

2017 Mitta Mountain Rally incorporating the Mitta Masters – back again, even better

Ross Runnalls did his duty getting a Victorian round of the ARC back off the ground with the successful running of the Eureka Rally out of Ballarat in March, which also served as the first round of the 2017 Focus on Furniture and Bedding Victorian Rally Championship. He then turned his mind to the second round, and an event that he is really passionate about, the North Eastern Car Club and Albury Wodonga and District Car Club Mitta Mountain Rally incorporating Mitta Masters for classic cars and competitors, returning for a second year on 6 May. The plan was to retain all those aspects that made it great first up last year, including the amazing service park on the golf course, modern Rally Base with excellent local catering, long no repeat mountain stages, results final on the day, wrapped up with presentation that night in the fantastic Mitta Pub.

The obvious reason for incorporating the Mitta Masters for classic cars and crews into the Mitta Mountain Rally was to boost numbers of entries for an event run a long way from Melbourne. The nature of the event, with more traditional narrow winding mountain roads, long stages and no pace noting should also appeal to competitors from former times. It was also felt that particularly on longer events with longer stages, then crew ability, attitude and stamina are more important than the vehicle, hence Mitta Masters awards were based on driver age, with awards for the most successful drivers in their 50's, 60's and over 70's. Co-drivers were not to miss out as they were to receive "Carers Awards" that reflect how well they have looked after their elderly chauffeurs. Although this format is not so popular with the modern day competitor, if they want to get faster, it may be what they need even if it may be not what they want.

38 entries were received, with five entered in the Masters only and seven in both Masters and the VRC. Andrew Travis/Arron Topliff had made the long trip from Bathurst. The field was whittled down to 36 by the start.

Saturday dawned foggy, but the sun burnt its way through to continue a lead up week of glorious North East Victorian autumn weather. Competitors were informed at the briefing that "There are long intervals in the roadbook with no instructions but lots of corners. It is a matter of judgement what bends deserve a caution. The organisers have cautioned corners that are not as they appear on approach or out of general character or might be an issue at high speed. If there are no cautions it does not mean that the roads can be maximum attacked. These roads warrant respect and a little reserve. They were built by loggers not engineers. They are unpredictable, constantly changing in direction, width, radius, shade, camber, and surface. The consequences are severe with big drop offs. They are demanding roads, but ultimately very rewarding. There is little history of corners claiming victims, i.e. no black spots, so do not create that history."

Steve Raymond/Kate Catford retained number one spot on the road in the top three ballot and headed off first out along the Omeo highway to the opening stage – 14.5km Dunstans, where advice for competitors was: "After last year competitors requested a shorter stage to start with before embarking on the long stages, so here is a busy warm up, on what was a wide logging road, but as there has been no logging here for ten years it has become a little overgrown with scrub and blackberries. It should still provide a beautiful early morning drive amongst towering Grey Gums, in and out of Blanket Leaf gullies gradually climbing up into thick Alpine Ash forests past Hopeful Saddle towards Mt Wills. This is more than a warm

up; it will be a very exacting introduction to this incredible terrain." Some recent dozer scrub removal work may have made the road wider, but a little sloppy in spots. In what has become a unique feature of this event, due to the lack of 2WD access into the middle of any stage, the only spectating options were at the start or finish of special stages. Spectators could walk in from the end of three of the stages along a rough track cut through the thick scrub by the organisers to a safe elevated viewing point.

All crews survived the warm up stage, with Lee/Lethlean quickest out of the blocks by seven seconds to Raymond/Catford and a further seven seconds to Hayes/Hayes, while in 2WD and Masters, Sytema/Wright edged out their fellow Escort of Walker/Richards by ten seconds. An average speed of 68.6 km/h indicated how twisty a stage it was.

Stage 2 – 30.9 km, Snowy, had the following advice for competitors: "This is the reverse of last year's opening stage, when it was rather slippery in the early morning before the sun got onto it. The first 5.6 km to the first SOS is in good condition following last year's logging. The next 15 km to the second SOS is not so well maintained, while the final ten km has been graded in advance of logging. It is downhill most of the way, relentlessly twisty, the road constantly changing in width, surface, undulations, camber and corner radius, with many of the large trees close to the road on exits to corners, all demanding tidy driving." Spectators were treated to a great bird's eye view of a wide turn hard right uphill under their noses only 200m from stage end.

