



High Range 4WD Club of SA Inc
Merna Mora – Flinders Ranges
2-3 April 2011
Submitted by Helen

Merna Mora Station (western Wilpena Pound) is a 130,000 acre sheep, cattle and tourism property located 42 kilometres north of Hawker on the road to Parachilna, Leigh Creek and the greater Outback.

Merna Mora Station's unique location expanding from the very top of Wilpena Pound to the shores of Lake Torrens offers you an ideal base from which to explore the central Flinders Ranges. Merna Mora has been owned and operated by the Fels Family since 1889.

Merna Mora Station also offers four unique self drive four wheel drive tracks to explore the vastness and contrasting landscapes of the property (jagged cliff tops to vast clay pans and sand hills). Then there are the unbelievable sunsets against Wilpena Pound.

This particular weekend was not an official club trip, but a reconnaissance trip put together by Barra to check out the tracks before the club heads up there in June. Barra is unable to lead this trip, so to be fair to other members, he thought it a good idea to check the tracks and the ability of our cars to manage them.

The Territory was the only AWD vehicle to negotiate the tracks, so we figured that would be a good indication of the other cars' abilities.

There were seven vehicles on this trip (five High Range vehicles and two visitors). Everybody made their own way up to Merna Mora. However three vehicles couldn't leave until after work, so Barra, ourselves and Sandra and Gary (and kids) met at Pt Wakefield at 7.00pm to travel in convoy. The issue of driving at night with the kangaroo population on the rampage was discussed and Barra very kindly purchased kangaroo whistles for our vehicles. I got very tired sitting on the bonnet blowing them, so fortunately Phil let me back into the car!! These whistles are meant to repel the roos somehow and I have to say that the only roos we saw were the two signs!! Once we cleared the big towns, Barra put on the high beam and it was a truly awesome sight to see the bush in the glow of the high beam. Seeing the trees lit up in the eerie glow was a spectacular experience, I have never witnessed before. The three cars travelling through the bush at a slower cautionary speed in the eerie glow rendered Phil and I silent (amazing feat in itself)

We finally arrived at Merna Mora at around 11.15pm to be greeted by the other members (after trying to find them in the dark!). Trying to find a camping site in the dark is interesting and not really recommended! Once we found our spot, the others set up in around 3 minutes, but Phil and I had a tent. So our well meaning and very helpful friends (thank you darling Jo!) decided to help us – very dodgy lighting and some slightly inebriated instructions from the others, finally got the tent somewhat up! Then over to the beautiful fire (in the creek) to gossip, drink and exchange our journey information.

When we finally got to bed, the wind decided to spring up (when I say wind, that is being kind!). It was a force 10 gale! After discovering that the tent was basically horizontal on his face, Phil

decided to get up and hammer in the tent ropes, which had been forgotten in the haste to get the tent up. He was gone for about half an hour (in his jocks!) and somewhat got the job done! I don't remember a thing!

In the morning, after the deafening night, we breakfasted (erected the marquee – I supervised) and went to the homestead to register, sign forms and find out about the first track we were going to tackle. There are four tracks to choose from. Bunbinyunna Track, Lake Torrens Track, Heritage Trail and Wowie Track. We decided to do the Bunbinyunna Track. Merna Mora has a great set up in that we received instructions on how to access the tracks, and were also given some great information about the countryside that we were travelling in. Our trip leader for this track was the very capable Jerren (no doubt ably assisted by his mum and dad!). Each stop was signposted very well and you could stop at many of the pegs to take photos and read up on the history of the trail we were travelling along. A lot of work by the owners has been done to keep the trail in good condition and there is a lot of wonderful history associated with the cattle yards and mine shafts. The information supplied provided us with cautionary details and conditions of the track that we would experience.

At some of the points along the way, we had to get out and move stones to allow the smaller vehicles to negotiate the trail. However, although a little nerve wracking in some places, all vehicles performed well.

Perhaps the most disconcerting thing that we discovered, once we started climbing higher into the ranges, was the proliferation of giant spiders, which were everywhere! Not only were the spiders huge, but their webs were massive. These spiders (we think giant orbs) strung their webs across the trees, sometimes 2-3 metres.. The webbing to anchor between the trees was as thick as small cables. Shudder! It somehow put us off walking some of the trails! On closer inspection, some of the webs were like rooms, fashioned in a 3D format – probably to maximize the chance of catching their prey – moths, butterflies, probably birds and the odd human! I couldn't help ducking as we went underneath them and some of the aerials of other vehicles knocked them. Jim and Lee's roof tent was under constant danger of collecting one of the beasts! Hope they checked before they went to bed! If you could overcome the fear of the spiders, you could well marvel at the engineering of the webs and you could only stare in awe as they hung glistening in their gristly beauty in the in the morning sun. It seemed like one of those horror movies as we moved along the trail surrounded on both sides by the huge webs!

We stopped and had lunch near the toilet (long drop what else!). The scenery was stunning and the silence was spectacular. The weather was lovely and warm and sunny. Note – the wind had died down! So far all cars had performed well. We had let our tyres down as a precaution because of the steep hills and rock climbing. The larger vehicles found the track to be relatively easy, engaging 4WD a couple of times. The Territory struggled during one of the steep hill climbs, only because of the slippery nature (loose shale) of the climb. Because the Territory has been lifted, clearance wasn't a problem. A protection plate had also been installed over the petrol tank and it was christened on this trail, but only once.

