

**The
Murchison River
Expedition**

March 2004

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The Murchison River is WA's second longest. From its headwaters at Central Bore near St Crispin Mine on Doolgunna Station at the eastern end of the Robinson Range, 100 kilometres NNE of Meekatharra it flows 780 kilometres through pastoral country and the spectacular Murchison Gorges to its mouth at Kalbarri.

The annual rainfall in the Murchison is only 250mm (Perth 900mm). The catchment is about 80,000 square kilometres (about the size of Austria).

With a mean annual average flow of about 200 million cubic metres per year the Murchison has a great variation in flow (1975 flow was 820 million cubic metres). This annual flow compares with a figure of 320 million cubic metres for the Avon River (measured at Walyunga National Park), 660 million cubic metres for the Blackwood (the biggest river in W.A.'s south west), and 12,500 million cubic metres for the Ord River (greatest flow of any river in Australia - the peak flow of the Ord is enough to fill Mundaring Weir from empty to full in 38 minutes).

Lieutenant George Grey discovered the mouth of the Murchison River on 1 April 1839 during his return from an exploration of the Shark Bay area. His boat was wrecked the previous day when an attempt was made to beach it at Gantheaume Bay. Grey and his party walked to Perth.

Grey named the river after Sir Roderick Impey Murchison (1792-1871), a noted geologist who was elected President of the Royal Geographic Society in 1831.

The Roderick River (discovered and named by surveyor Robert Austin in 1854) and the Impey River (discovered by Austin and named by F.T. Gregory in 1858) are tributaries of the Murchison making Sir Roderick the only person who has three rivers in Western Australia named after him.

The first power dinghy assault on the Murchison was in 1994 (Milly Milly Crossing to the North West Coastal Highway). In retrospect this was an incredible achievement.

Subsequent trips in 1995 and 1997 extended the length of river covered.

THE TRIP

This truly remarkable watercourse occasionally presents the opportunity for a truly remarkable boating adventure. Serendipity and happenstance presented just such an opportunity over the long weekend in early March 2004.

Because of the discrete area in which rain had fallen in the upper reaches, this trip could not be extended to the Murchison Gorges to cover the 14 kilometres of the river still un-navigated by power dinghy. However, we knew the country from Milly Milly to the expected finish point at Yallalong to be spectacular, and worth the long drive from Perth.

Seven days before the Labor Day long weekend (Saturday 28 February to Monday 1 March 2004) Cliff and I determined that there would possibly be enough water in the Murchison or Gascoyne Rivers to make a boating trip a worthwhile undertaking.

I made many phone calls to station owners in the fortnight preceding the proposed expedition and ascertained that the water had started around Mt Gould and by the proposed date of the trip it would be feasible to start from Murchison Crossing on Meeberrie Station. With luck, we could get a run down to Yallalong although at the time of phoning, the crossing at Yallalong was dry.

The word was put out and John and Stephen Bousfield, John Haynes, Kevin Williams, Cliff Hills, Greg Bardon and I were confirmed starters with Cliff, John and Kevin supplying rigs. Cliff and I had spent ten years convincing Kevin that rivers of the 'brown' country in our north were as interesting as the rivers in the 'green' country in the east.



On Wednesday before departure I received a call from Natalie Broad at Milly Milly Station to say that more rain had fallen and with the water measuring 400mm deep at the crossing it was definitely the place to start.

This meant a considerable re-jigging of logistics, particularly fuel. Wubin Roadhouse closes at 11.00pm and if we weren't able to refuel there, no fuel would be available until Murchison Roadhouse was reached after the boats were despatched on Saturday.

THE EXPEDITION BEFORE THE EXPEDITION

The Team departed at 7.30pm Friday night with the intention of driving through the night to Milly Milly. Failure to get fuel at Wubin would have meant a considerable re-ordering of plans. Greg, Kevin and I in the Patrol arrived in time. The crew in the Subaru arrived just as the staff was turning off the lights and we had to cajole them into turning the pumps back on. With the UHF radio in the Subaru underperforming it was essentially one way communication at any distance greater than 2.9 kilometres. However, the effective range of the UHF in the Patrol was about 40 kilometres. Memo – check Cliff's UHF radio when back in Perth.

