

Trip Reports:

Butcher Country Trip – 2nd to 4th February 2015

Trip Leader: David Blore, Geoff Bath, Gordon Bluck

Participants: Ian & Trish Barry

Noel & Irene Ham

Tony & Jill Miller

Keith Holland

Frank, Dawn & Harley Stephens

The convoy met at Swanpool, south of Benalla, at 7:30am and headed to Mansfield, where fuel tanks were topped up and last minute supplies purchased while Harley enrolled on-line for first-year University.

We motored up to Bluff Hut via Sheeppark Flat, where we aired down the tyres and had morning tea. Already we noticed the distinct lack of competing traffic due to this being a mid-week trip. Actually we didn't encounter any other 4WD traffic on any of the tracks we drove, although we noted the occasional camper at a number of readily accessible campsites. Other than within our own group, there wasn't even any competing radio traffic. You really appreciate the High Country when it's just you, your travel mates, great campsites and challenging tracks.

Further on we stopped at Lovick's Hut for photos and then continued on to the Macalister Springs carpark, via a bumpy King Billy Track, where we had a late lunch. The Stephens had hot pies prepared from frozen in a tiny 12 volt oven followed by "espresso" coffee and carrot cake. Frank might be better known as "Mr Gadget" – remember the TV series?

A short drive down the Howitt Road and we turned onto Butcher Country Track. This track follows a ridge-line south for approx. 20km and includes bog holes, loose rocks and ledges. Mr Gadget enjoyed playing with his "diff-locks". No one called for help so progress was good and we reached the Link Track down to the Caledonia River around 4:30pm. After a short but unsuccessful search to find a suitable campsite "up high" we backtracked a bit and headed down to the Caledonia River – a very steep and long descent, mostly in low range 1st gear with some necessary braking and straining of safety belts. The HEMA maps mark this track section as *Caution: Steep*.

We found a suitable camp close to the river, set up our wide variety of sleeping accommodation and spent a pleasant evening chatting, eating and drinking around a campfire. The overnight temperature was cool.

Bacon and eggs with espresso coffee for breakfast, for some, before four vehicles headed north up the Caledonia Track.

Keith's Challenger only has a 300 km range in this type of country, so he needed to head south for fuel. He, Noel and Irene headed south and up Dingo Hill Track: Noel went along in case Keith needed backup.

The Caledonia Track follows the river for 10km before climbing steeply up onto a ridge, which is then followed for a further 7km to the Howitt Road. A number of deep bog holes were bypassed with care, with the river being crossed several times before starting the climb. Jill drove the Disco while Tony slept in the passenger's seat. Great drive, Jill, on what wasn't an easy track!

Photo: *Guy's Hut on Bryce's Plain*



We drove down to Bryce Plain carpark where we met up with Noel and Irene and then walked out to Guys Hut and Pieman Falls, after which we had lunch. More hot pies for the Stephens. The Parks Vic Ranger came along and we had a quick chat about his role and problems with vandalism and cause for concern for the reputation of 4WDers.

After lunch we motored down the Howitt Road and then on to Kelly's Hut where we had agreed to meet up with Keith. However, as it turned out, Keith was mistakenly a couple of kilometres away at McMichael's Hut.

We regrouped and headed over to Dingo Hill Track for another steep descent to the Caledonia River. Tony changed a wheel before descending, as it had a slow leak caused by a buckled rim. We found another great campsite on the river and most had a swim or a bucket wash. Irene explored upstream and found a wonderful set of waterfalls and pools, which others also enjoyed. What a magic spot!

Another pleasant evening around a campfire, and a much milder night too, with increasing cloud cover. Next morning the weather looked threatening but fortunately there was no rain.

We drove up the Butcher Country Link Track, without drama, and then followed the Butcher Country Track down to the Macalister River - lots of loose rock and rock ledges on the way down. Turning north we drove along Blue Plains Spur Track (more river crossings and loose rock climbs), where we had morning tea before reaching Grimme Track. Grimme Track (*see Front Page Photo*) is another steep track that drops quickly down from a ridge into a small creek and then climbs quickly up onto another ridge. Great views from here back down the Macalister River Valley. The sun was out again.

Photo: *Group photo at Guy's Hut, Howitt High Plains*



We stopped for lunch on Mt Macdonald Road (Nobs Track on my map) next to a small creek. After lunch we headed north but the track progressively became more overgrown so we turned around. Frank got hooked up on a diff, negotiating a sharp turn around a tree, and had to be snatched free – not a problem for Keith's Challenger.

From here it was a straight-forward drive to Brock Road and then on to Merrijig to air up the tyres.

A great three-day trip with excellent weather, challenging tracks and convivial company.

Thanks David for the trip planning and leadership.

Ian Barry.

Ed: Well done...great trip and report.