Raymond/Catford were fastest by 13 seconds to Hayes/Hayes and another ten seconds to the other Raymond, Steve. Grant Walker continued to set the 2WD pace, with Travis slotting in between the two RS1800s. The stage 1 victory came at a cost to Wal and Shermo with a puncture before the start of SS 2 and another on SS 2 costing them five minutes.

Martin/Turner retired here with engine problems along with Davis/O'Halloran with gearbox issues. Thomas/Radnell experienced a jammed throttle cable spearing them off the road, and becoming beached on some scrub and logs. Adams/Kendrick first time out in a new but old car left the road to get jammed up against a tree, which took some extraction by recovery crews.

After service, crews headed north through Eskdale to a new shire road stage – 16.0 km Callaghans. This stage took some organising, requiring formal traffic management plans, and chasing up the written approval from 14 landowners who don't live on the road. Advice for competitors was: "This is very different to the other stages in this event. Sitting on the start line, the stage unfolds across open cattle grazing with few trees to help define road direction over crests. It does not pay to guess the direction over crests, as there are deep gutters on both sides of the road. There are also many narrow grids with solid posts either side. The road goes through some forest over O'Connells Gap before emerging back into open country to finish with. Road surface will be very slippery if dry." Dry it was, so very slippery it was. Many claimed it was the best stage they had ever driven. Some felt that they should have been told which crests to be careful on and therefore which ones they could go flat out over, rather than just treat all with respect until the exit is visible.

Raymond/Catford were again quickest by seven seconds to the Hayes, and in 2WD Travis pipped Walker out by two seconds. Unfortunately car 2 Steve Raymond/Luke Simpson in trying to catch brother Glen, rolled heavily less than one kilometre into the stage within sight

of the start. The crew fared much better than the car. The stage was held up while the MIV attended and also to clear the road of curious cows.

Stage 4 – 18.4 km Bullhead, followed shortly after. Advice for competitors was: “As can be quickly surmised on the track across the paddocks to the start of the stage, this road is rarely used. It is a little bumpy as it relentlessly twists and turns its way through the forest up and over Bullhead Gap, then finishes with a fast run along a shire lane out of the forest past spectators who have trudged some distance across the paddocks to get a good view of the action.”

The pattern continued as Raymond/Catford, with Kate enjoying the scenery in her first blind event again quickest by 26 seconds to the Hayes, with Wright/Meyer six seconds behind them. Lee/Lethlean had a brain fade on the last bend of the stage, firing straight off through a fence into a ditch. Alan Friend/Michelle Canning were now warmed up, interrupting the 2WD party fastest by eight seconds to Walker, and a further four seconds to Travis. Sytema spun here losing about 20 seconds.

Raymond/Catford won Heat 1 by 1.03 to the Hayes, with first 2WD in third place being Walker/Richards, ahead of Sytema and Friend, with Travis not contesting VRC.

Heat 2 was to be a single stage, 53.0 km – Bogong. While the more traditional longer stages was expected to appeal to the Mitta Masters crews, 50 km plus stages have made a comeback at WRC level, with Australia’s own long Nambucca stage at Coffs Harbour taking on WRC icon status. This final Bogong stage at Mitta was bound to be memorable, and maybe it will become iconic with time, as it climbs to the foot of Victoria’s highest mountain in a long testing loop from Mitta.

Advice for competitors was: “This will be hard work for the driver and a scenic tour for the co-driver in between some vital calls. The stage climbs for 18km up into the snow gums at the Hollow, at 1377m at the foot of the Granite Flat Spur approach to the Mt Bogong summit, along a road full of sharp stones requiring careful tyre management. The next 14 km link drops into an out of Camp Creek along a new road suitable for 2wd onto Camp Creek Gap at the foot of the Eskdale Spur approach to Bogong. Keep an eye out for hikers. This rugged link is necessary to get to Trappers Gap and the magnificent 21 km run down to the finish just out of Mitta.” Despite a thorough effort some weeks beforehand heaving loose rocks from the apexes and outside exits off the road on this stage to allow drivers more room to throw cars around and reduce the number of rocks thrown onto the road, the leading cars still managed to excavate from inside corners and dump some sizeable rocks into the middle of the road for later cars.

Raymond/Catford may have taken it a little carefully, or catching car zero just before the end of stage may have hampered their time enough to be knocked off by the Hayes by 33 seconds to win Heat 2 as well, with Liucci/Gavin coming in next 55 seconds in arrears. Walker/Richards fine run ended in a simple rotor button failure, and the mounting attack from Friend/Canning terminated with an off road excursion and very bent steering. Sytema/Wright drove to the end of stage with a flat, handing 2WD to the NSW guests, Travis/Topliff. Coleman/Ruessman battled through the narrow roads in the Commodore to run out of fuel due to a leaking tank and failed to finish.

