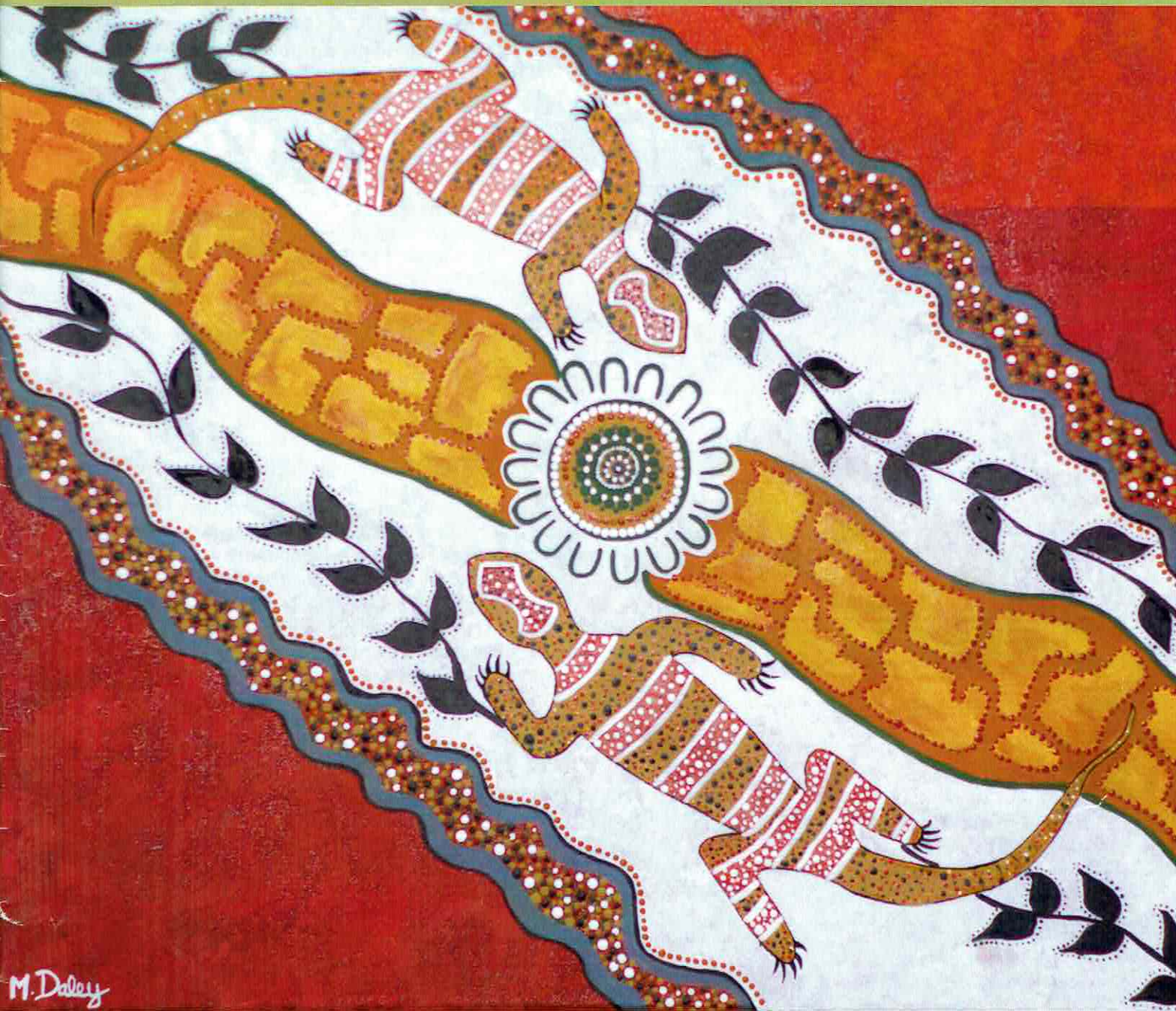




# NPA Bulletin

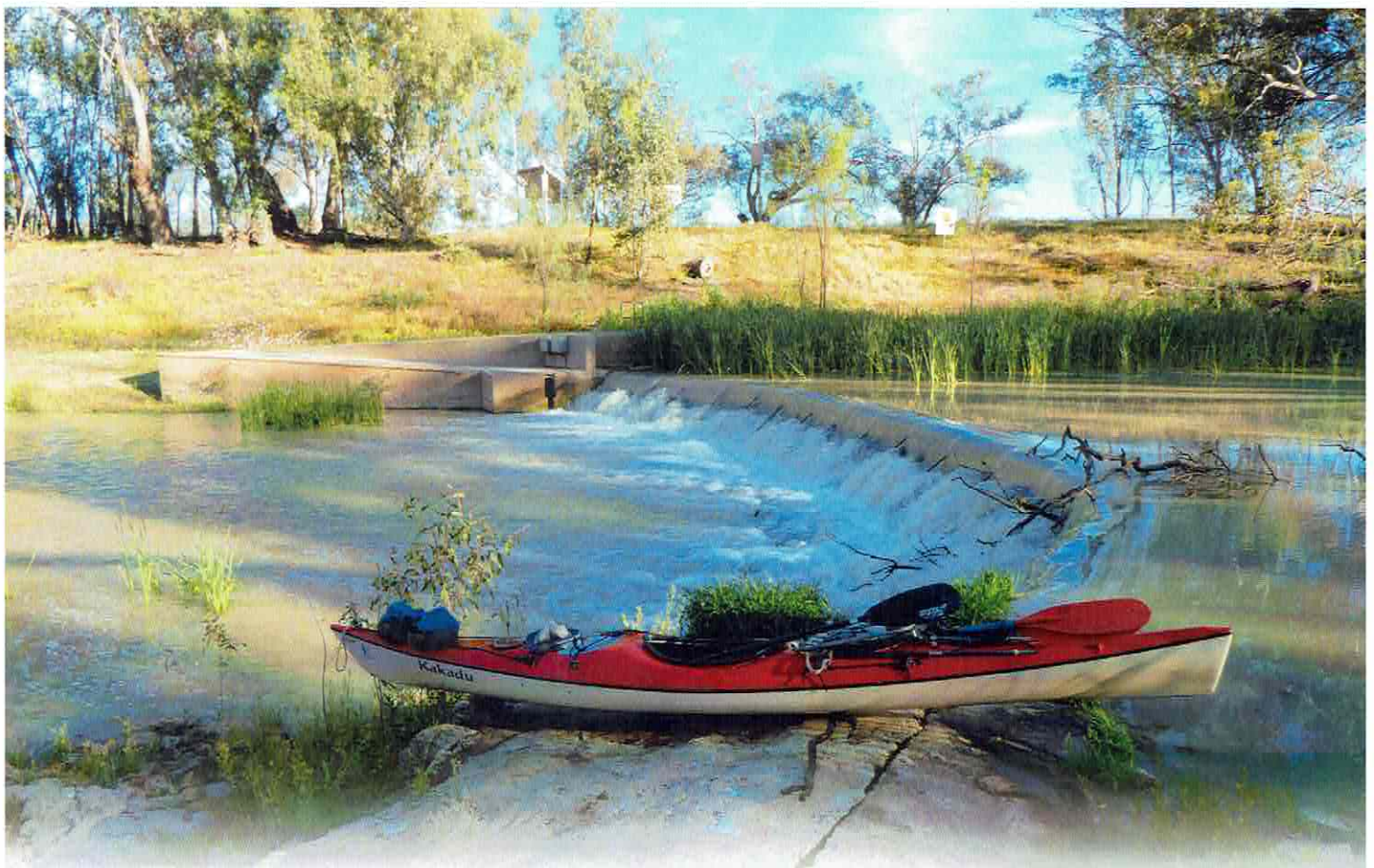


- Aboriginal art decorates new NPA work party trailer
- Scorched sphagnum gets sun protection at Snowy Flat
- Four Mile Hut given a voice in a plea to be rebuilt
- New walking tracks under construction in the High Country

*conservation education protection*

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## Down the Darling with a paddle

*Burtundy Weir. All photos by Mike Bremers*

*In the last issue of the Bulletin, Mike Bremers described his 2020 kayak journey down the Darling River from Brewarrina to Tilpa, a distance of 580 km, which took 3 weeks. The epic journey continues here to its conclusion in Wentworth.*

### Tilpa to Wilcannia

Upon leaving the village of Tilpa, where I had picked up 10 days of food for the 272 km paddle to Wilcannia, I was feeling apprehensive. I did not expect to see another human on most of those days and it would be the longest stretch of paddling I had ever done. Long distance paddling is as much a psychological challenge as a physical challenge. The enormity of the journey gets to you. The day after leaving Tilpa, Wilcannia seemed a long way away. What made it worse was the thought that Wilcannia is then only halfway down the Darling. Would I be sick of paddling? However, these doubts did not persist. Over the course of the next day or two there were brilliant sunrises, I camped near a magnificent canoe tree and I saw a good variety of birdlife from Sea Eagles to the ever present Black-fronted Dotterels. I was especially excited to encounter flocks of budgies. They were difficult to see but their chatter brightened the day. On the fifth day I reached the Coach and Horses Campground in Paroo–Darling National Park: other campers were present and good mobile phone reception connected me to the outside world just in time for Father's Day.

