

THE LOGBOOK BOOK JOURNEY

*A fine journey we made of it
And the weather
The perfect time of year
No rocks, nor rivers to hinder our progress
Only the snow to rub at our wax
And in thaw
The sun, to hide our tracks.*

Dean Turner.

We set forth on the first day of September 1990. I had initiated the idea of a 15 day ski journey in order to gather the final material for a book I was writing on the wisdom contained within the ancient pages of mountain logbooks. Such logbooks can be found in huts throughout the Kosciusko National Park.

Accompanying me was Graham Scully, President of the Kosciusko Huts Association (KHA) and lifelong friend. I had known him for just over two years at this juncture, but I could already tell that a lifetime was on the cards. Graham had taken over as logistical expert for the journey when I first mentioned the idea. I knew my limitations, and stood aside as soon as he offered to put together our menu. In reality, perhaps I was accompanying him?

Neither of us had any doubts that we were accompanying Pieter Arriens, professional landscape photographer, Antarctic veteran and third member of our happy band. Pieter's in-depth knowledge of the Kosciusko mountains and the vagaries of its weather patterns was to stand us in good stead for the duration of our trip. In fact, it was Graham who said that Pieter had "planned the weather for us".

Phil Bishop scrubbed up fairly decently as the fourth member of our party. He played the part of Graham's brother-in-law very nicely and as an added bonus, he provided us with a margin of safety in case somebody was injured. Phil's singing and easy-going nature would be a welcome addition to any party facing a long trek with black hole heavy packs.

We entered the National Park via Nimmo Hill and the Gungahlin River valley, lugging our heavy packs up the steep slopes to the east of Cesjack's hut. Finally, we skied in to our evening camp-site and hastily relocated the spot where we had secreted our main food cache two weeks previously. We were after the weighty objects! We knew it was not advisable to cart such things as legs of lamb and pieces of fruit over vast alpine distances and after due consideration, down went most of the first cask of port.

The morning dawned brilliantly, and after dividing the bountiful harvest brought forth from the bowels of our carefully hidden food cache, we set off over the

slowly thawing ice. Steadily, we crunched our way up the ridge and then along the higher mountain passes towards the Happy Jack's plain. I contemplated the origins of the name as we fell into the rhythm of a stuttacco glide - the glide you get when the morning crust breaks under the weight of a pack with five days food inside.

I never did reach a satisfactory conclusion in my musings. However, it wasn't long before I learnt that others had also wondered about Happy Jack. A day later, in the middle of a vicious snow storm, Graham and I were to stumble in the door of the rarely visited Happy Jack's hut 2 and 3 (one hut made of two). The first entry to catch my eye was addressed to Happy Jack and seemed rather fitting at the time:

*"Called in to have a look. Sorry we did. Worst hut I've seen. Supposed to feel different in a blizzard. I don't know what Jack's so Happy about with a hut like this?" Rob, Scott and Gibbs
(Acetylene Spur Backward Jogging Club)*

As you could guess, the weather was already on the way downhill. During the morning we had passed the flattened ruin of Jaanga lodge and stopped by to visit the outhouse which still stands near the ruin of Moulds hut. Here we took a photograph of an ancient fire extinguisher which we found in the dunny. Pieter reminisced about the old hut which had been burnt down back in the late seventies and about the use to which this particular fire extinguisher had been put. Perhaps a controlled burn? I recalled Ted Winter's poetic comments:

*"A desolate chimney and a pile of cut wood
Was all that remained of where Mould had stood
And a simple notice which plainly said
The Sydney Bushwalkers remember the dead"*

We crossed the saddle by Spencer's Peak around lunch and turned our backs to the steadily cooling gale. It was so much easier to be pushed before it and only an hour had passed before Pieter was forced to admit his one and only geographical embarrassment for the trip. He quickly had us back on course however and we descended the slopes of Tibeaud's Creek to lunch at Mackay's hut under shadow of greying skies.

A cold luncheon in this large hut soon had us stamping our feet to move off. Even the salami made little difference. I had little research to do for my book as the hut had no logbook. So as soon as we had nailed a new 'Huts Code' to the door, supplied envelopes for future donations to the KHA and installed a new logbook, we were off!

We re-entered the world of grey to feel the first stings of hardened moisture as it descended to drum on our emerging japara's and rattle on the galvanised roof of the hut. We made our way towards Boobee hut in steadily declining

visibility. Nestled under Far Bald Mountain on the edge of Happy Jack's Plain, Boobee hut is a snug haven at any time of year and on this particular evening we were hoping to strike it empty.

For some reason there's nothing like an empty hut at the end of day's journey. You stagger through the door, creating your own weather pattern as you enter. Droplets cascading from your pack as it's unceremoniously flung to the floor, rivulets of water running down your back as the japara is removed and the hood consequently empties. Greasy hair clinging lifelessly to your scalp. Wet gloves, soggy socks, steaming thermals, steadily stinking boots and a thin suspension of body oils permeating everything in the room. Ah, its grand to be alone when the weather closes in!

