

The Perth-Albany-Perth Randonnée, run across the harsh terrain of Western Australia, is a tough Audax challenge – which is probably one of the reasons it's sponsored by the makers of the candidly-named Aussie Butt Cream. Andrew Preston braved the miles of isolation... and the snakes, kangaroos, monster owls and killer trees. This is his ripper yarn...

ANDREW PRESTON

Whizzing through Oz

Remote doesn't quite describe the 1,200 km course of the Perth-Albany-Perth (PAP) event. There's a 153 km stretch with not a single house, junction, shop, garage... or anything. Just a straight road across an awe-inspiringly lonesome landscape.

"This is the most remote twelve hundred in the world," said event organiser Wayne Hickman, as he stood on the balcony of Collie football club in Perth on a chilly September daybreak, with the blustery wind and damp clouds swirling around us.

As I turned to go he said: "Did you get the route change for today?" He let the prospect of getting lost out there fully get a grip, before he pointed over to the outdoor cycle track and said: "Two laps of the velodrome before you go."

The small size of the field – 71 at the start – and the night stops which bring



Understated... Wayne Hickman

everyone together at the end of each day, gives the ride a collegiate feel. Before travelling to Perth, I was contacted by AUK PAP veteran Julian Dyson. He's done three PAP rides. He offered a share of an Airbnb near the start, so there were four of us – Chris Horsefield, Andrew Heard, Julian and me. We thus had time to get to know each other before the event, and it turned out that we all ride around about the 20kph mark and so were able to ride together a lot. In fact Chris and I were almost perfectly matched for pace, so we had hours of chat and laughs to pass the time, which made it a really sociable ride.

The ride starts at 5am, in the dark, on the 75km Perth Shared Pathway – an awesome two lane bike path which runs alongside the freeway. We flew off from the start at an adrenaline-pumping 40kph with the strongest riders at the front. After only about 10km we were starting to overtake riders who had taken the sensible decision to drop off the pace. Soon, a voice from the darkness on my left said: "See you at the finish", which decided it. Time for me to drop off the pace too, and chat to Brian Hornby from Queensland on his third PAP.

His preparation for the event had consisted of an admirable attempt to make



Starting block... Collie control

it harder by significantly reducing his power to weight ratio with a trip to New York and then a cruise with a free bar to Canada – so he was keen not to burn any matches too soon.

Our little reality check was contagious; only about half a dozen sprinted past to catch the leaders, everyone else seemed happy to drop the pace and stay out of the wind. Over the next 10km or so about five or six riders formed a steady little peloton, and riders took turns to come to the front, keeping the pace at a steady 30kph.

As we moved back down the line, we just cut in at the back of our team so that we didn't put anyone on the front who was going to speed up, break the rhythm, or



Cobber... Chris Horsefield

take us all out by hitting the brakes. It was a thing of beauty. After the cycle path ended, some traffic lights, junctions, and a substantial headwind (which was to test us all the way to Albany) blew the group apart. But it didn't matter, we'd covered a fast

75km without too much effort – and were almost at the first control.

As we pulled into the bakery the lead groups were just heading off. No worries, a quick drink, feed, and off alone into the headwind. Happy enough, but within 100m I passed Chris from our Airbnb pulling food out of a bag at the roadside, so I soft peddled until he'd caught me, each of us thinking it'd probably only be a kilometre or two before the other dropped us, we set off into the wind chatting, and rotating, and the kilometres ticked by. The headwind slowing single riders, and favouring groups, we gradually formed into another little group and headed for the next control.

I'd decided to see if I could really

on the loneliest road in the world



Beaut... Riding the six-man train

immerse myself in the joy of riding in the moment, and cultivate that meditative state in which time, speed, and distance don't feature; just pedal, enjoy the view and you'll get there. This was working well. I hadn't broken my resolve to not calculate my average speed, once and hadn't even bothered to know how far it was to Yarloop, so the control under a huge fig tree was upon me in a blink. A great stock of food, drink, tea, sandwiches, volunteers stamping the cards and just generally looking after us.

