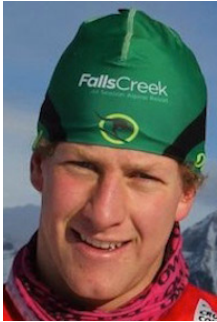


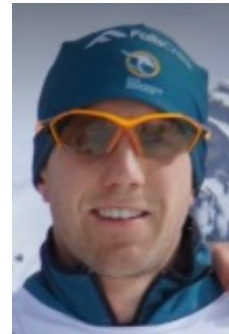
The Crossing

Mt Bogong to Hotham Winter Crossing 2018

Phillip Bellingham
(Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club)



During my time working alongside *Phil Rumpff* in the Howmans Gap kitchen, swapping a few stories and reading about his group that set the record for **The Bogong High Plains Winter Alpine Crossing** in 1985, I came up with the bright idea that I would one day have a crack at this epic adventure!



1985,
have

I floated the idea to only a few fellow skiers, *Callum Watson*, *Mark Pollock* (right photo) and *Iris Pessey*. Out of the three, Mark was the only one silly enough to take me up on the offer. I'd been biding my time, waiting a couple of years hoping for the perfect conditions on the perfect day etc., but when you're working a lot, it doesn't always line up. So one day, **late in September of 2018** Mark and I set off from Mountain Creek picnic ground. It was 4 am and we were hoping to be at the top of Mt Bogong (1,986m) by 5 am so we would have daylight for the descent of T-Spur and as much time as possible before we lost the crust. It was early!

What was carried — We both had a day pack. I took a small day pack with a water bladder in it and just a light jacket and extra thermals. The pack was mostly needed to change between track-shoes to ski boots. We just had a bunch of muesli bars, bananas and energy gels. Maybe 1.5 litres of water. Pack weight ~2.5-3kg. Mark had a drink belt and had a GPS watch with our route in it that we could use as a back-up if needed. It was not needed. No other real back up, just a mobile phone in our pocket. We didn't call throughout the trip though. Mark's parents only heard from us when we could see them towards the end. Many people new of our trip plans.

Although it was a fleeting idea, we did have in the back of our minds that **Audun Enderstad's (USA Olympian) record of 5 hrs 53 mins set in 1985** could be broken. Soon after setting out up the Staircase Spur we had to kiss those dreams good-bye, Mark was feeling pretty rough health-wise and so we dropped the pace back a notch. We had *Phil Rumpff's* time markers to go by so we would know if we were off the pace of *Audun*. We were.

At the top of Mt Bogong we were looking all right for time and felt pretty good but this was where we hit our first snag. Although there was still plenty of low snow everywhere else, due to wind (I'm guessing) there was a massive section of no snow for nearly a kilometre and no other way off the ridge down towards Cleve Cole Hut, so we were back to running. Once past here it was back on the boiler plate ice and bearing down on T-Spur. We were hoping for a good run down here as the snow line was still reasonably low. We were cautious of our navigation down here as this was the only section we hadn't skied prior to the attempt and we had also heard of *Audun's* wrong turn. We hit the spur easily enough but this was where time got away on us. We had plenty of snow, conditions were good in that regard, but we couldn't continue to ski as the regrowth and fallen timber from the bushfires of 2003 was so thick it got to the point where we had to take the skis off. Unfortunately going back to our running shoes on the rock-hard ice didn't make for much easier going either. After a slippery and frustrating log jumping session we finally made it down to Big River, way behind schedule. At this point we were starting to wonder if we would have to turn in at Falls Creek and pull the pin.

After a quick waste-high crossing of Big River, we started to have things go our way again. The trek up Duane Spur to Ropers Hut was a wet and soggy one and at this stage, after over 4 hours of skiing and running, we were feeling pretty tired. Once we got on snow again we started to fly. From Ropers Hut to Warby Corner (just before Mt Nelse Nth) took us only about 20 minutes.

