

It shouldn't be possible to find a bikepacking route this good less than an hour from Sydney, but fortunately, it is! The Royal Ramble, which passes through Royal and Heathcote National Parks, is my go-to recommendation for anyone looking for a beginner-friendly overnighter (very) near the city. Take the train to Sutherland Station, from where it's a short ride to the Royal NP. After a screaming descent on winding tarmac down to Audley, you hit the dirt and traverse Lady Carrington Drive. The old riverside carriageway traces alongside the Hacking River (where if you stop and stay quiet, you might see a member of the recently relocated platypus colony) and slowly climbs through increasingly lush rainforest. At the end of Lady Carrington, you hit the tar again to climb up McKell Avenue, before branching off near Waterfall to take the Uloola Fire trail for 6km to the bush campsite at Uloola Falls.

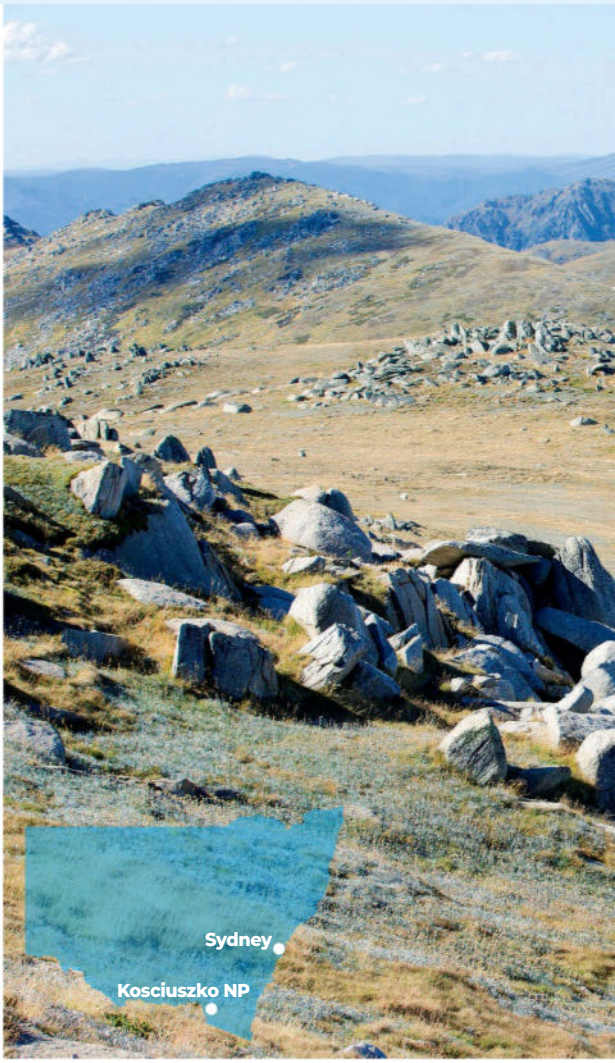
The second day ups the difficulty. Retrace your steps (well, pedal strokes) to Waterfall and then coast back down McKell Avenue to the Hacking River, before turning right to head south on Lady Wakehurst Drive. After 6.5km, you leave the tar to cut hard right to join the Hacking River Fire trail. Just a couple of hundred metres down, you ford the Hacking River (the rainforest is beautiful here, as are the river boulders) before beginning a killer climb up to Helensburgh (the station here is a potential bailout point). From here, take Cawleys Rd (largely tarred but closed to vehicles) to the Old Princes Highway, where you turn left then right to reach the road to Woronora Dam. After visiting the dam, backtrack a little to reach the Pipeline Rd, which you head north along before exiting at Heathcote. Not long before Heathcote, though, you pass Mirang Pool; it's a perfect swimming spot for a hot day or after a long ride!

CONTRIBUTOR: Matthew Crompton is an award-winning writer and photographer preoccupied with bikes, hikes, and the mystical solitude of the way-out. He is the author of the adventure-travel memoir *Roads Toward a Supreme Fiction*, the story of a solo bikepacking journey through Tibet, China and Central Asia.

KOSCIUSZKO NP

THE SNOWIES ALPINE + THREDBO LOOP

Words & Photography *James McCormack*



THE ROOF OF AUSTRALIA has always contained some of the country's finest walking. It's not merely that the peaks of the Main Range, including Kosciuszko and its surrounds, are the highest in the nation; there are—and pardon the cliches here, but they are entirely justified—the stunning views, the spectacular topography, the fields of wildflowers, the glittering lakes, the glacier-carved valleys, the crystal-clear brooks, the tumbling rivers, the incredible rock formations. Best of all, for some, is the openness; the area has the greatest expanse of high-alpine, above-treeline walking in the country. When you walk through seemingly near endless grassy meadows on a still, sunny blue day, it really feels you're in a walker's nirvana.

That openness means it's possible to set your own path and to wander off track with minimal effort, but many still prefer a trail to stick to. And for them, there's been a lack of options for multi-day walks here. Last summer, however, the long-awaited Snowies Alpine Walk was unveiled, a 56km trail that links the winter ski resorts of Guthega, Charlotte Pass and Perisher Valley, along with the Bullocks Flat area around the Ski Tube entrance near the Thredbo River. The link to the latter was particularly noteworthy, as accessing it before from the Main Range involved a long, steep, arduous bushbash.

But the new walk—while truly awesome in so many ways—does, unfortunately, have its flaws, not least being the fact it necessarily involves a series of shuttles or out-and-back deadends. The route suggested here changes that, linking via Thredbo to create a grand 89km, four-or-five-day loop that will carry you through this magnificent alpine environment, no car shuttles or out-and-backs required.

