

# Huntering & Gathering (Muswellbrook) 17 / 18 August

by Bill Parker

One of the things I have enjoyed most about cycling is getting out to new areas and exploring without being imprisoned in an isolating metal & glass box. On a bike you interact with and touch the environment, the sights, sounds and smells which makes the journey important and not just the destination. I therefore registered for the Audax Huntering & Gathering at Muswellbrook (taking the easy options on both days) and it was a magnificent weekend full of contrasts.

The predicted dawn temperature for Saturday was 5 but when I checked at 6am it was already 17 due to a warm northwest wind. The other riders (from Bathurst, Sydney & Wollongong) were already at the start when I arrived and as usual it looked like my front wheel alone weighted more than their entire bikes and the apparent capability gap was further confirmed as they discussed their recent 400, 600, 1,200 km rides.



Kevin, Bill, Gary, Ian, Katherine wait for the starters flag (picture thanks to Kim)

Within a few minutes we were outside Muswellbrook and heading north on a good and quiet back road towards Aberdeen, Lake Glenbawn (thanks to Dabba's sharp eye and local knowledge last week we were saved a 20 km backtrack due to a closed bridge on the original route) and Scone before heading south again with a very strong tail wind (but were we going

in the right direction?) by which time I lost sight of the others. Before Muswellbrook the route turned west with the wind now even stronger and very gusty with threatening dark clouds gathering, even on downhill sections (few and far between) if you stopped pedalling the head wind overcame gravity and brought you to a halt and the more common uphill bits were very tough going but there are rewards too, on one very smooth downhill section with the wind behind me the bike computer showed 61.5, fortunately no radar cameras. Near the end on Skellatar Stock Route a Magpie made a couple of half hearted swoops before taking shelter from the wind. Gary & Kim welcomed me back, the others still out doing the 200.

Dinner on Saturday night at the Workers Club showed again what a wide cross section of knowledgeable, interesting and caring people Randonneurs are and as well as inspiring stories of the last Paris-Brest-Paris 1200 we also solved most national problems.

The prediction for the Sunday start was again about 5 but checking at 6am revealed an actual 0.1 (BOM "apparent"/"feels like" temperature of -3.5). The start was therefore brisk (not our speed) but the morning quickly became just magnificent, clear blue sky, sunny and still. The route on quiet roads was through mostly open farming areas with the only other activity being mobs of kangaroos which bounded beside us until they decided to cross just in front. After passing "Mount Pleasant" the sharp ascent / decent on either side of Castle Gap was improved by being over a few kilometres of gravel but the view from the top was inspiring. We managed to keep our feet dry during the three stream crossings on the route.



The ride was so enjoyable that we forgot we were supposed to have a time limit and the last few kilometres required a quicker pace. While the route was mostly peaceful rural areas further contrast was highlighted when we came closer to the open cut coal mines that dominate much of the Hunter area.

All up there must have been a dozen Hunter crossings during the weekend.

A combination of a great route, great weather and great ride company, especially Kim, made Sunday's ride (even though short) one of the best I have done.

Rural rides in general and the Muswellbrook Huntering & Gathering in particular (in the calendar again next year) are highly recommended for everyone with 200, 100 and 50 km options.

There are many Audax ride weekends in rural centres such as this and Cowra, Mudgee, Wagga, Parkes, Jindabyne and others during the year with distances from 50 to 300 km that members or non-members can do and the great people are a bonus.

I want to thank the ride organisers Ian & Katherine for providing this and the other riders for enhancing the great weekend experience. See you next time.