

Heady times: there were plenty of spectators eager to glimpse the mountain horsemen show their dazzling skills.

Dogs: *left: Gavin Kennedy (left), Gary Jackson, Lisa Johnson and the Bessie and Johnny Red.*
Pictures: GREG SCULLIN

High on alpine air



Cup caper: the winner of the Cattlemen's Cup, Ricky Hodge, of Buchan, with Big Red.

THEY may be under siege from environmentalists wanting them out, but the graziers and their families of Victoria's Alpine National Park aren't leaving yet.

The families, many from the dry flats of Gippsland, travelled for hours at the weekend to attend the annual Mountain Cattlemen's Association get-together.

On the Bennison Plains at Higgins' mustering paddock they camped, sang, rode and danced.

Supporters came too, boosting numbers to 2000-plus.

Horseman rode. Poets recited and dogs jumped the high bar.

There was the Run Amok cup where riders bid for horses and the Mulga Bill bike ride.

Buchan horseman Ricky Hodge won the Mountain Cattlemen's Cup in a 2.5km ride.

It was an average year for Ricky who has been known to win the poet's prize, the cup and a few other prizes besides at the get-together.

But it was Billy Ross, from Queensland,

who was dubbed best poet. He gave a splendid, unamplified performance from the back of a mud-covered ute to win the Don Kneebone Heritage award, a perpetual award that costs nothing to enter, delivers no money but somehow pulls poets from all corners of the nation.

"Don Kneebone was one of our great cattleman poets," said organiser Linda Barraclough.

For some, the weekend was a fitting flirt with merriment in the face of rising threats of expulsion after moves by Environment and Conservation Minister Sherry Garbutt to prevent cattle re-entering the park.

One grazier, Bill Cumming, who holds a grazing licence, said it made his heart break to see grass to the knees going begging in the nearby Caledonia area, when his cattle were enduring drought on his farm at Glenmaggie.

"What's really hurting this year is that we are absolutely devastated by drought in our home area and to see the grass available in the leasehold area is frustrating in the extreme," Bill said.



Hat-trick: Rachel Parsons, from Mansfield, looked the part in her fine cowgirl hat.



Old hands: veterans of the saddle joined in the fun and showed a brisk turn of pace in the Mountain Cattlemen Stockmen's Classic.



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Dogs' life: Gavin Kennedy (left), Gary Ticknell, Travis Robinson and Bill Brereton with dogs Bessy and Johnny Red.
 Pictures: GREG SCULLIN



White water: a rider charges through a water obstacle during the mountain race. DAVID STONEY ↙