QUICK FACTS

Activity: Multi-day loop hike

Location: Kosciuszko NP

Distance: 89km

Duration: 4 days (as described, but 5 days works well too)

When to go: Late spring to mid-autumn is best

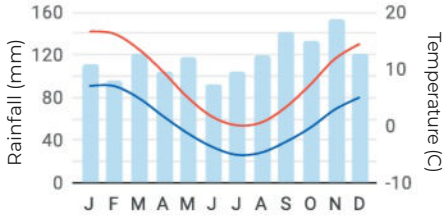
Difficulty: Medium (Grade 4)

Permits/fees required: No permits necessary. Entry fees $17/car/day (during non-winter months)

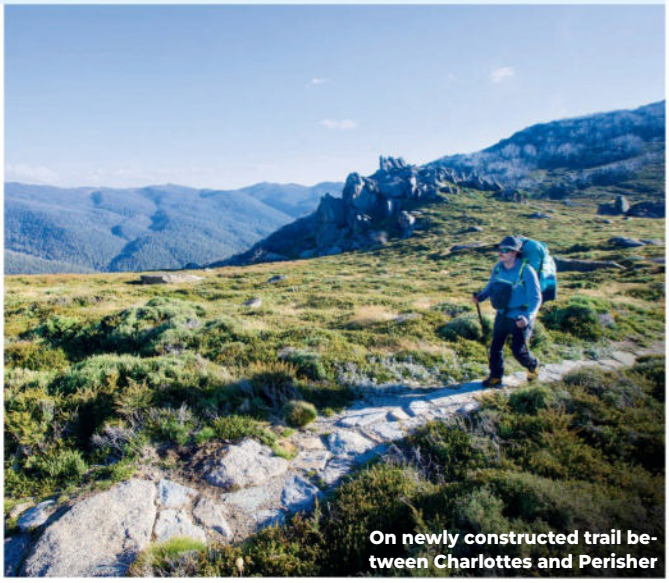
Car shuttle required: No

Website: nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/visit-a-park/parks/kosciuszko-national-park

CLIMATE: THREDBO AWS (1,957M ASL)



The walking just north of Kossie, with views of Muellers Peak, Watsons Crags and distant Jagungal (on the horizon)



On newly constructed trail between Charlottes and Perisher

Striding out on the loop's first few metres

WHEN TO GO

With this being the highest land in the country, it's not surprising that winter and early spring are out—a heavy snowpack smothers everything. Even November can see large sections of the route still under snow. From then until mid-autumn though is perfect; April, in fact, can be excellent. May, depending on the year, can be possible, but it's definitely getting iffy (and chilly). Be aware that snow can fall any time of year, including midsummer.

GETTING THERE

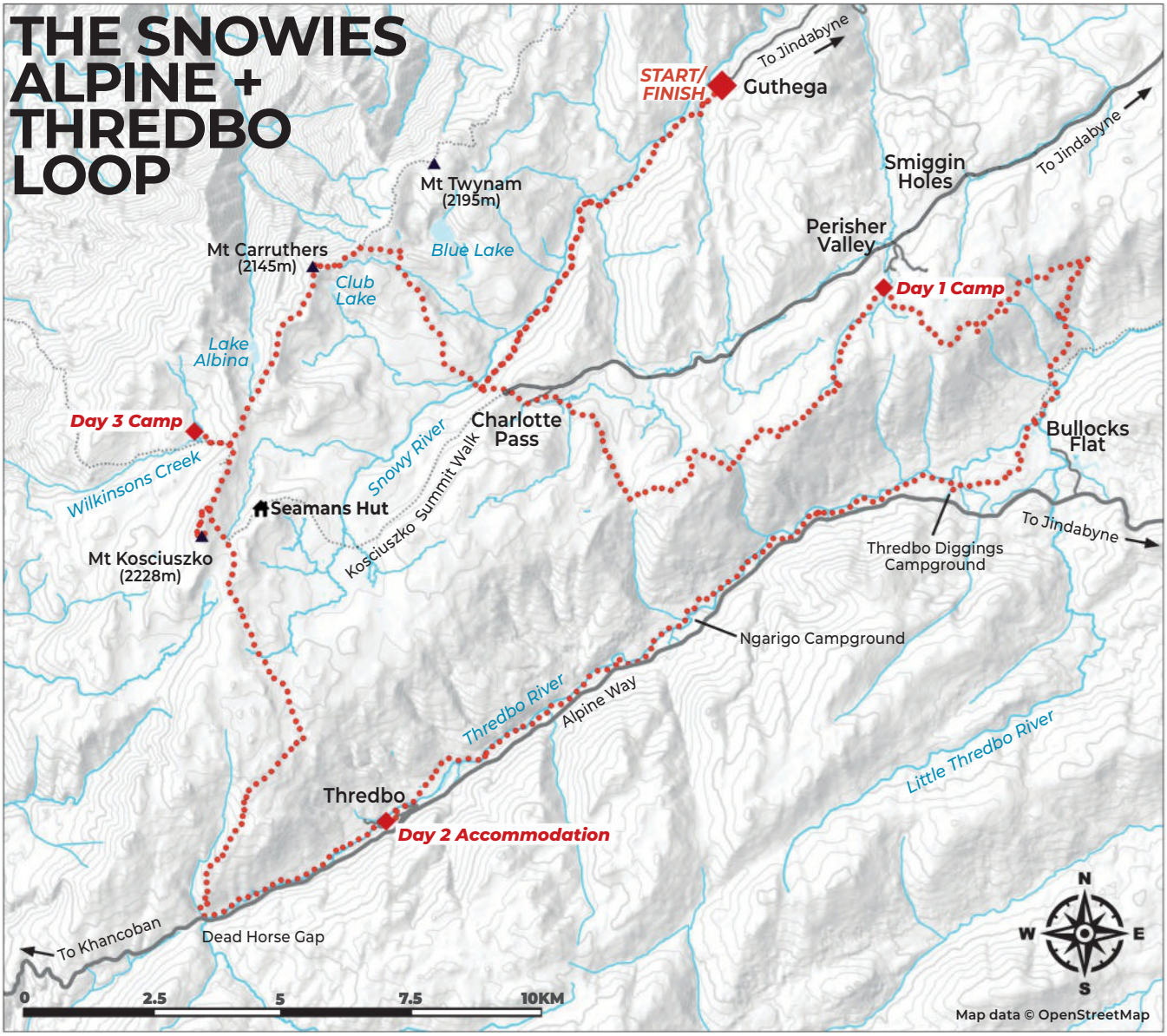
To do the route as described, cars are the only option for access. Drive to Jindabyne, and take the road to Perisher before branching off to Guthega (where this route starts and finishes). It's 42km from Jindy to Guthega (although there's a sneaky shortcut via Smiggin Holes that can shave a few kms off if you don't mind extra gravel road). Be aware there's no fuel after Jindabyne, and watch out for deer, wombats and roos if driving at dawn or dusk. Island Bend Campground (13km down the road from Guthega) makes a good place to stay the night before heading off. There are no fees there (yet), but a $6.00 booking fee must be paid online.

