

MYALL LAKES MID-WEEK TRIP

MYALL LAKES, 17-19 June 2008

Trip leader: Mark Crowley – GQ Patrol

Participants:

Margaret and Jeff Bouquet – GQ Patrol
 Chris Browne – GQ Patrol
 John Forsstrom – 80 Series
 Kevin Hayward – GU Patrol
 Sue and John Steggall – GU Patrol



Macdonald's Raymond Terrace, 10 o'clock, Tuesday 17 June. A cloudy morning with occasional patches of misting rain. The weather forecast has not been looking good so an important part of my trip preparation was to buy a new pair of gumboots. At Target the least garish model was one patterned with an assortment of Nestlé's best. Little did I know that looking as if I were wearing a box of Winning Post on each foot would be the least of my worries.

We leave Maccas around half past ten and turn off the Pacific Highway in the direction of Seaham, crossing the broad sweep of the Williams River several times. At East Seaham, we turn into Italia Road to reach Lone Pine Road, a track passing through the Wallaroo State Forest and Nature Reserve. In dry weather these dirt tracks would not need four-wheel drive but in current conditions they are quite slippery. At one stage we stop to let tyres down.

Rejoining the bitumen at Bucketts Way, we pass through a landscape of mist-shrouded conical hills and dark cattle knee deep in pale gold winter grass. At Booral we turn towards Bulahdelah. Along the way a sign indicates 'Our Girls Memorial'. 'Who is it for?' I wonder. 'Militant suffragettes? World War I nurses?' Sadly it is for one of those all too frequent tragedies on the Pacific Highway, a monument to a woman and her two granddaughters killed in March 2006 when a truck plowed into their car.



The wide Myall River lined with houseboats marks the entrance to Bulahdelah – our stopping place for lunch. The riverside park is flanked on one side by the Plough Inn Hotel and the Bulahdelah Bass sculpture (carved from a single brush box log by local craftsmen) on the other. Not quite the Big Trout but much more sympathetic to both fish and materials. Those opting for lunch at the covered park table share their meal with some plump geese that would do the French *foie gras* industry proud.

Before leaving town we make a brief detour to nearby Bulahdelah Mountain Park, which contains a massive bluff, Alum Mountain, named in recognition of the alunite (or alumstone) mining industry that existed in the area from 1847. According to the NPWS information panel there used to be quite a settlement here, with a trolley way to bring the mineral out, but nothing remains except some old photographs.

The afternoon's drive takes us south-west on the Booral Road, with a north-west turn onto Crawford's 'Road'. Mark's plan is to continue on the tracks through the Myall Lakes National Park to set up camp in a wilderness area on the boundary between the Myall River State Forest and the Ghin-doo-ee National Park. The drive past farming properties is uneventful but once in the forest, the road becomes ever more slippery and the ruts and potholes larger. Vegetation brushes the cars, indicating that the track hasn't been used recently. At the first major intersection, the route straight ahead and that off to the right look particularly overgrown so a decision is made to take the left hand track. We have only travelled a few hundred metres when a call comes over the UHF radio from Kevin that he has slid into deep mud on the right hand side of the track and is unable to advance.

First efforts with the snatch strap (on Jeff's GQ) are unsuccessful and some digging is required to free the right side step of Kevin's GU. Even so the car remains stuck. By a stroke of good fortune, John S has brought along a set of plastic traction mats (Mark had initially indicated there would be some sand driving on the trip). The mats are used to good effect and Kevin and his GU – after a bit of slaloming – are soon on the road.

Mark decides to continue up the central track. The going is not too difficult and we make good time until the first major obstacle appears in the form of a bridge collapse. There is a side route – albeit quite tricky with a dog-leg approach to the creek and a steep rutted exit. All six cars manage it so we continue. Next obstacle is a deepish creek but once again all six cars negotiate it without mishap.

The third obstacle defeats us. The bridge over a deep stream has far too many planks missing to attempt a crossing and a very large tree trunk is blocking the exit on the far side. This time 'Bridge Down' really means 'Go no further!' There is just enough space for everyone to turn around and drive back along the track. It is well past four o'clock and there is a worried feeling in the air that not only are we still many kilometres from our intended campsite but also that we are in very inhospitable country.

Mark wants to investigate a right hand track seen earlier (now from the opposite direction, on the left) and sets out alone. He is gone long enough for the rest of us to become anxious and we are relieved to hear his voice on the UHF: the track is impassable and he is turning around. Then the bad news. Mark's car cannot make it back up the track and he is going to try and winch it out. The fellas set out to help. I go along too – not that I can be of much assistance other than holding a torch, which is becoming increasingly necessary as night is fast approaching. The rain and the mozzies add to the tension and discomfort. The dense undergrowth, including an especially nasty kind of barbed vine, doesn't help either.

Chris's new electric winch provides a small ray of hope. It has been designed to move 6,000 pounds – roughly 2,700 kilograms – but that is for a boat, on (horizontal) water, not a fully loaded vehicle on an incline of slippery mud. A tree protector and a doubled snatch strap are wrapped around a suitable tree and attached to the winch cable. On the command 'Go', Chris presses the start button. Nothing happens; the car does not budge. After several attempts the electric winch is reluctantly packed away and the good old 'turfer' (*tir-fort* – French for 'pull hard') brought out. While the blokes take turns with the winch lever, I relay progress to Kevin and Margaret who are waiting in their respective vehicles. Margaret, very sensibly, has decided to sing to pass the time.

