

THE NATIONAL TRAIL™

FEBRUARY 2024

TRACKS

MAGAZINE

An Unexpected Journey

Jamie McDonald recounts how the National Trail sparked an adventure spanning 2 continents

The Adventure before the Adventure

The adventures (and misadventures) of Andrea Ferris

The Dynamic Duo

Robyn McLean and Karen Scott, two remarkable ladies taking on the trail together

Retracing Section 2

Mal Keeley talks about the challenges of updating a 30-year-old guidebook



Image: Andrea Ferris

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BEGINS

from THE BOARD

Welcome to another edition of Tracks, written as the weather warms and we wend through a weather-heavy summer season. For trekkers, this means a myriad of new challenges - heat, water sources, the ever-present risk of bushfires and storms. The Trail is wonderful at presenting adversity when least expected, in ways that make for wonderful stories later on. In this edition, you'll find some of those very stories.

It has been an exciting year for the Trail, as more and more trekkers share their stories through social media and allow us to follow their journey step by step, north to south or south to north. Alongside those online, it can be a surprise and delight to get an email from other trekkers who have almost anonymously made their way along the roads, informing us that they too have completed their trek.

Each week, the Trail board members are notified of new registrations, new people tackling a big adventure. Along the way, these adventurers meet and spend time with our section coordinators and other volunteers who devote time and energy to supporting them. It's always exciting to see their progress, along what can be a slow route along Australia's east coast.

The path each trekker takes is guided by the National Trail maps, and in this edition we also have an update from the Mapping team who have done a brilliant job re-tracing Section 2. Sue Richards and Mal and Denise Keeley have been working tirelessly to explore this north Queensland section, finding water, shelter and new trails. The amount of work it takes to update each section and bring them from the old printed guidebooks, well over two decades old, to modern GPS tracklines with up-to-date property contacts and information, is immense. Without the work Sue, Mal and Denise have done, trekkers would continue to have a very difficult experience in Section 2. Thank you to the Mapping team for all of their work.

From all of us on the Board, enjoy your trekking, your planning, and your dreaming. We'll see you out on the trail.

Neil

The trail is *wonderful* at presenting adversity when least expected, in ways that make for wonderful *stories* later on.

Image: Jamie McDonald



AN UNEXPECTED *journey*

From the spark of an idea to pedalling away from Cooktown on a brand new bike, it took just six weeks for **Jamie McDonald** to decide to tackle the National Trail. Fast forward to the present, and he has now completed 'nearly 10,000km of self-propelled adventure' across two continents.

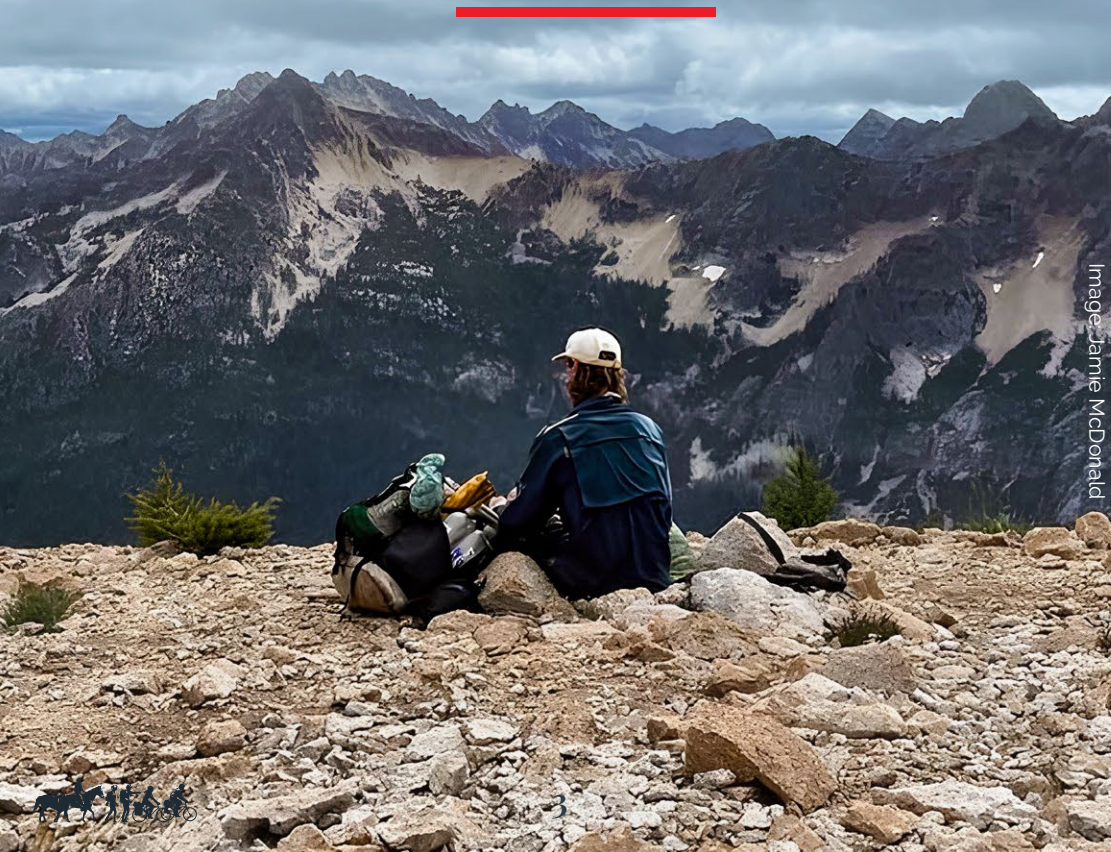


Image: Jamie McDonald

Over the past two years, I have travelled along the National Trail and The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Right now I sit on a couch in Los Angeles having just completed the Pacific Crest Trail two days ago.

