

# With apologies to Wood, Wood Wood's a fine spot

By Steve Waldon  
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Bats-to-be at the Australian Cricket Bat Willow Project.

Photo: *Neil Newitt*

I remember having a mint julep with taciturn Australian opening batsman Graeme Wood in 1982 after his record-breaking 78th run-out, when talk turned to cricket bats and the preferred constituents thereof.

Foolishly, I ventured that it might be no bad thing for India's Kashmire willow to be accepted into the world market.

Wood was having none of it. He trained his angry gaze on me, extinguished his celebratory cigar in my drink, and said only this before leaving in disgust: "All cricketing apparatus assembled from Kashmire willow should be formed into a pyre and set ablaze, the ashes collected and forwarded to the Ganges. All Australian and English cricketers know that the resilient, pale, light *Salix alba var. caerulea* is the only willow acceptable in traditional bat-making."



Vintage Woody, of course, and funnily enough I'd overheard Rick Darling, who was involved in 42 of those run-outs, saying exactly the same thing to Richie Benaud over a few steady rum at stumps on day two, so obviously the whole Australian cricket team had a set against anything other than English willow.

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I was reminded of Wood twice when we followed the Murray River from Swan Hill and stopped at the Australian Cricket Bat Willow Project, just outside Wood Wood. If you are going to farm timber, you might as well do it at Wood Wood. Stands to reason.

Of all its sundry uses, the Murray here is harnessed to keep the willow plantation a few centimetres under water. Hundreds of saplings are trained to reach for the sky, their lower limbs lopped to stimulate girth. Each of these trees is expected to yield maybe 30 willow clefts for bats, and an export market for Australian willow is not unrealistic.

And no matter how penetrating the bowling, you could picture Adam Gilchrist ripping one of these trees from the ground and flaying a punishing century in no time.

We stop again just opposite Goodnight, a small town on the NSW side, and walk a few hundred metres in because the river is twisting and winding as though it might double back on itself. Between here and Kenley, trees are clinging precariously to the banks, root systems exposed. The leaves are being tickled by the merest suggestion of a breeze, and the river looks more like a fermenting home brew than a mighty current. It must be inspiring with another three metres of water in it.

The absolute stillness is broken by a crow doing a Graham Kennedy call, and a little way downstream, the Murray is fed by a minor intruder called Wee Wee Creek. Yes, I know. That's what I thought too.

The Murray has regained some majesty and momentum by the time it flows past Happy Valley Landing and Wemen, where it disappears into the Murray-Kulkyne Park.

As it does, some serious-looking irrigation pumps are slurping huge draughts of water and feeding the megalitres through pipes to mobile gantry-like sprinklers, whose arms span perhaps 100 metres. The otherwise barren paddocks receiving this aquatic largesse look grateful for the soaking.

Disdainful of our roads and obstinately resolved to make its own course, the Murray takes a short cut to form the eastern boundary of the Hattah-Kulkyne National Park, which means it beats us to Colignan and Nangiloc, home to some of the healthiest citrus crops you could expect to see.

Photographer Neil Newitt keeps pulling over to take pictures of signs featuring the names of both towns, and still I have not caught on, which means we have the following exchange:

Photographer: "Don't you notice anything strange about Colignan and Nangiloc?"

Reporter: "No."

Photographer: "Tried reading either of them backwards?"

Reporter: "No. Hang on. Oh."

Between Nangiloc and Mildura, the river's flow has diminished again. It is moving, but reluctantly. Did a river-whisperer make it aware that the more it heads west, the closer it gets to the Adelaide Crows and Port Power? That horrid thought might explain its sloth as it straightens itself out and makes for the Victorian border with South Australia.

It is dusk when we end the day at Mildura, fully intending to murder two more chicken parmigianas while we plot tomorrow's journey. There will be lots of dirt, and little bitumen. Do you think the Murray cares about our discomfort? No.