

WILD DOG MAIL TRAIL RETURN MAIL WALK. 11-12th June 2011

The pioneers were tough people. Isolated by punishing distances they established pastoral enterprises in the vast arid lands of the Mallee. In 1883, Hugh O'Sullivan at only fourteen years of age undertook the vital weekly mail delivery route from Dimboola through Pine Plains to Kow Plains. He traveled the long and tough track for eight years at a time when the postcodes were the people along the way. He was an accomplished bushman and tracker and made the journey along the old bullock track. After recently trekking the locality, one cannot avoid thinking that the abundant white sand would have made the going especially tough for hauled wagons.



Recognising that the western part of O'Sullivan's route traversed a spectacular landscape in a rarely visited wilderness, the idea of an organized assisted walk developed two years ago into the inaugural "Wild Dog Mail Trail" from Pine Plains to Cowangie. Such was its success that in June this year the "Return Mail" walk was made in the other direction. Five members of Sunraysia Bushwalkers being Noel Hayward, Roger Cornell, Russell Shallard, Christiane Jaeger and Dick Johnstone left Mildura and dined at the Ouyen Pub before traveling to Cowangie on Friday evening. It was at our night's base, the tennis club that we met Adrian, our fellow walker and host at Pine Plains Lodge.



No need for alarm clocks out here next morning with Adrian illuminating the whole place at 4.40 am and suggesting that we needed to get motivated. Although the assembly point for the walk was near the historic Kow Plains Homestead, it was still dark save for some temporary lights and a glowing fire as we breakfasted on bacon and eggs. The surrounding morning air had long ago surrendered any warmth it may have once had.

With the issue of fiery orange shirts the forty two walkers were drafted into groups each equipped with a programmed GPS. At 6.50 with just the faintest light in the eastern sky, the five Sunraysia Bushwalkers plus Adrian and Ewan Stebbins began the day's walk to Twelve Mile Camp, ironically 34 km away.

For the first few kilometers, the journey was along an unsealed road as the morning sun rose across the croplands on the far horizon. With the GPS as navigator, we left the road, crossing an undulating stubble paddock seeing plenty of melons and mouse holes in the very light sandy soil. Out here the paddocks are huge and it took considerable time to reach the bush country and the site of Skeleton Hut. The hut was not to be seen but there was no mistaking the aroma of something that was not quite a mere skeleton.



We were now inside Wyperfeld National Park walking along a vehicular track through mallee country. Looking far behind we could see a huge active dune rising high above the rest of the land on the morning horizon. A sign titled “Ross’ Spring” preceded an extensive eroded depression, but just beyond the organizers were waiting to provide lunch for us. There really was water here – a significant pond that looked as if it had been there for some time. In fact, long enough for some creative sand sculpture to set and harden!

We had achieved a very good rate of progress and walked again on an established track to a location called Bend Turn. From here we left the track as the GPS guided us for several kilometers through low scrub until ultimately we came again to a defined path at Majorlock Soak.



Modern GPS amongst many other things shows the direction we need to travel and the distance to the target destination. Having become comfortably reliant on it, we thought its credibility was sorely tested as the last three kilometers through belah and mallee woodland seemed as if they had been transformed into miles.

At 4.45 we arrive at the tent settlement at twelve mile camp near an old lakebed. All the essentials are here from sprung toilet seats, a hot shower, kitchen tents, camp ovens and a fire heap that even made Russell marvel with envy. With dinner served, the air rapidly cooling and the sky now dark, the four metre high fire heap came ablaze with towering flames lighting the whole clearing with an amber glow. When you have trekked 34 km in a day your body reminds you that rest beckons. So even though a distinguished bush poet was about to recite in the fire light, we retired to our tents and slept soundly.

That wonderful sleep was punctually terminated at 5 am with a couple of bars of the reveille and the starting of the barking generator. For some of us the night’s rest repaired the previous day’s aches but for others the muscles protested evermore strongly. A cooked breakfast eaten beside the coals of last night’s fire got us fully awake.

This second day of another 34 km promised to be physically taxing. Whilst still dark at 6.45 am we were guided from the camp through a short flat patch of mallee to the start of the rising sand. Looking back, the line of headlamps was reminiscent of parties of old underground miners going underground. The rising track that has been created along the ridgeback by motorcyclists probably commands different terrain to the route that Hugh O’Sullivan plied. But as the early morning sky gradually lightened, we reached the ridgeback to be confronted with the vistas of mountainous ranges of vegetated dunes for the whole circle. We are all familiar with much of the Mallee but had never before beheld the grandeur of such landscape so close to home. The sun rose as we felt on top of the world. It revealed the deep valleys covered with the rich green tops of thriving eucalypts and pines. The ridge was not continuous with a consequence that we had a number of ascents and steep descents but a constant was the white sand made softer by recent motorcycle passage. We arrived at an especially high vantage point aptly called the Dropoff that possessed a forward view over lower but gradually rising dune country. Several kilometers later we could look back and see its form in the panorama from another strategic high point.

Parts of this terrain have been managed using controlled burns. Sometimes burnt circles of what would have been intense heat were apparent and we believed they probably were

ignition points. There were areas of newly generated banksias with fresh basal flowers. The coming months will see abundant flowering of a great range of plants.

At this stage a perusal of our maps pointed to a very long period of walking still to be done. Around noon we reached Sandmount; a misnomer as it was a piece of flat open lowland. The support vehicles were already there although they had had a challenging drive in on an almost forgotten track. With only a short stop for lunch and some wise counsel from Peter Crisp that there was much more to walk in the shrinking hours we resumed the mission. The next section had not been cut up and corrugated by motorbikes. Yet still we noted the variety of tracks in the sand including emus, kangaroos foxes and yes, wild dogs even though we were far from arable lands.

The defined track terminated at a small grassy plain from where we again relied on the GPS to take us along another ridge this time clad with a stand of broombush. From a high clearing we looked to the left to see the trig point on O'Sullivan's lookout and very soon after the clear form of the flat open Wirrengren Plain could be seen in the far distance.

By now the landmarks were familiar to Adrian and with a long distance still to walk, we varied the plan by taking the direct route in the lower lands to Millers Tank. We were privileged to have been chosen to share the journey with him for he shared a wealth of experience with us. When there is commitment to a mission he showed that age is no barrier. The task was made easier as we found corridors used by kangaroos who also visited the tank. It was 4.15 pm when we descended to the dam at the edge of the plain where the organizers were again waiting to check on us and offer the option of finishing there. Adrian had said earlier in the day that if we needed to finish in moonlight that's what we would do to complete the task. With nine kilometers still to travel on the track across the plain we were easily able to increase the walking speed even as the shadows lengthened. At about the three quarter mark where we were just entering the eastern end with occasional trees, we looked back at the last of the colorful disappearing sun. On reaching the last rise one and a half kilometers from the final destination it was dark save for the illuminated tower and trees of Pine Plains Lodge.



The Lodge has been created against daunting odds of great adversity and is now proudly presented by the O'Sullivan Family. Susan and the organizing team gave a wonderful and generous reception which in itself is another whole story to tell.

The creators and organizers of the event have earned our congratulations for providing this special opportunity for those of us prepared to walk the hard yards seeing this magnificent country. And a real bonus was the ideal weather.

Dick Johnstone 2011