

UP THE FRANKLIN

Sea kayaking on the Franklin River, Tasmania, 2004.

by Grant Dixon



A planned post-Christmas solo paddle on Macquarie Harbour didn't seem an attractive idea as I drove through heavy rain towards Strahan. And it seemed even less attractive as I stood on the Strahan wharf buffeted by cold southwesterly rain squalls; a few days up the sheltered Gordon River utilising the tourist cruise boat for access with perhaps a return to Macquarie Harbour later seemed a better option.

Also on-board were Dave and Sue heading for the lower Franklin with their sea kayaks. I'd been impressed with the "sea" kayaking potential of the lower Franklin during a rafting trip the previous year, so accepted the invitation to join their trip, at least for a few days.

Rough water and mechanical problems delayed the cruise boat and it was after 7PM before we had our boats in the water at Heritage Landing on the Gordon River. Cold showers and impending darkness chased us a few kilometres upstream to camp in rainforest beside the Spence River.

The southwesterly eased overnight and the envisaged slog into a headwind for 14 kilometres up Limekiln Reach turned into easy flat-water paddling. We glided by rainforest reflections, stopped briefly at Lake Fidler, and made it to Sir John Falls for lunch. The remains of this former HEC camp, from the proposed Gordon-below-Franklin dam days, is now maintained by the Parks and Wildlife Service as a shelter.

Upstream of Sir John Falls the Gordon River flows through a forested gorge and it is here that the river's flow becomes noticeable. While the flow of the Franklin River, which joins the Gordon above the gorge, is influenced solely by rainfall in its catchment, the Gordon is primarily influenced by the operation of the Lake Gordon power station, so it can be flowing quite strongly even if there has been little recent rain.



The river's flow was not much of a problem for the first couple of kilometres above Sir John Falls, but as the flow strengthened we started hugging the riverbank as much as possible. Approaching Big Eddy, the river becomes more constrained and the main flow was clearly unpaddlable, with big standing waves in mid-stream. Making upstream progress now became a

punctuated series of increasingly desperate episodes - sheltering behind a tree or rock that protruded from the bank mustering one's strength before attempting to power upstream to the next shelter, paddle flailing as the boat inched forward.

We got to a point where a bend in the river, and some respite from the current, was in sight but the current was now too strong to make progress against. A portage through riverbank scrub looked unattractive so I ferry-glided across to the other bank but it was no better there. With no viable campsites nearby, we resolved to return to Sir John Falls for the night and see if the river dropped overnight.

Next morning, a stick in the sand indicated the river had fallen slightly. Back at the previous days high point the river flow was marginally less than the previous day, but still not paddlable. Clambering out onto slippery riverbank outcrops, and aware that if a boat was swept away it would be embarrassing at best, we lined and dragged our boats over and around a series of outcrops jutting into the river (this wouldn't be the first occasion where our plastic-hulled boats were an advantage).

Upstream of Big Eddy was a reach of easy paddling with little flow, but not for long. At Franklin Rock, the Gordon flows strongly around a wide, with rapids scatted from bank to bank. Ferry-gliding across to the inside of the bend, we were forced to clamber through the branches of river-level Huon pine and scrub for a few metres, dragging our boats after us. After re-entering the boats while still jammed in the sheltering scrub, it was 200 metres of furious paddling around the bend before we were out of the clutches of the current.

Due to the high water level in the Gordon, the lowermost section of the Franklin River was like a lake, with several kilometres of flat and scenic paddling up to the imposing limestone overhang of Verandah Cliffs.

The first of the two major rapids on the lower Franklin, Big Fall, a 1.5 metre vertical drop between rock bluffs, was heralded by the roar of falling water. It was too awkward, and the consequences of a slip too serious, to attempt to portage laden boats, so they were unpacked, manhandled up and over the riverbank rocks, then repacked in the eddy above the rapid. A more lengthy, but straightforward, portage was necessary at Double Fall, the next day.

The lower Franklin comprises many long reaches, some lined by grey, bedded limestone cliffs with small caves, springs and grottoes, others an avenue of forest. With the exception of the aforementioned falls, these reaches are separated by many shingle rapids. These shallow rapids can often be paddled, if one picks the correct line. On a number of occasions we would make it part way up such a rapid before the flow became too strong to make headway then, flailing away to hold station, we would attempt to rapidly exit our cockpits (the river was rarely more than knee-deep in such situations) before being swept too far back downstream, then wade and line our boat beyond the crest of the rapid. On some other occasions just as we neared the top of the rapid the water became too shallow for paddle purchase so, again, an equilibrium would be reached - a point where there was enough paddle purchase to hold station but not advance, until one's strength slowed ebbed and river's inevitably took over.

We made it to the wide shingle bank of Flat Island on the second day from Sir John Falls and set up camp here for a couple of nights. We breakfasted as the first light lit the cliffs of the Elliot Range, the early start because we expected our objective, an ascent of Goodwins Peak, to involve a full day in the scrub. But this was not the case - complex limestone sinkhole topography with light scrub near the river soon gave way to a steep ridge clothed in relatively open rainforest. We were on the summit in a couple of hours and, while trees obscured the view, the towering face of Frenchmans Cap could be seen rising beyond the Surveyor and Deception Ranges to the northeast.

Back at the Franklin, we filled the afternoon by paddling further upstream, up some more small shingle rapids, past the cascading confluence of the Jane River and on to the wide and still Diana's Basin.



Heading back downstream to our campsite I erected my sail in a few minutes of tailwind, perhaps the first kayak sailing on the Franklin.



Needless to say, the run back downstream to the Gordon was somewhat faster and easier than the upstream journey. And, while sea kayaks are hardly designed with river running in mind and are not particularly manoeuvrable in that situation, the hard-fought shingle rapids were often exhilarating. On one occasion I had time to again

briefly thank my boat's plastic hull as I slammed sideways into a jagged limestone outcrop before some wild paddling to avoid a rapidly-approaching series of snagged logs. Back on the Gordon, Big Eddy's standing waves were a hoot of a roller coaster ride before we were drifting down the gorge back to Sir John Falls for the last night on the river.

Cold shower curtains obscured the rainforest-clad slopes ahead as we emerged from the lee of the rock pinnacle of Butler Island. Limekiln Reach was again mirror-like, but a freshening breeze and more cold showers had arrived by the time we stopped at a small beach on Expectation Reach for lunch. With the weather deteriorating again and only a day in hand I decided to again opt out of a Macquarie Harbour crossing and joined Dave and Sue for the cruise boat ride back to Strahan. Motoring downstream, we felt a little out of place clad in damp wet suits amongst the more smartly-dressed tourists but privileged to have experienced the place somewhat more intimately than merely a view through the rain-spattered windows of the cruise boat.