

A full-page photograph of a kayaker in a red canoe navigating a rocky river with rapids. The kayaker is wearing a hat, a life jacket, and a white shirt. The river is surrounded by rocky banks and green trees. The sky is blue with some clouds. The title 'A TALE OF' is overlaid in large white letters.

A TALE OF

On Earth's driest inhabited continent, Huw Kingston compares journeys on two vastly different rivers. One, the Snowy, percolates from the summit of Mount Kosciuszko, our highest point, and wanders to the sea. The other, the Warburton, flows inland to *Kati Thanda*/Lake Eyre, our lowest point. One, a river with its natural flow stolen. The other still flows free. A paddle downstream, a paddle upstream.

Words & Photography *Huw Kingston*

On the Snowy River...



TWO RIVERS

My foot again sank into the mud; mud that in a few weeks would desiccate to desert sand. Trying to avoid losing a shoe to suction, I spied a crab, the size of a mini-donut perhaps. Like so much of this country, the inland freshwater crab can sit out a dry spell, in its case for up to six years, buried deep, a metre or more into the riverbank, waiting, waiting, waiting ...

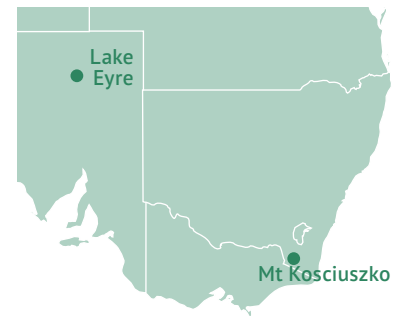
Like the crab, I too had been waiting some years for this. Two separate massive rain events early in 2019 had hit northern Queensland and, over the following months, the floodwaters soaked southward for thousands of kilometres. All these watery tentacles flowed not out to sea but inland, ultimately leading to Australia's lowest point: Lake Eyre. Sitting at nine metres below sea-level, gravity allows no water to escape *Kati Thanda*—as the lake is known to the Arabana traditional owners. And while it may be Australia's largest lake, it rarely holds water; the desert drinks up most of the flow before it gets there.

But when waters do flow here, they are wild and free. The rivers entering Kati Thanda—the Warburton, Georgina, Eyre, Diamantina, Cooper and Thomson—are some of the few in Australia not touched by dams, weirs and flood control, their integrity saved by the fact they rarely flow naturally.

From the east coast I watched the gauges enviously; the desert rivers were flowing. But alas I couldn't just go west. I had thrown my hat into the ring as a candidate in the federal election, very much on a platform of action on the climate emergency and including deep concern for the Murray-Darling; a waterway in peril. Cry me a river indeed.

Once the election was out of the way, I reckoned a river journey was still a possibility before all was dry again. After the fun and games of the previous months in what was, for me, a new environment, it seemed a perfect way to reset my compass. I drove west, crossing the ailing Murray at Mildura and on to South Australia. I drove north, passing the clubhouse of the Lake Eyre Yacht Club in Marree, a long way from any water.

And on the Warburton



It was good to be standing on the banks of the Snowy, good to be about to tackle a section of the river new to me. More water would have been nice but PhDs and algorithms are needed to work out how long the meagre rations released from the depths of Lake Jindabyne would take to reach us. More than a half-century ago, it was decided, as part of the Snowy Scheme, to divert nearly all the Snowy's waters away from the sea. For decades, a miserable 1% of natural flow dribbled down this artery. While not enough, the last 20 years has seen this increase to a quarter, thanks to a huge campaign to save the river.

A brown snake slithered into a boat, wandering among some dry-bags. Like us he was enjoying the warmth after a winter hibernation. I dropped neck-deep into the river to escape the flies, watching Guy move cautiously around his craft seeking out the invader.

We launched some distance above Snowy Falls. It was an eclectic mix of boats; John in an open Canadian, Andy in a whitewater play-boat, Guy and I with inflatable packrafts. If our boats didn't dovetail, our heritage did. All of us were long time immigrants, all had cut our teeth, and injured other parts, on the cold rivers of the UK.

John Wilde—a fine name for this publication—had paddled this same section a year earlier. He spoke of feral animals everywhere and a portage of Snowy Falls taking over five hours. Friends had also very recently, in much higher water, taken well over a day to get past the falls, scrambling high onto the cliff-lined banks.

We paddled slow-moving water through a maze of huge, worn, granite boulders. Had the water been grass, it would have been easy imagining we were strolling in a Henry Moore sculpture garden.

