



Credit: Sue Ferrari

The Wild office in 1981:  
Chris Baxter and Michael Collie

[ Profile ]

# Wild at 40

Our regular contributor of profiles for the magazine, Megan Holbeck, changes her gaze with a profile of a different sort: one on *Wild* itself.

Words Megan Holbeck

Looking through any old magazine is like opening a time capsule from another era, revealing the dreams, the heroes, the aspirations and the achievements. The first impression of *Wild* Issue #1 is that it's so tactile, so real. You can see the grain in the images, the effort in the design. The blood and passion and commitment are tangible in the stories and the magazine, and you can imagine the community it was set up to serve, thirsting for the first delivery of their very own publication.

This *Wild*-shaped window into '80s Australian outdoor culture also points to bigger transformations. It's obvious how much the internet has changed the role of magazines: There is so much space devoted to information you'd now find online—functional, newsy snippets about what people are up to, gear updates, specifics of how to do things and where to go. But back in 1981, unless you knew the right people, these details could only be found in photocopied track notes or specialised guidebooks.

The ads, of course, are flashbacks. There's a full page taken up with what looks like a blurry, skinny Christmas elf on Trak skis; a trekking company invites you to send \$1 to an address in Mosman to receive their brochure by return mail; a text-only box describes the joys of a packbed—an oh-so-comfortable sounding pack that unfolds into a stretcher. The Wilderness Society's full-page ad for its campaign to save the Franklin is there too, a reminder of the issue dominating the magazine's early environmental coverage. (see pp68-71 for a collection of Issue #1 ads, plus p4 for The Wilderness Society's iconic 'Franklin Flooded' ad.)

What is less obvious from thumbing through the pages is the thing that's remained the same, namely the magazine's purpose—to provide information, education, and inspiration, all of it flavoured with *Wild*'s ethos of being self-sufficient, adventurous, untamed, and a defender of wild places. We don't notice it anymore because over the last forty years we've absorbed, accepted, and come to expect it, and it's helped to shape not only

the magazine but also the community and culture of the Australian outdoors. The person who established and guarded this ethos is the person who loomed largest both in the *Wild* office and in its history: founder and Editor Chris Baxter.

## THE FOUNDING FATHER

Many Australians of a certain age (40+) and interest range (climbers, walkers, and outdoor types) have heard of Chris. But back in the tight-knit world of 1980s climbers, *everyone* would have known him. Before he started *Wild*, he was editor of *Argus*, the Victorian Climbing Club's magazine, and he'd written a half-dozen or so rockclimbing guides, and established hundreds of routes, mostly at Arapiles and the Grampians. He'd also climbed extensively overseas, and was the Australian correspondent for UK climbing mag *Mountain*, a role that earned him the nickname 'Radio Australia' from fierce rival (and later great friend) Rick White. According to Mike Law, Baxter is, and has been, Australia's most prolific climber, developing scores of areas and making the first ascents of thousands of routes.

But his achievements tell you what he did, not who he was. For that, you must go back further. The eldest of four boys, Chris was born in 1946, his love of adventure planted by his father's stories of long walks across the Victorian Alps with packhorses. By the age of eleven, he was off on solo overnight walks on his grandparents' farm in East Gippsland. He then spent a year at Timbertop, Geelong Grammar School's campus in the Victorian High Country, solidifying his love of exploration, adventure, and personal risk. From there, his life was about exploring: mountaineering, climbing, walking and trekking everywhere from Tasmania to Canada, Ethiopia to Italy, up until his early death in 2010.

When asked to describe Chris, people approach it in different ways. Some start with his size and demeanour. He was six-foot-four in the old measure (the only one that fits), and intimidating in the unconscious manner of someone



# Wild Ideas

## A Time for Action

● IT'S NO LONGER JUST A MATTER FOR 'greenies' and 'wilderness freaks'; if indeed it ever was. The situation is, simply, that the wild and beautiful places which readers of this magazine presumably enjoy and count on for their recreation and, increasingly, their livelihood, are disappearing forever and will cease to exist if we don't do something about it now.

