



BY GEORGE



Empty or full, expansive Lake George provides the most spectacular scenery on the drive between the Highlands and Canberra. In December, when the ephemeral lake was as full as it had been in 25 years, HUW KINGSTON took a closer look.

IN MID DECEMBER, I met my friend Guy at a rest area on the side of the Federal Highway for a rare paddle. Away to our east stretched an expanse of water, broken only by the top of a few fence posts and by what looked like a small, low island.

In recent months I'd been watching Lake George grow like a silvery rash. A mirage-like pool in the far distance that then spread, pushing flocks of sheep, herds of cattle and mobs of roos into soggy grasslands ever closer to the highway.

On the day we unloaded our sea kayaks, Lake George, with thanks to La Nina, was as full as it had been in a quarter of a century. Indeed, only six years ago it was completely dry.

At its fullest extent, the lake is 25 kilometres long and 10 kilometres wide. Only a handful of small creeks run into it, the largest being Collector Creek, so the filling of the lake comes mainly from slow runoff into the vast, shallow basin. Although the headwaters of the Yass River are tantalisingly close, no creeks actually exit Lake George to take its waters on a river journey. Evaporation is the only escape. This results in very saline water, the more so as the lake shrinks.

Guy and I dragged our boats perhaps 100 metres through

long grass to the water's edge, entertaining travellers who had pulled up for a leg shake or toilet break.

"How far do you think we'll have to walk before we can paddle?" asked Guy. We were surprised to soon be in water deep enough to glide across, piloted out by a flock of black swans.

A couple of kilometres across the lake our island turned out to be the horseshoe-shaped top of a grassy dam wall, poking no more than a foot above the lake level and guarded by semi-submerged fences and a gate. A number of farmers lease the Crown land that forms the lakebed, using it, weather dependent, to graze sheep and cattle.

There was once a chance a lot more infrastructure might have occupied the lake floor when Lake George was proposed as a possible site for the national capital. Artists' impressions showed a Venice-like network of waterways and buildings to house our politicians. The idea of draining the swamp was perhaps ahead of its time.

There does remain a political connection. Weereewa, the Aboriginal term for the lake, provided the name for the Federal seat of Werriwa, one of the original 65 seats in Parliament. Werriwa then stretched from south of the lake to southwest



Lake George was proposed as a possible site for the national capital.

TOP AND BELOW LEFT LAKE GEORGE IN NOVEMBER 2021 AND OCTOBER 2015, FROM WEEREWEA LOOKOUT (PHOTOGRAPHS BRAD PILLANS). **ABOVE RIGHT** BOATS ON LAKE GEORGE IN A 1961 REGATTA (SUPPLIED BY CANBERRA YACHT CLUB). **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** BLACK SWANS ON THE LAKE, AND CAPITAL WIND FARM TO THE EAST; GUY REEVE SEEKS WIND POWER; BLACK SWAN NESTS; SEMI-SUBMERGED FARM GATE; APPROACHING THE LAKE (PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON).

Sydney, including the Southern Highlands, but like Lake George itself, the boundaries of Werriwa have changed over the decades and it has shrunk to now represent a seat in southwest Sydney. The English name for the lake was bestowed by Governor Macquarie in honour of King George IV.

This summer, bird life abounds. Indeed, as I drove to the lake from the northern Collector end, the massive bulk of a wedge-tail eagle flew low across the highway with a hapless duck in its talons. On the low island, swans had made their nests and laid their eggs. I wondered if mum and dad knew for sure that their chicks would be born and off the island before the water rose further to engulf their temporary home.

Five kilometres from either shore I held my paddle vertically to touch the lakebed and found it was still no more than a metre deep. Such shallowness brings its own dangers. It is for good reason the eastern shore of Lake George hosts a large wind farm. When the wind blows, the shallow, latte-coloured waters whip up into a wild froth. At least a dozen people have drowned here including five army cadets from Duntroon. Their boat was overturned in such a wind in 1956. Less than two years later a family of five from Queanbeyan lost their lives when their boat capsized. Only a Catholic priest, who was with them, survived.

Guy, up in front, suddenly swung his kayak to the south.

At first I couldn't see anything other than the slightly choppy waters. Then, following the direction of his bow, I spotted a pencil thin structure rising from the water. Soon Guy had tethered his kayak to what looked like an old windmill without its sails. He clambered onto it for a better view of the lake and some drone style photos.

Now, close to that eastern shore, we could hear the blades of the wind turbines and, after slaloming through some granite boulders, we landed for a quick lunch to celebrate the crossing. En route back across the 10 kilometres to our vehicles, Guy set the small sail on his kayak. Inevitably the wind promptly died away and all power generation with it.

A wet spring and summer may have spoiled a few garden parties and drenched a few weddings, but it soaked our lands, and made paddlers, ducks and lawnmower sellers happy. Around the corner from every deluge is another drought. More often, more fierce. Will I get another chance to take to the waters of Weereewa? **HL**

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment says boating is not an activity that is currently authorised or recommended by Crown Lands on the lake due to the shallow depths and the presence of fencing and gates which make it hazardous for boating.