

A PLUG (or six) FOR THE EARNEST GILES



Join big Phil Bianchi on another of his epic adventures; despite magic scenery, challenging terrain and exhilarating 4Wdriving; they were abandoned by the tyre god.



I've driven the Great Central Road dozens of times and have always been intrigued by the remote Ernest Giles Range (EGR) and wondered what secrets it would hold.

When the opportunity arose to visit the area, I led a group of Getaway 4WD Drive Club members from Carnegie Station on the Gunbarrel Hwy down the Prenti Downs Road to the top end of Lake Wells.

RANGE

Staying well to the east of Larry Wells Range we made good progress and knocked off about 25% of our cross country leg. We dropped onto a well used mining track which we followed for some distance but it trended away from EGR so it was cross country again. A bemused group of camels watched us bounce by; they weren't frightened by us at all. I'm sure it was because we were the first vehicles they had ever seen and not because of the handsome bearded one in the lead vehicle! By lunchtime we were about half way and rather pleased with ourselves. The lunch break allowed the tyre god to catch up with us and after lunch he delivered tyre carnage with twelve punctures; one vehicle got six and all were in the side walls. Some punctures needed one plug and others a fist full.

This had us checking



◀ ***By lunchtime we had twelve punctures and all were in the sidewalls.***

our supplies of tyre plugs; that night some of us locked up our stocks of tyre plugs in case of raids! By camp time we had travelled a breathtaking ten kms since the lunch stop, we had plugged

heaps of punctures, almost worn out a number of compressors and spirits were low.

To make matters worse we had not seen any half reasonable spot to camp for hours, things look grim indeed. Having to dig out camping areas in spinifex country would be the last straw. Then fortune or was it the camp god smiled on us and a large cleared area appeared. To improve spirits further firewood was everywhere

We then followed station tracks trending south easterly until they petered out. Continuing at a leisurely pace in a south easterly direction our maps said it was about 80kms cross country to our target, a Frank Hann gnamma hole towards the northern end of the range. It couldn't be that difficult a job to cross a bit of gum and spinifex country with a few mulga belts could it?

and most of it was the prized black gidgee. Camp was quickly set up and refreshments appeared with the main topic being how many tyre plugs have you got left?



When heads poked out of tents in the morning three vehicles out of five were listing due to slow flats – bummer. It was out with the compressors and ever dwindling supply of plugs before heading off.

For the first three kms the mulga was so thick you almost needed your headlights switched on. As we reached the breakaway the country began to open up; however a call over the radio told us there was another flat. After five plugs they gave up and changed wheels; then another vehicle announced a flat tyre that eventually needed three plugs. I was starting to think that Hann, Giles, Forrest etc were onto something by using horses and camels – they wouldn't have any flats!

With great relief and a degree of satisfaction we reached the top of the breakaway and soon found Hann's corkwood gnamma hole of the 20 Feb 1908; it however was dry. Nearby we found cleared stone pathways and rocks stacked upon each other; presumably this was an Aboriginal

ceremonial area.

Heading south our next target was Nellie Hayes Creek and Hann's rockhole that; 'When full would hold some thousands of gallons'. Here the spinifex was as tall as the vehicle but was easily traversed. At Nellie Hayes we spread out and walked many kilometres tracing creek lines all to no avail;

◀ *Spinifex was thick, creating a fire hazard as it built up around cross members and exhausts.*



it didn't look like rockhole country, leaving me to suspect the Nellie Hayes Creek on the map isn't the same place as named by Hann. Never-the-less it was a good feeling to be walking in relatively pristine country.

In places we were almost driving on the edge of the breakaway and could see the country far off to the east. We managed to climb down from the top in a few places but didn't find any rockholes or art in overhangs. Being time to camp and with one eye on ominous looking dark clouds we found a relatively clear site and set up. Rain showers throughout the evening weren't heavy but were enough to spoil what would have been a terrific camp. Trending ever southwards a number of small but deep rock holes were discovered in an area of flat rock.

One of our crew, blind sighted, almost dropped his Nissan's rear left wheel into a deep hole. If he had he would have bottomed out to the chassis and the extraction would have been messy without damage.

Nearby the breakaway dropped away and revealed an area of predominantly red rock that had unusual weathering making for interesting photos. This area had two fantastic gnamma holes that stood out against the bright red rock and nearby were some Aboriginal song lines.

Another flat was announced, this one needed six plugs allowing the driver to 'win the coveted' Mr Plugger title for the trip. The tyre held air so he continued to drive on it until we reached roads that required speeds

new tyre that had never rolled on the road – he was most unhappy. That one brought the day's tally to five.