Chris had disc rubbing issues, so I pushed on, setting off at the same time as another rider so we teamed up to take the headwind. When sheltered we chatted and she told me her chilling London-Edinburgh-London tale of riding on the time limit into the Fens' headwind in the night alone, packing, out of time at St. Ives. As we battled into a headwind on the second day I had a feeling that the sense of déjà-vu would be too much for her, and so it was. She was just one of the 50 per cent of the field who dropped out.

Chris, who had packed on the Great Southern Randonnée two years ago was haunted by the memory. However, that he caught me in the section to Busseton without any ill effects after his brake issues convinced me, if not him, he was going to be fine.

Cheered by our first kangaroo sightings (but anxious about collisions with them) we rode on into the headwind, and eventually, sunset. And on to Margaret river in plenty of time. There would definitely be sleep tonight.

The climb to Nannup had been talked of all day, so we loitered, like penguins waiting for a group to form to make it safe to run up the beach – faffing, nodding, rushing, and then the roll out into the black night in small groups. After an hour or so I had to stop for a pee, confident I could catch my companions. I told them to ride on and not to wait. After gazing at the stars for a while I guessed they were probably a kilometre up the road, so I set about gradually winding them in.

Peddalling in the zone, total darkness all around, there was a sudden sweeping arc in from high – my brain for a moment convinced I was about to get flattened by a kangaroo. It was a huge white owl which had spotted something in the road in the beam of my headlight. Its swoop ended in a vertical drop. Wings upstretched, he looked four feet tall. With the prey in his claws, he turned to look at me with huge eyes, and with two powerful down strokes he went back the way he'd come, up and over my head. All over in a couple of seconds but an



I had triple cause to be happy. The owl, the discovery that the threshold for calling an ascent a climb is lower in Australia than it is in Wessex or Wales, and I was clearly going to get plenty of sleep.

As we climbed into the night control we could see a huge electrical storm off in the distance lighting up the sky, and no doubt pouring with rain. However, it wouldn't trouble us – we were nearly there. It turned out we were among the first third of the field into Nannup, and after great food and a hot shower I was ushered into a school hall at about 1am – noise cancelling headphones in hand – to find not a single snorer. The owl was now the second most

unusual thing I'd seen on this ride.

The headwind was strong, the first control a long way away, and you don't want to be out of time at the end wondering why you slept so long on the first night. Alarm call requested for 3.45am, Chris and I were off at 4.30.

We'd pedalled through vast, silent, dark forests for some time before we saw the first glimmer of light in the sky, and then on into a spectacular dawn.

Two huge mobs of kangaroos, one of which was spooked by me shouting "kangaroos" at the top of my voice – and like an army, they bounded off to the forest, where they disappeared from sight.

The scrub is amazing. On the face of it, it's one vast eucalyptus jungle, but in fact it changes slightly every few hundred metres, ebbing and flowing as the ancient microclimates transition, creating variations in shade, shelter, altitude, rain, and soil. There are thousands of species of eucalyptus, many of which can only be differentiated while saplings, and the landscape constantly changes with subtle variations in tree type, height, light, and undergrowth density. It's hypnotically beautiful to ride through.

A control at the half way point had a small fire to keep the mosquitos at bay, plus tea, cake, coke, chat, and bottle refill. Then it



Snake snacks... Yarloop control



A control at the half way point had a small fire to keep the mosquitos at bay, plus tea, cake, coke, chat, and

was off to do it again, this time with more wind, and more straight bits. There's levels of Audax fitness – fit enough to do a ride, and fit enough to do it whatever the weather. Like the last LEL, this was turning into the sort that needed the latter. This wind needed power to punch through, without it you're on a vicious cycle of lack of speed, lack of sleep, lack of speed.

You'd think it'd be hard not to count down the kilometres when there's a marker every 10k, but it's easy if you don't look at the clock, and if you resist the temptation to know what time it is, you can make each one feel like it's come in the blink of an eye.