In summary of how I completed the National Trail, I cycled somewhere between 4500-5300 km, starting in Cooktown. It was a four-ish month trip within an eight-month time frame. I took some time off for work and seeing friends at various stages. I also skipped some sections and took the road. Much of this was due to flooding and the intense rainy season we had in 2022. I know this may already be forgotten by some of the NSW country folks, looking at the current dry land. I am not sure how the other parts of the country are fairing.

How did this all begin? When I was at university, I found out about the Pacific Crest Trail. A 4,270 km single-track hike from Mexico to Canada. I thought, 'wow, people do this type of thing?' Fifteen minutes later I was with my buddy telling him I was going to do it.

This has been my approach to things over the past few years, say I'm going to do something, then figure out the solutions to problems as they arise. I felt like it would take a global pandemic for me to not hike the PCT. Unfortunately, that was what happened. I was not in the US, and my years of travel after university were

turning out to be working hospitality in Sydney.

I knew about the National Trail but didn't want to walk it. I had decided I did not want to spend that much time walking alone, it takes a special kind of someone to enter that adventure (like awe-inspiring Asha Fern). I was a bit stuck, not doing my big adventure, but not thinking about what to do after university.

One day, it popped into my head that other people had cycled the National

The first week saw a naive 23-year-old sweat absolute buckets. I learnt many things. Don't go swimming in the water. Don't go near a dad Cassowary. You can kiss a cane toad.

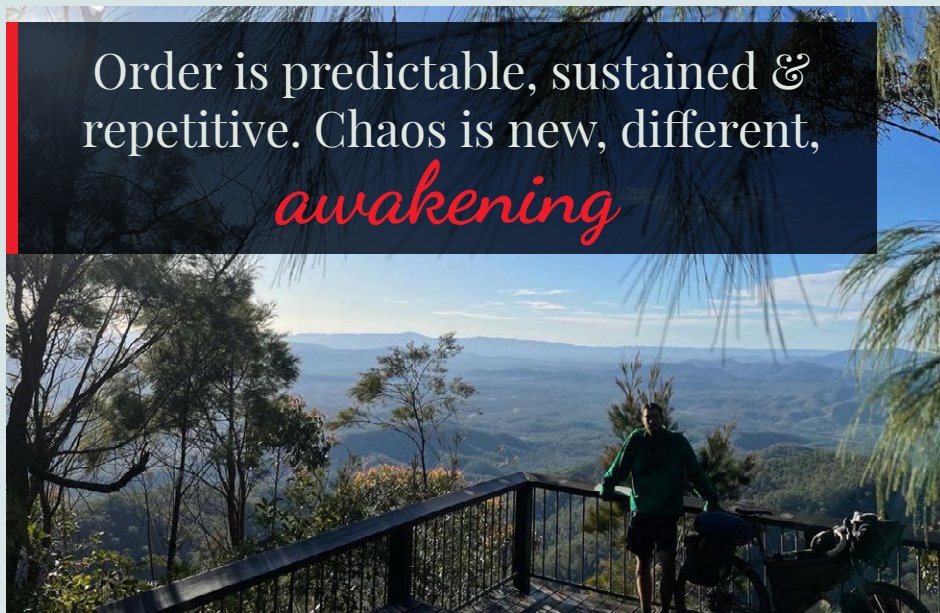
Trail, and the spark ignited. I called Mum two minutes later to tell her I was going to do it. I immediately went into a bike shop and said something along the lines of "Hey uhh, umm, I'm going to cycle this trail. I don't know anything about bikes. Ummm, what would you like uhh recommend for something like this?" The 18-year-old employee scratched his head and said "I guess a mountain bike would be best?"

Luckily I later found an awesome store that got me on my feet. Six weeks later, I was in Cooktown, in the sweltering heat, trying to figure out how to put my bike together. I had said goodbye to my family and friends and was standing at the plaque that marked the beginning.

I had no idea what I was doing. It was a strange feeling. People often spend years thinking about an adventure like ▶



Order is predictable, sustained & repetitive. Chaos is new, different, *awakening*



this before leaving, but for me, I was at the beginning before I knew it. 'Ah well', I thought, 'better start riding'. With no training and no bike-fixing knowledge, I was underprepared. But I'm still alive!

The start of a journey like the National Trail doesn't feel like it starts at the beginning. Even after spending a month in a bike seat, people still told me, "Oh you've only just started, long way to Melbourne". The first week saw a naive 23-year-old sweat absolute buckets. I learnt many things. Don't go swimming in the water. Don't go near a dad Cassowary. You can kiss a cane toad. Do not camp behind the BP in Mount Garnet.