Heading north out of Morawa I noticed the flashing lights of a police vehicle. As Cliff was behind us I figured he was in the best position to talk to the Police Officer so we continued on. Answering a call of nature a few kilometres further on we pulled over and waited for the crew in the Subaru. The Police Officer had noticed the boats as we drove through his town and tried calling us on channel 40 to ascertain where we were going and what we were doing (he was bored).

Unsuccessful, he turned on his flashing lights and pulled over the crew in the Subaru. He just wanted to have a chat and admitted that he would love to come with us if he could!

The Mullewa Road was in very good condition. The bitumen extended further north than on previous visits and gave way to recently-graded gravel through to Ballinyoo Bridge. This bridge, built in the 1930s, was only the second ever concrete bridge constructed in Western Australia.

The “Road Closed” signs on the Murchison Crossing road were clearly not meant for us and we drove around them. But seriously, it is irresponsible management on behalf of the local government authority to close five kilometres of perfectly good road when it is only the river crossing that is impassable – and that was debatable. When we shone our headlights out over the water at 1.30am it appeared to be only about 500mm deep. We headed back to the Mullewa Road and continued north.

Dawn broke as we turned off the Mullewa Road towards Milly Milly Station. Dry creek crossings punctuated the drive with one being particularly noteworthy as the home of a great many red-tailed black cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus banksii samuelli* to the scientific community, “Biddiarra” to the local aboriginal Pidong tribe). Loss of habitat in settled regions, particularly the metropolitan area, has seen their numbers decline over recent years but there seems to be plenty in the Murchison.

By the time we arrived at the crossing, 480 kilometres from the river mouth, there was already some heat in the sun. Preparation of the boats and breakfast took some hours. The temperature quickly rose to 30 degrees Celsius, then 35.

PREPARATIONS

Greg and I drove off to meet with Simon and Natalie Broad at the Milly Milly homestead. Greg commented that he did not know how they endured living there. Rainfall records for Milly Milly Station extend back to 1898 and the average annual offering is only 180



mm – dismal indeed. Time was short and we had little of it for socialising – just enough to elicit information about the track to Manfred Outstation on the western side of the river. In a phone conversation with Mark Halleen from neighbouring Boolardy Station the previous night, I had determined that it was not possible to cross the river at Manfred, 41 kilometres downstream. Unless a track could be located from the vicinity of Manfred westward to the Mullewa Road it meant that Greg and I would have to retrace our route to

the Byro-Milly Milly Road. Simon confirmed Mark Halleen's view that the track through to the Mullewa Road shown on the map was unsuitable and, in all likelihood, didn't exist.

This is very, very remote and potentially dangerous country. Should the Boat Crew experience any difficulties between the planned RV near Manfred and Minnowarra Crossing they were out of reach of the Support Crew. If they failed to reach Minnowarra Crossing the only option would be to mount an aerial search – expensive and embarrassing.

We returned from Milly Milly Station, passed a dead dingo hanging in a tree, re-crossed the river, and the expedition started.

THE FIRST LEG

The flow of the Murchison is sweet water over a sandy bottom through avenues of magnificent river red gums (*Eucalyptus Camaldulensis* - often described as white gums or ghost gums, they are known as river red gums because of the coloring of their internal wood even though their external coloring is white).



Some of the Boat Crew had difficulties getting to top speed. Wrong props for fresh water. Kevin was the only one able to get his rig to top speed. Cliff had fuel problems and couldn't get on the plane. The Boat Crew spent a lot of time waiting or going back looking for each other.

Fences were a hazard – right across the river at neck height with strain hawsers finger thick. They did little to contain the goats, emus, roos and cattle seen along the way.

John and Stephen were in front with instructions to go as fast as possible. Cliff was following in a boat by himself but was having fuel and jacking problems. Kevin and John Haynes were bringing up the rear with the GPS. This arrangement was OK until a RV was imminent. Kevin and John had to then chase down the two boats in front and return to the RV.



