

14 Days on the Franklin River

A Rafting Adventure Journal

by Nik Sands



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Expedition Overview

- **Day 1 – Collingwood Bridge to Franklin Junction**

- Wallabies shagging, snakes swimming
- Paddling, wrapping, patching
- Water level 50cm

- **Day 2 – Collingwood Junction to Irenabyss**

- 11.5 hours
- Huon pines
- Log Jam portage
- Jess knocked out of her raft by her paddle
- Jamie's Nasty Notch near miss
- Paul's paddle breaks

- **Day 3 – Irenabyss - Planned Rest Day**

- Rain
- Another spare paddle found
- Scones

- **Day 4 - Irenabyss to Fincham Crossing**

- Water level 80cm
- Fincham track and hydro hut
- Only rafting day of entire trip with no dragging, lining or portaging!

- **Day 5 – Fincham Crossing to Jericho Walls**

- Water level 65cm
- Nik flipped out of raft
- Nik loses his paddle
- Debacle Bend debacle

- **Day 6 – Jericho Walls to Brook of Inveraestra**

- Water level 50cm
- Paul's repaired paddle gets bent

- **Day 7 – Brook of Inveraestra to Corruscades**

- Crocker, Dean, Hawkins, Newland memorial
- Massive portage
- Lost and found

- **Day 8 – Corruscades to The Cauldron (Eagles Nest)**

- More huge portages
- Seal launch at Thunder Rush

- **Day 9 – Cauldron (Eagles Nest) to Rafter's Basin**

- Dicey portage at Cauldron
- Scones with jam and cream
- Trout
- Massive overnight rain storm

- **Day 10 – Rafter's Basin to Hobbit Hole**

- Water level 150 to 200 cm
- River flooding
- Nik flipped out of raft again
- Nik loses Jamie's paddle
- Paul's bent paddle breaks again
- Cut out a make shift camp due to river in flood

- **Day 11 – Hobbit Hole – Unplanned Rest Day**

- Stuck in make shift camp due to flooded river
- Water level 250cm

- **Day 12 – Hobbit Hole to Newland Cascades**

- Water level 150cm
- Nik flipped out of raft for third time
- Nik does not lose David's paddle!
- Sean flipped out of raft
- Rock Island Bend
- Sleeping in caves

- **Day 13 – Newland Cascades to Holey Cliff**

- No portaging!

- **Day 14 - Holey Cliff to Sir John Falls**

- Sculptured rocks
- Final rapid and final portage
- Gordon River in still silence and solitude
- Impromptu beach party
- Snoring

- **Day 15 – Sir John Falls to Strahan**

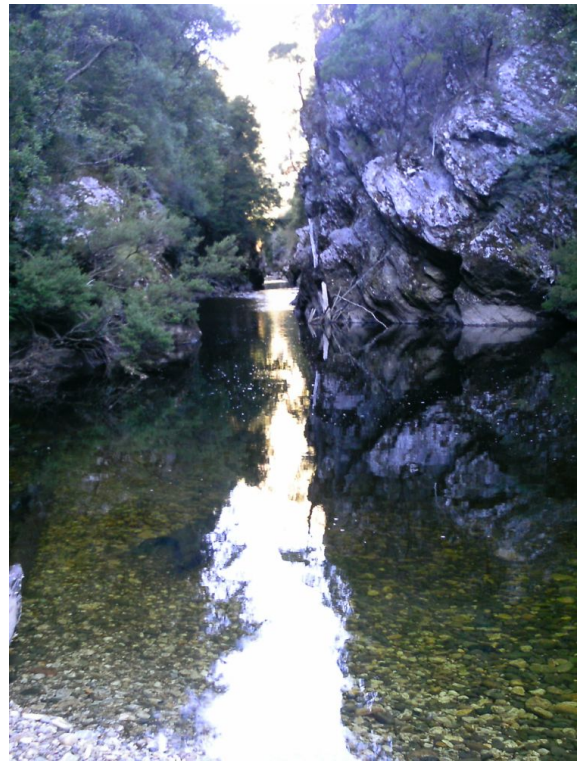
- Snakes
- Beach
- Swim
- Reunited
- Luxury Gordon River cruise

Introduction

The Franklin River is regarded as the last “Wild River” in Tasmania, winding it’s way from near Lake St Clair to the Gordon River which then flows into Macquarie Harbour on Tasmania’s West Coast. After work had already begun on damming the Franklin for a hydro electric scheme it was saved by the protests of “radical conservationists” in 1983. I was too young to participate in the protests at that time, but I can remember the protests in the streets and on the river (in the news) and I am very grateful to those who fought so hard and took such risks and went through some terrible ordeals in order to save the Franklin River. The Franklin River is a truly amazing place.

The area surrounding the Franklin River is famous for its beauty, its remoteness, its vegetation (including Huon Pines – *Largostrobus franklinii*), its rock formations and caves (with evidence of ancient habitation), and for its hostility, having claimed the lives of several rafters.

It is not recommended that inexperienced rafters attempt the Franklin River. People should either join a commercial rafting tour with experienced professional operators, or go with a group of experienced white water rafters only after having practiced on other safer rivers. Even then, rafters should do extensive research using the various rafting notes (and stories) that are available, taking note of the cautions regarding the many dangers, both generic for all white water, and those specific to particular Franklin rapids.



Franklin River at its Confluence with the Collingwood River



Huon Pine Foliage at Sir John Falls Jetty

Note that **this is not a river guide nor detailed trip notes** and should not be used to help people navigate the Franklin River. This is merely a journal of my personal experiences while rafting the Franklin. However, there are some lessons that can be learnt for people who wish to attempt the trip, and I hope that it will be of interest to others too.

How I Became Involved

David, who has been a friend of my wife's family for decades, had rafted the Franklin twice before, in 1979 and 1980. He was unable to convince his former rafting partners to join him on a 30th anniversary trip, so he set out to recruit a new team, including some of his now adult children to join him on what would be his third rafting adventure down the Franklin River.

About a year before this trip David invited me to join the expedition.

Of course, I said "no". I couldn't possibly join them, as I'd just promised my wife that I would be spending more time at home with my family and less time out bush over the next year or so, until our kids were a little older.

David invited me again several times during the year, and each time I said "no" with a different reason. "I just don't have any money to spare on extra activities this year", "I'll be very busy with my new job at that time of year", etc, etc.

But really, they were all just excuses. The real reasons I had declined the invitation were that **white water scared the crap out of me**, and **the Franklin River has a reputation for killing rafters**, both novice and experienced. Now that I have completed the Franklin River, it still scares me, but I'm a tad more confident and competent than I was beforehand, and may even consider other white water adventures in the future.

Eventually, at David's 60th birthday party, he asked me twice more, and after I again said "no" the first time, my wife told me that I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't go (and I knew she was right). She told me that I should go, and that her and the kids would be fine without me for a couple of weeks. So the second time that David asked me that night, I said "yes" and was admitted to the team.

The Team

The anticipated membership of the expedition team changed a few times, right up to the last few days. The final make up of the group of rafters was:

- David
- Sean (David's son)
- Jess
- Paul
- Jamie
- Nik (me)

For the first two days, there were an additional two people in the group who hitched a ride on our rafts (for the rest of the trip we had one raft per person): Kate (David's daughter), and Lauren

I generally refer to us as a "team" rather than merely as a "group", because even though each person was self-sufficient in terms of food and gear, we really did have to work together as a team to make it through. This was particularly important when it came to portaging where it was sometimes more efficient and easier to pass gear along a line of people, than to each carry your own gear the entire distance. Team work was also essential when scouting and directing each other through rapids.



Team of eight at the initial launch under the bridge on the Collingwood River: Jess, Paul, Jamie, David, Sean, Lauren, Kate and Nik (photo David Tasker)



Team of six on the last day on Pyramid Island where the Franklin River flows into the Gordon River: David, Sean, Jess, Paul, Jamie and Nik (photo David Tasker)

The Gear

David investigated several boats and purchased both a Bestway Mariner and an Intex Seahawk II for testing and comparison. The Bestway was lighter, shorter and wider. The Intex was longer and narrower with several more gear tie down points. Being narrower proved an asset whilst paddling in the lower river levels. More tie down points to choose from would also be very useful, so we made a bulk purchase of the Intex Seahawk II so that each person had their own boat.

In practice, this proved to be an excellent choice, despite not being designed for white water. These boats are reasonably quick to inflate and deflate as well as being tougher, larger, and more stable and forgiving than the small, light pack-rafts which are available these days. The only modification that I found necessary on mine was to cut off one of the rod-holders, which would have interfered with my paddle strokes. I also unscrewed and removed the rowlocks, but kept them so that they can be replaced later for rowing my kids around the flat Tamar River near home. Some others in the team cut off both of the rod holders and the rowlock mounts for similar reasons, although this resulted in one of the boats being punctured by a saw blade which led to some patching practice.

We assisted David in making our own paddles using a similar design to his original 1979 paddle, and his paddle-construction skills were very much appreciated by those of us with less experience in fibre-glassing. Commercially available paddles are designed for kayaks or pack rafts and are not long enough for reaching over the high, wide sides of our larger inflatable boats. David still had his old home-made paddle from 1979 which he used again on this trip. The paddles were made from 25mm aluminium tube shafts and fibre-glass blades, with the shaft extending a few centimetres beyond the blades so that we could safely use them to fend off rocks without smashing the fibreglass. David's 1979 paddle used 30mm tube which was no longer easily available, but which was a little stronger, as it turned out.

Each paddle was custom sized to the owner's requirements. The two halves were joined by a smaller diameter piece of tube inside the main shaft attached with rivets on one end and bolts or screws on the other. In this way, the paddle could be easily broken down for transport and reassembled as required. My paddle was 3.2 metres long. It probably still is, but I don't know for sure as the last time I saw it was when we unsuccessfully tried to retrieve it from deep underwater in a log jam in a fast flowing current (details later in the story).



Home Made Rafting Paddle In Action on a Franklin River Rapid

I also bought a large SEAL Line waterproof dry sack (as used by the US Navy, apparently) to keep my gear dry inside my back pack. Other team members used large plastic barrels to keep things dry. I purchased a decent PFD ('Personal Floatation Device', AKA life jacket), and a cheap crash helmet. I had a rope knife attached to the PFD (for entanglement/drowning emergencies – the highest cause of death in white water rafting, apparently). A very cheap waterproof camera was also attached to my PFD so that I could take photos at any time without worrying about the camera getting damaged.

Good non-slip shoes are also an essential bit of safety gear with slips in some locations being potentially fatal. Our footwear ranged from specialist wet weather shoes and cheap sneakers to wet suit booties. Despite advice to the contrary, I wore wet suit booties, not because I thought they would be good, but because I didn't have anything else suitable, and ran out of time and money to

(as I had been warned) so I had to use a lot of caution in some locations. They also offered very little protection from bumps and scrapes, and I stubbed toes twice on the second day, causing significant pain for a few days.

Most of us were already experienced Tasmanian bushwalkers so we already had most of the other usual requirements for an adventure out in the infamously rugged and meteorologically brutal South West Tasmania.

We also took with us two satellite phones and one PLB (Personal Locator Beacon) in case of any emergency which required urgent outside help. The satellite phones were also to be used towards the end of the trip to confirm arrangements and timing for our pick up which could not be confirmed precisely before we began due to the unpredictable nature of such an excursion.

Practice

Knowing that rafting the Franklin River without any white water experience at all would be foolish, we organised three short preparatory white water trips. These ranged in difficulty from a trip along the South Esk (Longford to Hadspen) to two trips on the Meander River (Dam to town). We had planned to use the Mersey River white water course, but we discovered at the last minute that the Australian White Water Championships had been carelessly scheduled for that location on the same dates that we'd planned our practice run, so we kindly left them to it and paddled the Meander instead.

I was only able to make one of the practice trips – the first of the two Meander River paddles – but it was an invaluable exercise in which I learned a little about how the raft handles in different situations, how to maneuver, how to read the water (at least in fairly tame conditions) and where, when and how to aim for different parts of the river (rapids, eddies, submerged and protruding obstacles, etc).

Reference Materials – Written Guides, Notes and Maps

Even with David's previous experience it was very important to have good notes and maps to guide us along the river, as there are some very dangerous sections that cannot be rafted, and other sections that can only be rafted by experienced rafters when the water levels are just right. The notes could tell us how to identify the dangerous rapids, where best to portage (carry gear around them), where to find different camp sites and how good or large the camp sites were. Some notes also include points of interest along the way.

We used a combination of three sets of notes and three sets of maps, each of which had their advantages and disadvantages. One of the map and note sets was based on Bob Brown's original notes (Franklin River conservationist/activist and later a senator).

One of the most useful maps we used was hand drawn, with hand written notes adjacent to each significant point on the river (including the number of deaths that had occurred at various points along the way!). This was provided to David by Ro Privett from his trip a few years ago (Ro is better known for his "Murray Quest" at <http://www.murrayquest.com/>).



Scouting and Discussing the Options for Shooting, Lining or Portaging a Rapid

I printed two sets of maps and one set of notes onto waterproof paper using a colour laser printer. I tested this waterproof paper after printing onto one sheet and found that it worked very well. After a lot of water, and a reasonable amount of scrunching and rubbing there was no damage to the printed map at all.

Of course even with the best information available for a variety of water levels, it is still essential to scout each rapid on foot, when the entire rapid cannot be clearly viewed from the boat (ie, almost all significant rapids).

Logistics

Transporting eight people from Launceston to the Collingwood River (where the rafting was to start) along with all their usual wilderness adventure gear, plus the additional rafting gear, is not easy. Then there is also the difficulty of how to arrange pick up at the end of the trip when we wouldn't know which day that would be on until we were close to the end. In particular, we would need a boat ride from the Gordon River to Strahan, somewhere to stay in Strahan overnight, and then a ride back home to Launceston afterwards.

We were very fortunate to have Paul in our group who has many tourism industry contacts including Peter McDermott (of McDermotts Coach Transport). Peter provided us with a mini bus and trailer which he drove himself collecting us and all our gear from our homes and dropping us off at our starting point. As they say, it is not what you know but who you know. Paul's partner Katie is Peter's daughter. Paul is also a friend of Guy Grinning who owns a 60 foot catamaran based in Strahan. Guy agreed to pick us up at the end of the trip and Peter came to the rescue again with the offer to let us all stay in his house in Strahan the night that Guy's boat brought us back to civilisation.



Being Picked Up at the Sir John Falls Jetty at the End of the Expedition

This made our trip much easier to organise than it otherwise could have been.

Our Plan

Some commercial operators using one large raft for the six or more people paddle the entire river in about eight days. They only go when the water level is just right and are able to power through some rapids that we would not risk with our smaller rafts with one person each. Of course, their expert guides know the river and each of its rapids a lot better than we do.

We planned for fourteen days on the river, including two days to climb Frenchman's Cap from the Irenabyss and back (at which point two of the party were to continue walking out to the highway along the Frenchman's Cap track). This would allow us to take it slower with less pressure to raft rapids we were not confident with. However, we knew that most similar expeditions get delayed for at least a couple of days along the way when the water level in the river rises quickly after rain (and it rains frequently in South West Tasmania). Some groups have to wait for several days for the rain to stop and for the water level to recede again, but thankfully it usually recedes almost as quickly as it rises.



*Make Shift Camp – Waiting for the
Flooded Franklin River to Recede*

Therefore we decided to be prepared for up to three weeks in the wilderness. I packed two weeks' worth of good food, and one week's worth of emergency rations (plain rolled oats, plain rice, dried vegetables).

David also suggested that each person should bring at least two 'treats' to share along the way. So most days we would have something unexpected and hopefully extra tasty to eat or drink. I planned for four treats (one in combination with David), and managed to come up with a fifth treat for our last lunch, which I hadn't planned but which worked out exceptionally well.

Day 1 - Collingwood Bridge to Franklin Junction

27 January 2012

It was very early in the morning when I extracted myself from between the sheets of my comfortable bed for the last time before spending two weeks in the wilderness. My wife kindly made me a special farewell cooked breakfast after which I waved goodbye to her and the kids at 6:00am. The bus took a few of us to Westbury where we were to meet the rest of the group... some of whom were just getting out of bed when we arrived. Something had gone wrong with communications and they were not expecting us until an hour later. So after coffees and hot chocolates while waiting for others to arrive, the full team eventually set off from Westbury aboard the bus and one car - a little late, but a lot excited.

The bus ride was a good opportunity for some of us to get to know each other a bit better. We were a bit of a mixed bunch and for most of us, our only connection was through David. Some of us had not actually met before now. The road trip was largely uneventful apart from a pair of wallabies shagging on the side of the road (they don't like being interrupted either and didn't move out of the way until the very last second) and a brief stop at the lookout on the Lyell Highway where there were great views of Frenchmans Cap. Just a few kilometres before our rafting departure point we picked up Kate and Lauren at the car park for the Frenchmans Cap walking track – they were planning to walk out that way after the first two days of hitching a ride on our rafts so they left their car there.

We unloaded our gear from the bus in the small dirt parking area beside the Lyell Highway at the Collingwood River and then checked the water gauge beneath the bridge. The notes for the Franklin River suggest that the ideal level for rafting the Franklin is between 0.8 and 1.2 metres. When we arrived, the water was not even touching the gauge. We estimated that it was about 0.5 metres (0.3 metres below the bottom of the gauge).

However, with our lack of experience and the nearby warning sign saying,

“DO NOT LEARN TO RAFT ON THE FRANKLIN RIVER”

we thought that a low water level might be good for us.

Most rafting trips start at the Collingwood River rather than the Franklin because, until their junction, the Collingwood has a greater volume of water. We had noticed as the bus crossed over the Franklin a few kilometres back that there was barely a trickle of water ‘flowing’ amongst the mostly dry rocks of the Franklin River bed.



Water level not registering at Collingwood River Bridge (photo David Tasker)



Ready to Launch at the Collingwood River Bridge

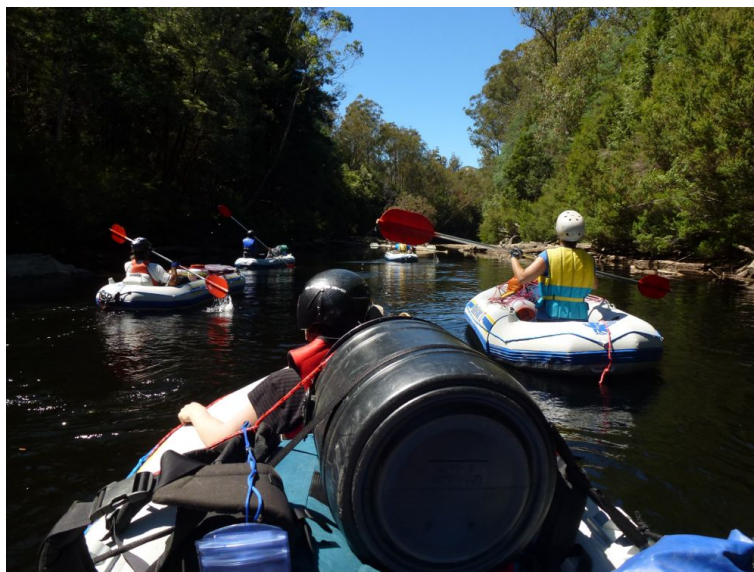
It was well after midday by the time we had finished inflating the rafts, packed the gear into them and donned our rafting attire. Each person had a different idea of what clothes were suitable and some changed outfits according to the weather over the next few days. Some of us (myself included) wore wetsuits, others had polypro thermals, while others just shorts and T-shirts. Of course we all wore helmets and PFDs for safety.

