

The beauty, the stunning views and the bushfire fuel of the high country ready to roar



Darren Gray

Rural affairs reporter for The Age

A gusty north wind blows over Mount Buller, sweeps across the Howqua Valley and rushes through the skeletal remains of a mass of burnt alpine ash and snow gum trees clinging to the north face of the Bluff Range.

As it blows across the alpine meadow on top of the range, the wind pushes the tall grass over to a 45 degree angle, and generates an unmistakeable rustling noise as it sweeps through the crowns of the gnarly old snow gums.

Charlie Lovick used to play bush cricket here, high up on the roof of Victoria in the Great Dividing Range. The players were either high country horse riders or mountain cattlemen.



Cattle woman Kellie Lovick gallops past "King Billy" an ancient Snowgum in Victoria's Alpine National Park. *Photo: Jason South*

He hasn't played cricket here, at an elevation of about 1500 metres in the Alpine National Park, for many years, but Lovick remembers the hit-outs well. Sitting on horseback as he faces the remarkable view of Mount Buller, the Crosscut Saw and other spectacular peaks, Lovick says the meadow looks different today.

"In the days of cattle grazing this would be like a lawn - you could play cricket here - an inch or two long and beautifully green all summer," he says.

But today much of the grass is half a metre or so tall and dying off. On this windy autumn day the meadow resembles a golden, mature wheat field more than a lawn.



Charlie Lovick in Victoria's Alpine National Park. *Photo: JasonSouth*

If the grassland ignited during a bushfire it would carry a "flash fire", Lovick says, and send flames into the canopy of the stunning snow gums. The gums here, well above the snowline, are about three or four metres tall, and many have branches that stretch down and nearly touch the grass.

This is one of Lovick's greatest fears for the high country - that fire could wipe out the snow gums that stand on the slopes and tops of the mountain peaks, leaving behind "bald hills" where the tallest thing standing is grass.

"It's not just the Lovick run that's under threat, it's the whole of our alpine region that's now got a fuel load that's so severe, that the damage done by the next fire, and believe me there will be one, will devastate the whole of the high country...One of our great values is our magnificent old growth Snow Gum forests, and we want them protected," he says.



Cattleman Charlie Lovick gets "Clyde" ready for work in Victoria's Alpine National Park. *Photo: Jason South*

In winter, these gums are covered in snow, but at this time of year, striking autumn colours emerge in the trees. Some of the branches are now a blazing mix of copper, gold and bronze. These trees, including the ancient King Billy Tree, are just one of the many magnificent natural features of the park.

Lovick, his daughter Kellie and fellow mountain cattleman Bruce McCormack, are guiding Fairfax Media and Nationals MPs Peter Walsh and Stephanie Ryan on horseback through the alps to see first-hand the state of the park.

We see panoramic vistas of distant alps, deep valleys and jagged ridges that leave you breathless, towering alpine ash trees and a stunning blue alpine sky.



[Click for more photos](#)

Victoria's Alpine National Park

Could grassland fuel feed a flash fire potentially sending flames into the canopy of our stunning snow gums? Photographer Jason South and writer Darren Gray headed off to the Victorian Alpine National Park to take a look at the state of the countryside. *Photo: Jason South*

But as we traverse a steep rocky trail we also see blackberries, while at other points we see other weeds, including metre high scotch thistles that graze the horses as we pass.

In two days on horseback, the only buildings we pass are a couple of alpine huts. Yet at night-time we see the glow of a mini alpine city across the valley and on top of Mount Buller.

In the area of the park that used to form the Lovick family's alpine grazing lease the cattlemen lead us to a bog on the mountain known as King Billy Number 1. The water is clear, but red mud wraps around much of the edge.

Carved into the mud are some days old, undisturbed footprints. The culprit, says Lovick, is a deer.

Back on the King Billy Track, a different culprit has left its imprint on a steep slope rising to the side. The wheels of a four-wheel-drive have gouged ruts in the earth, presumably so that its inhabitants could enjoy the amazing views from a higher vantage point than provided by the track, without leaving their seat.

But elsewhere, at various remote points, campers with four-wheel-drives are enjoying their holidays and respecting the park.

With the hooves rising and falling steadily Lovick points to the right of the rocky track. "This bush is now what we call dirty bush. It's got a build-up of fuel through dead-fall timber, it's come down in storms and it's quite heavy in fuel...I'd only burn select areas like this and reduce the fuel load, even to a small degree (and it) would probably save the crowns of these snow gums in a heavy fire," he says, of one area where the fuel load is noticeably higher than elsewhere.

A decade has passed since the Victorian Parliament passed legislation banning cattle grazing in the park, but cattlemen like Lovick and McCormack haven't given up hope that one day cattle could return.

Last month the State Government introduced a bill, which, if it passes parliament would ban any form of cattle grazing (including a "scientific trial" of grazing) in the Alpine and River Red Gum national parks. At the time Environment Minister Lisa Neville said grazing was detrimental to the environment and had no value in cutting bushfire risk or fuel loads in the alpine region. She said the government had "acted so that alpine grazing will never happen again."

But Lovick, president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, wants the bill withdrawn and the scientific trial of grazing in the Wonnangatta Valley introduced by the previous government reinstated. "There's no doubt in my mind and I hope to be able to prove it, that cattle contribute, they don't destroy," he says.

"I'm not saying that cattle (grazing) will completely stop fire, we've never said that and never will. It's just one of those simple management tools we can use to reduce the intensity of our fires."

Scientific research over 50 years has shown grazing cattle destroys alpine bogs and other pristine natural attributes of the bushland, contributing to reduced water quality, erosion, threatened species and the spread of weeds.

A state government inquiry into the 2003 bushfires, which burnt 60 per cent of the national park and 77 per cent of the grazed area, found there was no evidence grazing prevented bushfires.

New South Wales banned cattle grazing in parks in the 1960s.

April 8, 2015 - 10:32AM

To view the video, click on: <http://media.theage.com.au/news/national-times/interview-with-an-alpine-cattleman-6422857.html>