



Highland people gather to muster

MANSFIELD — Already the mornings are so cold on the Great Divide that you wake up believing you have no toes.

Ice is on the ground. The mist which began falling 12 hours earlier has been so thick that firewood dead for months feels as wet as sap.

Clutching an axe to cut more, you quickly decide instead to head back for the hut and wait an hour or two. The cold hits your hands and face like a hammer.

It's brutal country for people who don't know it. Trying to find Rocky Nob on Wednesday, we were lost for 12 hours. We winched our way twice up wet, steep bush roads, and only by chance found a hut in which to sleep the night.

And now the three of us, shivering by a dying fire in a damp, bleak dawn, tell each other we couldn't live here for more than a few days. Jeez no mate, you'd have to be mad.

But to cattlemen who graze their herds in the high country around Mount Buller and the Howqua River, the day dawns neither cold nor warm.

When at last you find their camp, they are strolling among their horses and wearing nothing warmer than short-sleeved shirts.

This is just one camp. There are perhaps 10 others dotted on various mountain spurs in the area.

This month the families from around Mansfield begin gathering to muster their cattle in the yearly drive down to the lowlands before the first snow falls.

In Gippsland, on the other side of the Great Divide, other families are doing the same.



Charlie Lovick: A challenge to his bushcraft.

HIS father took Charlie on his first highland muster at the age of 10, just as Charlie took Ned the dog at six months and will take his own son Wayne, now 4, in a few more years.

Charlie doesn't give up easily. When the muster is over, and the count shows fewer cattle than he should have, he invariably comes back a few days later for a second look. He's not often outwitted the second time.

The current muster began last Sunday, but so far hasn't brought in many head. A storm met the 26 Lovick riders as they reached their mountain camp 80 kilometres from their farm at Merrijig. Rain continued until yesterday.

His party, which includes guests who pay to take part, will probably remain at the camp until early next week.

If the weather stays dry, as it did yesterday, this will be enough time for them to assemble the 200-odd cattle and calves in a 2,000-hectare holding paddock.

The Lovick's grazing area is on a kilometre-high spur, falling on one side towards the Jamieson River, and on the other towards the Howqua. It is long and narrow, stretching from Mount Clear to Mount Magdala.

They have held it since 1959 and are confident they will hold it many more years despite conservationists' recommendations to the State Government that some grazing rights be ended.

To Charlie and, I suppose, every other cattleman the withdrawal of the grazing rights is unthinkable because the people advocating it "don't really know what they're talking about".

On the wall of the Merrijig Hotel, just before the high country starts, is pinned a cutting from "The Age", quoting the views of Professor Kenneth Mellanby, the English environmental scientist who visited Australia a few months ago.

The professor's view that controlled grazing actually improves forest land is heartily endorsed by them all.

Charlie Lovick points out, very calmly and with knowledge that seems well-based: "Look what happened at Bogong when they stopped the cattle. It's now covered with rattlebush. Kosciusko has become a fire hazard and a home for noxious vermin."

Keeps the tracks open, he says. If you stop the cattle grazing in the high country, the tracks will be covered over.

Charlie Lovick, 28, looking after camp in the one-day absence of his father, Jack, doesn't think there is anything remarkable in finding the family's herd in the wild 40,000 hectares to which they hold grazing rights from the Forests Commission.

Forty-thousand hectares is 100,000 acres — a lot of land. It is difficult to investigate because it is steep, slippery, wet, terraced, rocky and full of snow gums, mountain ash and undergrowth. There's hardly a flat place in it.

Wandering from a track, anybody but a mountain person could get lost in 10 minutes.

"No, it's not hard to find the cattle," says Charlie, "we generally have a good idea of their habits. Anyway, the dogs do a lot of the work. We turn 'em loose and maybe half-an-hour or 45 minutes later we hear them and know they've cornered some."

He's got 10 dogs this time, including Ned, the leader, who is aged 10 and looks about five. About half the dogs are pups, still inept but mad with the excitement they know is coming.

A split second after they get the command to fetch-em they charge yelping through the bush, leaping logs and rocks, swerving between the huge trees and skirting sudden drops to death.

Normally the Lovick family puts out 310 Herefords to graze on the highlands in December. That figure is their quota for the amount of land they lease.

From 310 they get back about 360, which include new calves.

This year, because dry weather reduced their capacity they put out only 220.

Do they lose many in those 40,000 hectares?

"If we lose six out of 300 it's not a real good muster," says Charlie. "If we lose 10, it's a disaster."

You sense that he's talking not only in economic terms. The disaster would equally concern his anger that 10 had eluded him and defied all his bushcraft.

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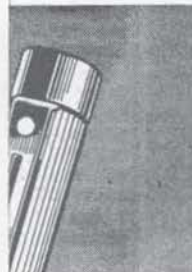
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CREATION





Glenda Lovick plays with Speckles before the dogs set off to find the cattle. Looking on is Sen Weir.