I found this in my notes from Section 1: "The first few days were lonely, I quickly realised that any connection with a stranger would be our last. The life of a solo wilderness traveller is respectable, and if enjoyed, kudos to that individual.

Having been conditioned for city life since I went to high school, social media, and constant visiting of people I love, this may take some getting used to. Anyway, time is a funny thing, do the same every day, the days fly by, do something novel and it feels like an eternity. If someone told me I started just nine days ago, I wouldn't believe them. However, my stench could tell me different. Cooktown seems like a lifetime ago. Maybe it's due to the order of life in Sydney, and the chaos of the situation I find myself in. Order is predictable, sustained and repetitive. Chaos is new, different, awakening."

I feel like this embodies my favourite parts of my experience. Feeling human. In my experience, being on a bike in the Aussie outback creates the opportunity for emotions to run rife. Each day consists of a high high and a low low. A feeling of 'feeling sorry for myself' exhaustion, to a

scream of 'cooeee' and laughter can be minutes apart. That is what I like about the trip, the good, the bad, being human.

It's difficult to decide what to include in a short piece about my experience on the trail. But overall it was incredibly rewarding and difficult. I'm not sure if I was prepared for what a solo journey fully entailed. At times I found it incredibly

I know that I am who I am today because of these experiences.

challenging. The isolation, the desire for an adventure friend, the lack of validation for the effort you put in at the end of the day. No one to talk to when you're in the pits, but also no one to share the highs with.

It has taken me a lot of thinking to reflect on this aspect of my experience. I know that I am who I am today because of these experiences. When I finished the trail, I hoped to have an adventure. And that was exactly what I found.

Recently, while walking on the PCT I listened to The Hobbit. It was a big



clicking moment for me. The story was a great metaphor for many experiences I've had in my 9 months on both trails. I think completing a long-distance trail is like Bilbo's journey. For those who haven't read it, Bilbo leaves his home of comfort, not fully sure he wants to and faces many challenges. During these challenges, he often wishes to go home. But in the end, it is obvious that he was glad he went out on his adventure because he got to see the world. In a very raw way as well.

That being said, you may think I didn't have a jolly good time on the trail. That is not the case. There were so many people on the trail that I only knew for a night, but felt so deeply connected with. I got to see much of my own country. Develop my idea of what it means to be Australian. Be invited into homes. Inspire other people. Have the pleasure of overcoming challenges (like fixing a bike chain for the first time 250 km from the closest bike shop). On a side note, I have learned to love the negative experiences. To me, they have so much meaning. Would I have preferred to sleep in my warm bed? Or have a night where I sit next to the fire without a wink of sleep because it was below 0 in Kroombit Tops? I prefer the latter.

Each section had its own story, and its own mindset. Queensland was amazing because it was 'the big beginning to a bigger adventure'. Like a kid tasting chocolate for the first time. By the time I went through NSW, the romance had worn off a bit and I was travelling roads I was already familiar with (I grew up near Nundle), meaning at times it felt less of the 'big adventure'. Victoria, despite its rigorous physical challenges, was my favourite part of the trail. It's where I learnt I like suffering a little bit. As those ▶

The long days, beautiful and rugged country, along with general exhaustion lead to a feeling of really being alive.



who have been there would know, the hills are steep. Many days were spent pushing, as opposed to riding. I got Covid, and a chest infection and got fairly sick. But the long days, beautiful and rugged country, along with general exhaustion lead to a feeling of really being alive.

What advice would I give? I don't think I can advise those that do the trail in its intended form - that being, those who travel with stock and on horseback. I will acknowledge that I do have incredible respect for those who do it in such a way. Bikes and feet do not need much maintenance! However, those that intend to walk or cycle, pack light and trust your gut. Having met many of my (and our) types on the PCT, I recognise now that we can often feel like the trail owns us and we must complete it. By the time I learnt that I only need to do what I desire and what makes me happy, my experience increased dramatically - even though I ended up doing practically all of both.

A very prominent saying in the US long-distance walking culture is 'hike your own hike'. This is the most important thing. In December 2022, with a couple of small stretches

skipped, but the majority of the trail complete, I told myself, my journey was complete.

