My Murray River Journey

By Jim Blyth

From Bringenbrong Bridge to the Murray River Mouth

The Murray River is the third longest navigable river in the world with a total length of 2520kms. The river’s source is at the Forest Hill Cairn at the western end of the Black-Allen Line on the NSW/Vic border at an altitude of 1374m in the Great Dividing Range. From this Cairn the river flows for 142kms descending 1108m to the Bringenbrong Bridge (on the Murray Valley Highway midway between Corryong and Khancoban), the start of my paddle. This section of the river is through mostly very rugged terrain as it descends the range. The river then flows for 2378kms descending 266m to the mouth.

Day 1 - I commenced my paddle at 10:15am on the 2nd March, in perfect weather at the Bringenbrong Bridge and paddled 45kms to arrive at Tintaldra at 14:45pm (where I spent my first night), averaging 10 km/h on a swift flowing river with many easy rapids. Whilst I was in Tintaldra I met a group of kayakers paddling Mirage 22S kayaks from Geelong who were doing their first stage of their “Murray River Epic” (Google for details of their adventures).

Day 2 - the next day the conditions were similar to the first day and I paddled 70kms in 7:30hrs averaging 9.3km/h reaching Burrowye Bend where I camped my first night.
Day 3 - I paddled the length of Hume Dam which at the time was less than 50% full. This meant I paddled in the river bed rather than straight lines across a lake. The distance paddled to the dam wall was 71kms in 11:00 hrs and as there was very little or no assistance from the water flow the daily average dropped to 6.5km/h.

Day 4 - this morning required my first portage of my kayak and gear from my campsite beside the Hume Dam, 300m up to the dam embankment, 200m along the embankment road, then 950m to a launch area downstream of the dam. The portage took over an hour of hard work as there was over 20m difference in elevation between Hume Dam and the embankment road. Another good days paddle with 40.5kms in 5hrs, averaging 8.1km/h. I sighted my first kilometre marker sign, reading 2220. These marker signs were originally placed every 2kms apart from ?? for the length of the river to the mouth. The weather was perfect though getting a little warm. I bypassed Albury by paddling the length of Wodonga Creek, passing an old paddle steamer “Cumberoona” on the banks beside the creek.
Day 5 - with the weather hot and dry I had a good incident free day’s paddle for 6hrs to cover 50kms to Howlong for the night.

Day 6 - I paddled 61kms in 8.45hrs for an average of 7km/h. According to the charts I had now paddled 25kms less by paddling anabranches than following the main river. Lunch break at Corowa. Then at sunset after I had set up camp, I was told by the landowner to shift my camp and kayak 200m further downstream because he was expecting visitors to arrive and use the shack I was camped beside.

Day 7 - the weather was dead calm, sunny and very, very hot. This was the day I paddled the length of Lake Mulwala to Yarrawonga. Before I reached Bundalong I passed a couple who were paddling, peddling, sailing a Hobie outrigger with the intention to go the length of the river. Lake Mulwala was like paddling through an obstacle course full of dead forest and submerged trees. When I reached Yarrawonga I then had to port my kayak passed the Yarrawonga Weir by wheeling my kayak 1.9kms through the main street of town to the Caravan Park so as I could launch the next day below the Yarrawonga Weir. This took 1:45hrs, including a shopping and an ATM stop.

Day 8 - disaster day!! By now I was getting confident that anabranches were a quick and easy way down the river – all this changed. This anabranch, at marker sign 1956, flowed quickly, 2.2kms shorter than by the river and was narrow enough for a large fallen river gum with two trunks, one just below the water surface and the other 1m further downstream just above the water surface, to go from bank to bank. Once caught in the flow I had no way of backtracking and was swept up against the upstream trunk. I then had to get my kayak over the first trunk and then under the second trunk – this took over 1.5hrs and in the process lost some of my gear and had water through the rucksack which was secured above my back hatch. The weather was still very hot, dry and breezeless. Despite the incident I paddled 54kms in 8.25hrs and camped at Fisherman’s Bend with many other campers. All camping sites along the Victorian side of the river bank were fully occupied from Albury/Wodonga to Echuca by campers, water skiers, fishermen with dinnies who were enjoying the fine weather and their public holiday.