The only incident to catch me by surprise on the way to Boobee hut was my brief encounter with the muddle-headed wombat, only this one wasn't muddled. He knew which way his burrow was and he didn't like being chased by the strange blue figure with the large growth on its back. He especially disliked his avenue of retreat being blocked and he bloody-well let it be known that things were going too far! I was on the receiving end of his intensely annoyed growl and it took me so much by surprise that I stepped backwards, tangled my skis and helplessly let my pack finish the process at its logical conclusion, ground zero. Mr Wombat took one step towards me as a final gesture of defiance, realised my helpless predicament and gave an indignant snort as if to say "well that's bugged you mate!" Then he turned his broad little back and fat behind to me and continued on his way at a much more leisurely pace. He was followed by howls of laughter which erupted from the three man band on skis behind me.

My only satisfaction was the distant memory of a poem about the wombat's own problems:

*As you splash along the track,
Eyes alert and ears pinned back,
You might have seen those queer square turds,
And thought, if not expressed in words
The stress of such a defecation
Baffles one's imagination*

*But it's not done to entertain us
The wombat has an oblong anus
So if your slumber is disturbed,
By cries and screams don't be perturbed,
Eyes closed, teeth clenched and racked with pain,
A wombat's gone and crapped again.*

*(From the newsletter of the Federation of Victorian Walking Clubs,
February 1989)*

That evening at Boobee hut was a magical one. The snow flakes became larger and the dusting on the snowgums became heavier. We sat about the warm fire in the hut, watching the icicles grow longer outside the window, occasionally venturing outside to ogle at the beauty and soak up the silence.

While I was out there I would check the cheesecakes, which I had nestled in the snowdrift, just to make sure that Sara Lee's recipe was setting in time for our late supper.

The next day was horrible. High winds and squalls lifted the dry drift-snow, blasting any patches of exposed skin into a raw red. Graham and I made a hasty trip to Happy Jacks 2 & 3 hut where we fantasized about a logbook entry written by Dorothy Brown, Klaus Hueneke and others:

"blue eyes, blue sky, blue stick and blue shoulder blades"

Their trip sounded like heaven on a stick to us!

Meanwhile, back at the camp, Pieter and Phil were enjoying a rest and a chance to let blisters harden. The evening meal was a well planned event, as our logbook entry indicated:

"Tonights Menu - House of Boobee:

Soup of the Night: Third World Coconut Chicken Soup

Main Course: Puree of Fresh-Picked Spring Macaroni with an Ample Helping of Honey and Lemon Lamb

Sweets: Seasonal Selection of Fresh Tropical Rehydrated Fruits Covered in a Moist Chocolate Overlay

(all to be washed down with brimming goblets of methylated spirits - as patented by Graham Scully this morning when he added that little something extra to his choofer-made pancakes)

Afters: A Selection of the Finest Nuts, Chocolate Bits, Dried Apricots, Apple, Desiccated Coconut, Oats, Bran, Dates, Sultanas, Jubes, Prunes, Bullets, etc; All Mixed Together in a Plastic Bag of Fortune and Opportunity.

(and as the chef places another glorious backlog on the fire we meekly perch our behinds on solid boards and await the total fuck-up which always follows closely in the wake of a carefully planned and prepared menu!)

We went to sleep with full bellies, listening to the ever fainter rustling of the snowgums as the wind died away. Soon the rush and gurgle of the stream became audible and I heard possums scrabbling on the snow out in front of the hut. Finally, the moon made its ghostly appearance through the clouds, and shadows emerged from amongst the rough wooden framework of the hut. I remember gazing about drowsily through the smoke haze and filtered light as I nodded off. It was a great feeling, no worries, no pressing commitments. Perhaps this was the moment when I forgot my PIN number. Bugger me if I could ever remember it again after the trip!

Morning came and with it the sun. My logbook entry said simply, "Awoke to a torrential downfall of sunlight." For twelve more days in succession the god-given rays poured down upon us and boy did we enjoy it!

First thing in the morning Pieter had us up and puffing our way through the deep powder snow. We reached the top of Far Bald Mountain to find ice rime on the dead limbs of the highest snowgums, in September! Such photographic delights are a rare treat and combined with one of the best vantages in the Park, this was enough to leave Pieter happily gliding about with his tripod all day, while the rest of us took off to enjoy the pull of gravity.

Down through the snowgums we travelled, knees carving a fluffy wake in snow that sprayed up from our skis like polystyrene foam. A world of bean-bag filler swirled up and over me as I completed a beautifully executed head-plant. But it didn't matter!

We tired quickly, and Graham decided to break off in more leisurely pursuit of wombats. However, Phil and I had huts to visit and logbooks to peruse. We continued on across the Happy Jacks river for lunch at Brooks Hut. Burning, burning, burning, the blackout only just managing to keep the alpine sun at bay.