As we launched our boats, and slowly paddled out of site of the bridge the weather was outstanding – fine and hot. I remember specifically searching the sky for clouds a couple of times that

afternoon so that I could be accurate when I state that there really was not a cloud in the sky. This was the point of no return. It was a little daunting to look back and see the bridge disappear around the first corner, knowing that we would see no other substantial man-made constructions for another two weeks and would instead be in the grip of a remote wild river which has claimed many lives.

Nevertheless, the first stretch of the Collingwood River consisted of flat water through beautiful forest. The leatherwood trees were in full bloom and the smell of the rainforest in Tasmania is something I very much enjoy when I've been away from it for a while. This easy start was a good opportunity for us to get used to our rafts and gear all fully loaded for the first time. Two of the rafts had two people in them, with their gear being distributed amongst the other rafts. I had an additional pack from one of those people in my raft, strapped onto the front of my own pack.

During the course of the afternoon we had to negotiate a few rapids on the Collingwood River. Although some of these were interesting, even challenging for novices like us, most of them were merely annoying with the water level too low to float our boats through. We frequently had to get out of our boats and lift or drag them over the rocks that were just below the surface of the shallow water. It became frustrating and tiresome work and the open water or occasional rapid that was good enough for us to 'shoot' (paddle raft through) were always a great relief.



Easy Paddling on Flat Water (photo David Tasker)

At one point during a flat section a tiger snake with very distinct stripes swam right across the river just in front of my raft. It then slithered up the bank and continued on its way. Later a large speckled dragonfly landed on my paddle, between my hands and right in front of my face. As I watched it, I noticed that it was consuming something small, white and fluffy that it must have just caught. When it had finished its snack it took off to further its pursuits elsewhere.

There was at least one rapid on the Collingwood leg of this trip that required us to line the boats through (ie, let them float through without anybody in them, while holding the boat by a rope). This particular rapid had a significant drop, but not enough water going over it to shoot it without damaging the boats. However, it still proved to be particularly problematic with Paul's boat becoming wrapped on a large smooth rock at the bottom of it. The term 'wrapped' refers to the boat literally being wrapped around the upstream side of a rock (or log) such that the pressure of the current pushing it onto the rock makes it very difficult to move. In some cases, boats have to be completely abandoned, because they are stuck so fast by the pressure of the water. In this case, Paul's boat was quickly swamped, and it took quite a lot of time, energy and team work from Paul and I to move one end of the raft enough to get a bit of current flowing between the boat and the rock. After this it was easier to move the raft away from the rock and then we could empty it of water. This experience opened our eyes to how easily a raft can become trapped, even in low volumes of water, and how difficult it can be to free the boat.

It was quite late in the afternoon when we eventually reached the confluence of the Franklin and Collingwood Rivers. It was exciting to reach this junction, firstly because we had at last reached the Franklin River, which was what we were here for, and secondly because it was the location of our first camp site, which meant we had finished paddling for the day.



Jess shooting a Collingwood River rapid one-handed



Kitchen area near the camp site at the confluence of the Franklin and Collingwood rivers

Before dinner, three boats required patching due to slow leaks. One from an imperfect patch that was applied a few days before the trip and two rafts had new leaks from scraping over the shallow rocks on the Collingwood River. As with all the patch work done on this trip, David's experience and expertise was invaluable, as he patched holes both inside and outside where possible. Most of us had brought repair kits and we sure needed them over the course of the next two weeks!

Day 2 - Collingwood Junction to Irenabyss

28 January 2012



*Paul and Nik paddling in early morning sunshine
(photo Jamie Warburton)*

Our second day of rafting would be our first full day on the Franklin River. We were packed and ready to launch the boats at 9:15am. This became a fairly typical starting time for us. As much as we endeavoured to start earlier each morning, with a large group there is usually a different person running late each morning.

During the morning we found the rapids were still very shallow. We frequently had to step out of the boats to drag or lift them over exposed or shallow rocks, until the point where the Lodden River joins the Franklin. From there on the volume of water was more suitable, and the rapids were much more enjoyable.

Just before reaching the Lodden River junction we began noticing Huon Pines along the banks of the river. They were quite common for the remainder of the journey and at our campsites. Although there we saw no truly large Huon Pines there were certainly a lot of small and mid-sized specimens, which is encouraging.

We stopped for lunch at the confluence of the Lodden and Franklin rivers where I had a nice ham and salad roll from the bakery near home and it was still reasonably fresh.

The afternoon saw us shooting some more substantial rapids and we were becoming more comfortable with them. It was on one of these rapids that we had the first serious mishap of the journey – one of two for the day. Both incidents had the potential to be disastrous (at least as far as I was concerned as a close observer of both incidents) and both were terrifying to watch.



Jamie sets out from the Collingwood River junction with the first rapid of the day in the background

While shooting a rapid, Jess' paddle got caught between the high boulders on each side of her, knocking her out of her boat when the paddle caught her under the chin. The current then pushed her up against her boat which had washed up against the underside of a boulder. She disappeared as the current pushed her under water and under her boat. It was a very anxious few moments for those of us standing on the nearby rocks watching helplessly (from where we'd been scouting the rapid) until she resurfaced about 15 or 20 metres downstream – she was shaken, but otherwise fine. It took some time for us to get her boat free from the boulder, but after a few minutes paddling, Jess was keen to shoot the next rapid.



Negotiating a maze of boulders

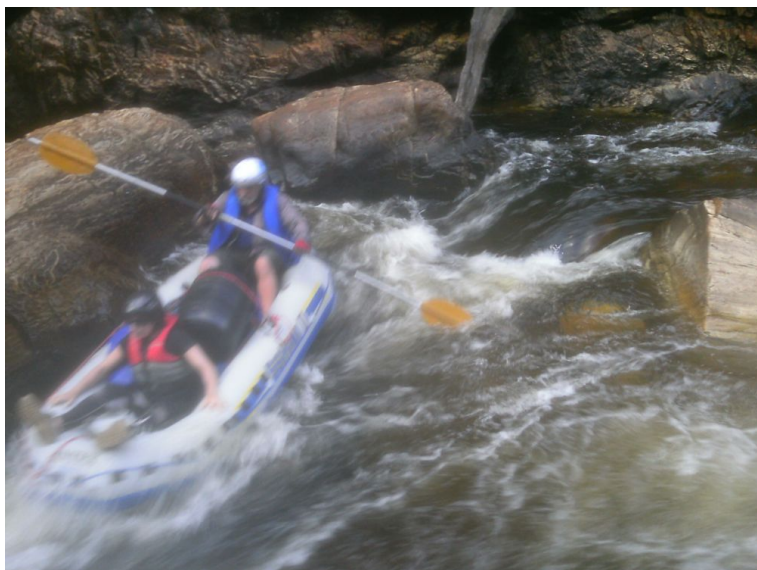
The afternoon also involved two substantial portages, where all our gear had to be removed from the rafts and carried around rapids that were judged too dangerous to shoot. Both were listed in the notes as compulsory portages, meaning that nobody should raft them (at least at low or normal water levels).

The first of these portages was a huge log jam. The largest of the logs was the trunk of an ancient Huon Pine spanning the entire river with many other logs and a few boulders pushed against it. While a few of the team started portaging on the left, unpacking all their gear and carrying each item and boat separately, Jess suggested that at the right side, we could lift our rafts, with our gear still in them, over the horizontal tree trunk and lower them by their ropes into the large pool on the other side.



Discussing the Log Jam portage (photo Jamie Warburton)

This turned out to work very well. In the time that two boats were unpacked and portaged on the left side we managed to lift and lower four boats, fully packed, over the right side. Using both portage methods simultaneously probably worked out for the best as we were able to portage two sets of boats at the same time. Later, we re-read the notes for this portage and found that they recommended lowering the boats over the right end of the tree trunk, during low water levels, exactly as Jess had suggested.



David and Kate Shooting a Rapid

It was at the location of the second compulsory portage for the day that a further serious mishap occurred. When we reached the rapid known as ‘Nasty Notch’, we secured our boats at the edge of the river and went to have a look at the portage options, knowing that this one was supposed to be impossible to shoot. Sure enough, when I laid eyes on it from the rocks on the river bank, the phrase “death trap” popped into my head very clearly. The water gushed down a substantial drop into a large hole between the boulders, bubbling and frothing up madly, with the only escape from the hole being a tangle of logs through which the water was sieved. If anybody was to get into

this hole they would have no chance of ever getting out. The inflow of water would constantly pummel them to the bottom of the hole. If by some miracle they managed to surface, they would then be pinned to the log jam by the pressure of the outflow.

After checking the notes and looking around on both sides of the river, it was clear that the best portage would be on the other side of the river. One by one we paddled across to the other side where there was only room for two boats at a time to be unloaded. Each boat could then be lifted out and across the logs and rocks.

When Jamie’s turn came to paddle across he was unlucky to just touch a log in the middle of the current with the front of his boat. It was a gentle touch, but it was enough for his raft to lose its momentum, and bounce back into the current just above the Nasty Notch. I can’t honestly recall how he then came to be out of his boat swimming in the water – perhaps he had decided to try to jump for the rock on which Kate was already standing beside the strong current and pull his boat into it – but whatever the case, I was in grave fear for his life as I watched him, his raft and his paddle being separately and rapidly sucked towards the Nasty Notch death trap just a few metres away. Kate reacted quickly and waded through a pool of water to where she was able to grab his boat. She pulled it to safety and called out to Jamie that she had his boat secure. Jamie then appeared to start swimming after his paddle which was about to go down into the pit of the death trap. I was on a nearby rock and yelled out to him, “Leave the paddle! Leave the paddle!”, as loud as I could, as did David from the other side of the river – there was clearly no way he’d be able to catch up to the paddle without being swept into the death trap himself. Whether he could even hear our yelling or not I don’t know, but he realised just how much danger he was in and changed direction, swimming directly for the nearby rocky bank where I was standing. He made it safely, but it was a very near thing, as the current accelerated just before dropping into the pit of the Nasty Notch death trap.

His paddle, by some fluke, did not drop into the pit. Instead, it became wedged under a boulder quite deep under the water with one end just visible, right on the brink of the drop into the hole. I didn’t see how they retrieved the paddle, as I became more involved in the portage on the other side of the river at that point (after being sure to paddle my raft across a LOT further upstream than was really necessary).

I later learned that Kate, who has a lot of rock climbing experience, secured a rope around Jamie who climbed over the slippery boulder directly above where his paddle was stuck. By leaning forward and reaching down, he was able to drop a loop of rope down to the paddle. With a long stick

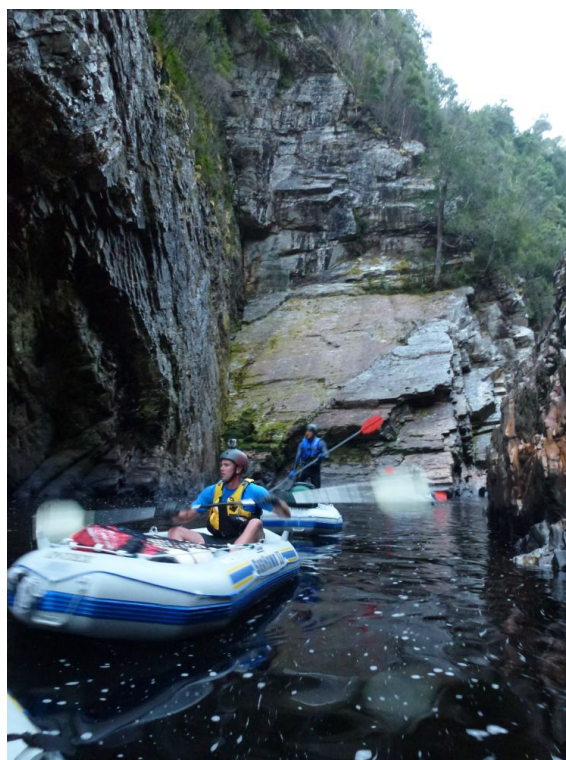
he managed to push the loop over the end of the paddle and draw it up. It was a difficult and dangerous operation and I was quite relieved when I heard cheering and looked back from my portaging work on the other side of the river to see them holding the paddle up high.

After an awkward portage over a rough and slippery route, we got our boats packed up again and continued paddling down the river. We still had a long way to go before our camp site. We were getting tired after what had already been a long and trying day.

We were still paddling as daylight was fading. Then suddenly I recognised where we were. Just after shooting a nice rapid we entered a beautiful serene gorge with overhanging cliffs on both sides. I stood up in my raft and called out “This is the Irenabyss!” to those just in front of me. This was very exciting to me because it was one of the most beautiful places I’d ever seen, having been at the other end of this gorge previously while walking out from Frenchmans Cap via an alternative route. It was very exciting for everybody else too, because we now knew that our camp site was just at the other end of this short gorge.

Sure enough, we reached our camp site five minutes later at the end of the Irenabyss at 8:45pm. That was 11.5 hours for the day! We were exhausted - physically and mentally.

During the course of the afternoon we had lost two paddles, but both were retrieved. Another paddle had been broken. Thankfully, David had a comprehensive repair kit and the next day, with some screws and some ingenuity, the broken joining tube inside Paul’s paddle shaft was shortened a little and screwed in securely again.

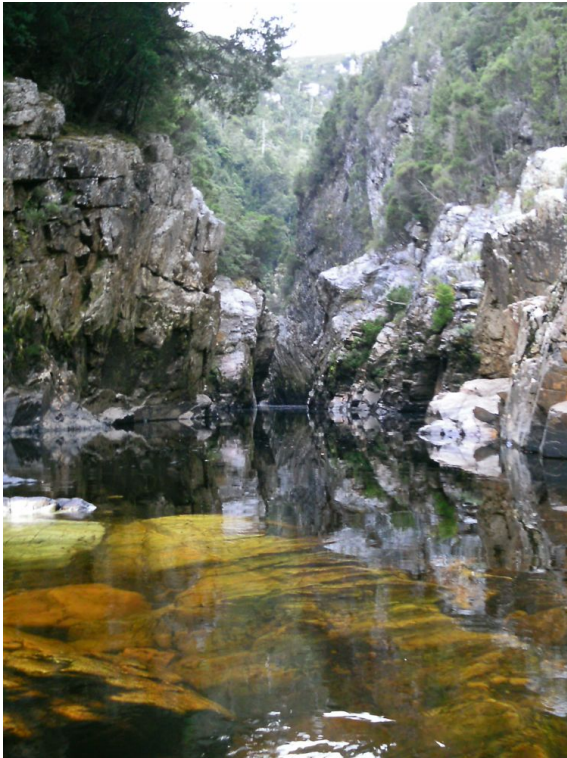


*Entering the Irenabyss
(photo David Tasker)*

Between David and I, we had organised a special dinner to share with everybody tonight before Kate and Lauren left us the next day via the Frenchmans Cap walking track. We cooked up a huge stir fry of fresh vegetables with marinated and vacuum sealed steak and rice. It was a rather late dinner which was eventually served to the ravenous team at 10:30pm. Everyone loved dinner and Kate suggested that all we needed now was dessert. “Well, I can arrange that”, I said, and I presented a container of choc-chip cookies that my wife had baked for us just two days earlier. After three of these each, everyone was satisfied and happy, but tired and very much ready for bed.

Day 3 - Irenabyss – Planned Rest Day

29 January 2012



The Irenabyss from the Western End

Our original plan was to climb Frenchmans Cap from the Irenabyss. From there, Kate and Lauren would continue walking out to the highway while the rest of us walked back to the Irenabyss to continue rafting.

However, it had rained during the night and the rain periods continued through the day. Since there are no views to be had from Frenchmans Cap in low cloud we cancelled the walk for the team, leaving Kate and Lauren to walk out over two days on their own. It was late morning when we farewelled them, so we stuck with the plan of not rafting further down the river today and had a rest day. We also had a paddle to repair and the opportunity to simply enjoy being on the river in a good campsite. I was not terribly disappointed about missing out on Frenchmans Cap, having climbed it twice before and not feeling the need to do it a third time, especially in the rain.

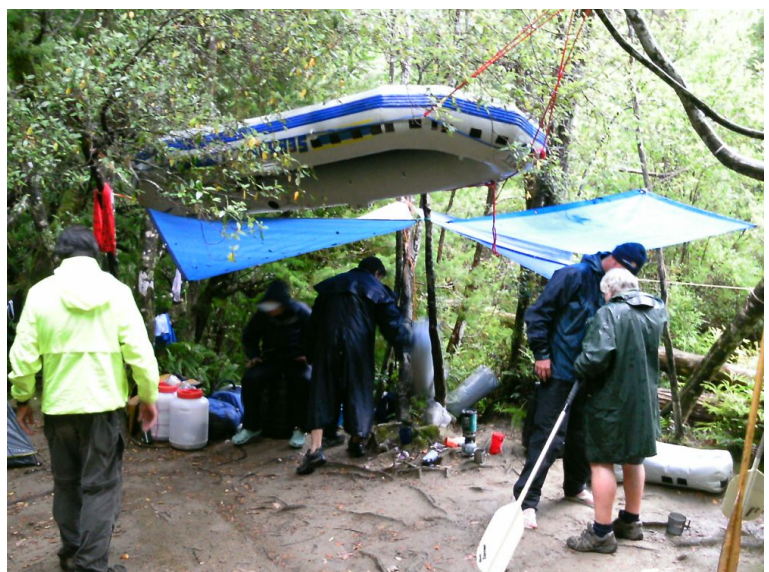
During breaks in the rain I paddled up and down the Irenabyss, initially alone and a second time with Paul. David and Sean had paddled up and down a little earlier. It is a beautiful part of the world in any

weather and it was very enjoyable.

