

HIGH TIME FOR A paddle



On November 6, the Shoalhaven River gorge in Morton National Park opened for the first time since the fires. HUW KINGSTON was ready with a paddle to make his way from Tallowa Dam to the gorge, a spectacular section of river for canoeing and camping that borders the Highlands.

ITURNED AGAIN IN MY SLEEPING BAG in that half-woke, half-sleep mode that dawn can bring. The chorus both delighted and disturbed me; an alarm I never set and one without a snooze button. Currawong, rosella, whipbird and more. By the time a kookaburra started chuckling at my laziness, I was up and out of the tent. Across the river, east-facing cliffs glowed orange from the light of a still unseen sun.

In truth, there were other reasons for my movement. I climbed away from the river, into the nearby bush. Only then did I see and hear that the dawn chorus was the responsibility of a solo performer, a lyrebird mimicking an orchestra of birdsong.

It was good to be back in the Shoalhaven River gorge. Our camp, in early November, was the first day in 2020 that the gorge had been open. Flames, floods and fever all to blame for the long closure. On this occasion we had canoed up into the gorge from Tallowa Dam, an embankment that has held back the waters of the Shoalhaven for half a century in Lake Yarrunga. It is possibly the finest flatwater paddle in NSW.

As your paddle blade propels you away from the dam wall, massive cliffs soon start to enclose the valley. The lower cliffs are often pock-marked with inaccessible caves, the upper ones all

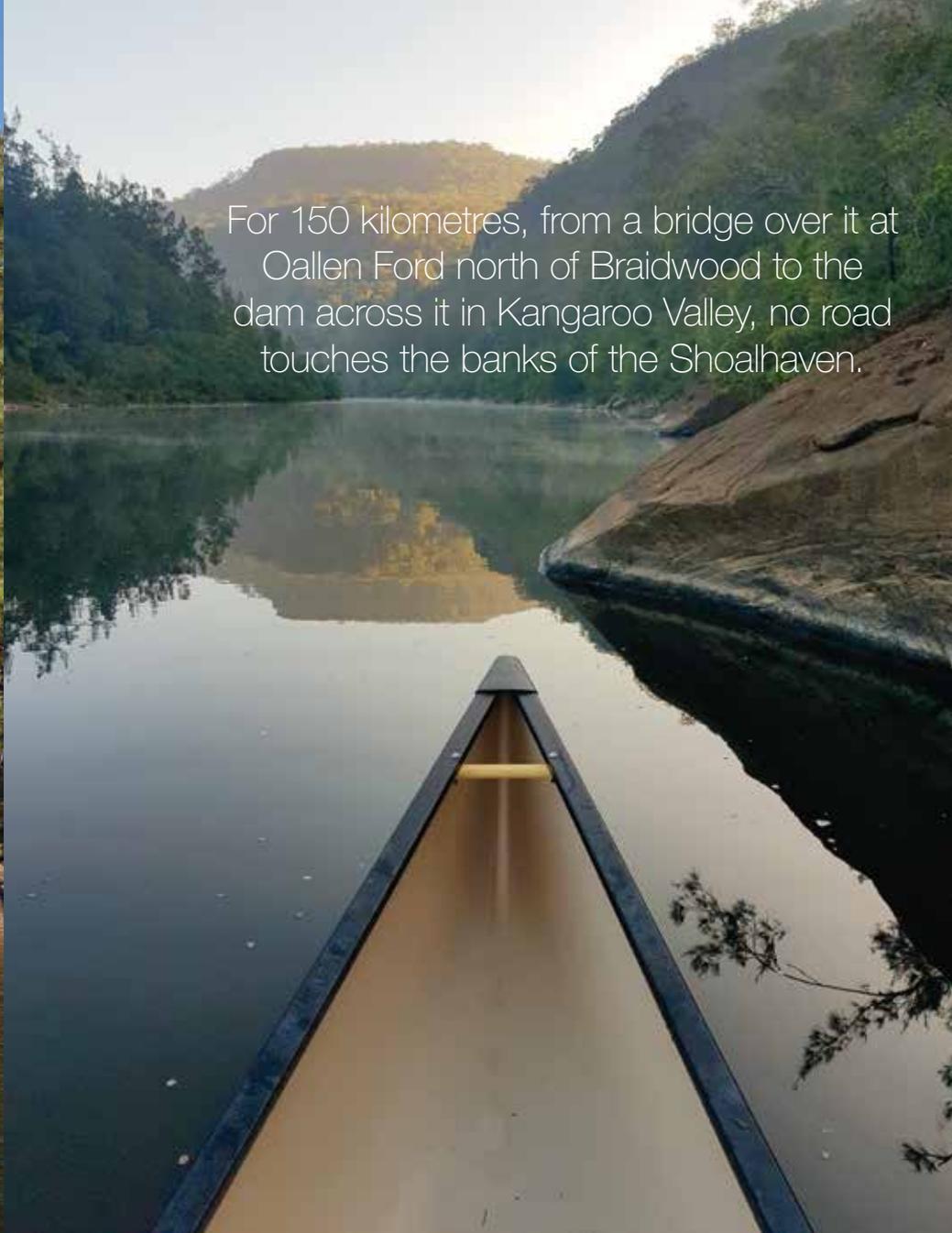
angles, aretes and blank walls. Whenever I travel in the gorge, I wonder what treasures might be found in those caves and, as an old rock-climber, still pick out magical-looking lines through the upper cliffs. Two, three or four hours later, depending on speed, stops and swims, you will arrive at some serene camping spots.

