

## **Yarra Ranges Donkey Festival - Show Article - Brayings by Linda Jay(organiser)**

It would seem that Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup> of January was the biggest day in Victorian Donkey history.

In the beginning it started as an idea. One of education and celebration. Through my earlier role on the Donkey Society committee, and then as the Yarra Ranges area representative, I found that numerous people had an interest in donkeys, but actually knew nothing about them. I have also seen repeatedly that donkey neglect and therefore rescues, were often the cause of a lack of education and understanding than conscious cruelty. Also, I regularly walk my donkeys through Warburton town and along the Warburton trail. Whenever I do this, I am mobbed by people who want to touch, feel, and experience donkeys and ask me numerous questions. At school and in the workplace I have been regularly ridiculed for choosing a donkey over a horse by people with no exposure, experience or knowledge of donkeys. I combined those thoughts with the observation of many donkeys in paddocks who are left standing idle with no purpose and little interaction. These were the things that I wanted to address through an event.

The idea was to make this event accessible to everyone, and therefore keep it affordable and open to all. I worked for 18 months to put this together, and along the way, it was easy to see that it was bringing massive interest. To highlight the festive celebration of the event and to entice the general public to learn more about donkeys, I invited stall holders, childrens amusements, live music and face painting. Everyone was quite excited to be a part of it. My phone rang hot and my inbox was full for months prior to the event taking place. Apologies to all those whose calls/emails I never got to answer!

I had brought my donkeys down the day before and slept overnight on site as did a number of other donkey people. On the 18<sup>th</sup> my day started at 5am. I thought I would put a bit more signage up before people came in, but then they came... Before I could say boo, in they came! Stall holders, sound guys, inflatable rides, carnival fun, and delicious, tasty, food vendors. From this point onwards I was running, as fast as my little red cowboy boots could carry me, from one end of the site to the other setting everything in place. Luckily then some helpers arrived. The SES came to sort out the gate and car parking logistics which was good as patrons were already arriving to see the donkeys. Then Michelle Gilmore arrived to help with setting the stall holders in place and then M.C.ing the event. Michelle did an amazing job of keeping the arena alive and informing listeners of what was going on throughout the day. It was a mammoth job, and she filled it brilliantly and with energy.

The DSV team arrived and looked after their shop, the raffle and registrations. They too were run off their feet, giving out information, signing up new members and selling out of all their goodies. Donkey breeders had set up their yards and had their donkeys on display. These yards were surrounded by arms reaching out to touch and connect with donkeys, accompanied by their tongues asking hundreds of questions about things they had always wondered about donkeys. Owners were locked to their donkeys by endless strings of enquiries.

Meanwhile, the talks commenced. Sue Martin spoke on Natural Equine Health and herbal remedies. James Harvey did a demonstration on Equine Dentistry. Kim Johnson from the Yarra Ranges Vet Clinic spoke about donkey health care followed by a valuable question time. Andrew Bowe, the Barefoot Blacksmith, used my Murphy for a demonstration on hoof care. Despite some wintery drizzle we were totally surrounded by interested faces. Happy to endure the wet to learn more about donkey hoof care. My Murphy was a little restless due to have been standing in his little holding yard for too long. In the middle of this, my phone rang for yet another live radio interview, this one with ABC 774. They enjoyed the back ground noise of voices and braying.

Kitty Byrnes was driving from Maldon and had some car trouble, but she was so determined to

do her talk that they went back and got it fixed, still arriving in time to enter some event classes and then give her interesting talk on donkey training. Many people had waited on, just to see her talk.

The show and event classes were fabulous. There were over 40 donkeys (3 lovely mules) at the event. Many of them had never been out of the paddock, let alone in the show ring. In the months leading up to the festival I had had several calls from people about training their donkey and getting it ready for the day, and teaching it how to get in the float. It warmed my heart to see many of these donkeys, not only arrive and take part in the event, but some of them won ribbons too. I love that!

