



Flying to see my beloved.....

I confided to my mate I was heading off on a flying trip to see my darling. I just had to scratch an itch, I said. He looked at me curiously and asked me, why then, was I was planning to take my wife, and a bunch of other blokes too? I couldn't keep up the ruse and finally said "well actually she's everyone's darling – the Darling River !" The **Hunter Recreational Flying Club (HRFC)** are always looking for an excuse for a flyaway and a 'Darling Run' fitted the bill.

A cracking morning greeted us in late July, as three ships departed Cessnock - Geoff and Irene aboard their Jabiru 230, Alan and Alan sharing the duties in a Tecnam Sierra and Genevieve and I in our FK9.

We tracked northwest , navigating the familiar scenery of the Hunter Valley toward Scone, while Mick had made an earlier start from Warkworth in his slick Evektor Sportstar.

A brisk headwind made the flight up the picturesque Hunter Valley a little longer than the regular \$100 coffee run to the Kittyhawk café at Scone airport, but who cares - we were here to enjoy the view. The café would need to wait another day as nearing Scone, banking left saw our track pop over the spine of the Liverpool range toward Coonamble.

The striking volcanic spires of the Warrumbungles National Park soon loomed ahead, looking even more formidable from the cockpit as we bounced our way through some turbulent air spilling over the ranges.



The Highlights !

- [Warrumbungles National Park](#)
- [Siding Springs Observatory](#)
- [Macquarie Marshes](#)
- [Byrock—Mulga Creek Hotel](#)
- [Louth—Shindy's Inn](#)
- [Menindee Lakes](#)
- [Pooncarie](#)
- [Narromine](#)



Siding Springs Observatory

We spotted the various telescopes of Siding Springs observatory atop one of the higher peaks at 3,822' and could even make out Mount Kaputar rising from the black soil plains to the north near Narrabri, some 70nm away.

Continuing to track west, the ranges gave way to a patchwork of rich flat farmland all in deep shades of green as our three ships in tandem all called inbound for Coonamble.

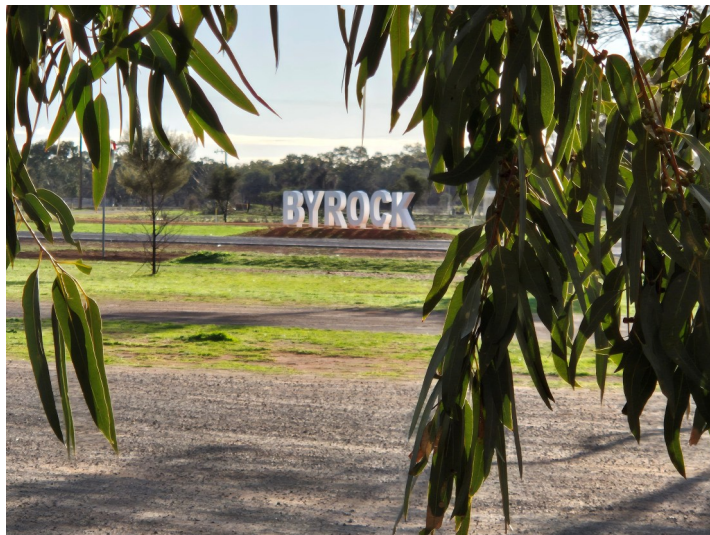
A top-up with fuel, a leg stretch and a bite of lunch were abruptly interrupted by the sudden appearance of a black snake standing guard near the Coonamble Aero Club's wheelie bin. Clearly, he'd appointed himself Facilities Manager and was taking the role very seriously. We retreated to a respectful distance, leaving him to his sentry duties, and were soon airborne once more — lunch break officially concluded by local wildlife.

Pushing further west, we set course for the once-bustling metropolis of Byrock (population 26). Scattered cloud started to build precisely on our desired cruise altitude of 6,500' (don't you hate that!). The two Alans in the Sierra opted to stay low to soak up the scenery while Geoff in the Jab and I in the FK9 chose to go VFR on top at 8,500' to chase some smooth air.

The two Alans made the better choice. Staying low rewarded them with spectacular views of the Macquarie Marshes—brilliant emerald greens broken by mirror-like flashes of water across country that's normally little more than red dirt.