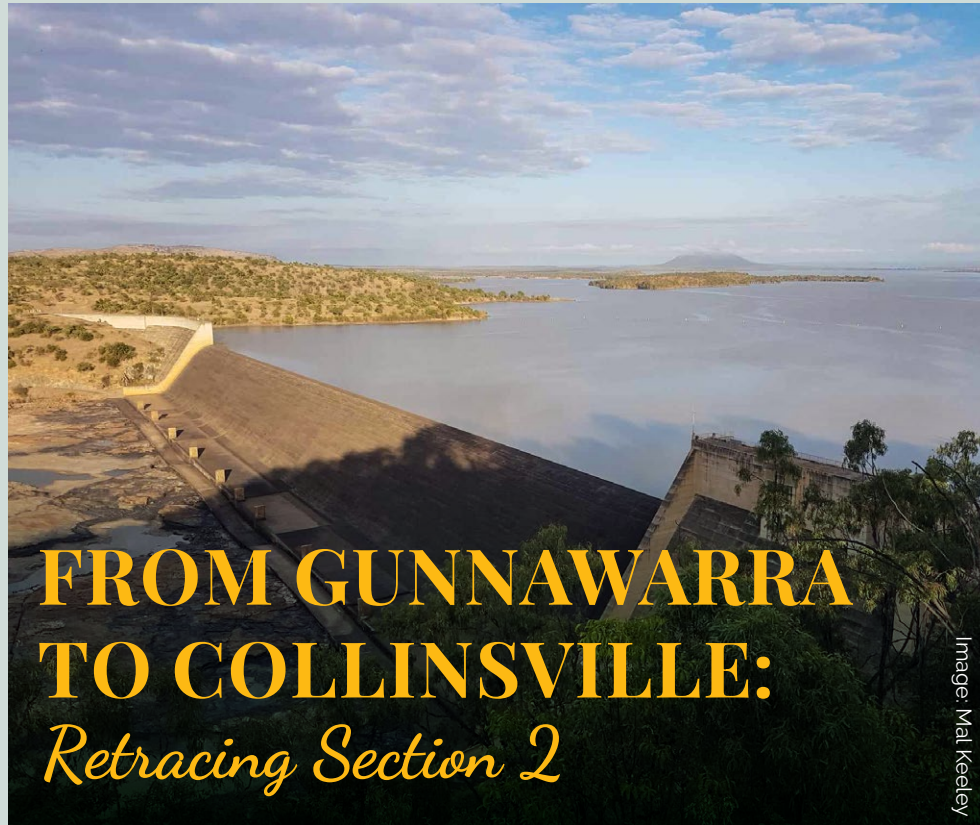
I worked for a few months afterwards and on April 15th, I began my walk on the Pacific Crest Trail. Again, what do I say about this trip in just a few words? Statistically, it was a 4000 km plus walk. I went through deserts with limited water, spent days upon days walking along snow (even carrying snow equipment like an ice axe!), deep lush forests, swarms of mosquitoes that make your skin look like a stirred ants nest, and crossed many mountains at an elevation of over 3/4000 metres.

Both the trips were so incredibly special. Both were intensely different

experiences. I'm so grateful I got to experience my own country, which developed a deeper love for the land I was raised on. Afterwards I got to experience the US' incredible natural beauty. It was also the best feeling in the world moving from a solo journey to a journey that I spent with people that became lifelong friends. I had the pleasure of meeting a few Americans in the early days of the PCT and hiked the entire trail with them. These relationships have been some of the strongest of my life.

I went out starting the National Trail with a hunger for adventure. I finish nearly 10,000 km of self-propelled adventure, knowing that it is all about the people you meet along the way. ■





FROM GUNNAWARRA TO COLLINSVILLE: *Retracing Section 2*

Image: Mal Keeley

In the extremes of weather north Queensland is known for, Section 2 is the epitome of the National Trail; isolated, remote, and challenging. Here **Mal Keeley** talks to Lucy Stone about the challenges of re-mapping this remarkable section.

There is a land of vast and open spaces, where a single property can span thousands of hectares and kilometres of dusty, isolated road. Where passers-by are few and far between, and water just as scarce. Inland from the lush rainforest of the central Queensland coast, high on plateaus where short,

ghost-barked trees grow stubbornly in red soil and the wet season, when it comes, brings fierce but welcome relief in flooding deluge, toward the mighty Burdekin Dam.

This is Section 2 of the National Trail, spanning roughly 200 kilometres as the

crow flies. By foot, across cattled plains and hot landscapes, it can take much longer. Unique to the Trail, the majority of Section 2 spans private properties, including more than 150 kilometres of private roads and only four campsites on public land.

Section 2 is one of the last National Trail sections to be re-mapped, bringing the nearly 30-year-old guidebooks up to date with new routes, new contacts, and fresh advice for trekkers tackling this challenging track. It is no easy task to re-map an entire section. To do so, the National Trail Mapping Committee had a mammoth task on their hands.

Coordinator Sue Richards and committee members - and long-term Trail volunteers - Mal and Denise Keeley planned out a two-week trip to central Queensland. The first task, however,

began well before they flew into Townsville. Tracking down the property owners for properties that had doubtless changed hands more than once in 30 years since the original guidebooks were published was a major challenge.

Off a list of property owners previously contacted by the Trail, only one number still worked.

"I pulled a lot of hair out," Mal said. "It took a month or so of ringing properties, asking properties for different people's names and finding people to get all the landowners, which was very, very difficult."

Finally tracking down dozens of new landowners, through whose properties the Trail wends, was just the start. Many landowners were surprised to be contacted by the Trail after so long, and wanted to know why so many people



In such a unique section, almost entirely spanning private property, winning over the trust and understanding of new property owners was critical.

were turning up to their properties asking to camp.

"They had people coming through expecting to stop here because the 31-year-old guidebook told them to ... they were a little bit irate in a few areas, saying 'what's going on?'" Mal said.

"I said to them, 'we've got a moral obligation, we want to re-map this book and we've got to make it right.'"

In such a unique Section, almost entirely spanning private property, winning over the trust and understanding of dozens of new property owners was critical.

Over two weeks, Mal and Denise drove along the entire section, testing out new

routes, writing out new instructions for trekkers, and finding solutions where insurmountable blocks emerged. With the help of recent trekkers who had only recently traversed the Section who provided their own GPS lines, Mal and Denise found a new way through.