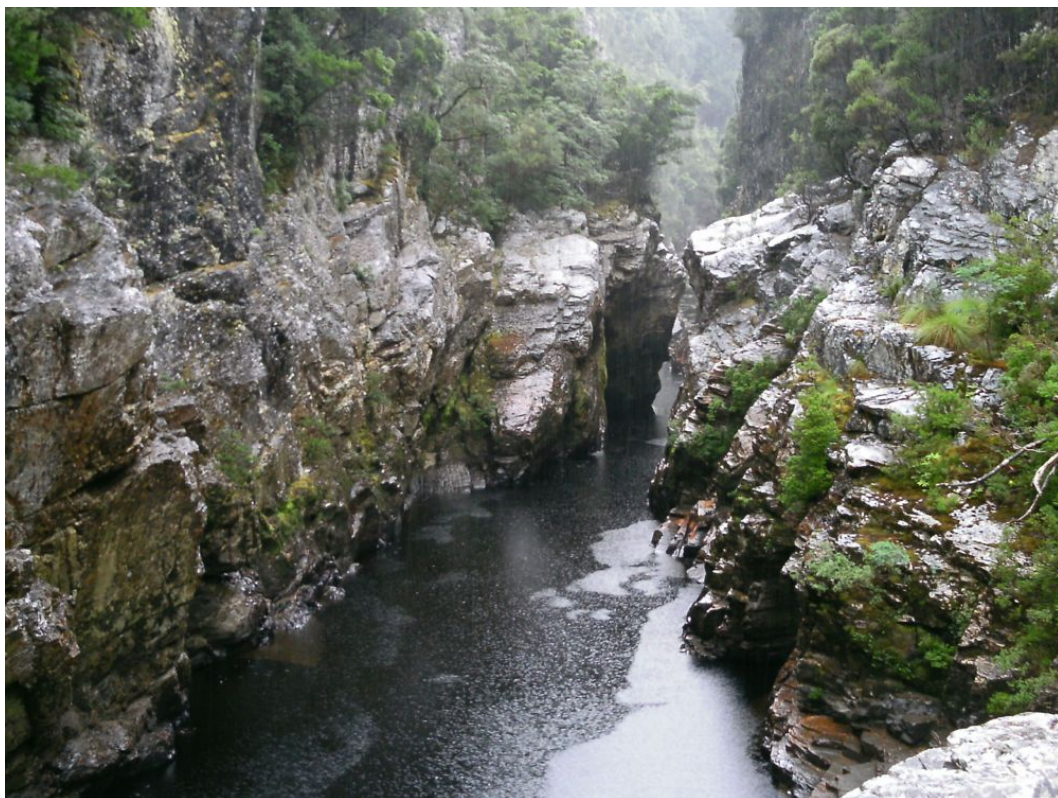
Paul and I also had a look around the camp site on the other side of the river where I'd stayed once before after swimming across the Irenabyss on a previous bushwalking visit.

On that earlier occasion, I had concluded that this was one of the most beautiful places on earth. The beauty was enhanced by the mystery of the place, wondering what was upstream beyond those overlapping and overhanging cliffs.

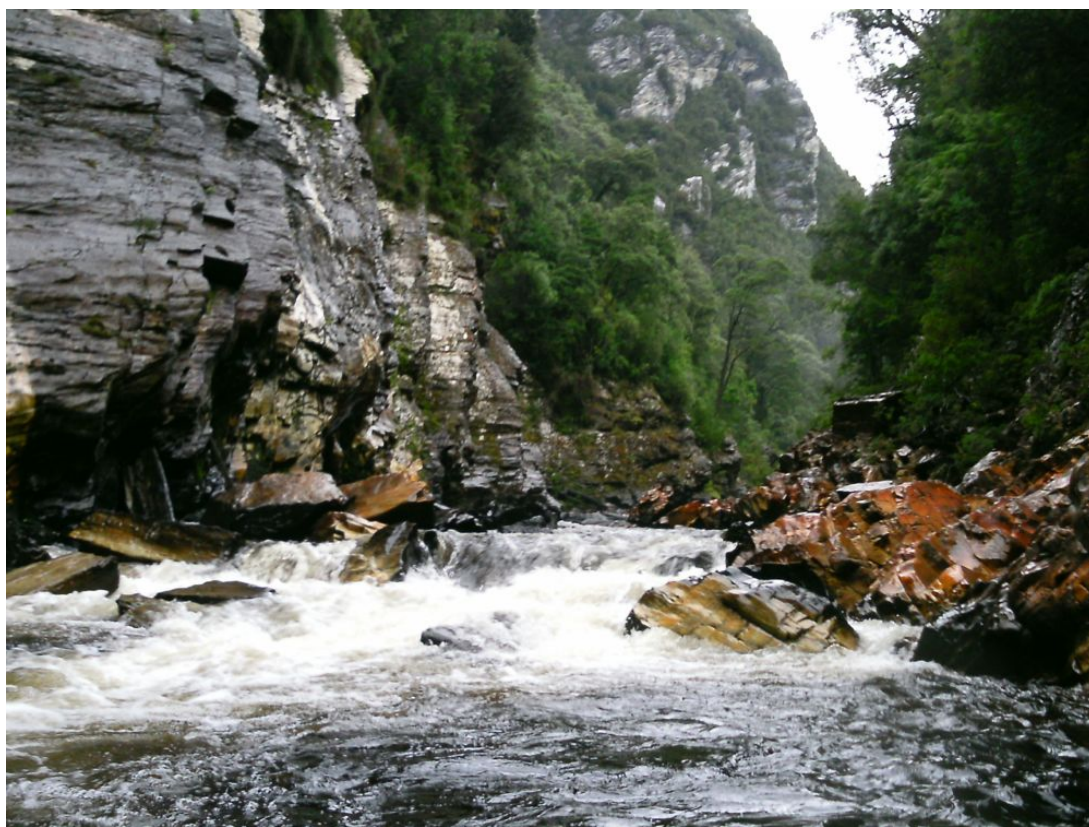
After rafting the sudden spill over the last rapid of Deception Gorge into the quiet waters of this chasm, I had experienced what was "just around the corner". So the magic and mystery of the Irenabyss was now gone. Although it looked the same as it ever did, the entrancing spell of its mystery was broken.



Paddle Repairs at the Irenabyss Camp Site



Rain at the Irenabyss



Upstream Where We'd Entered the Irenabyss the Previous Day

Earlier in the day Sean found an old-style wooden paddle amongst the trees behind our camp site. It was in very good condition, with just a small chip and a small amount of delaminating of the ply on one of the blades. I tried it out and found that I liked it better than our own paddles, being stiffer and thicker in the shaft than our aluminium. However, it was not quite as long as my paddle and required leaning towards both sides alternatively. Jamie gave it a try and being a similar length to his own aluminium paddle he decided to use the wooden one for the rest of the trip.



The Irenabyss from the Eastern End

Jamie separated his aluminium and fibre-glass paddle into its two parts after which there was some discussion as to who should carry this extra spare paddle, or whether it should be left in the camp site where we'd found the wooden paddle. Jamie had already brought a spare paddle of his own (a short kayak paddle), so didn't want to carry two spares when nobody else was carrying any. Paul volunteered to carry this additional spare for the next day on the understanding that we would take turns at carrying the spare paddle on subsequent days.

Late in the afternoon David put together another treat for us – 'pufftaloons' (pan fried scones). After mixing and kneading the dough on the concave lid of his rafting barrel and then frying them carefully, we had scones with butter and jam or honey for afternoon tea at 5:45pm. It was an excellent arvo tea. In fact it was so good and ate so much that nobody was interested in cooking any dinner that night.

David retired to his tent for an half hour nap saying "wake me around dinner time". The rest of us, having spent much of the day sheltering from the sporadic rain under tarps and rafts suspended in the trees, and being full of scones and jam, retired to our tents early at about 7:00pm to read and then fall asleep without any dinner. David slept on!



*David flipping pufftaloons
(photo David Tasker)*

Day 4 - Irenabyss to Fincham Crossing

30 January 2012

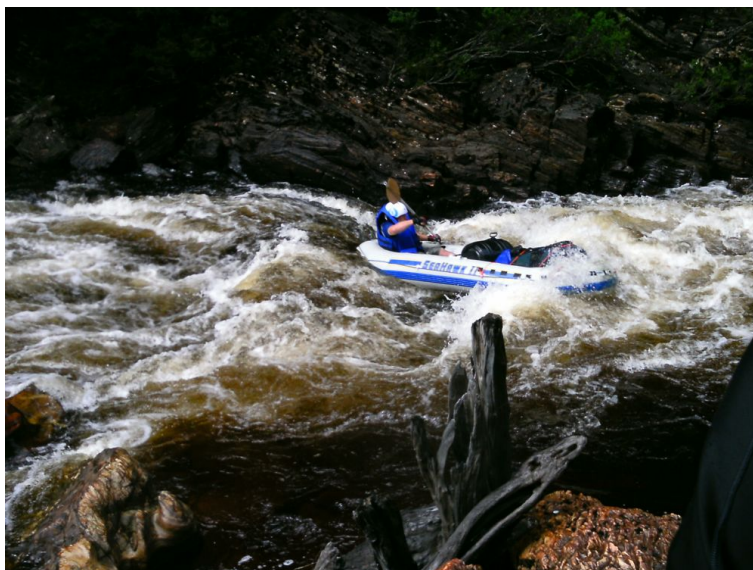
When we awoke and crawled out of our tents, we found that the rain had eased off to an occasional shower. It held off while we packed our tents and gear, but the drizzle returned occasionally throughout the morning.

When I packed my gear for this trip at home, it took about five tries to get all of my gear into my large pack with the intention that having to portage only one item (in addition to the boat itself) was the way to go. However, I'd not managed to get it all in again for the second day's rafting and had relied on using spare space in Kate's pack which was stowed in my raft. Now that Kate and Lauren had left via Frenchmans Cap, I tried again to fit everything back into my pack. But there was no way it was going to work.

Instead, I had to pack my dry sack and back pack separately with the dry sack tied onto both the raft and to the outside of my pack. I also had to be prepared for everything in the back pack to get doused in water. I had to completely change how I packed. Eventually I came up with a system that worked well for the rest of the trip.



Rafts which had been dragged up onto the beach and on rocks were floating on the higher water in the morning



David shooting a rapid between the Irenabyss and Fincham Crossing

Overnight the water level in the basin below the Irenabyss where our boats had been pulled up on the beach, had risen by about 30cm. One of the boats that had been sitting on rocks was now floating. Thankfully, we had all remembered to tie them up securely. I later learned that David also had a habit of quietly sneaking down to the river each evening to check on the boats and paddles. It was generally agreed that this slightly higher water level would be a very good thing for our rafting, as some of the rapids had been too shallow on the earlier two days of paddling.



Cruising the faster current between the Irenabyss and Fincham Crossing

This turned out to be correct, with all the rapids for the morning having a greater volume of water, making them more interesting, without being so much water that they would be too dangerous.

We only had a fairly short distance to travel to Fincham Crossing today. It took us only 2.5 hours and this was the only day of the entire adventure on which all of us paddled the entire distance for the day without having to drag, line, or portage at all. So we were very happy with the day's rafting.

There were a few nice rapids to be negotiated during the morning, and the only incident worth mentioning was

that while I was attempting to stop on the river bank so that I could get out and scout a rapid that I'd reached first, the boat bounced back off the bank right into the current. It quickly swept me into the rapid itself. Thankfully, I'd already gotten a reasonable view of the rapid from standing up in my raft as I'd approached it earlier and was moderately confident that it would be fine to shoot. Just before I went into the rapid, I called back to the rafters behind me, "I'm just going to scout this one while shooting it!". Thankfully, the rapid turned out to be a safe medium grade so at the bottom I turned around, waved the next raft through and gave them directions on which route to take through the rapid. This was one of only a few rapids that I paddled through first.

We arrived at our next camp site at Fincham Crossing in time for lunch. Two of us set up our tents on the helipad, which took some climbing on a rough steep track with heavy gear. The rest of the party set up three tents on the beach beside the river, being careful to monitor the river level with sticks in the sand (the water appeared to have stopped rising). They also erected a lean-to from a couple of rafts and paddles in order to be able to sit outside with some rain protection.

The helipad made a great tent platform, albeit a tad dangerous to be near the edge, which had a significant drop off. There was a good view of the river and of course it was nice to have a completely flat surface under the tents as well as flat areas to cook on. We were also grateful that no helicopters attempted to land, as it would have required breaking camp very quickly to make way for it.

Fincham Crossing is the site of an old flying fox which had been used to transport drilling equipment to the other side of the river to bore into the rock to test the stability of the rock for building a dam in this location. There is also a manual and automatic (solar powered) hydrographers station (ie, water level gauge) which was



Tents on the helipad at Fincham Crossing

originally used in dam planning but according to signs on the gauge is now used for climate data gathering.

It was quite a blight on the landscape and a bit of a shock to see this mess of cables across the river, the large metal construction of the water gauge, the helipad and the clear-felled rainforest around the helipad here in the middle of the wilderness.

After lunch three of us spent some time searching for the old Fincham track. After I located the start of the track immediately next to the monitoring station we walked the half hour each way to the old hydro hut which we

knew was up beyond the top of the hill. The track was clearly not used often and we cleared a lot of debris along the way, as well as negotiating several fallen trees and a recent land slip.

The hut was in good condition, although the door was almost held shut by the mass of spider webs all around it.

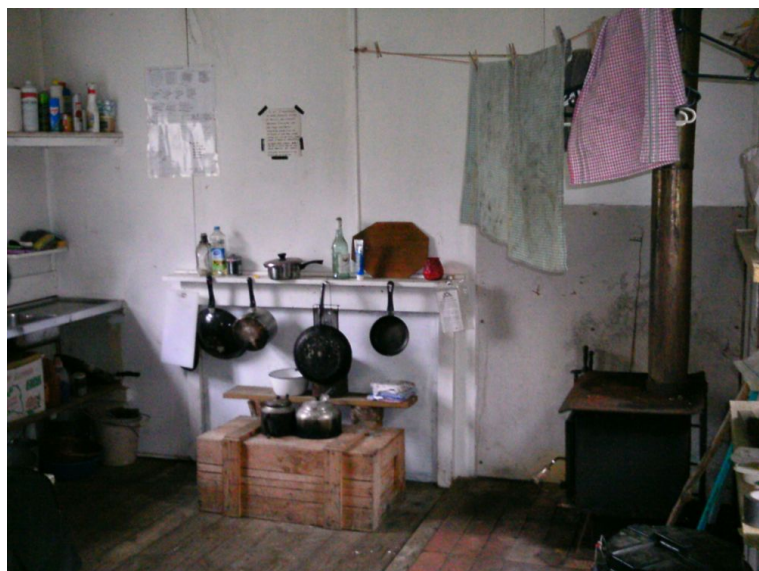


Clearing the Fincham Track (photo David Tasker)



First glimpse of the hydro hut on the Fincham Track

When we entered the hut David called out, “hit the lights please, Nik”. He was trying to trick me into an automated response. He succeeded but to his surprise the lights came on and he burst into a short round of hysterical giggling. Apparently he had caught a number of people out over the years when entering huts in the wilderness but this time the trick backfired on him, as this hut had solar powered lighting in addition to a wood fired heater and a sink with taps. That’s progress for you.



Inside the Fincham hydro hut

When recording our visit in the hut log book, we found that we were the only recorded visitors in nearly two years. There appeared to be a lot of activity in 2009, when the helipad was built, only two entries in the log book for 2010, and no entries at all for 2011, with us being the first for 2012.

On returning to our camp site, Paul found that his ankle was bleeding profusely from leech bites and that he still had a lot of leeches on his legs, socks and shoes. So I checked mine, and counted 19 leeches that I’d collected from that one hour walk. Not bad.

After dinner that evening Jess came up to the helipad with a treat for us – port. So we sat on the edge of the helipad, admiring the view over the river and sipping port. Just fantastic.

Day 5 - Fincham Crossing to Jericho Walls

31 January 2012

It was drizzling early in the morning, but it gradually cleared as the day progressed. The water level was down by about 15cm. That left it at about 15cm above what we regarded as the 'normal' (low) water level.

Before leaving camp we reviewed the notes for the section of river that we expected to raft today. In particular we discussed 'Debacle Bend'. As the name suggests there have been a lot of problems for rafters on that rapid. According to the notes the rapid looks perfectly raftable, however the notes made it abundantly clear that it should NOT be rafted due to very sharp rocks which are highly likely to cut right through fully laden rafts while paddling through it. The recommendation was to simply line the boats through. I.e, let them float down while being held by ropes from the shore or while wading through shallow water.

We were all clear on this, having had several punctures to boats already – to watch out for Debacle Bend, which would be later in the afternoon, and make sure we line the boats through. Simple! Other than that the notes indicated that the day would be a long but largely enjoyable one with a variety of rapids and not too much portaging. After further discussion, Jess agreed to carry the second spare paddle (Jamie's old paddle) for the day.



Paul and Jamie awaiting the next rafter while Sean calls the shots from upstream

As it turned out, the events during this day proved to be a serious wake up call, reminding us that all the notes and research that we had were only indicators. Every trip on this river would be different based on water levels and people skills and the notes, while useful, were merely a very general guide. We knew this – after all there were disclaimers on all the paperwork – but it finally hit home to us on day five.



Nik taking a break on flat water (photo David Tasker)

The first issue of the day turned out to be only a minor problem. Quite early in the day, while lining our boats down one rapid that we were not comfortable shooting, one of the boats was pulled so strongly by the current that its rope broke free from its owner. Thankfully it didn't get very far, and was retrieved without too much trouble just below the rapid.

There was one substantial mishap that happened to me. It was my first real personal scare for the expedition.

When negotiating rapids or other obstacles, it is advisable to do so one raft at a time. Each subsequent rafter is then waved through by a previous person, or somebody on the shore with a good view. This person acts like a traffic cop. They can also indicate the best line to take or point out obstacles to avoid.

On this occasion, there was a stretch of river where the current flowed quite quickly through an insignificant rapid, although several logs and boulders protruded into the current. There would likely be many more logs below the surface. Logs in strong currents are very dangerous. Rafts can get punctured or wrapped - and so can bodies.

Shortly after David had disappeared behind one of the boulders in the river, I thought I'd seen somebody waving me through. So I entered the current, drifted casually downstream and paddled around the boulders that hid much of the view. As I rounded the boulder I was confronted with a maze of protruding logs with David sitting on one of them and his boat resting against it. When he saw me coming he pointed to his right (my left) and shouted something that I couldn't hear over the noise of the water. At first I assumed he was directing me to paddle in that direction, but then too late I realised that he was telling me that there's a nearly invisible log just barely protruding from the surface of the water and I was charging headlong towards it. The log was parallel with the river banks, almost parallel with the water's surface, pointing upstream. It had a pointed end, just below the surface.

Afterwards, I learned that David had earlier been standing on his log to 'unwrap' his boat just before I'd seen him. He was sitting on the log and holding his boat so that it acted as a buffer that allowed Sean to swing through. Having misunderstood the signal to paddle through the rapid and David's signal to avoid the log, everything began to unravel for me very quickly.