Day 9 - I had a lazy day’s paddle with a brief stop at Cobram before stopping at Tocumwal to replace item that I lost in my tip out. The weather was still the same, same – uncomfortably very hot and windless. Tonight’s camp was at Upulna Creek.

Days 10 and 11 – By now I had a good routine going and the paddles were uneventful and as the days passed as I passed fewer and fewer boats and occupied campsites. Maybe these campers, caravaners have had enough of the continuing hot, dry and windless weather. Night in a motel at Barmah in order to wash clothes, recharge my iPad, sleep in a bed and fill up my water containers.
An indication as to how hot it was – cow taking shelter from the sun

Day 12 – Barmah to Echuca. Many boats today on the river. The weather was changing, though still hot, with strong wind gusts. Passed my first paddle steamer and learnt it was advisable to keep clear of their standing wave wakes which can be well over 1km in length.

Day 13 – an easy paddle to Tohurst Bend. By now I am getting no assistance from the river flow and if I want to progress I have to paddle. My daily average speeds are around 7km/h with distances for a full day’s paddle approx 50kms.

Day 14 – arrived at Torrumbarry Lock at midday and waited over an hour for the Lockmaster despite ringing him the day before to notify him of my arrival. In the lock for only 15 minutes but it lowered me approx 5.5 m. The river is now starting to get very quiet with only the occasional fisherman to talk to.
Day 15 – weather overcast and cool in morning becoming fine and windy in afternoon. Today I passed a person who is rowing his way to the river mouth in about a 3m rowboat. I wished him good luck and then fronted my next hazard – “duck shooters”. I met 2 groups of shooters, with the first pair I smelt the cordite in the air before I saw them round the next corner – they tried to assure me that they had all the permits and all was OK. The second group of about 4 men were in a dingy and they tried to convince me they were fishing, they didn’t as the gun shots could have come from nowhere else.

Day 16 – The weather had changed – it was cold and there was a very strong southerly wind blowing. Because of the bad weather conditions I had contemplated stopping early but I couldn’t find a suitable campsite. The river was very quiet, no campers and no boats. My average for today was 6.0km/h.

Days 17 and 18 – paddle to Swan Hill. For both days the weather was fine and warm. The river was again quiet, only passing about 6 people, fishermen, campers and 1 houseboat.

Camping on a boat ramp on Day 17

Paddle boats come in all shapes and sizes

Day 19 – another quiet uneventful day though back to paddling through anabranches – this one was 6km shorter. Also passed a comical group of 12 youths (leader said they were marginal cases on an exercise) paddling self constructed rafts with their gear which were quickly collapsing around them.

Warning signs downstream of Speewa Car Ferry - 35ft above MHWS 1376kms from mouth?

Day 20 – Atrociously very strong windy weather generally from the west today with the whole sky having a red tinge due to dust in the air, unpleasant paddling. (I found out later that Bundalong had had a mini tornado go through the town.) Stopped in Tooleybuc for a short break from the wind and a fresh salad roll.
Days 21 and 22 – back to fine mild weather and myself as company. Passed the Wakool and Murrumbidgee River junctions on day 21, with little to no flow from either of the rivers.

Day 23 – today my GPS trip odometer distance and the marker signs both read 1148. Back to taking short cuts and today I took the Bumbang Cutting into Robinvale shortening the river distance by 12kms where I could catch with my shopping and washing.

Day 24 – arrived at Lock 15 at 10:30am and let straight through on arrival, another 5m+ drop. Weather - fine, cloudless and warm. A very good day’s paddle. On speaking to the Lockmaster he informed me that the river upstream of Mildura was going to be closed on Easter Saturday and Sunday to river traffic for the running of the Mildura 100. (Reputed to be the world’s fastest water ski race over 100kms where the winning skiers’ average speeds of over 180km/h.) This meant I had to reach Mildura 230kms downstream from the lock by the day before Good Friday so as I could go shopping for food as my supplies were running low. Decided it was possible to reach Mildura before the closure and paddled 52.7kms in 7:45hrs today.

Reflections and low red cliffs on the bank

Days 25 and 26 – the first day the weather was perfect for paddling and I paddled 63.2kms in 8hrs averaging 7.9km/h, however the weather for the second day was hot with strong NW winds which made for uncomfortable paddling. Paddled 69kms in 10hrs today, leaving 37kms to reach Mildura. Rained all night.

