

## TRIP REPORT

# MCMILLAN'S WALKING TRACK (VIC,AUS)

Woods Point to Cobungra (Omeo) - Easterly

Mike Back and Richard Scott

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## Preparation

Saturday 21 Nov 2020

McMillans Walking Track is a point to point walk and although there are some public transport options to access the ends they are not very quick or convenient, especially if you're not sure exactly when you'll be finishing. We decided that the least-hard, and most flexible option would be to do a car shuttle, leaving a vehicle at the end and then driving back to the beginning in the second car to start the walk. We set out from the Melbourne suburbs at around 8am and headed out on the Princes Highway to Bairnsdale then up to Omeo on the Great Alpine Road. A quick pie at the Omeo bakery and another 25km up the road brought us to Cobungra where the Victoria River Track intersects the Great Alpine Road. This is where McMillan's Track ends and where we'd emerge, about a week later (actually we walked the track in reverse to 'normal' and most people start at Cobungra). We

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left one car and started the long drive back to Woods point (via Mt Hotham, Bright, Mansfield). We eventually rolled into Woods point around 8pm, 12 hours after leaving. It was a long day of driving but the traffic had been reasonable, the weather good and had the bonus of driving some of our favourite alpine roads. Tiring but not boring. On arriving in Woods Point we took the chance to check out where the trail head was in the last light before heading a couple of kms back up the road to the RH Scott Camping area where we spent the night. It was a hot night and the air was thick with bugs so one green can was plenty before turning in for an early night.

## **Day 1 - Woods Point to N18 Track**

Sunday 22nd Nov 2020

The 4:30am alarm signalled the start of our hike. We packed up, drove back into town and were taking our first steps on the trail about 5:15am, just as the first light of dawn was creeping in. The first section of the track is a 4WD track that winds its way through the valley and passes the various camping spots of Comet Flat. Also winding through the valley is the Goulburn River and the track fords it multiple times on the way through meaning we were crossing our first river within 10 mins of starting. The weather was warm and humid. After a while the track started winding its way upwards towards Johnson Hill. A frustrating early error had us missing a turn off from the 4x4 track onto a short section of walking trail but it soon came back together. We had seen the marker but there was no evidence of a path junction. Back on track, at the top of Johnson Hill, after only a few hundred metres up high we turned off the road and were descending again down a spur track. Back in the valley we crossed Stander Creek and again made a costly mistake of following the 4WD track instead of turning off onto a walking track. We discovered our error only after climbing quite a long way up an insanely steep 4WD track. We retraced our steps and with the help of GPS found where the turnoff should be. We found the track turnoff which was indistinct and unmarked but after joining it we found the path to be in pretty good condition and well benched into the hillside. However, as the track climbed and steepened it also deteriorated. We encountered more and more fallen timber in our way and it made progress slower and much more tiring as we had to push through and climb around obstacles. Again after reaching the top and gaining a road we were soon turning off down another steep spur all the way back to the valley and another river crossing (Black River).

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We started up our third steep spur track of the day (Lazarinis Spur) and like the last one it was heavy going with lots of fallen trees blocking our path. By the time we topped out we had already climbed 2000m so were weary and also looking for water. We joined and continued along the Lazarini Spur track, past a camping area on the right. Shortly afterwards puddles started appearing on the road which turned out to be a spring emerging on the left. This was very welcome and we each took 3L of water ready for camp. After passing another dry campsite and joining the Jamieson Licola Road we eventually turned off right and joined the AAWT for a short time to Mount Shillinglaw before continuing on to our camp for the night where McMillans Track (N18 Track) rejoined the Jamieson-Licola Rd. We were setting up the tent as the sun was setting and the first rain started falling. We'd covered well over 40km on steep and difficult terrain. Both of us were very tired and each privately wondering how we were going to keep this up for another 5 or 6 days! At this point Rich pulled out a surprise half a litre of whiskey which he'd smuggled along which helped ease the concerns and dull the pain of our sore feet!

### **Day 1 stats were all about the twos**

- 2x Snakes (Tiger?) seen
- 2x People met (hiking the AAWT)
- 2x 4WDs seen
- 2x Blue Tongue Lizards
- 2000m+ of elevation gain
- 2x Nav errors

### **Day 2 - N18 Track to Little Tamboritha**

Monday 23rd Nov 2020

We again rose to the 4:30 alarm and were up and hiking an hour later. First along the Jamieson Licola Rd then very steeply down on McMillan Spur Track. As we were descending, the rain started falling. My feet were blistered from the previous day and the combination of wet feet and a steep descent was very painful. We finally reached the nice camping area at Rumpf flat. We refilled our water bottles at the river, I patched my feet and we continued on up the switchbacks of the road in the, now very heavy, rain. We made good progress along the road and on coming into Licola North then turned onto a driveway (marked