Ever since Brewarrina, feral goats had been very common, apart from the notable exception of Paroo–Darling National Park. Feral pigs were observed over the first 4 weeks but not in great numbers. The weather started to warm-up with several days in the low thirties. My usual routine was to start paddling by 8 am and keep going more or less continuously until I found a campsite between 1 and 2 pm. On warm days it was desirable to find a beach facing east so that the trees on the bank behind would begin to shade my tent. I would then have a relaxing afternoon – sometimes even napping. Two days before arriving at Wilcannia I passed the Paroo River junction. The Paroo looked like a dry creek bed but it must be a very old river considering the depth of the channel.

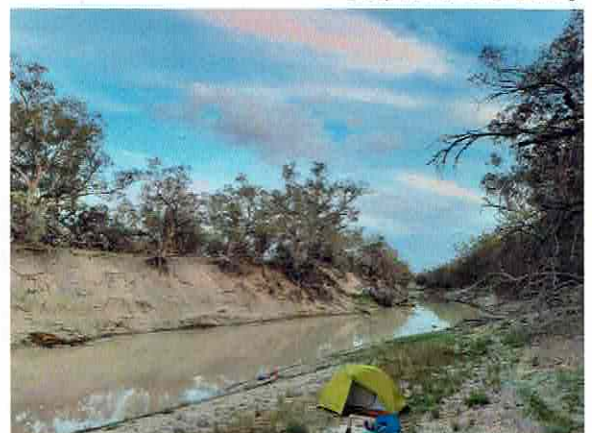
It was another hot day when I arrived at Warramong, just upstream of Wilcannia. I had to carry my gear a few hundred metres to the room where I was staying. Several trips in the hottest part of the day left me dehydrated. I had completed the section from Tilpa in 8 days instead of 9,

so elected to have an extra rest day at Warramong. Wilcannia, 850 km downstream of Brewarrina, marked my halfway point. It was once the third busiest port in NSW but now struggles to survive. There are many historic buildings in town, a cultural centre is due to be built and with its Indigenous culture I can see a bright future in tourism. The mobile coffee trailer was doing good business and the wildflowers around town were beautiful.

### Wilcannia to Nelia Gaari

The 6 days it took to paddle the 198 km from Wilcannia to Nelia Gaari Station could be broken into two halves. This first was characterised by great sandy beaches for camping. The second featured water backed up for 200 km by Lake Wetherell near Menindee, creating a deeper, wider river but without sandy beaches. I was still able to find great campsites, although on one occasion had to settle for a site with too much slope for a good night's sleep and there was a

*Steep banks, lower Darling*







Scar tree

dead goat in the water just metres away. Fortunately it did not smell.

A highlight of the whole trip was the reflections I usually saw in the first hour of paddling. Arthur Upfield, who travelled down the Darling in a row boat and went on to write the Bony series of novels, captures it perfectly with his description of the Darling as 'marked by the avenue of stately and ancient red-gums nearly two thousand miles in length'.

I had another rest day at Nelia Gaari, enjoying the wonderful hospitality of Greg and Lily, especially welcome after not having seen anyone for 5 days. Greg and Lily supplement their income by operating a farm-stay where travellers come and camp along the river, with facilities such as toilets and showers being provided. They and other tourist operations along the river had been very busy since regional travel resumed in early June.

Wreck of the Rodney



### Nelia Gaari to Menindee

The 4 day, 110 km journey from Nelia Gaari Station was rather eventful. Severe storms were forecast for the second day so I decided to do a big first day and find a good campsite in which to ride out the storm on day 2. This went to plan with a 47 km paddle on day 1. The campsite was well drained and skies cleared late on day 2 for a beautiful sunset. Early on the third day I strained my back while loading the kayak. Fortunately, I could still paddle okay. Then the expected 30 km paddle down the river and across Lake Wetherell to the regulator turned out to be about 37 km because the lake is basically confined to the meandering river channel until the final 2 km – unlike what is shown on the map. Things improved on the fourth day with a brilliant sunrise and an easy portage around the regulator. My back was recovering such that I could walk upright! On arrival at Menindee, I was greeted by Kevin Frawley from Canberra for two rest days in Broken Hill. Accommodation in Menindee was booked out but before leaving we had lunch at historic Maidens Hotel where Burke and Wills stayed in 1860.

