

HFNC Excursion to Bessiebelle Historic Sheepwash in the Stony Rises

17 Nov 2012

Rod Bird

The site is in the 14,000 acre Ardonachie Run of 1848 (split into Mt Eccles & Lake Gorrie Runs in 1864). Lake Gorrie (636 ha) was transferred to Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation in about 2008. This volcanic flow from Mt Eccles is a part of the 3,200 ha Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape (Indigenous Protected Area). Mt Eccles National Park (8,375 ha) lies to the west. Drains in the region may have reduced the water levels in the washes. For more information see *Victoria Heritage Database*.

Present: John & Glenys Cayley, Ken Grimes & Janeen Samuel, David & Lyn Munro, Rod Bird & Diane Luhrs, Ross Simpson, Hilary Turner, Liz Fenton, Bill Lane and another visitor.

Travel: the site is accessed by travelling to MacArthur (34 km), then on the Mt Eccles Rd to the Bessiebelle-Lake Gorrie Rd (2.5 km), and thence to Purcells Rd (11 km). Along that dirt road (3 km) turn right at Pyres Rd and continue to the locked gate (1 km). The gate marks the boundary of the Gunditj Mirring land. The main Sheepwash site lies adjacent to the track, 2 km from the entry gate. The WindaMara office in Kenna St, Hamilton kindly supplied us with a key to enable our group to drive in to the site.

First Sheepwash Site (GPS Aust84, 38-07-16/141-57-57)

A long race leads from the plunge pool and dry-stone walled yards above. There was a little water in the race; the winter water level a metre or so higher was indicated by a mark on the wall. It seems that sheep were forced down an alley from the small yard above and tipped into a pool formed in the rocks. There a man would stand in the water and wash the fleece on the sheep, then the sheep would swim along the 40 m race and out into a yard. That yard appears to have been near the present track. The construction of this sheepwash (between 1850 & 1864) involved much labour. The structures were restored by Heritage Victoria; works replacing stones and removing trees that had de-stabilised walls was completed in 2011.

Second Sheepwash Site (GPS 38-07-10/141-58-01)

This site is 200 m north along the track, on the west side. It is in good condition. There is a pool about 40 m by 20 m on the west side. The water in it was at least 60 cm deep. White-faced Herons flew from the pool as we arrived. There is a stone-walled race from a yard down to a 'landing' on the edge of the pool. The sheep may have been washed in the hole at the base of this race and then made to swim, to exit the pool at a stone race some 15 m away. Native vegetation surrounds the pool on 3 sides.

An interesting feature here was *Melianthus major* (Cape Honey-flower) as a tall, odd-looking shrub. Botanist Geoff Carr identified the weed when he visited the site a few days later.

We had our picnic lunch at the First Site, in warm sunlight. Some had to return early to Hamilton but others liked the idea of looking in at Lake Condah on our way home.



Lake Condah: We drove on Pyres Rd to the Bessiebelle Rd, SW to the Heywood Rd, 1 km further turn right onto Homerton Rd. About 7.5 km later, turn right into Condah Estate Rd and then down Vaughans Rd to the Blue Gum Plantation. From there, a short drive along the edge of the plantation to the lake.

We walked down to the weir and observed a modest depth of water in the lake but none running over the weir (there is an environmental flow through a pipe that has an outflow some 200 m down the drain). The lake was covered with Water Ribbons where, a year or two earlier, grew thistles.

Birds seen:

Swamp Harrier

Red-kneed Dotterel

Black-fronted Dotterel

Pacific Black Duck

Grey Teal

Hoary-headed Grebe

Great Egret

Masked lapwing

White-faced Heron

Black Swan

White-fronted Chat

Sharp-tailed Sandpipers

Little Black Cormorant

Red Wattlebird

Willie Wagtail

On driving home across the Boundary Rd, which crosses the drained Condah Swamp, we saw 2 Spotless Crakes, a Brown Songlark, Common Skylark and Golden-headed Cisticola.

Site 1. View from the west in 2008, before restoration (note the collapsed wall of the race).



Site 1. View from the north in 2012, after restoration. Note water in the race and repaired wall on right.



Site 1. View from forcing pen down the race to plunge wash hole and swimming race to the right.



Site 1. View of wash hole; the exit to swimming race is to the right.



Site 2. View from stone yard down the race to the wash hole and pond beyond.



Site 2. View of wash hole and exit race ahead. The sheep had to swim along the edge of the pond.



Site 2. View of pool and sheepwash structures from the pond side (looking back to the stone yards).