Pulling in above the falls, the largest on the Snowy, we were happy to see a portage route down a gulch on river left. A carry of our boats, then a lower (guided by rope), and that was it. All over in 40 minutes; legends of the falls indeed. But any smugness, mine at least, was soon upended when, on a rocky rapid, over I went. It was an uncomfortable swim, pinballing from rock to rock. At some point my paddle suddenly felt a whole lot lighter. Indeed, when I finally managed to swim to the bank, I emerged holding just half a paddle. My split paddle had decided it was time to split. I never saw my other half again.



John Wilde inspects Snowy Falls from below

BREAKING A SKIN OF ICE that had formed across the water in the billy—yes, there was irony in my paddling the Snowy in the heat, but to be out here now on the Warburton in the cold—I made the first coffee of the day and looked out on a fast-flowing river whose colour was no different to my brew. Brown not black, lest you think I don't take milk.

I came to the desert with a few ideas. With access points few and very far between, timing is everything. Too late and the water level drops before your eyes, leaving clagging mud and the uncomfortable hauling of boats through shallow pools. Too early and there's not enough water to play on. After much prevarication, I decided to paddle upriver from one of the few places accessible by my 4WD. After going against the flow for a week or so I could then turn around and enjoy an easier run back downriver. No vehicle shuttle or pick up required.

Paddling upstream is never easy and always slow. The trick was to keep, wherever possible, to the inside bends of the meandering river. Here the speed of the water was less. I found I was able to cover 15-20km each day, the slow speed allowing plenty of time to enjoy the river, the current plenty enough to test my technique and strength.

WE SAW NOT A SINGLE FERAL animal out on the Snowy. It surprised us, particularly after John's experience a year earlier. But perhaps the drought back then had driven so many to the river; after the deluges of 2020, food and water were more widely scattered. As we paddled, National Parks were carrying out an aerial cull in Kosciuszko; the tally included 1,315 deer, 230 pigs and 54 goats.

But no feral horses. The culling of the brumbies is prohibited, despite the destruction wrought by these horses that I've witnessed throughout the Snowies. Many a time I've sat on a high-country hut verandah and watched them graze and play. No doubt they look majestic but the damage they do to the fragile landscape is far from it—areas of creek, moss and bog churned up and polluted.

Pigs, too, dig up large chunks of frost-hollowed plains. Last winter, while ski touring across such a place—the damage by pigs hidden beneath a white sheet—a boar charged my companion. He stumbled backwards on his skis and the beast was upon him. It was only skilful fencing with ski poles and a tremendous shove that finally warned the animal off.

Of course, not all creatures here are unwelcome. One entire afternoon, a pair of bee-eaters entertained us, flitting about the branches of a single, dead gum. A platypus popped up for a look from the pool below our camp. A flightless emu looked up longingly at those that could. Earlier in the day, a roo had bounded across the river in front of our boats. How it didn't twist an ankle on the unseen, uneven rocks was a mystery. A pair of dingos looked on, impressed at the performance.



Pelicans take to the air over the Warburton



A long way from water



Dune camp on the Warburton



Paddling through the 'Henry Moore' garden



Portaging the Snowy Falls



No country for old men



Andy gets another face wash

THE BIRD LIFE IN THE DESERT was incredible in its variety and mass. Squadrons of pelicans grunted as they took off in the fashion of flying boats. Kites whistled above flocks of squawking corellas, decorating riverside trees like white baubles. Herons naggd, bitterns chuckled, cormorants dived. Spoonbills looked so elegant save for their ridiculous bills.

“But how do they all know? How do they know the river is flowing? How do they know when is the right time to arrive?”

But how do they all *know*? How do they know the river is flowing? How do they know when the time is right to arrive, when enough fish have bred and grown into worthwhile meals for everyone?

At one point I paddled past a pair of wedge-tailed eagles, fresh from a feed, blood dripping from their terrifying beaks.

