

ACROSS THE BIG DESERT

RON MOON reckons a quick trip to The Big Desert in Victoria's Mallee offers plenty of excellent sand driving and great camping



Opposite: Rusted farming equipment dots areas of the Big Desert; Sand driving west of Cactus Bore; Moonie gunning for a cuppa

Pioneer pastoralists had opened up much of Victoria's western regions by the 1840s and, within 20 years, sheep were grazing through large tracts of the Big Desert and Wyperfeld areas of the drier mallee region of Victoria.

The Nhill-Murrayville Track came into existence around that time as a stock route between Nhill Station and the Kow Plains Station, just south of the small, modern-day hamlet of Cowangie. Bores were sunk along the track over the next 30 years to make the job of shifting sheep and cattle easier, because there was very little surface water during the long dry summers. Today many of those bores and tanks remain.

As the Big Desert area was explored, small open plains were found hidden among the sea of spindly mallee trees, dense broombush and wiry native pines that, even today, are an almost-impenetrable barrier. These areas became the focus of graziers who used them up until recently, some erecting bores and even small huts, such as those that could once be found at Cactus Bore.

In later years broombush fence-cutters and beekeepers cut a myriad of tracks through the

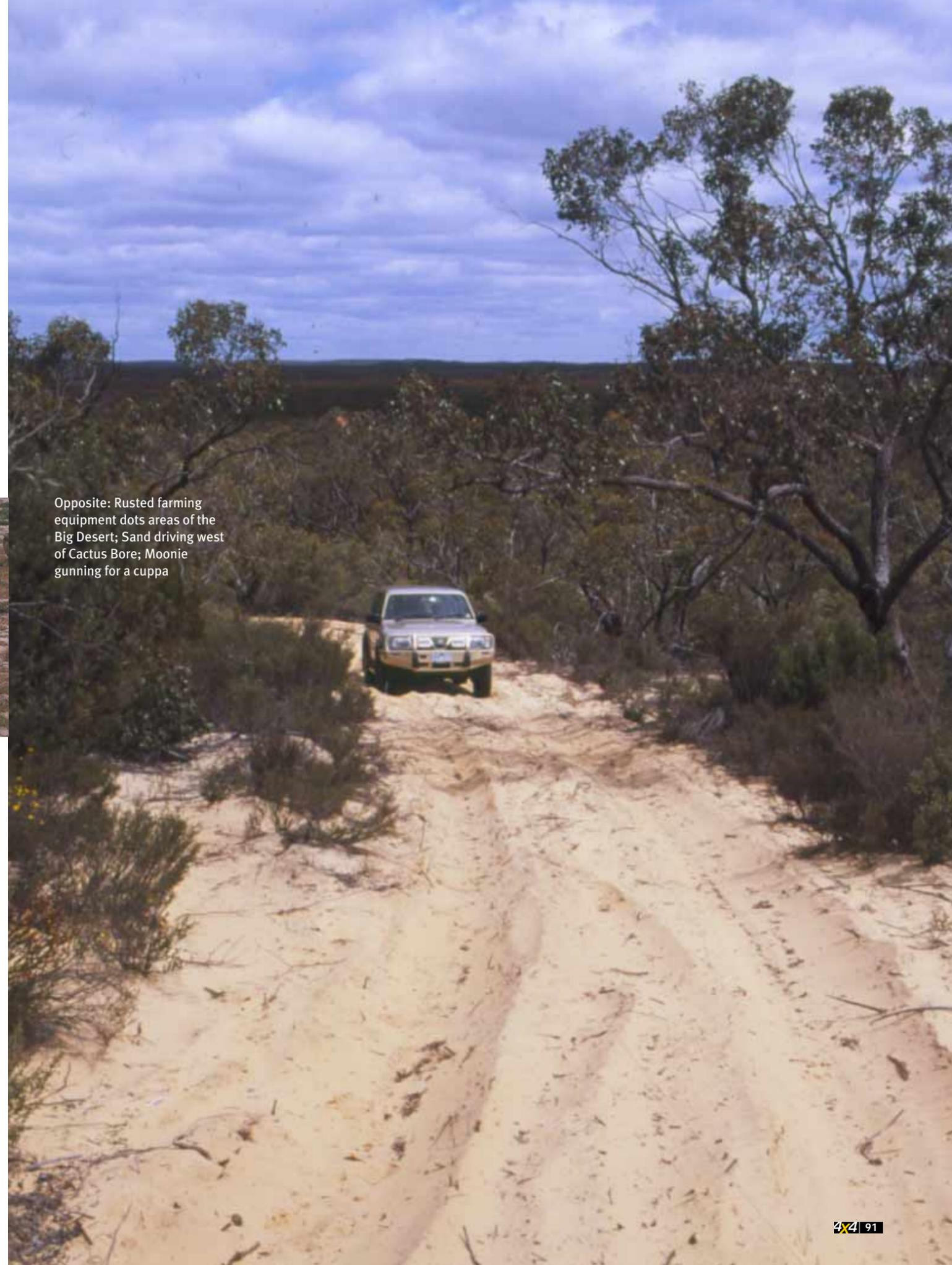
dense scrub linking many of the open areas and opening the region to us lucky four-wheelers.