### Menindee to Bindara

Menindee marked the start of the last third of the journey, 530 km from the Murray River. The Darling below Menindee Lakes is a controlled river. Water was being released at about 200 ML/day but just before my arrival it had increased to 400 ML/day and would stay at that level till January. The extra release was to encourage Murray Cod to breed after the devastating fish die-offs in early 2019. The additional water was also going to benefit me. It would increase the depth by about 20 cm which in some places would make the difference between paddling and having to drag the kayak through shallows. I had also decided I would need to swap kayaks. The Hobie had performed well but with shallower conditions I knew I would not be pedalling much. If I had to paddle most of the time then my fibreglass sea kayak would be more suitable. Additionally, it is only half the weight of the Hobie so portages would be easier. I would quickly come to appreciate having swapped kayaks, made possible thanks to Kevin who had driven to Menindee the long way to avoid flooded roads.



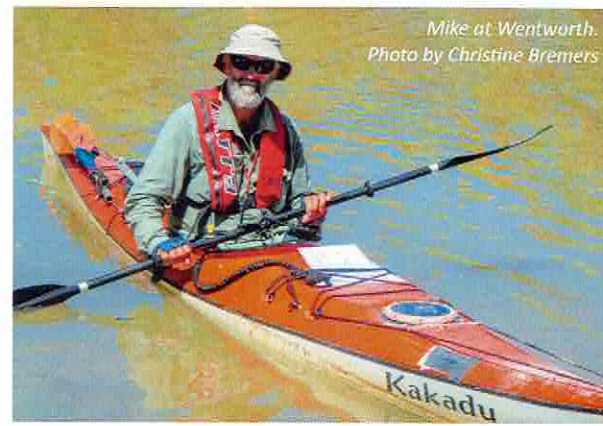


I covered the 94 km from Menindee to Bindara Station in four relatively easy days. Weir 32, just downstream of Menindee, required portaging and strong, cold headwinds ensured that paddling was not easy. Once past the weir the river returns to a relatively narrow,

snaggy, shallow channel with high, steep banks. Recent rain caused havoc with mail deliveries. My food parcel had not arrived at Bindara but fortunately turned up soon after. It would not have been a complete disaster if it had not arrived: during the whole trip I had carried a 5 day emergency supply and had leftovers from other days. Also, Barb at Bindara cooked lovely roasts which I enjoyed before heading to Pooncarie, 200 km down the river.

### Bindara to Pooncarie

During the 6 days it took to paddle from Bindara Station to Pooncarie the weather became hot, with temperatures in the high 30s. Flies and mosquitoes were becoming a real nuisance. On hot days there were signs of blue-green algae and treated river water was tasting earthy. I started to see more people camping or fishing. On my first night I camped at Great Darling Anabranch. It looks just like a dry creek bed but has been returned to an ephemeral system with the removal of weirs etc. Apparently, monitoring has shown a strong initial ecological response to restoration of the Anabranch. One of the highlights of this section was the wreck of the paddle steamer *Rodney* which was burnt during a shearer's strike in 1894. The remains look like the skeleton of a fish poking out of the water.



### Pooncarie to Wentworth

The 242 km section from Pooncarie to Wentworth took 7 days and included three weirs to be negotiated. The river ranged from shallow and snaggy below Burtundy Weir to wide and deep for the final 100 km due to water backed up by Weir 10 on the Murray River at Wentworth. The final 2 days were a shock. After being in remote areas for such a long time there were frequent signs of civilisation, with houses along most reaches of the river. Having set out from Brewarrina on 11 August, I arrived at Wentworth on 14 October, 65 days and 1,693 km later, to be met by my wife Christine who had been my lifeline sending supplies throughout the journey. Overall, the journey went as well as could have been hoped for. River levels were ideal, an infrequent occurrence on the Darling. The time of year was perfect – any later and it would have been too hot. There were no major medical or health problems; not even a bandaid or aspirin was used. The logistics worked perfectly, food supplies all arrived in time. It had been the trip of a lifetime.

Mike Bremers