“Give the pub a call with your estimated arrival time and they’ll organise a goat run”

With the tiny settlement of Byrock confirmed in sight, the chat channel came alive to share a warning of the tall radio masts close to the circuit area and to keep an eye out for feral goats on the strip. The bright red gravel strip is plenty long enough and in stark contrast to the surrounding Mulga scrub and the abundance of green after recent but rare downpours.



Reunited with Mick, who had touched down earlier in his Sportstar, we made the short trek to the only significant building in Byrock and our lodgings for the night – the Mulga Creek Hotel.

The Mulga Creek pub proves to be an oasis for a trickle of mining contractors working on a nearby copper/gold prospect and the occasional grey nomad couple passing through. For visiting pilots the pub offers a warm welcome serving up huge pub meals and of course, cold beers.

The current pub owners have been in charge for just over a year, but they've already upgraded the kitchen, begun renovating the accommodation, and have ambitious plans for even more improvements. They're keen to encourage fly-ins and go out of their way to support visiting pilots and their passengers.

If you're planning to drop in, give the pub a call with your estimated arrival time and they'll organise a “goat run” — a quick drive up and

down the runway to make sure any feral goats have cleared out before you land.

Byrock has a surprisingly rich place in the regional history. The natural rock holes — “*Bai*” in the local Indigenous language — provided a rare source of permanent water, which led Cobb & Co to establish a change station here in the 1870s. By the 1890s the population had grown to more than 500, with several pubs and stores serving the booming wool industry across the district.



The sole surviving business in Byrock—the Mulga Creek Hotel

Over time, severe droughts made the water supply increasingly unreliable, and the spread of rail gradually pushed Cobb & Co aside. Eventually the rail lines themselves gave up the fight after major floods washed away the tracks to Bourke and Brewarrina. Like many inland pubs, the original Mulga Creek Hotel eventually succumbed to fire, but it rose again in 1984 and now stands proudly as the village's sole surviving permanent business. Tough place, tougher pub.



Tying down at Byrock

The historic Byrock Cemetery is an easy walk from the pub and well worth a visit. The recorded causes of death are a sobering reminder of just how precarious life was for early pastoralists in such a remote place. Ailments that today would barely justify a GP appointment were often fatal without access to medical care. This bit of history also explains the quirky row of parking meters out the front of the pub — a curious sight in a tiny outback town. Drop a coin in and you're

supporting the RFDS, which feels like the most Australian thing you could do.

Heading further west



A chilly but cloudless morning greeted us as we prepared to fly the short 30 minute leg to Bourke for fuel before tracking southwest along the Darling River toward the tiny township of Louth. Geoff, however, was still nursing a mild grievance from the night before — the moon had been so bright that his stargazing plans weren't just spoiled, they were completely obliterated. According to him, it was less “outback night sky” and more “cosmic floodlight,” leaving not a single star worth staying up for.

We picked our way through the bulldozed Mulga scrub at the end of the

Byrock strip, made our way back to the aircraft, and loaded up. Later we discovered the reason for all that enthusiastic clearing — the RFDS had asked for both the undershoot and overshoot areas to be opened up to give their King Air B200s a little more wiggle room



HRFC supporting local business in Byrock

The Darling unfolds



Once airborne, the sheer scale of the Darling River floodplain unfolded beneath us. The narrow, coffee-coloured ribbon of the river snakes through country that is usually a harsh, sun-baked red. On either side, the grey mudflats can stretch out for up to 40 kilometres. But not this season. Right now, the floodplain and the surrounding countryside have merged into a single, uninterrupted sea of green. Locals spoke of last year as the best season in living memory, only for this year to surpass it. Horizon to horizon, the greenery is breathtaking in a region that is normally defined by its aridity. The township of Louth has a neat sealed airstrip just 500 metres from town, perfectly placed for an easy stroll to our base for the night — the legendary Shindy's Inn.

