

# Paddling Bundanoon Creek (Tallowa Dam), kids in tow

Author & photographer: TRAVIS FRENAY

**A**t 5:50am I was awakened by a small hand shaking my shoulder. My mind was in the process of working out what was happening when I heard my six-year-old son whisper excitedly into my ear, “Dad, it’s BUSH DAY!” I’d been up late packing the night before, but my tiredness was diminished by the radiant glow of anticipation emanating from this smaller version of myself – possibly the only person I know who loves ‘bush time’ more than me.

It was Term 1 school holidays and I’d been thinking about an overnight adventure with my son. I received a text invite from my mate Stevo asking us if we’d like to go on an overnight canoe journey for the exact dates that I was planning. I knew it was meant to be.

The trip would include Stevo with his two kids and our mate, Scotty, with his son. When I came to Australia in 2003 and applied for my first job in Outdoor Education, it was Stevo who answered the phone. I got the job and Stevo, Scotty and I all worked together. And then again, later, teaching Outdoor Recreation at TAFE. Fourteen years on and we’re all still great mates, the main difference being the fact that each of us have families with kids in tow.

## THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

We met down at Tallowa Dam, NSW, which is the structure that backs up the waters of the





Shoalhaven and Kangaroo Rivers to form Lake Yarrunga. Our destination was a lovely and secluded waterside campsite that was a bit off of the beaten path but had lots of opportunity for exploring nearby. I honestly believe that kids can sense your own level of excitement, and that they 'feed' off of it as well, because the moment the car doors opened, the kids were happily racing around spotting lizards, climbing termite mounds, and skimming rocks. We made quick work of unloading gear and unpacking the canoes and then we were off. Any thoughts of work or unfinished tasks were happily left on shore and soon we were slipping along the mirror-like surface of the lake.

There's a certain magic about the outdoors in Autumn. The low angle of the sun brings long shadows and a golden haze to the afternoons. There's a noticeable absence of flies and mozzies, yet the air and water are still warm enough for a swim, which we all took advantage of. Crowds have also disappeared which helps to ease the worry of arriving to a campsite that is already occupied.

Paddling in tight formation together allows us all to have a chat while the metres float away and the kids occasionally encourage us to race, while they add a small boost of power with their shorter, timber paddles.

We called in to a closer campsite for lunch and enjoyed stopping for a bite and a swim before making the second half of our journey into camp for the night. Along this route we encountered a section of drowned forest – a remnant result of the construction of the dam and subsequent flooding of the valley. I usually wouldn't enjoy these signs of man-made intrusion into the wilderness, however in this region I happily make an exception. The dam and its reservoir have allowed us access up this river valley to a spot previously not accessible by canoe.

The dead trees that are left standing provide an obstacle course through which we dodge, weave, and limbo, much to the amusement of the kids. Before long, we've reached the shoreline of our intended campsite and the kids dash off into the bush together to survey their home for the night and to play all afternoon.

#### RETURNING HOME

After a warm and delicious dinner around the campfire we've got the kids tucked away in bed and the three of us are left to have a chat and reminisce about times gone by.

As I turned in for the night, I took stock of my situation and looked at my little dude sleeping soundly beside me. I counted myself lucky that I have such a keen young adventurer as my son, and friends who hold the same values and will happily share the same experiences as us. Both of my kids have been sleeping in a tent since they were only a few months old and, for them, it's as normal as climbing into their own bed... if perhaps more exciting.

Of course, the kids were the first to wake and they beat the sun to rise. For them, there were too many adventures to be had to waste time sleeping. Travelling by canoe has allowed us to pack any and all of the creature comforts that might be necessary in order to make the experience a happy one for the kids. There's not a toy in sight, but they've found endless ways to amuse themselves over the two days with not one argument between them or squabbles over sharing. For Stevo, Scotty, and I, taking other people's children out bush used to be a job for us, but now it's an absolute pleasure, as we're taking our own. Sure, there's still some work involved in planning and packing but the reward is in seeing these little versions of ourselves having such a magical time learning about their environment and making it their playground.



