



A beautiful mini-gorge on the Upper Caledonia

A River is Calling

For decades, kayaking Victoria's Caledonia River, despite being just 34km long, proved an elusive goal for Ro Privett and his long-time paddling mate, Dave Matters. But the missteps and frustrations along the way didn't merely make achieving their goal more enjoyable; they were an integral part of learning about themselves.

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Photography RO PRIVETT & DAVE MATTERS

Change is inevitable, right? Very little appears constant, especially in light of COVID. As the years nonchalantly roll past—with all life's charms, trials and tribulations—a lot of us become acutely aware that it's also (and just as importantly) change at a personal level. Somewhere deep inside—whether we are receptive to it or not—questions pop up about our life choices.

Who are we changing into?

Who truly am I?

What's important to me?

That's where, from a personal perspective, wilderness journeys provide time and space for personal reflection. We earth ourselves, so to speak. Yet some rare experiences rise above that, and stand alone as a powerful metaphor for change and growth—a rite of passage you might say.

This is one of those occasions. Numerous failed attempts. All-night evacuations. A near-death experience. Yet the lure of this particular wilderness was as strong as ever; a river quietly tucked away in the Victorian Alps. This river was the first steep alpine wilderness river we ever attempted. It became our Everest. It became our nemesis.

While many other rivers raged in our attention, this elusive river lay patiently ... calling us ... knowing our time would come when we were truly ready. Twenty years later, with our personal transition completed and our vision reinvented, Dave and I returned. This is that story.

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“HEARD OF THE CALEDONIA RIVER, RO?” Dave Matters asked with a grin. The year was 2002, and Dave and I were enthusiastically squinting over a torn, old topographical map of the Victorian Alps. Back then, the two of us had only just started paddling together, but we were both at a stage in our lives when we had enough whitewater paddling skills to heed our calling—to seek, explore and experience rare alpine rivers.

I watched Dave’s finger sketch along a seemingly implausibly long, thin blue line on the map. Little did I know this would be one of those times when life’s destiny can be forged in one simple moment. Little did I know it would lead us into wilderness paddling odysseys all over Australia and the globe. And little did I know that nearly twenty years on, we still would not have successfully paddled the Caledonia.

There were, though, many attempts. Many hard-learned lessons. Lessons on dehydration and exhaustion to the point of fainting, lessons on unrelenting gorges littered with unmarked waterfalls, lessons on being hopelessly entangled in dense wilderness, lessons on kayaks pinned against logs in treacherous rapids. The list goes on. While determination was on our side, it wasn’t yet coupled with enough hardened experience.

We surrendered to the fact it would happen when it happened. We had to let go. Detach. Grow. And in the meantime, we kept our guard up. We kept striving with purpose. And eventually, we realised the lessons we learnt from our failed attempts of this rarely paddled river were serving us beyond our comprehension.

PULLING OFF MISSIONS LIKE THESE usually takes a mix of preparedness and perspiration and tenacity; you’ve got to really want it. Having Lady Luck—who usually has the last laugh—on your side doesn’t hurt either. And it was a combination of all these elements that saw us—nearly two decades after we first attempted the Caledonia—near the Mount Tamboritha saddle in northwest Gippsland.

But there’s one other ingredient that can help a mission, too: healthy stupidity. Enter a golfcart and a baby’s pram. Yes, Dave stood at the saddle wielding not only a kayak but a baby’s pram.

“Why the pram, Dave?” I asked.

“Another damn kid,” he replied, “will be the death of me.”

Look, we weren’t being entirely stupid. There is a 15km 4WD track all the way to the river, so we’d conjured up these makeshift trolleys for our ‘yaks. The wager was on for which trolley would cut the mustard better.

I lost that wager pretty damn quick. My golfcart’s plastic axles cracked under the load. Dave couldn’t resist a verbal jab: “Yeah, you always crack under pressure.”

We both fancy ourselves as bush ‘MacGyvers’, so with new axles made from tent pegs held in place with zip ties, we edged

“NO WORDS WERE NEEDED—THE EYES SAID IT ALL. HERE WE WERE ONCE AGAIN, SEARCHING FOR OUR ELUSIVE CALEDONIA RIVER.”

along the track, much to the astonishment of the kangaroos—no doubt they thought we were clowns. MacGyver might have thought the same; I soon found myself back in my old faithful mode of ‘boat dragging’. Primitive but effective.

Dave nonchalantly rolled ahead, proud as punch with his flimsy pram; I brang up the rear, grunting and cursing. The track seemed endless. The boats were heavy. The rocks took pleasure in scraping plastic off our trusty kayaks. By the time the final steep descent to the river beckoned, the day was getting long in the tooth, and thunder was clapping.