Kevin Williams and John Haynes in 175

On land, Greg and I followed a track (of sorts) south along the western side of river toward Manfred outcamp and a pre-arranged rendezvous. After three kilometres we left the Subaru and both trailers and proceeded in the Patrol. Greg navigated and I dodged roos and emus. We called in at a number of spots on the river but decided that the Boat Crew was ahead of us.

One emu bounced off the fence that closely followed the track and then bounced

off the Patrol. Semi-comatosed, it staggered off into the scrub.

Confirmation of the RV was guesswork. The coordinates had been taken from the map (a 1:250,000 topo) and the accuracy that can be determined from such a scale is less than ideal.

We waited 90 minutes at the RV for the Boat Crew. They were trying continually to raise us on the satphone but were unable to establish a connection to the network provider. The satphones were next to useless. It was hot, the flies were bothersome and there was precious little shade. Eventually the satphone rang. After a frustrating conversation with Kevin, I established the locstat of the Boat Crew and then drove 600 metres cross country to the RV. From this



Cliff drove his "expedition duck" solo

point, six kilometres upstream from the Manfred Crossing, it is 60 kilometres downriver to Minnowarra Crossing, the next accessible point (a full day in most power dinghy races). I was very uneasy about leaving the Boat Crew to their fate but there was no alternative.



John and Stephen were keeping pace with Cliff

This section of the Murchison River provides some of the most spectacular scenery and wildlife the region has to offer. Swans, ducks and pelicans abound. Magnificent eucalypts line the river to show the course proper as the water spreads across the country. Breakaways, cliffs, sandbars, sweeping bends, tight corners and long reaches provide an ever-

changing tableau. John Bousfield described it as, "a fantastic section of river, which was now getting deeper and more purposeful. Along a section of cliffs we got in the water and just hung on and went with the current. It is the cleanest, best tasting river water I have been in and, on a 40°C+ day, where else would you rather be?"

As Kevin saw it, "There was plenty of wild life such as ducks, swans and even pelicans. It was a pretty amazing sight. The river was wide, scenic and the rocky outcrops were marvellous."

A waypoint for the next checkpoint (Minnowarra Crossing) was set and a protocol for inability to contact by satphone was established and the Boat Crew took off. Greg and I returned to where the Subaru and trailers had been left.

During the dash Greg's knuckles were white with fear at my driving but I thought I was well within my capabilities, even considering that I was driving a large vehicle that was reasonably new to me. Perceptions alter according to whether one is holding the steering wheel or not. Safely arrived at the point where we had left the other units, we hitched up the trailer and headed to Murchison.

Near Curba Station I pulled over for a break. Greg stopped behind and immediately noticed the right tyre on the trailer was flat. Luckily, it had deflated only 40 metres before I stopped.

The thermometer in the kitchen section of the trailer registered 48°C. The wheel change took 45 minutes – a procedure that, under more favourable conditions, would have taken about 15-20 minutes. As I was sitting on the gravel road with a fierce, biting sun on my back, trying to juggle the wheel onto the wheel studs, I asked Greg, “are we having fun yet?” Such is the attraction of power dinghy expeditions.

I left the tyre at Murchison Roadhouse to be repaired and we headed to Meeberrie, where we met with Don and Mavis Goodwin, the caretakers of the Station.

Information gleaned at the Murchison Roadhouse about river levels and road conditions was suspect. It conflicted with information from Meeberrie Station and our own observations. There was no alternative but to dismiss the information received from the Roadhouse and proceed on our own. It is so often the case on expeditions - all over Australia - that “local information” is “suspect”. Often, we have the most up-to-date information on road conditions and river levels.

Before leaving the Boat Crew near Manfred I made arrangements with Kevin to phone me when the Boat Crew reached Minnowarra Crossing and a decision would be made whether to proceed to Murchison Crossing, depending on condition of rigs, time of day and level of water. So much for the planning! The satphone comms was unreliable and the “fallback position” was for the Boat Crew to remain at the RV.