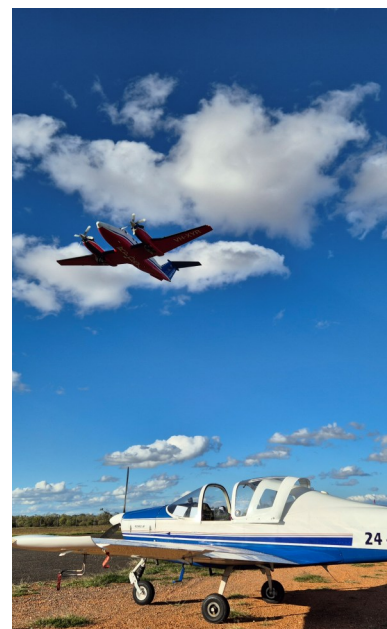
Shindy's !

Shindy's sits right on the bank of the Darling River and has a history as colourful as any outback yarn. Formerly the Royal Hotel, it was one of only two buildings in town that *didn't* go underwater during the monster Darling River flood of the 1890s. Naturally, it made up for that good luck by burning down not once, but twice.

Each time it rose from the ashes, most recently in 1956, when it was renamed after a local character known as “Shindy” — presumably someone with enough personality to justify slapping his nickname on a pub. Since then it's become an iconic outback watering hole, stuffed with historic photos and paddle-steamer memorabilia that make you feel like you've wandered into a museum with a bar tab.

Come August, Shindy's transforms from a sleepy riverside pub into a shoulder-to-shoulder madhouse for the Louth Races — a week-long celebration. For us, Shindy's delivered a classic country welcome — big hearty meals, reliably cold beers, and comfortable ensuite cabins tucked away out the back. Before settling in, we took a short stroll back to the airstrip to secure our aircraft on the tie-down rope, pausing while an RFDS King Air B200 departed after finishing their regular clinic in town. Chatting with the RFDS pilot, we were surprised to learn that the hardworking B200 is still mostly an analogue machine. Meanwhile, our little group of LSAs are sporting far more modern avionics. It's not often you get to say your light sport aircraft has the flashier tech.

Heading back into town, we followed the riverbank and took a quick wander through the main street before settling in beside the fire. The temperature dropped fast with the setting sun, and the glow of the flames made the perfect spot to end the day.



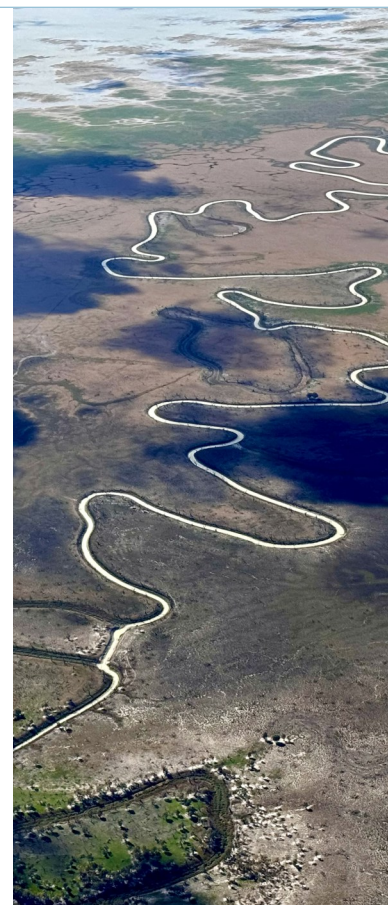
RFDS departs overhead Louth

“Come August, Shindy's transforms from a sleepy riverside pub into a shoulder-to-shoulder madhouse”

Following the flow

In the morning, clear skies and a brisk 2°C greeted us — the kind of temperature that clears the head whether you want it to or not. The two Alans, along with Geoff and Irene, were headed home to Cessnock, whereas Genevieve and I planned to continue our Darling Run to Menindee and later Pooncarie. Mick had unfortunately left us back at Byrock, heading home to Warkworth to attend to some business affairs. We waited for the thick frost to melt off the wings — always a good reminder that nature sets the departure time out here — before the two Alans in the Sierra and Geoff and Irene in the Jab headed east. They made a fuel stop at Nyngan and then continued on to the HRFC home base at Cessnock. We load up the FK9 and continue our gentle meander downstream, following the Darling past Tilpa with a first stop at Wilcannia for fuel. Fur-

ther southwest, the Menindee Lakes began to appear — a sprawling chain of shallow ephemeral basins spread across the landscape. Most still held water; some showed only the branching, tree-like pattern of rivulets draining toward their lowest point; others brimmed behind control gates. Everywhere you looked, it was green — impossibly, relentlessly green. After overflying the small township of Menindee, we tracked the Darling as it bent south toward its junction with the Murray at Wentworth. About 60 nautical miles further on from Menindee sits another tiny township on the riverbank: Pooncarie. It was our destination for the night, and it boasts what might be the best maintained gravel strip in Australia — a runway so neat it almost feels like someone sweeps it between landings.