I took a small detour to try my hand at cornice jumping. A day later, it was to prove a foolish diversion and cost me the use of a good stock. As Pieter reported from his vantage point below the landing zone, "I heard a slight crack and a nervous laugh!" But on this day the experience was a thrilling success and a new challenge bested.

We met up with another frazzled skiing party in Brooks Hut and lent them a screwdriver and some glue to repair a broken binding. Then after a lunch of assorted scroggin (a bushwalkers concoction of mixed everything) we continued on in search of Happys Hut. However, we were forced to abandon our quest due to failing light, and apart from the fact that we had been looking in the wrong gully, we were also in a hurry to return to Boobee hut in time for dinner.

Our return journey was bathed in orange light as the sun melted its way into the side of Far Bald mountain. Behind us, the moon struggled into the evening sky to compete. A mostly one-sided contest ensued long after the sun had sunk itself from sight!

Day five arrived and it was time to replenish our failing supplies by returning to our main food drop to the south. Back on our shoulders went the large packs and off we set in the blistering heat after first cleaning the hut and replenishing firewood for the next party.

Pieter's long memory combined with his artistic ability to produce a giant wombat in the side of the ski slope near our morning tea break. I returned

from skiing over the back of the ridge to find myself confronted again! I had to laugh at the preposterous outline as I slipped down to a late breakfast snack.

We made good progress on our return journey. No navigational errors this time and less sight-seeing. We could even afford a relaxing lunch on a lovely grey slab of warm granite, watching the muddle-headed wombats busily tracting up and down the creek through the weighty mass of snow. A sleepy stop was had by all!

Evening at our food cache provided another feast, as one would expect. Again it was unanimously decided to rid ourselves of prospective weighty objects. So down went a bottle of wine, a heap of Pieter's cheese sandwiches that Graham had forgotten to include five days ago and a can of pilchards.

The evening's entertainment was provided by the local mice who promptly settled down once they had each managed to fit our offering of one sultana into their tiny stomachs.

We were now getting close to a week in the mountains. But home sickness was the last thing on our minds. We had still to visit the Grey Mare Range, Pretty Plain and maybe even Wheelers hut under the Big Dargal mountain.

Day six dawned and we set out again with a week of food. The glare was amazing throughout the day due to the presence of low clouds which had decided to descend on the mountain for a one-day-only appearance. We thanked our lucky stars that we were heading west rather than east. Going in the opposite direction we would have had little or no chance of picking out cornices from the rest of the landscape. The only warning in such a journey would have been the crunch as you and your heavy pack performed a pile-driver through your skis, bananaing them deep into the soft snow metres below. As it was, we had little chance on our crossing, of working out where sky ended and snow began!

Lunch was a grand affair. We set up near Strawberry Hill to watch the shafts of sunlight etch out the ragged edges of the clouds and paint brilliant patterns as they scudded across the southern faces of Mt Jagungal, 'the crouching lion'. Lines from Ted Winter's poem came back to tease my memory:

*Jar-gan-al or Ju-gun-gal
Call it what you will
Or just call it the Big Bogong
Which means a king-sized hill....*

*... A lion of a mountain
Does it crouch or does it rear
It loses not in grandeur
To those elephants huddled near.*

We heard voices across the snowscape that seemed to be talking directly to us. Another half hour passed before these figures even came into our view. We watched them trek across the valley below us. No doubt their eyes were intently fixed on the goal in front. Intrigued by their pantomime, we sat quietly as spectators, lurching above them on the grand stage of Jagungal's south amphitheatre.

Large wet snowflakes settled on our packs and japara's liberally soaking everything as we descended Strumbo Hill en-route to the Grey Mare Mine. The short-lived snowfall broke up over the head-waters of the Tooma river as we traversed the ridge above. Down on Back Flat Creek, no snowbridges remained. I got the job of finding a crossing and then I had a job to dig my way back up the snow bank and out of the creek on the other side.

We arrived at the Grey Mare late that afternoon and gathered what wood we could find before darkness overtook us. An evening of good food and tales from the logbook raised the ugly spectre of rats. Frequent mentions of furry visitations in the small hours had us straining our ears for early warning sounds. One young scout had obviously reached the hut well before his leader and had deftly filled two pages with possible solutions to the expected night-time invasion. I've included a few of the more choice examples:

*"Toasted Rat and Lettuce Sandwiches
Stir Fried Rat
Rat and Pepperoni Salad
Condensed Rat
Dehydrated Rat Sticks
Crumbed Rat Cutlets*

(there were also a few suggestions for dealing usefully with the pesky mosquitoes. These included:)

*Whipped Mozzy Party Dip
Mozzy Mixed Muesli
Mozzy in a Biscuit."*

(the young scout from Forestville also had an interesting marketing idea which he called dehydrated water. You could buy it in a can and in his own words:

"It weighs nothing, is colourless, has no texture and tastes pure. Simply add three cups to every can." (Chlorine was optional.)

