

Trip Leader	Craig Marchant	Date	3 rd to 10 th February 2024
Location	Victoria High Country starting in Mansfield and finishing in Bright		
TLCCSA Members	Michelle and Leon, Grant and Louisa, Russell and Genevieve, Marg, Peter, Pin and Kim		

Day 1 – Saturday 3rd Feb. Mansfield

Everyone arrived safely and with a Craft Brewery 5 minutes’ walk away, it was an easy choice for dinner. It proved to be a great opportunity for everyone to get to know each other and at the same time, enjoy some pizza and tasty beer.



Day 2 – Sunday 4th Feb Craigs Hut & Kings Hut

A perfect morning weather wise welcomed us to our 9am departure to Craigs Hut. We took the back way, up to Mt Buller and then turning left onto Cornhill Road where we aired down before the track got rocky.

Cornhill Road provided great views of the valley below and Alpine National Park on the horizon. Before long we arrived at the junction with Monument Track which provides a little shortcut up the side of Mt Stirling. An easy to medium track, it was a little taster of what the trip had in store.

With clear skies and no wind, we enjoyed the amazing views and tranquillity of being at altitude on such a pleasant summers day.



We were even treated to seeing a small helicopter taking off which was great to see close up.



Descending to Circuit Road, we then headed east to Speculation Road and then King Basin Road before ending up at Kings Hut. There was a nice shaded area next to the King River so we stopped for a spot of lunch.



An easy drive on some well-maintained tracks and back roads had us arriving back at camp at 5pm.

The weather forecast for Monday was stating heavy showers and thunderstorms across the region, starting at 8am and continuing into the early hours of Tuesday, with up to 18mm of rain, so the decision was made to stay in Mansfield another day.

Happy hour was at the caravan park camp kitchen and details of Mondays itinerary were shared.

Day 3 – Monday 5th Feb – Jones and Stringybark Creek Campgrounds, Ned Kelly Tree, Tolmie.

With dark skies looming in the distance, we set off north east from Mansfield so the group could drive some more back roads which would eventually take us to a secluded campsite next to the Blue Range Creek.

Upon arriving shock horror, the campers from the previous night had left the fire going with 3 large logs well ablaze. It took at least 5 buckets of water before the coals were cool.



Once our civil duties were done, we could stand back and enjoy the tranquillity of this secluded camp spot.



Next on the itinerary was Stringybark Creek campsite which is also where the Ned Kelly tree is. This is the location where the Kelly gang ambushed a police party who were out to locate and arrest them. Killing 2 and injuring a 3rd, this led to them being classified as Outlaws, meaning anyone could shoot them on sight, armed or otherwise.



On the way back to Mansfield we took a detour to the historic town of Tolmie. This has featured in the ABC Series Back Roads and along with historic buildings, holds an annual sporting event and country fair.



We had just enough time for a walk around and lunch before the heavens opened, and we all scrambled back to our cars and drove back to Mansfield in the pouring rain.

Happy hour was once again at the caravan park camp kitchen, which a few of us also used to cook our dinner. An early night was called as it was likely to be a longish day tomorrow.

Day 4 - Tuesday 6th Feb – Bluff and Lovicks Huts, Wonnangatta Valley.

We awoke to a bright and still morning. After packing up and checking out, we were on our way to the Wonnangatta valley.

Turning off the Mt Buller road onto the twisting Howqua Track, we were soon ascending the Howqua Hills before traversing Brooks Road which has quite a few camping spots spread along the banks of the Howqua River.

As the road continued east it became steadily steeper and rougher, so we pulled over to let some air out of the tyres. This was just in time as the descend into the valley took us across some creek crossing and into a Jurassic like world. The valley floor was full of large firms, mosses and thick vegetation, a amazing site.

Climbing out of the valley it was not long before our final and even rougher ascend to Bluff Hut commenced. At 1,600m the air had a noticeable chill to it, and with the wind blowing a creepy mist, it made for an eerie scene.



Next on the itinerary was Lovicks Hut, another iconic hut 4km east of Bluff Hut. With the sun shining through and having the place all to ourselves, it made for an ideal lunch stop.



With quite a few kilometres still to go and some difficult tracks coming up, we needed to get going as King Billy Track was next, a Black Diamond track so we did not know what to expect.

Thankfully King Billy track was in reasonable condition and along the way we came across a very unusual scene, a Rock Talus. This is a geological formation of large rocks, usually formed by a collapsing cliff edge further up the mountain.



After Peter got his fancy side steps working again after a too close encounter with a large rock, it was time to get going as next up was Zeka Spur track, another bucket list track for 4 wheelers as this takes you down into the Wonnangatta Valley.

This track is very steep in places, and with clay sections is treacherous when wet, so a few of us took a couple more psi out of the tyres.



It was a slightly anxious start as the track as soon as it started descending, was in fact wet and a bit slippery. Oh no. Thankfully, we were going down as it would have been very interesting if we were going the other way.