After failing to ferry glide across the current away from the log, my third mistake was that I instinctively leaned away from the log just before impact. This meant that when colliding with the log side on, the underside of my raft was pushed up over the end of the log, causing the upstream side of the raft to tilt into the water just enough for the water to start flowing into it. The force of the current then pushed the raft further down so that it turned completely upside down, tossing me unceremoniously into the water. The raft was then pushed underneath the log upside down.

It was quite a shock to be dumped so suddenly into the cold fast flowing river. I tried to cling to the side of the raft, but soon lost my grip and was swept downstream for a short distance. The water was fairly flat and I managed to grab hold of another protruding log to arrest my progress. I could then push myself to a nearby rock on and climb out onto the bank. From there I walked back upstream to my raft which was still stuck upside down and mostly submerged under the log. More of the log was now visible above the water as the raft pushed it up aided by the force of the current. David was still there with his raft resting on another log just near mine.

I clambered across to help David who had started working to free my raft. The pointy tip of the log was right in the middle of the inflated floor of my raft, with all the pressure of the current pushing on it. Thankfully it was not too sharp and by some miracle the raft was not punctured.

Following David's instructions (and wondering which one of us was more nuts) I walked out onto the log, stepped down on top of my raft and stood fully on the underside of the floor of my boat. As David directed, and with his help, I pushed one end of the boat down from the point of the branch and further into the water. This enabled us to maneuver the boat away from the log as the upstream side was lifted up by the current.

I then dragged it to the bank and turned it right way up while David relaunched his own raft. His calm, sense, and knowledge in these situations was invaluable to all of us at times. I for one am exceptionally grateful for his help on this occasion and several others.

At this moment I realised I'd broken one of the guidelines for rafting (ie, my FOURTH mistake in this incident): If you get tossed out of your boat, hold onto your paddle! The theory is that your raft will not sink, and even if it drifts a long way downstream, it will most likely be recovered. But paddles, even those that float in calm water, will often end up pushed under water by the current, and are frequently never seen again (and there are other dangers with having paddles tied to boats). I knew all this, but in the moment of panic instinct took over and I let go of everything, subconsciously thinking of nothing but protecting myself.

By this time a couple of the others had come to our aid on the bank. One red blade of my paddle was spotted under water in the middle of the swift current. It was jammed deep under an invisible log that could not be reached from the bank and the current was too fast to be able to reach it by raft... unless...

Sean volunteered to sit in his raft, while Paul and I held his raft's rope, keeping him fairly stationary in the current just near where the vague red patch was just visible under the water. It was difficult to hold his boat still and in the right location. Eventually he managed to get a grip on my paddle by levering it with his own paddle. He brought the end of my paddle almost to the surface but then it slipped from his grip and we lost sight of it. It was spotted again, this time a little deeper and even more difficult to see. Again he got a grip on it with his paddle but it slipped out of his grasp and out

of site completely. My paddle was never seen again but I was grateful for the team's help in trying to recover it.

After staring helplessly into the water for a few minutes and seeing no more sign of my paddle, I declared that I was happy to carry the second spare paddle for the rest of the day and to relieve the others of the burden for the rest of the trip as well. So thanks Jamie for your paddle! We were now back to having only one spare (kayak style) paddle.

Another paddle was lost overboard by another member of the team on the same day, but was easily recovered just downstream. It happens all too easily with careless novices like us but has the potential to lead to serious trouble.

On a flat stretch of water Jess lost her enamel cup while using it for bailing water out of her raft. She was a little upset by this but felt a lot better when only a few minutes later she found a nice insulated cup amongst the rock on the river bank.

By 3:00pm it had been a long, eventful, stressful and tiring day. We had somehow skipped lunch, perhaps because we were too distracted by the events of the day. However, there was still a long way to go before the next camp site. We were hungry and tired, both mentally and physically. This is probably why we had forgotten to keep a look out for 'Debacle Bend' and did not recognise it.

We scouted the rapid and decided that it looked fine to shoot it. Our strategy was to keep to the right and be prepared to fend off the rock wall with the paddle to avoid slamming into it just after the big drop. No worries – it looked simple.

I was in the middle of the group through this rapid. My raft scraped a few rocks under the floor but other than that I thought it was great. Then I caught up to Paul who was looking somewhat less than happy. He told me that the floor on his raft had instantly deflated as he went over the edge of the drop. I turned around to see Jess paddling through the rapid. As she came over the drop one entire side and back tube of her raft instantly deflated.

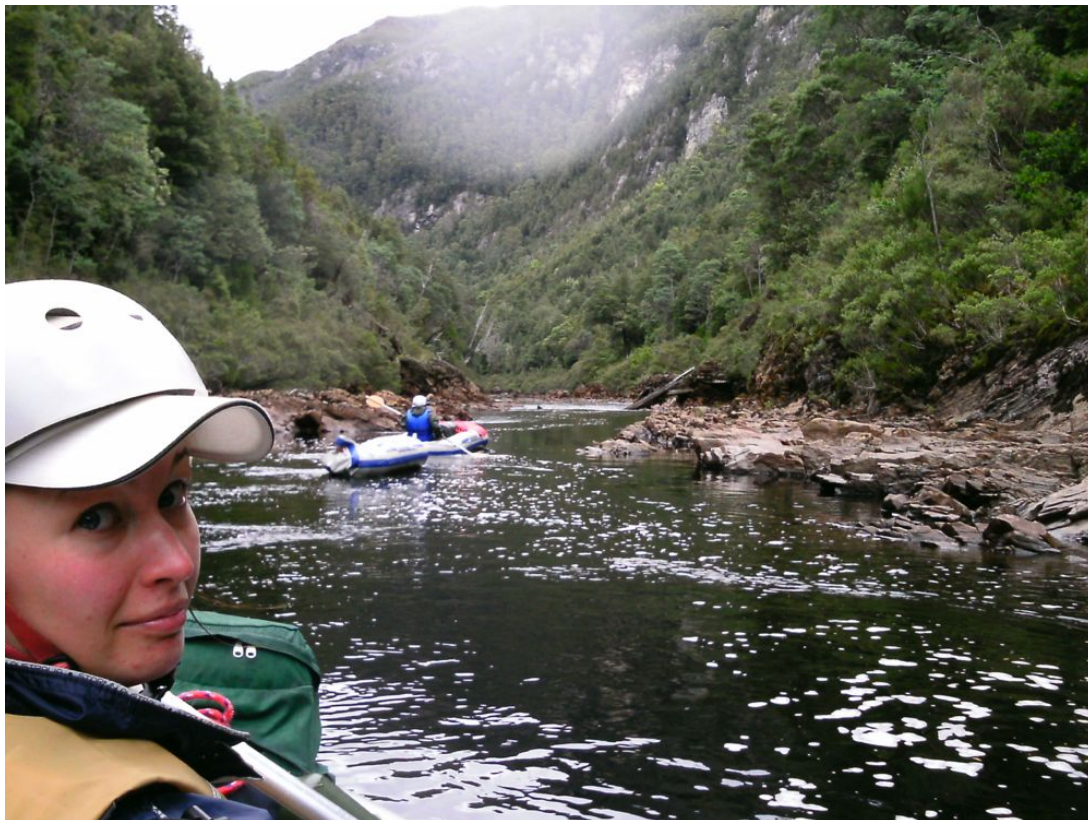


Jess' raft's tear & one of two tears in Paul's raft floor

Rafting with a deflated floor is possible (albeit more difficult and less comfortable), but rafting with one entire side and the entire back of the raft deflated is completely out of the question.

We signalled all the "no-go", "stop", "abandon" hand signals we could think of and shouted out to those yet to shoot the rapid. They were then careful to line their boats through the rapid. But it was too late for Paul and Jess. Two boats out of six had suffered gaping 20cm tears in them thanks to Debacle Bend.

After Jess' gear was removed from her boat and distributed amongst the other rafts, David carefully pulled up the deflated sides and roped them in place to at least keep the vague shape of a boat. He towed her boat the rest of the way to the next camp site (rapids and all) and Jess hitched a ride with me.



Jess watching her damaged and deflated raft being towed by David

It was another half an hour of paddling until we reached the camp site at 3:30pm just beyond Jericho Walls (a long line of cliffs on the North side of the river). We had been looking out for the camp site for some time when I noticed a rock on the river bank that was clearly out of place and I figured it was probably a marker. After searching the forest nearby I found what I thought was a decent, although not brilliant, campsite

We began unpacking the boats and a debate began regarding whether there might be a better camp site nearby, or if this was even a camp site at all. Soon the boats were re-packed to move on to a better camp site, but then debate restarted and finally it was decided that because it was late, we hadn't had lunch, we were tired, hungry and a little stressed by the days events, and because we couldn't be sure there were any other camp sites nearby, we had better stay at this one.

Once again the boats were unpacked and we set up camp. Some of the team opted to set up their tents on the beach on the other side of the river, while the rest of us camped in the rain forest.



Jericho Walls camp site (on both sides of the river)

The damaged boats were patched inside and out by David, our expert boat repairer, who was concerned that he needed the warmth of the sun to facilitate the repairs. We had been using more of our repair kits than we had anticipated and he expressed some concern that if we continue damaging boats at this rate we would run out of patch material or glue. However, we had brought a LOT of repair materials – we only ended up using most of the largest of the three repair kits that we'd brought.

We had no lunch at all today, but dinner was well-deserved and much appreciated when it finally came at the respectable time of 6:00pm.

We decided that skipping lunch was a very bad idea. It led to poor judgement, unnecessary weariness and had the potential to be very dangerous. What ever happened on the days ahead, we must make an effort to stop for lunch by mid-afternoon at the latest.



David patching Jess' raft

Day 6 - Jericho Walls to Brook of Inveraestra

1 February 2012

The previous morning my tent was a bit damp and I was still trying to work out my packing routine so put the tent into my pack and not into the dry sack. My pack had spent a few minutes under water during the day while my boat was upside down, wrapped under a log. Therefore when I went to bed, the tent was quite wet, inside and outside, including both the fly and the inner.

I was pleasantly surprised in the morning when I found that despite camping next to a river, and in a damp rainforest, my tent was much drier than when I went to bed. In fact, it looked as though it was just the normal amount of condensation that is to be expected when sleeping in a tiny one-man tent.

The water level was down by another 15cm, which meant that it was now back to the level that we started with.

The boats that were patched on the previous evening had both deflated slowly overnight. Jess' boat required a quick re-patching over the existing patch in the morning and fully re-patching again at the end of the day. The inside patch had probably not taken well, due to water on the inside of the tube.



*Nik and Paul lining rafts through a shallow and log infested rapid
(photo David Tasker)*



Paul's bent paddle

After breaking camp and launching our boats we discussed the high number of mishaps on the previous day and talked about ways in which we could improve our communications and avoid further problems as much as possible.

Even so I still managed to get my boat wrapped on another log. It was a long log that ran down the side of a rapid. Everybody's boat bumped it on the way through. The lesson I should have learnt the previous day did not overcome my instinct and I leaned the wrong way again, exposing the underside of my raft to the log. The raft then filled with water. I didn't get thrown out of the boat this time and was

able to easily crawl out onto the log, but could not budge the boat on my own. After calling out for help I was assisted by Jamie, and we got the boat free without too much trouble. I then overturned it to empty the water out.

On the same rapid, in about the same spot, Paul's paddle got jammed under a submerged log as he came through. The current and his momentum pushed him onwards. Instead of the paddle coming with him, it stuck and bent about 30° just where the shaft joins the blade before it popped free of the log.

This was the same paddle that had snapped the inner connecting tube on day 2, and this would not be the last time that Paul's paddle suffered significant damage.

After yesterday's Debacle Bend debacle, which some of us had attributed in part to a lack of good rest and food during the day, we made sure we stopped for a long break. We enjoyed our lunch sitting on a beach at a camp site that we spotted just after midday. It was very comfortable and relaxing, empowering us for the afternoon's rafting. I pulled out six fresh apples from my pack to add a fresh and crunchy fruit surprise to everybody's lunch. They were only a little bruised.



Lunch break (photo David Tasker)

We rafted from 9:15am to 5:30pm today. When we finally reached our camp site at the end of the day we were tired and hot. But we were in good spirits, having had a good lunch break and no serious mishaps for the day. The camp site was at the Brook of Inveraeatra which is a very pretty creek where it flows into the Franklin between rocks and under a tunnel of overhanging rainforest trees.

The weather today was fine and hot so before dinner I had a good skinny dip in the Franklin River. I washed my wetsuit, my underwear and myself, and felt much refreshed for it (and somewhat less stinky for the sake of those around me).

David got to work again patching new holes and replacing patches which had not sealed satisfactorily due to dampness the day before.



Sean shooting one of the more reasonable rapids of the day

Day 7 – Brook of Inveraestra to Corruscades

2 February 2012



Some of us shot this rapid, while others lined their boats through the smaller channel at the side, due to concerns about shallow rocks

We had a later start than usual from the Brook of Inveraestra, finally setting off at 10:00am. We scouted the two-step rapid near the camp site which turned out to be good fun and an easy rapid despite appearing to be a little difficult to us the evening before.

During the day we all shot a number of rapids. As we had different skill levels and confidence levels, some rapids were lined by a few individuals while others paddled through.

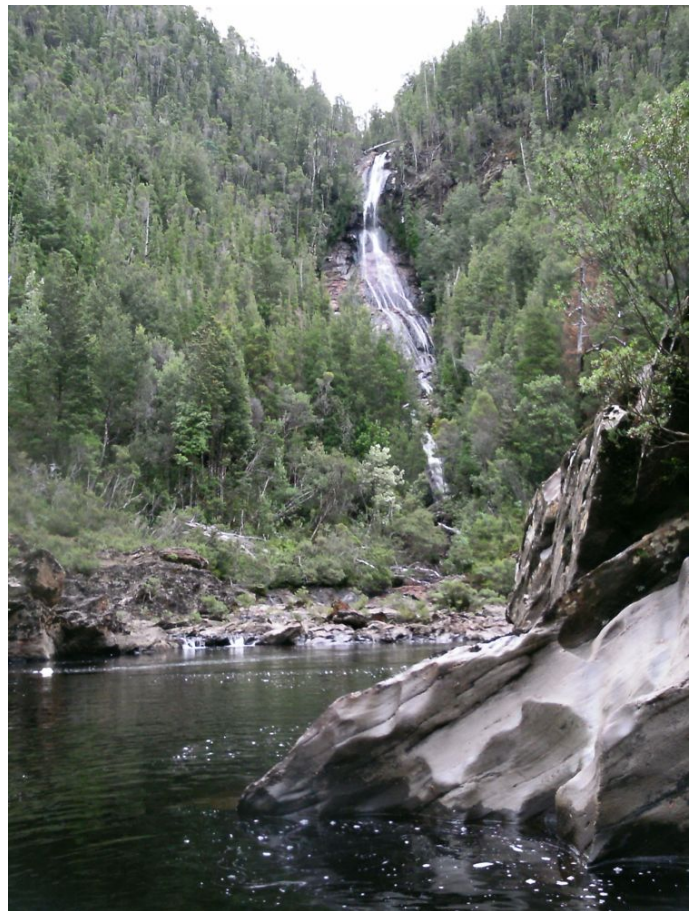
It was a long day, largely due to the huge portage that was required at The Churn – a rapid which started with the water swirling through a narrow gap in the rocks and was too dangerous to

raft. We pulled our boats up on the bank and unloaded them. Following a good one hour lunch we commenced the portage along a well defined but very steep track that Sean had identified.

This portage was long and was so steep that it required the use of a permanently fixed rope at the downstream end where it descended to the river after winding through the rain forest for some distance. The track was obvious although rough and steep. We had to completely deflate and pack up all of the rafts for the first time on this expedition.

It took us 3 hours to complete the portage which was closely observed by a resident quoll which ran out onto the track to check up on us occasionally. It was a hot day and we were exhausted by the time all the rafts and gear had been carried over the hill, through the forest and back down to the river again. We were all glad to eventually get wet and cool again.

During the course of the day we lost one paddle which was recovered just downstream, one cup and one glove. At the



Blush Rock Falls

end of the afternoon we had to paddle through Serenity Sound – a long quiet flat stretch of the river just before the Corruscades rapid where our next camp site was located.

As we approached the end of Serenity Sound and I approached the camp site, Jamie turned his raft to look at something floating in the water. He discovered that it was David's glove that had been lost above The Churn before lunch!

Most of us had a swim or a wash in the waters of Serenity Sound below our camp site, taking advantage of the hot summer weather which we knew was unlikely to last for long in South West Tasmania.

The Corruscades camp site was excellent. There was plenty of room for all our tents as well as a good area for everyone to use for cooking and relaxing. After dinner I offered everyone a choice of a Cherry Ripe or Turkish Delight chocolate bar. Jamie also shared around some fantastic d'Anvers chocolate fudge. It was a great evening for the chocoholics.

When I got up for a call of nature during the night, I noticed glow worms under the cliff behind the tree ferns, which complemented the clear stars visible through the canopy of trees above.



Nik negotiating the Side Slip rapid (photo David Tasker)



We found this plaque commemorating the 1959 visit of the first 4 Franklin canoeists near The Churn portage track on a now fallen and rotting tree trunk



The Churn portage descent

Day 8 – Corruscades to The Cauldron (Eagles Nest)

3 February 2012

Day eight started with another major portage around the Corruscades rapid. It was the second portage of the expedition that required the rafts to be deflated. The portage was a substantial distance and included scrambling through forest and over boulders.



Ripples of water drops reflected onto rocks

The portage was long and tricky. It was a huge relief to have all the boats re-inflated and on the water again at last, dangling on the ends of their tethers.

Unfortunately, it was only a few short paddles downstream that we reached the Thunder Rush rapid which required another portage. It was lunch time when we reached Thunder Rush. The track notes suggested that there were two portage routes – a ‘high portage’ on the right side of the river climbing steeply through the rainforest, and a ‘low portage’ on the left side, mostly over the boulders on the river bank.

It took Paul and Sean some time to locate the high portage. They scrambled up the steep slope and disappeared into the tree line. It was about an hour later when they returned and informed us that it was not only long and high, but also treacherously difficult. It would be even more difficult than usual due to a recent landslide. They judged that it could be more dangerous than shooting the rapid itself. Looking across at the hills and cliffs through which they’d just trekked, I believed them.