Finally Mark's car begins to move, centimetre by agonising centimetre, and once it has gained level ground I think, 'OK, we're away' and return to the main track. After many long minutes there is still no sign of the GQ. Standing in the darkness at the track junction, all I can think about is the lateness of the hour and those two creek crossings. What if the rain starts in earnest and water levels begin rising? The prospect of spending an uncomfortable night sleeping either in the car or in a tent cramped into an unsuitable spot on a muddy road is most uninviting.

After what seems an eternity headlights appear and voices can be heard. Mark's car had slewed into a small tree in the effort to remount the track and precious minutes had to be spent cutting the wood out of the way. As feared, the GQ cannot make the last steep muddy rise onto the main track and John F is ready with his car and snatch strap. Again the manoeuvre is anything but straightforward, the Landcruiser being at an awkward angle to the GQ. It takes several attempts before, with a rousing cheer, Mark's car is back on track. We quickly but cautiously set out towards the creek crossings. John F makes the first one with ease and the confidence in his voice reassures the rest of the convoy. It is a similar scenario with the second crossing so that the drive out is almost an anticlimax.

Our original campsite is now out of the question so Mark activates Plan B and we follow him north to the Violet Hill campsite at the southern end of Myall Lake. In the inky darkness it looks good, even if the tent area is a grassy swamp. Light rain is falling but serious showers hold off and we have all six tents up and food on tables by ten o'clock. Several of the group's members talk on into the night but I just sneak off to bed.

On Wednesday morning we are woken by birds, not rain – a good omen for the day. A quick inspection of the camp reveals it to be a well-equipped site ('eco' toilets, cavernous rubbish bins and a boat ramp), right on the edge of the lake – a vast expanse of water and sky with swans and ducks animating the foreshore.

It is clear from yesterday's experiences that the mountain trails will be difficult, with varying depths of mud. Sand driving is out of the question as the storms and high seas have been wreaking havoc with the beaches. Mark moves to Plan C and suggests a leisurely exploration of coastal tracks and scenic sites.

On the way to Seal Rocks we pass Mayer's Point which, Mark tells us, used to be a railway port where cedar logs were transferred to ships. Now the place is completely overgrown with blackberries and lantana. Quite the opposite at the Seal Rocks lighthouse, which we find in pristine sparkling-white condition. It was built in 1875 to a design by James Barnet. According to architectural historian Joan Kerr (writing in the *Architecture Bulletin* in 1986), the NSW Colonial Architect's office under James Barnet was the most architecturally prolific place for lighthouse building in colonial Australia.

The steep walk up to the lighthouse from the keeper's cottage is well worth the effort. With a 360-degree panoramic view over land, bay and ocean, it is hard to tear ourselves away.

Lighthouses are strange places – Janus-faced – looking out to sea and over the land, standing in the present yet anchored in the past. As Kerr writes, 'the Age of Romanticism will never be over as long as the notion of lighthouse continues to conjure up the spectre of the last surviving lighthouse-keeper...or his brave and beautiful daughter'.



Coming back down to earth, or at least the car park, we drive south to Yagon Beach for lunch. This time we share tables with a young brush turkey. At the surf viewing platform John and I are rewarded with some whale sightings – spoutings actually, but exciting all the same.

After leaving Seal Rocks, we return to The Lakes Way and turn into Sugar Creek Reserve Road to pass through magnificent stands of tall glistening olive-green eucalypts in the Wallingat State Forest. At the Gur-um-bee picnic area we admire the cabbage tree palms and luxuriant vegetation so abundant that even the air seems green. We also visit the Sugar Creek Picnic Area and more of the best that coastal Australia has to offer in the way of forest scenery.

Last stop for the day is the Whoota Whoota Lookout overlooking Wallis Lake. Forster and Tuncurry are just visible in the northern distance beyond a vast silvery expanse of water ruffled by wispy breezes carving patterns in the water. To the south, Smiths Lake and Myall Lake play hide-and-seek between densely forested hills.

Back at the camp the landscape already has a late-in-the-day look, all colour drained from it, the stillness broken only by V-shaped ripples on the water as swans and ducks hunt for a last snack before nightfall. It is a pleasantly warm evening and Wednesday's Happy Hour more than makes up for Tuesday's non-event.



Last stop on our trip is a Thursday morning visit to the tallest tree in New South Wales. From Lakes Way, we turn into the northern section of the Myall Lakes National Park and its soaring eucalypts, some milky-pale, others olive-green. We have been wondering what they are and the answer of course lies with the grand old tree itself – *eucalyptus grandis*, flooded gum. A short walk from the road to a viewing platform and there it is: 'The Grandis', four hundred years old and seventy-six metres tall, centre stage in an amphitheatre of ferns, palms, young flooded gums and a tangle of vines. A sapling at the beginning of the seventeenth century, now a dignified survivor of a once mighty forest. We all stand in admiration, not too sure how to react, nor what to say other than a most inadequate 'Wow!'

All too soon it is time to leave the forests. A hurried farewell amongst a group of mud-spattered cars waiting their turn at a service station air pump and that's it.

Perhaps we got more 'adventure' than we bargained for but we were also amply rewarded in being able to visit some truly beautiful sites in the Australian bush.

A big 'thank you' to Mark Crowley for once again going to so much trouble to take us there.

Sue Steggall