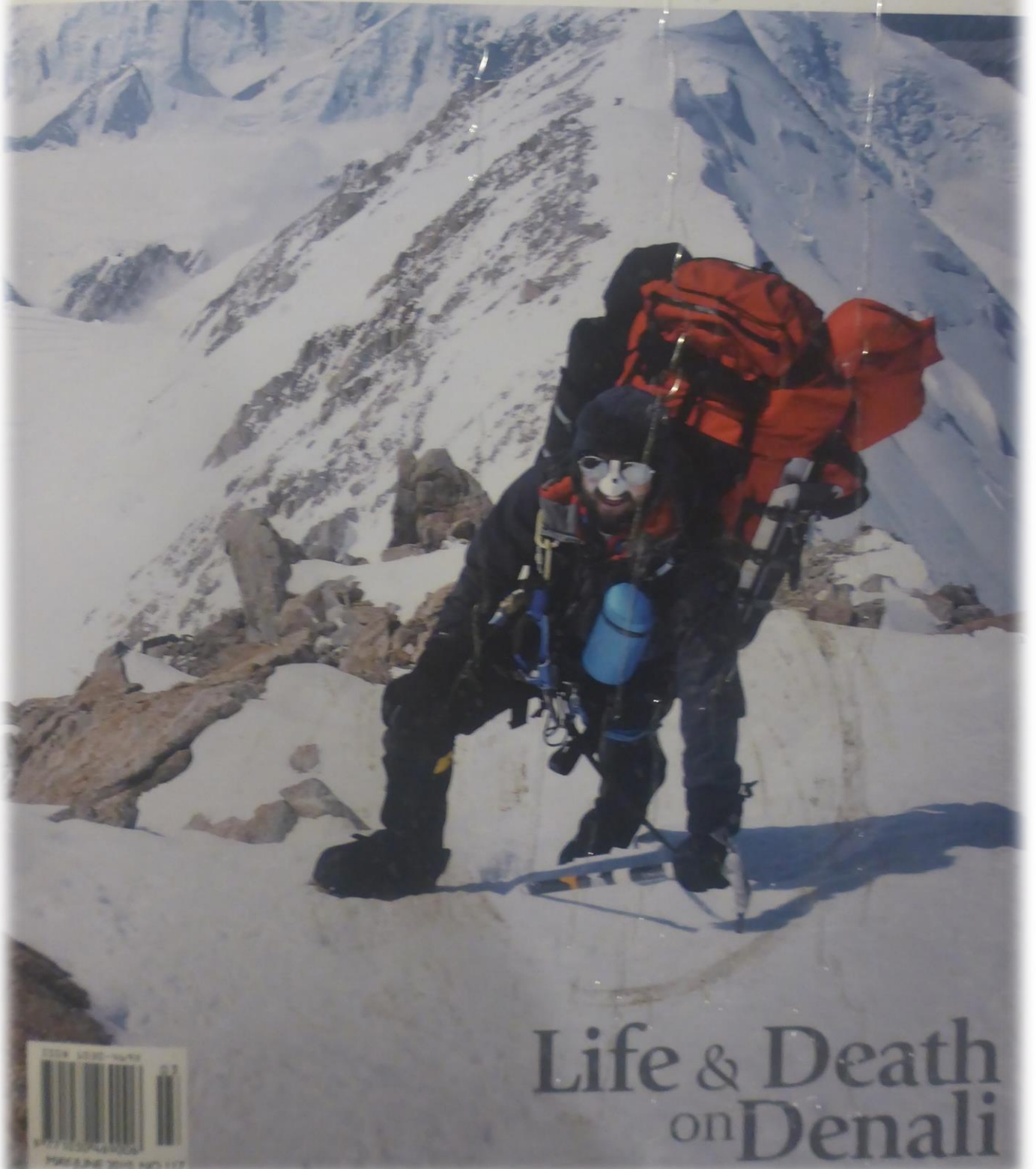


Wild 117

29 YEARS OF WILDERNESS ADVENTURE HERITAGE

TASSIE ADVENTURE
SOUTHWEST CAPE SOLD
FOOL'S GOLD
PADDLING THE DARGO RIVER
FIVE KIMBERLEY DAY WALKS
TREKKING TRAINING
CROSSING THE ROOF
OF AUSTRALIA
CHRIS BAXTER REMEMBERED



Life & Death on Denali





FOOL'S GOLD

Braving frigid water and swinging strainers, two paddling mates put in the hard yards to flow with the snow and find the route to rapid wealth on the Upper Dargo River in Victoria's High Country.