John and Stephen shoot the remains of a small barrage downriver from Manfred

The Boat Crew arrived at the Crossing. Cliff missed the RV and continued on down river. John jumped into his duck by himself and gave chase. He described it, “I jump into my boat and chase after Cliff through a tangle of trees. It is the first time I have ever driven a duck at speed, solo. What a fiasco, skating sideways around bends. Six kilometres downstream I find Cliff on the bank. Not happy. Back we go to the RV. Travelling upstream solo is worse!”

There remained no option but for Greg and me to drive to Minnowarra Crossing. It was 6pm when we arrived. The Boat Crew had been waiting about two hours.

With his bushman's eye Kevin noticed that the bush looked dead but was starting to grow – the result of rain from local thunderstorms.

Camp was established, dinner cooked, boats repaired, motors checked, props straightened and swags rolled out.



Water flowed up the track leading to the Minnowarra Crossing

After a long drive the night before with no sleep, a hot and tiring day on the river, and then a few drinks, the entire crew crashed early. It was hot, a very strong north east wind was blowing and the mozzies were friendly. An uncomfortable night but, if one wanted to experience the thrill and the adventure of a fast flowing Murchison that occurs only once in seven years (how lucky have we been? - four trips in 10 years), these privations were a small price to pay.

SECOND LEG

The next day it was hot even before the push started. Plans were made to RV at Murchison Crossing, 40 kilometres downriver. The flies, heat and humidity made for a slow start to the day. Preparations seemed interminable. Eventually all was ready for a Start.

John Haynes drove the Subaru and I piloted my Patrol to the homestead at Meeberrie Station to pay a courtesy call to Don and Mavis. We then drove to the Crossing.

On the water, the boats set a much faster pace, skating around corners, flitting through trees and frightening mobs of emus. Greg was with Kevin, John and Stephen remained together and Cliff continued in his boat by himself.

On water, Kevin relates, “We were hooting along the river with John in front, Cliff in the middle with Greg and me behind, when all of a sudden Cliff stopped dead in the middle of the river. On a closer inspection [we saw that] Cliff had run into a fence under the water. He was catapulted to the front of the boat. He wasn't injured but it looked funny.”

At Murchison Crossing, John and I sat in the water till the Boat Crew arrived. John and Stephen were in the rear and didn't recognise the Crossing for what it was. They powered on but after a while tied up to a tree and had a swim. Cliff had given chase and guided them back to the RV. Refuelling, checking of motors and replacement of missing nuts on Cliff's motor's upper leg took about an hour.



Typical Murchison country

The Boat Crew headed off to Billabalong Station 67 kilometres downriver. John and I headed to Murchison to pick up our tyre and refuel. Diesel was \$1.25/litre. It was only a short drive (by Murchison standards) to Billabalong Station.

At the Station we met Peter Jefferies and station hand, Chas. They showed us the way to the footbridge across the river. On arrival at the footbridge we took note of

the water level. The river was clearly rising. After chatting for some time it was obvious that it was going to be a long wait. Peter knew his country and set about preparations to muster a mob of sheep in the paddock just over the bridge. If the river rose only slightly more it would break its banks and create another channel to the east, forming an island and isolating the sheep. He had to get them to the homestead before the river rose further. Chas didn't seem too worried and stayed to chat with us.

John Bousfield had broken his gearbox only four kilometres after leaving the Murchison Crossing. The Boat Crew had tried to get me on the satphone but there was no network coverage. The satphones were a big disappointment during the whole trip.

A decision was made to tow John's boat behind Cliff's because of his bigger motor. Stephen moved into Kevin's boat with the equipment from the stricken boat, and John went into the front of Cliff's boat which towed the now powerless inflatable. It was Greg's job to steer it the best he could and keep it upright. Three times he went to the opposite side of a tree to the

towing boat. John described the trip, "Greg used his weight and mobility to follow us in the towed boat and was entertaining to watch. Trees caused a great problem, as did going sideways and being thrown out."

Greg reckoned that he never had so much fun in his life.