Pooncarie, population roughly sixty, has a pub dating back to 1922 — built from stone and, perhaps because of that very sensible choice, is one of the rare inland pubs that hasn't burnt down at some point in its history. Like most settlements along the Darling, Pooncarie Port owes its existence to the paddle-steamer era, helped by a natural earthen shelf on the riverbank that served as a convenient loading wharf for wool bales and other cargo.



Menindee Lakes on the lower Darling River

Opposite the old wharf sits the *Old Wharf Café* — an absolute gem of the outback. Bob and Barb, who seem to be long-standing institutions in Pooncarie, serve up home-made dishes so good you'd never expect to find them in a remote one-horse town. On top of that, they'll happily pick you up and drop you back at the airstrip if you choose to dine at their café.

Meals at the pub were also very wholesome, and the attached accommodation perfectly comfortable — a solid option if you're staying the night.

After filling a couple of fuel bags with PULP98 in town and enjoying a great breakfast at the café, Bob drove us out to the airstrip the next morning. It was time to leave "my Darling" behind and start making our way back east.

The forecast showed low cloud pushing in from the south and west, which quickly put an end to our original plan of tracking east from Pooncarie to Condobolin before heading north to Narromine. Plan B was the better bet: fly north to Cobar for fuel, then turn southeast toward Narromine. Airborne around 10 a.m., we could already see the cloud pushing in from the west. A quick rethink of the flight plan — Plan C by this stage — and a few quick calcs (gotta love EFBs) had us cutting the corner off the triangle and tracking to Nymagee enroute to Nyngan for a fuel stop. This kept us neatly on the eastern edge of the weather and comfortably ahead of the cloud.

A quick leg stretch and a load-up of fuel at Nyngan set us up for the short 30 minute hop into Narromine for the night.

The handy tourist park beside Narromine Airport was, unfortunately, booked out, but the next best option — the Peppercorn Motel — came to the rescue and picked us up. The Services Club is an easy walk into town as is the superb *Soul Food Depot* café for breakfast. Off the main street, if you're keen, you can also check out a statue of Narromine's favourite son - Glenn McGrath.

A long study of the forecast suggested a sleep-in and a lazy morning were on the cards, as the low cloud had finally caught up with us. Sure enough, we woke to overcast skies and broken cloud down to about 1,200 feet between Narromine and Dubbo on our route back to Cessnock. The cloud was expected to lift slowly as the day warmed, and if we could just get past Dubbo it looked like plain sailing from there.

By around 11 a.m. the cloud base had risen to roughly 2,500 feet, with a few encouraging holes starting to open up. We made our way back to the airport and were delighted to find the Freedom Formation group of RV flyers warming up for practice. As the gaps in the cloud continued to widen, we were treated to a magnificent eight-ship formation display — an unexpected bonus !

By midday, the Dubbo TAF was showing a cloud base at around 3,000 feet, which gave us enough room to slip underneath. We headed due east from Narromine, overflying Dubbo Airport on our way toward Gulgong. A handy tailwind nudged us along, and the cloud steadily thinned as we approached Gulgong and the rising terrain of the Great Divide. Even with the skies now clear, we still chose to thread the needle over the open valleys of Bylong and the Goulburn River toward Denman, which soon placed us over the familiar coalfields and vineyards of the lower Hunter Valley. Calling inbound to Cessnock after an enjoyable 90 minute flight from Narromine, we stayed sharp, mixing with the usual training traffic, helicopters, and itinerant aircraft in the busy Cessnock airspace.

Taxiing back to the club hangars, we were greeted by the usual gaggle of HRFC regulars doing what aeroclub members truly excel at — standing around solving all of aviation's problems one hangar-chat at a time.

The conversation naturally veered toward the next fly-away, preferably to a spot with a runway that behaves itself and a pub that won't serve your meal still mooing. Yet every pilot knows the truth: the destination is just a waypoint. The real joy is the people who make the journey worth logging.