If you're lucky, you will do the trip after a period of heavy rain. Then long ribbons of water fall off the cliffs around you and pinball their way to the main river.

The Shoalhaven defines much of the southern boundary of the Highlands and is our grandest waterway. From the Highlands plateau though, it is hard to see and harder to access. Near the little village of Tallong, a couple of lookouts, Badgerys and Long Point, offer glimpses of the river and rough tracks that descend 500 metres to it. By now the river has lost most of its 1000 metre fall in a long journey from a source in the ranges west of Moruya, east of Cooma.

For 150 kilometres, from a bridge over it at Oallen Ford north of Braidwood to the dam across it in Kangaroo Valley, no road touches the banks of the Shoalhaven. It runs, rages, boils and twists through deep gorges and wild rapids before slowing to a crawl then a stop in the backwaters of Lake Yarrunga.

For 150 kilometres, from a bridge over it at Oallen Ford north of Braidwood to the dam across it in Kangaroo Valley, no road touches the banks of the Shoalhaven.



ABOVE SHOALHAVEN REFLECTIONS (PHOTOGRAPH TRAVIS FRENAY); WATER DRAGON (PHOTOGRAPH HUW KINGSTON).
OPPOSITE PAGE PADDLING IN THE SHOALHAVEN GORGE (PHOTOGRAPH TRAVIS FRENAY).

When the rains come, keen whitewater paddlers look up the river gauges on the Bureau of Meteorology website. One metre at the Hillview gauge (near Oallen Ford) is a minimum, up to three metres is plenty of challenge, beyond that it is wise to steer clear.

The Shoalhaven Gorge was a barrier of sorts to the Currowan fire that ate its way north through Morton National Park last summer, a fire that had travelled further than the length of the river. But the destructive fire that rained upon my village of Bundanoon and neighbouring Wingello, Penrose and Exeter on January 4, 2020, came not from that fire front but from a pyrocumulonimbus, a massive cloud generated by the heat of the fires. Some 10,000 metres tall, it was awe-inspiring and terrifying.

Throughout the rest of that month, the nights passed with the sky glowing red from fires burning in the deep gullies of the national park. The sound of sirens, the sight and smell of smoke was our summer. The blackest of summers for so many.

Finally, in early February, we could rejoice and relax as torrential rain hosed down the fires, filled dams and drenched the parched and blackened land. The Shoalhaven flooded; the gauges rose.

Many times over many years, with the river up, I've dragged a small kayak down the steep, rocky track from Badgerys Lookout to put on the river. This offers a couple of hours of

flowing water and rapids before the backwaters and that flat paddle out to Tallowa Dam for a pick-up.

Recently, technology has introduced the packraft, a small, inflatable whitewater craft that weighs as little as three kilograms and rolls up small enough to carry in a backpack. The perfect craft for a Badgerys to Tallowa Dam mission.

When those rains came last February, down the track I went; drawn to the river to see how that remote country had been affected.

At first there was little evidence of the recent fire but as I moved further downriver, more frequent burnt patches appeared. As the flow slowed, and me with it, it was obvious the gorge had proven a barrier in places but in others, fire had hopped across it with disdain, climbed the cliffs on the north side and marched on. The forest above the ramparts was now just poles stripped bare, silhouetted against the sky.

I saw little wildlife, not even the water dragons who usually lie, head high, on the river boulders. As I rode one rapid, I spied something pink in the water a few metres from my paddle. The wave pushed me closer and I glided past a fleshy nose and large, black head. Pigs might not fly but it seems they can surf.

While the deluge had been welcome, the devastated country along the length of the Shoalhaven offered no protection to now bare ground. Countless tonnes of soil and ash washed straight into the river. Sandy beaches were now knee deep, cloying



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP TAKING A BREAK IN THE GORGE (PHOTOGRAPH TRAVIS FRENAY); LEAVES AND STICKS ON MUD PLINTHS AFTER THE FEBRUARY 2020 FLOODS; PACKRAFT IN THE GORGE; BURNT TRUNKS IN THE WATERS OF LAKE YARRUNGA (PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON).

mud. Where floodwaters had receded, leaves and sticks were left high and dry on mud plinths as mini sculpture parks. In the backwaters, burnt, dead tree trunks stood tall in now deep water.

The real hell though, was saved for after my pick-up at Tallowa Dam. The drive toward Kangaroo Valley was a horror of charred forest and property destruction.

The rains came again and again through 2020, creating some of the highest levels ever seen on the Shoalhaven. A land of fire and flood indeed.

When I did go back on that opening night in November, old favourite camp spots had washed away but new ones had appeared. Much mud had been scoured away, dropping into the ever-shallowing waters of Lake Yarrunga, and leaving behind sandy beaches once again. Peripheral greenery was everywhere but recovery will be long and hard. Water dragons now sat up

as we paddled past. A possum artfully stole food from under our feet at camp. He had forgotten nothing during the long closure.

Bushwalkers, too, can sample the Shoalhaven Gorge, linking the trails between Badgerys, Long Point and further upriver into the spectacular Bungonia Gorge. My wife and I did just that for the Millennium. As we swam at a riverside camp below Long Point, we wondered what post-Y2K weird world we might face when we climbed back into civilisation. That bug of course was all fear but no reality. Two decades later a very real bug changed our lives in the most peculiar and challenging of ways. **HL**

Companies offering canoe hire from Tallowa Dam include Paddle & Portage Canoes and Kangaroo Valley Safaris. Due to COVID restrictions, camping bookings in the gorge are required. Visit nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/camping-and-accommodation/campgrounds/lake-yarrunga-tallowa-dam-camping