Consider what we have lost in as short a period as the last 20 years. The destruction of Lake Pedder and its surroundings is an obvious example, but most other remote areas, particularly in



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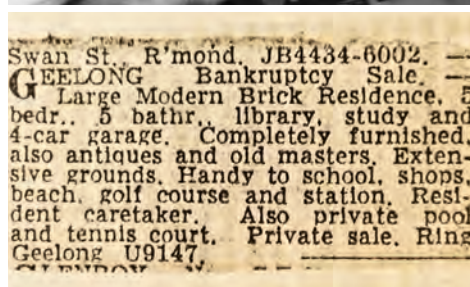
Editorial from *Wild* Issue #3, 1982

Chris at work on the typewriter

Readers were rarely left in doubt as to where Chris stood

*Wild* HQ was in the front bedroom of Chris's house. The room was shared by a piano, a bed, and a wardrobe. There were no funds for extravaganzas like filing cabinets; records were 'filed' in piles on the floor

Chris put his boarding house up for sale in the *Geelong Advertiser*



All manner of sacrifices have been laid at the feet of the sacred cow of 'safety'—the catch-cry of the alliance. As a consequence, adventure is frequently anything but adventure. Fearful conservatism abounds. Groaning under massive packs stuffed with superfluous equipment, brow-beaten by rules, regulations and gems of wisdom from their teachers, many young outdoors enthusiasts are pitifully dependent on man-made crutches—unnecessary gear, tracks and signs and a general information overload. In activities once renowned for the colour, resourcefulness, sense of adventure and individuality of their participants, the stodgy uniformity of the current scene by comparison



accustomed to being right. Others begin with his approach: Michael Collie, graphic designer for the first seven years of *Wild*, describes him as disciplined and mischievous, while long-time climbing partner Dave Gairns mentions his intensity and humour. Other adjectives associated with Chris are honest, straightforward, gruff, opinionated, and scrupulous. If this all sounds quite dry and terrifying, that's because it's only one side of the man.

When I asked his widow Sue Baxter Jarratt for a quick summary of Chris, she took about a minute or so to stop laughing. "With most people that's hard; with Chris it's impossible." Because on the flip side of all that rectitude was "an amazing, adventurous spirit that just couldn't be quietened, not ever. Even when he was as sick as a parrot, he still wanted to be out there. He was still writing lists of what he wanted to explore, and do, and where he hadn't been."

Chris also loved a good story as much as anyone I've ever met. All the clichés about knee slapping and roaring with laughter fit: His whole body got involved in his mirth. I worked with Chris at *Wild* from 2003 until he retired in 2004, and you could always sense when he had a tale to tell, a joke in the making: It fizzed off him in bubbles of anticipation. As Mike Law wrote in his obituary in *Rock* magazine: "Many people first saw his planning and care in business matters, and would find this hard to reconcile on the weekend when he was either champing at the bit to get into a new cliff, sounding terrified but continuing up a climb, or cheerfully demolishing reputations around the campfire in the evening."

In keeping with Law's observation, some of my favourite stories about Chris are the least expected. Ones like the intriguing, amusing idea he had before the athletics carnival at boarding school: If the running track was shortened just a

little, all sorts of records would be broken—and wouldn't that be fun ... So Chris enlisted friends, swore them to secrecy, and the night before the big event they washed off the finish line and drew it back on just a little bit shorter, all by torchlight. The following day there was much jubilation as record after record was smashed. Eventually someone grew suspicious and, after a lot of beard stroking, the measuring tape came out. The game was up, but Chris and his mates were never caught. As Sue describes it, that prank captures every aspect

**“ Things quickly got serious: In the lead up to the first issue of *Wild*, Collie and Baxter spent seven months working seven days a week.”**

of Chris: the sense of fun, adventure, and risk combined with very careful planning. He followed this up with a more audacious idea, and set about selling his boarding house via an ad in the *Geelong Advertiser*.