The first part of what was to become Wyperfeld National Park was reserved in 1909 and it grew in stages taking in the regions north and south of the Chinamans Well Track west to the Nhill-Murrayville Track in 1992. Much of this last extension was declared a wilderness zone, but in a victory for four-wheelers the Chinamans Well Track remained open for desert tourers.

While west of the Murrayville track was declared the Big Desert Wilderness Area in the 1970s, the northern-central area of the desert has now been declared a State Forest, although you'd be hard pushed to find any valuable or even large timber in the region. Still, being a State Forest means that all the 4X4 tracks are open and you can camp without National Park restrictions.

TREK START, FINISH AND STANDARD

This trek starts on the outskirts of Nhill on the Western Highway, 380 km west of Melbourne, or 370 km south-east of Adelaide. It heads north through the Big Desert, passing through the south-eastern section of the Wyperfeld National





Park, and then a short distance north along the Nhill-Murrayville Track. The trek then leaves this main dirt road and heads west through the Big Desert State Forest to the SA-Vic Border track. You follow this track north to the Mallee Highway, just east of the SA town of Pinnaroo (244 km east of Adelaide) and 22 km west of Murrayville in Victoria. It's 540 km north-west of Melbourne.

The trek, about 180 km long, is easy to moderate with only a few sections that can be either boggy when it's wet, or softly sandy when it's dry.

While there are no real steep sand dunes, you still may need to lower tyre pressures: 18-20 psi (115-140 kPa) makes the sand a lot easier to travel on for you and everyone behind you.

TIMINGS

This trek makes an enjoyable weekend (or longer) jaunt from either capital city. Join it up with our SA-Vic Border Trek (*4X4 Australia*, Jan 2001 issue) and make a longer loop journey out of the two.

BEST MAPS

It's a bit untapped, so there's not one really good map of the area. The Victorian Dept of NRE has a small brochure titled *Big Desert State Forest - 4WD Touring Map* that covers the region and Hema's Western Victoria map is also helpful.

BEST TIME

Spring and autumn are the best times. Summers can be hot and the sand soft.

CAMPING AND THINGS TO DO

There are some excellent camping spots here, especially in the State Forest and at Big Billy Bore on the Murrayville Track.

In spring the wildflowers can be very good. The area is a favoured bird watching area and is rich in wildlife, although the most people generally see is big roos, emus and lots of lizards.

ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPLIES

Nhill is a decent-sized town that can supply travellers with all their requirements. For tourist info, ph: 03 5391 3086.

Murrayville is a small community where you should be able to get all of your basic supplies, fuel and accommodation.

Pinnaroo on the SA side of the border can supply a traveller's needs. For more info the Pinnaroo Tourist Centre, ph: 08 8577 8644.

PERMITS AND RESTRICTIONS

No permits are required to travel this route.

The tracks are generally open all year round. Check with Parks Victoria, ph: 13 19 63 or check out the VAFWDC website at www.vafwdc.org.au.

Gas fires are required from the November 1 to the end of April.

MORE INFO

For more info, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, ph: 13 61 86 can help, or check out www.nre.vic.gov.au.

