

# Our 2010 / 2011 Australian Outback Safari

**By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan**

**Newsletter Number Seventeen**

The spectacular Victorian High-country was most captivating, and certainly an area to revisit. There was so much exploring beckoning us in this area, we were not keen to move on at all!

We left the town of Adaminaby at noon after fitting a new synthetic 'Dynamica' winch rope which is known to be 'stronger than steel'. The steel winch rope we replaced had certainly done its turn, especially in the last week. With Megan's fingers on the remote control, our wire rope snapped while attempting a technical recovery operation. ("No problem" she said-that's why we carry a spare one!")

From this small resort village we followed a back road north towards Canberra via Shannons Flat and Namadgi National Park. This route was not our first choice as we found many of the 4WD tracks through these National Parks to be locked. These tracks are locked for the winter season when they become impassable; however, the locals told us the Parks officers frequently 'forget' to re-open the tracks once the weather improves which is a trap for visitors like us planning to follow a series of tracks through the back-country. We normally check with the police & locals when planning our route.



We continued to weave our way through deep valleys, shimmering with the mid-summer temperatures in the high 30's. These delightful ranges of granite boulders & peaks separated us from isolation all too soon, & later that day we arrived at the eerie white Space Station antenna and buildings associated with the Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex at Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station!

This impressive site is one of 3 locations in Nassa's Manned Space Flight Network. The others are located in Goldstone, California and Madrid in

Spain. These antennas relayed the first TV images of Neil Armstrong's historic steps on the moon on 21 July 1969.

Driving a few kilometres further, the bush skyline was interrupted by the first sight of Canberra, Australia's Capital City. High rise buildings loomed on the horizon, & then over one more rise, the bush gave way to the impressive modern architecture and streetscape of the very orderly & busy city centre. Graeme had joined a 4WD group from Canberra in 2008 to tackle the Canning Stock Route so we enjoyed meeting up with the Collins/Dobson/Kjar trio again to swap notes and enjoy their welcoming friendship once again.



We escaped the blistering mid-day heat in a cool air conditioned mall, then later sheltered from a spectacular thunder and lightning storm followed by torrential rain which resulted in some really hot steamy conditions – a good test of our roof-top tent!

Continuing on our journey north –west, we made our way to Yass though fine wool growing country to Dalton where outside the dusty old corner pub we discovered a steel sculpture display of the legendary Ned Kelly and a couple of fine horses all fabricated from steel!



The Ned Kelly story is a clash between outlaws and the authorities in NSW. Ned Kelly & his gang represented the last of the 1800's bush-rangers. In their 'famed suits of armour' they defended themselves against State Troopers & the Police. The tales of bank robberies & train hold-ups were brought back to the forefront in a 2006 movie featuring the late Heath Ledger 'in one of his best performances'



Driving through more lovely country-side northwards allowed us to enjoy the tiny townships of Gunning & Grabben Gullen – 'a fossickers treasure trove' where sapphires garnets, zircons & gold have been found in abundance over the years, but now only the 'Gabby Pub' seems popular! The next little town was Crookwell, right on the top of the Great Dividing Range (1000m above sea level) & nearby in the Wollondilly River the first rainbow trout were released on the mainland back in 1888. Now tree lined streets & old majestic buildings continue to grace these tiny villages. A huge modern wind-farm is perched on the hillside in the distance.

East to **Taralga** – a village proudly preserving its unique buildings from the 1860's built from locally gathered stone. These classic old petrol pumps and hotels were features we constantly admired in these tiny towns and villages all over Australia. >>>



Later that day we met an ex NZ couple at Abercrombie River who had a nasty experience. We watched on as their 4X4 & caravan narrowly avoided a head-on collision by taking out a tree after a dramatic brake lock-up on a tight corner while



approaching a one-way bridge in wet weather. We had parked just metres away for a picnic lunch & witnessed the dramatics first hand! (Note the tyre skid marks!) We reported these hazardous conditions and the lack of warning signs to the local Shire Office at Oberon.

Then it was on to Kandos & Rylstone following the Cudgegong River & its breathtaking views over the sandstone ridges & escarpments to the Blue Mountain range between Bathurst & Sydney. We continued on to **Bylong** where we camped at Breakfast Creek. The green frogs that joined us in the shower block out numbered the locals in the nearby village 10 to 1! The 'Bylong Mouse Races' an annual charity fund raising event has run for over 20 yrs & brings this village to life – All the mice are trained locally!



(This Mouse Racing event can be viewed on UTube!)



We woke to another beautifully clear day from our camp spot within the old church grounds opposite the General Store. From here we enjoyed stunning views of picturesque valleys on the edge of Woolemi National Park – NSW largest wilderness area from where we could see a maze of canyons, rocky cliffs & natural forests.

We reluctantly resisted exploring some interesting looking tracks into this beautiful national park! (We will be back to explore this Park in 2012/13)

We arrived at Denman in the Hunter Valley – the home of fine wines, olives, & where everything equestrian is in the forefront! Some unusual wild-life call this home. **This is a road-killed fox!** >>>



We travelled over the plains rich in horticulture and beautiful horse-studs to Musselbrook on the Hunter River, then along the New England Hwy to the town of Aberdeen (all decked out in tartan) A quaint little street on the hill caught our eye!



