

Ikara Ridge off Victoria Falls Road at Mt Victoria

Friday 18th November 2005

We drove across the Causeway under a cloudless blue sky on the way to the starting point for this walk. The ridge line along which we would be walking could be seen running parallel to this road back toward the Upper Grose Valley. From this distant view of the venue the predominating olive green/grey of the vegetation belied the explosion of colour we were to encounter at closer quarters. Those who assert the Australian bush is dull and colourless have obviously never walked along Ikara Ridge in late spring.

At Victoria Falls Road we met other members of the group and we also welcomed Robyn, Shannon, Ros and Barry of the "Bilpin Coffee Walkers" who were joining us today. Following a car consolidation to accommodate the sixteen attendees we travelled a few kilometres toward Victoria Falls and arrived at the start of our walk. (Having fourteen other companions should make my dear beloved happy as she bemoaned having only yours truly to talk to on the many walks we did in NZ).

Initially the track meanders through open woodland consisting mainly of Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*) with an understorey of Tea-tree (*Leptospermum* sp) and the occasional Broadleaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*). The morning sun filtering through the sparse canopy glinted off the fine convoluted stems of the glossy green Curly Sedge or Old Mans Whiskers (*Caustis flexuosa*), the main ground cover in this area. Within a few metres of the start of this track we were greeted by that tiny gem of the bush the Slender Violet (*Hybanthus monopetalus*), its dominant mauve/blue lower petal peeking out from beneath the thin undergrowth. Also present on the early stages of this track were several examples of Black-eyed Susan, its compact habit and drooping flowers with "floppy" petals suggested it was perhaps the Blue Mountains species (*Tetradlea rupicola*).

The narrow and in places indistinct track we follow on this walk has that lovely enclosed feel about it with the vegetation pressing in on both sides. A feeling of being in touch with nature is quickly achieved. We were blessed with a perfectly still day, bright sunshine, fresh mountain air, the glorious aromas of the Australian bush and the only sound to be heard in this tranquil setting was the lilting, melodious tone of my better half's voice letting all and sundry know that she's back!

Those near the front of the group were treated to the sight of a pair of Spotted Quail-thrush scampering across the track then lingering in the nearby undergrowth apparently unperturbed by our presence. Soon we diverted to a rock outcrop where we stopped for an early morning tea. The section of valley we were looking into from this vantage point is very close to the source of the mighty Grose River. At this spot were examples of the *Leptospermum macrocarpum* a tea-tree whose flowers are up to 30 millimetres across. These however had finished their flowering and the fresh large seed capsules of this season decorated the shrubs. Their shiny deep green skin was tinged with red flashes contrasting markedly with the silver grey almost metallic appearance of the more mature

capsules still persisting from past seasons. Also in this area were a couple of sparsely blossomed Flannel Flowers (*Actinotus helianthi*) the soft velvety white bracts of their few blooms a complete antithesis of the surrounding coarse sandstone and dark ironstone outcrops.

Continuing along the ridge we approach the first of several sandstone hummocks scattered along this track. Beside this embankment we spot our first group of Pale-pink Boronia (*Boronia floribunda*) and as pretty a picture as this presented it wasn't a patch on what was to come. Skirting around this outcrop we emerge onto a rock platform on which there are several tiny tufts of the Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*). Even when devoid of flowers these plants present an attractive sight, small spiky looking green/grey balls clustered together in the scant pockets of soil. As the group traversed this platform there was a metallic clink as they walked on the ironstone shingles strewn across the sandstone surface.

It is a very pleasurable experience when bushwalking to encounter a landscape scattered with boronia in bloom. To be literally wading through a sea of pink is something else again. This writer has never experienced such an extensive swath of these delicate flowers and to see them on a day such as this against an azure sky was simply magical. As a background to this spectacle were the ubiquitous tea-trees brightening the scene with their profusion of white blossom.

To gain a view into the valley and back toward Mt Victoria we climbed onto one of the higher wind eroded sandstone outcrops which contained tortuous veins of ironstone extrusions and had an aperture worn through its higher section. From this eyrie we could see some of the buildings of Mount Vic and also observe traffic moving along the Causeway. How fortunate and privileged we are to have areas as easily accessible as this where, if you divert your gaze from those objects of urbanisation, you can imagine you are in an untouched landscape far away from civilisation.