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private property). We continued on the driveway which climbed up to a ridge with a locked gate (again marked with a private property sign). We climbed the gate and continued down the other side, descending to the Macalister River. After wading the river which was just over knee deep we started up the climb on the other side which after a short while turned up hill ferociously steeply and continued that way until gaining a ridge where you turn left and continue higher to eventually meet a high point with a small cairn and then to a path junction with the Crinoline track. We turned right and descended steeply on the well formed path through switchbacks. At the road we turned left past the MGS lodge and stopped for a good break at Breakfast Creek with hot drinks and food. We started the climb up Mt Tamboritha at around 4pm. The climb is very steep, right from the start but in OK condition and we climbed well and gained a fair bit of height quickly. It's a very long climb though and definitely not to be underestimated. We hoped to have reached the summit (or beyond) but as we got higher the track was harder and harder to follow and the ground was rocky and overgrown. We realised we weren't going to make it over the top and decided to camp at the saddle below Little Tamboritha, not far from a small dam . We stopped around 7pm and got the tent up before dark. We had a really enjoyable night up in the alpine at around 1200m with dinner in front of a small campfire while drying out our shoes and socks.

### **Day 3 - Little Tamboritha to Moroka River**

Tuesday 24th Nov 2020

We were up and hiking by 5:30am again to make use of the first light and continued our climb higher. It had got cold in the night and the morning was fresh too, the only time I really needed my down jacket on the whole walk. The final section up to Little Tamboritha was hard to navigate with virtually no distinct path . It was a beautiful alpine scene once we got out on the open grassy slopes up high. With wildflowers, golden early morning light and great views. A highlight of the whole walk. After gaining Little Tamboritha the track got much better and this continued the short distance up to Mt Tamboritha summit (cairn) and then all the way down the other side. We stopped at Shaws Creek for breakfast and to take on water. I had been having some stomach pains over the top of the Tamborithas which I suspected was due to being a bit dehydrated. A couple of cups of tea soon fixed it! After a short distance on the road we turned right into a really nice wide avenue of walking trail

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lined by trees. Presumably an old disused cart track or road. We crossed a couple more creeks by stepping stones and as the day was warming up so took the chance to dry out some wet clothing on my pack. Also refilled water bottles and drank plenty as I was still rehydrating. We arrived at Kelly's Hut and chatted to a Parks VIC crew that were heading out to do some track clearing on Mt Arbuckle. We had the benefit of a freshly cleared track up and over Mt Arbuckle. The fun came to an end once we hit the Moroka Road. We had a 5 or 6km slog along the road in very hot sun with no shade with the heat reflecting back up at us from the pale gravel. We eventually turned off left onto the pleasant old vehicle track leading gently down past 'Volkswagen' camp (although there was no sign of a Volkswagen). The track trends gently down hill and over a couple of very rough log bridges over creeks, at which point we stopped for our afternoon break for a coffee and good feed. At 4pm we continued on. Just before the end of the vehicle track we found McMillan markers directing us off left onto a walking trail. This was the start of the 'real' descent down to the Moroka River. The top section of the path was reasonably well defined and marked but as we continued lower it got much worse - lots of very thick vegetation with little or no path and infrequent markers. It was a very hard and tiring descent that finally got us down to the river and our camp spot for the night around 7:30pm. We cleared an area for the tent, lit a small fire among the rocks of the dry river bed and settled in for some food and rest. A wash in the river was also very welcome after a long and hot day.

## **Day 4 - Moroka River to Wongungarra River**

Wednesday 25th Nov 2020

Our 4:30 alarm had us on trail at 5:30am as usual and we set off north keeping the Moroka river close on our right. For the first 3kms or so we picked our way through the bush as best we could, at times there was an indistinct path or animal track which we could follow, other times it was bush bashing. After which we came to the end of the Moroka River 4x4 Track that comes down to meet the river. There was a camp area here with a big fire circle and disappointingly someone had left ziploc bags of food here which animals had torn open and spread around. Very disappointing to see rubbish spread around in such a pristine place. There was a trail marker here but that was the last one we saw for a long time and there was no path. We continued on our way in the same way as before until the first river crossing was needed as our side of the river became a sheer rock and so