OPTIONS

The walk is described here as an 89km four-day loop, starting and finishing at Guthega. While two nights are spent camping (the first and third), the second is spent at Thredbo Village. In summer, it's a great little hive of activity, and has a nice buzz about it. There are plenty of eating and drinking spots in Thredbo, the only true year-round village in NSW's Alps, and staying here can make for a nice juxtaposition from the other two nights of camping meals and sleeping in a tent. Accommodation here is plentiful, but it's hard to beat the value for money offered by the Thredbo YHA, where shared-room beds start at less than $50/night.

However, not everyone wants a night indoors; some will prefer to spend every night camping. There's also the fact that the second day on the loop is, at 30km, a long-ish one. While many hikers will be comfortable with a distance like this, far from all will be. Thankfully, there are some great alternative second-night-campsite options that will shorten Day Two, turning the entire loop into a five-day outing, one in which every night (if desired) can be spent in a tent. You pass through two official campgrounds on Day Two—Ngarigo and Thredbo Diggings (both allow car camping and are currently free, but online booking is required; again $6.00). Either option is good, but the latter splits Day Two's 30km almost exactly in half, and is a prettier campground. Ngarigo is nearly 5km further up the trail. From either campsite you can spend the next night in Thredbo, or you can continue up to Dead Horse Gap or beyond, where you can remote bush camp.

Speaking of which, if you really want to expand your options, under Kosciuszko NP's Plan of Management, you can remote bush camp in most areas, as long as it's not within 200m of a road or the Thredbo-Kosciuszko walkway, not within an alpine lake catchment or ski-resort boundary, and not within 30m of a creek (see the NPWS website for full details). It means there are plenty of spots to camp on the route. Curiously, the official NPWS Snowies Alpine Walk webpage doesn't even mention camping, and only mentions paid accommodation in the villages along the route.



FEES/COSTS/PERMITS

Entry to Kosciuszko NP during the non-winter months is $17 a day per car. There are annual passes, too. All campsites are free, although booking is necessary ($6.00) if choosing to stay at the optional campgrounds of Ngarigo and Thredbo Diggings.

DIFFICULTY & NAVIGATION

One of the beauties of walking in this part of the world is, given you're in an alpine area with truly spectacular views, the moderate nature of the terrain. The are no truly big, hard climbs on this route. That's not to say it's dead flat, however, and the 700m-vertical descent from Perisher to Bullocks Flat will have more than a few knees trembling. It's also for this reason that it's best to walk the loop in a clockwise direction, so that you're descending rather than ascending this section. Other than that though, most climbs would be regarded as moderate, and much of the route would actually be regarded as relatively easy.

Beyond the climbs, there are the trail surfaces themselves, which have among many hikers led to a divergence of opinion. Some love the rock-armoured sections of trails (of which there are a surprising amount given the cost and effort involved), but others are less enamoured. There are also many long sections of metal boardwalk. While they do a great job of protecting the fragile environment and with dealing with large numbers of hikers, they can, on the downside, feel like you're on a walker's freeway.

As for navigation, it's relatively easy. Apart from two brief sections (at Charlotte Pass and down to Day Three's camp at Wilkinsons Creek), not only are you on trail the whole way, the walk is very well signposted. Be aware that while nearly (but not all) the entire route is on the 1:25K *Perisher Valley* topo map, it crucially does not display almost any trails for the nearly 50km of walking between Illawong Hut and Thredbo Village. In short, you'll likely want electronic navigation for this walk. Make sure you've downloaded your maps before heading out, though; while there's some phone reception, it's sporadic and not guaranteed.

ACCESS TO WATER

Water is plentiful here; you'll rarely go more than an hour or two without crossing some kind of little creek or water source. Bring your water-filtration/purification system of choice though; not all the water here is as pure as it looks.

EQUIPMENT

The big thing to remember is that weather can change quickly here. Snow can fall even in summer, and the winds can be incredibly strong. Be prepared. And bring *loads* of sunscreen.

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

View across the Snowy River on Day One

There are few things better in life than, on a sunny day, to loll about in alpine meadows taking a break

Some of the hikers' bridges you'll encounter on this route are quite impressive. Here's the bridge over Spencers Creek. It's also perhaps Australia's highest-elevation suspension bridge

At the right time of year, wildflowers are everywhere

THE WALK IN SECTIONS

DAY 1

Guthega to Perisher via Charlotte Pass

21km; 848m ascent/690m descent; approx 5-8 hours

With no car parking at the actual trailhead, you first need to make your way roughly 500m from the main Guthega car park; walk along the Mt Tate Rd for 300m, then branch right. Soon you arrive at the shiny new trailhead (albeit with the deliberately rusted aesthetic you'll see on all signage along the walk), clearly marked as the departure point for both the Illawong Walk and the Snowies Alpine Walk.

For the first couple of kays, you parallel a few-hundred metres above the Snowy River, sidling up slowly through sporadic stands of snow gums. It's nice enough country, and it gets progressively more open, but it's after the 2.7km mark—where another trail branches off to the right to the Illawong Bridge that crosses the Snowy River—that you leave the trees for good.

From here, the views are excellent. The Snowy River roars away beneath you, tumbling over huge boulders. There are shallow valleys to look up, many with clearly U-shaped bottoms, indicating their glacial origins. At Spencers Creek, where there's a nice little suspension bridge, the shallow side valley has trees higher up but none 100m either side of the creek; it looks like a massive but picturesque 200m-wide grassed firebreak snaking up the valley. A little further up, there are great views straight up the side valley of Blue Lake Creek, with the waters of Blue Lake itself and Hedley Tarn emptying over a nice set of cascades.

