



Ochre Cliffs near Renmark. All photos by Mike Bremers

## Paddling the lower Murray

*NPA ACT member **Mike Bremers** recounts his latest adventure, an 830 km kayaking trip down the Murray River in March, from Wentworth to the Murray Mouth near Goolwa. This followed a 65-day kayak journey down the Darling River from Brewarrina to Wentworth, a distance of about 1,680km, in 2020.*

COVID-19 outbreaks in NSW and Victoria over the summer, and subsequent border closures, presented logistical difficulties in the planning stage of this journey. Fortunately, all borders opened by the time I left Canberra in late February so I was able to drive to Wentworth, leave my kayak and gear at the riverside caravan park before driving to Goolwa where I left my car. From Goolwa I caught a bus to Adelaide, flew to Mildura and caught a taxi to Wentworth. This whole process took 4 days but it was nice to know that my car was waiting for me at the end of the journey.

### Wentworth to Renmark

This 7-day, 268 km section is the most remote part of this journey down the lower Murray. However, it is not nearly as remote as much of the Darling River. There are five weirs with locks, lockmasters, campers and houseboats along the way, such that every day I saw people. In the first few days I was particularly affected by the difference from the Darling. The contrast was striking, the Darling was narrow, shallow and had very high banks – there was always something to look at or look out for. The lower Murray was wide, deep, generally straight and, due to water backed up behind the weirs, often I was looking out onto the forest floor. Also, there seemed to be much less birdlife, the birds may have dispersed to billabongs and wetlands away from the main river channel, possibly due to a wet summer.

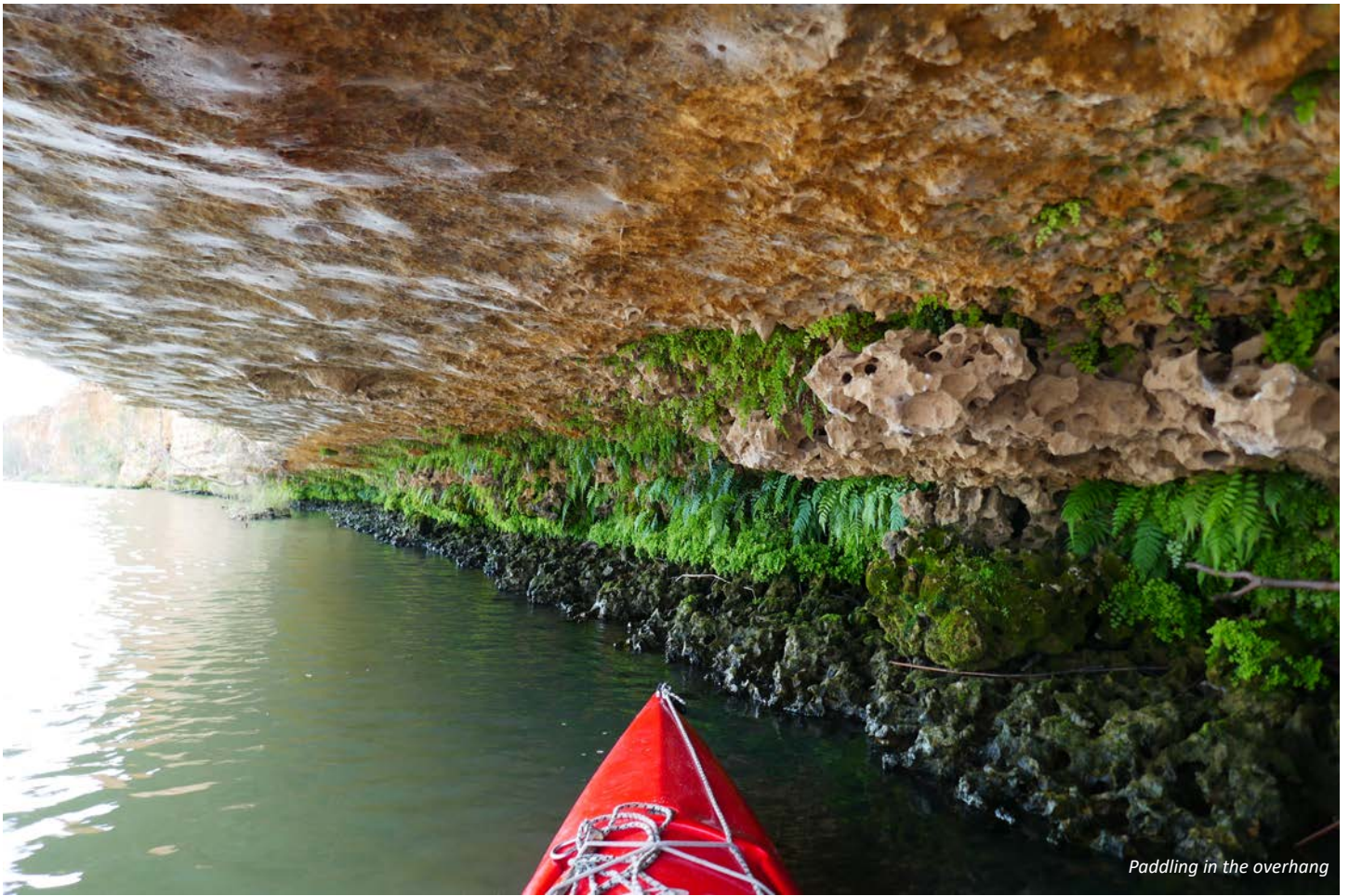
The highlight of this section was camping opposite the cliffs at Devils Elbow. These cliffs are unlike any other on the Murray being actively eroded by both river flow and surface water run-off. Devils Elbow was named because it was such a difficult piece of navigation for paddle steamers. The sharp hairpin bend has been cut through by the water so it's not difficult any more. Sturt on 26 January 1830 reported<sup>1</sup> that on examination of these cliffs both he and Fraser 'had well nigh been buried under a mass of cliff that suddenly became detached'. Raven-Hart in about 1947 described<sup>2</sup> these cliffs as 'Neapolitan ice-cream horizontal strata'. The soft light at sunset and sunrise made for a beautiful scene.

