

The Main Range Rat. An Interesting but Extinct Animal

By John Douglass

THE scene was the Gap at Charlotte's Pass, near sunset, and my mind had just completed the third verse dedicated to the purple cumulus cloud a'rollin on the Rollin Grounds, when I saw it, or rather, him.

The Snowy was black in the shadows, when I made out a short stocky figure with shoulders bent, hunch-backed with rucksack steeply edging out of the Snowy Valley. He was dressed like a stockman with felt hat, no gloves, a pair of home-made ski, with bindings and rucksack to match. I think his beard might have been a permanent one. It was past the danger period for snakes, so I offered him my snake-bite cure.

He kicked off his planks and sat on his heels. He said he wanted to know what the "noo red hut wus on the ridge" (referring to the top building of the ski hoist). He was kind-a unfriendly until I told him I knew Billy Knap, and Ray, and then he became all friendly like. He was a Snowy Mountain man all right, who had spent a lifetime on these very hills. Every winter he climbed the Main Range and lived in the huts; "Just a snow-shoe trip", to remind him of the time he was champion snow-shoer of the Brassy Club.

I was coughing the first fumes of the rum off my lungs, when I realised that he had something to tell me. Two pulls later he told me this was his last trip. It sounded as though the mountains had been flattened out—they were not what they used to be. Them hills were becoming populated in the winter with flash city folks.

It started on the Big Bogong, when he found so many snow-shoe marks that he thought they must be holding sports on the top. He even forgot to look at "Kossie" in the distance, which was his excuse for climbing the Bogong, because of the litter of fruit skins and tins.

He followed the tracks down the mountain. They were long-winding ones, made by blokes who had one snow-shoe loose. There were no straight ones like his. The tracks led to the Brassy, then on to a new hut. The hut was to his liking, with a steep roof and a broad chimney you could climb down if it was snowed-under. He was surprised to meet Ray there, as he had heard that Ray was breaking in colts for Flanagan.

Ray said "Cumanhavedrinkati". So they went in and, what a hut, with a stove, with men, and, believe it or not, wimmen—wimmen on the Main Range. They had flash grub, too—sago, tins of this and tins of that. It made him "crook in the guts". The place was too modern for him, so he made New Mawson's that night. It seemed a real place after the stream-lined snow-shoes and pants of them city-ites.

It was foggy next day and he missed the tracks of the endless city people. He decided to make Tin Hut, which was small and real homely, and the smell of Dr. Schlink's cigar smoke had long since vanished. At night he climbed down the chimney of the hut and knew he was safe from strangers.

Next day a long, clean climb over virgin snow to the look-out at Gungartan, and the glory of seeing the Big Bogong like an ice cone in the morning sun, with Yellow Mountain in the distance, and the Rolling Grounds looking so close at the foot of Adam's Lookout. Twynam you could almost touch, and the Victorian

High Plains in the distance snow-capped were as far removed as another world. And what a rundown to White's Hut, with dry crystal snow that flew through the air, with the snow the deepest on the mountains—all to be ruined by finding White's populated. They had done something to it—oh, yes, there was another room, and bunks and plates.

Could he escape this menace—would he find trams, cars on tracks over Jack Adam's Hill? The hill was iced over at the Lookout. It was clean like the air—not like the hill they misnamed Kossie. "Bespattered with orange peel", as some bard once said. He had been taking in the panorama, following down past Dead Horse Ridge to Guthrie, when he saw the red hut previously mentioned.

He sky-hooked down Tate Ridge in record time, crossed the Snowy at Mant's Float, and was coming up the rise when I sighted him. The New Red Hut—how could you explain a ski-hoist to someone who had never used seal skins—to whom sago, tinned fruit, and fried eggs represented the height of luxury. Yes, the Red Hut on the rise; it was a light-house to guide the modern rangers (with all mod. cons.) over Tate to the bosom of the air-conditioned Chalet. I told him something of this, and his yell still reminds me of the banchees on blizzard nights at Betts', as he disappeared like a blonded willy willy towards Forman Hut. And so he's gone like the rest—the now totally extinct Main Range Rat.