With tongue in cheek, Graeme suggested they may have been expecting us! >>>



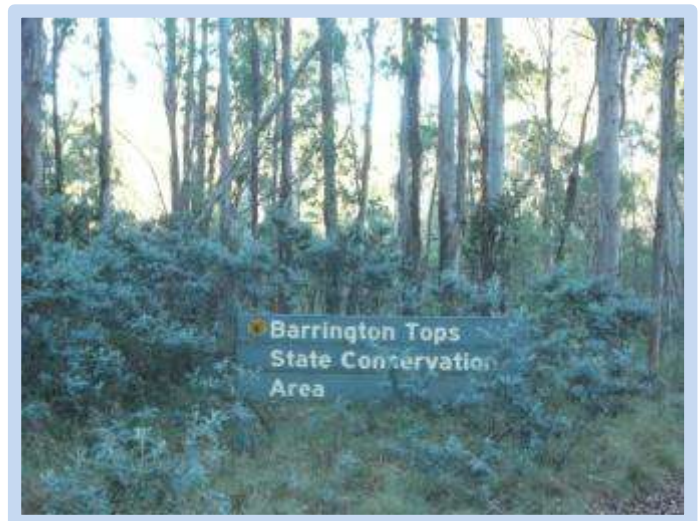
<< The style & quality of the signage in & around the Upper Hunter Shire was most impressive.

This sturdy old bridge is just another grand example of early engineering and construction. (Built to last)



We left the highway to travel east past Lake Glenbawn along the pretty valley floor to Moonan Flats and took a short 4WD detour along the edge of Barrington Tops National Park. We were thwarted by locked gates and private property signs, but some helpful locals directed us to 'the Snow-Gate' into the wonderful Stuart Brook State Forest (this gate is locked seasonally when it becomes impassable during the snow season)

<<< This **Snow Gate** was a most intimidating entry.



It was late in the afternoon with long shadows creating an enchanted forest effect amongst these huge trees. (A paradise for 4WD adventurers and a place worth conserving)

We caught sight of a mob of brumbies deep in this isolated wilderness forest on a trail that our GPS mapping system assisted us with- only to end at a locked gate! Bugger! Another U-turn, and several hours searching for an alternative exit eventually led us to a large farm named 'Ellerston' where we made camp for the night.

This ended up being a very scary night! We had little sleep as there were lots of very strange & mysterious noises for most of the night. The light of day revealed the Ellerston main gates nearby- complete with a fully manned guard house, a 6 foot high perimeter fence, a high-tech surveillance security system protected a simply stunning & privately owned Golf Course! This 'Greg Norman designed' 18 hole world class golf course is the private 'invitation only' playground of the Packer family 'a pristine gem in the Upper Hunter Valley' - perfectly manicured and irrigated & accessible only by helicopter (or 4WD!!).

We headed n/west towards Wombramurra leaving the bush clad steep valleys via Nundle, & Dungowan to reach **Tamworth** - proudly proclaimed to be Australia's 'Country Music Capital'. We toured the impressive 'Golden Guitar' gallery to view the Country Music Legends & its Stars in the Wax Museum. **Slim Dusty** >>





We recognised Tex Morton, Slim Dusty and a few others, including the more recently popular Lee Kernaghan.

**This Golden Guitar** certainly made a statement outside the Wax Museum in Tamworth >>>

Despite Megan's background of farming and horse interests, she was not persuaded to purchase any country music!



<<< In Tamworth an impressive bronze monument - a tribute to the ANZAC corps & their horses who served us so well overseas.



The imposing Australian Equine & Livestock Centre hosting a Camp Drafting show. A horse auction was in progress when we arrived. >>



<< Grandeur from yesteryear! A delightful outback stone shelter for stockmen.



North on the New England Hwy we camped near Uralla, 22km south of Armidale, where we endured more thunder storms & more rain than we had seen in the past year!



We passed by this lovely quaint little church at Gostwyck, picture-perfect & set behind some beautifully created old stone walls on our way to The 'Danger Falls' on the edge of the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, which was an ideal resting spot for lunch.



We returned to Armidale, some 12 months after passing through here when our Safari commenced in March!

The iconic dark brick buildings give the city a majestic air. We parked outside Richardson's Arcade, which was built in 1842.



One of the many intriguing front yard displays seen in our travels. The Flinstones -no less! >>

We chose a route to Brisbane via Ipswich which included some tracks we hoped would give us our last taste of 4WD driving before the end of our Safari. Leaving this lovely city behind, we followed dusty gravel roads through some magnificent farmlands which led us deep into a Eucalypt forest on a 4WD track through the Oakwood State forest near the boundary of Guy Fawkes River National Park.