My final 2 days of this section, after crossing into South Australia and approaching Renmark, coincided with a long weekend. Water skiers



Devils Elbow





*Paddling in the overhang*

and jet skis were out in force and, whilst they were well behaved, I was satisfied in the knowledge that I expected my journey to be completed before the Easter holidays at the beginning of April. The cliffs upstream of Renmark are characterised by a beautiful orange-ochre colour. They were especially brilliant in early morning sunlight.

### **Renmark to Morgan**

After a rest day in Renmark, it took another 7 days to reach Morgan, 244 km downstream. The Murray River is now flowing through the Riverland region of South Australia with its orchards and vineyards and sizeable towns every 2 or 3 days. After the long weekend the river was quiet with very few other watercraft to be seen.

The highlight of this section of the river was the beginning of the sandstone cliffs that plunge vertically down into the river such that it was possible to paddle within a metre or two of them. My favourite campsite in this section was opposite Cave Cliff. I arrived at the end of a cool, blustery day with rain threatening. I found a gap in the reeds, quickly set up my tent and then spent the rest of the afternoon sheltering from the rain. However, the next morning was calm with brilliant sunshine such that I paddled the short distance upstream, something I am usually extremely reluctant to do, to investigate the cave that gives the cliffs its name. There is a canoe tree outside a limestone cave with a squarish entrance. Apparently the cave has been used by the local Aboriginal people for thousands of years. I then paddled close to the vertical cliffs admiring the ferns and other plants that grow in the rock crevices just above the waterline.



*Canoe ring tree*



The town of Morgan is located at North-west Bend where the Murray dramatically changes course from north-west to a generally southerly direction for its final 320 km to the sea. In 1878 Morgan became one of the busiest ports on the Murray when the railway line from Adelaide was opened. A section of the wharf and two of the original hotels, both of which I visited, are still open, as the town now relies mainly on tourism.

### **Morgan to Mannum**

From Morgan the river is often lined with palatial houses or 'shacks' as they are called by South Australians. These, combined with cliffs and reedy banks makes finding good campsites difficult. Often, accessible beaches are taken up by houseboats moored for the night. However, regularly spaced towns with riverside caravan parks provide a good option. It is 46 km from Morgan to Blanchetown, which I decided to do in a day. However, the caravan park is located just downstream of Lock 1 so I had the deadline of reaching it by the last lockage at 4:30 pm. With an early start and light winds I made it easily and was able to enjoy a beer or two and a meal at Blanchetown Hotel which, being established in 1858, is reputedly the oldest pub in the Riverland. Camping in riverside caravan parks does have its benefits!

