

The Mawson Trail

Steve Chapman, April 2015

The Mawson Trail is a 930km off road cycling trail in South Australia. The trail begins in Adelaide, climbs through the steep Adelaide Hills, on to the picturesque Barossa valley wine region, through the wheat belt and then to the arid desert region of the Flinders Ranges, finishing in Blinman.

The trail is extremely well marked along the entire route with arrows on posts that are easy to see most of the time, provided you pay close attention to your surroundings. Bike SA have produced an excellent series of maps that are vital for trip planning and navigating en route. The route in general is technically easy and the terrain is not mountainous. Hill climbing is subjective, my opinion would be generally flat to undulating with occasional hills. The Garmin recorded 9,500m of climbing in 940km's. With a few small navigation errors and some shopping detours, the official route distance may be closer to 900km.

I chose to start my solo bikepacking trip from the northern end of the trail in Blinman. The bus logistics were easier from the north and the towns were further apart when my supplies were full and legs were fresher. The short term weather forecast was also important as a forum search of other riders on the Mawson Trail highlighted that rain in the northern section made the clay tracks impassable.

I caught the Genesis Transport bus from Adelaide to Parachilna on Saturday April 11. Our small bus with two passengers and my bike in the aisle arrived at the Prararie Hotel mid arvo. We were instantly greeted by a 1000 flies. Welcome to the Australian desert.



I rode the 32km east to the trail start in Blinman, partly to check my gear and bike but mostly because there is no other way to get there. I had booked in at the hotel so enjoyed a huge meal and beers with some BMW desert bikers. We wished each other luck in the pre dawn light as I headed south and they with big engines and supplies, north into the deep sand.

The Flinders Ranges offered spectacular scenery and interesting riding through the desert scrub. The Flinders has an ancient and varied geology that led Antarctic explorer and geology

lecturer, Sir Douglas Mawson, on research trips into this region with students to study the rock formations. My study of rocks was limited to dodging the biggest sharpest ones.



Wilpena Pound is a popular tourist campsite with a shop and general store. I stocked up on food and more importantly water as the next town, Hawker was 120km

south. The trails to Hawker were interesting and varied with even some bitumen balanced by harsh rocky plains of Mordor, through a cattle station.

Some heavy looking Brahman bulls were reluctant to move off the track so I did the polite detour around. My shadow was getting long in the dust when I came across a large group on a camel trek. They offered me to camp with them but Hawker hotel was just over the ridge with only one sharp climb in between. The climb was testing, not so much for the gradient but for the football size rocks forming the track. It was the only time I had to dismount and push along the entire trail.

It was just on 6pm when I arrived in Hawker, a typical small country town. The pub was open, everything else was shut. Lesson one, it's hard to stock up if you get into town late and leave early. The food, beer and bed on offer were a fine reward for a long day in the saddle.

Hawker to Melrose was my agenda for day two. The terrain was more open and flat, away from the Flinders. The sky was overcast and temperature in the low twenties. The time and the landscape just slipped by. 120km into the day, the Quorn café took me in and filled me to breaking point. Melrose and the remarkable Mt Remarkable appeared again just on dusk.

After Melrose the towns were generally closer together. The tracks to Laura took me via the Wirraburra forest. A recent fire necessitated an official re-route which I followed with some apprehension. Light rain swirled on the mountain as I skirted around the farms. An exchange with a typically negative old farmer went like this:

"G Day, you reckon it's going to rain" I said.

"Yeah you're going to get wet. Where you heading" he replied.

"Adelaide" I replied with optimism.

"You're going the wrong way mate"

I am an old farmer also but if I was that negative, I wouldn't be enjoying the ride. I pressed on the correct route missing the showers. A big brunch at Laura wasn't far away. From Laura to Spalding someone turned up the volume on the sun. The wind picked up, the temp

was pushing 30C, my skin was burning and my water was disappearing quickly. Navigation in the Bundaleer forest was cautious by necessity. The strong crosswind had locusts pelting into the spokes so densely that they sounded like clickers on the wheels. Eventually via some old aqueducts and 100 gates with 99 different latch systems I arrived in Spalding for refreshments.



Hallet was going to be a push for tonight. Darkness was falling, sweat running down my arms as I cranked out a steady rhythm up Hurricane Hill Rd to the wind farm. I could see the town lights 10km away but had to get out my lights. I was keen to avoid riding in the dark so that I wouldn't miss any of the landscape but food was not far away.

Everything was closed in Hallet at 6.30pm, including the pub. I filled my water from a tank and pressed on for another 10km until I found a tree to camp under. A freeze dried meal and some protein powder was tonight's meal. Sleep came quickly in the warmth of the bivvy under the stars.

Burra was 80km away. I had 2 litres of bad tasting water and one power bar left, just enough I figured. The tracks were hilly, varied and interesting. Great adventure riding over Mt Dare and a steep pinch up White Hill Rd. After fuelling the engine in Burra I headed out toward Clare, the start of the wine country and some more vivid colour in the landscape. I met two fellow riders going the opposite direction. It was great to break up the solitude and have a chat. The bad news was it another 40km of savage headwind for me before a respite in Clare. The following 40km of sheltered railtrail to Riverton was a welcome reprieve as was the shower, food, beer and bed.



Adelaide was now in striking distance, 190km away. I slept badly and woke early. I started pedaling at 5.30am. Uphill into the wind, in the dark with rain starting to fall. A question mark arose for the first time on my journey. Ten minutes later I was over the crest watching kangaroo silhouettes bounce along the fence line against a brilliant red sky. The answer lay ahead.

It was just on 8am when I arrived in Tanunda for breakfast. Today I had choice about which towns to stop in. Kapunda for brunch as there was some climbing ahead. Up Steingarten Road the trail arrows pointed. This was a real hill. I enjoyed the challenge, the rhythm and sweat. An old bloke in a HiLux drove up to see if I would make it.

“Good on ya mate” he encouraged.

Not quite an Alp D’Huez crowd at Le Tour but the support was welcome.

Onward through the picturesque Jacob’s Creek high vineyard. It occurred to me how generous all the private landholders are to the Mawson trail bike riders.

High Eden Rd took me into the big red gum country, into the clouds and mist. Birdwood appeared at long last. Another feast before the final push to the big smoke. There were a couple of items in my kit that I hadn’t touched since starting: my reasonably extensive toolkit and my raincoat. Five minutes later the raincoat was on to stay. Steady rain washed the dust and sweat from my body and bike as the trail weaved up, down, left and right testing my patience and weariness.

Finally, the last downhill to Adelaide. Four emus, six kangaroos, two goats and a stray sheep all appeared to say goodbye in the last few km’s of forest. Goodbye animals, bush and big sky country.

All up the Mawson Trail took me five days to complete 940km’s. Ms Garmin tells me the average moving speed was a tad under 20kph with 9500m of climbing. My fully rigid steel Niner MCR ran faultlessly with chain oil being my only maintenance. I ran Maxxis Crossmark tyres with Stan’s sealant.

Once or twice the rocks and corrugations prompted thoughts that suspension forks may have been worth their weight.

I highly recommend the Mawson Trail as an enjoyable, achievable adventure for the well prepared bikepacker. There is plenty of opportunity to take a week or two, relax and find your own horizon.

ENJOY THE RIDE !