



Having left all the relatives in WA with a move to Canberra, Ray A and family decided a camping bush Christmas was in order. Running the mantra that “the adventure starts when reception stops” a suitable camping location also needed close access to a body of fishable water. With two such challenging requirements it didn’t take long to decide to explore the Murray River with a base camp at Tom Groggin. Examining logistics we knew that ye olde portable Jerry Mo would not cope with three digestive systems over four days. So it was a relief to find that conflicting intelligence on the availability of toilet facilities worked in favour of our little plastic shrine being able to enjoy respite over the Christmas period too!

Now anybody who has watched ‘A River Somewhere’ would recall Tom and Rob’s aversion to the ‘comfortable ain’t camping’ philosophy. We also, are staunch opponents to the discomforts afforded by leaving life’s little luxuries behind so set about applying a few little tweaks to our Adventure Pack that will one day adorn the much coveted camper trailer. There were two necessities that went in for an early delivery from the Jolly Fat Bloke in red; increased off grid endurance for the fridge and being able to remove the grime and chill from a day’s wading in cold alpine streams.

Pondering the plethora of information on the interweb from varying degrees of experts and well intentioned, but a tad misguided, opinions on solar charging, battery technology and a world of acronyms (AWG, PWM, MPPT, AGM, LiIon, Pb, DoD ...); dusting off some diesel electric submarine theory and finding my slide rule buried in the back of the home office



*Ray, Grayson and Naomi pretty pleased to see that Father Christmas found them in the dark.*

drawer, it was the K.I.S.S principle that won the day. Provided that amps going into the box each day at least equalled or exceeded the amps coming out of the box, with around a day’s buffer ability if overcast, then campsite power would be sufficient. I worked on the ability to survive for a week with a couple of overcast days thrown in. The end result was a 120W solar panel (on special at 2/3 the price from a large retailer) that would recharge two already held 100A/Hr batteries. We also grabbed a 2 meter, dimmable, LED light strip that provided oodles of light (100W equivalent) that meant we could do away with gas lights, mantles and the ever present risk of broken glass. The LED light was fantastic, minimal draw on the battery AND more than enough light for older eyes to tie flies by!

The solar system came with a modulator and the ability to get amps into the box.

Getting amps from the box and distributed around the campsite, factoring in some design creep, required a distribution box. The design philosophy resulted in 3 Merritt sockets, dual USB outlet and the ability to monitor battery voltage. One is sure that the trade instructors who imparted their knowledge over 30 years ago would be impressed to see old knowledge and skills still produce a work of art!



*Ray seems well pleased with his power distribution box.*

Any fisher that wades mountain streams knows that the water gets a bit chilly, even through waders and thermals. Then if the felt soles, fast water and rolling rocks work against you and that cold mountain water



*The locals were unperturbed by our intrusion.*

gets on the wrong side of your waders, being able to warm up relatively quickly and avoid hypothermia is a sensible outcome to achieve. In a somewhat serendipitous occurrence, attention was drawn to one of those webbynet advertising splash screens for a portable hot water system which would pump and heat water for as long as you had water, 12V and gas available. The Joolca Hot Tap came with everything you need to enjoy piping hot showers in the bush and all controlled from the one switch on the shower head. You will recall that we do not subscribe to the 'comfortable ain't camping' philosophy! In fact the only issue that was discovered about the hot water system is that the switch on the shower head is difficult to operate, too difficult for young or arthritic fingers, once the system is pressurised; compounded with slippery soapy hands. A design modification to incorporate a ball valve near the shower head has proven much easier to use.

The extra kit now meant our ever dependable and faithful trailer was overfull, a couple of late nights adding gas bottle and water container carriers outside the trailer regained the required volume allowing us to depart not much later than planned on Christmas Eve for Tom Groggin. A coffee in Cooma was followed by a visit to Alpine Angler to top up the fly box as we passed. I must commend Alpine Angler for their advice which paid dividends for me less than 24 hours later! The trip down was uneventful and it was comforting to see the air temperature dropping as we climbed the mountain,

16 degrees as we passed Thredbo in the middle of the day suggested we would be avoiding the incredibly warm Christmases that we had endured for many years in WA.