We had another restless night and vowed never to let Graham sleep inside again during the trip. Graham's ability to toggle up in the sleeping bag, turn over, and resonate the entire hut within twenty seconds, is unsurpassed.

It was a cold morning, the snow had turned to concrete overnight and allowed me to walk a long way down into the valley amongst the early mists. I took a few photographs and soaked up the amazing quiet and stillness of the whole

scene. Only the mists were changing as they slowly rose and evaporated against the morning sun.

A week had passed and all of us had been writing letters in the off-chance that we could convince a passing group of skiers to revive the tradition of the skiing mailman and carry out our mail on their way back to civilisation. All along I had secretly hoped that we could post from the Grey Mare. For some reason I had this incredible compulsion to write the senders address as Dean Turner c/- Grey Mare Mine, Grey Mare Range, Kosciusko National Park. I'd even dreamt about it!

For years ^{early this century} in the late 1930's Tom Bolton had skied the mail into and out of the Grey Mare gold mine. Not since 1940 had anyone sent mail from this out-of-the-way destination. However, at 8.30 am two skiers made their way across the creek far below us and began the long ascent towards our hut. Our mailmen had at last arrived!

We replenished the tea leaves and rekindled the morning fire. Graham added the final touches to an historic letter, a letter which was eventually posted in Melbourne and received by Ossie Bolton in Cooma. It was more or less a letter from the past, a letter which was, in spirit anyway, a letter from his father.

I met up with one of our mailmen about four months later skiing the cruddy spring snows off the sides of the metal path that snakes its way from the top of Crackenback to Kosciusko. His face looked familiar to me but I couldn't quite place him until I saw the skis and stocks. Still a bit of shoelace holding the basket together, boots cracked and worn with bindings bent to suit the favourite stance and wax still caked on the base from years ago. He only recognised me when he saw my skis. It was fairly comical, looking back. At the time my 'crown base' was in the process of lifting away from the right ski and I still had one stock which had been remodelled at the Grey Mare to incorporate a bolt and screw for its tip.

The Bogong Group have always been rather infamous for this sort of gear 'life extension'. I would even go so far as to label some of the members 'antigear freaks' as opposed to the 'gear freaks' of today's modern apre ski set. The members are an informal group of friends who have been ski touring and repairing mountain huts for years before anyone thought of forming a Huts Association. In fact members of the group finally helped to start the Association. The Group's motto has always appeared to be, "If you can make it last, make it last!" and perhaps along the way I had picked up a little of this commonsense attitude. Besides, where I was at the time my gear failed dictated the amount of choice I had in the matter!

Recently I have noticed some Bogong members turning back to new gear for that little added bit of assistance. To give them the edge over those younger

fellahs? Or perhaps some of them sense the need to prepare as they move that little bit further down the road to a long winter!

But I have strayed from my story. It was still day seven of the Logbook Book Journey and three of us had decided to throw on the light daypacks and head south along the Grey Mare Range.

The packs were a welcome relief from the heavy load of provisions we had carried on the previous day's long haul. Pieter was not coming and had instead chosen to prowl Rocky Bogong in search of photographic inspiration and more specifically, a new view of Jagungal. However, I was more interested in bagging another hut, the Grey Hill Cafe.

We had a long day in the brilliant white and the raw red. But fantastic views of the Kerries and the Rolling Ground unfolded as we traversed the eastern side of the Grey Mare and finally in the late afternoon the cloud lifted away from the far mountains and the main range was revealed in all its glory!

We wasted some time at lunch searching for the Grey Hill Cafe (hut) in the wrong saddle between Grey Mare's Bogong and the Granites. However finally we realised that the track descended another 160 metres to a lower saddle further to the south. So it was down, down, down as quickly as we dared for the shadows were growing longer. The track was lost on a regular basis due to the masses of bent, twisted, split, and broken snowgums which had to be negotiated. In many cases trees had been buried up to their seed pods by the huge snowfalls and leafy branches lay just inches under the soggy crust waiting to trap the weighted ski tip as it plundered the snow from above.

It was four in the afternoon before we found the half-buried hut with snow-filled chimney. We took a few snaps, read the Park's smallest logbook and installed a new logbook that may well last for over a decade, given the location. As we departed I stopped to hastily jot down the Cafe's menu which someone had pushed onto a nail above the hearth.

"Today's Specials

*Entree Possum Pate
with toasted gum bark croutons*

*Main Course Gang Gang Goulash
garnished with grilled gum nuts served with curried Currawong Sauce.*

Dessert Iced Sorbet."