And our roles had been reversed. Instead of us dragging our boats, now it was our boats trying to drag us, right down this steep slope; we strained at the slings we had in place to stop our fully laden kayaks from careering away. Our paddling booties were no match for the loose rocks and gravel, and we found ourselves clinging for purchase on all fours.

Then I heard the cry. “Watch out! Runaway boat!”

I turned and saw Dave’s kayak hurtling towards me. Crikey. I launched superman style off the track, cursing the cruel ironic fate of coming to grief via a kayak on dry land—not ultimately in a treacherous rapid. Go figure.

The kayak ghost-boated past me and launched down the trail,

ricocheting off trees before ‘slam parking’ against a manna gum. We shared one of those glances when no words are needed—the eyes said it all. Here we were once again, in the middle of the Victorian Alps, searching for our elusive Caledonia River.

THE FIRST TIME WE CAME FOR the Caledonia, back in 2002, we never even saw it. We were close, and on our way to it, but then I made a suggestion: “Dave, let’s take a shortcut down this creek.” And so we started to paddle down Shaw Creek, an innocent-looking stream which accesses the Caledonia at its confluence. Soon it got steep. Very steep. Like waterfall-steep.

We were out of our depth. There we were, two green expedition newbies, on our first true alpine whitewater paddling trip, and we were dealing with high-grade rapids, waterfalls, a remote steep gorge, freezing conditions, and inappropriate and heavy kayaks. And heck—it wasn’t even the right river! After numerous, involuntary kayak cartwheels over some large boulders in a treacherous long rapid, we decided to cut our losses and get out of there. We spent the next few hours multi-pitching with ropes and dragging our kayaks up near vertical cliff faces in the dark—just to get out.

But the next attempt of the Caledonia was even worse. I wasn’t there for it though; the first I knew of it was when—just after finishing hiking in Nepal—I saw an email from Dave. The subject simply read ‘Almost died’. He’d taken it upon himself while I was away to do a solo reccy mission. In the middle of a scorching summer, Dave tried to reach the river but was blocked by endless cliffs. With no water left, he chose to cross a ridgeline to the next valley, but was foiled by dense scrub. He went days

without hydration. Out of pure desperation, he drank his own urine. Eventually he made it—literally on his hands and knees—to the Macalister River. Gutsy stuff.

“TIME FOR A CUPPA, DAVE!” I announced. It’s my usual response when things get sticky.

“So how is it,” Dave chuckled as the brew got going, “that we always find ourselves in these situations?”

Good question. We often wonder ourselves. We might like to think we choose these adventures, but ultimately, it seems, the adventures choose us. And the beauty of them is that you never know whether the cards will fall your way or not, a bit like life.

“So exactly how many times have we attempted this river, Davo?” I asked as we packed up the stove and billy.

Dave didn’t answer. Instead, he responded with a question of his own. “Hang on mate—what’s that sound?” We listened. “That’s got to be the Caledonia, my friend.” I’ll be damned. The sound of water flowing is always music to a paddler’s ears. Especially this time—after twenty-plus years, we two stubborn paddlers were finally about to reach the banks of our nemesis. You couldn’t hold back the cheeky grins on our faces. Payday!

But we had little time to savour the moment as the heavens suddenly opened up, subtly cueing us not to get ahead of ourselves. We snapped into action, and descended the last steep kilometre. And there it was. The Caledonia. Our Everest. Just as we envisioned, it was beautifully flowing and innocently unaware of our lifetime ordeal to reach her remote banks. After reflecting upon and cherishing this humbling moment, we indulged in one of our river welcome rituals, and drank from her veins.