"The objective was; do the mapping, get an electronic trail, get a waypoint for each campsite and each specific intersection that you need to know about," Mal said.

"We set off, we had two weeks and we started at Innot Hot Springs. That's not where the old Book 2 started - that was Gunnawarra."

Changing the starting point for Section 2 to Innot Hot Springs gave trekkers better options for public transport in and out, groceries and access to caravan parks and rest points. In contrast, Gunnawarra was simply a point on the side of the road.



We've got a moral obligation, we want to re-map this book & we've got to make it right.



"I'd pre-arranged to see the landowners on such and such a day. We'd missed some because they were out mustering and they said 'well, we can't wait around all day,' which was fair enough," Mal said.

"We saw probably about 80 per cent of the land owners, and the ones we didn't see we talked to on the phone.

"They came up with some requirements, which was fair enough."

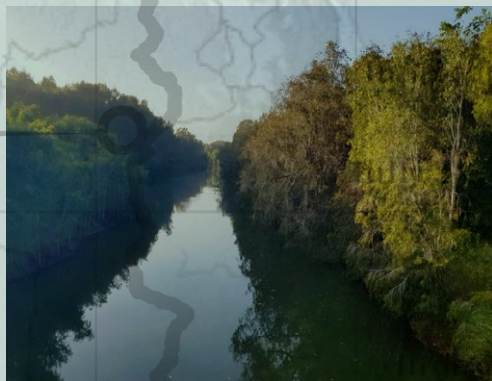
Those requirements include trekkers adhering to biosecurity arrangements within a Section full of cattle and

livestock, including daily cleaning of clothing and equipment to remove weeds and seeds; an agreement that there are to be no open fires throughout the Section; leaving gates as they are found and no camping within 300 metres of stock watering points.

Trekkers are also expected to contact each landowner in advance, with proof of Trail membership and request permission to camp on private properties.

"Once we talked to them about all of that, all bar one landowner came around," Mal said. ►





Mal and Denise explored the beauty of the Burdekin Dam, the long winding roads and isolated ranges.



"We have a duty of care to people as well to remind them that's the deal. A landowner can refuse access, if they want to - they can't stop someone travelling on the road but they can certainly refuse access through private property.

Over the two weeks, Mal and Denise patiently created a new route for Section 2, bringing together private properties, National Parks, road reserves, towns and villages into a section that clings closely to the original route, with only some necessary changes.

"[The landowners] were really happy, actually."

Water will always be a challenge in Section 2, an issue trekkers will always have to manage.

It wasn't all communications work, however. In their hired Prado, with special permission to drive through private properties for the sake of mapping, Mal and Denise explored the beauty of the Burdekin Dam, the long winding dirt roads, and isolated ranges.

"Some maps were 35-kilometres apart, and we split them up so we can try and do 20-25 kilometres a day, because that's as far as you can go on a horse," Mal said.

Another challenge of Section 2 is a three-day traverse along road reserves running alongside an active Army base, where trekkers might wave at a convoy of tanks rattling along the road.

"We actually split a few maps up and made them shorter days. Some places there'd be at least 20 kilometres between water, and that was when it wasn't particularly dry."

Now back home in their own section around Lithgow in NSW, Mal and Denise's work is now being collated by Mapping Coordinator Sue Richards, with the hope that within a few months, trekkers will no longer have to translate a 30-year-old guidebook in a section that is always changing, never the same. ■

SECTION 2

COLLINSVILLE



SECTION 3



the ADVENTURE *before the adventure*



Recovering from spinal surgery is not fun – and it's a long way from packsaddling the National Trail, writes Andrea Ferris.

Images of beautiful scenery between the ears of a pretty horse fall way short of telling the story about a trail trek. Because, in my case, those pictures will depict the end of quite an adventure.

In the mid-1990s, I stood at the then-Bicentennial National Trail plinth in Cooktown. I was 30-something and, as I stood there in the tropical heat gazing toward the south, I made a wish: to ride this trail from end-to-end.

I nurtured that dream for nearly 30 years until mid-2021 when I quit work and began planning and preparation in earnest.

Research and learning from others' experience being paramount to success, I read books on long-riding, online articles, and joined relevant Facebook groups to ask questions and had inspiring discussions with past adventurers.

I kept the 'short and fat' sage advice in mind as I put together the horse team. And the human team, my non-rider partner Wayne, had quite a learning curve to negotiate!

The unsupported logistics were just too daunting, so we bought a truck with living quarters and found a bloke willing to drive it for us; the idea being to camp at the truck when we could and packsaddle in between.

The shed full of micro-light camping gear from previous sea-kayaking, cycling, and hiking adventures was raided, a lot of saddlery equipment was purchased, and I learned how to trim hooves – something I'd happily left to skilled farriers.

A series of health checks including skin cancer, bone density and, in my case, a hip and spine CT scan, tetanus injections, Covid vaccinations, dental check-ups, and eye tests were done.

Wayne's job was to research wayfinding and communications. The National Trail maps were downloaded onto the Avenza smartphone app and printed, and he bought a Garmin GPS with satellite messages and SOS facility. ▶

Image: Andrea Ferris



The day before we were set to leave a horse stood on my foot & broke 3 bones in spectacular fashion.