At the 7.5km mark, having continued to make your way up sequences of stone path and metal boardwalk, you gain a view to distant 2,180m Etheridge Ridge, Australia's fifth-highest peak, and soon after that Kossie itself, although at this point it looks more like an unimpressive knoll. And at the 8.5km point, you meet the Main Range Walk junction; turn left here for the short climb up to the car park above Charlotte Pass.

There are excellent views across the Main Range from the lookout near the car park here; it's a great spot for lunch, with some snow gums for shade. One thing about this car park is that it's also the trailhead for the Kosciuszko Summit Walk. With tracks heading all over the place here, you'd think the Snowies Alpine Walk would be well signposted. It is not (at least not at the time of visitation). In fact, there is no indication at all of where to go. This is likely because there's an almost inexplicable 400m gap in the trail here for Snowies Alpine Walk, with the path recommencing 400m away down near Charlotte Pass Village itself.

It leaves you with three choices: You can heath-bash your way down (be warned; it's harder than it looks); you can head east along the road before cutting hard right to take you down to the village trail; or you can head due south above the car park for 100m before then heading east straight down the T-bar lift line. (Having taken the first of these options, next time I'd take the last).

Whichever route you take to get there, a couple of hundred meters east of Charlotte Pass Village, you'll find a Snowies Alpine Walk trailhead, from where the track officially recommences. For a kilometre or so, you're on river flats before you gently ascend into snow-gum forest. For the rest of the day, you'll be diving into and out of alternating forest and meadows, the trail twisting and turning all the way.

Three kays in from Charlottes, you hit Trapyard Creek; it's a good spot to fill water bottles. Not long after, the trail does a sharp 90-degree bend to the NNE. Here, and sporadically for the next few hours, you're treated to expansive views of the heavily forested Thredbo Valley far below. But while the land drops away steeply to your right, to your left and ahead, the country is far gentler, and you make your way along an undulating ridgeline. Along the way, you encounter some granite tors, the most dramatic of which are Porcupine Rocks, which you access via a short sidetrack you meet a bit over 10km from Charlottes.

From here, it's downhill for the rest of the day, as you descend 1.5km to a point where you cross a small creek that's surrounded by flats. Camp here. This is the last creek you'll hit before Perisher Valley ski resort, where camping is not allowed.

DAY 2

Perisher Valley to Thredbo Village

30km; 410m ascent/830m descent; approx 7-11 hours

Today is a biggish day, so start early. Start by continuing down the valley towards Perisher for 700m, where you hit a well-signposted junction; branch right here to go to Bullocks Flat. Before you do, though, make sure your water bottles are full; the next reliable water you'll encounter isn't for another 6km. You climb gently for a kilometre, meandering through subalpine snow-gum communities, and then the descent begins. From here to the Thredbo River, you'll lose roughly 700m in elevation.

It's this newly constructed 11km section of the Snowies Alpine Walk that really opens up the possibility for this loop as described. Prior to the track's construction, bushbashing/scrub-wriggling through here was heavy going; with this track open, it's now far easier to link up the Thredbo Valley with the high country around Perisher and Charlottes. And although in this section you're often in relatively thick forest, it's not like views are non-existent, especially three kays in from the junction, where you hit a sidetrack with a 70m walk to a lookout. It's highly recommended to make the diversion, as there are some fantastic views to Thredbo Valley and Crackenback Village far below. After a further 3km, you hit another highly recommended diversion. This one is just off the track—a pretty set of cascades flowing between mossy boulders. It's a great spot for a break.

The descent continues, still in thick forest. Eventually, nearly 10km in, you reach a junction with the Thredbo Valley Trail. At this point, the TVT is designed for MTB-ers only (later in the day, you'll be on a shared-use section), so head straight across it and stay on the walkers-specific track that takes you all the way to Bullocks Flat. Not long before you reach Bullocks Flat, however, you pop out alongside the rushing waters of the Thredbo River; there are some open areas and good potential campsites here.

After another 500m, take the bridge across the Thredbo River to arrive at Bullocks Flat. Turn left just after the bridge, looping back around under it, and follow a concrete path that after a few hundred metres has you at a signposted junction with the Thredbo Valley Track. For those poor souls sticking rigidly to the Snowies Alpine Walk, they'll walk a couple of hundred metres up to its official terminus, where they'll need to have arranged a car shuttle to get them back to their starting point, or be willing to trudge back up the 700m vert on a return walk to Perisher. But for you, the loop continues; you head right here at the Thredbo Valley Track. The track, from this point all the way to Thredbo Village, is designed for shared use between MTB-ers and walkers. The NPWS website doesn't make this readily apparent, however, (in fact, the website in some instances makes the opposite seem the case, and that it's for bikers only), but knowing that

walkers are allowed on this next nearly 17km of trail is key to turning this entire trip into a satisfying loop. It's also worthwhile knowing that while, no doubt, there are surely occasional selfish, reckless MTB-ers careening down this shared-use trail, the vast majority are polite and will slow down for walkers. It can also help if you plan to do this section not on a weekend or busy period.

With the trail being smooth, and with the climbing being very gradual, the walking on this entire section is quick; you can maintain a fast pace. Given you have a lot of territory to cover today, that's a good thing. Unfortunately, sweeping views along the TVT are nonexistent, and compared to the open, expansive country up on high, you may feel a little closed in. There are, however, several crossings of the lovely Thredbo River via impressive bridges, so it's not like the whole section is visually unattractive.

From the point you turn off onto the TVT, it's 2.4km and 7.2km respectively to the campgrounds at Thredbo Diggings and Ngarigo, either of which (as mentioned in the 'Options' section) can be used to break up this 30km day if you feel it's too much.

Nearly 17km from Bullocks Flat, you reach Thredbo Village. Having walked 30km, you'll likely be ready for a cool beverage and a meal on the deck at The Local Pub, before heading off to your soft bed and a pillow somewhere in the village.