The journey back to the Grey Mare was eventful to say the least. A fantastic sunset lured us into a false sense of security as we dallied on the ridge top. By this stage the mountain had turned to ice and we were caught in the ruts of

our afternoon track, slipping and scratching our way along the steep side of the ridge in inky black with nothing to measure our speed by. With sore ankles and tired limbs we leaned heavily to the uphill side, straining against the mountain side and skiing like drunken men. When we fell, it was heavily! The concrete surface yielded to no-one.

Luckily I had included a small torch in my daypack for just such an event. The bulb was not a strong one but it helped to locate the track on occasion when the pull of gravity and pace of the ice forced us to take the wrong line. All was well until soon after we began the descent from the top of the range towards a lower ridgeline which we had to follow in order to locate the hut. I lost the track on a particularly icy part of the slope and at that stage my torch also began to give out. With only a feeble yellow flicker to see by and no moon I was forced to test a new locational device. This device I termed the side-slide.

My theory was simple. If I slid sideways down the mountain eventually I would relocate the now solid ruts of our once deep and slushy morning tracks. The theory worked! I hit the solid tracks and locked into them with such a thump that I almost broke my ankles and then proceeded to execute a perfect head plant into the concrete surface. I decided that the locational device was a rather crude one!

It was at this time, while relocating my legs and searching for spare batteries in the pack to assess damages, that Graham fell on the inky slope above me and lost his glasses. I was apprehensive at first, picturing the bleak future in leading a blind man through miles of wilderness where one wrong slip could put him half a mile away from help in a few seconds. Then I thought about shattered glass being confused with ice and finally about a pair of glasses breaking all previous speed-skiing records.

As the commotion from above increased I had to laugh. Phil had also crashed trying to reach Graham quickly to offer assistance and now there was some consternation as to whether in fact he might have run over the glasses in the process. Meanwhile, I was still trying to find my spare batteries! Apart from a few muffled curses and plaintive wails from Graham all I could hear was a lot of scratching on the ice as the two of them struggled to release bindings and then prevent skis from executing their own descent. I had a mental image of Graham lying sprawled on his stomach with skis crossed at right angles behind him, arms and hands feverishly searching the ice in front and below while Phil struggled to keep his feet and not step on anything that could prove crucial to the success of the journey.

Just as my torch sprang back to life I heard a cry of success from above. Nothing was broken and our journey back to the hut could be resumed. Ten minutes later and Pieter's brilliant night light could be glimpsed as we

approached through the snowgums. He nearly blinded us as we finally emerged centre stage, tired, hungry, but nonetheless happy.

We slept very well that night and didn't get up until after Pieter had made us a steaming billy of porridge with sultanas. This was the morning I discovered that my stock tip had broken. It was patched using a bolt and screw found inside a tool box in the loft, some tie wire which I always carry (normal for a farmers son) and Pieter's araldite. The stock was then strapped onto the pack to allow the araldite to set and finally the party could set off.

Eight skis and seven stocks made tracks from the Grey Mare to Pretty Plain. We stopped for lunch under the shade of a large tree before beginning the main descent of the Strumbo Fire Trail. By early afternoon the snow had softened remarkably, making progress down the steep track very tricky. Entering the huge belt of Mountain Ash we began to lose much of our earlier concentration. As we gazed all about us in awe it became a sure bet that a fall was imminent. The dingoes, alias one Pieter Arriens, were at their most uproarious. I seemed to be surrounded by the beasts, mocking me with their howls, now below, now above. I never glimpsed one of them amongst the big timber. I joined in the chorus once I realised that Pieter had eluded me and after some time I was answered by a hoarse bark from far below. I vowed it was the last time that I stopped for supposedly slower skiers!

After making our way down the upper reaches of the Bulls Head Creek with a couple of stops for Pieter's photography, we arrived at Pretty Plain Hut. As we drew close Pieter insisted on a circuitous approach to the log structure. Pieter explained the reasons for his Canberra bus-route navigation: "It is not so much that we are reconnoitring on our bellies in the event of enemy occupation, but rather that we leave untracked snow before us and thereby preserve whatever photographic opportunities may be presented when the sun rises tomorrow." Perhaps Pieter didn't say it quite like this, but he is apt to talk at tangents sometimes, so I feel justified in putting his remark down on paper in such a way that I, at least, can gain immense satisfaction.

I was impressed with Pretty Plain Hut when I saw it. I still think my first impressions were best recorded in a letter to my girlfriend:

The hut is magic. It's huge, the logs are huge, and the character of the place is absolutely rustic! A real stockwhips and saddles hut!

Washed in creek just outside. It was bloody cold but boy did I feel better! The others soon followed suite..

Day 9 arrived and we were off again with the lighter day packs bound for Wheelers Hut. But first there was a photographic extravaganza to create. We built up a large fire in the hut and then Pieter encouraged us to put it out again

with wet vegetation. Such a lovely column of smoke made for a very impressive photograph.

Then we left for Wheelers.