Other stories show the freedom, opportunities and space of the Australian outdoor scene in the early 1980s. Chris was one of the early climbers at Mt Arapiles, putting up climbs willy-nilly, almost wherever he wanted. One Sunday he was heading home, sodden and exhausted, when he saw a 'For Sale' sign out the front of a house on Natimuk's main street; he pulled over for a quick glance through the front window. The next day he called the real estate agent and made an offer, becoming the proud owner of a Nati climbing pad, paid for on his credit card without ever being inside.



Chris met Michael Collie and Brian Walters on a ski touring trip on the Bogong High Plains in September 1980

## THE EARLY YEARS

So that's a snapshot of Chris: scrupulous, adventurous, larger than life, a lover of pranks and great stories. He was also a taker of measured, sensible risks, and one of these was starting *Wild*. He'd been working on the idea for a year or so, devoting a day a week to research and planning when, in a stroke of good fortune, he met Michael Collie and Brian Walters while ski touring on the Bogong High Plains. Collie was studying graphic design and Walters was a lawyer, neatly fitting the two roles that Chris had identified as essential for starting the magazine.

Things quickly got serious: In the lead up to the first issue of *Wild*, Collie and Baxter spent seven months working seven days a week, finding subscribers and advertisers, planning the magazine, working out logistics. During much of this time, Michael lived at Chris's house, sleeping under his desk: It's safe to say they put in some effort! According to Collie, they knew the only way it would fail was if they didn't work hard enough, so they made sure that they did.

Certain founding principles were put in place from the beginning: Contributors were paid equally and transparently; advertorial, freebies, and irrelevant ads weren't accepted. These rules continued throughout Chris's time, earning him both friends and enemies. The magazine was set up to serve its community, and it certainly did that: The arrival of each new issue was an event. In the early days, Collie hand-delivered each issue to the outdoor shops and advertisers in Sydney and Melbourne, visiting each in person to get feedback and put out any fires.

The magazine was also an early sponsor of many expeditions, including the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest in 1984 by Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer. And the

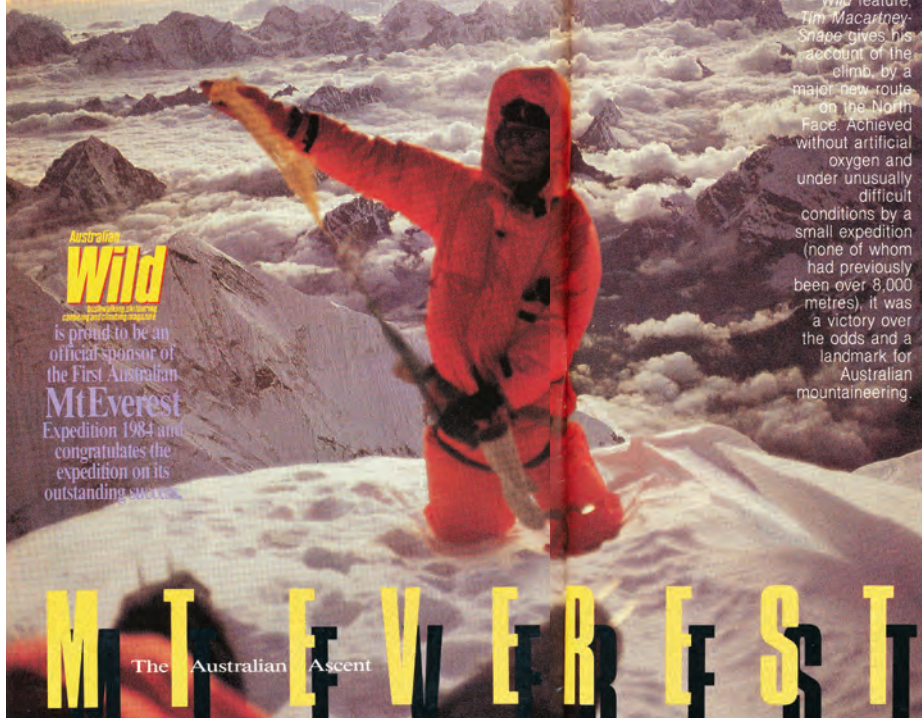
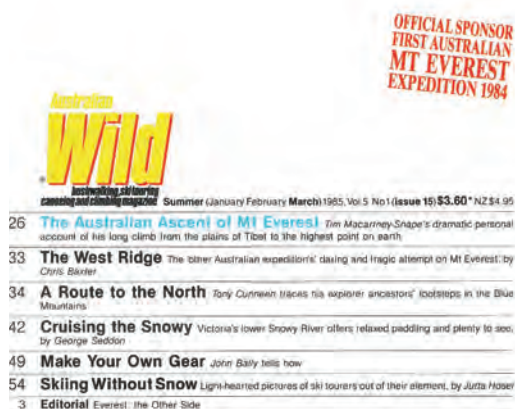
“Gear has become lighter. More breathable. More comfortable. More disposable. In the '80s, people were still wearing woollen Army surplus trousers, oiled japoras, and scratchy woollen thermals.”