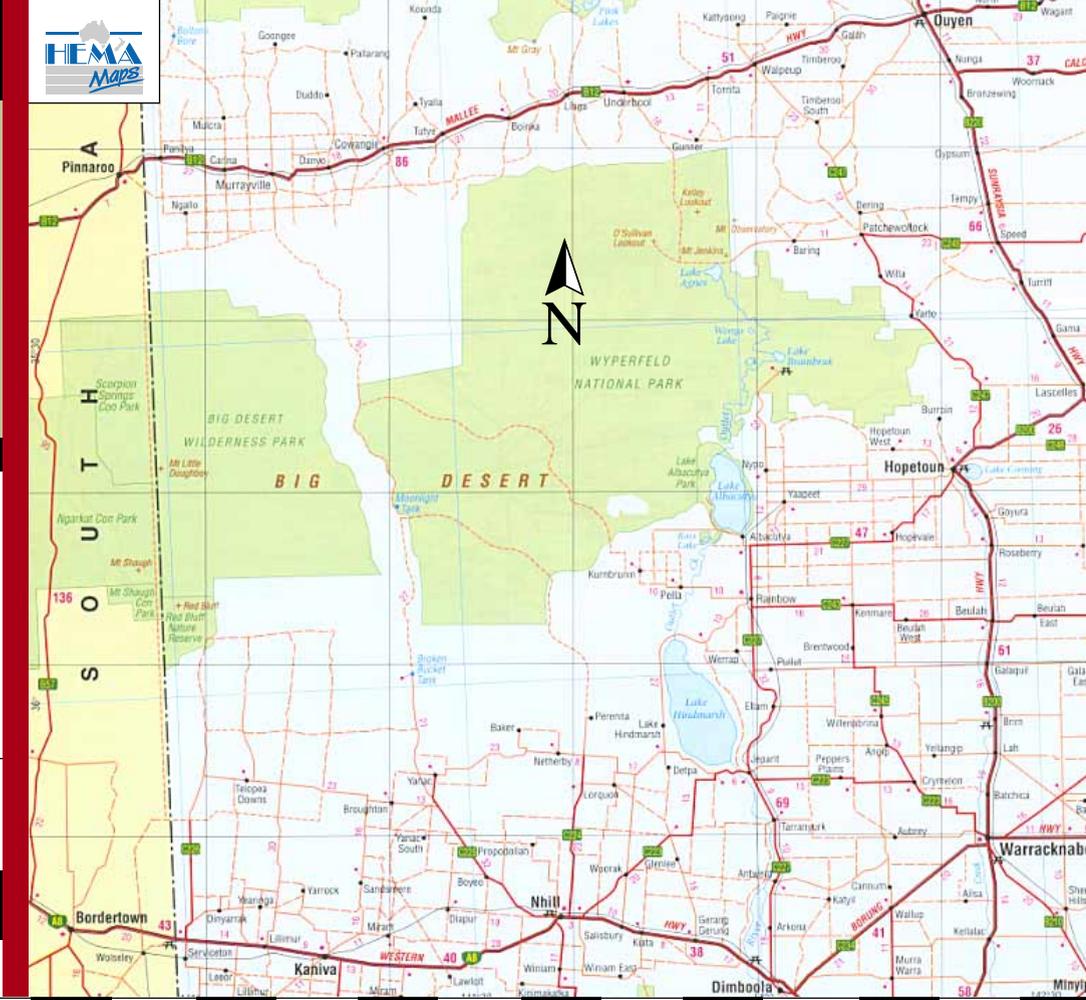
(Clockwise from top)

The Pella Track junction north of Chinamans Well; Sim Perry's hand pump; The extremely-remote Cactus Bore; The well-named Big Desert State Forest



LEGEND:

- TL** Turn left
- VL** Veer left
- KL** Keep left
- TR** Turn right
- VR** Veer right
- KR** Keep right
- TOL** Track on left
- TOR** Track on right
- LAF** Leave as found
- PSA** Proceed straight ahead
- SO** Straight on
- SP** Sign posted



For more treks and four-wheel drive information check out the Nissan website: nissan.com.au/patrol



