

## Grey Mare and Pretty Plain

T. Moppett

**L**AST August John Houghton and I visited Alpine Hut for a fortnight, but took equipment and some extra food for a five day tour. During the first week snow fell most days, and one day it rained. It was definitely not touring weather. But on Friday night the weather conditions and the meteorological report over the radio agreed that Saturday and the following day or two would be good—and they were.

We went across to Grey Mare Hut via Mawson's, using the route described by Don Richardson in the 1947 *Year Book*. The only real obstacle was Rocky Plains Creek, which was open, but we got across with the usual frozen feet.

A point to note is that Grey Mare Hut is a couple of hundred yards back from Grey Mare Creek and about fifty feet above it. When approaching from the bed of the creek, it is impossible to see the hut until right in front of it, as the ends of the ridges screen it from up and down stream.

"The 'Greymare Gold Mine' as it says on the door, was originally twice the size, but half was pulled down a few years ago by a horse. The exposed end of the hut has been repaired with old sheets of galvanised iron, and it is now a four-roomed, lined hut and seems to be fairly sound. The doors have to be lifted when locking or unlocking. Snow still gets above the ceiling and on a hot day drips through so that one room was quite damp. There are beds for three, a double spring mattress and a single bag between poles. But there are no kapok mattresses or blankets. There is a small creek about thirty yards from the door and there are scattered dead snow gums a hundred yards up behind the hut. These provide enough wood for cooking and a small fire afterwards, but there are no big logs and unless wood is strictly conserved, it won't be long before wood getting will require a lot of effort. Before lighting a fire we had the job of clearing the snow and starling droppings out of the fire place. The hut is well known as a freezer at night, and no wonder—it is right

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J. Houghton



in the middle of a great expanse of bare cold snow, unprotected by trees or hills. Even on our second night there, when we had every possible piece of clothing under us, we were not quite warm.

On Sunday we took our lunch along the Grey Mare Range and ate it on top of Grey Mare itself. It was a beautiful clear day, without wind, and we just wandered along the range, stopping frequently to accustom ourselves to the vast panoramas on all sides. It was just such a day as we had wished for. John was cook and was very anxious to get back early to practise his art. I was in no hurry so we compromised by returning almost non-stop in an hour.

Monday was our third fine day and we moved to Pretty Plain Hut. Our route was up Grey Mare Creek to its head, round the northern side of Big Bogong then a course north of west to the Hut. The "Big Bogong" referred to is near the junction of Grey Mare Range with the Strumbo Range.

From Big Bogong on there are a lot of small gums, but they are not thick until the final descent into the narrow valley where the hut is. Here, although the floor of the valley is clear of trees, the sides are thickly timbered. We wove our way down through narrow gaps in the trees, from open space to open space, until we landed in a small side valley, and with difficulty followed this to the main valley and the hut. On the way we met two wombats, one drinking in the side creek, the other chewing grass beside the main creek. There must have been quite a number about as we saw several places where they had removed the snow and fed on the grass.

On Tuesday morning there was some sun, but the weather had changed. We set out with the idea of following down the Tooma to Wheeler's Hut, but had just reached the river when it started to rain. We crossed and took shelter in the small bark hut at the junction of Pugillistic Creek with Tooma River. After waiting some time we decided there was little hope of the weather improving, so had a very early lunch and dashed back to Pretty Plains Hut.

Although I understand there is good skiing on parts of the Dargals Range—the Dargals, Ink Bottle and Toolong—most of the country west of Big Bogong is quite thickly timbered. But in any case it is well worth while to visit Pretty Plain.

Pretty Plain Hut, at 4500 feet, is well



Rocky Plain Creek.

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sheltered and is most attractive, being built of round logs and has a high galvanised iron roof with wide eaves. It has two big rooms, living and bunk, and a small corner room with an outside door only, used for storing feed. There is no ceiling, giving a very spacious effect. The hut is well equipped and there are a lot of spare bags to help keep the cold out. The bunks, six of them, are of bags slung between poles. It has been kept beautifully clean, as have the two satellite huts up and down stream.

We spent Tuesday afternoon sitting before the fire in our sleeping bag cushioned chairs, reading. The Cook produced a super dinner at his leisure, and then we drowsed in front of the fire until supper. A really enjoyable rest afternoon.

Unfortunately we made a small hole in the cement hearth splitting wood, but a letter of apology to the owner plus a small sum to cover the damage has brought a very friendly reply.

Next afternoon a blizzard was blowing higher up, although it was quiet in the valley. Having cleaned up the hut, and made sure the fire was out, and some wood left inside, we set off at about 8.30 for Alpine Hut, a distance of approximately 13 miles.

As far as Big Bogong and the source of Grey Mare Creek, we followed our outward route, but going as straight as possible instead wandering about learning the country. From there we went E.N.E., and climbed to the top of the Strumbo Range at a point from which, looking back, we were looking down the valley of the Tooma. So far, although we were in fairly thick fog part of the time, there were times when we could see quite well. Unfortunately there wasn't only fog, and of course wind, but some rain, and it had to be at lunch time, too. We ate our lunch of biscuits, butter, dates, cheese and peanut butter, standing under a snow

gum, then got going again as quickly as possible before we froze.

From the top of the Strumbo Range we had to go five miles across the open Range, with no protection from the blizzard. Fortunately the wind was behind us, or it would have been much more uncomfortable. We could see only a short distance, and all we could see was snow and fog and rocks and odd patches of snow gums. So we headed eastward for Bulls Peaks by compass, going over or round an endless succession of small hills. We had several showers of rain, which made the snow soggy and the going hard, as we got no run at all.

As time went on we became very bored with the succession of rocks and trees which went slowly past, and our comfort wasn't increased by the odd trickles of ice cold water which got past our ground sheets and down our necks. Nor was the billy bag I was wearing for a hat as effective as I could have wished. We were glad to arrive at Bulls Peaks about 4.15.

Bulls Peaks are right on the edge of the Range, so we went southward along the edge and eventually down through the thick belt of trees to Macdonnell's Diggings and for dinner.