

Ben Warden (leader)	Honda CBR954	Mark Copeland	Kawasaki ZX10
Misho Zrasic/Pina Garasi	Honda CBR1000	Jason Wilson (rear)	Kawasaki ZX9
Steve Mudford/Cindy Lee	Suzuki GSXR750		<i>5 bikes, 7 people</i>

I was surprised to see even this many attendees at the ride start, Yarra Glen. The forecast was miserable – cold, wet, overcast, no chance of improvement, much like all the previous days of the week. People knew how bad the weather was going to be. I was very surprised to see Mark who had travelled all the way from Darley, a hike in itself just to get to the start point. I was curious that Marc Marais didn't show up as he is a hard core rider and has been on most rides through winter, though he had been suffering with the flu, he told us on last Sunday's ride. As it turns out via the Google group posting, he sorely missed the ride, missing his weekly fix.

Cindy was wearing warm riding clothes, but not waterproof, and sitting as pillion she was copping a dousing from the rear wheel spray, much like Pina does on the back with Misho. Cindy was already wet and cold.

The sky was overcast, the roads wet, and the sun nowhere to be seen. So it came as no surprise that it was a struggle to get everyone going and it wasn't till 25 past 10 that we finally made tracks, Jason taking up the rear riding position and Ben at the front. Ben was filling in for John Willis who was otherwise engaged for this Sunday, and probably recovering on the next.

Up Chum Creek Road to Toolangi saw us tangle with a couple of motoring enthusiasts in red sports cars: a Lotus and an MG. Neither had much grunt in the straights but the Lotus reeled me in hand over fist in the corners, so I couldn't get away. Conditions were difficult – very fine, misty rain – but the least of your problems when fighting for traction everywhere. On inspection, my front Pirelli Diablo was well past its best, the steering particularly heavy, resisting change of direction. Garage time at the end of the ride for sure.

We all jammed up behind a white ute on the last few corners before peeling right and down Chum Creek Road. This road is more open and flowing and speed is more related to fear rather grip. And the road looked particularly green in places as the lichen gets a foothold. In Healesville I turned right down a side street to avoid the diabolically long traffic lights which would have split the tight knit group. Over the potentially slippery wooden bridge and back on to the high street and through town to pick up the Pakenham Road.

On to Yarra Junction for a smidge of highway before ducking down side streets to reappear almost opposite the Old Warburton Road. Pina was all for avoiding challenging roads, which I pondered before choosing to go there anyway. After-all, Misho was riding, she was pillion, and as it turns out, nearly all the residual gravel had been washed away and the road was in very good condition, though wet of course.

On to Warburton and down to the lower café under the bakery to say hello to Kyle and his pretend 1920s replica which on closer inspection houses a Chinese 50cc two-stroke slotted into a steel pushbike frame with oversize wheels supporting "fat" pushbike tyres. Just a one-off bodgy backyard mock up that is a conversation starter with the mug punters whose opening line is "I used to have one of these!"

After a leisurely morning tea was consumed we headed off to Upper Yarra Reservoir and up to the lookout. Incredibly, not a black bike on the ride, so the obligatory group photos were more colourful than usual with a green, two yellow, an orange and a white bike.

Back to the bikes and on up the Reefton Spur. This is my preferred direction as it mainly uphill and you are going around the left side of the Spur providing better visibility through the corners. A few patches of white snow caught my eye in the lower reaches, possibly from cars returning from Lake Mountain, or genuine natural snow. But it did indicate how cold it was. There wasn't much between us when we reached Cumberland Junction so we continued on towards the Lake Mountain turnoff and Marysville. We encountered the heaviest rain along here, now soaking its way through to my toes and fingers, both becoming painful and then numb. Fingers still hurt three days later. Oh, the joy of riding in winter. But at least you appreciate a hot shower and dry clothes so much more.

Pina was her usual reptilian self, with absolutely freezing hands as the blood drained from them to central parts of her body. Being a pillion sucks as you don't do any exercise on the back, and hence don't produce any heat. And the wind chill is greater as the bike fairings on sports bike seemed designed to protect the rider, not the pillion. So by Marysville, Pina was very pleased to stop and thaw out.

We piled in to the bakery and then ate outside, exchanging various updates on our fallen friends. The King Parrots were eating from the bird feeders across the road providing a brilliant crimson contrast to the grey and brown denuded landscape.

The initial plan was to head down the Acheron way for 14 kilometres till the start of the dirt, but being cold and wet, direct to Healesville looked more appetising. So across the Black Spur we went. Amazingly, despite it being the last day of the School Holidays, traffic was very light and accommodating. Lots of cars moved over when they saw my bike looming up behind them. Having a white front fairing may have confused them with another well known white bike riding group – coppers. But I prefer to think the drivers were happy for us to slip past, only too pleased to make it as safe as possible.

Healesville servo and the ride is finished close to 3 pm. No need to fill up as we have only ridden 184 km since Yarra Glen, and having not troubled the tacho much throughout the day, our carbon expenditure was very low. Farewells were exchanged and homewards we went.

Back to Yarra Glen and through Christmas Hills, around the Ring Road to home and the painter finishing off another couple of rooms. I could be painting or I could be riding. Tough choice. Not!

Quality garage time began with the footy on the radio and the garage door closed keeping in the engine's radiant heat. Off with the Pirelli and on with a second hand Pilot Power. Hopefully this will lighten up the steering. Log book indicates 247,000 km on the chassis 75,000 on this motor. Almost checking the oil every other ride these days as this motor burns plenty of oil – probably valve guide seals dried out when the motor sat unused for 7 or 8 years. But what's a bit of oil among friends?

Don't forget to ring daughter Fiona who got her car licence on Friday, a few days after her 17th birthday, to see if (i) it has stopped raining in Sydney (15 inches in three days) and (ii) if she has gone "solo" yet. Then settle in for a mighty night of sport with Cadel Evans winning the Tour de France, Casey Stoner winning the MotoGP and Mark Webber coming third in the F1. Exhausting! Only six days before the next MSR ride.

Ben Warden