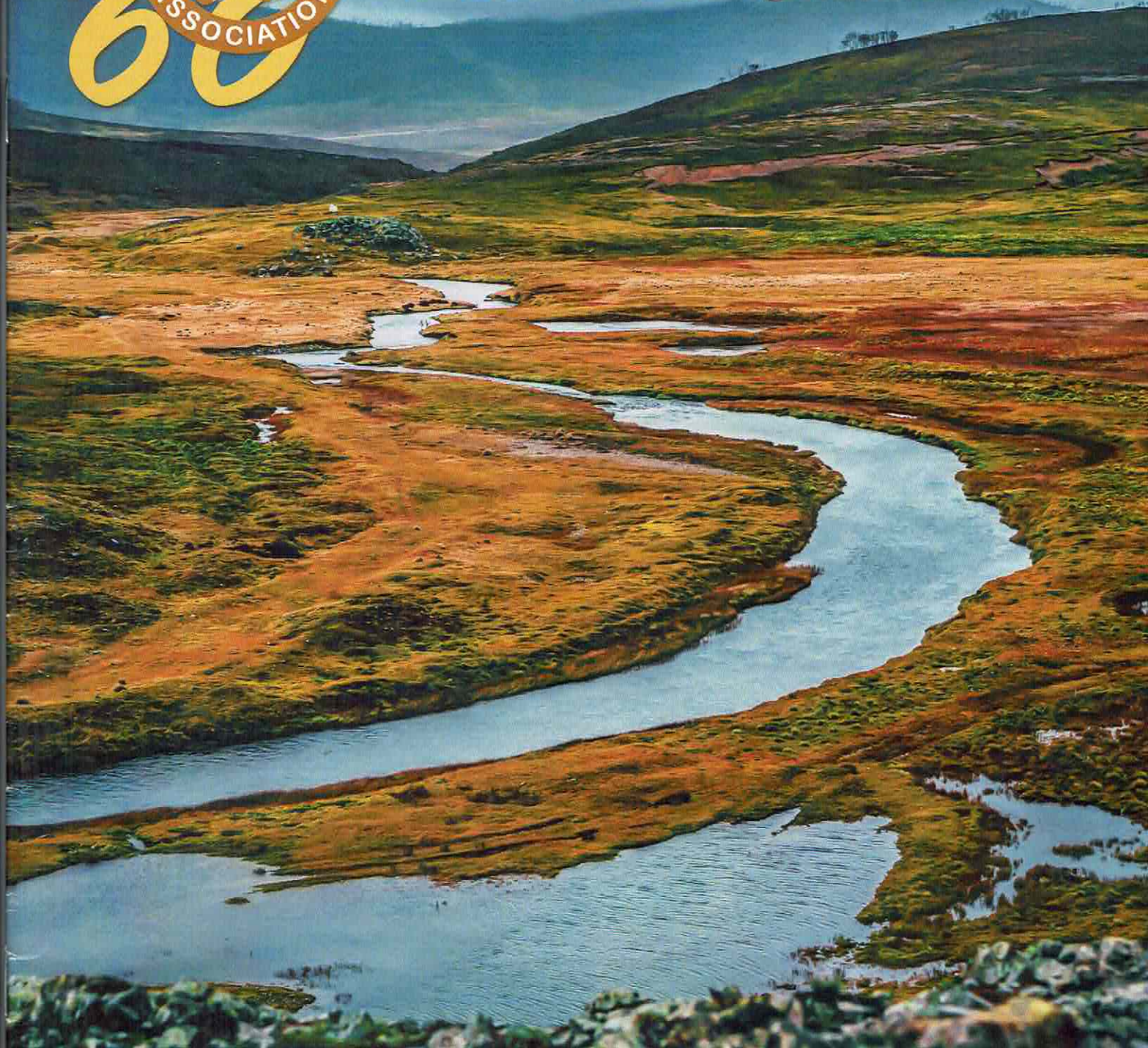


NPA Bulletin



- **Winners of NPA photography competition announced**
- **NPA ACT named environment group of the year**
- **Hut loss dilemma for parks authorities**
- **Escapee horses sighted in south-eastern Namadgi**
- **Paddling down the Darling**

conservation education protection

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Derek Synnott paddling the Barwon River on a foggy morning.
All photos by Mike Bremers

Down the Darling with a paddle

With water flowing in the Darling River again, Mike Bremers takes the opportunity to fulfil a longtime ambition

Having paddled the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers over the past 25 years, I had a desire to add the Darling to the list.

According to *Murray-Darling Journeys*, of which I am co-author with my daughter, Angela, journeys down the Darling are few and far between. There are published reports of people travelling long distances in canoes or makeshift boats as far back 1864 but there is no doubt that the history extends back thousands of years.

In early 2020, torrential rain in Queensland sent floodwaters down the Culgoa River into New South Wales. The confluence of the Culgoa and Barwon rivers forms the start of the Darling River upstream of Bourke and then flows for about 1,570 km to meet the Murray River at Wentworth. These waters provided a great flush to the dry Darling and resulted in enough water to be stored in the Menindee lakes system, about 1,100 km downstream, to ensure that the lower Darling would flow for at least the next 12 months with controlled releases from the lakes.