Further down the track it got easier as there had been recent track maintenance done, it was assumed to assist the heavy machinery brought in to clear a huge tree that had fallen across the track prior to Christmas.

With quite a few tight switch backs, it made for a great drive.



With the clock passing 5pm and the track continuing to be tight and technical with numerous ledges and rutted sections to contend with, it certainly tested the concentration and stamina of the crew.

Finally, by 6pm, the Wonnangatta Valley came into view.



It was 6:30pm by the time we were setting up camp, so with no mucking around, the tents and swags went up, the fire was put on and happy hour called.



After dinner and with another calm evening, we sat around enjoying the fire and sunset.



Day 5 – 7th Feb – Traversing the Wonnangatta Valley

We woke to the gentle sound of the Wonnangatta river and customary dawn chorus. With a lot to see and do, we were on our way by 9am. 1st stop was the Wonnangatta graveyard which tells the sad story of Ellen Smith who died after giving birth to twin daughters. Not long afterwards, the daughters died as well so their father buried them all in the valley.



It was then off to the Wonnangatta Hut and while we were there, Peter carried out some running repairs on Marg's Prado after a screw had vibrated loose, causing the protection plate to rattle around.



Feeling adventurous we took the hard way out of the valley which is up Herne Spur. Another very steep, dry weather only track. Before we could get there though, the track crosses the Wonnangatta River 5 times. These crossings are generally only passable after periods of minimal rain, due to the amount of water that runs off each side of the valley and into the river.



Upon exiting one of the crossings, a large branch had fallen down, blocking the track. Craig had to call in Leon to come across and help him drag it out the way.



We then ascended Herne Spur and with some spirited driving, we all made it to the top safely.

Turning right onto Wombat Range Track, we continued at elevation, and with the track steep and rocky in sections, it made for slow going. Starting at around 1,000m, the descent to Eaglevale was particularly steep. The rain on Monday was forecast to deliver up to 25mm, and it was evident the region got a lot with a multitude of freshly formed wash ways crisscrossing the track.

It was 1:30pm by the time we once again crossed the Wonnangatta River and arrived at Eaglevale so after a long day yesterday, and a challenging drive today, it was decided to find a nearby campsite as tomorrow was sure to be a big one.

We camped at Neates campground, just a short distance west of the start of Billy Goat Bluff track.

With another still and warm afternoon, we did the usual camp setup, put the fire on and had a relaxing afternoon.



Day 6 – 8th Feb – Billy Goats Bluff Track, Pinnacles and Camping at Elevation

The camp was woken at 5:30am by an overly vocal Kookaburra, so we were all up early and ready to go at 9am to tackle one of the most famous and now infamous tracks in the Victorian High Country, the Billy Goat Bluff Track.

Recent reports had the track being in its worst condition ever, due to the volume of traffic that had been on it in the last year. Ascending 1km over its 7km length, it is a steep and now technical drive with a considerable amount of exposed rock steps and holes.



The track does not give you any warm up as within a few hundred metres, you are into your 1st rock garden, giving you a taste of what is to come.

2km from the start is the Helipad which gives drivers a chance to catch their breath and also turn around if they wish, as once you drop off the helipad and start the 2nd stage of the track, you are committed, as there are very few opportunities to turn around.



Some very difficult and rough terrain followed with the track unrelenting in its challenges with sharp rocks, wombat holes and exposed rock ledges testing you all the way. Just before the “Dragons Neck” is a small parking area which allows you to pull over and give yourself a break and check the cars for damage. Besides a few scratched rims and a bit of diesel leaking out of a breather from all the rocking all rolling, we were in good shape.

The convey made its way out onto the Dragon Neck, providing an exhilarating view of the mountains with sheer drop offs on either side of you.



Next stop was the Pinnacles Fire Tower and Look Out at 1,445 metres. We were once again blessed with calm weather, and as we walked up to the fire tower, a myriad of butterflies accompanied us on our journey.



The large campsite near the parking area was free so the call was made to go back there, have lunch and setup for a lazy afternoon. Once again, we set up camp, collected some firewood, put the fire on and happy hour was called. Russell even had time to fly his kite!



Russell also called a mini boots and bonnet session where we looked at each other's setups, and shared lots of knowledge about all things 4 wheeling.



With another perfectly still and warmish night, a few of us took the opportunity to cook on the camp fire.



We were all keen to get up early and see the sunrise so after a few fortified wines and a bit more chit chat, we headed off to bed.

Day 7 – 9th Feb – Sunrise at 1500m, Driving in the Clouds, Winching and Dargo.

The crew were up at 6am to see the sunrise and it was well worth it. We only had to walk 100m to a lookout to see directly East. It was made extra special by being above the clouds.



Craig and Kim were feeling particularly energetic so they ventured back up to the fire tower for a full 360-degree view of the mountain tops. With not a breath of wind it was an amazing experience.