Steve Brown Powell

It's hard to imagine what passersby must of made of us. Dave and I were 1600 vertical metres up the side of Mt Hotham, hauling two whitewater kayaks through the snow with no water to be seen for miles. Talk about being up the creek with no paddle.

As cars drove past, curious faces pressed up against windows, we shared a laugh about the ridiculous nature of this trip. Like the gold miners of a bygone era we were hauling our heavy loads east from Mount Blowhard along Morning Star Ridge, through roughly seven kilometres of snow and thick bush, to the Upper Dargo River.

The seed for this adventure was planted years earlier. We both make a crust as outdoor education teachers in Victoria and in our spare time we like to dabble in whitewater trips. It's a silly habit of ours to finish one paddling trip with 'How about a trip on the (insert next river)'. And this was exactly how the idea for a trip on the Upper Dargo was born.

THE UPPER DARGO starts its journey on the southern side of Mt Hotham. Water from snowmelt flows from Hotham Heights and Mount Blowhard and then meanders its way south for 90 kilometres to the town of Dargo. This stretch of river is rarely – if ever – paddled, due to its poor access and remoteness, which is exactly why it appealed to us.

Throw in some rich history from the gold prospecting period the valley saw in the late 1800s, the promise of good gradient and alpine wilderness and... need we say more?

Lingering in the back of our minds though, was the worry that the river may barely be flowing or, worse still, might be choked by fallen logs and blackberries. Getting to the water was one thing, getting out could be another. Time would tell.

On a reconnaissance weekend we were knocking down a beer at the Dargo pub when we bumped into an old chap named Jim Shepherd. Turns out he was a bit of a pioneer of the Dargo Valley and even had a creek named after him, so we picked his brain for routes and conditions. His parting words were to watch out for the waterfall near Shepherds Creek. 'A real big boomer', he said with a wry smile.

Finally, after three years in the making, our moment of truth arrived. We rounded up our faithful logistics man Lawrie and his trusty old 1970s Series II Land Rover to help with the shuttle. With Lawrie filming our departure, we donned our snowshoes, assumed haulage position and pushed out along the Australian Alpine track before heading east along the Morning Star ridge.

The first 20 metres took both of us by surprise. It was extremely hard to drag and control our heavy 'sleds' as they hung off our waists at right angles down the hill. Rounding the initial corner the first of many hurdles presented itself in the shape of a steep and frozen slope. We had to cut steps into the slippery face of the icy incline to avoid the same fate as our skiing cousins only a few kilometres away at Hotham. The next hour was spent kayak mountaineering. Our technique may have been unusual, but it was methodical, and we were all too aware that a slip of a boat or person could spell the premature end of our little caper.

From there the spur opened up, daring us to follow, and we obliged in style, tobogganing along the gentle slope of the ridge, chuckling as we slid. The next four hours were spent dragging the boats along this same ridge. Crammed inside the rear of the boats was enough gear and food for six days. Fully laden the kayaks weighed about 45 kilograms, so hauling them through the wilderness and up slopes was no stroll in the bush. The last knoll along the ridge was a real back breaker. It was hard to believe that in the late-1800s, gold miners were filing out along this spur in large numbers.

After slogging hard for hours, the top of the last knoll at last appeared. From there it was 1.5 kilometres down a spur to the west branch of the Upper Dargo. According to rumour, the undergrowth wasn't supposed to be too thick here, but as any bushwalker knows, south faces are notorious for thick scrub.

At 4pm we decided to camp in a sheltered saddle. As the roaring fire kept the worst of the cold at bay, Hotham Heights teased us with bright lights that seemed a mere stone's throw away. After a bit of banter, we bunkered down in our one-person tent... the things you do to save space.



Dave hauling a lolly laden boat Ro Privett. Main image, Ro riding 'The Fang' rapid Dave Matters.