I've always wanted to stay a night in Wheelers, however on this occasion there was really no chance. We had a far greater chance of skiing, as opposed to wading, if we travelled light and carried only day packs. Fortunately a cloudy day arrived to assist our glide over the dreaded Bosiea which lay in wait below. I remember someone once saying to me, "Bosiea! Isn't that a summer plant?". It was a brave thing to say but I doubted the sincerity of the person who said it. Ever since the remark it has amused me to point out the winter invader wherever it has managed to poke a finger up from beneath the snow that hides it.

spelling?

All day we vigilantly kept a sharp eye out for any dingo wearing a pair of black underpants. Yes, the riddle of the black underpants had kept Pieter occupied all morning before we departed. A last glance back at the hut had Pieter scouring the creek for further clues. Perhaps a trout had grabbed it while he was bathing the night before?

Morning tea was had at Pugilistic Hut after an icy crossing at the junction of the Tooma and Pugilistic Creek. Somehow Phil avoided getting his feet wet. I still don't know how he did it. I tried a different route and fell in. Graham, however, simply elected to wade straight through.

I don't know what all this said about the character of our little band. We were certainly all individuals. I made a half-hearted attempt to construct a psychological analysis of our independent actions. Fortunately, wet boots brought me crashing back to reality and I gave up the idea.

After some scroggin and a few photos of four posts, a roof, and a wooden bed, which is all that remains of Pugilistic Hut, it was time to depart. This time I found a relatively narrow river crossing further down the valley. Again I fell in. I thought it was shallow on the far side when I jumped, but six feet across and three feet down later and my legs were soaked again.

A slalom course was set up for a while on a gentle slope near the Tooma River using ski stocks as the slalom poles. It was fun, but Graham refused to take pictures of us successfully negotiating the course. He would only take pictures as we fell. This caused us to rapidly lose interest. We soon decided that it was time to go on.

We arrived at Wheelers to spend a bitterly cold afternoon. It wasn't windy, just still, and bone-numbingly cold. We took some pictures of the snow piled up around the hut. A rare sight indeed for Wheelers! We shivered through lunch and I pored through the logbook for more entries to add to my book. I raised a good

laugh at some of the fishermen's summer adventures. It was hard to imagine them stretched out in the sun beside a lazy stream, and harder still to grapple with the concept of a 'teenage mutant ninja trout'. I was amazed to see that the commercial world had even managed to infiltrate Wheeler's logbook.

We made it a fast ski back to Pretty Plain Hut, with one small detour onto the anominate ridge that slides out into the plain just south of Pugilistic Hut. It was from this late afternoon vantage that we finally understood the meaning of Pretty Plain.

At 4pm, as we reached the hut, the sun returned to welcome us back. Once again the sound of distant dynamite was heard. This had been the third day in succession that we'd heard a large tree fall in the late afternoon. I hypothesized as to the timing. Perhaps it was due to softening of the snow around the base of the tree or perhaps, with the sun sinking, the evaporative pull of the transpiration stream was reduced and this, in turn, lessened the internal tension of the tree ... my scientific musings were interrupted by the arrival of Pieter with a sled-load of wood for the evening. He also announced the discovery of the black underpants. This blew my latest theory on the hygienic wombat.

I seem to remember that the evening meal was forgettable. I drifted off to sleep on my bed of calico, wrapped in down, listening to the faint rumblings of Graham Scully as the snores from his tent broke along the logs of the hut like waves against a sea wall.

Day ten and bright clear skies again!

We had decided to reshoulder our full packs and make our way up the Bulls Head Creek through Ryrrie's Parlour towards the top of Rocky Bogong. It was there that Pieter hoped we could establish a tent camp on the snow for a night while he pursued some impressive dusk vantages of the Big Bogong, Jagungal.

It was a hard full day uphill grind in very hot weather. We all felt an overpowering lethargy as our muscle strength drained away. At the time I attributed the condition to either a mild dose of the lurgi, dehydration or lack of salt. Later, as we demolished the Magi noodles in record time, complete with as many salty MSG flavour satchels as we could find, we decided that the cause had been a lack of salt.

After stamping a solid base for the tent, we set about lighting an evening fire on what appeared to be a relatively consolidated area of snow. The fire eventually sank about eight feet and was still going when we stomped off to bed!

I remember sitting on the branches of the snowgum near the fire, gazing out to the Big Bogong as it turned a beautiful soft pink against the evening sky. Pieter was way up on top of Rocky Bogong with his camera, awaiting the perfect

moment. Our tent site was on a subsidiary ridge just down from the summit. As quickly as I could write it down I watched the colours turn to red and finally just the top part of the mount remained in the light.

Then the sun went on its way, down around the bottom half of the world. It seemed an act of total abandonment. It was almost as if Jagungal was stretching up in those last few seconds, to steal a final moment that would otherwise have been denied.

