

In mid autumn 2011, James Mumme and Bert Lloyd completed a paddling venture which took them the full length of the Darling River in western New South Wales, a total distance of about 1600 kilometres. They had paddled the lower half of the river in 2010 and this year, accompanied by Lane Cove River Kayakers clubmate John Thearle, went back to do the upper half. In the following articles they describe the 2011 trip. Previous articles they wrote describing their 2010 trip can be found in the June 2010 issue of *Kayak Kapers* at www.lcrk.org.au.

Paddling the Darling River: A must do ... done

by James Mumme

Last year Bert and I paddled the lower half of the Darling River, 820km from Wilcannia to Wentworth. This year our aim was to paddle the upper half (short) of the river from Warraweena to Wilcannia, a further 720km (as measured on Google Earth). All we needed was water, which fortunately was provided by Queensland summer rain.

When John Thearle heard, he soon signed up for the trip. Dates decided, my sister Les and her partner Morris agreed to drive us to the start and pick us up at the finish (without their help this trip would not have been possible).

John, Bert and I had a few discussions and Bert's Troupe carrier was the vehicle to get us there. The plan was to leave on the 15th April, 12 days paddling and 2 rest days, one at Louth and the other at Tilpa. Bert had spoken to Wayne O'Malley, the owner of Warraweena cattle station. I drove to Orange and left my car for my daughter Alison. Bert and John picked me up and we drove west to Dubbo, meeting Les and Morris, then reaching Bourke before dusk. We had a quick look at the river, flow was good so smiles all round.

Accommodation was difficult, with Les and Morris staying at Bourke Bridge Inn north of Bourke and we stayed in a historic home which was being renovated not far from the old wharf. Dinner was at the Port of Bourke Hotel, the photos on the wall reminded us of the area past and our trip ahead!

Next morning we fuelled up at the bakery and petrol station, drove to Warraweena, met Wayne who gave us a hand-drawn map, in sections "down the river over the second cattle grid follow the fence off to the right, may pick up some 4 wheel drive tracks as a couple of fishermen went there the other day". Wayne was most welcoming and passed on greetings to a mutual friend.



Bourke wharf, designed for times when the river was considerably higher



The country looked good for the rain, emus were plentiful and soon we were to be reacquainted with the mud. Following the track was difficult as it was indistinct. John, Bert and I decided to walk it and signal Morris the best way. As we walked the mud caked up our shoes, our shoe prints resembled a Bigfoot's. With a kick the mud soles were shed and we became airborne. This was repeated till we reached the banks of the Darling.

We packed the craft, thanked our landcrew and paddled upstream to the junction of the Culgoa and Barwon – the official start of the paddle! The weather was overcast and our minds on the paddle ahead, not realising that for Les and Morris their



return trip to Bourke was to be hairy as light rain fell and the track was to become an ice rink and our names mud or some other expletives.

Bert was feeling average at the best, quite crook for a couple days prior, but gutsed it out over the next two weeks. It was a late start, and soon 60km a day would be pushing it. At this time of the year the weather can vary from freezing minimums to maximums in the low thirties. The weather proved to be close to perfect, if anything a bit warm in the afternoons as we were often paddling into the setting sun.

Mosquitos were not a problem. We soon managed to have the camping side down pat. Camp was soon set up, John provided excellent campfires and clothes lines. Day 2 was a bit of a slog.

We paddled to Bourke, then had to portage over the Bourke weir (downstream of Bourke). And for Bert, this day was a real battle, he was still crook and we decided to set up camp early. Bert wondered if he would be able to go beyond Louth.

This trip, the muddy banks were not the same problem as last year. If the river levels drop quickly, say 4 to 5 metres in a week or two, you have difficulty getting footing, either sinking into the mud near river level or sliding down the slope of the bank. Fortunately we had river heights about 4 to 5 metres the whole trip and the warm weather.

John, Bert and I soon settled into a routine, breaking camp, a short rest every hour and a longer break out of the boat every two hours, lunch after four hours etc till we looked for camp sites for the evening.

The aim was to make it to Louth by day 5 and have a day's break and reassess the trip. It looked as though this would not be possible, as we would probably fall 10 to 12 kilometres short. I think Bert saw this as a bit of a challenge and sure enough we got there on sunset with the daily average back up to 57km.

The camping site was on the opposite side of the river, overrun by ants, no amenities and to sum it up "we were not happy campers". This was soon remedied by a walk to the pub and a talk with the publican. One hour later we were camped on lush lawn on the levee bank next to Shindy's Inn at Louth, then the hot shower, beer and dinner. Things were looking up. We ordered breakfast, went to bed and would reevaluate our plans.

Next morning, following breakfast, we went for a walk, watched goats being loaded on to a semi headed for Wodonga, a quick trip to the cemetery where we discussed that with Bert if he was going to stop here he would have to dig his



John Thearle and James Mumme take an hourly rest break



own grave. Bert questioned our honour. Phone calls were made home and we looped back into town past the clinic where the Royal Flying Doctor and mental health worker visited every two weeks. The patients queued outside also told Bert that “around here you had to dig your own grave”.

Louth provided the perfect rest spot for us and Bert was soon back on track, getting stronger each day. By the time we got to the next town, Tilpa, our paddling averages were way up, mission achievable. Maybe some day we will be able to return for the Louth races which they liken to the Birdsville races. This year I think it is run on August 8.

Tilpa is a small town, basically a pub, we arranged for a couple of cabins, meals and refreshments. It had a decent mouse plague and a mouse ran across my chest during the night and one bit Bert. I’m sure Bert will write more on the mouse tails.