We leave camp before lunch to repeat our route in reverse back to the cars. Even though it was only two days away, the recharge provided by the time with friends in nature has made it feel more like a week. Again, the lake surface was like glass and we happily cruised back in formation as the kids played with the echo provided by the valley walls.

#### THE NEXT GENERATION OF PADDLERS

Canoeing and paddlesports have become the way in which I make a living, but I've been careful to not force that onto my children. Rather, they have been able to sample smaller, and more enjoyable, experiences in the outdoors from a very young age and they've come to their own conclusion that it's a wonderful thing to do. By five years old, my son was taking the canoe out for a play on his own and working out how to handle it. Just before he turned six we had our first whitewater canoe adventure together and I'm pretty sure that he's hooked for life. Every time we cross a bridge with a river or creek below he yells from the back seat, "Dad, I just saw some rapids!" I think that there will be many more adventures to come.

I occasionally meet an old paddler who tells captivating tales of paddling the Kangaroo River to the confluence with the Shoalhaven River prior to the dam's construction and I just think of how magical it would've been. 40 years later, because of the dam, we have the unique privilege of paddling among the standing ghosts of the former forest which is, in and of itself, an incredibly magical experience. Each year there are fewer and fewer of the trees standing as they succumb to rot and strong winds. It's fascinating to think that, in another 40 years, those trees will no longer be standing, but my son might be the older paddler telling stories of what it was like to canoe through them as a child. **W**

TIPS FOR PADDLING WITH KIDS

- Set yourself up for success: Choosing a flat-water venue that's not overly wind-prone is likely to increase your chances of having an enjoyable trip. If you're well within your own comfort zone then the kids will feel more relaxed as well. Getting them scared, cold, bored, or capsized on their first outing doesn't bode well for future trips.
- Start small: Do a trial of a few shorter outings before going for an over-nighter. It gets the kids used to being in the canoe and then the trip is over before they even realise it. When you go for that first over-nighter try to keep the length of the paddle short. A shorter paddling distance means less time in the canoe with the kids asking "how much longer?"
- Paddle close to shore if possible. It's like going on a bushwalk except that you're floating and it doesn't take any energy (for the kids, anyway). The scenery is always changing and it's easy to see that you are, indeed, moving. You're also more likely to see lizards, birds, snakes, and any other wildlife that might be along the shore.
- Let the kids bring a few "special" items from home and have them be responsible for them. My kids like to bring a few little things and they like knowing where they are at all times. For this reason I might let them put them in the canoe barrel or drybag right before we depart – then they know exactly where they are when needed.
- Help them make a "seat" or to create their place in the canoe. For my kids, it varies from trip-to-trip how they like to get set up in the boat. One thing remains common – they like to use towels and bags to create their own little nest that becomes their base of operations. Once we're moving they always crawl along the canoe on top of the gear but, eventually, they always return back to their nest for a chill.
- Let them play. We often pull a canoe or two up on shore

and let the kids use them as a place to play. For them, the concern of falling out into the water is removed and they're un-knowingly getting more comfortable with moving around the boat.

- Keep snacks handy. A good mate of mine once told me "you're only as good as your snacks." I'm constantly surprised by how often my kids need to munch on something (way more often than I do). For that reason my wife and I keep lots of food options close at hand so that they can be dispensed when needed. Now that my son is older we just give him his own "snack bag" that he can manage throughout the journey.
- Give them a paddle and let them contribute. They don't need to paddle for the whole time and you may not benefit at all from their input but, for that brief period of time that they're paddling, they're part of the team. They're contributing toward that common goal of getting somewhere. If they are paddling, and even if it's wrong, then thank them for their help! As they get stronger and learn better techniques then they might actually be interested in helping out if it's always been a fun option for them. My kids seem really keen on helping to carry gear from the car down to shore and vice-versa. I'm more than happy for them to help with this as every little bit counts!

CONTRIBUTOR

Originally from upstate New York, Travis moved to Australia in 2003. Having worked in conservation and outdoor education since 2001, Travis became lead teacher of canoeing at Lithgow TAFE in 2007. Travis runs and operates Paddle Portage Canoes [paddleportagecanoes.com.au](http://paddleportagecanoes.com.au)