IMAGES - TOPTO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

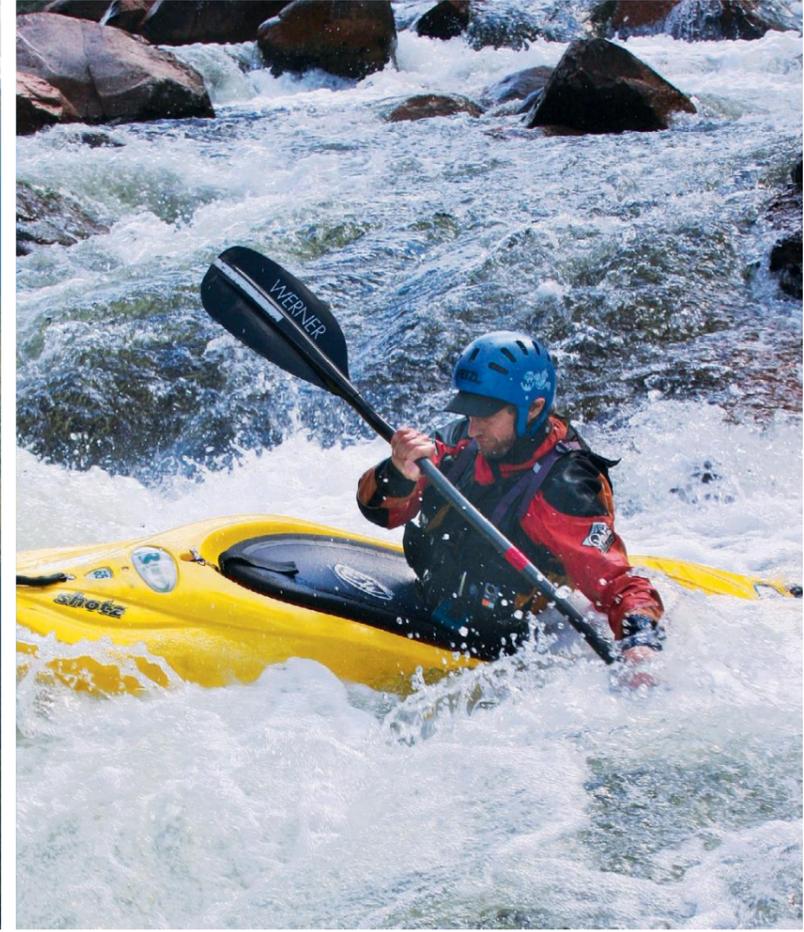
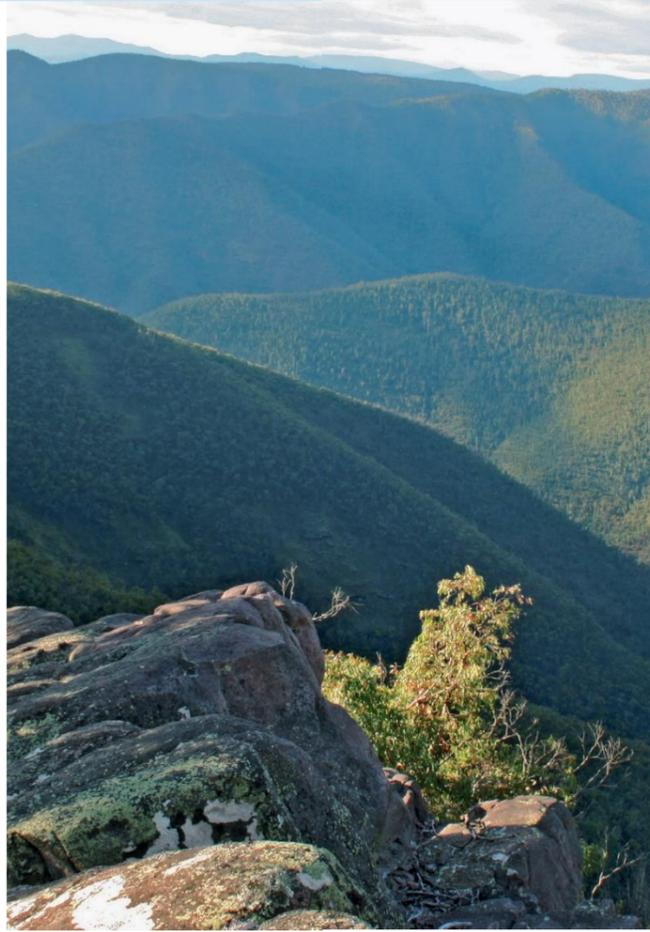
Dave and his pram

A view towards the Crinoline on the walk in

Off-track ‘boat lowering’ as we descended to the river

Our destination in the valley below

In our element among uncharted rapids



“ON A RIVER WITH THIS PROFILE, RUNNING A RAPID WITHOUT INSPECTING IT COULD PROVE FATAL OR, AT THE VERY LEAST, FOIL OUR BOLD ADVENTURE. IT WAS GAME ON.”

Even though the heavens stayed open all through the night, we slept contentedly, snug in our achievement thus far. On daybreak, we quickly packed our gear into our 'yaks, and slid onto the Caledonia. It was a momentous occasion indeed as we traded numerous grins back and forth.