Now we moved into an area where Pink Kunzea (*Kunzea capitata*) was blooming in abundance. Scattered among this field of fluffy pink blossoms were the brilliant golden flowers of the Narrow-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anethifolius*), the white densely clustered flower heads of the Long-leaf Coneseeds (*Conospermum longifolium*) and the brilliant white of the Coral Heath (*Epacris microphylla*). Dotted among these plants and standing out like beacons were occasional examples of the Tufted Blue Lily (*Thelionema caespitosum*) their electric blue flowers with yellow woolly filaments compensating by their sheer brilliance for the small stature and low number of these plants. Another gold centred blue flower present here, indeed it was scattered right along this walk, was the Blue Damperia (*Damperia stricta*) its small, crinkle petalled, yellow throated flowers peering out from beneath the low vegetation.

Skirting yet another rocky outcrop we passed a gnarled Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) and on the rock face nearby was a *Dracophyllum secundum* its tubular flowers, which emerge only from one side of its stem, just beginning to open. Back on the ridge top a few Grass-leaf Trigger Plants (*Stylidium graminifolium*) were sighted. The flower

stalks were just beginning to extend and with their tightly bunched buds atop gently curving slender stems they gave the impression of serpents rising from spiky baskets.

The ridge was more open now as we approached the headland. Both the Heath Banksia and Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia* and *spinulosa*) were displaying lush new growth and the Dwarf She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) were conspicuous with their honey coloured male spikes atop green needles. We passed through a line of Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) and were now at Ikara Head. The name Ikara is an Aboriginal word meaning “throwing stick” and was selected for this area by Myles Dunphy when he was a member of the Place Names Committee of the Blue Mountains National Park during the 1960’s. (This information was gleaned from the book “Back from the Brink – Blue Gum Forest and the Grose Wilderness” by Andy Macqueen).

We stood at the edge of the escarpment taking in the majestic views down the Grose Valley. The grandeur of the golden sandstone walls, glimpses through the tree cover of the waters of the Grose River far below and the profile of Mount Banks in the distance. The spectacle was completed by the appearance of a Sparrowhawk darting across the sky while two Wedge-tailed Eagles effortlessly rode the thermals above the valley.

A flippant remark regarding train spotting was made in the newsletter following the Yarramundi walk, today we did indeed spot a train, a long coal train trundling along the main western line toward Bell.

The Bilpin Coffee Walkers must have been in need of a caffeine fix for they bid us farewell and headed back to the cars as we settled down for lunch. “Settled down” is probably an overly optimistic expression as the imminent arrival of summer was signalled by the several thousand flies which also turned up for lunch. However we bushwalkers are a resourceful lot and it was a revelation to watch the various techniques employed to avoid ingesting some additional fresh airborne protein.

The return journey was a retrace of our morning trek with a short diversion to look down onto Girraween Cave in the valley on the eastern side of the ridge, a walk across a rock platform which we had skirted around on our outward journey and a brief stop at a rock outcrop to take advantage of the cooling breeze rising from the valley.

Back at the cars there was a thank you note left by the Bilpin group, beautifully inscribed on a paper tissue, at least it looked like a paper tissue – I did say bushwalkers were a resourceful lot!

We then drove back to the cars which had been left closer to the highway and carried on to the historic little cemetery nearby where we finished off the day with the traditional cuppa under a shady tree. Another wonderful walk in a picture perfect landscape, how fortunate we are!

Oops Department: Near the final approach to Ikara Head, Ray Harrington pointed out a shrub that he felt was the rather uncommon *Atkinsonia ligustrina*. My initial response

was that the leaf form and growth habit certainly indicated it was an *Atkinsonia* but some doubt crept into my mind when I noticed the quite small star-like flowers. My memory of the flowers on *Atkinsonias* we had seen on other walks was that they were larger than these and a little more showy. I was not really comfortable about this so I paid a visit to the *Atkinsonia* which grows in Du Fours Rocks Road at Mt Wilson and discovered that I must have been having a senior's moment on Ikara Ridge! So, well spotted Ray, that is another location we can add to our knowledge of where this unusual root parasitic plant grows.