If you are not familiar with Tom Groggin campground, it is

a fantastic site. Acres of open grassland that abound with kangaroos that appeared quite comfortable with human activity. We were fortunate to find only a few sites occupied and we set up in what was probably the choice spot with plenty of shade, a short stroll to the 'facility' and an even shorter stroll to the river. Once the camp was setup, it was time to reconnoitre the river for activity.

A small beach permitted access right next to our camp, heading downstream necessitated wading to avoid the heavy bramble and other impediments. I didn't mind committing a bit of a sin as there looked like plenty of likely trout spots as the water cascaded and eddied past many rocks and other structure along the way. I had a few days to come back and try likely spots so I didn't mind if I spooked any fish this time. To catch a fish one must have a line in the water so I experimented with some weighted nymphs, a hopper and a woolly bugger as I went down and back but no success and nothing sighted either. Not that I expected much, it was a bright afternoon so I expected fish to be deep and the close proximity to the campground

would likely see the section heavily fished. Fishing after dinner in the dark was short lived, without realising I was snagged on a back cast, the tip of my rod snapped off and it was a heart-breaking trudge back to camp.

Our first 'Bush Christmas' was a grand affair. Father C had managed to find us in the dark and left a haul under our little camping Christmas tree that would have made Ronnie Biggs quite envious. After the traditional exchange of gifts, which included a few surprises for us all, breakfast was consumed and I relaxed into campsite mode as I contemplated where to fish for the day.

Turns out I was too relaxed, simply returning my head torch to the tent pocket got my head too close to the pillow vortex and I was sucked into a couple of hours slumber that saw me emerge just in time for Christmas lunch. Big thanks to my wonderful girls for spoiling me on the day!

Lunch was delicious with a spread of meats and selection of salads washed down with a chilled wine from the fridge! That electrical system was paying dividends. The solar input to the battery was more than keeping up with the demands of the fridge which kept everything well chilled that needed to be.

Post lunch cleanup and some relaxation then it was time to spread some Christmas cheer around the Murray. My Christmas day was made extra special with my first ever wild trout that succumbed to a bead headed nymph and on a new



*A surprise to find a new fly reel in the stocking*





*A rainy day activity*

reel straight out of the stocking that was deployed on an older spare rod. They say that an angler's first trout catches the angler rather than the other way around. This seemed no exception to the rule as I let the nymph do its own thing with the eddies in a deep pool that had water sucking the fly down quite deep, dragging it down stream before it would then reverse direction with an eddy that travelled several meters back upstream. I discovered later that the current had scoured a very deep hole here (and was thankful of that hot shower) that produced my first gorgeous little rainbow. I didn't feel the take and was not sure how long the bow was hooked and I only realised as I moved the rod tip around to 'randomise' the fly's movement up and down this long eddy that I had, in fact, caught a trout.

This 'bow turned out to be the only fish of the trip. Not that I cared too much, like many I guess, I just enjoy the tranquillity of the surrounds, disconnected from the hustle and bustle of 'life' as I work along the river. A Gang Gang cockatoo spent quite some time only a few meters away on a bank feeding and quite indifferent to my

presence and rod arcing back and forth. Later, what I initially thought was a platypus but closer inspection revealed a Rakali (Australian Water Rat) swam nonchalantly by. Fading light and an empty belly eventually enticed one back to camp.

Boxing Day saw rain pretty much all day. It was anticipated from the forecast saw I took fly tying materials just in case. I wasn't motivated to fish so instead spent the day filling up my fly box with Ray's interpretation of a few flies. Several got wet the next day, some still reside where I couldn't retrieve them from trees or just lost after some over exuberant cast's whip cracked them off the tippet. Another gift, a wading staff, proved quite invaluable in keeping the inside of my waders dry; especially allowing a wade across some deeper fast water that would have been fraught with great risk of a dunking.

It was a tad sad to strike camp after a great few days but we thoroughly enjoyed our bush Christmas and look forward very much to exploring more of the highlands as I build my skills. Meanwhile, as I pine for a return to the water, I read and further my education on all things trout and aspire to develop what truly is the art of fly fishing.