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impassable. The river was in good flow so we took our time choosing our spot but it was fine, no more than thigh deep. On the other side there were no markers or path and we spent the next (maybe?) 2 hrs persevering with trying to push our way through the bush in the hope of finding a clear way through or track. We crossed back and forwards between sides of the river as we needed to. We had a break for late breakfast and decided that we should stop wasting time looking for a path and just find our own way downriver as best we could. This was how we spent the next few hours. Mostly walking in the river itself. We eventually made it to the river junction with the Wonnangatta about 1:30pm, after 8hrs of walking. We were very happy to find the start of the Moroka Junction Track soon after that and stopped for a well needed break for food/drink and a swim. The day was already very hot by then. We made good time on the Moroka River Track and followed it all the way down to Eagle Vale where we had another break. It was around 6pm. We felt it was too early to stop and so we decided to keep going and try to get over the Mt Cynthia range. We were already up to our shins in water crossing the ford when we spotted the suspension bridge, I'd seen it on the map and had a look for it but hadn't gone quite far enough. We backed up and crossed at the bridge, which was even more sketchy than it looked - definitely not to be missed! The first part of the route through the farm was easy enough to find but the start of the walking track over the range was extremely hard to find. Fires had been through and devastated the hillside and there was lots of regrowth and fallen timber. Animal tracks criss-crossed the area obscuring any walking track. With the help of GPS we found our way up into the correct spur and joined the walking track further up. It became much more distinct so route finding became easier but fallen trees still made progress slow and tiring. We arrived at the top just as the sun was setting. It was a sort of crossroads with a dirt road running left and right along the ridge of the range and another one (almost) straight ahead that descended down the other side. A marker pointed the way straight ahead down the very steep dirt road and we headed down by moonlight and then headtorch. We finally got into camp exhausted about 9pm. It was a scrappy overgrown camp area next to the Wongungarra river with very tall grass and a broken bench. Bugs filled our faces when our head torches were on. We weren't thinking very clearly due to the fatigue. We got the tent up, had a quick meal and the last of the whiskey before collapsing into sleep.

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## **Day 5 - Wongungarra River to Twenty Five Mile Creek**

Thursday 26th Nov 2020

The day started with us crossing the crappy muddy river and then spent a lot of time fighting through thick scrub which was re-growth from bushfires. In the lower section that followed the river there was the occasional marker and section of track but mostly we were just trying to pick a way through in the right direction. After climbing up a bit, the track eventually improved to a nicely benched trail. We topped out on this and met a road which we followed down to the beautiful camping spot at Talbotville and the first of the 20+ river crossings on the crooked River Track. It was fast progress up the 4x4 track as we just splashed through the water in the fords. At the end of the 4x4 track after a bit of hunting due to head high brambles covering the path entrance we found our way onto the Crooked River Mining Track. It was well made and supported by old stone walling for much of its length up the valley. We had underestimated how long this section was and the very hot afternoon sapped us as we made our way up the valley. We were further away from the river than we expected and so access to water was not as often as we really wanted on such a hot day. It's actually a stunning section of the track with fantastic views down to the rushing river below and a strong sense of being in the wilderness. We reached the small 25 Mile Creek camp area around 5pm tired and thirsty and decided to call it quits for the day. It was a fantastic camp spot at the confluence of two rivers and the base of the spur we would be climbing in the morning. It was a much-needed earlier finish than the previous day. We made the camp our own and refuelled, rested and enjoyed the evening, drying our shoes and socks in front of our campfire.

## **Day 6 - Twenty Five Mile Creek to King Spur**

Friday 27th Nov 2020

We slept through our alarm but a bit of hustle had us leaving camp at around 6:10 and crossing the river via the stepping stones to the start of the spur track on the other side. There was no easing into it slowly, the spur track ascended steeply and gained about 200-300m of height very quickly before we popped out at the White Timber Spur Track dirt road. We continued up the spur following the track making good time but then after a few kms made a navigational error that had us starting to descend on Ritchie Road when we

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should have continued on White Timber Spur Track which was a more minor turnoff. We backtracked and corrected once we realised but it wasted some time and energy. We continued north on the spur track but again missed a turnoff and only realised once the track we were on started turning south. We walked up and down twice trying to locate ourselves and the takeoff point for the path. Our GPS was out of juice and it was another very hot day and concerns were starting to creep in. We'd gathered some unappealing cloudy water from a creek crossing the track a few kms earlier so as a circuit breaker we sat under the shade of a tree and made tea by boiling the already brown water and had something to eat. During the break I tried again to recharge my iPhone which had been letting us down and fortunately this time it came back to life and charged. This was a big relief as we soon got an exact location and we were back in business. We backtracked to the last marker and got confirmation that our 'track' was not actually a track, just a fence to follow over awkward tussocky grass. After going a short way Rich spotted a wild dog watching us closely from the long grass. It nervously backed away and we didn't see it again. We found our way through and around a right hand turn along another fenceline and out to the Dargo High Plains Road. We stopped at Lankey Plains Hut for a well needed break and refilled all our water bottles and an extra 4L so we'd have plenty to drink and for camp. We started out down the King Spur track in the late afternoon planning to try and cover a few kms and make camp when we wanted. We eventually stopped at a great spot overlooking the valley with views across to Dinner Plain. We were about 1.5km short of treasure Spur. Had a small campfire and enjoyed our last camp of the trip. We had phone reception for the first time in days and sent messages to family back home. Food was running low so it was a dinner of bits and pieces of whatever was left.