I blinked and entered the night.

I spent a relatively comfortable night in the middle of Pieter's three man tent. The morning was glorious again and just right for telemarking. The side of Rocky Bogong was fairly cut-up in places from the tracks that others had made a day or two earlier. The snow wasn't quite soft enough when I started and I miss-timed my way into some pretty heavily carved icy corners that didn't want to yield. However, with persistence, things started to hang together and soon I was weaving my way out onto the smooth, softer parts of the slope and bringing the curves of each turn in tighter and tighter together. Bang, bang, bang, one knee forward and then the other, faster and faster, each time with more punch until I was leaning forward confidently, keeping the shoulders almost rock solid and facing squarely down the fall-line. Or, at least, that's how it felt. What a feeling!

I climbed back up to the top about a dozen times until I had sweated enough. No-one was there to watch. I must admit this was slightly disappointing. However, I felt sure that I had left some tracks that would make many others envious for days and I felt even better when I was able to see them once again later in the afternoon, just visible from a distant vantage.

After packing the tent we began the long haul back to McAllister saddle and thence to our food cache. We had lunch near Strawberry Hill and Pieter decided to stop thereabouts for late afternoon photo opportunities towards the Main Range. Graham also hung back with Pieter for a time while I raced on to Cesjacks Hut to complete my rifle through the logbook for further interesting entries.

Near Cesjacks we almost skied into Alan Hall, half snowblind after a brilliant day-trip to Jagungal without sunglasses. That night we listened avidly to his stories about the last areas of true bush in Sydney and his work with the National Trust and with volunteer groups to save those areas. We also regaled him with rather exaggerated accounts of our exploits to that date. The story of my encounter with the wombat had become funnier with each retelling and a cask of port certainly added to the plot.

Day twelve revealed a grey sky, a strong wind and a fast approaching change. I wrote in my letter, "This perfect weather couldn't have continued forever!"

It had come time for a decision or at least some decisive action. So we loaded up our packs again and set off in driving rain and near whiteout for Mawsons Hut.

Mawsons Hut, the Rome of the high country. All roads lead to Mawsons and therefore you expect, inevitably, that in bad weather the place is almost certain to be full of people. From bedraggled Main Range Rats to flouro Skinny Skiers and all the public in between, such as a scout group in jeans or an ADFA platoon in fatigues. But surprise, surprise, when we arrived it was empty and no-one else dropped in all night. Mind you, the next day brought in four Main Range Rats, a hardy independent type with his beginner mate (and what an introduction he had), as well as a party of seven Wilderness Expeditioners. So it made up for any initial loneliness we might have felt.

The journey in to Mawsons was really quite uneventful if you discount the conditions and the rapid debacle of a river. If you don't ignore the conditions, then I can safely say that the section from Tarn Bluff to the Big Bend in the Valentine was scary enough for this writer.

Once again, a whirlwind of sleet and snow followed us into the hut when we arrived. Everyone and everything was soaked and Mawsons was fairly well buried. We played 500's until late in the night and everyone was feeling very warm and happy after Pieter produced another bottle of claret from deep inside his cavernous rucksack. It was unbelievable that we should find Mawson's empty. Almost too good to be true!

The next day 13 people arrived!

We woke to sigh of the wind and the rattle of icy snow crystals on the tin roof. Occasionally, small puffs of fine snow would sprinkle down near my feet from a hairline crack at the edge of the window. I looked up through a hole into the ceiling where a ragged strip of hessian dangled and the remains of a plastic barrel hung suspended from a piece of fencing wire - someone lost a good food cache when that broke open! Day 13 did not look particularly inviting for ski touring.

However, Valentines hut was not that far away and I was much more prepared to tackle a blizzard with a lighter day pack. So, I dragged Graham and Phil along with me and we travelled a high valley to Valentines. The snow was magic, it was like skiing on talcum powder, the skis were completely silent.

Our arrival at the Valentine was uneventful. We trooped in the door, dodged the hole in the floor and parked ourselves by the efficient, modern, pot-belly stove. The logbook made for an entertaining read, especially the entry concerning two large razor-backs and their attempts to invade the hut. More sobering perhaps was the entries concerning a party of three lost skiers. This story had made all the papers back in Canberra and I'd recalled hearing about it earlier in the winter.

The logbook accounts put to rest all the sketchy and ill-informed reports that I had heard in the media and no-doubt the same accounts saved the search parties a lot of unnecessary work. As you will see from the entries below, the party which may have raised the alert came within only a few hours of relocating the three skiers who were feared lost:

From Mawson's Hut Logbook:

"12/8/90 Paul Berry and Party

60km/hr wind with wet snow/sleet, and at times ice pellets. Therefore abandoned Jagungal, and skied back here.