We were about half way through the track at this stage, so after lunch, onward we went. During the hill ascents, we were treated to a spectacular view of Lake Torrens in the distance. Awesome! At every opportunity, we would get out, take photos and engage in whatever

activity was warranted at the various stops. Hence we have some wonderful photographs of members adding stones to monuments, signing guest books, taking photos, studying the flora and generally enjoying each other's company.

It was interesting to note the beautiful return of wildflowers and the surrounding countryside looking green, due to recent rains. Upon coming to the end of the track, we had been driving for around 4-5 hours, we closed the last gate (lots of them!) and headed towards the sunset and our campsite.

Jerren parked the car nicely in the marquee! – what a marquee – it was brilliant and well used by the members. After dinner, we once again settled around the campfire to yarn and curse the return of the gale (this time force 25!).

I retired early this night and drifted off to sleep to the dulcet tones of Jo “discussing” with her son Scott about how she hates sitting in the back of the car, she is an adult now and has earned the right to sit in the front – oh to be a passenger in their car!!! After another restless (by this time the tent was horizontal and that is how we left it), sleepless night, and dust, too much dust, we breakfasted (in the marquee) and decided to take on the Wowee Track. On this drive, we were joined by some other campers (an older couple) who although a little nervous during some of the descents, performed really well – we take on anybody! This track was around 2-3 hours duration and was just as spectacular. Once again Jerren was our trip leader. For this track, I was the driver and I have to say that I enjoyed the experience very much. There were some hair raising ascents and descents, all handled with ease by the old girls (me and my Territory). The information provided by the Fels as our guide, was once again invaluable. This track, we think was a little more challenging, Jerren had to use his internal radar to guide us through some areas which had disappeared. There was one particular descent which brought my heart into my mouth as I thought the car was going to skid off the hill, but all good! We were treated to a close up view of two beautiful wedge tailed eagles.

We came upon a large wash out, which proved challenging for the Tribute and the Territory. So we were able to put to use the waffle bridges which Barra had borrowed from a friend. They enabled us to traverse the steep wash out with no problems. The larger vehicles had no need for the bridges (because we cleared the way for them!). We finished the track around lunch time, came back to camp, had lunch and started packing for home. The wind had abated a little, but the dust was a killer! We re-inflated our tyres and bade the homestead a fond farewell.

We took the Pt Augusta route home, driving in a convoy with Barra, Jo and David, arriving home around 8.30pm. Not a bad journey. Interesting to note though, on the Tuesday after our return, I got a flat tyre, and when getting it repaired, was told, unrepairable, completely macerated! Not surprising really!

Conclusion – there were two smaller vehicles – Mazda Tribute and Territory, the other five vehicles were 4WD. Both smaller vehicles handled both tracks really well, but it should be noted that both smaller vehicles have been lifted and have bash plates installed. We would not recommend low clearance vehicles take the tracks. All of our club members are capable drivers and could easily drive the trails. All vehicles lowered their tyres and sometimes, engaged 4WD.

On this note, there is no reason that members in lower clearance vehicles could not come on the trip, they can take hitch a ride with other members and take turns in driving if they wished.

I note that there are seven cars registered for the trip, and hopefully more will register. We are thinking of taking the Lake Torrens drive and possibly Wowee again.

It is a wonderful trip, with spectacular scenery and challenging driving. Hope to see a heap of members come!

The tracks cost around \$45 per vehicle and camping is \$10.

Thanks for everybody for this trip – thoroughly enjoyed by all – it was good to meet with other drivers. Thanks to Jerren for his capable trip leading abilities and thanks to Barra for organising it – oh and by the way thanks for the roo whistles (\$5 we owe you??!!).

P.S. Phil and I have hired a camper trailer for June long weekend!!!

Mishaps

Gary and Sandra – chipped windscreen journeying to Merna Mora.

Territory – lost spare tyre again!

Territory – flat tyre day later.

Landcruiser Barra – fuse somewhere!

Flora – abundance of rare trees, wildflowers, fruit trees. Merna Mora prides itself on its revegetation programmes and the proliferation of natives is testament to these efforts.

Fauna – not much – some wallabies oh yes and spiders!

Weather – warm, sunny, windy, dusty - not too cold at night (amazing!).

Vehicles – Barra and Chris (Landcruiser), Helen and Phil (Territory), CJ, June and Jerren (Mazda Tribute), Jo, David, Scott and Kelly (Terracan), Gary, Sandra, Luke, Mariah (Pajero), Patrick (Pajero), Jimmy and Lee (Hilux)

Photo gallery



Putting up the marquee



Flattened tent!



Lift the leg – not that leg Phil!!



Camp site



Hmm where you going!



Spectacular scenery



Told you they were huge – and now multiply them by hundreds!!







Magnificent seven!



That pesky spare!







That was quite a scary descent – it doesn't look like it does it?



The fly net comes out!



Are we there yet? Oh no, I am not driving!



Beautiful