*Wild* office was often the first port of call for those returning from trips, eager to show off their slides and tell tales of their adventures, with articles to follow. *Wild* set the standards, the dialogue: As the first of its kind, it made up the rules.

## CHANGES

*Wild* has changed since, but so have both the world and the Australian outdoor community. Flicking through the early issues, one of the things that's noticeable is how many ads there are for small businesses—gear, maps, packbeds, early guiding, whatever—most of them Australian. By my count, there are 53 separate advertisers in the 56 pages of the first issue, with most one-third of a page or smaller, as well as almost two pages of classifieds. *Wild* #177, for comparison, was 114 pages long with 21 different advertisers (all taking at least half a page) and no classifieds. It's a good indication of not merely the influence of the internet, but also the way outdoor gear and services have gone from being small, local, independent businesses to (often) being multinational corporations.

Gear has become lighter. More breathable. More comfortable. More disposable. In the '80s, people were still wearing woollen Army surplus trousers, oiled japoras (although



Wild features Tim Macartney-Snape gives his account of the climb by a major new route on the North Face. Achieved without artificial oxygen and under unusually difficult conditions by a small expedition (none of whom had previously been over 8,000 metres), it was a victory over the odds and a landmark for Australian mountaineering.

Wild Issue #15, Summer 1985 ran Tim Macartney-Snape's account of Australia's first successful Everest expedition

Sponsorship tag on contents page of Wild Issue #15, Summer 1985

Gore-Tex had just come onto the scene), and scratchy woollen thermals. According to Andrew King, owner of One Planet, “You had to be a bit harder because the rain jackets leaked, the tents didn’t have floors in them and your boots were crap—an outdoor experience involved getting near hypothermic.”

As well as being less comfortable, gear was also much more expensive, comparatively at least. Just ask Steve Hamilton: In 1984, he was 16 years old when he saw *Wild* in a newsagent and became enamoured with the idea of bushwalking. That year, without ever having gone on an overnight walk, he quit school to work fulltime to buy the gear he needed. Four years later, he started working at *Wild*, remaining there for a total of fifteen years and eventually buying the magazine from Chris.

And for an illustration of how much cheaper gear has become, look at the back cover of this very issue of *Wild*, where there’s an ad for Lowe Alpine’s Cerro Torre Pack. In the pack survey in 1987’s Issue #25, the 68L version went for \$325 (approx. \$860 in today’s currency). That was 83% of the average weekly wage back then. It now sells for under \$500, just over 30% of 2020’s average weekly wage.

Cheaper, better gear has made walking both more comfortable and accessible: You no longer need to be a masochist

**“With there now being fewer wild places, but with more people in them, there is greater pressure than ever on the environment.”**

or to quit school to do it. Increased car ownership also means people can get to where they want when they want. Bob Brown identifies this as one of the big advances of the last four decades. “Everybody is super mobile, so access to wild and scenic country is much easier and much cheaper. Back then hitchhikers were everywhere; now they’re nowhere—everybody is self-sufficient.”