******WORRIED about party of 3 we saw here yesterday who seem to have left most of their gear here and gone off on a day trip. *****"*

13/8/90 (the next morning)

*People missing yesterday still not returned. All food here and stove plus 3 sleeping bags and 3 thermarests and tent
ie - no sleeping bags
- no tent
- no thermarests*

*Anthony Moulay - male, identified by wallet in green pack
N. Davis - female, identified by prescription drugs in top pocket of blue pack."*

(Paul Berry, with friends Miles Davenport, Andrew Wiles and Stefan Bernard then left for Valentines Hut on their way to raise the alarm in the outside world as the entry below shows.)

From Valentines Hut Logbook:

"13/8/90 - Hi Mawson Hut party here!

No, the three others were not found and we hold grave fears for them. We are on our way to Munyang and will alert the cops..."

(only a few hours later the three missing people skied into Valentines Hut and left the message below. I am unsure who it was that actually raised the alarm back in the outside world. If it was the above party from Mawson's and not someone who knew they were overdue then it staggers me that they could have missed the three lost people because, presumably, they were using the same route between Orange Hut and Valentines Hut. But then again, a later entry made the point that the three lost skiers seemed to have unusual route selection!)

"13/8/90 - 1200 hours

Party of 3 (2 men and 1 woman) (ie:R Sag, N Davis and A Maulay) alive and well and passing through on the way back to Mawsons to collect our gear. Severely geographically embarrassed on Sunday and ended up staying the night at Dianne (Orange) Hut."

13/8/90 - Phil Baker and Geoff Egarr

"Arrived from Schlink en route to Grey Mare Hut. Passed missing party of 3 just above Valentines Hut. They seem to be going a strange way back to Mawson's."

The return journey to Mawson's after lunch was against the wind. The sun came out once or twice between ragged clouds but each time the grey landscape returned. The wind was still exceptionally strong and as I emerged over the top of the ridge above Mawsons, I was hard pressed to make any headway against it. With near zero visibility and snow stinging my eyes I plunged recklessly down the slope. Fortunately, I managed to keep my feet all the way down to the trees below. It was there that I was entranced by glimpses of red and yellow. Slowly the colours merged into shapes and within a few seconds I was amongst a party of seven skiers from Wilderness Expeditions as they set up a tent camp for their night at Mawsons.

An hour later we were all sitting with hot cups of tea in front of the fire, when another two skiers arrived. Joe and Frank had just come from the Grey Mare and had waded the Valentine in order to beat another group of four others who had spent the night with them in the hut. It turned out that these four were none other than Rex Cox, Colin Brown and party. These main range rats arrived almost two hours later. They had avoided a swim but a member of their party had also managed to snap his ski. He had been forced to splint it with snowgum (everyone knows that snowgum doesn't grow straight). The result of his forced grafting operation was a very arty but very slow ski!

What a night we had at Mawsons. Lots of stories from Rex about the old days, battles with the Park, journeys with his mate Paddy Pallin and a giant stew to warm everybody in the hut. I'll never forget the size of the enamel mug that Rex pulled out of his pack. He isn't a very big fellow and the mug helped to emphasise the fact.

When we left the next day, it was with some regret. By the time we approached Tarn Bluff, the weather had abated considerably. The wind dropped away and we were left to admire huge soft snowflakes as they slowly sank onto the perfect snows in front of us. After lunch we rounded the base of the bluff to confront a mob of sheep. In the National Park?

I took a large berth around towards the back of the mob to allow Pieter enough time to set up his camera and tripod. After all, it's not every day that an immediately historical shot presents itself. I managed to herd the mob for some distance. It must have looked rather absurd. I even managed to cut out two of the sheep so that they were standing alone on an isolated rock amongst a sea of deep powder snow. They had become wild animals again as a result of their adventures. The attempt to gain a higher vantage was the act of a tired animal prepared to make a last stand.

We grew tired of our history-making photo session and continued on towards McAllister saddle and the last night of our journey back at our food cache, where all good trips end! The low clouds came back to reduce visibility, but the worst of the weather had passed. We took photos of each other in the grey world around us. They look bleaker than we knew our prospects to be at the time.

The journey really ended that evening. I was going to say that it ended without much event or fanfare. However, the next day after packing for the trek back to the cars Pieter realised that he had lost his tripod somewhere between the cache and Tarn Bluff! It didn't make sense for us all to go back, so I volunteered.

What a great finish it made the journey for me. The sun was brilliant for our last day, the snow was fast, and I really felt like doing some skating. I was only disappointed that I found the tripod near McAllister Saddle and not back at Tarn Bluff. I treated the whole trip as a race, cutting corners wherever possible. Going straight down hills, getting the most out of the contours on long slopes and cutting straight down through the trees with complete abandon, ducking and stepping all the way to avoid bark and branches and soft patches. It was fun!

There will never be a ski trip to match it. But the huts and 'Gods Own Country' in Kosciusko will draw me back year after year.

And I will never give-up trying to relive those two perfect weeks.