It took me 5 days to travel the 170 km to Mannum. Again, the main highlight of this section of river is the magnificent limestone cliffs that plunge vertically into the river. Often these cliffs continue for a number of kilometres and I could paddle under the overhang in places. It was fun to see the antics of the Sulphur-crested Cockatoos that shelter in hollows in these cliffs. Back in 2006, when

I first paddled this stretch of river, I wondered if it was the result of habitat loss. However, my question is answered by the journal of Capt. Charles Sturt who recorded<sup>1</sup> 'The reader may form some idea of the height of these cliffs, when informed that the king of the feathered race made them his sanctuary.'

### **Mannum to Goolwa**

The final 150 km to Goolwa and the Murray Mouth can be broken into two halves. The first, from Mannum to Wellington, generally comprises a wide meandering river lined with shacks, houseboats, reeds and willows. It is not particularly scenic especially on the grey, cool days that I encountered.

Shortly downstream of Wellington the river flows into the large expanse of Lake Alexandrina which is roughly 30 km across. It is a final challenge for people paddling the length of the river. The lake is shallow and very exposed to winds such that large waves can form. In 1939 Hunt and Harrison<sup>3</sup> waited for 2 weeks for light winds before crossing the lake. Some paddlers<sup>3</sup> go directly across, even choosing to go at night when the winds are lighter. Navigation is an issue because there are no clear landmarks when you enter the lake, even in daylight. One paddler<sup>3</sup> accidentally circumnavigated the lake – his advice was to carry a compass! My plan was to follow the southern shoreline of the lake and have an overnight stop at a camping reserve at Narrung about halfway around the edge of the lake. It ended up being a rather wet and uncomfortable day. The winds seemed to be stronger than forecast, or I had underestimated the wave height that would be generated, such that most of the day was spent paddling with a cross-wind and waves crashing into the side of my kayak. Later I found a 6 cm fish under my kayak seat! The forecast was for a sunny day that turned out to be cloudy. It even rained as I got near Narrung – not that it mattered as I was already soaked. Nevertheless, I made good time by doing the 35 km in 6 hours without a break. The weather

*Wentworth sunrise*



cleared to a sunny afternoon, the wind dropped and there was a beautiful sunset and sunrise the next morning.

I stayed another 2 days at Narrung waiting for light winds. The nearby Point Malcolm lighthouse, built in 1878, was a pleasant outing. It is Australia's only inland lighthouse and its smallest. The final night at Narrung was marred by the arrival of a camper with a serious snoring problem. Even deaf campers who turned off their hearing aids were complaining the next morning!

The final 35 km from Narrung to the Murray Mouth was an easy paddle in light winds. After portaging over Tauwichee Barrage I was now in the salt water of the Coorong. It was now a very enjoyable 12 km paddle to the Murray Mouth. The clear water, seals, sand dunes, the sound of the ocean and even seagulls standing on the backs of pelicans were all new experiences after so long on the river. My wife Christine met me at the boat ramp on Hindmarsh Island opposite the Murray Mouth to be whisked away to the comfort of a motel. The next day I returned to where I left off for the final 12 km paddle to Goolwa where I was greeted by the team of the Inland Rivers National Marathon Register (IRNMR) who presented me with a certificate for my journey from Brewarrina to Goolwa. The IRNMR was started in 1954 when Bill Confoy arrived in Goolwa after paddling a canoe from Goondiwindi. He approached a nearby fisherman, Frank Tuckwell, asking where he could register his journey. There was nowhere to register but Frank gave Bill a scrap of paper noting his arrival and thereby started the IRNMR<sup>3</sup>. Frank Tuckwell is now 87 and still greets many paddlers who arrive in Goolwa so it was a special honour to receive my certificate from him.

*Mike Bremers*



*Mike with Frank Tuckwell*

## References:

1. Sturt, 1833, 'Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia, during the years 1828, 1829, 1830 and 1831', republished 2001, University of Sydney Library, <http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00096.pdf>
2. Raven-Hart, R, 1948, *Canoe in Australia*, Georgian House Pty Ltd, Melbourne.
3. Bremers, Angela & Bremers, Mike, 2017, 'Murray-Darling Journeys: Two hundred years of significant rowing and paddling journeys on the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin: 1817 to 2016'.

*Mike's account of his trip down the Lower Murray appears in the [June 2021 issue of the NPA Bulletin pp.28-31](#). His two-part report on his earlier trip down the Darling appears in the [December 2020 NPA Bulletin pp. 25-26](#) and [March 2021 issue pp. 8-12](#).*

*Australia's inland lighthouse*