As we neared the end of the EGR we found ourselves in spinifex country with large marble gums, what a majestic sight and what a relief. Soon we stumbled onto a cleared line which we followed west to the Blaxland Range Lake Wells Road; from there we headed to Lake Wells Homestead that is now used by mining workers as living quarters. By the time the last vehicle of our convoy went by the homestead, they were stopped by the camp supervisor and were asked: 'Where did you guys come from?'

'From Ernest Giles Range' our man replied. 'But there's no track out there' he said. 'There is now' was the response!

From here we made our way to the Great Central Road and Laverton for coffees at the tourist centre. Except for the tyre carnage, what a terrific trip it had been to pristine country with fabulous scenery, lots of breakaways and creek lines to explore and the company was terrific.



▲ *The luxury of a clear camping space was marred by precipitation.*

"Two fantastic gnamma holes stood out against the bright red rock." ▲

higher than 25 kph; that way he wouldn't risk a good tyre. Another of the crew when checking his spare under the vehicle he found it had a puncture; it was a





▲ *The majestic marble gums are a stunning sight out among the spinifex plains and dense mulga.*

TYRE DISCUSSION

We had a mixed bag of tyres on the five vehicles; BFG ATs, Cooper STTs, Mickey Thompson ATZs, Bridgestones and Goodyear Wrangler Kevlar MTRs. All vehicles had two spares.

I ran the Goodyears and was lead vehicle; I had flats in only two tyres; one would expect the lead vehicle to have a higher flat count.

The vehicle with the Mickey Thompsons had some fifteen punctures and ran out of serviceable wheels and we had to insert a tube in one tyre so he had rubber to get out of the area.

The BFG owner didn't have any flats. The Coopers man had many flats, one needing six plugs.

The Bridgestone owner also copped many flats but he was able to drive back to Perth without problems.

Were the punctures the result of; poor tyre selection, poor driving, differing wheel tracks, lack of experience

or bad luck? It was probably a mixture of all of these.

One thing is certain the Goodyears are a very tough tyre and reasonably puncture resistant, as were the BFGs. As for Mickey Thompson ATZs I wouldn't touch them; when we fitted the tube we were amazed at just how thin the sidewall was. "The thickness of a bicycle tyre" someone joked. No wonder that vehicle had so many punctures.

Some people say that split rims with tough as nails cross ply tyres are the way to go when cross country driving, others say tubeless are easily plugged and once pumped up you're on your way. It's a difficult one and is bordering on the "Engel v Waeco, which is best" argument. One thing is certain—don't do cross country work with thin walled inferior tyres, you'll soon tire of wrecked tyres and fixing punctures and after spending a lot of money getting out there, have a most unhappy trip.

EDITOR'S OPINION

All I can say Phil is that heading into trackless tiger country like this on any standard all terrains is absolute folly. Driver experience and awareness I can't comment on but, in my opinion, the minute you take soft sidewalled tyres of a rating much less than 12 ply and with raised tread on the sidewalls which can catch stakes and line them up to penetrate the tyre, you're looking to wreck some very expensive rubber. My suggestion for the very few prepared to tackle this sort of country - rock hard rag tyres or radials equal to anywhere between 12 and 16 ply rating with smooth sidewalls on split rims and with heavy duty tubes. With two spares and a sharp eye out for potential stakes, you

can generally get to camp where repairs can be done at your leisure. If you get too many punctures on the tyre set-up I'm suggesting, and you go through two spares and end up doing repairs en-route, then I'd say you should be in a tank with steel tracks or there's a much more pleasant way to spend a day.



Excerpt from Hema's WA State map.CL 2010.

INFORMATION BAY

This is very isolated country, plan thoroughly and be well prepared and totally self sufficient. Ensure your vehicle has been serviced and thoroughly checked over with a special emphasis on tyres, shocks, springs and batteries. Two spare tyres is a must have. You would be very fortunate to come across someone else travelling in this area to

provide assistance.

Plan your fuel needs carefully, expect double your normal consumption rate.

An HF Radio or Satellite Phone is a must out here. Your mobile phone or UHF radio is useless if seeking help in an emergency, the signal from these will not carry.

Fix some shade cloth to the front of your vehicle to prevent radiator blockage by spinifex.

The best time to travel in this area are the cooler months April to September. This trip is not suitable for soft roaders or towing camper trailers.

Western

86th EDITION Autumn 2013

4W DRIVER

WA's own 4WD Magazine

**Earnest
Giles
Range**



D-Max

4 door space cab

The

Donnelly -

**Trip
noted**

Touareg

V6 TDi

The things you see

Shooting with Shutterbuggers

Traveller's guide to water

Devil's in the detailing

Northern Yilgarn



Print Post Approved
E02869/00784

RRP \$8.50