

*R.M. Williams*

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**NEWCASTLE  
WATERS**  
a new era

**Murray-Darling: what now?  
Rodeo action in Merrijig  
Bull-catching pioneer**

STATIONS

*Weaner tailer Jock Mackay  
walks a mob down to the  
lake paddocks on Newcastle  
Waters, near Elliott, NT.*

# PRIDE OF THE BARKLY

*Newcastle Waters and adjoining Ucharonidge make up one  
of the largest pastoral properties in the country.*

STORY + PHOTOS KEN EASTWOOD





**A**s Cyclone Trevor battered the Gulf Country coastline in late March, the police contacted Newcastle Waters station, 250 kilometres north of Tennant Creek, warning workers the storm was on its way. New station

managers Marcus and Ally Doumany – just two months into the job – tied everything down, gave most of the 45 staff the day off, and waited for the much-needed rain the cyclone would bring. It had been one of the driest summers on record, with only a fifth of the long-term average of 790 millimetres received, and rain was desperately needed for the long dry season ahead.

But Trevor spent his fury elsewhere, petering out before reaching them on the western side of the Barkly. They received a paltry 2mm on parts of the 10,331-square-kilometre station, and two-fifths of buggie-all on the rest. “That’s when we really hit the go button,” Marcus says. The huge Consolidated

Pastoral Company (CPC) property and its adjoining 2455sq km station Ucharonidge can carry almost 80,000 head, but from their first week at the station – most of which Marcus spent in a chopper looking over the place – Marcus and Ally and their CPC superiors had decided they needed to wean and get off as many of the cattle as quickly as they could. Black-soil paddocks that should have been flush with Mitchell and Flinders grasses were bare. Lake Woods – a 1000sq km beauty that is one of the largest freshwater resources in the country – was completely dry for the first time in seven years.

By the beginning of May, the team at Newcastle Waters had taken off 40,000 head, with up to 10 road >



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The 100m long house, built by Kerry Packer, stands out on Newcastle Waters; weaners in the home yards as a dust storm approaches; Dylan Wall chats with station manager Marcus Doumany; CPC staff gather around the Newcastle Waters dining table: (l-r), CEO Troy Setter, Ally and Marcus Doumany, HR manager Tracy Chan, and Henry Burke, general manager of NT/WA; pilot Matthew Swain and stationhand Nikki Hammer about to start work at dawn.*



trains arriving every day to take more. “We will have trucked 7000 more in seven days this week,” Marcus says.

“We enjoy a challenge and that’s what we got,” Ally, 29, says. “For the first month we barely even made eye contact with each other.”

“The first couple of months were just madness,” Marcus, 35, says. “We saw each other for about five minutes a day – just enough to say, ‘You going alright?’ The style of management we like is to be really inclusive, and have a team part of building a plan, but we had to move faster than that. It’s been really tough. There are paddocks you think are right, and you’ve got feed, but then a hot wind goes through and kills it in a week.”

Some of the market-ready stock has gone to the live-export trade out of Darwin, or to meatworks at Rockhampton, but because the decision to destock was made so early CPC was able to secure a lot of agistment in wetter country further north, or move cattle to other CPC properties, such as Dungowan, which Marcus also oversees as part of his role as group manager of the Barkly. “We shifted 3–4000 heifers up there,” he says. “They’re only 200km north, but they’ve slipped into that wetter weather pattern.”

At a time when Newcastle Waters and CPC itself is up for sale, Marcus and Ally brought fresh eyes to a station that needed updating of major infrastructure, including staff facilities, and an evolution in culture. They also inherited a groundbreaking early weaner program that had started in 2018. Traditional weaning occurs when calves are 150–250 kilograms, but on Newcastle Waters calves are now taken off their mothers from 50kg, and the 50–150kg calves are put on feed. This gives the cows an earlier break from milking, to help them recover in dry conditions and get back in calf earlier. “I came in with a head start into the drought because there were 10,000 weaners here who weren’t on mum,” Marcus says. “That’s the very good dilemma of having our herd being so productive. Our cows are performing that well with the early weaning program, so every cow that was weaned last year is getting back in calf almost straight away.”