Yet our adventure was only just beginning. Consistent Grade II water greeted us, carving its way through this beautiful steep valley. We bounced through rapids and rocks, aided by the spring conditions and last night's deluge.

We knew nothing about what lay around each corner. All we knew was that our faithful map had us zig-zagging between a hell of a lot of contours and cliffs for the first 20km as the river plummets to the Macalister River junction. Nonetheless, we were attuned to the fact that this waterway may become busy. Very busy. There was the real potential for technical and rocky rapids, river-choking logs, and little reaction time. On a river with this profile, running a rapid without inspecting it could prove fatal or, at the very least, foil our bold adventure. It was game on.

Thankfully, though, despite the rain, the river wasn't flowing too high; it wasn't too pushy—it granted us paddlers 'room to move', so to speak. It's all about management. The river gods tend to favour the careful, not the foolhardy. And so, slowly and methodically, we swapped leads, paddled defensively, read off each other's lines while signalling each other, and routinely caught eddies so as not to run any rapid 'blind'. And we started to absorb the beautiful surrounds. The cascading creeks that nonchalantly trickled in and added to the flow; the stunning cliffs that overlooked each bank; and even the occasional deer we caught off guard, deer that normally never experience human intrusion.

It doesn't get better than this. You don't forget these days.

We pulled up for lunch on a beautiful little rocky outcrop. It was thirsty work, so our bodies appreciated some well-earned Staminade. And as we drank, we remembered that the last time Dave was in this valley, back on that solo mission, his desperate search for water nearly cost him his life.

“EDDY OUT!” I HEARD DAVE CRY as he signalled 'stop' with straight arms. Looming dangerously close was a fallen tree blocking the whole river—a paddler's nightmare. We have both been stuck under these damn things before; never wanting to experience that again, we both eddied out to safety.

Portage time. We dragged our 'yaks around the log, shuddering at the thought of being stuck under it. But portaging around fallen trees is par for the course on these alpine adventures, and throughout the rest of the day, we portaged another four or so times—not too bad, all things considered.

On we paddled, amazed by continual Grade II/III rapids and the clear, manageable river—all read and run. Gold.

We were literally 'in the flow'. Attuned to our environment, paddling strong and connected to our surroundings. Right. Left. Middle chute. Ferry glide. Eddy out. Swapping signals. Run a drop. Left again. Repeat. It was a consistent pinball of lines and chutes, kilometre after kilometre. Even a wedge-tailed eagle soaring above us agreed. It was a moment when you are simply being, when you rise above thinking. A moment you live for. A moment that draws you back.

This rollercoaster of clean lines rolled flawlessly on until we saw another river coming in on the right bank. I'll be bugared. We'd reached the Macalister junction. Tick. It meant we'd successfully plummeted through the steep 'unknown' section from the high plateau to the plateau below and were on more common ground, so to speak. We had cracked the back of our Everest.

“DAVE! YOU SMELL SMOKE? What's going on?” We couldn't believe it when, tucked away in this rarely seen valley, we spotted two guys on the bank.

They madly waved and cheered at us, so we pulled in. They were two deer hunters who'd trekked into the upper Macalister for a few days, and they were as amazed to see us as we were to see them. They never expected to come across two mouldy kayakers venturing along these rivers. We never expected to meet anyone who'd endeavour to trek in to such a remote location. And that wasn't all that was unexpected; we soon found ourselves sharing a campfire and dining out on smoked venison! It was one of those great moments you just can't plan.

With some of their 'Dutch courage' in our bellies, we pushed on. We didn't get far. Dave's kayak developed a nasty crack under the cockpit; it seemed like he was paddling a submarine. After a few kilometres, we pulled up stumps for the day.

“You cracking under the pressure now, Dave?” This was my revenge for his broken golfcart wisecrack at my expense yesterday. It seemed like the universe was telling us to set up camp and tell stories around a campfire.