After more than six solid months of singularly focussed activity, the day before we were set to leave a horse stood on my foot and broke three bones in spectacular fashion ... any walking or riding was off the table for some time; I was beyond gutted.

The next wheel to fall off the plan came when my foot was almost healed and we were ready for a six-day test trek. A



much-loved horse was vetted out of the team with ringbone. The team was now three; albeit easier to handle and 25 percent less to feed and maintain.

The test trek from the front gate through the southern part of section five to Elgin Vale revealed a few minor holes in the preparation, but proved a great confidence booster that the dream was indeed manageable.



In the meantime, our truck driver moved on with his life and we began the search for a replacement.

A shout out to the grey nomads' social network secured a couple willing to drive the truck and, once again, we packed up the house and trucked down to Elgin Vale to rendezvous with 'Tales of the Trail' long-riding power couple Monique and Erwin, and the plucky solo hiker Asha who we had hosted at Kilgivan a couple of weeks previously.

It was now September 2022, and the intention was to trek south to be in Healesville early 2023.

The first couple of days were amazing. The horses seemed keen to resume their jobs, the weather was kind and the scenery just lovely. All the 'fixes' from the August test trek proved sound, especially the helmet intercom system. And then I began to feel unwell ...

We reached Linville, a pretty railway town on the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail where, luckily, a friend has a holiday home and a spare block of land for camping. At daylight the next morning, I felt very sick and decided to stay in bed, until Wayne poked his head out the tent and announced that all three horses had disappeared!

Five hours later, after a mass search by townsfolk, trail riders and travellers, the team was discovered five kilometres back the way we'd come in a burnt paddock happy as clams. But I was sick and exhausted and not too surprised to test positive for Covid.

The local council gave permission for the horses to stay at a nearby fenced reserve with plenty of feed and water, which was much appreciated as, three days later, Wayne also tested positive, and it was ten days before we could resume the journey. ▶



After a rainy rest day at Blackbutt, we loaded the packsaddle for a few days trekking off-road through some lovely country that included a challenging creek crossing and some navigation bloopers!

We rejoined the truck for a rest day and packed up again for another few days of camping out, cheerily setting off after checking in with the section coordinator and contacting the owners of the properties that we were to travel through.

It was as we corrected another slight navigation hiccup that disaster struck. A mob of domestic donkeys and mules ambushed the team and, in a blind panic, they bolted off into the distance. It took several hours to locate the pack horse who had gone through a barbed wire fence and severely cut his face.



After a fruitless wrestle with the local council about accommodation at the local showground, we decided to head home and seek veterinary assistance enroute. It was also the end of the truck drivers who, I'm guessing, were not enamoured to align themselves with a disaster-prone journey.

After less than a month on the trail, we were back home, licking wounds and support-crew-less – again.



By this stage, what I can only deduce was 'long-Covid' had taken hold and I could barely walk from the house to the shed without gasping for breath. There was no way I was fit to resume the trek, so we decided to wait until after the heat of summer and leave in April 2023 to go north for the winter.

In February 2023, I had an unspectacular fall from one of the horses that resulted in a fracture of a sacral segment. However, the pain did not abate and in March I experienced a disc extrusion, where the disc squeezes out from between the vertebrae and migrates up or down the spine.

A month later, I had a laminectomy and discectomy, which didn't resolve the pain sufficiently, and as I write this in late September 2023, I'm recovering from

double spinal fusion surgery. No riding for at least six months.

Have I given up on the 30-year dream—no way! But I do realise it will be modified and some compromise made.

My experience, woeful as it is so far, proves that behind the pretty pictures of the trail scenery in blogs, posts and articles, there's likely to be another story of disappointments, mistakes, compromise, and the getting of wisdom that actually ends with the first steps on to the trail.

For more information about the preparation for our National Trail journey visit www.themaneevent-2022.com or find us on Facebook at The Mane Event 2022. ■

It took several hours to locate the pack horse who had gone through a barbed wire fence & severely cut his face.



PATHWAYS

Updates from the trail



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

THE BICENTENNIAL NATIONAL TRAIL LIMITED

The Annual General Meeting of the Bicentennial National Trail was held on Saturday 28th October 2023. Chair Neil Ward provided an update to members and an outlook on the year ahead. Members who could not join the livestream are welcome to contact info@nationaltrail.com.au for more information.



Jim Cooper

National Trail Life Member Jim Cooper passed away on October 1, 2023. A former Director of Central Queensland, Jim spent many years on the Trail board and as a section coordinator. Jim contributed enormously to the National Trail over decades and will be missed by many. His funeral was held in Bundaberg on October 11.



Mapping Committee opening

The National Trail's mapping committee has an opening for a new volunteer Mapping Coordinator. This role typically sits on the Board and is heavily involved in leading the updates of the 30-year-old guidebooks to new GPS tracklines and PDF maps. The role requires good level of technical knowledge of mapping, trekking and groundtruthing, as well as understanding of modern GPS mapping systems.

Excellent communication skills are a must as this is a key role that involves a great deal of work with section coordinators, landowners and government stakeholders, and the Board.

For further information, please email info@nationaltrail.com.au in the first instance.