## **Day 7 - King Spur to Cobungra Station (finish)**

Saturday 28th Nov 2020

Our day started MUCH earlier than planned with some rain coming through in the night causing me to zip up the tent. Shortly after that a few huge gusts of wind came through and ripped one of our tent pegs which then caused 3 or 4 more to ping out. It was flapping crazily in the strong gusting wind and about to take off and the rain was starting to fall. It felt like the start of a storm and we were in a very exposed spot. We made the quick decision to pack up and get out. It was 1:30am. We stuffed everything in our packs and



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hiked away from the exposed edge back to the track by head torch and slowly started making our way along the track. We thought it might be too difficult to descend Treasure Spur in the dark, especially if it was going to be overgrown and hard to find as we had found many times before in this hike! We considered taking King Spur track instead as we knew this would be easy to follow in the dark but we didn't want to leave the McMillan unless we really had to and it was also a longer way round. At the top of the spur the rain had stopped and Rich suggested we just lay out ground sheets and try to rest a while, or as long as the rain stayed away. It turned out to be a good call, because despite another few spots of rain a while later a full storm never appeared, it had just been a passing squall. It was a warm night and we actually both managed to sleep pretty well in our temporary bivy until dawn and were packed up and moving again at 5am. It was still pre-dawn and we set off down Treasure Spur. Our worries about the track were unfounded and we actually found it to be well marked and pretty easy to follow. We actually found that the track markers were reflective and if anything we could pick them out more easily in the darkness than in daylight, shining back the light from our headtorches. At the base of the spur the track enters the huge flat grassy Mayford camping area and we kept walking on the good track until the far end where the track fords the river. We refilled our water and I went barefoot for the crossing to try and preserve dry shoes and socks for the rest of the walk out. My feet were already sore and blistered and I didn't want to do any more harm. On crossing the river it was an immediate left onto the very steep and rough Mayford Track. We initially missed the turning but only by a very short distance and we quickly backtracked and found it. Mayford track is an old vehicle track that is now closed to traffic but has been bulldozed into banks and littered with tree trunks, presumably to either prevent people driving it or to aid revegetation. Either way there is no clear path and it was a pretty hot and ugly climb (500m ascent) back up from the Dargo River valley. We knew it was the last major obstacle so we dug deep and got it done. After reaching the top it was only a few hundred metres more until we reached the junction with Victoria River Track. We took the track and this was our 'home straight' to the finish with no more navigation needed. After 2km or so we came to the Black Sallee lake and camping area and then the final couple of hours to cover the 8km to the finish at Cobungra, where we'd left the car a week earlier.

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## Final Thoughts

All the things you read about McMillan's Track are true! It's a tough walk, not to be underestimated. There is some very steep terrain to cover, in some sections it's very sparsely marked and sometimes very overgrown. Often there is no 'track' at all. I would actually call it more of a 'route' than a track.

We did it very fast and we pushed ourselves very hard which resulted in us doing some suffering! Generally the recommendation is to do it in 10-14 days and this would make it more manageable but taking longer would definitely still not turn it into an 'easy' walk.

It's a real mixed bag of terrain from modern (dirt) logging roads to historical cart tracks, to thin walking tracks and in some sections no track. You do get access to some wild and remote places that I'm sure very few people visit which is amazing but you also get some pretty so-so dirt road sections. We hardly encountered anyone. You need to be totally self sufficient, prepared contingencies and confident in your skills. There is good access to water for most of the track which is a great feature. You need to plan ahead with your water for a few dry sections and make sure you're carrying enough but it's very achievable (at least it was for us).

I'd be interested to know what the 'vision' for the track is. Is it to keep it as undefined and raw as it currently is? Perhaps it is just a case of lack of resources rather than planning. Volunteers have probably done much of the work so we're lucky McMillan's Track exists at all. Personally I think it would be improved by polishing it up a bit - more markers and defining / clearing the trail better. It would take it to the next level. If the track was more defined then perhaps more people would walk it and it would stay clearer. Just due to the nature of the terrain it will never be an easy walk so there is no danger of sanitising it but it could be made a more enjoyable walk. All the bush bashing is no fun and cutting in a trail on the sections where one is missing would definitely help it. As it stands I think it probably has a pretty narrow 'market', which is a shame. At 210km it is a nice distance to walk in one push and could be a more well known and well walked if it was a bit more accessible.

Overall it was a very memorable experience. It was very tough, in part due to the style and speed we chose to hike. Even with more time it would still be pretty tough. There are also

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some really great sections and camping spots on the track. We made a few mistakes but overcame them. We suffered a bit. There were highs and lows and times when we weren't sure if we'd make it. It was definitely an adventure - exactly what we signed up for!