The bush started out okay on day two, but soon got as thick as our morning porridge. Battling on under ripper blue skies, Dave suddenly lost hold of his boat during a steep section. 'Watch out below!' he hollered, as it slammed up against a tree next to me. 'Well parked Dave!' I replied, as my mind conjured up images of broken bones.

We struck out towards a small creek to our west, in between the spurs, which seemed less thick and severe, with fewer logs to contend with. The slope abruptly turned into a steep downward climb. Having almost lost a boat a few moments earlier, we opted for belaying our kayaks down. Like backward multipitch climbing, one of us guided the heavily laden boats down the slope while the other kept the line tight on a friction knot around a tree. After repeating this process many times, it was a relief to finally reach the relative comfort of the creek. From there, we wrestled our boats up and over logs and through scattered blackberries.

The weight of the boats was mostly carried by the water in the little creek, but we were often forced to walk knee-deep in the water, slashing at blackberries with our expensive carbon Kevlar paddles. This continued until



Dave remarked upon a white glow from the bottom of the valley. After a pause to wipe the rain from our eyes, the realisation that the Upper Dargo was flowing slowly sank in. What we were gazing at was the upper west branch of the Dargo River, covered in white caps. Suddenly the blackberry scratches didn't seem to hurt as much.

Since we were both like drowned rats anyway, we ploughed straight through the deep holes of the creek, impatient to see what lay below. The river was clear of debris and flowing gloriously. Instantly three years of waiting, planning and hoping was paid off.

AFTER TREATING OUR boats as toboggans for two days, we couldn't wait to launch on this stretch of water. But before we did, we quickly poked our noses around the corner at the Eureka Flat battery site just upstream, where many a hardy soul tried to make their fortune. Back in the mid- to late-1800s, the Upper Dargo was abuzz with numerous gold mines and settlements, all tucked away in this remote valley, miles from anywhere. It's amazing how resilient and determined these folk must've been. Where we had lunch was the site of a restaurant called Tobias' back in 1867.

Sightseeing tour over, we braced in our kayaks and slipped into the river – afloat on the Dargo at last. Straight from the off it was a grade-two rollercoaster, with small chutes and various lines. It was hard to believe that the river was flowing so well only a handful of kilometres below its source. We'd timed it a treat.

The old Brocket settlement soon loomed on the bank, scattered with rock wall ruins from old miner's huts. For interest sake, we'd brought an old Brocket township map with us, which outlined the surveyed blocks for sale back in the day. Time was fast eating into our remaining daylight, though, so we concentrated on reaching the confluence of the east and west branches of the river, where a rare campsite was rumoured to be hiding among the thick vegetation.

Sure enough, the junction appeared through the bucketing rain after a couple more kilometers. Preparing for a very wet camp, we joked about the possibility of an overnight flood. It all felt eerily similar to a shared experience at the Loddon River campsite on the Franklin River in Tassie a few years earlier. On that occasion, as a joke, we had tied up our boat four metres above the river level in the fork of a tree, but it rained

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ONE PLANET



Clockwise from above: Ro on the pull Dave Matters. The view downstream from the third night's icy campsite Ro Privett. Ro's face says it all – there must be easier ways to go a paddle... Dave Matters. 'Kayak mountaineering'. Ro ferrying gear across an icy snow traverse near Mt Little Blosward Dave Matters.

"We had to cut steps into the slippery face of the icy incline to avoid the same fate as our skiing cousins only a few kilometres away at Hotham. The next hour was spent kayak mountaineering."

furiously overnight and by the morning we found the water lapping at our raft.

It was one of those long nights tucked away in the tent, counting drenched sheep until sunrise and hoping the rain would give up by morning. We were well below the snowline but the icy cold seeped into the tent to keep us company. The night was made even longer because we couldn't find the lighter to get the stove going. Confused and shivering, we chose to conserve energy instead of burning madly in the rain for lost equipment or the spare lighter, making do with a handful of sticks and a cold dinner.

There was no Franklin-style flood overnight, but there were promising signs of

good weather. The river had more gush after the rain too, and the second tributary also added to its flow, so we got on the water early.