Section 11 Map update - Kambah to Yarralumla - alternate route for horses/hikers.

Stromlo Forest Park has a much improved National Trail for horse/hiker trekkers. Considerable negotiations have occurred with Stromlo Forest Park Manager, Darren Roper, ACT Equestrian Associations President Christine Lawrence and myself re trail designs and expense changing concrete causeways constructing cavalettis, and installing Equestrian signs to keep trekkers safely away from the busy mountain bike tracks.

This new well signed grassy trail surrounded by bush is a delight. The horse/hiking route starts inside a fenced corridor at the T intersection of Warragamba Avenue and Eucumbene Drive in Duffy crossing the Cotter Road into Stromlo Forest Park and exiting the cavaletti to underpass of John Gorton Drive, and follows the equestrian route to Molongo River. There is also a day use dedicated rest area next to a dam. The cyclists route continues as per map and guide notes. Check updates for new route directions and mud map.

- **Jenny Costin, Section Coordinator**



the DYNAMIC DUO:

The National Trail begins

The Dynamic Duo are Robyn McLean & Karen Scott; two active middle-aged women who met for the first time in 2015 on an overnight kayak adventure on the Hunter River in the Upper Hunter Valley of New South Wales.

Image: Robyn McLean

Since then, 250km of the Hunter River have been paddled from Moonan Flat to Stockton Beach over 11 stages; The Great North Walk (GNW) from Newcastle to Sydney (250km) has been hiked over 16 stages and the National Trail from Ebor to Jenolan Caves is in their sights and has thus been divided into stages. They meet 3-4 times per week in the early hours of morning to walk 6-10km to keep fit whilst discussing the organisation & logistics of

any upcoming endeavours. Since March 2021, they have been on the trail with day trips &/or overnights completing 450km (still more to come) over 10 stages. Robyn writes a recount on the completion of each stage.

"Happy to share the fun times, the good times, the hard times, but never a bad time the Dynamic Duo spend on the trail with TRACKS MAGAZINE"

Stage 1: South to North – Widden to Sandy Hollow (40.3km)

Date: Saturday 27th March 2021

It was a 6am meetup for our very first stage. It involved two cars - one left at the Sandy Hollow Tourist Hotel (finish) and another at the Widden Horse Stud

(start). Entry into the stud was via a causeway but it was not possible today due to a recent rain event, Widden Brook Creek was flooded. ►

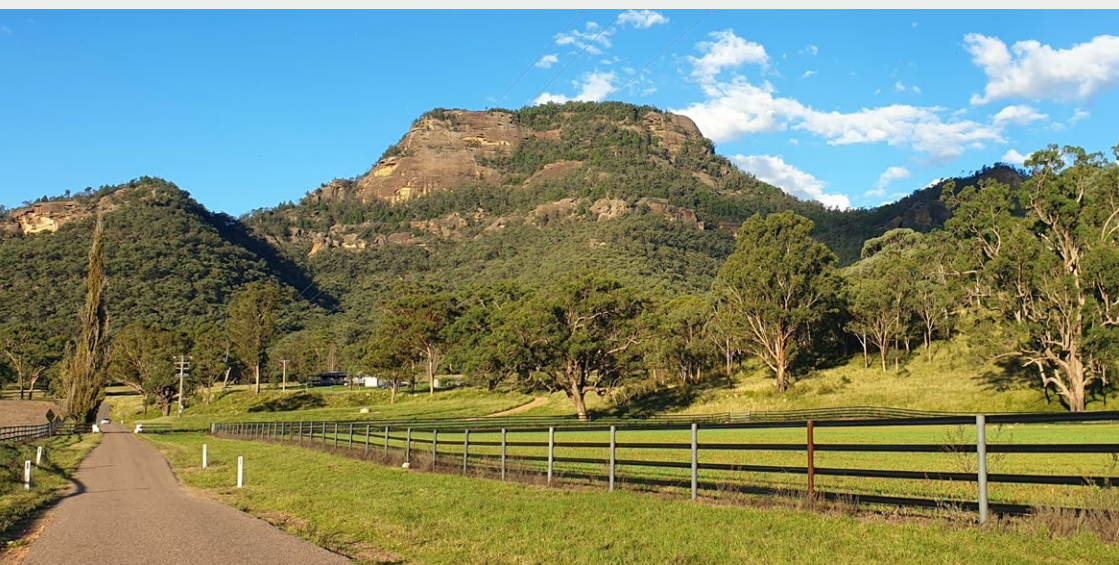


It was a cool 10 degrees with the sky beginning to show early colour when we rode our bikes out the poplar tree lined exit of Widden Stud and onto Widden Valley Road. As the sunrise colours faded, light hit the Widden Valley mountains. The exposed cliffs and caves were beautiful - the more sunshine that shone, the more spectacular they became! We passed many thoroughbred horses in green grassy paddocks and admired newborn calves sticking close to their mothers.

On one section of this road, with no fences, a herd started to run. They thought we were trying to round them up and move them along. The mothers ran ahead with their calves racing up behind them. As we overtook, they would stop their nervous flight BUT ... there's always one who will behave differently to all the others! I watched Karen approach a grid with a nervous mother and calf on her right. A locked gate was on her left. The cow lowered its head as if to charge

My heart was in my throat thinking would she get up? I hoped she hadn't injured herself.

