

Alison's 2011 Outback Odyssey wrap-up

What is there to be said about my third journey along the Mawson Trail?

It was another good trip.

I'm not quite sure what my goal was on this particular jaunt. Round one was to see if I could do it. Round two was to see if I could do it better - with less falls and riding bits that had been walked previously. Plus to recapture the sense of "what a great holiday!" that had stayed with me for months after round one.

I guess round three was partly not wanting to miss out on another great holiday. I had kind of hoped I might find improved capability and no need to walk any section- but that would have required more conscious preparation plus more skills and strength acquisition than was achieved prior to setting out this time. That might prove to be a realisable goal for round four! I had bought a nice road bike last year and spent most of my riding time in the last 12 months on this, and it wasn't until about a month before this year's Mawson that I got back on the MTB only to realise that road riding is NOT the same as MTBing... and that a comfortable sense of bike position and balance and confidence off road takes nurturing and maintenance! It did come back pretty quickly but is now recognised as worthy of keeping current rather than doing a last ditch update prior to a ride!

As with other Mawson veterans I am now aware how much the trail changes from one year to the next. What was sand one year might be hard packed track the next. Creek beds are likely to differ after every rain. The summer rains had left the trail a bit washed out in some places but very green everywhere. This year seemed to have a few sections of Paris-Roubaix cobblestones thrown in on day 2 & 3 on stretches that I recall as being smooth roads previously but which had obviously had significant rain damage. Disappointingly the trail from Burra to Tooralie was impassable in some stretches meaning a detour was required around the section before Dare's Hill Summit which unfortunately bypassed some of the beautiful scenery rolling off to the east... but also meant we got to keep our feet dry by avoiding one of the permanently watery creek crossings. This year we chose the option of riding the Rattler Trail from Riverton to the start of the Riesling Trail... and kept on this right through to White Hut Rd.

We were also pretty lucky as far as prickles went and most survived the Bundaleer Channels without copping a flat, despite the fear that the rain may have brought out a good crop of caltrop.

Weather wise we were again pretty lucky with nothing more than a bit of drizzle on the first two days. Rain & dew meant the tents were wet to put away on all bar a couple of days, and we did have a few chilly mornings and overcast days, but heavy rains and strong winds kept their distance.

The ride itself appears to get easier each time, some of which relates to road conditions [the climb up Richman Gap before Quorn had been nicely graded, and the single trail in the Wirrabara Forest was much less rocky], but I know I am also a few years more bike hardened which seems to have improved the power output!

2011 was a smaller group than 2009, with a few more familiar faces. All had improved and many were getting in several hours earlier than previously. Some were clocking up their 4th or 5th ride, and a few had previously ridden it back in its inaugural iteration in 2002. Most proclaimed the usual sigh of "I am never doing this again" on arrival in Blinman... but I am starting to think it has a sneaky way of getting under the skin to the degree it needs to be tackled again... and again!

There is talk of next time having an option to push on to Arkaroola which is likely to be another drawcard.

We had a couple of changes of venue- staying at Lobethal for the first night, and Quorn oval instead of the caravan park. We also relied solely on local catering which meant for mostly scrumptious country treats but unfortunately also meant no porridge for brekky.

As far as the actual ride went- there are a few thoughts worthy of report. I managed a few wrong turns by inadvertently following riders in front and not paying as close attention as I should have to where we were. I did pretty well just relying on memory and trail markers and really only pulled out the maps to figure out where we had gone wrong when we took a scenic diversion [aka got lost!]. I did walk a few stretches up Castambul, and through a few creek beds and down Mt Little.

I did have a few falls - mostly inattention with unclipping and a couple when the bike shied away from needing to bunny-hop and when rolling in and out of steep ditches proved ambitious! I can happily report, though, that I got up the climb onto the plateau before the Mt Little descent which had tripped me up on both previous rides!

The medical report for this year almost includes more off-trail incidents than biking troubles! There were a couple of concussions, painful ribs, a cut lip, one fractured collarbone and a handful of soft tissue injuries to be dealt with. And of course the obligatory respiratory bug that someone brings along to share with everyone by the end of the trip! Apart from the sniffles I managed to limit myself to the usual collection of bruises and a bit of bark off a knee and elbows!

Two years away is too far to make any definite pronouncements- but I would certainly not be ruling out going again for round 4 and beyond! I will be aiming to be better at some of the technical skills- getting over obstacles and up & down steep loose surfaces. Bring it on!!