

In the Steps of the Black Cat, 2008

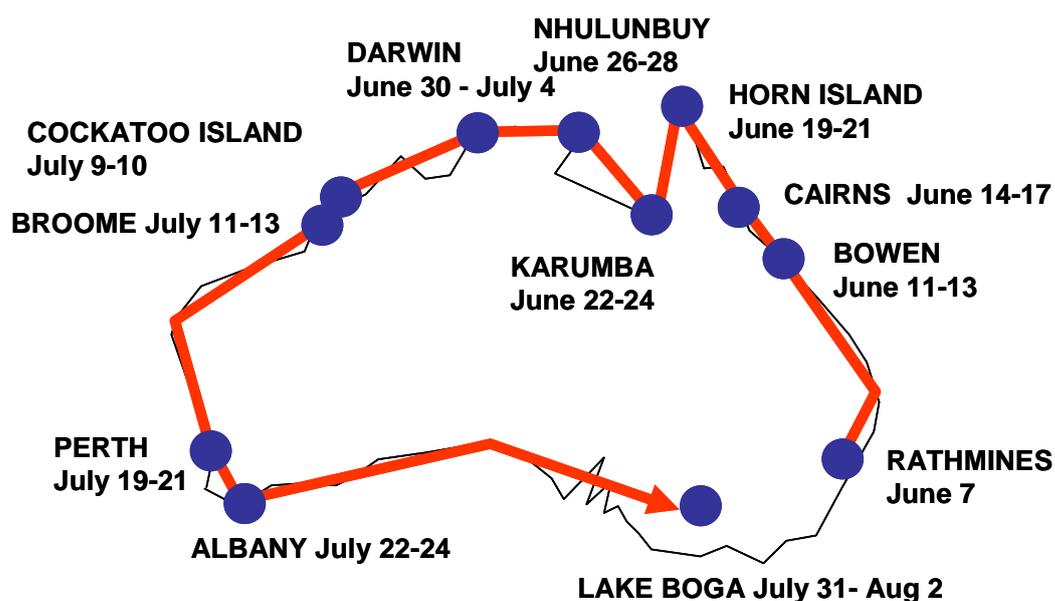
In June to August this year Pete Stuart-Smith, a geologist, and his wife, Trish, an Anglican priest, from Canberra, will be circumnavigating Australia in their homebuilt SeaRey amphibian aircraft VH-PAZ. The trip will retrace the final flight of Pete's father, a WWII Catalina captain, in a PBY-5 Catalina flying boat in 1945, and take in all of the Australian operational bases of the "Black Cats" as they are affectionately known.

The expedition, sponsored by the Australian Geographic Society, and supported by the Catalina Association (NSW), Lake Macquarie Historical Society and the Seaplane Pilots Association of Australia, will raise awareness and support for the "*Catalina Flying Memorial*" based in Rathmines, on Lake Macquarie, NSW.

Principal aims of the project are to:

- Take a flying adventure in their own homebuilt seaplane, following in the steps of the Catalinas, in particular, the final flight of Pete's father in A24-84 in September/October 1945
- See where Pete's father served on Australian bases during WWII and to honour him and all those who served in the RAAF Catalina squadrons during the war,
- Help some of the Catalina story be told and not forgotten,
- Raise money and foster awareness and support for the newly acquired Catalina aircraft (VH-CAT), that forms the heart of the Catalina Flying Memorial (www.catalinaflying.org.au), to be based at Rathmines. Rathmines was the principal RAAF Catalina and other seaplane crew training facility in WWII.

The Itinerary



Commencing at Rathmines on June 7 and terminating at Lake Boga on August 2, the eight week trip will take in all of the Australian WWII operational bases and Catalina sites of significance. Evidence for the bases still exists at many of the sites,

especially at Rathmines, Bowen, Nhulunbuy (Melville Bay), Perth and Lake Boga where substantial concrete ramps and aprons have been preserved to varying degrees, partly because of their solid structure, but mostly owing to their usefulness to boating. Like the 'Black Cats' before them, these too could disappear with time. Rathmines, on Lake Macquarie, arguably the biggest complex, also retains some of the original buildings including the officers' mess, now used by the local bowling club. Horn and Cockatoo Islands were refuelling stops, for the 'Cats' en route to operations in South East Asia. Getting to them will require traversing some of the wildest, and most scenic parts of the Australian coast - all at 500 ft.

As they reoccupy the old sites, the presence of the Consolidated PBY Catalina won't be just in Pete and Trish's attempts to picture the past. Remains of one aircraft, that didn't make it off the water, lie ingloriously on the mud flats of East Arm at Darwin and bits and pieces of Catalinas and other flying boats, destroyed in a Japanese bombing raid, are still scattered on the beaches of Broome. Better preserved will be the Museum treasures they will visit at Perth, Albany and Lake Boga.

The trip will be recorded by HD video with the aim of producing a documentary, and possibly a 'coffee table' book. Emphasis of the film will be on visiting the historic sites and interviewing local veterans wherever possible. Proceeds of the documentary and book will go to "*Catalina Flying Memorial*". The trip can be followed on the following websites: www.catalinaflying.org.au and www.australiangeographic.com.au



Pete and Trish Stuart-Smith with their homebuilt SeaRey flying boat.