Day 27 – commenced paddling in the rain for the first hour until the weather cleared up. Today I witnessed some very fast waterskiing as some of the skiers were practicing for the forthcoming race – scary. Reached Buronga Caravan Park at 1:00pm – much river traffic and houseboats aplenty now.
Day 28 – Good Friday – went through the Mildura Lock at 8:45am and had a very pleasant day’s paddle to Wentworth 42.2kms downstream. Paddled through a very shallow Cowanna Bend cut (used by both 4WDs and kayaks) which was 8.3kms shorter than by river.

Day 29 – through the Wentworth Lock at 9:00am with another vessel and had a good day’s paddle in cool, overcast conditions. Plenty of campers, caravaners and fishing traffic, no skiboats, on the river today. Showers at night.

Day 30 – arrived at Lock 9 at 10:00am and let straight through with an audience of bus passengers watching. Then a good paddle to arrive at Lock 8 at 4:15pm (tried to phone before arrival but “no service”) where the Lockmaster saw me arrive and let me straight through, paddled another 2hrs before I set up camp.

Day 31 - arrived at Lock 7 at 12:00 noon and again let straight through. Paddled through Pollard’s cutting (original Murray River bed now blocked). Good days paddle, weather cloudy with sunshine at times. More animal and birdlife along river banks than people.

Day 32 – an eventful day with firstly going through Higgins Cutting (8.3kms shorter than by river), then the NSW/SA border followed by 11.2kms further downstream by the Vic/SA border. Next event was Lock 6 where I had to find the Lockmaster first (no mobile phone service again). Having passed through the Lock I lastly paddled through Wilkinson’s Cutting (1.6kms shorter than by river). The only moving vessel I saw today was mine. Once I reached the South Australian Borders there were plenty of high red cliffs. This was in complete contrast to the river banks I had been paddling through for most of the journey up to this point.
Day 33 – uneventful paddle to Renmark with the weather being cool and windy in the morning changing to warm and sunny in the afternoon.

Typical river banks in this area – cliffs one side and low banks on the other

Day 34 – left Renmark at 8:00am and when I arrived at Lock 5 I was required to do a portage of 800m around the Lock because this Lock was under maintenance. Next I paddled through the cutting at Pitt’s Bend (1.7kms shorter) and then onto Berri passed more high red cliffs near Berri. Met Kym Werner, the Riverland contact, for the proposed SSRKC Club trip in November for discussions about this trip.

Day 35 – paddled through another shortcut, this one pointed out to me by Kym Werner, just upstream of Lock 4. Then straight through Lock 4, again the Lockmaster saw me coming. Weather perfect and scenery spectacular with the high red cliffs and the undulating and open areas rather than the continuously flat lands of the past 2 weeks.
Day 36 - arrived at Lock 3 at 2:00pm after a good quiet and peaceful paddle in perfect weather. The high cliffs now a yellow/golden shade along parts of the river. Paddled till 5:30pm and had difficulty finding a campsite. Eventually I had no choice and selected an area swarming with ants, made for an interesting challenge.

Day 37 – decamped and commenced the paddle early to get away before the ants were active and thus went through Lock 2 early in the afternoon. Bypassed Waikerie as many of the towns in the Riverland are on the top of the high cliffs making it very uninviting to visit. Now paddling in the region where there are many long straights – 4km plus and equally long bends. Weather ideal for paddling.

Day 38 – good paddling and again many long straights and bends (2kms plus in length on each bend). The strong southerly wind made paddling made some of the reaches hard. Arrived early in Morgan to do the laundry and shopping before staying the night in the Morgan Caravan Park. As there was only one small grocery shop with a very limited stock it made it a bit more of a challenge to buy food for the days ahead that I could carry in the kayak.

Day 39 – good paddling today though the stiff southerly wind made it hard at times otherwise the weather was fine and cool. Up until yesterday I was paddling generally in a westerly direction, now it almost due south to the sea. On arrival at Blanchetown at 3:00pm I paddled, without stopping, straight into Lock 1 after a houseboat had just left the lock. When the downstream gates of the lock opened for my departure the “Murray Princess” was waiting to go into the lock. After I had set up camp at Blanchetown Caravan Park the “Proud Mary” tied up on the beach right beside my kayak for the night.