As we rode into the night Chris was feeling the sleep deprivation, and our pace slowed, but I was happy to ride with him and enjoy the night. We maybe lost an hour, but the run into a sleep control is a zone where doubts can creep in, and accidents happen, and I didn't want to leave him on his own.

The Albany control is a residential college. We got awesome food. There was

some hilarity when I asked for a second helping of the strawberry pasta – strawberries, tomatoes, they're both red. It made sense in my head for a moment. Then we were taken up a lot of stairs to a bed in our own room!

After another hot shower, my head hit the pillow and I slept for four hours straight, waking up in exactly the position I'd laid down in. When the alarm went off I fell out of bed looking for the phone, and had to take a moment to work out where I was. Bliss.

You know you're a Randonneur when a 406km to go sign means it's only 200 more today, and then 200 tomorrow – nearly there. We can do that, right? Finally, with the wind behind us we headed north. On up to the Bakery at Mount Barker.

I wasn't really paying attention and thought the next stage was 110km with no shops or houses so bought loads of food, only to find out that the long stage was the one after this, 69km baby. I

packed in the food anyway, as we sailed along in the tall wind to another one-shop-town, then off into the deep scrub again. The tallwind enabled us to stay together and enjoy the amazing landscapes – both botanical and social. Just as we'd given up on a control to replenish, there it was, staffed as always by the cheerful volunteers. And then back off into the sunset, and on into darkness.

The little café in Boyup Brook had stayed open for us and in we stumbled: mug of hot tea, a shared sandwich, and off into the rain which gradually got heavier. By the time we descended again to Preston River, it was pouring, and cold.

My mind kept expecting dry stone walls on either side of the road, and was forming the scrub into hedges in front of whitewashed cottages, but every time I shone my lights to the side it was dense eucalyptus, if you had dropped me on to this road in these conditions and said "guess where you are" I would have said Scotland.

The whole "don't look at the clock" thing was panning out really well. I had no idea of

time, and it all seemed to be flying by. I caught a rider on the climb to the final sleep stop at Collie, made a bodge of the gear change to drop to the slower speed and threw the chain off the front and rear sprockets. Confident I could catch him again I waved him on, and set about removing the chain without damaging the spokes. As I did so, there was a huge crack as a eucalyptus somewhere in the woods below shed a big branch. When I caught the recumbent rider he started telling me stories of deaths and near deaths at the hands of the "widow maker" tree. It certainly took my mind off the cold and the rain!

Finally, we pedalled though the desolate wet streets of Collie and into the control. I got the controller to take a photo of me to show how totally soaked I was, but I just look super happy in that picture. Anyway, we were very wet, and very cold. There were people abandoning behind us, getting picked up by the bus over 900km into the ride.

Fatigue amongst the other riders was

obviously setting in. The dorm sounded like a Breton gym during PBB; the air beds sounded like a sea of space hoppers compressed together, and outside it rained. So only a bit of sleep before a 6am wake-up call, and 7am departure. Hot food is served the instant you walk into the dining room. It speeds things up a lot.

As I rode out of town, a fresh rider pedalled up to me. We struck up conversation. Bryan was thinking of building up for PBP starting with the 200km Collie to Perth brevet. We rode all the way back to Perth together, joking, chatting, and at the end, team time trialling up the bike path with the Airbnb crew to get back before dark.

Riding the end of a big event with friends, and a rider with fresh legs is a great feeling. The adrenaline, helped by some snake sightings on the bike path, meant we were perfectly timed to finish in daylight.

All in all a great event, and a great experience. If I possibly can, I'll be back in four years' time.

☘ The scrub is amazing: On the face of it, it's one vast eucalyptus jungle, but in fact it changes slightly every few hundred metres, ebbing and flowing as the ancient microclimates transition, creating variations in shade, shelter, altitude, rain, and soil ☘

Down.... The roads wet from the storm we'd seen last night... we pedalled on

Perfect timing... the Perth skyline on a fine, clear day and the end of the ride



Snake Piss... don't ask if it's poisonous, it probably is