The champagne presentation and spray was held at parc ferme on the edge of the oval below rally base with Mt Welcome in the background bathed in warm afternoon light. Raymond/Catford, Ben and Cathy Hayes and Luke Wright/Kate Meyer (later to be displaced by Travis/Topliff), got to wet themselves as event podium placegetters in that order. Travis/Topliff edged out Sytema/Wright by 1.22 seconds to win 2WD, but the latter took home the Geoff Portman Cup for winning the Mitta Masters. Cody Richards and Ged Blum put in a meritorious performance in the first outing for the car after rolling out of the first round last year. Not only did they get to the finish after starting the week with a freshly painted bare body shell, but finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Mitta Masters.

Provisional results were issued at 5.30 pm and as no protests were received, they were final at 6.30 pm enabling trophies to be presented later in the evening at the Mitta Pub.

The scene was well set for the formal presentations by a lively compilation summary of the day's events on film, put together by Jake Lucas, including an aerial view of the Lee/Lethlean park in the ditch. The clerk of course thanked: David West for Albury club input coordination and advance car duties, Ron Woodward for North Eastern club coordination and officials coordination, Steve Roman for organising equipment, Scott Spedding for checker and 00 duties, Colin Elliott for safety officer, Ian Douglas for rally base radio duties, Steph Richards for entries secretary role, Clint Thomas for minding the radio repeater, stage commanders – Ray Wingrave, Luke Whitten, Steve Roman, Al Roman, Steve Dunbar, Jason Whittaker, Brian Royal, Phil Paterson, Tom Kaitler, Richard Fung and Steve Hollowood, Sean Payne 0 car, Dean Allen 999 car, Andy and Sherryn White sweep, Ben Quick and Luke Webster recovery crews, all the time controls, road closures, SOS and spectator point officials, and lastly the people of Mitta district who made the event so welcome.

MC Joel Wald interviewed Towong Shire mayor David Wartman, as well as the event patron Geoff Portman about his rallying career. Geoff then presented trophies to the major winners including the Geoff Portman Cup for the outright winner of the Mitta Masters.

Social intercourse continued on afterwards, with some (particularly Ted Perkins) being rescued by the 11 pm bus provided for those staying at Dartmouth.

The event has proved to be a worthy addition to the VRC, providing variety and its own unique character which the organising clubs are committed to continuing next year and in following years.

## **Award winners**

### **Mitta Mountain Rally round 2 2017 VRC**

First Outright Glen Raymond / Kate Catford Subaru Impreza WRX STi

Second Outright Ben Hayes / Cathy Hayes Subaru WRX STi

Third Outright Andrew Travis / Arron Topliff Nissan Gazelle

First Two Wheel Drive Andrew Travis / Arron Topliff Nissan Gazelle

Second Two Wheel Drive Luke Sytema / Adam Wright Ford Escort RS 1800

Third Two Wheel Drive Brian Semmens / Dan Parry Nissan 200SX RV S12

First Novice Brendan Hood / Dylan Braithwaite Hyundai Excel

First Excel Brendan Hood / Dylan Braithwaite Hyundai Excel

First PN2 Brian Newton / Ryan Price Honda Civic

First Class PN 3 Paul Lahiff / Conner McLeod Toyota Altezza

First Class PN 4 Brian Semmens / Dan Parry Nissan 200SX RV S12

First Class PN 5 Glen Raymond / Kate Catford Subaru Impreza WRX STi

First Class PN 6 Franco Liucci / Niall Gavin Mitsubishi Evo VI

First Classic Rally Car Luke Sytema / Adam Wright Ford Escort RS 1800

First Club Rally Car Andrew Travis / Arron Topliff Nissan Gazelle

### **Mitta Masters**

First Outright and GEOFF PORTMAN CUP

Luke Sytema / Adam Wright Ford Escort RS 1800

First M50 David Lawrance / Cary Seabrook Datsun 1600

First M60 David Officer / Kate Officer Mitsubishi Colt Galant



The winners sliding towards the end of stage 2, Snowy, in the Mitta mountains





Thrid placegetters Travis/Topliff powering through the shadows on Bullhead Lane



Sytema/Wright, Mitta Masters winners on the opening stage



At the end of the day winners are grinners, and also wet



We all do now