DAY 3

Thredbo Village to Wilkinsons Creek

19km; 890m ascent/330m descent; approx 5-8 hours

Start by walking SW along the road from the Thredbo Visitor Centre to head to Dead Horse Gap (or, if you're sore from yesterday's long kays, by taking the (soft!) option of riding the Kosciuszko Chairlift to save yourself 560m vertical of climbing). After 400m, there's a bridge to the right. Cross it, then immediately turn left along a trail called the Riverside Walk. For a while, you walk between the golf course and the Thredbo River (surprisingly smaller in flow than yesterday). After exactly 1km, you hit a junction; take the left-hand option for the Cascade Track Head and Dead

IMAGE - THIS PAGE

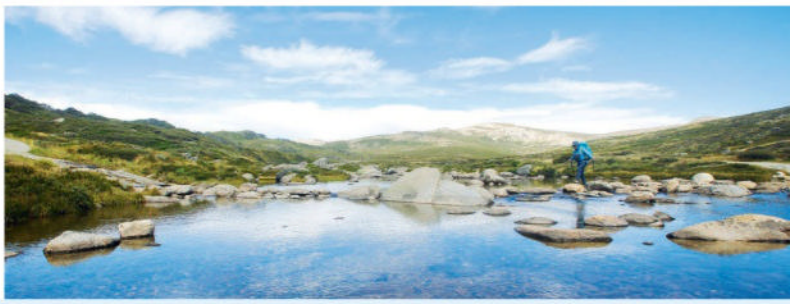
Approaching Mt Carruthers. Kossie is the high mound on the distant skyline

IMAGES - OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM

There are numerous long sections of metal boardwalk, which protects the environment, but it can at times feel like you're on a walker's freeway

An impressively well-girthed snow gum on the walk between Charlotte Pass and Perisher

Forget being the highest person in Australia at 2,228m; climb Kossie's obelisk and you can get to 2,229. Credit: Ryan Hansen



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

The summit of Carruthers offers arguably Australia's best alpine views

Boulder hopping across the Snowy River

The valley surrounding Wilkinsons Creek makes for a gorgeous campsite

Horse Gap. You now begin slowly climbing up the least-manicured track surface you've encountered thus far, with plenty of small boulders strewn along it. And although you're mere metres away from the rushing river, dense shrubberies mean you largely can only hear it, not see it.

Soon you cross the river, and the walking becomes very pleasant. Roughly 3km from the last junction (be aware that many trail markings around here give conflicting distance advice) you reach the Dead Horse Gap trailhead. Turn right, and begin climbing; there are steps much of the way. Eventually, you pop out at some meadows, and then at a rock platform with great views south towards the Pilot. The snow gums slowly thin, until after roughly 3.5km they disappear entirely and you're back above the treeline.

The track soon largely levels out, and 5km from the Dead Horse Gap junction, you meet the main, metal-boardwalked trail between Thredbo and Kosciuszko. Get set for the crowds! This is likely the most visited trail in the park, but it's nonetheless pleasant, if not fast, walking. After 1.7km, you reach Kosciuszko Lookout, where there are great sweeping views across the rolling high alpine. A further 3km gets you to Rawsons Pass, where there's a toilet bunker (you'll see what I mean), and a junction with the Koscisuszko Walk from Charlotte Pass. Before you lies the unmistakable mound of Kosciuszko. Head west towards it, and begin climbing. After 680m, you meet the junction with the Main Range Walk, where you can choose to either dump your pack or just take it up to the top. One kay more of relatively easy climbing, during which you're spurred on by dramatic views to the west then south, and you're standing at 2,228m asl, literally on top of Australia. Well done!

Backtrack now to the Main Range Walk track junction, and head NNE. After 1.6km, as you near the saddle, strike off the main trail for 600m to the west, down to the broad, flat and incredibly gorgeous valley surrounding Wilkinsons Creek, where you can set up your tent for the night. Be aware there's no signpost indicating where to branch off, nor an official trail, although there is a footpad, indistinct at first but that soon becomes clear.

DAY 4

Wilkinsons Creek to Guthega

19km; 340m ascent/650m descent; approx 5-8 hours

Your final day is a stunning but easy one, with only two real climbs, both shortish. Commence by ensuring your water bottles are full (it's more than 7km to your next water), and then by heading back up to the Main Range Walk; once you've regained it, turn left, heading north. You soon find yourself sidling around Mt Northcote on its steep western face via a benchcut track, from where there are excellent views of exquisite Lake Albina below.

A long section of metal boardwalk ensues, before you then begin the stone-paved climb to Mt Carruthers; at 2,145m, it's Australia's equal-eighth-highest peak. But while that means there are seven higher peaks nearby, arguably none of them have better views than Carruthers. In fact, it's easy to argue the peak offers the best alpine views in Australia. The triangular peak of the Sentinel is nearby, Watsons Crags plummet to unseen depths, Twynam looms to the north, and in the far distance, there's the brooding, lonesome hulk of Jagungal. Look back where you came from, and there's Kossie, along with Australia's second-highest peak, Mt Townsend (2,209m). And to the west, ridge upon ridge upon ridge upon ridge runs all the way to the horizon.

After soaking in the views, descend 900m to the saddle to the north, and follow the main track, which branches right. After another 900m, you hit a junction for an optional 370m sidetrip down to the Blue Lake Lookout. Continue descending, now on a paved brick road, all the way to the Snowy River (at this point, you're just over 10km into the day).

After boulder hopping across the river (hopefully its cold, clear waters are low enough that you can keep your tootsies dry), a short climb brings you back up to where you stood on Day One, at the Guthega-Charlotte Pass trail junction. Head left, retracing your steps for the gentle downhill 9km walk back down to Guthega where your vehicle awaits. **W**

James McCormack is the editor of *Wild* Magazine.

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REVIEW

LEKI

SKYTERA FX CARBON SL COMPACT TREKKING POLES

Lightweight strength.