Conditions were currently perfect. 20 minutes later we were crossing the front of Mt Cope. At this point we thought *Audun's* record wasn't untouchable. If only we hadn't lost so much time down T-Spur. Only problem was, it was now mid-morning on what was quite a sunny day, and we had just lost the crust. The section between Mt Cope and Mt Jim was already challenging enough as there were big windblown sections of no snow but then we lost the crust which not only made it slow but also meant the snow bridges were failing. Unfortunately for me, I got wet feet again as a snow bridge gave way beneath me over one of the minor creek systems there. Luckily my skis were all in one piece so we could continue on. After rounding Mt Jim and feeling pretty cooked by this point we soon started the descent down Basalt Temple and into Dibbins Hut (head of the West Kiewa Valley). It was slow going again through the bushfire regrowth areas but we knew what we were in for here as we'd skied this section just a couple of weeks earlier.

After running out of water near Mt Jim we drank the creek dry at Dibbins Hut, ate the last of our food and continued on very slowly up Swindlers Spur – the last section of our journey towards Mt Hotham. There was no spark left in either of our legs and after the 7 hr mark we both started to battle with cramps. A hot north facing slope didn't help this and neither did the ankle-deep slush. We stopped briefly at the Charlie Derrick Hut before continuing on. Not a lot of words were being spoken at this stage and picking the most direct line towards Mt Hotham somehow become much easier.

Brenda Pollock (Mark's mum) offered some words of encouragement as we slowly rounded the top of the ski runs on Mt Hotham's far side and a surprised *Chris Hocking* wondered what we were doing and why we weren't up for much of a chat as we slogged out the final few kilometres. *Phil Rumpff* said we had to go all the way to the General Store for it to be the full crossing but I would have been more than happy to pull the pin at the Mt Loch car park! Nonetheless, we trudged on through the village of bewildered downhill skiers to the General Store where we came in at **8 hrs 30 mins** and feeling like we'd earned every drop of the beer *Mark's* dad *Greig* had waiting for us!

After de-briefing with *Mark*, *Phil Rumpff*, *Andy Kromar* and a few other in-the-know locals, I've come to the conclusion that *Audun's* record will remain unbroken forever. I believe that if you were feeling good and had a perfect day, with a low snow line that you could probably drop the time down just under 7 hrs. But with the state of the bush after the fires, there won't be fast, skiable conditions probably until after climate change has finished it all off. Either way, Mark and I had an unforgettable day that day, we covered a lot of ground in challenging conditions and were pretty happy to have completed it. We definitely encourage others to give it a go and no doubt I'll have another crack at it in the years to come!

Phil Bellingham
October 2019

Editor – The [Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club](#) is very proud of Phil, the first club member to complete **The Crossing**.

Trip details — The winter crossing was from the Mountain Creek Campground, up Mt Bogong (1,986m), across the Bogong High Plains to the Mt Hotham General Store. Skiers had to climb ~2,620m and descend ~1,420m over the ~55km distance.

A little history

- 1964 - *Charlie Derrick* (Wangaratta SC). Died attempting The Crossing.
- 1975 - *Danny Flynn* (Wangaratta SC) (10 hrs 15 min). Classical technique.
- 1980 - Robin Gibb, John Kerby & Bill Woods ((Wangaratta SC) 12 hours.
- 1985 - *Audun Enderstad* (USA Olympian) 5 hrs 53 min, *Christine Brugger* (Swiss Olympian) 8 hrs 17 min, *Phil Rumpff* (AUS) 8 hrs 45 min & *Andrew Walker* (AUS) 9 hrs 53 min. Skating technique.
- 2016 - *Matt O'Keefe* (AUS) – Falls Creek Ski Patrol Manager (20 hrs)

- 2018 - *Phil Bellingham* (Birkebeiner NSC) & *Mark Pollock* (Wangaratta SC). Both are National XC Ski Team members (8 hrs 30 min). Skating technique.
- 2019 - *Jamila Tyrril* - Bright Vic (11 hrs 30 min). Used alpine touring skis & boots.



The boys at Dibbins Hut (Cobungra Gap – Upper West Kiewa Valley). From left: Mark & Phil



From left: Mark & Phil (towards the end of The Crossing)