It was hard to leave the views but the day's activities were beckoning so we all headed back to camp, had breakfast, and started packing up. It was then that a creepy mist descended on the camp. Weird, as it was so still and clear, and then out of nowhere the mist appeared.



We were then on the road, heading south east down Castle Hill Track. As the track gently ascended and descended the side of the hill, we found ourselves driving in and out of the cloud line. Another great experience and at times the cloud was so thick you could not see more than 20 metres in front of you.

We then turned onto Junction Spur track where the driving got a little more interesting. We were now descending quite rapidly, and with a slightly wet and in sections clay base, we needed to drive slowly to ensure everyone made it down safely. Being on the south side of the mountain, the forest and vegetation was completely different to the north side. Tall gums reached for the sunlight, large ferns grew in the cool shade and moss covered the damp ground. So different to the north side which was rocky and covered in short mallee like gums and hardy perennials.

Along the way we had a little reminder of how easily it can all go wrong. This Amarak had apparently been here since the Christmas / New Year period. The P Plater was heading downhill, and we assume started sliding on an exposed rock section, losing control, and then rolling at least once before slamming into the tree.



Reaching the bottom of the valley, we crossed several streams and pulled up for morning tea.



It was then time to tackle the more challenging Scrubby Creek Track, but before doing so, Craig put out an all-channels call advising 6 cars were about to ascend the track. So it was a bit of a shock when Craig had ascended several hundred metres up the rocky and rutted track, rounded a blind corner and there were 4 vehicles coming the other way!

Being in a difficult position, Craig got assistance from the lead driver in the other group to wedge himself up against the side of the hill on the tight corner, while Peter provided assistance to Grant so he could reverse back down safely.



Not long after our encounter with the 4 young drivers, we were on another steep section of the track which was rutted and with decent step ups over some exposed rock, proved quite challenging.

With a bit of spotting a few of the crew got through one particularly challenging section, but with Leon's 76 Series being a bit too top heavy, winching over this section was a safer bet than pushing it too hard.



At the same time as we were organising the winch, it came over the radio that Peter had spotted a flat tyre on Pin and Kim's 80 Series. This led to some fun and games, changing a tyre in a less than ideal location.

Eventually we all made it to the top of the hill. 4 hours after leaving camp and only having travelled 20km, we needed our lunch break so it was a quick descend to Wombat Creek, with great views across the Wonnangatta Valley.



The creek was more like a river so we had fun with another water crossing.



On the other side was an ideal spot to have lunch and cool down while soaking up the serenity of the valley.



Pin and Kim left the group at this stage to return to Adelaide for the Club's Summer Brunch on Sunday. With the afternoon ticking away the call was made to stay at the back of the Dargo hotel. After a few days off grid, it was hard to go past the thought of a pub meal and a few cold beers. First though, we had to get the iconic Dargo Hotel photo!



The hotel is definitely worth a visit, loads of character and memorabilia inside.



After another long day in the saddle, a few of the boys needed to cool off, so they took a dip in the Dargo River.



Camp was then setup and happy hour called under the shade of the trees lining the river bank.



With tummies rumbling and counter meals calling, we headed to the hotel for our trip ending dinner, as a few of the crew were heading off tomorrow.



We had been keeping up a fair pace over the previous 5 days. A bit of fatigue was setting in with people leaving as planned yesterday and today, we joked that it was starting to feel like a Survival of the Fittest reality TV program.

Alas, we needed to keep pushing as next on the itinerary was another bucket list item, Blue Rag Range track. Not before we spent some time in Dargo though, admiring the old buildings and charm of the town. Definitely worth coming back and spending a more time in the area, it has so much to offer.

The drive north on the Dargo High Plains Road is easy and picturesque. It climbs quickly to 1,400 metres and you get more great views of the countryside. The road then turns to dirt and with it being a bit chopped up, we pulled over to let some air out of the tyres.

Continuing north the road remains elevated at around 1,400 all the way to the turn off to Blue Rag Range Track. Upon ascending the 1st section, it was obvious this track had also seen a lot of traffic over the holiday period as it was quite chopped up.

Half way to the trig point, we started hearing some professional radio chatter and then references to TLC. Craig listened some more than then had to ask whether they were from another LandCruiser club. As it turned out, they were from the NSW branch, so we waited for them at the summit and chatted over lunch.



The NSW branch took on the Billy Goat track a day after us, and they to couldn't believe how rough and chopped up it was. Needless to say, a few were stating they'd never do it again!

With the trig point having turned into a carpark since we'd arrived, we descended and made the final run to Bright. There we said our goodbyes to Genevieve and Russell, and Craig, Leon and Michelle continued on to the Riverside Caravan park.

The evening was very warm so we went for a leisurely stroll around the centre of Bright, before having pizzas for dinner. An early night called as we were all pooped and with a very early start and long drive home, we needed our rest.

In summary, it was a great trip. Iconic alpine huts, scenic views, challenging tracks and changing countryside, great camp spots, perfect weather and a great crew made for a very enjoyable trip.