When a few of us gathered on site the night before, we had some fun setting up the obstacle course. We enjoyed laying out a path which we thought may spook a few donkeys. This included some jumps and a tarp, a flapping flag course and a platform. One of the jumps was particularly high, and most donkeys balked at it, including my Murphy, who was happy to go over it as long as he knocked it down with his hoof first. (see donkeys aren't silly!) Quite surprisingly my little 5 month old part bred mini foal, Piccolo, flew over the high jump with room to spare. This caused the audience to roar with applause. It was really fabulous to see a mass of interested faces watching all of the events. Not just having a quick sticky beak, but actually sitting all around the arena and watching intensely as each donkey attempted the course, giving sighs, squeals, roars and laughter along the way. It was great to be a part of that, and it was great to see some of the donkeys we had never seen before do so well at all of the events. Kelly Gilmore brought her donkey, Winter, who did fabulously well. It is quite amazing to think that Winter was a rescued ex-desert donkey not so very long ago. An achievement which illustrates that Kelly is doing some wonderful work with her handling skills. The Farm Store gave out 5 x \$50 online store vouchers as encouragement awards. It was great to be able to give these out to people who showed particular progress or enthusiasm, or had overcome larger hurdles with their donkeys, now showing great potential.

Mackenzie and Annabel Harkin, from Whispering Hollow stud, also received a young handlers award for showing confidence, handling skills and potential in the arena. This was their first time in the arena and they did very well. They have won a Natural Horsemanship lesson from Wrangler Jayne, who also had a stall on the day. The Harkin family were also amazingly helpful in the lead up couple of days to the event where I really needed an extra hand or two. The whole family came and helped out. They also took some materials which I had purchased for the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and they made the donkey and all of its tails the night before the event. They did a terrific job of that, and this made a children's activity available which was free of charge and donkey related for the younger children to play with throughout the day. This game was manned by Alix who was dressed in a unicorn costume and remained vibrant and bubbly throughout the day. The face painter was in a fairy costume, and they were side by side down in the area filled with icecream, fairy floss and children's rides. Speaking of children's rides, back up the other end of the site, was Haydi Kubak and her team, who all day ran donkey rides around the site. There was no end to the queue of people who were lined up to have a go at riding a donkey. The donkeys and their handlers walked tirelessly all day to fulfil the waiting riders.

The last event was the fancy dress, and, as usual, competitors came up with imaginative and refreshing ideas that were humorous and fun. Kim Dalton won the prize with her effective disguise as a monk, complete with leather bound twigs on her donkey's pack. Hazel Knights donkeys were dressed as a bride and groom (the groom even wore pants!) Fiona and Ross Mottram made me laugh big belly ones with their bee keeping costume, which was not just a costume, but a performance.

The show and events were judged by Clare Davis, with Jo Bond as the steward, and various other hands were able to assist on the day which was terrific as it was a huge job over a very long day. Every entry was assessed with careful thought and consideration. It was wonderful

seeing the fun and laughter in some of the winners who had just received their first ribbon in whatever colour.

In between all of this was the live music. Andy Marshall and Danny Stain played some beautiful solo and duo music in between the talks and events. This filled the site with life and harmony. They also played while Fiona and Ross performed a driving demonstration in the arena. When the last donkey ribbon was judged and placed, then the 1950's style Rock and Roll band Play House kicked in with some grooving rythmns. At this time many stall holders were packing down their sites. Donkeys were being loaded into floats for the trip home, while others caught a breath and caught up with eachother about the day. All of this was happening with the tapping of boots and the movement of melody as everyone enjoyed the sounds as this massive day drew to a close.

At this time people were already coming up to me and saying "I would love to be a part of this again next year". The call for this has been overwhelming. My phone is continuing to ring from people who want to come along or be involved next year. I have even had a call from a bus tour company who wants to bring bus loads of people from interstate/overseas to come and experience the event next time it is on.

It was a fabulous event, and the benefits are far reaching, from the funds raised for the Donkey Society & SES to the education of the community. The donkey festival was even mentioned in Parliament during February. Well over 2000 people came to the event, and many more are still talking about it. During the course of the day there was a sea of voices saying "Gee, I didn't know that about donkeys!" and that is the greatest success, knowledge.

During the organisation process of an event like this, funds are required to bring it all together. This event would not have been the day it was without the support of The Yarra Junction and Warburton Branches of the Community Bank, Bendigo Bank who were very much saviours in putting this event together.

Unfortunately there will not be a Donkey Festival 2016 - I just don't have the energy, and I promised my family and my farm that I would not do that to them, and plus, by this time last year I was already 7 months into it, but thank you to everyone who came along and took part in the day, as you too made this day a success.