COVID-19 struck with lockdowns in early 2020 but NSW restrictions were eased so that regional travel was allowed from early June. By this time, the Bureau of Meteorology was forecasting a wet spring so the chances were that the Darling, which had almost ceased to flow again, would get fresh inflows, making a kayak trip possible.

I spent much of June getting my gear and food supplies sorted so that I was ready to go once good flows started coming down the river. Since towns are few and far between along the Darling, I decided to divide my food into parcels that could be posted ahead to localities or farm-stay stations along the river. Each parcel would be sufficient for 7–10 days to cover the 200–300 km between locations where I could resupply. I had decided that I would start my journey at Brewarrina on the Barwon River about 100 km upstream of the official start of the Darling River.

‘We covered the 205 km section from Brewarrina to Bourke in 7 days. While there are properties along the river, we did not see anyone else for 5 days’

In mid to late July, a series of rain events in New South Wales resulted in a significant flow of water, mainly from the Castlereagh River, into the Barwon River upstream of Brewarrina. I could predict when the flow would arrive at my start point by careful analysis of the data from the river gauging stations and, as a result, the start date was set for 11 August 2020.

Derek Synnott was interested in paddling with me for the first week to Bourke and Kevin Frawley had volunteered to drive us to Brewarrina. In the weeks before the trip I had developed some soreness in my wrist, so

instead of my usual fibreglass sea kayak I opted to start with a Hobie Revolution 16 pedal kayak. This would give me the option of either pedalling or paddling and an opportunity to build up strength in my wrist. I hoped that the water flow of 900 ML/day at the start would give me enough depth for the fins of the pedal drive mechanism to operate under the kayak hull without obstruction.

A tour of the Brewarrina Fish Traps seemed an appropriate way to start the journey. These traps are believed to be many thousands of years old and they were the first of many reminders of Aboriginal habitation along the river that I would see over the following 2 months.

Brewarrina to Bourke

We covered the 205 km section from Brewarrina to Bourke in 7 days. While there are properties along the river, we did not see anyone else for 5 days. Apart from the trees lining the riverbank, much of the countryside goes unseen from river level due to the steep banks. It rained on the 4th day but cleared in the afternoon in time for setting up camp. The banks were sticky, resulting in thick clods of mud sticking to the bottom of our boots. At one point I lost my spectacles and after wandering around trying to find them I realised they were embedded in the mud stuck to the sole of my boot. Fortunately, no serious damage was done.

We passed the Bogan River confluence and the Culgoa River neither of which were contributing much flow. This was in contrast to earlier in the year when the Culgoa River was contributing 10,000 ML/day. One of the enduring memories of this section was the large number of Red-tailed Black Cockatoos seen and another was the number of shallow rocky bars across the river, especially just downstream of Brewarrina and on the approach to Bourke.

Bourke to Louth

My wrist had fared well in the first week and the water levels remained steady so, after a rest day in Bourke, I continued down the river alone. The 205 km section from Bourke to Louth took 6 days.

There were several cold days with strong headwinds but the Hobie pedal kayak performed well into the wind. I stayed a night at Rose Isle Station along the way. I particularly enjoyed spending the afternoon of the windiest day in the camp kitchen beside the open fire.

There also were three weirs to portage, each taking about an hour of hard work. Two of the weirs required unpacking all of the gear, carrying it up a steep bank then down another before repacking. Sandy beaches were becoming more common, which is great for camping. The ideal site was where I could pitch my tent within a few metres of my kayak. The water rose no more than a centimetre overnight and I knew from the river gauge data, via my mobile phone, that there was no significant increase further upstream.

I had planned to have a rest day at Shindys Inn in Louth but, unfortunately, it had not reopened after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Instead, I headed for Dunlop Station 40 km downstream. Dunlop Station was at one time a million acres and, in the 1880s, was the first to convert its shearing shed to mechanical shears. The shearing shed and shearers' quarters are in the process of being restored by Kim and a dedicated bunch of volunteers who were very welcoming.

The Murray Turtle likes to bask on logs in the sun.



Louth and Tilpa

Typical red gum forests along the river flats

A few days later I had another rest day at Kallara Station (17 river km upstream of Tilpa) which was another friendly stopover with many relics of past farming days.

I completed the 170 km Louth and Tilpa section in 7 days and it included another two weirs that required portaging.



Dunlop Station shearing shed was the first to convert to mechanical shears

When I arrived at Tilpa it just happened to be lunchtime, so I ordered lunch at the hotel. After 3 weeks of muesli bars and dehydrated food, the burger did not last long on the plate!

The next section down to Wilcannia was the longest at 272 km. It was a bit daunting leaving Tilpa and heading alone downstream into such a remote area alone.

To be concluded in the next issue

Mike Bremers has been an NPA ACT member for over 30 years.

Feral goats are a common sight along the Darling