> "The Skyteras are comfortable and, at just 173g, truly lightweight."

NEED TO KNOW

Pole type: foldable

Materials (shaft): carbon

Length (as tested): 100-120cm

Packed length: 39cm

Weight: 173g (per pole)

RRP: $379.99

More info: leki.com

JUST AS NICK CAVE BELIEVES in an "interventionist God", so do I subscribe to an interventionist approach to hiking (trekking poles, ibuprofen, processed cheese etc). I'm all for making life easier on the body. But I have history with trekking poles. And not in a good way. I've busted more than I care to remember. Durability is my primo concern (I hike rough tracks, not the Three Capes). Low weight is good, too.

Which gets us to the Storm Trooper aesthetic Leki Skytera FX Carbon SL Compact poles. After some local warm ups, I took them on a five-day Blue Mountains barge 'n' bash bushwalk.

In theory, the walk was on track. Thanks to the camouflage overgrowth, it felt more like off-track. I constantly stumbled due to holes and sticks and head-smacking branches. The Skyteras came out of the melee unphased and undamaged, however, and constantly helped me not go face first into the dirt/rock (ie they withstood sudden pressure-bouts of my body weight slamming into them).

With these being foldable poles—which makes them super packable—and with my history of breaking poles, I was a little concerned about 'floppiness'. But any doubts about durability and reliability were allayed once deep in the jungle. The Skyteras' single locking mechanism—where height is also adjusted—is robust and intuitive; once the initial single lock clicks in, the pole's three sections are firmly secured. This is a plus; a single lock vs multiple locks minimises the likelihood of section 'slippage'.

All the characteristics you expect of quality poles are there: contoured grips, adjustable wrist straps, easy-to-adjust length. The grips are extended, too, to assist with steep climbs. The Skyteras are comfortable and, at just 173g per pole, truly lightweight. They are carbon, after all. One thing to note is that due to their internal locking system, it's important they are wiped down after use to remove grime.

They aren't the cheapest poles on the market, but they are good value. And they're packable, super lightweight and strong. I have no hesitation in recommending them.

CRAIG PEARCE

LAUNCH

MOUNTAIN DESIGNS

LEGACY RANGE

Celebrating fifty years of adventure.

IN THE LAST ISSUE OF *WILD*, we ran a piece celebrating the 50th birthday of Aussie outdoor-gear company Mountain Designs, focussing on the impact its visionary founder, Rick White, had on not just the company but on Oz's outdoor scene in general. (If you missed it, you can check it out at: **wild.com.au/news/fifty-years-of-mountain-designs**) We also mentioned the company was going to acknowledge the achievement by releasing a 'Legacy' range, a capsule collection of heritage-inspired products. Well, the range went on sale last month, and there are thirteen products in the collection, ranging across the outdoor-gear spectrum: a sleeping bag; a 30L daypack, 20L racing pack, 60+10L travel pack, and a hiking pack in either 55L or 70L versions; a lightweight chair and table; a duffel bag; a men's and women's T-shirt in a range of colours; a cap (with three logo variations); and two water-bottle varieties.

It's hard not to miss the old-school MD's influence, right down to the inclusion of the original acid logo. There's a heritage colour palette, too. And frankly, some pretty cool retro designs as well. The Expedition Pro 40L Duffel, the Edge 55L Hike Pack, and the Overlander Sleeping Bag are (in my opinion) particularly nice, with the stripes of the latter being inspired by the Mountaineer and Whitefox Sleeping Bags found in Mountain Designs' 1979 catalogue. Honestly, though, there's a really nice vibe across the entire range. You can check it out at **mountaindesigns.com**

JAMES MCCORMACK

REVIEW

ZORALI

SUMMIT-SEEKER 2P UL TENT

Cutting grams affordably.

ULTRALIGHT GEAR HAS MANY ADVANTAGES, but it does come with drawbacks, one of the key—if not for many people, *the* key—being the price. The equation is usually simple: fewer grams = more bucks. But not always. Aussie outdoor-gear company Zorali—still relatively youthful at just six years old—set out to prove that equation wrong when it released its Summit-Seeker 2P Ultralight Backpacking Tent. So let's cut straight to the chase. The Summit-Seeker's weight: 1,763g (as I weighed it, including pegs, bag, et al). It's price: a mere $500. Now, look, I know $500 is not nothing for a tent, but for a tent on the boundaries of ultralight, that's damn good value. I say "on the boundaries of ultralight", because in my mind 1.7kg sits right on it, although I know there'll be some who'd argue ultralight 2P tents might only start at 1.2kg. Regardless, this is still a light enough tent.

And it's spacious, too. I found there was plenty of head height (the interior height is apparently 110cm), and with essentially vertical interior walls, there's loads of usable volume. Meanwhile, the fly has a good angle, meaning the vestibules have plenty of space, and that they can shed wind easily. And the basically hexagonal footprint of the fly, once it's staked out, means that wind direction isn't an issue. The included guy lines will help with wind, too.

The interior is full mesh. That's great for summer, although not ideal for the winter months (depending on where you're heading). The interior is also completely free standing, although you'll need pegs to stake out the fly. Speaking of pegs, I like the fact my Summit-Seeker came with eleven of them (plus repair patches, seam sealer, a pole sleeve, extra guy lines); it seems some tents nowadays are being shipped with just a few pegs in order to save on packed weight.

There's a nice-sized gear loft, and the interior-access doors are *huuuge*; not only can you enter and exit the tent easily, you can open it up for a nice, airy feeling. The doors, however, both interior and exterior, have a two-zip system rather than the usual one. Some people won't like this. I thought I'd be one of them, but I quickly got used to it. And really, for the exterior doors, you can just use one. What's more, because they're two-way zips, you can pull them inwards when closing them, rather than the usual process of tugging them away.

One last thing: Zorali gear in general has a cool, understated, retro aesthetic, and the Summit-Seeker is no exception. And while it mightn't be the lightest UL tent out there, it is one of the best value.

