

# The Victorian Riviera: *Gippsland Lakes*

Report by Di Ross, general photographs by John Batty



Hazy morning on the Mitchell River

**H**aving cruised the waters of Lakes Entrance, Metung, the Tambo and Nicholson Rivers to date, we based ourselves at the Lake King Caravan Park to catch up on domestic chores such as some re-provisioning (boring but necessary).

This park is set in natural bushland on the protected waters of Eagle Point Bay and offers good ramp facilities, jetties and moorings for guests as well as shady camp sites and cabin accommodation, bait, tackle, fuel, a heated pool and hospitality aplenty.

Paynesville is ten minutes by road, less by water. Lake King is a great park to make base as it offers waterside camp

sites and cabins, is centrally located within the Lakes system and gives you every opportunity to use your boat to the maximum during the day (or evening, for that matter).

There is an influx of boaters over the weekends; fishers and skiers all of whom seemed very much in harmony. It is not uncommon to see the afternoon activities within the bay almost in "tiers" - water skiing on the inner waters, wind surfing a little further out, full on yachting on the outer waters all amid the fishers trolling around at random.

The township of Eagle Point (pop 350) has a kangaroo reserve which is open to the visitors to take a walk through and interact with the wildlife and the many bird species.

Well, mundane stuff up to date, we are ready for some more cruising. Casting off we head NE past the Compass Swinging Station to Reef Point and the lead markers for the

**Mitchell River.** The Mitchell along with its subsidiaries, the Dargo, Wentworth and Wongungarra Rivers, commence their journey from high up in the Dargo High Plains and Hotham Heights areas, before heading seaward through steep lush forested gullies and rolling hills.

At the end of its journey silt jetties have formed, stretching some 8km out into the Lake King and, in fact there would only be a kilometre or so of water between the start of the jetties and the mainland at Thumb Point. These long finger-like protrusions have been created over time with the

Guess that's why the major water storage reservoirs have been constructed along these rivers, providing irrigation and domestic water for Melbourne. Travelling upstream at the 5-knot speed limit, the environmental work undertaken to retrieve and stabilise the banks after the floods is evident. It's an odd feeling cruising in the river in sight of narrow strips of land with the waters of Lake King and Jones Bay on either side.

This has been stunningly captured by Glen Hooper in his aerial photograph of the silt jetties (F&B #87 last month)

Just before the break in the silt jetty, known as The Cut, we stop off at the local community ramp. This area is easily accessed by a well-maintained dirt road. We spent some time at this spot realising that the ramp provides for quick access to Jones Bay via The Cut. It is well patronised by many fishers, both shore and boat alike. A couple of nice flathead just happened to be lurking in the reeds across the river and found themselves biting off a bit more than they could chew. 'Gotcha - dinner tonight! They were healthy looking lizards to boot.

The locals spoke of trout residing in the brackish waters. We did see a photograph of a 3kg version "in the bag", but don't think that's a regular occurrence... just a phenomena like the silt jetties. Heading on past The Cut (with the old tree stumps providing good roosting for the abundant bird life), we pull into the bank opposite The Bluff's sandstone cliffs (about 8km upriver).

Above the cliffs, the Lookout is busy with tourists taking in the views over the silt jetties. On the water a solitary white duck lurks in anticipation of tucker coming from our boat or up from the depths - sorry little duck, fresh out of luck.

The terrain flattens out as the river winds through grassy banks and the fertile flood plains. Along the riverbanks there's no shortage of the good old "bomb ropes" slung over substantial trees . . . gee, that was fun as a youngster.

The Paynesville Road runs parallel to the river as residences appear, most with a boat at the bottom of the garden, and we arrive at Bairnsdale (19km upriver). Passing the butter factory and under Highway One, the backwater runs off the main river as you enter the CBD of this regional city.

Let's head back, it will take some time at five knots, and there's lot's more to see and do. Once clear of the silt jetties and the channel markers, we travel SE across Lake King, heading for Point Fullarton and the lead markers for McMillan Strait. Numbers of elegant and graceful black swans appear, totally unfazed by those sharing their aquatic home seemingly welcoming us to . . .

**Paynesville** (pop 2,650). If there's a heaven on earth for the cruising boat owner, Paynesville must go close to being it. Being surrounded by the waters of Lake King to the north and Lake Victoria to the south, it is understandable that it has the reputation of being Victoria's Boating Capital.

There are more black swans here than pigeons at an MCG test match - they almost put on a parade. One of the first encounters of the human kind was a member of the Water Police, not for any misdemeanour, but more that we were identified as a "new boat" to the area. He welcomed us very pleasantly and the local information flowed freely and was much appreciated.

The Gippsland base of the Water Police is at Mariners