This tied into the movement away from clubs and into people doing it for themselves. *Wild* helped with this, providing not only the inspiration to get started, but the information needed to do so—where to go, and what gear to bring. Melissa Harper, author of *The Ways of the Bushwalker*, says “[*Wild*] has always looked great and had interesting stories, but it’s been

an educational tool for people. It’s been so important in giving people knowledge about places to go and equipment—how you can do it.” The thirst for this is shown in the magazine’s growth: After only a year and four issues, it had doubled its circulation and increased its printed pages by more than half.

As gear got better and access easier, more people began bushwalking. Bushwalking guidebook author John Chapman, a *Wild* contributor from the first issue, compares it to the changes in surfing culture from the 1960s to the 1990s. “Surfing in the ‘60s was just a hardcore group who really wanted to do it and went out there, and everybody knew everybody. Nowadays you don’t know everybody at all.”

But with this increase comes a change in the type of bushwalking, with day walks, shorter overnight walks, and guided, luxury walks taking over from the longer, self-sufficient exploratory forays of the 1980s. In the Eighties, the commercial walking industry was in its infancy; the Overland Track was likely the only guided, commercial multiday walk in Australia. Now one company alone, Great Walks of Australia, boasts twelve multiday guided walks, all with—and anyone who has read *Wild* recently knows this is contentious—a big dollop of ‘eco-luxury’ comfort.

According to Collie, this reflects a change in more than bushwalking trends. “My observation is that Australian culture and Australian values have changed quite dramatically over the last fifty years. We’ve become affluent and comfortable. In fact, personal comfort and pain avoidance—they’re our chief cultural values at the moment.” He points to a traverse he did of the Eastern and Western Arthurs in 2011: over fifteen days, they saw two other parties. “Where,” he says, “are the walkers?”

“In fairness, however,” says *Wild*’s editor James McCormack, “some studies actually point to there being more bushwalkers than ever; perhaps what’s changed is the types of trips they’re undertaking. And there are still a lot of hardcore people willing to suffer; many have just found other outlets. Back then, virtually no-one took on a 50k trail run. Now, you’ll get literally thousands turning up to single events of 100k (or more, often far more) or to 24hr MTB races, or to multiday races. And there are more backcountry skiers in Oz than ever.”

Nonetheless—and James readily admits this is the case—it’s hard not to come away with a sense that, broadly speaking, people have become a little softer, a little lazier, a little less daring. And there’s less adventure on offer, too, with more

# Wild Information

Tasmanian Dams Issue Hots Up



• **Franklin Blockade.** As the most prominent leading edge of the campaign to prevent the construction of a hydro-electric dam on the lower Gordon River and to save the South-west Tasmanian wilderness, the Tasmanian Wilderness Society blockade is proving itself to be one of the most extraordinary events ever to occur in Tasmania and a major milestone for the conservation movement.

Hydro-Electric Commission construction camp as they swarmed ashore carrying garbage bags to clean up rubbish left around the camp. The police have at times been flummoxed by blockaders sporadically appearing out of the HEC dam foundation investigation tunnels at the dam site itself, and materializing at the Sir John Falls, immediately behind the police camp.



One month after the start of the blockade, over 500 people had been arrested, most of them on charges of trespassing on HEC land. Notably, there has been no violence at all during arrests, although several conservationists, including TWS Director and Member of Parliament, Dr Bob Brown, have been bashed by pro-dam locals. All blockaders must undergo at least three days' training in non-violent action techniques and tactics before going into action.

People arrested in the first month of the blockade include Pierre Slocum, wilderness Hobart solicitor, Nick Gohle, endorsed Democrat candidate for Bass, Claudio Accorobio, millionaire businessman, Mrs Betty Downie, a seventy-year-old grandmother and archaeologist, Julie Davison, a pond victim who was arrested in his wheelchair on three separate occasions, Andrew Lohrey, a

land is the Yalmy River, bordered by the Snowy River National Park to the west and north and the Bonang Highway to the east. Yalmy's wilderness values and importance as a refuge for biodiversity have long been



Forest defenders up a eucalypt in the Yalmy River region, East Gippsland, Victoria. Eli Greig

recognised by conservationists. Its magnificent ridges rise to 940 metres from the Snowy River and the area gets an average of 1000 millimetres of rain a year; Yalmy is a major water catchment for the once mighty Snowy River.