This challenging forest track declined from a good forestry track to an unused, overgrown & unmaintained trail. Navigation was only possible with the assistance of our trusty GPS. We soon realised it had been many years since anybody else had ventured this way. This was to have been a quick and simple alternative route to the 'Black-Top', but it soon became an irresistible off road challenge! After winching & chain sawing through no less than 9 large fallen trees in the wet undergrowth & fording 2 swollen river crossings, we were forced to make camp in the forest when we came across yet another

very large fallen tree right on nightfall when visibility was poor & rain was once again threatening. We knew we were approx 1km from the final river crossing so we thought it best to tackle this in day-light as we expected this to be more of a hazard (going by our GPS).

In the morning we cleared the fallen tree only to turn the next corner & find another tree down not 500 metres away! (No wonder I've lost 8kgs on this Safari!) This proved to be the last tree we winched out of the way, but not the last challenge of the day! Fortunately we had only light rain overnight, but it was obvious there had been considerably more rainfall up-stream by the look of the flooded creeks we came across!

The next challenge was the river we had been concerned about crossing the night before. It was 80cm deep & swifter than we had expected with a very muddy & challenging exit on the other side. As we had come so far, we were not keen to back-track!



The mere prospect of having to retrace our route and look for an alternative exit didn't appeal as this would have taken more than a day to execute in these conditions.

We assessed the situation carefully, considering all recovery options & the risks if the worst occurred. As the entry & exit to this crossing were steep Graeme suggested that we had several options. These all seemed to involve 'the winch-girl' getting very wet to test the depth & to ensure the base of this crossing was firm! Graeme indicated that my safety was paramount – of course I would be safely roped to the truck in case I was swept off my feet ..... Another option involved me sitting on the truck bonnet, legs wrapped around the bull bar & the HF aerial for stability, whilst gauging the depth & base for holes or soft mud by prodding with a long stick as the truck inched its way forward..... The winch girl went for this option! (But only after GB promised not to hit the brakes suddenly!) We cautiously proceeded across this filthy swift water from the steep grassy bank. The crossing was successful, the water deep and the base was reasonably firm. The 'human depth gauge' (yours truly) & the driver, were relieved to climb out onto the grassy bank on the far side.



This 4WD adventure ended as we reached a gravel road near "Pretty Valley Farm Homestead". We meandered through rolling farmland which showed a lot of flood debris high up on fence-lines and bridge abutments which indicated very high flood levels in recent times.



It's hard to believe but this is the view back over the country & its vague tracks that we had traversed during the past 48 hours from Raspberry Hill (which is 1122m above sea level.) This view explains why we had felt so remote! These deep gullies and steep ridges provided a green wilderness of native bush & lush rainforest, isolated & wonderful – **We loved it!**

This normal sized corrugated iron water tank had been caught up in recent flood-waters, & had become flattened against a tree by the sheer force of the rushing water. Only a few days later this creek was gentle and clean again, the debris looks absurd but served as a subtle reminder. >>

Near Tabulan (east of Glen Inness) the Clarence River had recently flooded with the water rising 16 metres – making this area unrecognisable! We ventured north through more magnificent rain forests which overlooked the Tooloom Range, then with a sense of De ja vu, we arrived back in the camp ground at Woodenbong. This is where we had stayed 12 months ago on the second night of our Safari. Ironically, it's now the second to last night of our Safari!



One last cheeky off-road detour was obviously not meant to be! This locked gate was most convincing!!

**6 Padlocks (one for each permit issued) >>>**



We had plenty of camp visits from these inquisitive Dingo's & Kangaroos throughout our journey.



<<< A not so welcome dining companion arrived in our Camp Kitchen tonight!



We continued northwards, crossing the NSW – Queensland Border in a remote area near Lake Maroon.

This Queensland forest Boarder is well protected by multiple 24 hour cameras as shown. >>>



<<< We made camp for the last time in Brisbane City where an Aussie native called in to visit us! We chased him off our roof-top tent. Unlike NZ, opossums are a protected species here in Australia.



Today marked the end of this exciting and fulfilling year, touring the Continent of Australia. This has been a true adventure and we have really enjoyed sharing some of the highlights we've had with you via our 17 Newsletters during the last 12 months.

We concur that this past year would have to rate as one of the best years ever in our lives 'so far'.

The experience, the excitement, the calculated risk taking, the new friends made, the knowledge we accumulated, & the thousands of photographs will leave us with wonderful & lasting memories.

Our faithful Toyota Landcruiser has been serviced & had a valet before being put back into storage ready for our next adventure.

From here we fly back to NZ as we both have to fulfil our work commitments before we embark upon our next adventure later this year which includes Turkey, The Greek Islands, a Danube / Rhine River cruise from Budapest to Amsterdam & then home via Switzerland & Thailand.

We have yet to finish the last 6 month leg of our 4X4 Safari in Australia, but this will have to wait until 2012/13.

In the meantime we bid you farewell and hope that you have enjoyed our Newsletters.

It would be remiss of us not say 'Thank You' for all the feedback you have given us.

Your comments have only served to inspire us to do more, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

We wish you all a safe, prosperous and fulfilling year ahead.

**Goodbye for now, Graeme & Megan**



**Another exciting adventure completed.**