Hooting along in plenty of water



A lot more water at Billabalong during the 1997 trip allowed Cliff to drive through a gate near their large woolshed

Between Meeberrie and Billabalong the river spreads out into a huge floodplain known as the Wangoolia Floodout.

It was in this vast expanse of water that Kevin and Stephen became separated from the two joined boats. In each of the previous trips (1994 and 1997) that entered the Floodout, the same drama occurred. It is remote and scary country. Kevin recalls, “Within five minutes of re-starting the trip a few problems started to happen. With the extra weight I had in my boat, it took longer to get onto a plane, which meant I was starting to lose contact with the other boats. I lost sight of the boats in

front of me. I took a turn down a channel which looked good. After heading down this channel for a short time it didn't seem right so we backed out and went down another channel where the flow was stronger. We were still uncertain if we were going down the right channel when we started to see bubbles in the water and wash on the banks – certain evidence that boats had passed this way.”

Given the uncertainty of the water level from Billabalong to Yallalong – or even to Ballinyoo Bridge – and the u/s gearbox on John's Mariner, it was a relatively easy decision to pull out at Billabalong. On reflection, we should have continued – at least to Ballinyoo, possibly Yallalong.

We had lunch under the shade of the homestead trees. I spotted an aluminium dinghy leaning against the woolshed and hailed Peter when he returned from mustering to collect more gates. It was one of the six dinghies used in the record breaking 1981 Murray River Expedition. So



One of these boats from the 1981 Murray River Expedition ended up at Billabalong Station

how did it end up on Billabalong Station? Many years before, Vaughn Barndon at Yallalong Station had purchased it from a wheatbelt farmer. How the farmer came by it is not known.

It was used at Murchison Crossing to ferry people across the expanse of water during times of flood for a number of years before Vaughn gave it to Peter. Although he didn't say anything at the time Peter was rather dubious about my claim of the dinghy's antecedents. It was not until I sent him a

photograph of me shaking hands with the Lady Mayoress of Murray Bridge with the boats clearly visible that he was convinced of the veracity of my story.

Lunch finished, we drove to Yallalong. The water level at the crossing was about 400mm deep and, while it was no trouble for the Patrol, we were a little concerned for the Subaru – unnecessarily as it turned out.

It was clear that we would reach Kalbarri at an unacceptably late hour so we decided to camp at the Galena Bridge camp area. When we camped there in 1994 the flies were the worst I had ever experienced anywhere in Australia. This time it was mosquitoes and other bugs. Once bitten, twice shy. Galena Bridge is most definitely OFF my list of preferred campsites – even without consideration of the altercation with a pushy neighbouring camper.

THIRD LEG

We made an early start to Kalbarri and drove straight to the boat ramp in front of the caravan park. The boats were quickly prepared for a dash upriver under threatening skies – the result of a cyclone further to the north.

The river here is tidal and, at the time we were on it, shallow. I drove Cliff's duck with John Haynes in the front. Greg and Kevin were in 175. John and Stephen were in their inflatable. Cliff stayed behind and replaced the spare wheel that had been fitted to the trailer on Saturday with the original that had been repaired at Murchison.

After a few kilometres of shallow water, indistinct channels and hard work it was decided that the goal wasn't worth the effort and we headed back to the boat ramp, loaded up and headed off to Perth, visiting the spectacular coastal gorges along the way.

CONCLUSION

We were extremely lucky to have local thunderstorms dump enough water into the river channel at such a convenient time and without adversely affecting roads. We started behind the peak of the "fresh", caught up with it, and had we continued on, we would have run out of water around Yallalong.

The Murchison when flowing is an amazing river. The water is fresh, the country through which it passes is spectacular, the wildlife is incredible, the birdlife is bountiful, the course is challenging and the remoteness is daunting.

From Kevin's point of view the trip was, "very short, sweet with very interesting terrain and magnificent scenery all the way around and well worth doing again." Greg reckoned that it was a "well organised trip."

And, while we have the capacity to take on the challenges of a remote and ephemeral river, the Murchison will always be at the head of the list.