Newcastle Waters has a vast variety of terrain, offering different feeding country. As well as the black-soil downs, there are coolibah forests, bluebush, spinifex ridges, and red timbered country with tea-tree, wattles and eucalypts.

TOP: Managers Ally and Marcus Doumany with their daughter Primrose, 2.  
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: Contented cattle graze on the verbine monoculture on the lake paddocks; the exact amount fed to the weaners is computer controlled; drinks in the social club at the end of the day; head cook Penny Raleigh with Gregory, an orphaned nail-tail bridled wallaby who follows her everywhere; head stockman Dylan ‘DJ’ Wall.



*Feeding the paddies is the first and last job of the day for backpacker workers such as Alleshia Gaskell. OPPOSITE: Some of the 300sq km of green verbine feed on Lake Woods.*

“The variety of feed is quite incredible,” Marcus says. “That’s what the power of this place is. We’re fortunate to have such a blend of country – not only the lake, but good red timbered country. It’s not straight downs. These red ridges saved us initially – they responded well to the little bit of rain we had. Some sweet pick came through, and the cattle can browse pretty widely.”

The saving grace this year, however, is the lake. Although bone dry, it has produced 300sq km of protein-rich verbine (like a native lucerne) on which cattle are gaining an impressive 700–800 grams a day. From the air, the Brahman-cross cattle on the lake look like grains of rice scattered across a billiard table. On the ground, contented mobs move through the belly-high olive-coloured feed.

“It’s like a perfect monoculture. It’s incredible,” Marcus says. “No-one else has anything like this at the moment. No-one. It’s a pretty cruel paradox because it’s so dry. The cattle need this and they also need something else, but we don’t have a lot of anything else at the moment. They’re sort of eating straight ice-cream, but they need a bit of salad to go with it.”

Seizing on the feed bonanza while it lasts, Marcus put in extra fences and eight new watering points, and has teams moving all the remaining cattle onto the lake paddocks. “We also cut 4000 bales off it, and it’s come back greener,” he says.

Near the station homestead, Ceny Hussie is overseeing the early weaner program and a team from Ucharonidge, which is administering vaccines and weighing another 700 head. Members of the mostly young and green team – in good spirits and dancing to Savage’s ‘Let me



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STATIONS

see your hips swing' – keep moving to keep swarms of flies out of their eyes, splitting the weaners into different yards according to 20kg weight ranges. Over the music, the clash of the crush, the slam of steel gates and the lowing of cattle, you can hear the screeching of thousands of corellas covering the trees and ground nearby.

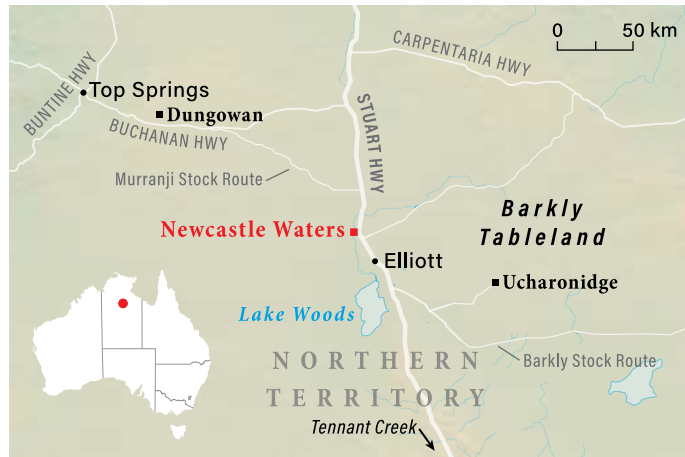
Ceny says CPC started the early weaning program on Newcastle Waters and Carlton Hill and Isis

Downs, so each CPC region can feed early weaned calves. "There's still some trial and error but it's getting pretty consistent now," she says. "The heavier weaners are looking good – fat and shiny and happy. You know when you put them out on the lake that they're going to do well."

