

A new Ski-ing Village on Mt. Baw Baw

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THE growing popularity of snow sports in this country again draws attention to the comparatively unknown Baw Baw plateau located in Gippsland approximately 100 miles from Melbourne and within easy reach of all Gippsland. The 30 square miles of snowfields in this area could become one of the most popular holiday resorts in Victoria. At present, access is difficult and only the most hardy and enthusiastic skiers reach the Baw Baw Plateau, and it is perhaps not generally known that the snow season lasts from June until the middle of October. Being the closest reliable snowfields to Melbourne they offer opportunities long sought after by skiers, provided that suitable access is provided.

The plateau is approximately 30 square miles in area at an average elevation of 4500 feet, with some peaks of more than 5000 feet. Mt. Erica and Talbot Peak are at the southern end of the plateau, with Mts. Baw Baw, St. Phillak and Kernot near the centre. Mt. Whitelaw is at the northern end.

The best ski-ing country is provided in the Baw Baw-St. Phillak area, the country consisting of a series of roughly parallel ridges with large flat morasses between them at an elevation of from 200-300 feet vertically below the surrounding peaks. One deep gully provides two first-class runs of 950ft. and 750ft. vertically, at an average slope of 25 degrees, but both are at present heavily timbered. Although not comparable with Mts. Hotham, Buller and the Bogong High Plains areas, the slopes and snow conditions hold the interest for experienced skiers and provide a good training ground for novices and beginners because of the wide variety of gradual slopes with excellent run outs. It is also more sheltered than these other areas and therefore less dangerous in blizzards.

Prior to the disastrous bush fires of 1939, which swept practically all Victoria and destroyed much of the State forests, the only approach to the Baw Baws was via Erica township. This route was used by all people who wished to visit the plateau during summer or winter. In the summer time the plateau was very popular with hikers and

sightseers, many of whom travelled right across the plateau on the Walhall-Warburton walking track which has been a popular route with hikers for many years. Three huts were provided on the route, two of them being located on the Baw Baws, one at Mt. Whitelaw and the other at Talbot Peak.

For some years, skiers had been ski-ing on Mt. Erica and a Division of the Ski Club of Victoria was formed with headquarters at Yallourn—the centre of Victoria's power industry and brown coal deposits. Other clubs from Yallourn erected huts on Mt. Erica and ski-ing was confined to this area except for intermittent trips to the centre of the range, where it was often found that snow conditions were better than on Mt. Erica.

As a result of the 1939 fires and recent demands for timber, new roads have been constructed to open up timber mills beyond Tanjil Bren and well up on the Baw Baw Range. In 1943 members of the Mt. Erica Division investigated the western approach to the Baw Baws and used a new road reaching to within two miles of the summit of Mt. Baw Baw at an elevation of 3600ft. During the 1944 season a number of exploratory trips were carried out and snow conditions and terrain were found to be superior to those on Mt. Erica.

The Division then decided to transfer all its activities to this area at the beginning of the 1945 season.

The decision to open up an entirely new area to ski-ing by a small organisation was made more than ordinarily difficult by wartime restrictions on transport and material.

However, some official recognition was obtained, making transport possible, and in October, 1944, work commenced on clearing and blazing a track for two miles, commencing at 3600ft elevation and ending at Mt. Baw Baw at 5130ft. The lower section of this track was through very heavy undergrowth with many fallen logs and trees. The track had to be fully cleared to enable horses and men to haul up all material required for the building of a 30ft. x 14ft. hut.

Work on the hut commenced at Easter,



On the Baw Baws

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1945, in extremely wet weather and four days were required to carry the foundation stumps to the hut site, making it appear almost impossible for the task to be completed at all.

Some horse transport was obtained for the carriage of very heavy material, but nearly all was carried up by club members, some making four or five trips in a day to the hut site. Work was continued throughout the winter and heavy snow made it both miserable and extremely hard going. Success was finally achieved in September, 1945. In the main, all work was done one-day trips, which required workers to leave home at 3 a.m. and return home again at 10 or 11 p.m. the same night. The hut has been made more comfortable each year. 18 bunks have been fitted and the hut fully lined with "Caneite." The hut has always been available to all comers to the Baw Baw snowfields and no person has ever been refused admission if reasonable notice was given.

The 1945 season was the first real ski-ing season on the Baw Baw. Word soon spread of the new field and in each subsequent season the numbers visiting the Baw Baws

has rapidly increased. On King's Birthday week-end 1949, approximately 300 skiers were seen on the mountain. Other week-ends see an average of 80-100, despite the fact that the Mt. Erica Division hut is the only accommodation and most have to camp at the foot of the track and climb the mountain each day. The popularity of the hut is indicated by the fact that approximately 1000 people used it during the 1949 season and hut fees amounted to £50 for the season. (Members pay no fees on day visits.) It is probably the cheapest ski accommodation in Australia.

The 1946 season indicated that the Baw Baws had a great future provided that suitable accommodation could be erected, but the Division's own experience showed that construction costs and the work involved would prevent any large amount of building. An access road was required and the obtaining of this road has been the major objective of the Mt. Erica Division for the past five years.

The State Development Committee has visited the area and recommended its development. Industrial developments in the

Latrobe Valley of Gippsland are focussing attention on the area. The West Gippsland Regional Committee is taking up the cause and, at last, preliminary surveys for the road have started. The Regional Committee has reported to the State Government as follows:—

The Committee as a result of the investigations are of the opinion that:—

(a) The development of the Mt. Baw Baw snowfields is a desirable and necessary work, justified by the resultant provision of recreation facilities to a large proportion of the State's population in general and in particular to ensure that the greatest measure of recreational facilities offered by natural resources are available to the expanding population of the Latrobe Valley.

(b) That the Development should be pursued concurrently with industrial and urban development in the Latrobe Valley.

In order to implement the development of the Baw Baw snowfields the following recommendations are made:—

(i) That a government grant of funds should be made to ensure early commencement of the construction of a road to the snowfields and that one of the government bodies should be the constructing authority.

(ii) That an area of nine square miles be set aside as a snowfield and portion should be sub-divided by the Forests Commission into building allotments for residential purposes.

(iii) That a Committee of Management to control the snowfield be appointed for a period of three years and should consist of

the following—two representatives of the Forests Commission and one each from Lands Department, C.R.B., S.R. & W.S. Commission, Shire of Narracan, West Gippsland Regional Committee, Ski Club of Victoria and/or Federation of Victorian Ski Clubs. The Chairman to be one of the Forests Commission representatives. The secretariat to be supplied by the Forests Commission.

(iv) The Committee of Management should be responsible for—

(a) Allocation of sites and the issue of permits to erect buildings in the residential area and to prescribe standards for such buildings.

(b) Ensuring a satisfactory water supply for the residential area.

(c) Ensuring a satisfactory sanitary scheme.

(d) Ensuring adequate protection measures, including refuge accommodation.

(v) That until such a committee of management is appointed and the necessary survey completed, applications to erect huts should be deferred.

(vi) That when a satisfactory access road has been provided, the committee of management should be responsible for traffic control and maintenance.

If the recommendations of this report are carried out the Baw Baw snowfields will provide a valuable addition to Victorian skiing facilities and one of the Mt. Erica Division's greatest ambitions will have been fulfilled. A new ski-ing village is about to be born.