

**Hattah Lakes National Park**

**Mungo National Park**

**Moama – Echuca**

**April 2016**

**Jennie and Jim Russell**



## Camping trips within Australia

### Hattah Lakes, Mungo National Park and Moama

April 2016

Victoria's countryside was definitely showing signs of severe drought as we headed up the Calder Highway towards Donald to call in on Willa on our way to the Hattah Lakes. Huge flocks of white cockatoos reigned supreme and turned bare trees into white screeching masses. For hundreds of kilometres dams were bone dry and only stubble or burnt paddocks were left after wheat crops had been harvested. Yet as we passed over the Loddon River it was full to capacity, so too the dams within its vicinity, this was rare. The sky was a brilliant blue without a wisp of wind, clouds of dust hung in the air and obscured the road as farmers ploughed and planted paddocks in their hope for much needed rain to germinate their next crop. Did they know something we didn't?

It was interesting to see the old rusty farming machinery and implements used for decoration at property entrances. Some even had vintage dusty rusty trucks and cars as well in the front paddocks. One factor that made us both very happy were the large number of solar panels on the roof of most properties whether domestic or commercial.

During lunch Willa mentioned it was worth doing a detour along the Henty Highway on our trip to see the paintings on the Brim silos.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-07/brim-grain-silos-guido-van-helten-art-wimmera-victoria/7072768>



Brim Silos

What a really great suggestion, the 30 metre high murals on the old grain silos were excellent. A Brisbane artist had captured the Wimmera's rural struggle on the faces of four local farmers so well. These silos were proving a lifeline for the town of 261, bringing people

from near and far. At weekends the local community held stalls and offered coffee to visitors.

It was dusk at Hattah Lakes as we set up camp and prepared our dinner on a bed of ants! We were pleased to see the main lake (Hattah) was near full of water, it shimmered in the moonlight. Water birds were making plenty of noise as they settled for the night. With only four campsites being used, the place was very quiet and inviting.



A Cheeky Kookaburra

The next morning our attempts at a bike ride around the lake were aborted after about 3km by a puncture in Jim's tyre. Thick stretches of loose dry sand on the track certainly slowed us to a standstill as well. The 10 km 'ride' pushing the bikes through the sand seemed like 30km as we walked the rest of distance in the hot mid-day sun in the

company of the great friend of all country Australia, sticky, irritating flies.



Our Trek Setup

Jim lagged behind me, I wasn't the nicest person, wanting him to hurry up and stop missing out on seeing animals jump across the track. I told him he would get sun-stroke at his speed, he was unmoved!!

We did however see many emus, kangaroos, wallabies and flocks of screeching cockatoos as well as crows. The most interesting flock of birds seen during the day were the bronze winged pigeons. There were footprints of countless other creatures whose ownership we will never discover. Evidence of the original owner's presence living in a then healthy food rich environment was echoed as we passed several old 'canoe' trees.



The series of mostly dry lake beds were surrounded thickly by young sapling gums creating wonderful reflections and giving any water present a peaceful appearance. Especially so when the water lapped to the lake edge in the breeze. Later in the afternoon we drove some distance to the other campsite by the riverside where there were two restful camps setup. The whole ambiance was sadly ruined by “3 rally drivers” hooning up the road creating clouds of dust!



Hattah Camping Ground

Once back at camp and preparing dinner, a young cheeky kookaburra stole some pepper cheese right in front of my nose! He proceeded to ‘kill’ it on a branch before eating. The Maggies below were enjoying the titbits that broke with each bash! Later the stars were shining brightly as we took a moonlight walk before bed.

There was one unusual emerald green area near the camping ground with a dry creek bed running through it. The whole area was covered with plant we had not seen before and had difficulty ascertaining if it was indigenous or introduced. It was a green haven surrounded by desert and so restful on the eyes.



A Green Haven

With no showers provided, I couldn’t survive the day without a wash in the morning, a quick lick and a promise was better than nothing. After dismantling camp, we following vineyards for many miles as we headed to Mildura on the way to Mungo National Park. Mungo is 132 red dusty dry kilometres out of Mildura on what appeared at first to be a very quiet road with only a few cattle stations along the way! The road was appalling for the entire distance, huge semi-trailers had

churned it up causing deep drifts of sand which had to be negotiated very carefully. Vehicles roared towards us at great speed creating an invisible road and thick clouds of dust.

Suddenly there was a very loud bang and Bertha swerved madly forcing us to stop. The camper-van's spare tyre had disappeared and the mudguard was digging into the wheel. Jim hammered out the mudguard while I walked back to find the tyre. Thank-goodness we were back negotiating the bulldust on the road in no time at all.