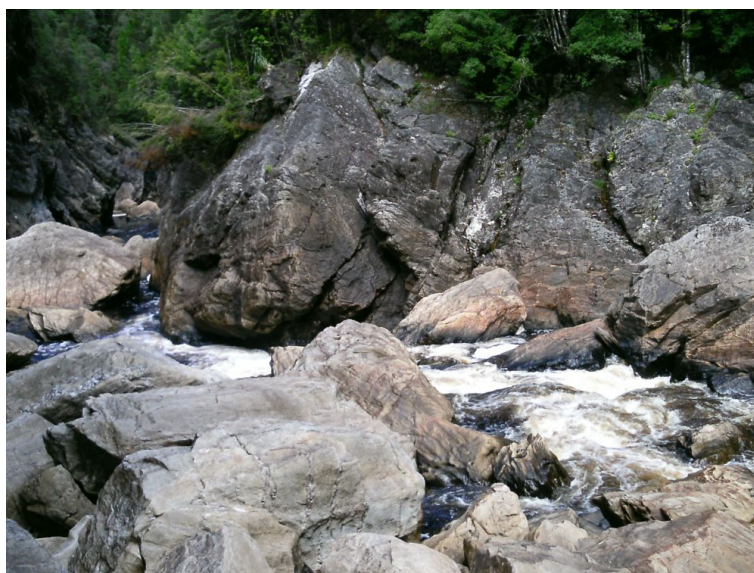
Nik resting while waiting for others to catch up, just before Thunder Rush (photo Jamie Warburton)

The low portage on the rocks on the left looked precarious as well. In particular, there was nowhere to launch the boats as the bank became too steep to walk on part way along the rapid. We weren't sure what we were going to do when we'd got all the boats and gear that far - only about half way down the rapid. At least deflation of the rafts would not be required for this shorter portage.

When we reached the end of the Thunder Rush portage there was still a lot of the rapid yet to be paddled but there was no calm place to launch the boats and load them up. After putting a few heads together a plan was devised. We undertook a rather odd boat packing

and launching procedure. There was one spot in the near side of the rapid where a lesser amount of water flowed through a narrow channel in the rock before dropping down to join the rest of the bubbling, swirling river. It was not wide enough to place rafts into but we figured out a way to use it.

One raft at a time, we placed a boat on top of this narrow channel where it sat wedged in by the rocks, just touching the water. We then loaded the boat's gear without fully securing it. The gear was only secured quickly so that the raft could be moved on to make room for the next boat. The raft's owner then climbed in with their paddle. By squirming, pushing on the rocks, and with some help from those still standing nearby, the raft was effectively 'seal launched' off the rocks over the small drop with the rafter and all their gear on board. Our narrow channel of water was then joined by the main current and each rafter had to make a sharp right turn and head back upstream into an eddy where they could finish securing their gear into the boat.



Thunder Rush

The current was quite strong and flowing swiftly to a rather dangerous looking part of the rapid. David, in the first boat away, managed to paddle out of the current and into the eddy behind some boulders. He found that there was a reasonably straightforward route through the rest of the rapid on the other side of the river. However, it looked like it was not going to be easy following David's lead into the eddy.

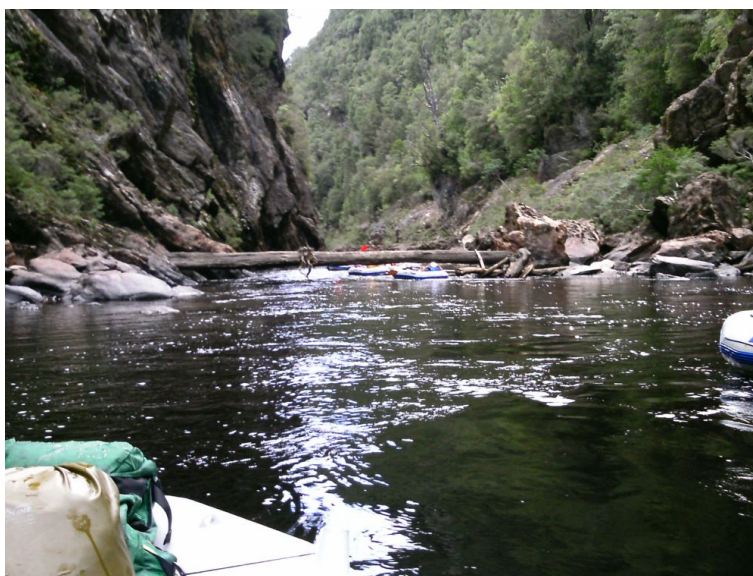
David paddled back a little, got out of his raft and sat on a protruding rock at the edge of the main current, at the downstream end of the entrance to the eddy. As the next two boats came through he held his boat out into the main current to act as a buffer, or a grab rail (if necessary), to help guide the other boats safely into the eddy. My boat was third in line and as I had neoprene (wetsuit) boots

on, and David's feet were getting cold dangling in the water while waiting for each boat to be loaded and launched, he asked me to take over his position on the rock.



Launching in Thunder Rush (taken from the buffer rock at the entrance to the eddy)

So I took his place sitting on the rock between the main current and the eddy, pushing my raft out into the main current as each of the three remaining rafts came down, to assist them into the eddy. I think everybody could have made it into the eddy OK without assistance, but a couple of the boats were nearly swept passed it, so the safety buffer was certainly a very good part of the plan.



Raft Limbo – Nik's packs would not go under without jumping on the front of the boat

It had been another long, hard and tiring day, with little progress made in terms of distance, which was a little demoralising for some of us. However, our spirits lifted when we set eyes on the “Eagles Nest” camp site which we’d read about in the notes.



Arriving at the Eagles Nest camp site

Situated right above The Cauldron rapid on a cliff ledge which overhangs the river, the Eagles Nest camp site is probably the best camp site I’ve ever stayed at. Access is very difficult however, requiring use of a permanently bolted on rope to climb a very narrow and steep ledge in the adjacent cliff. Furthermore, there was nowhere to pull the boats out of the water and no access to the river except right at the bottom of the roped ledge. This made unpacking the boats and getting gear up to the camp site quite difficult. We ended up having to clamber from one boat to the other in order to get the gear to somebody on the cliff track. Only the gear that was really needed for the night was carried up to this camp site. The boats were all left in the river, tied up to the rocks and bolts in the cliff.

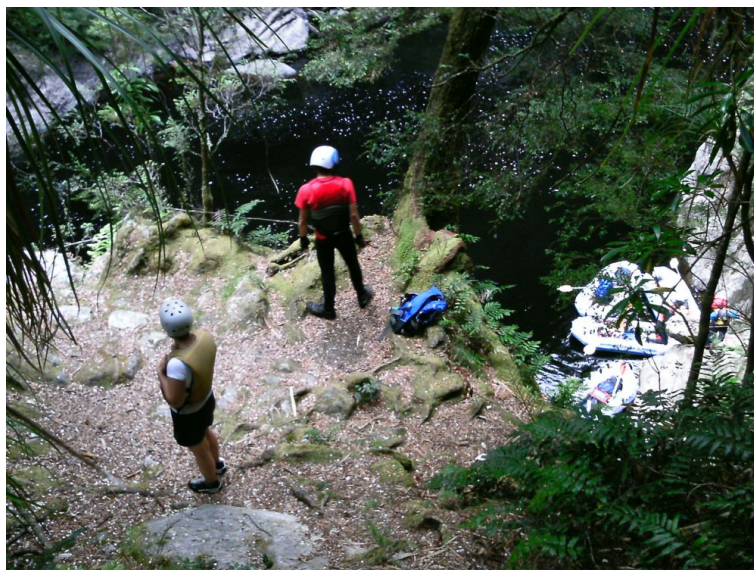
David opted to sleep on the small beach on the other side of the river, so we said an early “good night” to him, before setting up camp.

Of all the tents brought on this expedition, mine was the smallest, being a one person tent that is quite easy to pitch nearly anywhere (a One Planet ‘Goondie’). The Eagles nest camp site is very small and quite rough with rocks and roots over most of the ground. I noticed one spot where there was a tiny patch of flat ground surrounded by substantial rocks on one side and very large roots on the other. I figured that the small flat spot was just big enough for one person to sleep in. The vestibules of my tent could be stretched over the adjacent rocks and roots, and therefore not waste any further flat area where other people might need to sleep.

So I claimed the spot for myself and pitched the tent on it. I felt a little guilty for nabbing the only truly flat spot in the entire camp site, but at every other camp site for the entire trip (both before and afterwards), I let everyone else choose their spots first, knowing that my smaller tent could be pitched where the other tents could not.

I still felt that I'd been a bit selfish when everybody else at the Eagles Nest ended up sleeping on their tents or on tarps rather than in them, with tarps over the top of some of them, because they felt that there was not enough space to pitch the other tents.

Nobody wanted to negotiate the dangerous rope climb down to the river to collect water for drinking and cooking. So after we'd used up all that we'd brought up with us earlier, Sean tied a bottle to a rope, and threw it over the cliff. It worked a treat and was pulled up full of water every time (as well as a few bits of leaves and debris from bumping on the cliff on the way up).



Surveying the Eagles Nest camp site

Day 9 – Cauldron (Eagles Nest) to Rafter's Basin

4 February 2012

It began drizzling at Eagles Nest around daybreak. Not only did this make packing up a little annoying, but it meant that those who were not in tents or under tarps had to quickly find things to pull over themselves to keep their sleeping bags dry!



View of boats and David's camp from the Eagles Nest

After breakfast we had to deal with the complicated and difficult job of moving gear and repacking boats. From the Eagles Nest we had to negotiate the awkward and risky descent, following the almost vertical path. We had to simultaneously hold onto the safety rope and carry our gear while working our way back to the river. David had opted to camp with his tent on his upturned raft on the other side of the river using his boat as a base for his tent and had an easier job to pack up his camp.

Literally right across the river from our camp was the start of the mandatory portage around the rapid known as the Cauldron. No sooner than we had finished packing our gear into the boats we had to unload them again. This first stage of the portage could only be done two boats at a time because there was only a tiny landing available. There was also a strong current that flowed into the Cauldron which had the potential to drag any waiting boats into the rapid.



*Cauldron from Eagles Nest camp site:
 Yellow = last part of portage route (dashes = behind rock)
 Blue = boats/gear storage area
 Red = ropes anchor point*

After all the gear was unpacked and had been carried along the first stretch of the portage and all the boats were stacked in two neat piles on top of a huge flat boulder, we assessed the remainder of the rapid and the portage. At that point we began to formulate the beginnings of a plan to tackle the remainder of the portage which appeared to be almost impossible to negotiate, even on foot.

We had to be very cautious because this portage required passing gear from each slippery, wet boulder to the next through the middle of the rapid rather than on the bank around the rapid. Some of the boulders were at steep angles as well as being wet and slippery. In addition to all this, we knew that a few years ago a rafter had died at this spot when he slipped into the river while portaging this rapid. I couldn't help but wonder if he had been attempting exactly what we were about to try. It was clearly a time to play it safe and to take extreme care.

The plan we came up with was a little on the dubious side but we figured it was the best we could do. We nervously set ourselves up in a chain



Ropes anchor with jammed and cut ropes from other expeditions

gang with each person taking a position on a boulder, with two ropes traversing the route between us. The idea was that each person should maintain hold on a rope. If anything went wrong they could at least keep hold of the rope. If they fell we might have a better chance of helping them. At one point in the transfer it was necessary to tie each item of gear to a rope and slide it down a boulder to the last person, who was too far away to be able to pass the items directly from hand to hand.

At first it was suggested that Jess should stand on the first large boulder and hold the rope around her as an anchor. I quickly vetoed this idea as being crazy as it would only take one person to fall to pull Jess in also. I then found a suitable anchor point for the ropes around a rock. This rock was wedged between our flat boulder and the cliff on the river bank. On closer inspection we could see that it had been used as an anchor many times before, with several old rope remnants still tied around it. Presumably these ropes had been cut by previous groups who had been unable to remove them any other way.



Portaging through the Cauldron

For each boat and its gear, Paul and I would lower the empty boat sideways into a narrow crack where a small part of the river flowed between our boulder and the cliff at the side of the river. The crack was wider at the bottom so that as the boat touched the water it could turn around and lie flat in the water. We then let out more of the boat's line so that the current took it down to the end of the portage route where Jamie could grab it and lift it over the small rocks and into a pool behind him. Paul and I then passed each barrel or pack for that boat to Sean, who clambered over two boulders to David. David tied the container to a rope and lowered it, sliding down a boulder, to Jamie. Jamie placed each item into the waiting boat.

Initially Jess was on a boulder between Paul and Sean. As her boat was loaded first, she scrambled across the remaining boulders so that she could move her boat downstream to make room for the next boat.

It was at this time that we realised our portage plan needed tweaking. We could not afford to lose any more people from this chain gang. If the next person moved their boat downstream we would not have enough people to safely complete portaging the rest of the boats and gear. Instead we decided that we should simply leave each boat with its gear in the relatively enclosed and calm pool behind Jamie. Thus all boats and gear could be moved to the end of the portage before any of the remaining people clambered down the boulders and through the pool to their raft.



Sean takes on a rapid between the Cauldron and Rafter's Basin

Communicating this change of plan over the deafening roar of the Cauldron was difficult. It took some time and angst to get the message across to everybody. Eventually the plan was executed without any mishaps.

It was quite late in the morning when we finally began rafting for the day.

During the morning Jess found a 40cm length of steel tube that was bent and damaged at one end, lying on the rocks on the river bank. Not wanting to leave rubbish lying around, Paul covered the sharp ends of the tube and packed it away with the rest of his rubbish. We figured that it was part of the broken shaft of some previous rafter's paddle.

We set up camp at Rafter's Basin in time for lunch and were grateful to have a short day on the river with time to relax in the afternoon. Rafter's Basin camp site was huge and the basin itself was beautiful. We found a plastic paddle blade with a short length of steel shaft still attached to it. We did not take this with us the next day even though it looked similar to the small length of steel tube that Paul and Jess had retrieved earlier in the day.

For afternoon tea, it was time for puffedaloonies again. This time the scones were consumed with raspberry jam and whipped cream. What a luxury to have whipped cream on our ninth day out in the wilderness! The cream was long life 'UHT' type supplied by David and whipped by Jess in her new insulated mug.

I spent much of the afternoon reading while sitting on my upturned raft which was drawn up onto the rocks on the bank of Rafter's Basin. It was relaxing and very enjoyable. Paul and Jamie did some more fishing, which they'd been doing periodically at a few camp sites during the trip.



A rock cairn sculpture in a hollow on the river bank

The drizzle recommenced later in the afternoon so we congregated under the shelter of the tarps at the camp site where we shared various snacks and consumed percolated coffee and tea.

The rain became heavier although around dusk it cleared just long enough for people to crawl out of their tents to stretch their legs a bit before settling down again for the night.

During this brief break in the rain Paul brought out the trout he'd caught earlier in the afternoon. He shared it with all of us and it was very tasty! What a day – reading on the banks of the Franklin River, scones and cream for afternoon tea, then fresh trout for supper!



*Reading and relaxing at Rafter's Basin
(photo David Tasker)*

During the night the rain increased dramatically becoming very heavy at times. According to a report that we received by satellite phone a couple of days later there was more than 50mm of rain that fell in the Franklin catchment that night, despite only 20mm having been forecast.

Later when I returned home, I read an ABC News report about how “a recent wild storm that lashed Tasmania’s west coast has cut short the lucrative leatherwood honey season”. I counted the days back from that news report and realised that they were talking about the rain that fell while we were camped at Rafter's Basin. This explained why the leatherwood trees had been covered with blossom on the first few days of the trip but very few of the white flowers could be seen towards the end of the trip (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-02-14/storm-cuts-honey-season/3829474>).

Being sheltered from the wind and being in bed during the storm we didn't really grasp just how significant the rain was until the next day when the affects of this rain storm caused a dramatic change to our experience of the Franklin River.

A few days earlier I had noticed that the muscle pain in my right side (lower rib cage) was not subsiding as expected. Usually my body becomes accustomed to using its muscles in new ways. This time, instead of getting better it was getting worse. By the time we reached Rafter's Basin, even breathing was causing substantial pain and lying on my right side to sleep was not possible. Changing positions in bed was a seriously painful procedure accompanied by much grunting and groaning during the night.

Day 10 – Rafter's Basin to Hobbit Hole

5 February 2012

There had been a heavy rain storm during the night which we later discovered had resulted in news reports back home. In the morning we found that our boats were floating. The river had risen by about a metre overnight and covered the previously exposed rocks along the river banks and was encroaching a little on the vegetation line.

The water level was higher than we had seen before. We figured that it would continue to rise through the day as heavy rain had only just eased and lighter showers were continuing. Everyone felt it was at a reasonable level and were keen to paddle on.



Yesterday these rafts sat on the rocky bank. Today, there was no rocky bank to be seen.

The first rapid at the exit from the large, calm pool of Rafter's Basin was wide and shallow as well as very long. Jamie was keen to get moving and led the way. He called back directions to the rest of us and used hand signals to indicate the best route through the rapid. We all negotiated the rapid through the much stronger current and larger volume of water than we had been used to without any problems. It was not a steep drop, making it fairly easy, and the speed of rafts on this more substantial current was exhilarating.

The first few rapids of the day got us very excited. We were charging along at break-neck speed and having a ball. Even where the water was flat the current was very fast. The fast, strong current in the flat sections produced a very odd feeling in an inflatable raft. It would invisibly push or pull the boat in unexpected ways and occasionally it would hold the boat in place with water rushing past.

Presumably this strange tangle of strong currents was produced by the rush of water rebounding off boulders hidden below the turbulence of the dark and furious river.



The flow continued to increase during the day

As expected the water level continued to rise throughout the day and was well above the vegetation line on the river banks by mid-morning. We soon recognised a problem that we needed to address. The speed of the current and therefore the speed of the rafts, was making it difficult to keep the group together. Generally it is important to keep close together so that if anything goes wrong somebody would be nearby to help out. It is also important to take each rapid one at a time to avoid getting in each others way (which

could be quite dangerous). Our problem was that at each rapid the group became separated as people were unable to pull into an eddy which in turn made it difficult to tighten up the group between rapids. Even where the water was flat the rafts would be carried along at great speed. Anybody who stopped to take a photo, have a drink or eat a snack would quickly get left behind.



The Franklin river was now wider, deeper, stronger and faster, with the usual rocky river banks now completely submerged

At one point we managed to regroup and discuss the issue, making it clear that we needed to make a greater effort to keep together as a group. Those at the back would have to keep paddling without being slowed down by distractions and those at the front should slow down using eddies where possible and back-paddling if necessary.

The increasingly strong and turbulent current continued to make regrouping below each rapid more and more difficult. The noise of the raging river and the distances between each raft made communicating almost impossible for much of the time.

It was in this environment that a very simple problem rapidly escalated into a near disaster which terrified several of us and changed our perspective of the Franklin River for the rest of the trip.

During a flat section of river David had his paddle sitting on his raft while drifting along with the high speed current. For just a moment he turned around and when he did so his paddle fell off the raft into the river. David has substantial high frequency hearing loss and didn't hear it plop into the water (although I'm not sure I would have heard it over the noise of the water either). By the time he turned back and saw that his paddle was not there, it was already well beyond his reach. On most days this would not have been a problem in such a flat stretch of water as he would have been able to paddle slowly by hand or to call out to somebody else to grab the paddle. But on this occasion the current was hurtling along at great speed and there was a substantial rapid not far ahead.