JAMES MCCORMACK

NEED TO KNOW

Category: 2P free-standing UL tent

Weight (as tested): 1763g

Waterhead (mm): fly - 2,000; groundsheet - 3,000

RRP: $500

More info: zorali.com

REVIEW

NEMO EQUIPMENT

TENSOR ELITE ULTRALIGHT INSULATED SLEEPING MAT

Weight saving, no g-strings attached.

IT DEPENDS ON THE TRIP, but I can at times be a ruthless gram counter. No, I've not taken to plucking out half my toothbrush's bristles. Nor have I ditched regular undies to go out in a g-string to save weight on the fabric. Not yet, anyway. But I have, in order to head out with the lightest sleeping mat possible, for a long time used a super thin, ¾-length inflatable mat, one with huge sections cut out of it so that it looks like a skeleton of sorts. It's so light that I've put up with its shortcomings (ie no comfort, and an R-value of 1) for years ... until now. This year, Nemo released its Tensor Elite Ultralight Insulated Sleeping Pad. It weighs a SFA tiny 246g. (That's *Sweet Featherweight All*, BTW.) Yeah, it's a little more than my skeleton mat, but not that much more. And it packs down almost equally small as well, to about the size of a Coke can. But unlike the other mat, the Tensor Elite (at least the regular mummy version, which I have, is full length at 182cm, has an R-value of 2.4 (which makes it suitable for three-season camping), and, crucially, has a 7.6cm thickness. That's pretty plush; not that long ago, even heavyweight mats were topping out around there. This is a genuinely comfortable mat. Oh, and it sleeps quiet, too; it's not a noisy, crinkly mat.

Be aware that the 246g weight (Nemo claims 240g) does not include the bag, tie-up strap or (importantly) the Vortex Pump Sack. Together, the whole package on my scales came to 323g. But gram counters, here's the thing: You don't need the pump sack! Ditch it, blow up the Tensor Elite directly by mouth, and save 62g.

The mat is a tad slippery though; if you tend to set up camp on steeply sloping sites, you may find yourself sliding off it. But overall, this is a mat that provides near-luxury at a seriously incredible weight.

JAMES MCCORMACK

NEED TO KNOW

R-value: 2.4

Weight, mat, pump sack, bag (as tested): 323 g

Weight, mat only: 246g

Thickness: 7.6cm

RRP: $399.95

More info: nemoequipment.com

REVIEW

ONE PLANET

RUMOUR -12°C SLEEPING BAG

Every detail has been considered to make this cold-weather bag as awesome, and as moisture-proof, as possible.

DOWN, AS AN INSULATING MATERIAL, is incredible. So much warmth, so little weight. But the enemy of down, in fact its kryptonite, is moisture. Once wet, down clumps together, and its ability to insulate is gone. For winter sleeping bags, this is a big deal, because the inner walls of tents so often drip with heavy condensation on cold nights. After a few nights out, your bag can be rendered close to useless. In sub-zero temps, this is not ideal (yes, that's an understatement).

But none of this concerned me last winter, when, on several Kosciuszko NP ski trips lasting up to four days, I had the opportunity to take out One Planet's Rumour -12°C sleeping bag. You see, the Rumour Series bags sneer at moisture, with multiple defences keeping it at bay. The shell fabric is Pertex Quantum Pro, a highly water-resistant but highly breathable material that stops moisture entering the bag. The down itself—which is 800-850 loft, towards the very upper end of quality—is treated with a non-PFC hydrophobic water repellent, reducing any potential clumping. The zip is waterproof (and YKK, too, ergo awesome), and the baffles—which are a mix of vertical and horizontal to assist with better lofting of the down—are welded, reducing the amount of stitching where moisture can enter. Lastly, in terms of moisture defence, the inner liner—highly breathable Vapour Vent V2—has been given a non-PFC water-repellent treatment.

Speaking of that inner liner, you don't have to be a gear geek to notice just how nice this bag is to the touch. It almost feels silken, and is lovely against your skin. Another thing you'll notice from feel alone with no need to geek out is how well the zip works. I've slept in many winter bags where the draught tubes, trying to compensate for the colder temps, simply get in the way of the zip and get caught in it, jamming it up. It's, well, bloody annoying, fighting with a wayward sleeping-bag zip in the darkness. But I found the Rumour's zip (which is waterproof, btw) to be super smooth, with never a hitch. And then there's the toe box; it's nice and roomy. I didn't ever feel like I was trapped, and it struck the right balance between mummy-shaped warmth and the space to move your feet. The hood struck the right balance too; I found it cinched up well, enough to cover most of my face while still being able to breathe (although a few might wish it closed down further still; Jared, a Canadian buddy who I used to ice climb regularly with, used to leave a hole the size of 20-cent piece to breathe through once it got cold).

There are also -6°C and -9°C versions of the bag, but one thing worth remembering about the Rumour, if you're considering it for winter backcountry-ski or split-board touring, is gender. Women, by and large, but not always, feel the cold more than men, which is why the version I took out is rated with a -12°C limit of comfort for guys, but just -4°C for gals. And while a -12°C rated bag is perfect for Aussie ski touring (it rarely gets colder, though it's not impossible, in which case wearing your warm jacket will see you through the night), a -4°C bag will almost certainly have you feeling cold frequently enough. (Luckily, One Planet is releasing an updated Winter Lite Series in 2026, suitable for colder temps.) But for me, -12°C hits the sweet spot for a snow-camping-oriented bag that's not too heavy or bulky, but that will keep you warm through an Aussie winter. And here's something to note about One Planet's temp ratings—these have been independently tested to ISO 23537-1 standards; many other bag manufacturers are opaque as to how they arrive at their ratings.

Each Rumour is filled to order in One Planet's Melbourne factory, and they can even embroider your name on the stuff sack. It's indicative of how much thought, care and consideration has gone into this bag. One Planet should be proud of themselves.

