

Packrafting – Bathurst Harbour (SW Tasmania) (March 2014)

Jeff Howard

Mar 4-15 SOUTH WEST TASMANIA – Packrafting (Q)

12 day combined bushwalking and packrafting trip. Fly in/fly out Melaleuca. Exact route and dates to be decided and very weather dependent. Everything to be carried – no food dumps. Expressions of interest sought. Lightweight Alpacka packraft (or equivalent), paddles and life jacket required. Party limit of 6. Experienced walkers/packrafters only. DISTANCE: MEDIUM. TRIP GRADE: MEDIUM/HARD. MAPS: SEE LEADER. LEADER: JEFF HOWARD

Trip duration: 12 Days. Participants (3):

Jeff Howard (Leader, with blue 2.4kg Alpacka Denali).

Sara Maywood (with red 2.2kg Alpacka Alpaca).

Rob Jung (with green Alpacka Denali).

In the February 2012 issue of *Into The Blue*, I wrote an article about the *Inaugural CMW Packrafting Trip* which described a December 2011 day trip from Palm Beach to Cowan Station.

Apart from describing the trip itself, the article went into some detail about how Duncan Cross (arguably ‘The Father of CMW Packrafting’) had brought an Alpacka into the clubroom, blew it up and thereafter demonstrated its lightness, versatility and clever design, and then invited the Club members present to consider what to do with it.

Well, since that time, Duncan had convinced at least three disciples that a combination of bushwalking and rafting can open up an array of new trip possibilities. After the very enjoyable Palm Beach to Cowan experience, we have walked to and paddled up and down most of the scenic Hawkesbury and Port Hacking tributaries, explored mangrove creeks in Jervis Bay, Wallacia to Lapstone on the Nepean and did a number of overnight rafting trips on the Shoalhaven (sometimes, to speed things up on the long pools, towing those with lilos). In addition we have used packrafts in white-water on the Colo and Snowy Rivers.

To this point we had learned:

1. Paddling against any sort of wind in a packraft is not recommended.
2. Paddling against the wind and tide is more than not recommended.
3. Be careful when trying to land next to oyster beds and sharp rocks like limestone.
4. Don't expect to take a packraft and keep up with others on a Col Halpin CMW sea-kayaking trip, and
5. The rafts are stable going down the easier (grade 2-3) rapids.

With this accumulated experience under our belts and growing confidence in these little boats (no punctures so far!), I proposed to Sara and Rob that we should go to Tasmania and packraft Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey (Duncan was unavailable – cycling to Perth at this time). The planned trip was quite ambitious – Melaleuca, Horseshoe Inlet, Bathurst Channel, North up Joe Page Bay and as far up the Spring River as possible before re-joining the Port Davey Track. This would be followed by a long

day's walk over Lost World Plateau to somewhere nice (hopefully) on the Crossing River, the last few kilometres off-track. Then we would spend the next few days paddling down to the Davey River, through Davey Gorge and on to Settlement Point – where in the 1800s century a community of ¹pining families lived. Some ‘rest days’ were budgeted at this stage waiting for good conditions to paddle into Payne Bay and Port Davey and gain the shelter of Bramble Cove at the entrance to Bathurst Harbour. The last part of the trip was to paddle back up the Harbour to Melaleuca.

They accepted my opinion that this would represent the “Pinnacle of Packrafting Trips” (weather permitting, of course).

As the weeks counted down before leaving for Hobart, we each had to work out how to carry all this extra stuff – packraft, foam life-jacket, paddles, repair kits, spray-deck and the like – in a pack that already has full equipment and food for 12 days in SW Tasmania.

Sara and I met Rob the night before our flight to Melaleuca in our Hobart hotel dining room for the traditional ‘Last Supper’. We had flown down from Sydney the previous afternoon, and Rob had taken a number of days to drive down and cross Bass Strait on the *Spirit of Tasmania*. He had plans to tour around parts of Tasmania after the packrafting trip.

Early on Tuesday 4th March the departure lounge at *Par Avion* was full of day-trippers, a number of bushwalkers destined to do the South Coast Track, and the three of us. The weather looked fine and clear as our twin-engine plane flew round the South Coast. We recognised the usual landmarks – South Cape, Precipitous Bluff, Prion Beach and Cox Bight, and had a good view of Mt Rugby and Bathurst Harbour before landing at Melaleuca. It felt good to be back in this part of the world. After we filled our fuel bottles with metho, we started walking the “always muddy” Port Davey Track, heading north for our first night's camp



The three of us next to the NPWS sign at Melaleuca (Jeff Howard's camera).

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Sara and Jeff paddling over beds of marine vegetation
(Photo by Rob Jung).

beside Horseshoe Inlet. This was reached after about 4-5 hours, with the last half-hour spent struggling through the 200m scrub belt defending the shoreline.