NHILL TO BIG BILLY BORE TO MURRAYVILLE

0.0	0.0	Nhill – junction Nhill–Netherby Road with the Western Highway. Head north, crossing railway line. GPS S 36° 20' 8" / E 141° 39' 32"	0.0	(0.0)	Big Billy Bore on left – PSA. Tables & water
20.5	(20.5)	Cross roads – PSA. Left leads to Netherby South.	6.8	(6.8)	Tracks right/left – PSA. RH tk Deliso Track. LH tk leads to crest of a tall dune.
24.5	(4.0)	Cross roads – dogleg to right then left (PSA) onto narrow bitumen. Left leads to Netherby.	10.0	(3.2)	Track on left – TL onto Cactus Bore Track. Sim Perrys hand bore pump on right. GPS S 35° 26' 03" / E 141° 16' 49"
30.5	(6.0)	Road turns to dirt.	17.9	(7.9)	Track on right – PSA. RH tk Old Murrayville Tk.
37.0	(6.5)	Track on left – TL onto 'Netting Fence Track 4WD Only'. GPS S 35° 59' 57" / E 141° 42' 40"	23.4	(5.5)	Cactus Bore on left and track on right – PSA, climbing steep dune. Good spot to camp and good views from top of sand ridge. Bore sunk in 1929. GPS S 35° 27' 19" / E 141° 09' 39"
37.2	(0.2)	Track on right – VR onto 'Chinamans Well Track 15.5 km' (SP).	23.9	(0.5)	T-junct – TL. Right leads back to Cactus Bore (300 m).
38.3	(1.1)	Old windmill/tank on left – PSA.	24.2	(0.3)	Track on left – TL onto Coburns Tk.
42.2	(3.9)	Dam on left – PSA continuing on track.	28.7	(4.5)	Track on right – VR.
46.7	(4.5)	Lost Swamp – reasonable camping spot. Track can be boggy through this section when wet. GPS S 35° 55' 52" / E 141° 39' 42"	28.9	(0.2)	Track on left – PSA. LH tk leads to lookout.
52.3	(5.6)	Y-junct – VR. Left leads to Chinamans Well 100 m. Chinamans Well: GPS S 35° 53' 01" / E 141° 39' 35"	29.5	(0.6)	Track on left – VR.
52.4	(0.1)	Track on right – PSA veering right. Left leads back into Chinamans Well.	30.3	(0.8)	Y-junct – VL on main track.
52.6	(0.2)	Bypass track around boggy hole – numerous tracks. Camping area.	34.4	(4.1)	Red Gums – head north–west across the flat and pick up the track on the other side. Good camping area in low depression with big red gums. GPS S 35° 25' 3" / E 141° 6' 3"
53.7	(1.1)	Track junct – TL continuing on Chinamans Well Track. RH tk is Pella Track. GPS S 35° 52' 25" / E 141° 39' 54"	39.5	(5.1)	Tracks on left – TL and track beings to follow edge of farmland. Track hard left leads 2.2 km to Coburns Pines – good camp site.
54.4	(0.7)	Track on left – PSA.	48.0	(8.5)	Track on right – PSA. RH tk leads 100 m to camping spot beside fence and farmland.
64.8	(10.4)	Faint track on right – VL. RH tk leads to crest of a large dune.	49.7	(1.7)	T-junct – TR onto Border Track. GPS S 35° 23' 29" / E 140° 57' 54"
66.2	(1.4)	Track passes through big sand dunes.	49.8	(0.1)	Gate.
83.5	(17.3)	T-junct – TR onto Murrayville Track. GPS S 35° 46' 04" / E 141° 23' 03"	51.1	(1.3)	Gate.
98.9	(15.4)	The Springs.	52.6	(1.5)	Track on left – PSA on Border Track. LH tk Hamilton Road.
103.2	(4.3)	Track on right – PSA. RH tk leads 28.6 km to Milmed Rock.	54.3	(1.7)	Road on right – PSA. RH rd Bridge Road.
112.8	(9.6)	Track on right – PSA. RH tk Brushcutters Track.	56.7	(2.4)	Road on left – PSA. LH rd Tiller Road.
113.1	(0.3)	Track on right – PSA. RH tk leads 800 m to Big Billy campground – tables, chairs, toilets and fireplaces.	57.4	(0.7)	Road on right – PSA. RH rd South Five Chain Road.
113.2	(0.1)	Big Billy Bore on left – PSA. Tables & water. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56"	58.8	(1.4)	Road on left – PSA. LH rd East Road.
		Zero trip metre at Big Billy Bore	60.7	(1.9)	Cross roads – PSA. LH rd Nickolls Road, RH rd Ngalo Road.
			63.5	(2.8)	Road on right – PSA. RH rd African Alley Road.
			66.0	(2.5)	T-junct with main Mallee Highway & railway crossing – left to Pinnaroo, right 20.4 km to Murrayville. GPS S 35° 14' 26" / E 140° 57' 54"