

# Exploring Cattai Creek

## by Justin Paine

Searching for somewhere different to explore, our picnic paddle group – Kenji Ogawa, Peter Janecek, Lee Xin and myself – decided to have a crack at Cattai Creek. Running into the eastern bank of the Hawkesbury 12km downstream from Windsor, it appeared on Google maps to be wide enough to take kayaks. I asked around for someone who had paddled it. No success. I'll try Richard Barnes, he's paddled everywhere. But no, everywhere except Cattai Creek.

We drove out to Cattai National Park on Monday Feb 8, picking a day when we would be near the top of the tide and hopefully have more water in the creek.

Where to launch from? The shoreline was covered with thick undergrowth with no sign of a break, so we settled on the little wharf just downstream of the mouth of the creek. This is the jetty which forms Checkpoint A for the Hawkesbury Classic so is well known to most Lane Covers. I've seen it many times, but always from the water.

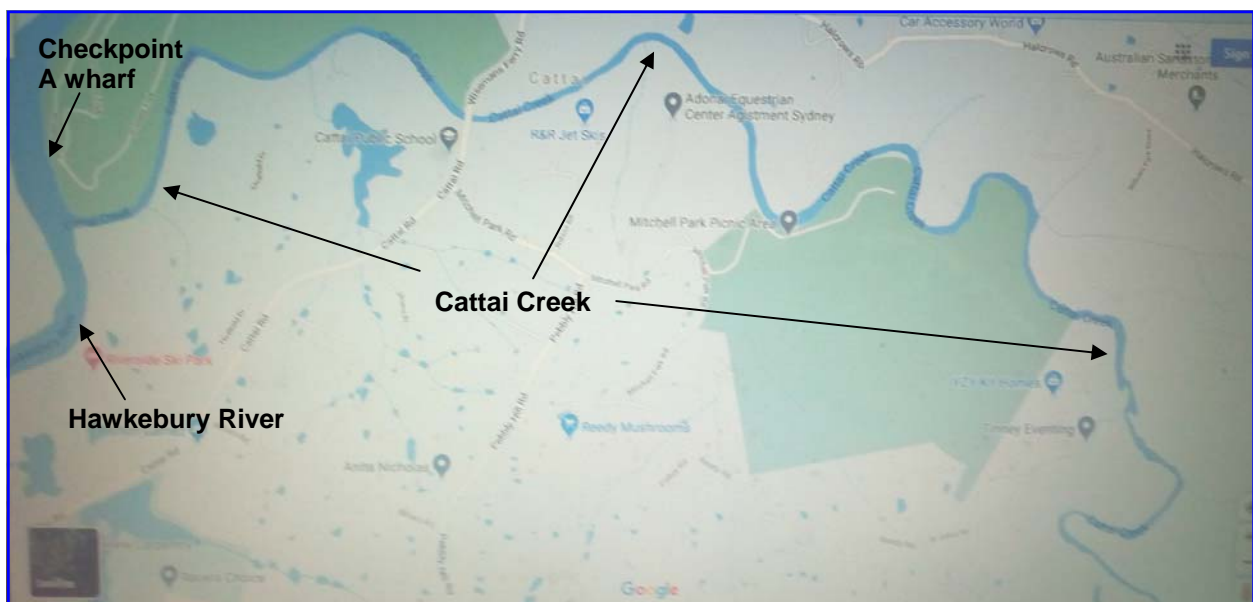
Narrow steps lead down from the wharf to the water. We put the boats in an hour before high tide with the water pushing upstream against and lapping the bottom step. A short paddle back towards Windsor and we were entering the creek. There was a swimming spot here, maybe it would be possible to carry a kayak through the bush and launch.

The creek turned out to be reasonably wide, not dissimilar to Lane Cove River from the pontoon to Fullers bridge. A few fallen trees to watch out for.

"We could race here," said Kenji. "The Cattai Classic."

The undergrowth was solid, at times scrubby, in other parts dense and resembling a tropical jungle. Lift your head to see from under the brim of your hat and trees towered into the sky. One majestic gum had a massive birds nest in a fork 30m above the ground, Kenji reckoned it was a metre and a half wide. No sign of any occupants, indeed the creek was devoid of bird life.

After a couple of k's we passed under the bridge on the Wisemans Ferry Road and soon after that came upon Mitchell Park picnic area, a separate part of Cattai National Park. It was cleared land with lots and lots of trees, very attractive. No shortage of places to pull in for a picnic.



Dotted along the creek bank were basic launching ramps, a lot apparently on private property and often without a road or track leading to them. At one point a small catamaran had been converted into a pontoon, but there was no sign of road access.

Peter spotted a water dragon swimming in the river, and a short time later Kenji saw another stretched out on a tree trunk which had collapsed into the creek. As thick as your arm and a bit less than a metre long. Head up proudly.

Later we saw another reptile on a small branch just above the water. It was about the same size and had dark markings on its back and a lowered head, I think it was a goanna.

Around a curve and in front of us was the perfect picnic spot. The shoreline was a beautiful wall of sandstone blocks curving in at the middle to form a concrete boat ramp. A small beach had stepping stones. On the shore, surrounded by recently mown grass, was a large sandstone shed very expensively fitted out. There were no signs to indicate ownership. It seemed too elaborate for a national park. Private property?

So we lunched in style. Kenji boiled a billy in true bushman fashion and we had Ozzie tea.



**Justin, Peter and Lee at lunch**



**The water dragon**

The tide had turned and was with us on the return trip. I noticed a few 4km maritime speed limit signs which, together with the boat ramps, indicated the creek is used for boating. But today we had the waterway to ourselves.

Emerging back into the Hawkesbury, I noticed for the first time the beautiful natural sandstone bank opposite the Checkpoint A wharf. Maybe 10 metres high and stretching for several hundred metres, it is beautifully coloured. I have paddled this section of the river many, many times but only ever had eyes for the wharf.

Landing our kayaks required care. The tide had dropped to about half tide and the waterline was now well below the bottom step of the wharf. The outgoing tide was pulling the boat away from the step. We made it safely but I would not like to do it at low tide.

How far did we go up the creek? I don't know, maybe 7km. All indications were that we could have gone several more k's.

An unpleasant surprise to finish with was the greasy, brownish mess on our hands as we carried the kayaks up from the wharf to the land. The bottoms were covered with a thick slime

which had to be scrubbed off. (I hit mine with soapy water when I got home.)

Memories of Lane Cove River crudslime when the starch factory was at its height, but worse.

It was not, however, a nostalgic note to end the day.

*(Pictures by Kenji Ogawa)*