Our thoughts at this stage: happy that we will be on the water next day and not have to carry heavy packs on a muddy track, but wondering what conditions will be like crossing Bathurst Channel with a weather front due to pass through the area tomorrow morning.

The weather overnight proved accurate – high winds, scattered showers and (unfortunately for us) all coming from the north. We set off in our boats next morning, but could only manage a few kilometres up Horseshoe Inlet before having lunch at Balmoral Beach – which had a nice sheltered campsite facing the Bathurst Channel. It was so nice there that we were joined by a Par Avion tourist boat with some of the day-trippers we had seen in Hobart.

The northerly winds moderated to a breeze as we crossed (the still choppy) Bathurst Channel and headed up into Joe Page Bay, passing some nice beaches, small islands and increasing numbers of ducks and cormorants – and then we entered the black swan paradise of Manwoneer Inlet. It was getting late as we explored the swampy shoreline for somewhere to camp, and hopefully watch and listen to groups of swans honking all night. However, there was nowhere habitable and all the creek water flowing into the inlet was brackish, so we returned to Joe Page Bay to camp.

That night we took stock of our slow progress and decided to abandon the trip over to the Crossing and Davey Rivers and spend our time touring Bathurst Harbour. We could see the writing on the wall – the possibility of running short of time on the wrong (exposed) side of Port Davey, with the certainty of social consequences for the leader.

We were still curious about how far we could get up the Spring River and whether we could get to the Port Davey Track – so Day 3 was spent on a return paddle upstream. As the map told us, the riverbanks were either very swampy or very well defended by thick scrub – but at the spot I intended to exit to the Port Davey Track, it did look possible once you climbed up the mud-bank. Sara and Rob were less sure (bordering on sceptical?). We had a quick lunch on the only (little) beach we could find, as the incoming tide swallowed it up.

The next day dawned brilliant as we paddled slowly down from Joe Page Bay along the northern shore of Bathurst Channel. The revised plan was to reach Bramble Cove over the next couple of days. The morning was windless and we had time to enjoy each of the little bays and inlets – often going ashore, noting sources of water and future campsites. Then we headed round a prominent point and were immediately exposed to fairly strong headwinds and choppy seas (refer Rule #1 above). Lunch was delayed somewhat as we tried to find some shelter – a timely small cove then appeared. In the afternoon we continued hugging the northern shoreline, and then, using the lee of Munday Island, we crossed over to Schooner Cove. On the way we sighted a small shark among the thick mussel beds. Perhaps there should be another rule about not packrafting next to sharks?

Two nights were spent in a great campsite at Schooner Cove, a designated boat anchorage. We were visited by one fishing boat and a large sailing boat (*Windward Bound* out of Hobart). We did daywalks. Rob followed the ridge network to Mt O'Brien and Morning Hill, and Sara and I were content with looking up and down Bathurst Channel from the top of Schooner Hill, and then walking over to view Hannant Inlet, Spain Bay etc, which are accessible to walkers doing the South West Cape circuit.

Bramble Cove was the next port of call for two nights. This is another sheltered spot to anchor one's yacht or cruiser and is also very nice to paddle around – past outcrops of limestone and stands of giant kelp gently waving in the swell. Protected from the ocean by the Breaksea Islands and a reef called 'Boil Rock', the Cove was the site of a whaling settlement in the early 1800s. By 1878 the huts were abandoned and the cemetery overgrown. All that remains now is a plaque containing inscriptions from the cemetery in thick scrub.

We met a few boat people (like ourselves, though they had much larger boats) in Bramble Cove. On one of the sunny beaches we met Tony, an artist. It happened that his

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Rob down near Bramble Cove (Photo by Jeff Howard).

father set-up a pulp mill in Aberdeen, Scotland where Sara's stepfather did some architectural work. On another beach we met a young family from an anchored schooner taking the opportunity of making sandcastles in the good conditions.

We settled down in a perfect campsite luxuriously appointed with a private beach and tables and chairs. It was festooned with ropes for drying gear and featured a reticulated water supply – the side creek had a hose rigged up providing running water.

The second day in Bramble Cove was cloudy with passing showers, but it was still good enough, from the top of Mt Milner, to get great views of the offshore islands and over to Kelly Basin and North to Payne Bay and Settlement Point, our 'Plan A' destination. On a more promising day, climbing rugged Mt Stokes would have been tempting.

It was now Day 8 and time to start paddling back up Bathurst Channel towards Melaleuca – this time exploring the southern shoreline, which is a bit more exposed. Along the way we met a group of sea-kayakers from *Roaring Forties Kayaking*. They were on a 7 day trip and heading for Bramble Cove. After chatting mid-channel and parting ways, Sara and myself thought one of them sounded a bit like (CMW Club Member) Bruce Baldwin disguised under sunglasses and zinc cream. No, couldn't be . . . we thought.