Karen as she passed by. I slowed to a near stop. Inch by inch I came up behind them. I was taken by complete surprise when the mother crossed quickly in front of me and attempted an ungraceful jump, clamber, and tumble over the gate! My heart was in my throat thinking would she get up? I hoped she hadn't injured herself. Thankfully not - She got to her feet and ran away through the long grasses toward the creek, abandoning her calf. Judging by an evident loud splash, she jumped into the creek and



made her way across. I had stopped. Karen also had stopped. We both looked in the direction of the calf who was now crying out loudly for its mother.

I wanted to open the gate but before I had time to get off my bike, the calf had ploughed through the fence (thankfully not barb wire) momentarily catching its back legs before managing to get free. She chased after her mother bellowing and then jumped into the swollen creek! Surely it would drown being so young?

We couldn't look, what could we do to help? We peddled to the next bend in the road, clearly seeing the calf being carried downstream but in the next instant, it had found its feet and made its way safely to its mother! - What an absolute relief!

We continued on and later stopped at Glennies Cutting to view the swollen creek. Off the bikes, Karen walked ahead waving a stick about to clear the orb-weaver spider webs that crossed our path. We made a joke about her being Harry Potter - 'Wingardium Leviosa' ...

not the correct spell to use at the time, for it was the one to levitate objects (this I looked up in my Harry Potter books when I got home). It would've been better to use (which I couldn't think of at the time) - 'Avada Kedavra', which was the spell to bring about instant death. That's what we needed to rid ourselves of these spiders!

At the water edge, we traced in the sand BNT 21 and excitingly explored the small animal footprints that lay about. From

Glennies Cutting to Widden Cutting

we followed alongside the Widden Brook Creek.

We had 3 safe water crossings - with a hard peddle and feet splayed outwards, we coasted and squealed like young school girls right on through them. It was similar for the cattle grids however one in particular, Karen squealed more loudly - I thought she was just having fun but she later told me it was

because she had crossed the path of a red-bellied black snake and couldn't avoid running over its head! Chop! Chop! Was it dead? She hoped it was before I came onto it. I thankfully never saw it! ▶



She had crossed the path of a red-bellied black snake & couldn't avoid running over it's head!

Upon reaching the intersection of Widden Valley Road and the Bylong Valley Way we could see in the distance, the railway bridge over the Goulburn River. Karen and I had paddled on a two day adventure from Merriwa to Sandy Hollow passing under that very bridge back in October 2016. Good times!

Before entering the Bylong Valley Way, we stopped for a safety briefing. I wasn't looking forward to this section of road – it was narrow with cliff edges and cars passing with 100km/h speed limit. We negotiated the first cutting safely and without issue so pulled into Phipps

Cutting rest area. Time for a snack and a chat with Joe, a local property owner (he looked the part in his cowboy boots and hat) and was the section coordinator from Sandy Hollow to Cudgong River. I had spoken to him a few days prior regarding the condition of the trail due to the recent rain. He was very friendly and most helpful. He said he went out the day before to re-mark the track and said the trail may be overgrown in parts. We avoided the road section following Phipps Cutting by sticking to the original trail. An old wagon road on the ridgeline which towered above the Goulburn River and that's where we saw our first BNT

(NEW) marker nailed to a tree!

We stopped on the ridgeline to take in the views overlooking the Bylong Valley and climbed over the convict hand-built stone wall which dates back to 1924.

On advice of the section coordinator, we avoided Folpps Cutting by turning off road, through a gate into a paddock with the aim to follow the river downstream for about 800m. The Goulburn River was swollen (which we knew) and had washed away any sign of the trail so ... we made a new one! We followed the barb wire fence higher up away from the river,

pushing our bikes through knee high – head high grasses; weeds, stinging nettles, fallen trees, soggy patches, and through prickly boxthorn bushes! 800m felt like it was so much more, it was thickly overgrown & quite exhausting to barge our way through. With a few scratches & stings we did make it and were in need of an energy boost by the time we sighted the exit gate.

We detoured slightly to a Baerami property for lunch and sweet hot tea. It wasn't long before we were back on our bikes zooming down the long sections of tar on the Bylong Valley Way toward Sandy Hollow. At the Sandy Hollow crossing we stopped for a train, counting a total of 91 wagons probably supplying coal from either Ulan or Wilpinjong mine to the port of Newcastle or one of the power stations.

Arriving at the Sandy Hollow township sign, we were almost done, the last part of the ride was along the Golden Highway to the Sandy Hollow Tourist Hotel. We rode on the footpath, stopping briefly at a lovely sculpture garden which also had freestanding mosaics of Australian wildlife and Visions of Life within the Hunter Valley – top find for us locals! Finally at the pub, bikes attached to car we walked into the bar and ordered a nice cold beer to celebrate the completion of Stage 1 – What a great day! What a great beginning to our BNT adventure – I simply cannot wait to return, to be back on the trail looking for the infamous red & yellow triangle markers.

Stay tuned for next submission - Stage 2: S2N – Sandy Hollow to Aberdeen (48.5km). ■

We stopped on the ridgeline to take in the views overlooking the Bylong Valley.



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