Day 40 – weather was again perfect for paddling, fine, light breeze, and warm. Spent the whole day “leapfrogging” with the “Murray Princess” and “Proud Mary” with me meeting with both vessels 3 times, they passing me and me passing them. Stopped at Swan Reach and had an excellent counter lunch at Swan Reach.
Day 41 – weather same as yesterday. Passed the “Proud Mary” and she passed me later on her way to Murray Bridge. “Murray Princess” passed me on its way to Mannum after I had setup camp for the night. Going upriver was a Murray River Boat Owners boat ramble. This ramble consisted of 38 vessels that included a paddleboat, many houseboats, sailing boats under power, and launches of many different designs. Also met and passed a canoeist with his dog who was heading for Goolwa, who told me that he had commenced the paddle from the Bringenbrong Bridge 18 months previously.

Day 42 – favourable winds at last for sailing and made a very good distance of 65kms to reach Murray Bridge for the night. Passed very few vessels today, mainly houseboats heading upstream. There are still cliffs along the river banks however they are not so impressive or high. Today I arranged a place to store my kayak in Goolwa whilst I was collecting my car.

Day 43 – very early departure today as I spent last night on a park reserve in Murray Bridge just in case the authorities came. Country now low undulating hills with towns where the river meets the cliffs, e.g. Tailem Bend and Wellington. Many kilometres of the river bank today was continuously either reeds or low willow trees, impossible to land. The weather was overcast with southerly (head) winds. Tonight I camped in Wellington after I asked a camper for permission to park my kayak on his land.

Day 44 – up very early because I knew I was going to have a long day’s paddle. Departed Wellington at 6:30am and was adjacent Brinkley Homestead at 7:00am and abeam Pomanda Island an hour later. Decision time – was I going to paddle 1) clockwise around the edge of Lake Alexandrina past Narrung, then to Point Sturt or 2) go direct across the lake to Point Sturt 27kms away. The weather conditions were favourable but were forecast to change after midday to strong south westerly. After weighing up my options, including the advice from many locals that the lake has already taken many lives I decided to go direct to Point Sturt using my GPS for navigation as I had no land in sight. At times as I crossed the lake it rained dropping visibility down to less than 200m making me totally reliant on my GPS for direction. I reached Point Sturt at 12:00 noon and then headed for the northern shore of Long Island and into Boundary Creek. The wind that was favourable for the lake crossing changed to very strong southerly head winds and made paddling and conditions very unpleasant. Once I reached the tidal barrage 4.1kms into Boundary Creek I then had to port my kayak over the barrage and launch it on the other side. I then camped in the only location I could access and find shelter from the bitter cold wind, namely amongst fishing shacks located 2km further downstream on Boundary Creek. It also rained.

Day 45 –15th April - tent wet from the rain made it very unpleasant decamping. Paddled 6kms from camp to the Murray River mouth reaching there at 8:30am, my destination. Then on to Goolwa after passing through the Goolwa Barrage. Whilst I waited for the Lockmaster to let me through this lock I spent time watching many seals at the lock. After passing through the lock the weather conditions changed and the strong winds made river conditions very choppy and paddling difficult for the last 3.7kms from lock to the boathed, the end of my paddle.
Over the 45 days I paddled and ported my kayak 2229kms from the Bringenbrong Bridge to Goolwa. The distance the kayak travelled is roughly equivalent to the distance by road from the Sunshine Coast to Adelaide.

The waters of the Murray River are controlled. On my journey downstream I went over, or through 1 dam, 1 weir, 13 weir/locks, 1 tidal barrage and 1 tidal barrage/lock. This meant there was a restricted or very little river flow over about 80% of the river, which meant I had to paddle to make progress.

To achieve this task unsupported, I took 2 days to drive from the Sunshine Coast to Tintaldra (1550kms), 3 days to travel firstly by 4 buses from Goolwa to Tintaldra via Adelaide, Melbourne and Wodonga then drive my car via the Murray River Highway back to Goolwa to pick up my kayak. Then it was a pleasant slow trip home to the Sunshine Coast.

For the trip down the Murray River I averaged 49.5kms/day at a speed of 6.6km/hr. I tent camped for 34 nights, 5 nights of which were at Caravan Parks and the others were on the river bank.

For navigation on the river from the Bringenbrong Bridge to Blanchetown I used the “Murray River Access” series of books published by Spatial Vision and from Blanchetown to Goolwa the “Murray River Pilot” published by Baker – Reschke.