JAMES MCCORMACK

> "You don't have to be a gear geek to notice **just how nice this bag is to the touch. It almost feels silken."**

NEED TO KNOW

Intended use: Four-season/alpine camping

Shape: Box-foot mummy

Weight (regular, as tested): 1,051g

Stuffsack weight (as tested): 98g

Temperature rating: Men: -12°C; women -4°C; extreme: -30°C

Fill: 800-850 loft down

RRP: $969

More info: oneplanet.au

25 YEARS OF THE NORTH FACE'S SUMMIT SERIES

The North Face's Summit Series sub-brand turns 25 this year. At the heart of its success has been the feedback from athletes willing to push gear to its extremes.

Sam Smoothy in 2023 during his XXIV project. Credit: Jasper Gibson

> **The crew out there testing Summit Series gear**—on all kinds of first ascents and crazy expeditions—**reads like a who's who of the adventure community."**

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, The North Face launched its Summit Series. Now, a quarter century is a long time for a brand to be around, let alone a particular product line within a brand. But the Summit Series is no ordinary collection of products. From the very beginning, it was designed to be the pinnacle of The North Face's gear. And at the heart of it has always been its athlete testing and sponsorship program.

Man, I've often thought to myself, wouldn't that be the gig to be on! Become one of The North Face's sponsored athletes, then flit around the world going off on awesome trips. But the thing is, of course, you actually have to be talented. Really, *really* talented. It kinda rules me out. You also have to know your stuff. And you have to be willing to put yourself, and your gear, through some of the most gruelling, demanding conditions on the planet.

Over the years, the crew out there testing Summit Series gear—on all kinds of first ascents and crazy expeditions—reads like a who's who of the adventure community: Conrad Anker, Jimmy Chin, Lynn Hill, Kit DesLauriers, Alex Lowe, Dean Karnazes, Alex Honnold, and (the late) Hilaree Nelson. One of those team members is also Kiwi skier Sam Smoothy, who you may remember wrote *Wild* Issue #192's cover story 'XXIV', an account of his ambitious project to ski all 24 of NZ's 3,000m peaks.


Conrad Anker testing Summit Series gear in Tibet in 2000. Credit: Kris Erickson

Sam joined The North Face team in 2013. Wanting to hear first-hand how athletes get involved with product development, I gave him a call. He was happy to chat, but he had a warning for me: "The reason I might potentially sound a bit flat is that I was on a meeting with The North Face's global product team from 3AM to 4AM last night, going over the latest batch of Summit Series developments, and providing feedback on that, and areas where I thought we could improve pieces."

"One of my favourite parts of being a professional skier," Sam told me, "is actually product research and development. You know, taking new samples and prototypes out into the field, and putting them through their paces, and being part of a team that's really motivated to try and get every last little detail right and to make the best possible kit. I've had a lot of input into the gloves the last year or so. It's nice to feel valued by such a large company that [tries] to stick to that mantra of 'athlete tested, expedition proven', and that actually takes on board what we think about things."

"You can get put in touch with a specific designer of gear. You [can say], 'Hey, I've been using this pack and I'm having these issues with it; I want to talk to someone in technical packs.' And they'll be like, 'Cool, this is the guy or girl.' You can be proactive and just reach out, and they'll get back to you."

While the Summit Series was originally conceived in 2000 as a product lineup suitable for extreme conditions, most notably mountaineering and alpinism, it quickly evolved to include gear for the snow-sports community and for trail runners. Even so, feedback from the team remained at its core. Notably, in the 2010s, The North Face asked its athletes what they needed in an essential kit; they responded "simplicity". It led to The North Face drastically paring down the Summit Series lineup. When the sub-brand was paused in 2013, it had more than 90 styles. When it was re-released in 2015, there were just eight men's and eight women's pieces. Conrad Anker, The North Face athletes' Team Captain for 26 years until 2018, reportedly explained the reduction like this: "It's like heading up a mountain and knowing you will only be eating couscous for days. Sometimes less choice is better; you find something that works and stick with it."

For Sam, one element of simplification is his choice of gear. "I only wear Summit Series in the mountains. To me, it's like the pinnacle of outerwear that's been, you know, pretty much a constant companion through every first ascent and alpine peak that I've climbed and skied."

Sam also admitted to me that that wasn't the sole constant in his life of adventure: "I've always been especially talented at wrecking gear. It's nice to use that for some good." I can only imagine how much better the Summit Series, and The North Face, is for having hundreds of athletes over 25 years who, like Sam, are happy to push gear to its absolute limits and then some.

JAMES MCCORMACK

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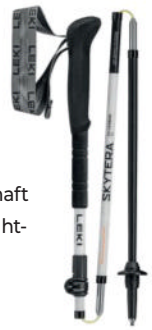
LEKI:
SKYTERA FX CARBON SL POLES



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FROM THE EDITOR: This is not your usual Wild Shot, and I'll explain why, but first here's a bit of background. Every Wild Shot since I became editor of *Wild* seven years ago, we've given away a prize, one organised by Zac Dooling, marketing director at Outdoor Agencies. It meant that every three months or so, I'd get on the phone with Zac to talk about the upcoming Wild Shot and the prize to go with it. Our conversations were rarely short, usually half an hour or more, and we'd chat through not only the prizes but also our recent adventures, a bit of industry gossip, and, more broadly, life in general.

In July, however, two days after our last chat, Zac had a massive heart attack, and passed away. He was in his 40s. I'll always associate the Wild Shot with Zac, so it seems appropriate this issue to remember him with this image, shot by Lachlan Gardiner, from their trip together last year to Tassie's Western Arthurs. Zac was no mere desk jockey; he was always out there either doing an adventure or planning his next one. Beyond that, he possessed a truly infectious energy, had a great sense of humour, and was one of those people who was genuinely universally loved.

RIP, Zac, you will be greatly missed.

Although there was no reader-contributed Wild Shot this issue, we've still got an awesome Nemo Equipment **MOONLITE** reclining camp chair valued at $249.95 to give away to someone who sent us a Wild Shot this past year that wasn't published (CY, you're our winner). The chair brings comfort to the backcountry, and is barely noticeable in your pack. A unique pulley system allows you to adjust your sitting position on the fly, and oversized tubes create exceptional strength and stability despite the chair's light weight.
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Photo: Lachlan Gardiner

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