I had been just about to enter the rapid when I heard David call out behind me that he'd lost his paddle. I pulled out of the main current and paddled back up the side of the river as fast as I could

(which was not very fast) while David prepared to throw me a rope. The first throw did not quite reach me but I caught the second throw and tried to paddle towards the bank while holding the rope, towing David behind me. Unfortunately the proximity to the rapid soon made it clear that there was no way I was going to make the bank of the river in time. David and I were both about to be sucked into the rapid.

David called out to me to let go of the rope so I tossed it back in his direction. Loose ropes in a rapid could result in a serious danger so he attempted to stow it as quickly as he could. He still had no paddle and therefore no control as we entered the large, powerful rapid side by side – something that should never be attempted.

We raced down the rapid together, driven by the current towards the large standing wave in the middle. Before entering a larger rapid, I would usually move from sitting high on the stern of the raft to the more stable position of sitting low on the floor. However, in this case I was too distracted before the rapid and was still sitting on the stern.

At the same time that we hit the huge standing wave, our two boats collided with each other. I was thrown into the air and in the moment of panic I let go of everything – my boat and the spare paddle I was using (again). I was running on instinct for just a few seconds and that instinct was just to survive what was happening right now.

After going under water briefly, I then found that I was floating down the rapid in the water on my own. I did remember the advice to keep my feet up and forward while floating down the rapid (to avoid getting jammed in underwater obstacles). As I body surfed the rest of the way down on my back I could see my raft just a little ahead of me, upside down. I could also see David in his raft still careering down the rapid without any paddle.

At the bottom of the rapid I was able to swim towards my raft and grab it. I was then very fortunate to get pushed by the current to a little alcove in the rocky bank along with my still upside down boat.

I was safe and I still had my boat and my gear but I had no paddle. David was somewhere further downstream going at high speed and also without a paddle. I then looked around and saw Sean, David's son, paddling down the rapid. Paul had picked up David's paddle above the rapid and passed it to Sean who was now carrying it as well as his own. After quickly checking to see that I was OK at the bottom of the rapid and finding that I had no paddle, he passed David's paddle to me and then raced off after his out-of-control father.

I was still in deep in water and it took me some time to turn my boat upright again and then to get back into it. As I was doing so I saw Paul coming down the rapid but he was holding his paddle high in the air instead using it and had a strange expression on his face. Then I noticed that the shaft of his paddle had snapped clean in half. It was held together by a short rope so he could not even use one half to paddle canoe-style.

Paul later told me that as his raft hit the large standing wave in the middle of the rapid, his boat nose dived throwing him forward. He then leant hard on his paddle on the front of the boat which caused it to snap.

We shouted our respective status to each other as he floated past, somewhat out of control with his broken paddle. Back in my boat at last and now with the David's paddle, I eventually managed to continue downstream to join rest of the team.

What a disaster! David was fine but feeling very contrite and responsible for losing his paddle in the first instance and creating the confusion that caused the mess.

We regrouped and debriefed on a log-jammed river bank. I was shaking from cold and the shock and exhaustion probably didn't help either. Jess and Sean cooked up cups of tea and soup for everybody and we all shared what snacks we had readily available. We did all that we could to revive our spirits and re-fuel our wet, cold and tired bodies after a frightening and nearly disastrous few minutes.

Paul and David used the recently found piece of steel tube and some screws to repair the broken paddle (David had a good repair kit). The paddle ended up even stronger than it had been at the start. Great job guys!

Before doing this they had to cut the mangled end off the tube, but nobody had a saw even though we had three multi-tools between us. When asked if I had a saw on my Gerber multi-tool, I replied that I did not, so Paul spent about half an hour cutting through the steel tube using the file on his Leatherman.

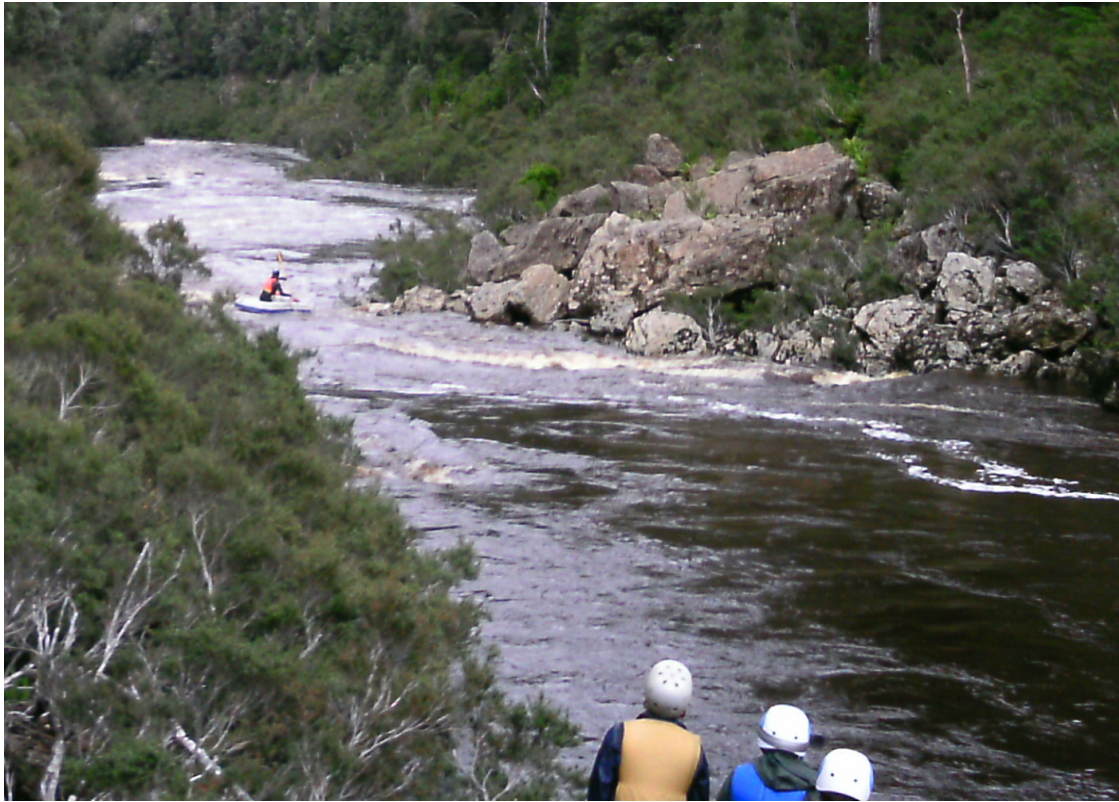
Meanwhile, I went for a bit of a wander through the bush with two purposes in mind. Firstly, to see if I could see the paddle I'd just lost (Jamie's original paddle) somewhere in the river, but more importantly to me, I had been shocked into the belief that the still rising water level was too dangerous and that we should find somewhere to camp as soon as possible. However, I was not able to find anywhere that would be even remotely suitable for camping anywhere nearby. I did not disclose this line of thinking to the rest of the team just yet. I felt that so long as we all managed to hang on to the paddles we still had, we would still be able to keep going a little further. We just needed to take even more care.

With the paddle which I'd borrowed from Jamie for the last few days now missing (as was my original paddle), David kindly let me keep using his while he used the spare kayak paddle that Jamie had kept strapped to his raft from the beginning.

We now had no spare paddles after I had lost two paddles permanently. Paul's paddle had been broken and repaired twice (and was still quite bent). We could not afford to lose or break any more paddles and still had several days rafting to go.

The water continued to rise as we paddled on. I estimated that the water was about 1.5 metres above yesterday's level by this time. After this morning's events some of us were a lot more nervous. The excitement of earlier in the day had been extinguished by the cold reality of the dangers of the Franklin River in flood.

For the next few days of rafting I was quite nervous about each rapid I entered while the water level was high. I would sit down low on the floor of my raft for even the tiniest of rapids (to keep the centre of gravity low and reduce the risk of being thrown out). Previously I had been sitting high on the stern tube of the raft for smaller rapids and adopted the lower position only for larger or more technical rapids.



Jamie shows the way, on one of the last rapids we tackled for the day

After a few more large, fast, but not difficult rapids, we stopped for a much needed lunch break. All this time the water level continued to rise and the edges of the river pushed out to well behind the scrubby vegetation which was protruding from the surface of the river.

A little further on we came to a long rapid which continued around a slight bend in the river. Much of the rapid could not be clearly seen from where we approached it so we needed to stop and scout the rapid – ie, to walk the length of it, or as much as was necessary to determine if the rapid should be shot, lined or portaged. However, stopping was very difficult.

The current was very fast and there were no good eddies on the side of the river as we approached the rapid. Jamie managed to grab a small bit of protruding rock on the river bank and Jess grabbed Jamie's boat. I managed to grab Jess' boat and Paul grabbed mine. All the while, Jamie was trying to improve his grip on the rock, while we increased the load on his grip. Eventually we managed to get the boats secured to small shrubs on the bank and clamber up steep rocks and through the scrub to scout the rapid.

Before even looking at the rapid, I shouted to David above the din of the raging torrent, "We need to get off this river – it's getting too dangerous!". David replied that he had been looking out for a camp site since lunch time, so I said that I was going to head off through the bush to see if I could find somewhere suitable.

At this point my main concern was not the rapid that we were scouting (we could portage or line it if necessary), but the fact that we had very nearly been unable to stop before entering a rapid and had not yet determined if it was safe. If we failed to stop before the next rapid, or any of the subsequent rapids further downstream, and that rapid happened to be too dangerous to raft, that would be catastrophic.

I was now of the firm opinion that the river was at a flood level that was well beyond my novice capabilities and beyond the capabilities of most of our team. We needed to stop and camp until the

river level receded. Having some experience of bushwalking in South West Tasmania, I knew that the water levels of such rivers rise quickly and that they also recede quickly once the rain stopped.

I also knew that I would be able to find a camp site in most areas, but that other people would not like some camp sites that I would consider to be OK. So while the others were scouting and debating the possibilities for the nearby rapid I was busy searching amongst the rocks and scrub for any possible camp sites.

It was not long before I found something I thought would be suitable. There was an overhanging rock with a protected dry area below it. The dry area was not terribly flat or level, but could accommodate two or three people if necessary. Just beyond this in the scrub, I found two small areas of relatively clear, flat and level ground where two tents could be pitched. A bit of work would be required to make it suitable by removing some shrubs, relocating some rocks and leveling some soil.

Knowing that this was going to look most unappealing to some of the team members, I spent the next two or three minutes frantically 'landscaping' the two potential tent sites in order to make it look at least a little more attractive. I then scrambled back to where the others were still discussing the rapid.



Scouting the controversial rapid

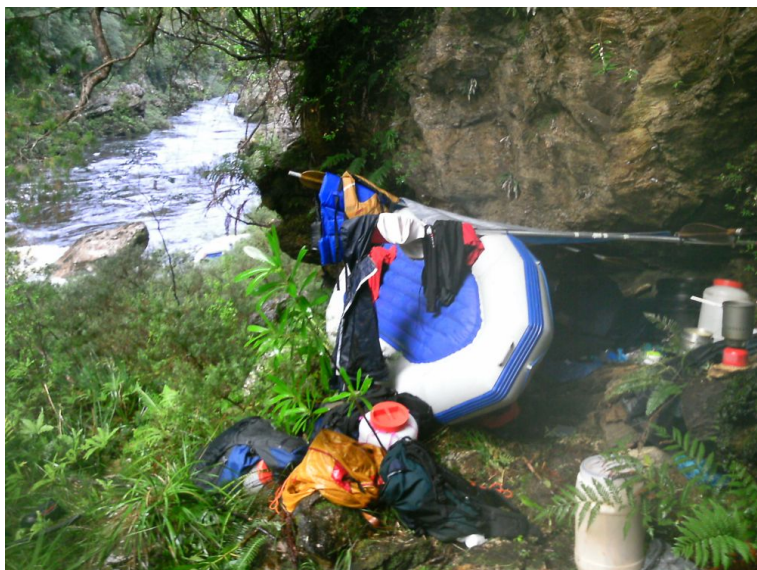


The first of three stoppers on the rapid that we nearly were unable to stop at the top of

When I returned there appeared to be some disagreement about whether the rapid was safe to shoot or whether it should be lined or portaged. We had always agreed that we would never place any pressure on anybody to shoot a rapid they weren't confident with, so while some might shoot the rapid others could walk around it portaging or lining. No matter what we did with this rapid, there was also the potential danger of being unable to stop before another dangerous rapid further downstream.

When I announced that I'd found a reasonable camp site just a bit further through the bush they were keen to see it, at least to postpone the current

discussion if nothing else. After everybody had inspected both the potential camp site and scouted the rapid, the debate became even more complicated with the option of camping now added into the mix.



The lean to at the makeshift camp site

Eventually it was decided that we should camp in this less than ideal location at least for the night and monitor the water level. We understood that we could end up stuck here for another day or two if the rain continued.

After some more substantial 'landscaping' to improve the tent sites, we managed to set up two tents – my one person 'Goondie' and a the two person tent. The rest of the team built a large lean-to around the dry area under

the overhanging cliff using paddles, rafts and tarps. It did not look like a perfect place to sleep, but it was moderately large (albeit with a low roof), and quite dry.

I had found a third tent site a little further on but nobody seemed particularly interested in clearing it, using it or even inspecting it. The mood in camp was as damp as the scrub all around, into which water was constantly dripping from the overhanging cliffs above and splattering off the rocks below. There was very little space to stand within the camp area where you wouldn't get wet, even when it wasn't raining. Just near the entrance of the lean-to was the only dry spot even when it wasn't raining.

The rain continued for the rest of the afternoon and by the end of the day the river level was already a further 30cm higher than when we arrived.

And then... Hey, look at that – I do have a saw on my Gerber after all. Whoops. Sorry, Paul!

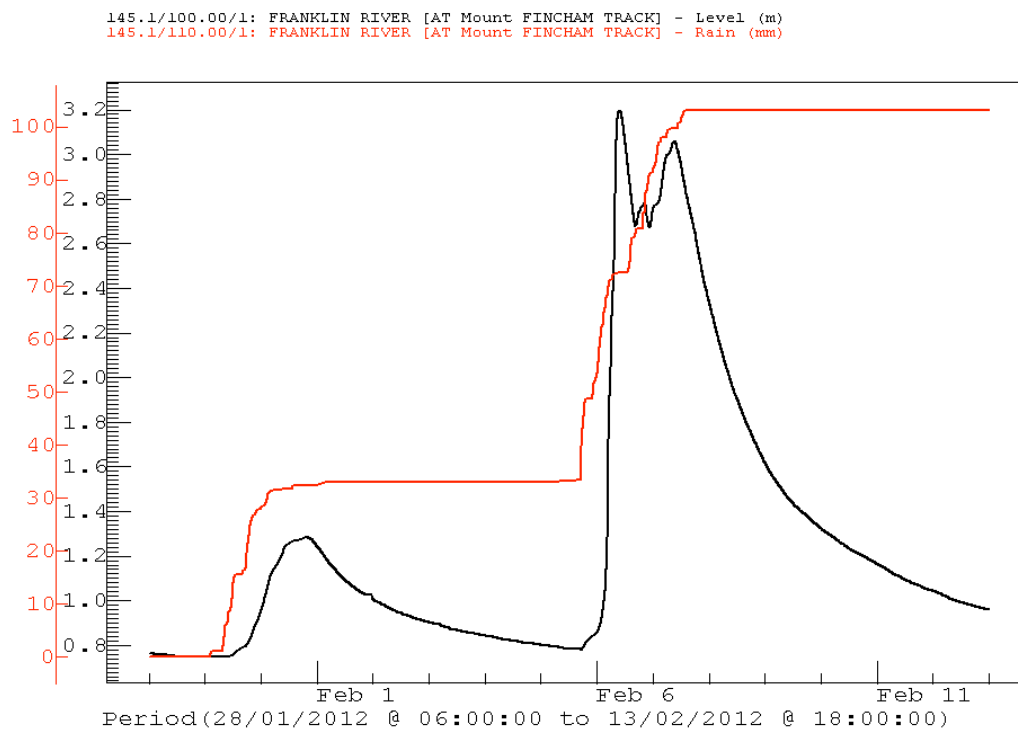
We ate a substantial amount of food that night and sat around in the lean to and just outside its entrance talking for some time. Paul also surprised us with some whiskey liqueur which was very tasty and helped to revive our demoralised spirits.



Inside the lean to

Day 11 – Hobbit Hole – Unplanned Rest Day

6 February 2012



Official Graph of water level and rainfall from the Fincham gauge upstream

Even before getting out of bed, I could tell that we were going to be stuck in our miserable hovel of a camp all day and for a second night. The rain had continued spasmodically during the night and the deafening roar of a violent, raging river just a few meters away was also a bit of a hint.



*View of the river and the start of the nearby rapid
from our make shift camp site*

The river level continued rising during the morning and peaked at midday about two metres higher than the level that we had started with. Of course there was some guess work involved in this estimate, but we watched it drop by almost one metre during the following 24 hours, and more over the next couple of days.

This was going to be a psychologically difficult day for us as we were stuck here all day and we didn't know if the water level would be any better the next day or not.

Additionally, the occasional light drizzle and the constant spattering of water dripping from the cliffs above

made our camp a less than ideal environment to be stuck in. We had to retreat to the shelter of the lean-to or our tents several times during the more substantial showers.

In between rain showers the sun came out occasionally so there were a few opportunities to get out and stretch the legs. I spent a lot of time standing on one of the large boulders amongst the scrub just looking at the environment around me. I became very familiar with the view of the nearby rapid and of the forest across the other side.

As the afternoon progressed, we watched as the river level began to drop. We became hopeful that we would be able to recommence rafting the next day.

At one point while walking between my tent and the lean-to, I slipped on wet rocks and landed hard on my left hip. It was very painful and produced a large bruise which lasted for about a week. I was lucky I didn't break any bones.

With not much else to do, we went to bed quite early. On the previous night three people had crammed into the two person tent and two people had slept under the lean-to. On the second night there were only two people in that tent and three in the lean-to. Apparently it had been rather uncomfortable with three in the tent.

I felt a little guilty that I'd had a reasonably comfortable place to sleep both nights at the Hobbit Hole. My tent didn't quite fit in the spot I'd cut out of the scrub with both ends hanging over the edges of the flat area. I'd built up the ground underneath it with rocks to make it work and ended up with a fairly flat area on which to sleep so my tent site was quite reasonable.