<http://www.aussietowns.com.au/town/lake-mungo-nsw>



Thirsty Wallabies

Mungo NP main campsite had minimal but good amenities and was sparsely occupied. A relatively new toilet block and covered picnic

seating area with tanks to catch every drop of rain seemed adequate for the camper's numbers. It was ideal even if there were no showers. I carried buckets to collect water from a tank, a wallaby with a joey in the pouch and one alongside, challenged me. She stood her ground and growled like an angry dog and took a swipe at my face. I gave her my teacher's voice and she backed off. After the fright settled down I realise all she wanted was a drink from the bucket. She seemed quite accustomed to campers collecting water and giving her some. We became good friends the next day, the family of 3 hung around hoping for any morsel we could offer. There were quite a few wallabies, even an aggressive old man wallaby around camp but thankfully only this one gentle group stayed near us.

After a good sleep we rode our bikes around the nature trail and to the 'Walls of China' lookout stopping to read the many informative signs providing background information along the way. In its hay-day the lake would have been huge, supporting many fish, animals and birds for the local aboriginal tribes.

Later, before investigating to the 'Walls', we dropped into the Visitor Centre and small local anthropology museum to learn more about 'Mungo Woman and Mungo Man' who had lived some 60,000 years ago in the area and had been ceremonially cremated close-by.

Although camp bookings are essential at sites, payment at some seems to be totally by trust and camper honesty. At this visitor's centre we had to work out the amount due from a chart, place it in an envelope and deposit it down a chute, the centre was unattended most of the time.





Woolshed – Lake Mungo

Leaving the nearby woolshed for a later visit, Bertha headed down and across the dry bed and blue saltbush covered Lake Mungo for several kilometres passing a few kangaroos and emus. The contrast between the clear blue sky and the many coloured ochres of layered sands on the eroded walls was special. Every colour between a light cream beige to a deep red orange were there with few trees or bushes to obscure its beauty. Red Top Point, some kilometres away was quite different as the sand was cream only and had deep erosion crevices creating superb patterns rather like Cappadocia, Turkey. Hattah Lake and its surrounds are part of the World Heritage listed extensive Willandra Lake system that has not seen water since 1956.

<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/7631/>

Russell Drysdale's 1945 painting 'Drought at the Walls of China, Gol Gol' defined the parched landscape perfectly. One of the series of paintings was later used for a 30C Australian stamp. For many, the stamp issue was their first knowledge of the lake and its area.

Later we returned to the visitors centre for a much needed refreshing hot shower in clean amenities and wandered around the large Cyprus timbered woolshed where in the 1930's, up to 50,000 sheep had shorn a year.



Mungo Lake with Walls of China in the Distance

On our return to main camp we found several campers had packed up and left while new groups had arrived, there would have been 20 school students in one quiet well organized group. It proved interesting to see the various types of camping outfits people choose

for such trips, some have simple tents while others have a complete home away from home.



Walls of China - Lake Mungo

The stars twinkled brightly overhead and constellations were easy to identify, the evening was crisp and the sky clear with a full moon throwing light over the entire area. This was a sure sign we were in for a freezing night. We had a silent visitor while we slept who went through our rubbish. Must have been our mum and babies!

Our time taken in dismantling of camp was improving with practice. Jim decided to return to Victoria by the Balranald Road and turn south to Swan Hill. A far better choice than attempting the Mildura road nightmare again. A NSW politician must own a station along that road for it be so well graded and smooth for easy travelling.

The 'other girl' in Bertha was giving some strange calls for left or right turns onto non-existent roads, as well as making many annoying repetitious instructions. It took a while for Jim to work out how to mute the GPS so we could simply enjoy music and still follow the instructions. We passed Bourke and Wills Road and a signpost to a town named Goodnight.

We rewarded our dusty throats with an ice-cream at Balranald. Its times like these when you realise how expensive it is to live in a small country town miles from the main towns on highways or capital cities.



Red Top Point

How nice it was to be back amongst the tall Murray River Gums while passing citrus and stone fruit farms and vineyards along the Murray



Valley Highway from Swan Hill to Echuca and Moama. There was plenty of evidence of past poor water irrigating practices on properties destroyed by salt rising to the surface making the land useless for future cropping. The paddocks laid waste and barely capable of supporting the growth of saltbush.



Thong tree by the Murray - Echuca

Our next camp site, Coco Bend was just that, at a bend in the Murray River a few kilometres out of Moama Township. A spacious site on grass was offered with hot showers and electricity laid on but sadly no wildlife! It was a peaceful place until the dogs started making their presence known. With so few dog friendly camp sites available, this place was popular.

During our stay we visited the Railway Pump Station, now converted into the town's visitors centre, watched the popular and crowded paddle steamers on the river, enjoyed some wine tasting at St Anne's and bought a few things at the busy Sunday Market.



Paddle Steamer Canberra - Echuca

How relaxing to be surrounded by greenery for a while and not have the cruel drought scenery surrounding us. That pleasure didn't last

long however, the trip home following the Northern Highway to Bendigo again took us through another drought affected landscape.



Cobb & Co - A Bygone Era

The day after our return the heavens opened and the region we travelled through was slightly blessed. The farmers we saw ploughing must have a special line to the weather making man.