The weaners are split into ten 1–2-hectare cells according to weight, where they're supplied over two daily feedings 20 tonnes of hay, water and a protein mix designed by CPC in Queensland. With the weight of every animal known, the exact feed required in each paddock is computer-controlled, and the weaners put on up to 1.2kg a day. "Because they're in with the same size, the little fellas are not getting bullied or pushed off the feed or out of the shade by bigger animals," Ceny says.

The mob is a mix of brindle, brown, black and beige as a result of Newcastle's recent efforts to bring in wagyu and Angus genetics to improve fertility and carcass quality, while still keeping 75% Brahman blood for resilience. "I was born in Darwin, so I'm used to Brahman, but I was petrified of black cattle when I came here," Ceny says. "There are lots of days almost 50 degrees Celsius and I thought they wouldn't handle the heat, but they're doing fine."

Towards the end of the day, Ceny and the team prepare to walk the drafted weaners to their paddocks. But the smallest >



Nat Bretherton (on bike) and Ceny Hussie walk a mob of young weaners at the end of the day.

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*The Newcastle Waters and Ucharonidge teams gather around the indoor pool with contractors and visiting head office staff.*

animals are skittish, running off in different directions. “They have no mob mentality,” Ceney says. Bikes are sent racing to retrieve them, and then they are brought back, in order to be led out again tomorrow. It’s an essential part of the education of the stock, Ceney says. “If the last thing they do with you is run away from you, then they’ll remember that and run away next time. And it’s just teaching them general respect, too, so when you go and muster them out of a paddock and you’ve got three bikes, you can get them to behave.”

Another mob of weaners is taken out, and as a result of the inexperienced crew not quite understanding instructions or doing things right, that mob also disperses. Ceney and the team work hard to block the cattle, then they walk them back to the yards as a mob and start again. “Once they’ve learnt that they can get it over us, they’ll keep doing it,” Ceney says, “so we have to do it again.”

It’s no real surprise that Newcastle Waters is part of this groundbreaking early weaning program. Positioned near the junction of the Barkly and Murrniji stock routes, it’s often been at the forefront of changes in the industry since it was first stocked in 1883. In the 1960s Ucharonidge became one of the first Barkly properties to introduce Brahman. In 1966, 80 workers on Newcastle Waters walked off in protest at the pay differentiation between Aboriginal and other stockmen, prompting the famous Wave Hill walk-off further south. In 1983, Kerry Packer bought the iconic property (and built the extraordinary 100-metre long big house, with

its indoor pool), starting CPC. In 2018 the company had assets worth \$1 billion.

The amiable CEO of CPC, Troy Setter, says the UK private equity firm Terra Firma bought CPC in 2009. All the worldwide businesses in the fund in which it sits are currently being sold. “So the CPC business is for sale, but also bidders have the opportunity to buy parts of it,” he says. “To take a piece out, we have to get an individual property sold for a premium – particularly Newcastle Waters, which is such a key piece in the jigsaw in sheer hectare size, value on the balance sheet, and it produces calves that go to other properties. The lake also helps with drought mitigation. But while we are in negotiation we are running the business and the stations like we’re not for sale – in terms of investing in infrastructure, people, genetics and the environment. Yes, there’s value to be created in doing that, but it’s also the right thing to do.”

Marcus says that from his perspective he doesn’t even think about the station being up for sale, as it still has to be managed and the progressive change program continues unabated. “It’s been an incredible move for us, having run and managed a smaller station and a successful feedlot, to running one of the biggest stations there is,” he says. “We’ve had wonderful support, and in spite of the terrible season the challenge is what makes it so worthwhile. It’s not only surviving through this season but it’s setting ourselves up for when the tap does get turned back on. When it does rain, we’re going to be bloody euphoric.”

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