This Pandanus Family of four in the forest across the river frequently caught my eye and reminded me of my own family back at home



Camp Tasker, AKA, the Hobbit Hole

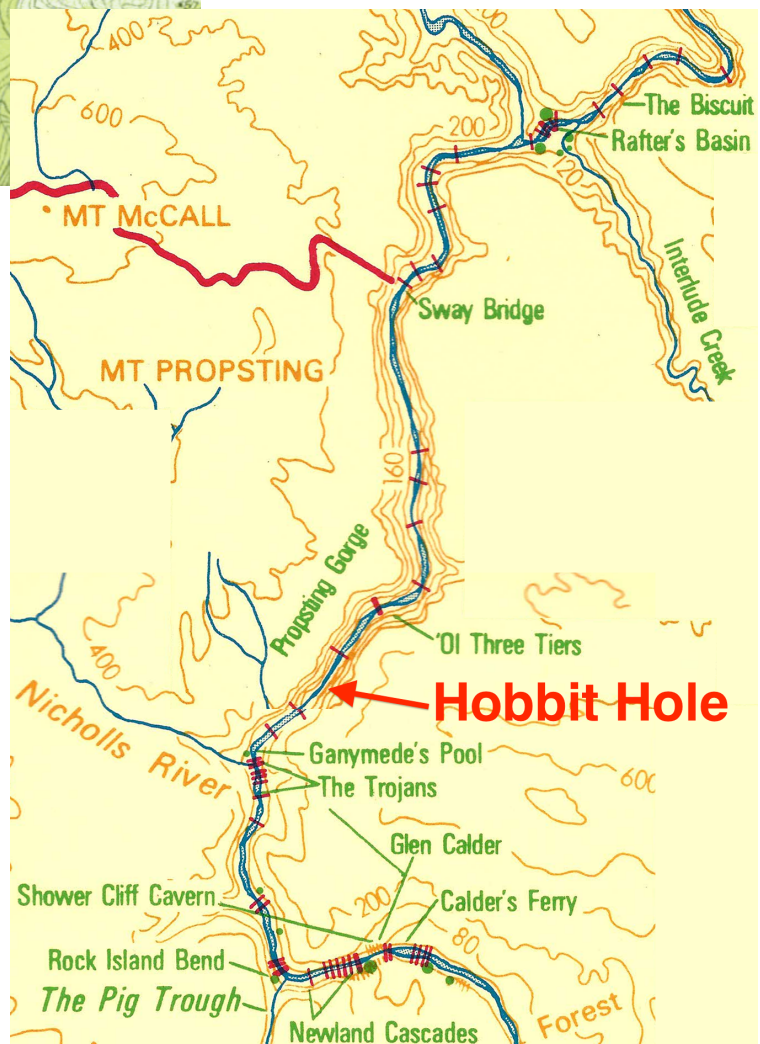


For lunch I cheered myself up by cooking cheese toasties as I'd read about on the bushwalking web site at <http://bushwalk.com/> – they were great!

However, it hurt to lie on my left hip; it hurt to lie on my right ribs; it hurt to move; it hurt to breath. I was not a happy camper.



Hobbit Hole location as recorded by iPhone GPS



Hobbit Hole location on the map from the old reference notes

Day 12 – Hobbit Hole to Newland Cascades

7 February 2012

We woke this morning to find that the water level was down quite a lot more than when we arrived at the Hobbit Hole. Everybody agreed that the rapid looked relatively easy and should be fun. Two stoppers were still visible in this rather long rapid, but they both looked small and therefore should not be a problem. Finally, we were all very excited that we would get rafting again. The water level now looked ideal for us.

As if the severe pain in my left hip and lower-right ribs wasn't enough, I slipped and fell on the rocks again this morning. This time I sliced the palm of my hand open. It wasn't terribly painful, but it was quite a deep cut that would require some care to avoid infection and to heal properly in this environment. Thankfully, it was lower down on the palm than where I grip the paddle. I gave it a quick dressing with band-aid and elastoplast. I knew that I'll need to give it some better treatment later on.

After breaking camp and packing our gear we had to begin by paddling through the rapid that had stopped us in our tracks when in flood. It was right next to our make shift camp site and had been under observation for the better part of two days. However, what now appeared to be an 'easy' rapid proved to be yet another disaster and I am thankful that we did not attempt to do it when we arrived and the water level was 1.5 metres higher.

The first four boats went through the rapid and from where I was at the top, they all appeared to make it through OK. It was a long rapid and the far end was obscured by a corner, so it was difficult to be certain.

I was second-last in line and when the boat in front of me was close to the bottom of the rapid, I paddled into the current and began my descent. There are two things I was careful to get right as I approached the first stopper: Firstly, to make sure that I had enough momentum to carry me forwards over the stopper, and secondly, to make sure I hit the stopper head on and not at an angle. If a raft doesn't have enough momentum, it may not be able to continue forwards, up and over the standing wave in the stopper and will run back down effectively getting stuck in the stopper's hole. Then it would most likely fill with water and flip over. If a raft hits a stopper side on, it is highly likely that it will flip. In either scenario the rafter would be tossed out and could get trapped.

At the last second before hitting the stopper some hidden force in the current twisted my boat sideways just as I went over the drop into the stopper. Once again I was flipped out of my boat and again, despite everything I knew, I let go of my paddle in the panic to just survive. Once more I experienced the rude shock of being unceremoniously and unexpectedly dumped into cold water.

This time I did not just casually float down the rapid without my boat. In fact did not surface at all. I was tumbled around under water like a rag in a front-loading washing machine. I could not even determine which way was up. I was terrified. I tried to remain calm and think rationally. I recalled that in this situation, attempting to swim to the surface may not be advisable, because I might just be pushed straight back down again. Apparently, it may be possible to swim down and then out, but there would be the risk of getting jammed in rocks or logs under water. Another school of thought is to just relax and eventually the stopper would spit you out – if you were lucky (although some large stoppers are known to trap bodies permanently).

So I tried the relaxing technique. It's not easy to relax when you're panicking. It's not easy to relax when you're underwater, unaware of which way is up and realise that you're very low on oxygen - probably due to panicking. But I tried. Eventually, after what seemed like about two minutes (but

was probably less than 30 seconds), I knew I had to take a breath, whether I was still under water or not, I knew I needed to breath in. My body insisted on it.

At that point I surfaced – the stopper had finished with me. But my respiratory orifices barely broke the surface. Even with a PFD humans don't float very well in water that is full of froth and bubbles. I breathed in deeply but inhaled a lot of water. I coughed uncontrollably, sucking in more water as I did so. While coughing, spluttering and trying to catch my breath, I managed to assume the correct feet-first-face-up position to body surf down the next section of the rapid.

As I floated down the rapid, I observed my raft speeding into the distance and then rounding the corner out of sight. At least it was right way up this time. I then noticed two paddles floating in the water just off to the side a little further ahead. It was a good spot to swim out of the current and I was able to pick up both paddles, one of which was the paddle I'd just lost (the one David had lent me). As I clambered out onto the river bank, I wondered who's the other paddle was and how they were getting along without it.

I then turned the other way and looking back up the river I saw another raft stuck upside down in the stopper. I knew Sean was the only person to come through after me, so it must be his. Was he still stuck under water under his upturned raft? Was he tangled in a rope, or trapped against a log or rock? Then I saw him swimming and climbing out of the river just upstream from me. Phew!

Sean later explained that he had entered the current somewhat behind me and when he saw me flipped out in the stopper he had tried to slow down to avoid running into me. It was probably this lack of momentum that then caused his raft to become stuck in the same stopper.

I called out to him that I had his paddle and held it up for him to see. He shouted back that the paddle I was holding was actually Jess' paddle. We still didn't know where Sean's paddle was. So three of us had lost paddles in this one stopper and two of us had been flipped out and rolled around underneath it! I knew that Sean and I were OK and I was fairly confident that somebody would have caught my raft for me below the rapid, but where was Jess and was she OK without her paddle?

By this time the rest of the team were around the corner and out of sight. I realised that they must be starting to wonder if Sean and I were alright, as we should have joined them by now. With Sean's boat still bobbing around upside down in the stopper, we had two paddles and no boat, and no way of notifying the people downstream, including Sean's father that we were OK but stuck. I wondered if any of them had seen us get caught by the stopper before the current took them around the corner.

I climbed over the rocks back up to where Sean was. We were just starting to discuss how we might free his raft, when it popped out of the stopper by itself and started heading quickly downstream. We had very little time to think about how to stop it before it would float past us. Sean climbed out onto a rock that protruded into the river and was preparing to jump out onto the floor of his upturned raft as it came past, without a paddle. We didn't have time to discuss whether this was a good idea or not, or even if there were any other options. And then, his boat stopped just a few metres short of where we were. It's rope had come out of it's strapping and had got caught on something underwater.

We took the paddles from where I'd left them and climbed along the river bank to as close as we could get to the raft, still bobbing around in the middle of the rapid and held in place by its rope. It took quite some time for us to pull the boat close enough to the shore using a paddle and the rope and with Sean sitting on it's upturned floor. We then attempted to take it upstream some way in order to get some slack on the rope and to try to free it, but were unable to do so and eventually had to cut the rope.

Then we were able to turn Sean's boat back up the right way. With me in the front and Sean in the back we finally managed to complete the rapid and catch up with the rest of the group around the corner. They had been very worried about us until eventually Paul had clambered back up the bank a little, spotted us both on the river bank and given the rest of the team the 'thumbs up' signal.

They had Sean's paddle, as well as my raft! So we'd managed to recover all three paddles this time, as well as the one raft that we'd lost on that rapid.

It had been an appalling start to the day, on what we'd thought would be a fun easy rapid. My already fragile nerves from the experience of two days earlier were not helped by this nasty accident and I was again very cautious going into even simple looking rapids for the rest of the morning, slowly getting my confidence back as the day continued.



Sean shooting a big rapid

We encountered a few other rapids during the day and the river was still swollen with a high volume of water. Some of the rapids were too dangerous, requiring us to line the boats or portage all the gear. Others were rafted successfully – albeit with some extra adrenalin produced as a result. At one rapid (the Trojans, I think it was), we started off planning to line the boats, but the plan failed due to a large log protruding from the river bank, cutting through the water. While the rest of us were attempting to line the rafts around the first section of the rapid we unwittingly left David to try to get his raft over the log on his own. Eventually we realised he was going to need help so Sean and then others joined him to lift the boats over the log. The second boat to be lifted over the log got wrapped around it and filled with water. It was quite difficult to free it, but it was eventually hauled over the log. At this point the rest of us decided we would portage this one instead of lining the rafts through, especially since the log had a sharp-looking point where the rafts had to be slid over the top of it.



Caves and columns near the Trojans



Pig Trough rapid

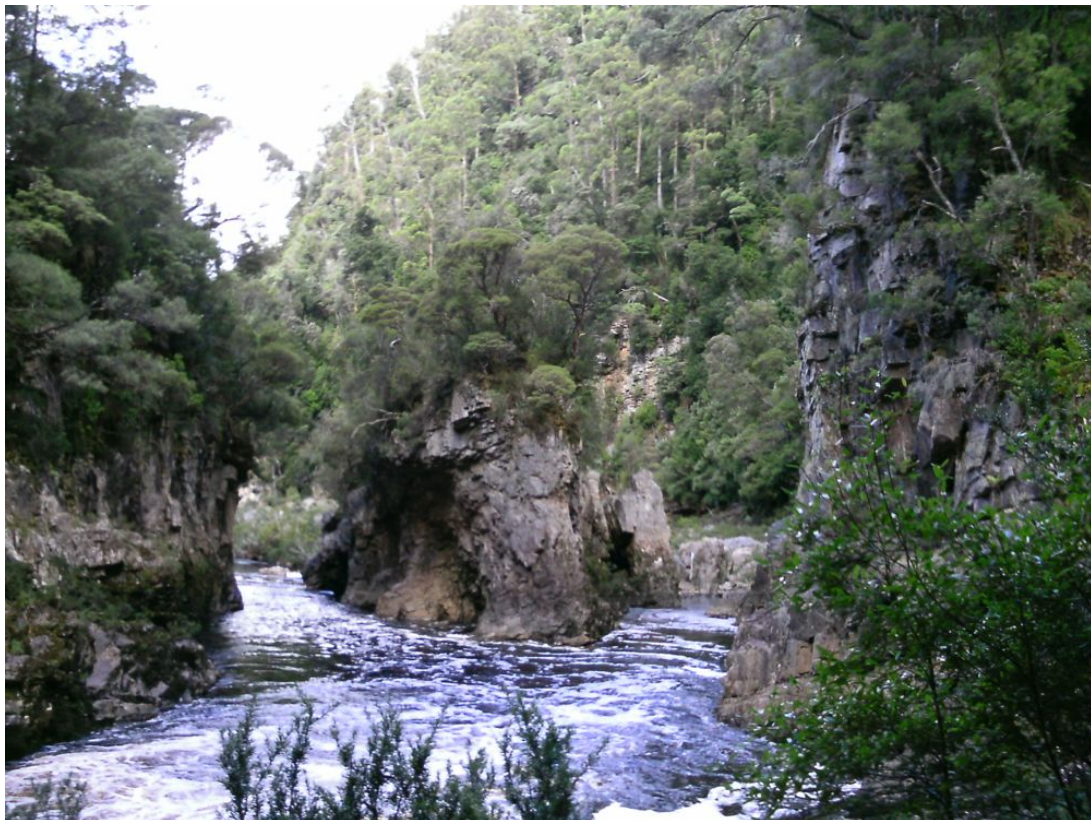


Pig Trough Creek

Eventually the rafts and gear were all transported around the rapid, except for Jamie's. He was keen to paddle through it. He was more confident and more capable than most of us and there were a few rapids that he shot on his own while others portaged or lined boats through. One of these rapids had a large stopper that very nearly caught his boat. At the moment when it looked like the boat was about to slide backwards into the stopper, he threw himself towards the front of the boat, using his momentum to ride over the top of the standing wave and keep moving in the right direction. It was a great piece of work, perfectly timed.

It was 4:30pm when we finally reached our lunch spot at the Pig Trough rapid – a compulsory portage, according to our notes. I was very excited to be here. Named after Pig Trough creek which joins the Franklin River just below the rapid, it is a terrible name for one of the most beautiful places on earth and the place that of all the Franklin River I had most longed to see.

Immediately below Pig Trough Creek is Rock Island Bend which has been made famous by the spectacular photo taken by Tasmania's renowned wilderness photographer, the late Peter Dombrovskis. I had a poster of that photo on the wall at home while growing up and it had always had a special significance for me. Until a few months earlier I had never expected to actually see it with my own eyes.



Rock Island Bend



End of the Pig Trough portage

Our late 4:30pm lunch at Rock Island Bend was very much needed after two portages. Even though we knew there was not far to go in terms of distance, we were very tired and knew that there was likely one more long portage or lining to go.

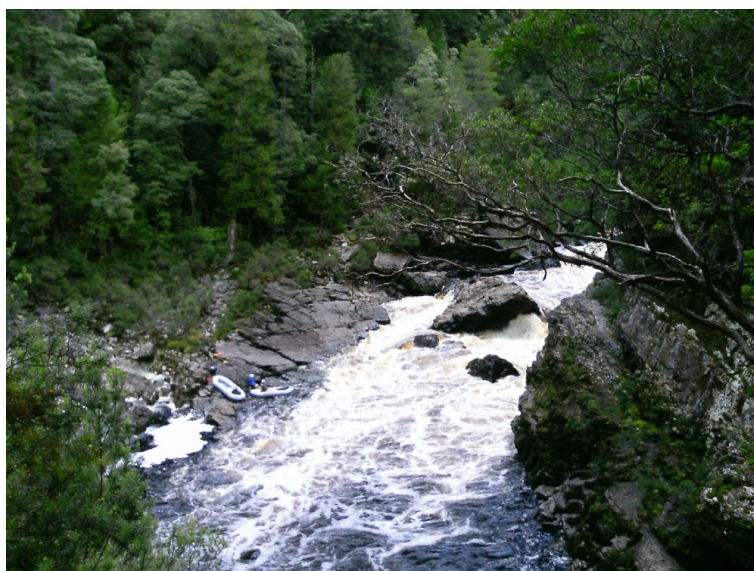
We ate our lunch at the camp site right next to the Pig Trough rapid. It was a nice rainforest camp site, but it was freezing cold. It appeared to have it's own microclimate, even colder than rest of the Tasmanian rainforest. This was hard for me as I'd never really warmed up after my unplanned swim in the river right at the beginning of the day.

Once we'd completed the portage after lunch and I'd finished packing my boat, David suggested that I should go off ahead to the other end of the rock island where I could wait in the sunshine and hopefully warm up while everyone else finished packing their boats. I must have looked cold.

When I reached the other end of the island I found that unlike the large cliffs at the upstream end, the downstream end tapered off gradually. I tied up my raft and quickly ran up the slope of the island to where I could watch the others finish packing up from the top of the island's cliffs. That warmed me up!

From here it was only a short paddle to the beginning of Newland Cascades – the longest continuous set of rapids on the entire river, according to our notes. The rapids were grade three at low water levels, so with the current water level being still a little high we scouted the first section of the rapid cautiously.

We decided that the first stage of the rapid was safe to raft, with an easy spot to stop and scout the next section. The next two drops of the rapid looked a little more tricky, but raftable, however there was nowhere to stop below them without having to take on another hundred metres or so, of frothy raging torrent that looked well beyond us to negotiate safely. So we lined our boats down a little further and then unpacked the gear to portage the rest of the distance to the camp site which we knew was under the cliffs we could see near the far end of the rapid.



*Looking back down at the Pig Trough
from on top of the rock island at Rock Island Bend*

It was a long distance to portage, but much easier than most of the portages we'd done previously, as the rocks were mostly large flat slabs after the first few metres.

We finally reached the Newland Cascades camp site at 7:30pm. We were knackered but happy, because the camp site was fantastic. Beneath a huge overhanging cliff were a series of ledges and caves which were completely dry. It appeared as though they rarely, if ever, got rain. There were large flat slabs of rock floor in front of these which were also protected from rain by the overhanging cliff and which had various table and seat sized rocks scattered about on it.

Tents were not needed here as the caves, ledges and overhangs provided plenty of protection from the weather. Our tents were hung over nearby trees and rocks to dry, along with a lot of other damp gear, as it was the first time in three days that we'd had a dry camp site and that it hadn't rained during the day.



Newland Cascades Camp Site



Nik's bed at Newland Cascades camp site

Some of us then took the opportunity to strip off and have a swim and wash in the river, as we'd been unable to do this for a few days and the hard work of three portages in one day had increased our odour level somewhat.

It was getting dark by the time we cooked our dinner, but we'd had a late lunch and were now getting hungry again after a big day involving three portages, with not a lot of paddling between two of them. It was well and truly dark by the time I crawled into my cave to sleep and I was grateful to find that it was quite comfortable, even for my aching body.

Day 13 – Newland Cascades to Holey Cliff

8 February 2012

It was great to find that most of the gear we'd hung over rocks and trees overnight was now completely dry for the first time in several days. It had been hard to keep things dry during the recent rainy days, especially the two days at the Hobbit Hole.