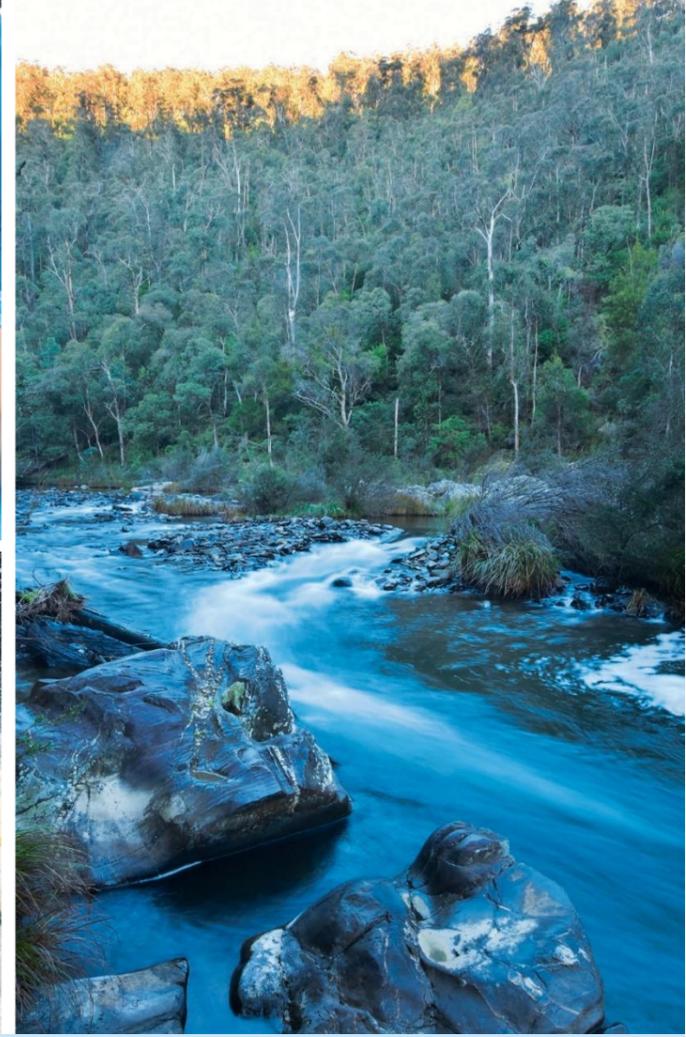
In the morning, we did some dodgy plastic welding with our cigarette lighter. “That'll hold, Dave!” I told him. But it didn't take long for the crack to reappear, and so Dave was forced to empty out his submarine hourly.

After a couple of hours, we reached the Barkly River junction—a river we'd ventured down a few years before.

“You know, Dave,” I said. “We've got our money's worth out of this river valley over the years.”

“Shame they didn't all end up being paddling trips,” he replied.

Beyond the Barkly, the river consistently greeted us with Grade II rapids and waves. It gave us some rewarding play time, but I could tell Dave was pulling for the finish. Not only was his bathtub dampening his enthusiasm, but he was all too aware that cold beers were stashed in the river at the end. It was all the motivation he needed.



THE LAST FEW KILOMETRES, while tiring, were spent in pure awe of what we'd finally achieved. Our perseverance had paid off.

Farm paddocks came into view and the foreign sound of a car broke the silence along Tamboritha Road. “This is it, Davo!” I hollered. The final bend was upon us, and as we rounded it, some riverside campers were startled by our sudden appearance. We shared a few words, but our minds were on the stashed beers. Thud. Our trusty kayaks docked for the final time and with little fanfare, we located our two sunken treasures and set upon deciding their fate. Priceless. We had knocked the bugger off. Happy days. Once again, it was one of those moments in life that you never forget. Time just stood still.

For the months to come, we allowed the splendour of the moment to wash over us. Slowly but surely, as the adrenaline and the memories ebbed, it allowed the doors of reflection to swing open. What had we achieved? Well, first and foremost, two good mates had lived out their paddling dream. The last twenty years had dished up one hell of a flow. We'd embarked on a silly paddling mission. Successfully too. Silly to others but proudly normal to us.

But then there were those questions I asked at the start of this story:

Who are we changing into?

Who truly am I?

What's important to me?

On the Caledonia, I realised it was the connection to nature. The earthing. The comradeship. And I also realised that this closing of the Caledonia chapter was a turning point. While Dave and I probably will stubbornly never hang up the paddle, the desire to incessantly chase remote and committing rivers no longer resonates at the same level. That's okay. More than okay.

Our priorities are changing, and we can embrace that. The Caledonia was our holy grail and our yardstick. It kept us honest, even though it wasn't a high-grade river in the end. But that's beside the point. It was high grade to our growth and to our sense of wellbeing. Change is inevitable, and so the memory of honouring our Caledonia passage helps us embrace forthcoming change, change that is so evident in these turbulent times. May your own adventures help you embrace it too. **W**

IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Dave celebrating our arrival at the river finally

Not our day job—plastic welding, MacGyver style

Campsite with a view

Delighting in a continual cascade of rapids

CONTRIBUTOR: As soon as Ro Privett tore off his wretched nappies, he was in a wetsuit. A lifestyle in Outdoor Education and kayak instruction flowed from there as rivers became a metaphor for his life.