



VNPA MEMBER LYNN GUNNING IS AN ACCREDITED EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGIST AND FREELANCE WRITER WHO LOVES BIKE RIDING, BUSHWALKING AND CANOEING, AND ENJOYING AND ADVOCATING FOR AUSTRALIA'S GREAT OUTDOORS AND ITS FLORA AND FAUNA.

PHOTO: LYNN GUNNING

Canoeing the Glenelg.

A wildlife and relaxation paradise, Lower Glenelg National Park, about 380 km west of Melbourne, is a hidden treasure offering great hiking, boating, camping and paddling opportunities.

The perfect way to take in the surroundings is by paddling at a leisurely rate along all or part of the 46 km stretch of the Glenelg River within the national park. With elusive platypuses, koalas, shingle-back lizards and birds, plus dedicated canoe camping sites, it's the place for a break that's both incredibly tranquil and very invigorating.

You don't have to own all the paddling gear needed as it's easily hired from local operators. Ross and Marg Atkins run Paestan Canoe Hire and kitted us out with boats, paddles, personal flotation devices and barrels to put all our gear in (see www.canoehire.com.au).

They also dropped us off and picked us up from our entry and exit points. The only hassle was navigating our way through the new Parks Victoria booking system, which has individuals and school groups alike scratching their heads and sometimes giving up in utter frustration.

Booking blues

Parks Victoria introduced a new campsite booking system with increased fees in 2014 and it hasn't been smooth going for the park since then. The first time I used the system I found it unwieldy and hard to navigate when you need to change campsites each night. The key issues are:

1. The system is designed for stays of several nights and does not easily cater for one-night stays and daily changes to site bookings.
2. One site can accommodate up to four people. So camping areas with six sites can take up to 24 campers. However, many confused users book one site for each person. Thus in campsites with four sites you may find only four people instead of 16.
3. Groups of more than 16 people are excluded (even though some sites can take up to 24 people).

Ross has noticed his business has dropped 10-15% in the last two years. Meanwhile campsites along the river that were once only available by ballot over the very popular summer period are now often vacant.

"The lack of campers with permits has created a vacuum, and unfortunately, the thing that is filling that vacuum is illegal camping," says Ross.

"Where there were once six or eight other campers keeping an eye on unruly groups, asking them to quieten down or pick up their rubbish, now there's nobody to moderate bad behaviour."

Then there's the significant increase in prices for hiking and canoeing, to \$10 per night per person and \$50 per night for vehicle sites. By comparison, a family can stay at a nearby private caravan park with all amenities for around \$35 per night.

School groups have been particularly hamstrung. First they have to use the cumbersome booking system, with bookings required for each individual student. Not much fun when you're taking 40 kids. Teachers are able to email details through, but this is not seamless or foolproof.

Schools are also being charged twice as much as they used to be, despite some of them doing volunteer maintenance while they are in the park. Imagine the increased overall costs if this volunteer labor were dissuaded from continuing to visit!



Clockwise from top left: Calling on a koala; Superb Fairy-wrens are abundant along the river; Shingleback lizard; 'Wedding cake' formation, Princess Margaret Rose Caves; tent with a view (and kangaroo); echidna at work.

PHOTOS: LYNN GUNNING

We chose to paddle upstream from Dry Creek to Pritchards over four days. With limited canoe camps, the length of each leg is largely determined by the capability of the paddlers and the availability of the next camping site.

All campsites have drop toilets and picnic tables. With a large group of eight people of differing abilities, we opted for two short days of around 6 km each to start with. This gave us plenty of time to visit the Princess Margaret Rose Caves on the afternoon of the first day.

This 90 minute side-trip offers a welcome break and an intriguing look at some great limestone formations. The caves are leased from Parks Victoria by a commercial operator and car camping is available on site.

With an international guest in our group, the highlight of our first night at Lasletts campsite was a local wombat feeding away happily only five metres from our tent.

The second leg to Pattersons canoe camp took less than 90 minutes and allowed

for a sleep-in for those still unwinding from the rat race. As shelter is available at this campsite, we were able to keep dry amid passing showers and prepare a gourmet meal – all the while watching kangaroos hop down to feed by the river, or the resident possum sneak out after dinner to try his luck at securing some easy pickings.

The shorter paddle leg also gave us the opportunity to hike a section of the Great South West Walk, where we spotted an echidna foraging for ants.

Day three is a longer 12 km paddle to one of my favorite sites: Georges Rest. We stopped along the way for lunch and explored another car camping site (where we discovered a tiger snake). We had the campsite to ourselves and spent some of the afternoon cooling off in the river, later to fall asleep listening to the somewhat intimidating grunting calls of the koalas.

Our final day was an 8 km paddle to our pickup point at Pritchards. We saw two koalas in the trees along the riverbanks, and one Azure Kingfisher.

Our international guest was surprised and thrilled to be able to see so many native animals in their natural habitats along the river – something he had never experienced before.

As we disembarked from the canoes we couldn't take the contented grins from our faces. Completely free from mobile phone coverage for the duration of the paddle, we'd been able to truly connect with each other and with the inspiring environment around us. • PW

The Great South West Walk

A section of the 250 km Great South West Walk (which starts and finishes at Portland) hugs the river for three days of walking and is very popular with hiking groups. From Moleside camp, hikers have dedicated campsites at Battersbys, Murrells, Pattersons and Simpsons, and can walk the 50 km through to Nelson in three or four days. More information is available at www.greatsouthwestwalk.com