My sore hip was starting to feel better, but the cut hand was beginning to get painful. It required re-dressing and disinfectant. The rib cage was still quite painful as well.

A satellite phone call last night had finalised the arrangements for our boat pickup in two days time. We planned to get to the pick up point at Sir John Falls after padding today and tomorrow. This would give us an extra half a day in case there were problems along the way. Or we could use any spare time to relax if everything went smoothly.



Early morning Newland Cascades camp site (photo David Tasker)

With two days of paddling to complete the journey there was still a substantial distance to travel so we knew that we had to make today count.

It was a long day but there was no mandatory portaging. Apart from Jamie we all lined two fairly substantial rapids. At one of these I merely paddled to a ledge on a lesser current at the side of the rapid, stepped out, pushed the boat over, and jumped back into the boat.

There were a few more good rapids at the start of the day today that we all rafted, including one right near the previous night's camp site. We were entering the lower Franklin and the water was mostly flat with long stretches of paddling required.

The landscape was also beginning to change. Previously we had been in high sided gorges but now the river was lined with low hills, and a generally flatter topography. We had a good view of the

Elliot Range as we paddled past. The river banks also changed to include long sections of caves and unusual rock sculptures.

When we reached our camp site for the evening, it was quite difficult to moor and unpack the boats because of the steep, muddy and slippery river bank, and the untidy collection of logs in the river close to the bank. We ended up tying a rope from tree to tree up the bank in order to make climbing up and down easier. The empty rafts were then stacked in two piles of three still floating on the flat water.

Although the camp site appeared to be well used it was actually a bit further beyond the Man Tree camp that we'd been aiming for. David said that he had seen steps leading up the river bank a short distance back up the river which was probably Man Tree camp.

There was a substantial cliff behind our camp site, with a large round hole in it about five metres from the ground. We thought this may have been what our notes referred to as Kutikina Cave and that it could be navigated for some distance into the rock. The awkward mess of dead branches underneath the cave entrance and the late hour of the day discouraged us from climbing up the cliff to it. We later found other people's pictures of Kutikina Cave and decided that this was not it after all and for lack of any better name I now refer to it simply as Holey Cliff.



Updating the journal at Holey Cliff camp site (photo David Tasker)

Although it had been fine and sunny for most of the day, it began to drizzle again late in the afternoon. Tarps were erected in the camp site so that we didn't feel like we had to be confined to the tents or raincoats for the remainder of the evening.

Day 14 – Holey Cliff to Sir John Falls

9 February 2012

It felt very odd to sleep by a quiet part of the river where I could not hear the loud noise of nearby rapids all night.

This was to be our last day on the Franklin River. It would include few rapids and was mostly flat water, meaning constant paddling with less help from the current. More brawn and less brain.

However, there were still a small number of good fun rapids early in the day. We were able to shoot both sections of 'Double Fall', but that was as adventurous as the day got for us. Jess and I accidentally did part of it backwards, but at this end of the journey going backwards down a rapid was second nature to us so it was not a problem.

The banks of the river were frequently lined by fascinating rock formations including caves, arches, and other weird indescribable shapes.

When we reached 'Big Fall' we unpacked the boats for our last portage. Big Fall has killed several people and at least one of the bodies has never been recovered. Apparently, at very high water levels it's quite safe to paddle through being just a dip in the river. At other water levels it can be exceedingly dangerous for rafting, even though it may look safe (according to the notes).



*Jess re-inflates her leaky boat every half hour since Debacle Bend
(photo David Tasker)*

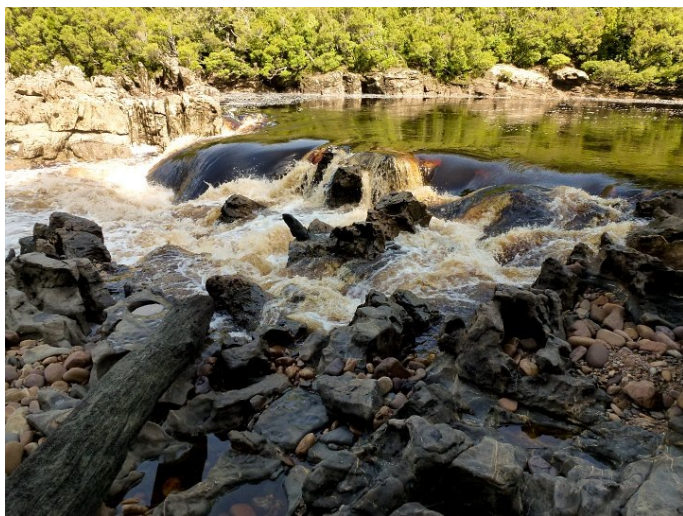
None of us thought it looked even remotely raftable. Thankfully the portage was quite short.

A little after midday we stopped for lunch on Pyramid Island at the confluence of the Franklin and Gordon rivers. I regarded this as the beginning of the end of our journey. Everybody was excited to have now completed rafting the Franklin River, although perhaps a little sad that the adventure proper was now over.

After lunch we faced six kilometres of paddling down the Gordon River until we reached our final camp at Sir John Falls where we were to be picked up by boat the next day. The Gordon River is wide, deep and flat from here on, without any substantial current to assist rafters. The usual north west winds of Tasmania are directly in the face of rafters trying to paddle down the Gordon and paddling an inflatable dinghy against the wind is a body breaking and mind bending experience that none of us were looking



*Lower Franklin River Bank
(photo David Tasker)*



Big Fall (photo David Tasker)

100m to the beach in front of the old Hydro hut (one of the remains from the abandoned dam constructions days).

Apart from the six of us there were three retiree kayakers staying in the hut. Across the river at Warners Landing, three yachts were moored with six people between them. After unpacking our gear we headed down to the beach to relax for a while.

We were soon joined by the kayakers and then the yachties also putted across in their various dinghies. They generously shared their beer, wine and nibblies with us. It was an unexpected and delightful surprise to celebrate the end of our expedition with a small impromptu beach party while still being in out in the south west bush.

That night in the hut there were four snorers, each with their own repertoire of strange noises and one of our group who I know snores wasn't even asleep yet. Lots of people were tossing and turning noisily. I knew I would not get a wink of sleep if I stayed in there. I lay awake for a couple of hours and then started trying to think of where I could go to get some sleep. Certainly not on the grass outside the hut as we'd seen several tiger snakes there! Then I remembered a suitable spot that Sean had noticed amongst the trees behind the beach. I grabbed my tent and mat and in the middle of the night crept out in only my undies and set up camp. I returned to the hut for my sleeping bag and pillow (a bundle of polar fleece clothes) and then zipped myself into the tent in peace. I slept quite well that night and my tent dried out too.



Celebratory photo of the team on Pyramid Island (photo David Tasker)

forward to. However, as we paddled down the Gordon River there was not a breath of wind. We were blessed with mirror-still water reflecting the rain forested hills around us all the way to Sir John Falls.

I found myself out in front for the Gordon River paddle and contrary to my expectations, I thoroughly enjoyed paddling through this silent stretch of river and rainforest. I felt like I was out there alone for that final six kilometres and did the whole stretch non-stop.

After reaching the jetty and pontoon at Sir John Falls, I stripped off and had a quick swim and wash before I paddling the last



*Nik exiting the Franklin River around Pyramid Island
(photo David Tasker)*

Day 15 – Sir John Falls to Strahan

10 February 2012

With our excursion on the Franklin River over, we had most of Saturday to wait until the boat came to pick us up at 4:30pm. The weather was excellent and the location was fantastic, so it was a pleasant and relaxing rest day to end our trip.

For breakfast, we each chose the best of whatever suitable food we had left. The yachties on the other side of the river had given us a loaf of bread they'd made yesterday so we also shared fresh toast and butter!

There were several resident tiger snakes under and around the hut, including three spotted in one patch of grass. One of them favoured sitting right next to the water tank, making using the tap a somewhat more delicate exercise that it ought to be. Another one enjoyed sun baking in the middle of the track to the toilet block. As if this wasn't enough, there was a nest of Jack Jumpers under the step right at the hut door. Jack Jumper ants are pure evil – far worse than tiger snakes in my opinion (and more deadly according to statistics).



Tiger Snake outside the old Hydro Hut

We spent most of the morning lazing around the hut and the beach. I spent a lot of time sitting in my raft reading the final pages of my novel in the sunshine down on the beach. A float plane from Strahan landed on the river near the Sir John Falls jetty a couple of times during the day, carrying tourists wanting to see the South West from the air.

For lunch, Jess made falafels to share and I made cheese toasties for everybody with optional home-dried tomato and/or tuna. After my first attempt back at the hobbit hole, I now perfected the bush cheese toasties by folding the mountain bread around the cheese and other contents first, then toasting on the pan. It worked a treat! Everyone loved the toasties and the falafels. Some even had falafels in their toasties.

After lunch we packed our gear into the rafts for the last time and paddled the 100m back to the jetty to spend the afternoon waiting there until the boat arrived. Once the rafts had dried out, we deflated them and packed them up for the last time. It really was over.

Some of us had another quick swim and wash in the Gordon River. The water was very cold and I had the record for the longest time in the water that day, at 45 seconds according to Sean's stop watch.

Commercial tour boats are not permitted to go up the Gordon River any further than Heritage Landing which is several kilometres further downstream than Sir John Falls. We were very fortunate to have connections in our team with people who own a few boats at Strahan and had kindly agreed to time one of their recreational trips up the Gordon in their private boat so that they could pick us up.

We had been told by Paul that this boat was a large catamaran. No! Even larger than what we were thinking. No! This boat is huge, claimed Paul. It was difficult for the rest of us to grasp what "huge" meant until we saw it.

About five minutes before it peeped around the corner we heard it coming. And it didn't actually peep around the corner, but rather the top of the cabin peeped over the trees before the bow became visible. This thing completely dwarfed the ocean-going yachts that were moored on the other side of the river. I was later told that it's about 60 foot long.

It was an amazing site to see this massive thing cruising towards us with a group of much-missed spouses, partners, and loved ones on the deck waving at us. Of course, I knew my wife wouldn't be able to make it to meet me, due to some logistical issues,



Float plane takes off from Gordon River



My wetsuit, boots and gloves were all ruined and went straight into a rubbish bag



*Relaxing on the Gordon River beach near the hydro hut
(photo David Tasker)*



Greetings from loved ones as the boat approaches



Jamie and Sandie (photo David Tasker)



BBQ on our Gordon River cruise

and would be at home looking after our kids, but one of the distant voices I could hear sure sounded like hers. Then Paul said, “Hey, there’s kids on that boat! There’s only one of us here with kids”.

Sure enough as the boat got closer I could see my wife and our five year old daughter waving frantically at me amongst the group on deck. I broke down in tears, I was so happy. Although I’d missed my family, I did not realise how much until that moment.

I soon became concerned if they could manoeuvre a boat of such magnitude so close to the shore as this short jetty was, but the boat turned towards the jetty and gently touched it. We quickly threw all our gear onto the deck and jumped aboard so that the boat could get away again and we could greet our loved ones – and there was much rejoicing.

The trip from Sir John Falls to Strahan took about three hours, even on a large powerful boat as this (partly due to speed restrictions on the Gordon River), but it was three of the best hours of my life. Our partners had brought beer, wine, cheese platters, and various other nibbles. Later the ship’s owners wheeled a BBQ out on to the stern deck where they cooked sausages, rissoles and veggie burgers. This was a Gordon River cruise like very few people ever get to do it. Much farther up the Gordon than commercial cruises go, a huge ship all to ourselves, and the exhilaration of having just completed rafting the Franklin River. I felt like we were being treated as royalty. My daughter wanted to show me everything about the boat and was loving the experience too. It was fantastic to be with my wife again a day earlier than I’d expected.

We spent the cruise down the Gordon River and across Macquarie Harbour telling our families about our adventures, taking in the sights (including great views of Frenchman's Cap) and revelling in being safe and together again. Eventually we floated into port at Strahan just after dark, mooring in a prime position right next to the road. Unbelievable.



A distant Frenchmans Cap from Macquarie Harbour

At Strahan we had full use of a large house that was owned by one of the team members relatives. This meant that we had time and space to have a nice hot shower and relax. We even got to sleep on real mattresses before the long four hour drive back home the next day.



The catamaran that picked us up as painted by my five year old daughter at school a few days afterwards

Epilogue

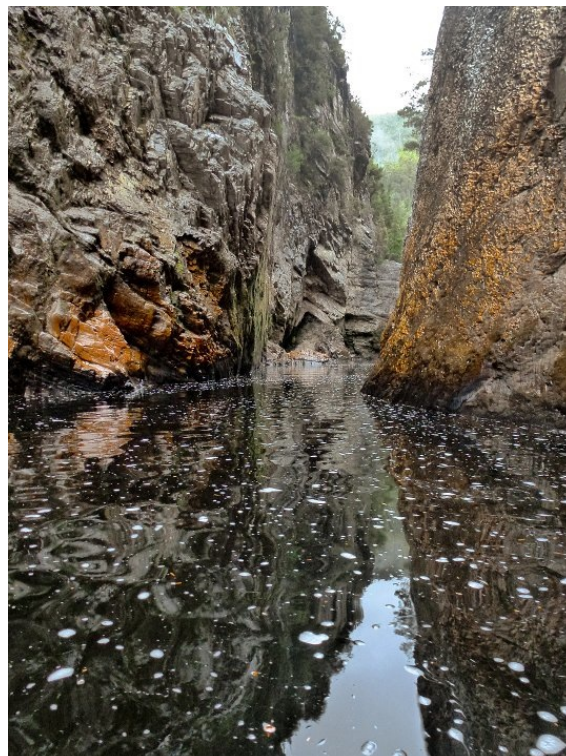
It is usual, while away on extended adventures in the wilderness, for thoughts about issues from home or work come to mind periodically, particularly during the first few days. However, I didn't anticipate how much this would happen the other way around back at home. For the first few days after returning home I found that my subconscious was frequently considering how to tackle the next rapid, or manage the gear in my raft, or various other issues that I might face on a Franklin River rafting expedition.

On the first night back at home in my own bed I had a rather bizarre dream. My eyes must have been half open as the dream was derived from what I could see and hear in the bedroom around me, combined with my ongoing subconscious thoughts about rafting the Franklin River. It was a warm night and the bedroom window and blind were open, with moonlight shadows on the walls and the floor. I was lying with my face over the edge of the bed.

I thought I was in the rain forest and could clearly see a tangle of moss and lichen covered tree trunks and branches criss-crossing in such a way that it would be very difficult to walk through, let alone to get a raft through it. I was trying to figure out if I should paddle, line the boat or portage the gear through here. Then I looked down through the tangle of branches and noticed how flat and



Franklin River Junction (photo David Tasker)



Irenabyss (photo David Tasker)



Rafts at Rock Island Bend (photo David Tasker)

smooth the surface was beneath the branches. I couldn't figure out whether it was the ground or the river. What ever the case, how was I going to get my raft through this tangle of trees?

Then an electronic alarm noise began and I became very agitated, calling out, "What's that?!". To my great surprise in that remote rainforest, my wife's voice answered that it was her alarm to get up and take our toilet-training three year old daughter to the toilet. This shocked me and I was now completely confused and bewildered.

A few moments later my wife returned and started talking again. I sat bolt upright and yelled out, "How did you

get here?!", to which she quietly explained that she was just returning from helping our daughter in the bathroom.

I sat there for a couple of minutes very confused in a state of near panic. Then the tangle trees and branches slowly dissolved into chair legs, bed posts, window panes, and their criss-crossing shadows. The flat surface beneath them could then be identified as neither the ground nor the water, but the merely the floor of my bedroom at home. I realised that I was sitting on the edge of my own bed.

It took another minute or so for my head to clear enough to fully understand that I was no longer on the Franklin River.

I was at home. The adventure had ended.



*Franklin River from Newland Cascades
(photo David Tasker)*

David's Expedition Review

After reading this Franklin River rafting journal David wrote the following comments.

When thinking about who to invite on this, my third Franklin trip I cast my thoughts back to 1979 and 1980.

My companions from that era were all around 25 to 30 years old and each had at least five solid years experience in the Tasmanian wilderness. We were all “bushies” although none of us had any rafting experience. Each of my “old” rafting buddies turned down the invitation. One was approaching his 65th birthday and claimed “old age” another sadly passed away only a few months before. It seemed unlikely that I could make up a balanced group. I would be a 30 year old guy stuck in a 60 year old body on departure day. One of my good friends put it this way. “David, you were young and dumb in those days and it seems like only one thing has changed”.

I already had three candidates with my son Sean, my eldest daughter Kate and Paul our part time adopted boy of 31. I really wanted Nick to come along though. I had never been in the bush with Nik but I knew that he had a lot of experience and would be a solid team member. This proved to be true on the river. I was really pleased that his wife was able to talk some sense into him and get him to accept. The other two who made up our group, Jamie and Jess, were unknown quantities. I could only hope that there would be enough time and practice sessions to figure them out. I knew that once we were on the Franklin we would be faced with a life changing experience and some testing situations. How could I explain that?

I had unexpressed reservations about my own ability and strength to complete this trip. I knew (or at least hoped) that I could call on help from the younger and fitter people but I was determined not to have to do that. I have said many times in the past while on hiking trips “If I can’t carry my own gear, I shouldn’t be here”. I was not trying to prove anything either to myself or to anyone else but I was determined “pull my own weight” as the expression goes. Hopefully, without sounding vain I believe I managed to contribute as much as any other team member. I am very grateful to my team mates for their efforts.

Looking back on the trip I have more visual recollections from my previous trips than this one. There was much more drama and many more “incidents” on the trip than either of my two previous journeys. In fact I was quite frustrated by day four as there had been more “paddle overboard” accidents in three days of rafting than the whole of the combined time from 1979 and 1980. I couldn’t understand why everyone seemed so casual about handling their paddle or their boat. It seemed so obvious to me that you either carried your paddle when lining your boat or firmly secured it to your raft. Why did I need to tell these guys the obvious? On reflection It is possible that they were looking for my guidance. Being senior and having rafted down twice before it could have been simply that I was expected to say more. Eventually I did speak up and quite firmly stated “your paddle is your lifeline”. I would have those words thrust back at me by my son when I had my own “paddle overboard” event later in the trip.

I also realised that the Franklin was quite beyond anything that Nick and Jamie had experienced in the bush, even though they were the next most experienced in our group. Which was why in the evening, I would check that the boats and paddles were secured. It was surprising how often I had to move a paddle away from the river.

I have a rare photo book that was published by Bob Brown as material for the “Save the Franklin” campaign. The forward was written by a well known (then) American adventurer. He said, and I paraphrase, “If you are privileged to experience this River once in your life you are indeed fortunate. It will be a life changing event”. I sincerely hope that Nik and the others in our group feel that they have done something that only a relatively few from seven billion earthlings will ever do. We were lucky, we were adventuresome, we were bold. Would I go with you guys again? In a heartbeat!