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Author(s)	Dennis Harvey
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ALONE ACROSS AUSTRALIA

(DOCU — AUSTRALIA)

Produced by Ian Darling, Jon Muir. Executive producers, Phillippa Bateman, Mitchell Block, James Hersov.

Directed by Ian Darling, Jon Muir. Camera (color, DV), Muir; editor, Sally Fryer; music supervisor, Kim Green; sound, Muir. Reviewed at San Francisco Doc Festival, May 16, 2004. Running time: 52 MIN.

With: Jon Muir.

By DENNIS HARVEY

Veteran Aussie adventurer Jon Muir goes "Alone Across Australia" in this self-explanatory, diaristic docu that's stirring enough to make viewers wish he'd extended it to feature length. Already the recipient of several fest awards (it won aud nod for feature at S.F. Doc Fest), pic should overcome that handicap to easily score more fest dates as well as broadcast and specialty home-format sales.

Called a figure of remarkable endurance and survival skills by some similarly inclined types — though one also semi-jokes "It's tempting to call him a raving nutter" — Muir's past conquests include Mt. Everest, the North and South Poles, remote sea kayaking, et al.

He's determined to complete the "first unsupported traverse" of his native land, sans communication or navigational technology; no resupply stops, just hunting, gathering and otherwise living off the land. (This is just his latest attempt — prior ones were ended by injury or disastrous weather.) Keep in mind that the 1,600-mile, 128-day south-to-north trek includes passage through the continent's three driest deserts, and the entire human population en route is under 100.

Accompanied by his ever-game Jack Russell terrier Seraphim, Muir endures water both in short supply and in rainstorm-produced excess; mini-health crises; bouts of depression; an attacking dingo pack; some menu items many viewers probably didn't know were edible and probably didn't want to know. Throughout, he shares his thoughts with the camera, as well as an endless appreciation of nature. Much of pic's appeal is due to his eccentric, unguarded personality — he makes for delightful company. When Seraphim suddenly dies (having consumed poisoned meat left for dingos at a frontier station), his raw grief is very moving.

Apart from some interviews and long-distance zoom shots taken after the actual trek, entire pic was photographed en route by Muir, quite handsomely, too.

Final package is sparingly scored and briskly edited.

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