The stands of old-growth eucalypts have been in the sights of the timber industry for

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A new logging road into the forests of the Upper Florentine Valley would open up hundreds of hectares for logging. While the mountains of the World Heritage Area, such as Mt Mueller in the background, are protected, the forests on the valley floor aren't. Vica Bayley. **Left**, the day after the Weld blockade was busted, 40 people protested a few hundred metres from where the Weld Ark was a day earlier. Three people were arrested for refusing to leave. Laura Minnebo

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ade that had halted the construction of a proposed logging road for more than 18 months succumbed to a massive, state-sponsored assault. In league with Forestry Tasmania, more than 50 police raided the camp at dawn on 15 November. By the end of the day the camp had been destroyed,

after the police and machines left, the community reclaimed the forest with two structures being established to block access. No further work had been undertaken by mid-January but logging of coupes adjacent to the new road was expected to start in late January or February. Numerous areas of



Fighting to save the Franklin (above) has been just one of *Wild's* campaigns over the decades. East Gippsland's forests (centre), the Daintree (lower right) and Tasmania's Weld Valley (upper right) are just three of the many other areas *Wild* has fought for

restrictions in place. Since the 1980s, wilderness areas have been destroyed, fragmented, and their remoteness has vanished, removed by access roads and development. Coupled with this are technological advances that mean you can conduct work chats on wilderness walks, blast hip hop from the hilltops, and blog from your campsite. It's hard to feel you're self-sufficient or have escaped from it all when you're still in touch with the world. Bob Brown bemoans this loss of remoteness and true wildness, saying, "The experience of being self-reliant and out of communications for days, if not weeks, at a time is almost impossible to recreate forty years on."

It's not just the wilderness we've lost, but also the freedom to explore it. The ability to go where you want—to walk, camp, climb, ski and paddle where you choose—has all but disappeared. There are many reasons for the increase in restrictions. Some involve ecological protection—prohibiting campfires in many national parks has allowed the surrounding bush to recover and likely prevented bushfires, and restricting numbers on popular walks has reduced crowding and prevented the degradation of sensitive areas. And our society has become more aware of cultural and environmental values and the importance of their protection. But some restrictions are the result of Australia having grown more litigious and risk-averse. And with there now being fewer wild places, but with more people in them, there is greater pressure than ever on the environment.

One thing, however, hasn't changed over these last four decades: *Wild* has, since the first issue, remained a staunch defender of Australia's natural environment. Looking back over the years, there have been so many campaigns of different size, duration, and outcome. But while it's depressing to note what has been destroyed, and the time taken to achieve protection while wilderness values have been slowly whittled

away, it's also humbling to see the hard work, passion and commitment of conservationists, with *Wild* consistently taking the side of nature. Brown, for one, is deeply grateful for the magazine's lasting contribution to the environmental

**“ In this world of everything being seen as exploitable, it's great there's an entity like *Wild* that's there to defend the very thing it's about.”**

movement. "In this world of everything being seen as exploitable, it's great that there's an entity like *Wild* that's there to defend the very thing it's about, not just to exploit it and sell it and wrap it up and make money out of it."

Recent issues of *Wild* display its values proudly, the cover emblazoned with three words: adventure, conservation, and wilderness. This ethos has remained the same for the last four decades, informing the direction, content, look, feel and readership of the magazine. Of course, some things have changed, but if you look at how the world has altered since 1981, that's to be expected.

But what Chris Baxter would love is—that at the heart of this magazine—there is the same celebration of wildness, of exploration, of people doing brave, adventurous, and courageous things, of getting out there and appreciating Australia's amazing natural beauty. And that is something of which we can all be very, very proud. **W**

**CONTRIBUTOR:** Megan Holbeck is a writer based in Sydney. She's convinced that an 'adventure-mindset' is a real thing, and cultivates it at every opportunity. Sometimes it even works.