In the calm (but getting windier) conditions, we arrived at our planned campsite for the day – Balmoral Beach. There was time for Rob to climb Balmoral Hill and Sara and myself to walk the beach and around the corner to collect some water from a local creek, which was ringed by thick scrub. The *Roaring Forties* people said that a weather front was due the following day – and they were right.

Next day dawned with strong westerly winds and waves to match. After a good look, we set off in "a

lull" which very quickly drove us 2kms up the Bathurst Narrows to Joan Point. There we stopped for some time, to shelter next to the bushwalkers' boats on the Port Davey Track. It was fairly hard work keeping the packrafts pointed in the direction of the wind, but they were stable enough. Camp that night was made in Iola Bay. Water was available and it was well sheltered if pretty scrubby in outlook. Rob's afternoon walk took him to the top of Mt Beattie (again, excellent views).

Day 10 was a rainy day with low clouds and most of that day was spent sheltering at Platypus Point in our tents. A planned climb up Mt Rugby was quickly forgotten. There was only thick scrub and not the track indicated in my guidebook. Other sources indicate the track starts elsewhere.

Day 11 was one of those still, magic days in Tasmania. The water of Bathurst Harbour was like glass with fine reflections of surrounding mountains including Mt Rugby and the Western Arthurs. Rob went into a flurry of photography which ranged from the reflections of mountains and trees to close-ups of swan feathers on the water surface. We toured round each of the Celery Top Islands and landed on one. This had a quartzite beach and mature forest containing lots of native pine trees. Celery Top Pines are no longer found on the surrounding mainland, because of bush fires. After finding a good campsite featuring Bathurst Harbour and Mt Rugby and the Western Arthurs as backdrop, we paddled to a hut nestled in a part of Forest Lagoon called Claytons Corner. This was the home of Win and Clyde Clayton from 1962 to 1976 and now managed by the Tasmanian National Park Service. Win was the daughter of Charles King of Melaleuca and the sister of Deny.



Sara passing Mt Rugby (Photo by Rob Jung).

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Dawn from our last campsite was spectacular. It was windless with colour on the top Mt Rugby and other mountains. It really was hard to leave, but we had to go as another weather front was approaching. We obtained this information the day before from people on *The Antipodean*, a large cruiser tied up at the jetty next to Claytons Hut.

As we paddled up Forest Lagoon towards the entrance of Melaleuca Inlet, Sara noticed a lone figure on a point. As we approached, a check with the binoculars revealed it was Maggie Baldwin (another CMW Club Member) - and obviously, we did unknowingly talk to Bruce a few days back. We, of course, halted our paddling and went on a guided tour of their modest *Roaring Forties Resort Village* camp – complete with separate enclosed kitchen and happy-hour wine and cheese area and modern sleeping huts for the kayaking guests – and a resident quoll. The toilets all had views. They were leaving and flying out that day. They later caught up and left us in their wake.

The rain started to fall as we approached Melaleuca. We deflated the boats for the first time in many days and packed them away, and then walked to the Charles King Hut and campsite and thought about lunch. We were planning to have a leisurely afternoon looking around Melaleuca. However, we were advised on the basis of weather forecasts to leave that afternoon. And so it was, we left on the last flight. The clouds looked ominous but we had a fairly smooth flight back, this time over the Western Arthurs and the Picton Range in a straight line back to Hobart. It was another world in Hobart – a very warm, sunny afternoon.

¹“pinning” refers to the Huon Pine.

NB The party was regularly **SPOT**ted by several club members during the trip – refer to <http://au.findmespot.com/en/>.



Left: View from above Nellies Glen at Katoomba from near **Norths Lookout (aka Nellies Glen Lookout)**, looking towards Narrowneck Plateau in the mid-distance and beyond to the Gangerangs, Easter 2014. The *Wildwalks* website has a guide on how to access this lookout at www.tinyurl.com/Wildwalks-NGLO. The map displayed also shows some of the tracks that can be used to access the area more directly from Katoomba, and which are not shown on the *Katoomba 1:25000* topographical map.

Below: A ‘Wild Dog Tree’ (note the varying coloured coats) on the road between Omeo and Benambra in Victoria (on the way to Native Dog Flat), March 2014. (Both photos by David Springthorpe).

Bushwalk Australia Emag

The latest edition (**Autumn edition, Volume No 4, April 2014**) is available to be downloaded at <http://emag.bushwalk.com/BWA201404.pdf>

Previous editions can be downloaded at <http://emag.bushwalk.com/BWA201310.pdf>
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These magazines are well worth a read and contain lots of good articles and images.

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One Liners . . .

A new study has found that women who carry a little extra weight live longer than the men who mention it. Dealing with stupid people is like playing soccer. You can use your head, but a swift kick is more effective. When they discover the centre of the universe, a lot of people will be disappointed they're not it.