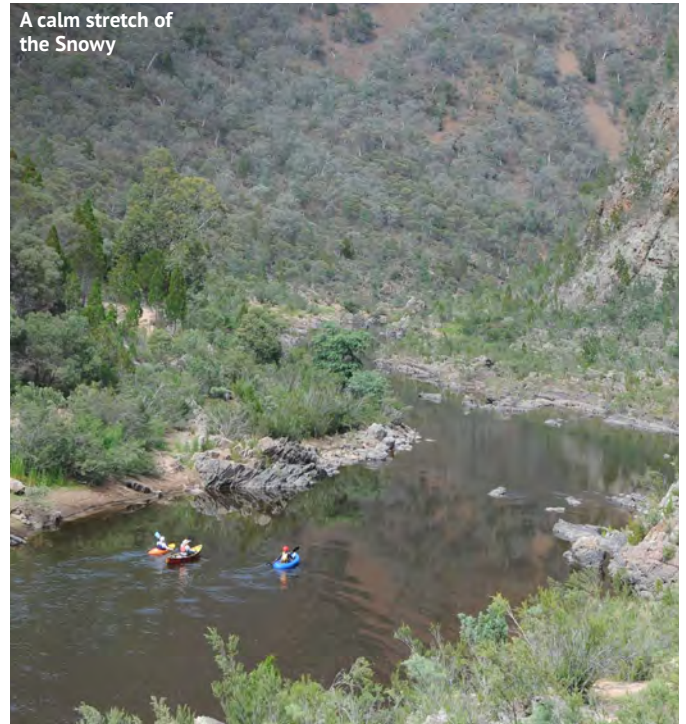
Oblivious to everything, the fairy martins busied themselves building their own mini versions of Petra into the sand cliffs.

IF THE SNOWY'S WARM WEATHER had been welcome, it played havoc with fresh food. That night I should have thrown aside the black, soft, slime-covered mushrooms steaming inside their bag. When I cooked them, a foam rose to the top of the pan and the lads recoiled from the smell. Still, I persisted. I added them to—and thus ruined—the main course. I moved straight to dessert.

The flow downriver took us through fun rapids and a beautiful gorge. The water was warm enough to swim in, despite winter's proximity and the name of the river. A lengthy flatwater section followed, where the Snowy opened out to another perfect campsite, another day where we saw no-one nor any signs of previous camps.

Coal-black clouds marched up the deep valley as we approached one of the bigger rapids on this section of the river. The others ran it while I took some photos. Scrambling back up the river to my packraft, spots of rain spattered onto the granite boulders. As I readied my boat, heaven didn't just open, it spat out sheets of rain so thick I was blanketed by them. Beyond soaked and struggling to see, it was good to run the rapid without incident.

IN THIS FLAT, BROWN COUNTRY, down below the level of the surrounding land, it was easy to become lost in the life on the river. But camp each night reminded me of exactly where I was: with



the tent perched atop a dune, and the desert stretching endlessly and silently away across the sands and the gibber plains.

I saw no-one on the river and enjoyed the pleasure of no digital connection, an increasing rarity. There were only feathers, not strands of torn plastic, caught in the lignum bushes or coolabah branches dipping into the water. How sadly rare is that?

If this sounds like a certain paradise, then of course the flies were there to spoil things. Despite it being winter; with all that water and all that life around, the season hardly mattered. The colder the morning the later the shift would start; sometimes I'd be through breakfast and a couple of brews before the forward guard arrived. But arrive they would.

A veil is useful, but who has not forgotten its presence and brought food to mouth? On one occasion I smeared hummus all over the netting. The dingos close to my camp grinned in amusement.

Eventually I turned around to go with the flow and paddle back down the river. Everything came up so quickly, and I almost felt guilty for the ease with which ground was gained; my slow-motion journey now on fast-forward back to my start point. The river was falling rapidly; well over a metre in the week I had been upriver.

LAST WINTER, I JOURNEYED UP to the highest reaches of the Snowy River, with a violin case strapped to my already bulging pack. World-renowned violinist and composer Richard Tognetti was heading out with me for a few backcountry days and nights. It was his first time skiing beyond the resorts. We crossed the shaky suspension bridge that spans the only section of the Snowy still running free. Talk of rivers and dams was fitting. Richard was taking a break from composing the score to River, a follow-up film to the hugely successful Mountain, to be released later this year. The film will both celebrate rivers and mourn for them.



*Once across the Snowy, we skied until dark to camp. In the morning we climbed over the watershed to the Western Faces. From this side, snowmelt and rain falls to the infant Murray River and, skirting desert sands en route, flows to the sea in South Australia. Once on the summit of Mount Anderson, Richard swapped his ski poles for a violin bow and skied off down toward the Murray, linking turns to tunes. A serenade to the mountains and to all those rivers that flow from them. **W***

CONTRIBUTOR: Self-confessed jack-of-all-trades and master of none, Huw Kingston has capsized, slid, fallen and tripped in some of the most spectacular parts of the world.