The trip this year was memorable for the night sky, a couple of rainbows and the waterbirds. The highest density of the bird life was around Bourke and to the south due to the flooded Warrego River, and further downstream due to the Paroo. The weirs caused a logjam effect, with the carp concentrated on the lower side of the weirs, providing hawks with a ready meal, 60 or more were circling at one time.

For me, paddling up the Paroo was the highlight. John was keen as, just to keep on paddling. It is





John Thearle and Bert Lloyd prepare to camp for the night on the bank of the Darling

a rare occasion for the Paroo to flow from Queensland through to the Darling, only 2-3 times since white man inhabited Australia. A photo of Bert paddling up the Paroo is my favourite, we had just seen pelicans soaring above in the most effortless manner, the setting was just nature at its best.

Also you could really appreciate A.B. Paterson's "Clancy of the Overflow" which refers to the Paroo overflow and the comparison with the scribe in his office.

We were just a camp and a short paddle from Wilcannia and the end of an adventure for Bert and me and a mid chapter for John.

Wilcannia soon approached, the outskirts, telegraph posts, hospital, ripple above the weir, the old and new bridges, the mandatory photos, the smiles and a huge sense of satisfaction. A must do ... done.

The drive back was long, our minds going backwards over the trip, and forwards towards the possible. "Hey Bert, how about the Gregory River out of Mt Isa next year?" John, what do you think? What about a gourmet paddle from Gundagai to Wagga or Warrandera ... heard the local wines and fare are good."

Random Thoughts on a River Paddle

by Bert Lloyd

Where to start? 5.20pm the day before we were due to go on our trip, the last appointment of the day, my GP had just squeezed me in. Yep, a nasty chest infection and a stomach infection, pills and a week's bed rest. Then, with a sigh as he showed me out the door, have a good trip anyway.

Many will recall that 12 months ago James Mumme and I paddled from Wilcannia to Wentworth on the Darling River. That two-week trip of 800k's represented exactly half the river's official length and a short article on the trip was published in *Kayak Kapers*. This time we were to paddle from the official start of the Darling, where the Culgoa and Bogan Rivers meet, down to Wilcannia, a further 800k's. We were to be joined on this leg by John Thearle, also from LCRK.



We had an eventful trip to Bourke via Dubbo, where we picked up Morris and Leslie who would do the car shuttle for us. Thanks folks, our trip would have been near impossible without you. Next out to the Station where we were to launch, thanks Wayne for access. Wayne's directions said it all ... down the road for about 5k's, turn right and follow the fence for about 5k's then about 2k's through the scrub you will come to the river. Only problem, it was raining and on the black soils of the area we only just made it, even with a proper 4WD.

The first day's paddling was short, so I survived that. But the second day involved 60+k's and a portage around the Bourke weir. By the time we made camp I was ready to quit. If there had been any way out I would have taken it, but there wasn't so I didn't. No-one can paddle your kayak for



Bert of the Overflow ... Bert Lloyd paddles up the Paroo River

you, but thanks to James and John for doing most of the carrying during the portages and up the banks to set up camp.

So what did we see? Birds, lots and lots of birds of just about every type. Birds of prey from wedge tails and other eagles to hawks and kites. Ducks, possibly millions of ducks (thousands at least), pelicans, shags, ibises, and others I couldn't name. Parrots and cockatoos of all types, black, red tailed black, white, white with pink, white with yellow and pink and grey, also budgies, tree parrots, grass parrots and others.

Not many animals, mostly goats (originally feral, they are now prized by landowners as they have some value and require little maintenance), some cattle and sheep, a few pigs, kangaroos, foxes, snakes and not much else. EXCEPT ... MICE; probably due to the current good conditions and abundance of foods, the area currently has a plague of mice. Initially I thought this almost funny as both John and James ended up with them as bedfellows and I managed to escape that. However, on arriving home I found I had a hitch-hiker, only one fortunately but it took some dislodging.

The surprising thing again was the lack of people. Between towns we saw almost no-one – one or two campers, either fishermen or pig shooters, and this was over the Easter break. Each night we camped on the river bank where we finished paddling (after the usual 10 metre climb up the mud cliffs) and not once did we see anyone.

There are four towns on this section of the Darling. BOURKE, where we started, is trying to revitalise and rebuild. LOUTH is a small town of one pub and about 20 homes. The hotel has recently been rebuilt by new owners who couldn't do enough for us during our brief stay. If there is one town on the upper half of the Darling that I would revisit it is Louth, everyone was friendly (Pooncarie was my pick of the lower Darling). TILPA consists of a pub and not much else. It really is the Wild West, in all ways, if you want to see something different. WILCANNIA, where we finished



Can you spot the three kayaks?

our trip, is the midpoint of the Darling, Let’s just say that Wilcannia has problems.

The PAROO, the legendary Paroo River written about by all our early bush authors and poets, drains the far, far west of our state. Trouble is it runs out of water before it gets anywhere. Only two or three times in recorded history (it seems the historians can’t agree) has the river run its full length and drained into the Darling. It is now, or was then, and we were there. Not only that, but we paddled 8 to 10 k’s up, then back down, so I feel reasonably confident in claiming a first ascent and descent for our group.

For the final point I can only repeat what I wrote 12 months ago. “What is the lasting memory of the trip? Not only the river itself but the MAGNIFICENT ISOLATION of the river banks and the whole area. You should really to visit ‘the river’ not just because you’re a paddler but because you’re an Australian.”



Bert Lloyd and John Thearle in the main street of Tilpa



Bert Lloyd (right) in the Tilpa pub