The water kept us on our toes, flowing slickly and keeping up the grade-two pace the whole way, with little or no flat water. As much as Dave and I feel at home on the water, we never take it for granted. On a tight and tricky river such as this one, lined by thick vegetation, we had to be particularly careful of logs (known as 'strainers' to paddlers) and debris on the water. If we were washed up against a log it could be curtains.

The conditions required us to paddle very defensively, always looking out and never entering a rapid or river bend blind. We either got out of our boats and had a squiz, or 'eddie hopped' until we could see whether the river was clear downstream, before moving to the next pre-determined eddie.

With the weather clearing, we were all grins as another old mining settlement flashed past in the shape of Louisville. It's said that 1500 miners rushed to this valley after gold was found in 1863, with Louisville's population peaking at about 300 prospectors. Before long it became obvious that the valley

could not support such numbers, and the rush abated almost as abruptly as it began.

Our defensive paddling was paying dividends as we avoided some nasty strainers that reared their heads. No damage done and the grade-two rapids kept on rolling. We had to keep pinching ourselves at how lucky we were with the good flow and relatively clear lines. A shared smirk said it all. 'We may just knock this boggler off!'

Continuous rapids kept us honest and the occasional log gave us some air time. We came across one that was just underwater and made a 1.5 metre drop. Cheap thrills. By the next settlement, China Flat, we were starting to really hit our straps. The river was delivering beyond all our expectations; we both had our eye in and were now below the danger zone represented by the first steep section.

The rapids and banter kept flowing and we quickly found ourselves arriving at the grassy and rather palatial campground of Mayford. Hopes of adding a fresh pear to our lunch, courtesy of the famous 100-year-old pear tree here, were dashed by the season. Mayford, where the famous McMillans Walking Track crosses the river, was once surveyed to assess its potential to



become a township, but it never developed beyond one store.

A small distance downstream, a ten-metre-long mess of logs stood in our path. Clambering around the timber, we found some more clear water downstream, but more strainers and clawing blackberries made progress slow for the next few kilometres.

With less gradient and a more open river valley, we expected the rapids to ease, but the grade-two wave train rolled on until our muscles simply couldn't stroke any further and we pulled stumps. With over 30 kilometres of paddling under our belts for the day, we set up camp under a clear sky and recounted many a tall story by the fire.

BY MORNING OUR paddling gear resembled stiff cardboard more than Gore Tex, and we virtually had to wear our snowshoes to get around camp. The fire was cranked up to thaw ourselves and our gear out. Rejoiced by the notion that we might reach Dargo by beer o'clock, we slid back into the water and re-established our acquaintance with this alpine water highway.

"With less gradient and a more open river valley, we expected the rapids to ease, but the grade-two wave train rolled on until our muscles simply couldn't stroke any further and we pulled stumps."

Miners Flat, passed by soon afterwards, placed us somewhere near Shepherds Creek, site of good old Jimbo's wicked waterfall. We were prepared for surprises and one duly hobbled up, in the shape of a mini gorge that narrowed and presented us with some solid grade threes and three and a halves, all with clean exciting lines. The crux rapid was a ripper double stager, with some nice chutes and lines, which we nicknamed 'The Fang' after a rock at its entrance.

With the hard yards behind us it was like nature had decided to throw us a beer and we were drunk on this river's glory. As the Little Dargo confluence went past and the river swung back to the south on the last leg to Dargo township, we pushed hard in the knowledge that happy hour at the pub wasn't far off.

A couple hours further on we past

Matheson Flat, putting the Upper Dargo Track on our river right. The day was dimming, but on we pressed. After negotiating a few more user-friendly strainers, it was just about dark, so we pulled up stumps just a few clicks short of Dargo township. Close enough.

While swinging high fives to celebrate the culmination of three years of planning and a successful journey, it dawned upon us that we had pulled up close to where some folks who were camping. Some swift explaining didn't dispel their opinion that we were 'nuts', so we adjourned to the Dargo pub for a debrief.

And then, who should waltz into the pub but good old Jimbo Shepherd. As we shared a few ales and tales, we had just one thing on our minds. We never found that waterfall Jimbo. **W**

On weekends working as outdoor education instructors, Dave Masters and Ro Friesen double in the white water world on a regular basis, particularly searching for and relishing rare wilderness paddles in our great outdoors. They are sponsored by Carbo Shotz sports nutrition.