

The Overcliff and Undercliff Tracks, The National Pass and Valley of the Waters At Wentworth Falls

Friday 19th August 2005

The early settlers in this area were a romantic and imaginative lot. Here was a landscape of such grandeur that Charles Darwin, who visited this site in 1836 during his voyage on HMS Beagle, was lost for words to adequately describe the scene. This area, abounding in precipitous cliffs, plunging waterfalls and majestic distant vistas they named Weatherboard! All the natural beauty was ignored in favour of a small weatherboard storage shed built beside Jamison Creek by William Cox the road builder! Perhaps this was the genesis of that Aussie adage “ a bloke and his shed”.

With the foregoing in mind one may well have some qualms that the meeting place for this walk is the Conservation Hut. However this name derives from the original hut built here in 1930 as a tea-room, rebuilt in 1960 by the Katoomba and District Wildlife Conservation Society, then in 1991 the present more substantial mud brick building was constructed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. So dear readers join the eleven walkers who gathered on this glorious morning to explore what lies beyond the walls of the weatherboard shed.

The itinerary today had to remain flexible due to major maintenance work being carried out on the National Pass track. This resulted in the possibility that sections of the track would only be open for very limited periods. Undaunted by these potential hassles we headed down the slope through the rather sparse cover of Sydney Peppermint (*Eucalyptus piperata*) and Silvertop or Black Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*).

Soon we turned left onto the Overcliff Track and here, as was to be the case for most of the drier parts of this walk, the scene is decorated by the profusely flowering *Leucopogon setiger*. This small rather rigid shrub with linear sharp pointed leaves would not warrant a second glance when not in flower. At this time however they are adorned with masses of delicate pure white almost translucent bell-shaped flowers hanging below the stems, shimmering in the morning sun as movement is induced by the gentle breeze.

As we descend toward the cliff line the white starburst blooms of the Slender Rice-flower (*Pimelea linifolia*) are quite conspicuous as are the pink wing-like flowers of a Matchhead (*Comesperma ericinum*) triggered into early bloom by the mild weather. The ground beside the track here is adorned with the delicate fronds of the Lacy Wedge-fern (*Lindsaea microphylla*). Nearby a young Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) has shed its bark to expose a soft pink trunk. At the base a narrow fringe of peeling bark remains curled back forming a patterned ring encircling the trunk and sitting above a bed of vivid green moss. Jan Northam quipped that the Park Rangers were very artistic being able to assemble an arrangement as exquisite as this.

Soon we were at the Lyrebird Lookout where we could look down onto the National Pass where it meets the Valley of the Waters, a section of track we would be walking later in

the day. Workers could be seen going about their maintenance tasks there. It is fascinating to look down on the canopy of the forest. The creek lines snake their way through the valley and a distinct pattern is formed by the different growing environments. Dark green areas designate the sheltered rainforest and the more open forest in the exposed areas presents a grey/green hue.

On leaving this area the track skirts along the edge of a hanging swamp. Here there are clumps of Button Grass or Button Bog-rush (*Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus*) and various sedges thriving in the moist peat-like soil. These hanging swamps are very important for the health of the valley environment. In times of high rainfall they suck up water like giant sponges and slowly release it during drier times. On the margins of this swampy area there are examples of the Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*), their candles providing a touch of gold while the ever reliable Tea Trees (*Leptospermum* sp) brighten the scene with their clean white blossom.

The track continues along the cliff top affording tantalizing glimpses through the slender trunks of the Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) of the distant views into and across the vast chasm that is the Jamison Valley. Today the blue haze that gave these mountains their name is very much in evidence. The cliffs beside the track here support many plant forms, among them the Alania (*Alania endlicheri*) which at this time appears as tufts of grass clasping the moist rock face. This plant bears clusters of white flowers in summer and is restricted to the Blue Mountains. Also trailing over the rock ledges in this area are examples of the *Epacris reclinata*, some displaying bright red tubular flowers while others carry soft pink blooms. A number of Dog Roses (*Bauera rubioides*) were present here displaying not only their usual pink blossoms but also the occasional white flower.

Presently we move out of the open landscape and descend slightly to the more enclosed environ of Den Fenella Creek. Soon after this creek crossing we are on the Undercliff Track which provides an ever-changing environment as it twists and turns, rises and falls, sometimes proceeding beneath rock overhangs then out to dry exposed points on the cliff line before swinging back into moist gullies. We pass large banks of tangled Pouched Coral Fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*) and small stands of *Dracophyllum secundum* which are carrying stems of white and pink tubular flowers. At a particularly wet spot on the track there was a slab of smoothly worn yellow sandstone coated with water onto which had fallen some bright red ochre. The movement of the water across the stone formed gently swirling red linear patterns on the golden background, another of nature's little cameos.

The morning tea agitators had been surprisingly subdued up to this time however the sight of an inviting rock ledge under a huge overhang prompted the declaration that it was time for some sustenance. What a spectacular spot to rest awhile. In the near outlook was the grandeur of the cliffs below Kings Tableland and a view of the stairway which we would soon descend cut into the cliff beside Wentworth Falls. Further afield the vista included Sublime Point, Narrowneck Peninsula, Mount Solitary and the distant Blue Breaks. Weatherboard indeed!

Shortly we were treading the stepping stones which cross Jamison Creek above Wentworth Falls. The amount of water flowing at this point does not appear to be sufficient for the spectacle it provides as it leaps over the edge. This is the start of the National Pass Track, possibly the most dramatic track in the Blue Mountains. As we descend the stairs carved into the sandstone cliff face one cannot help feeling a huge sense of admiration toward those responsible for their construction. There is a sudden change at the base of the stairway from the exposed environ of the cliff face to the enclosed atmosphere of a small pocket of rainforest which leads to the base of the first drop of the falls. The rock ledges in this area are home to a rather rare conifer, the *Microstrobos fitzgeraldii*. This dwarf plant of which less than three hundred are known to exist in nature grows only in the sheltered mist sprayed environs close to waterfalls in the Wentworth Falls/Katoomba area.

While we paused at the creek crossing at this point we met Vu and Trin, a Vietnamese couple visiting from Melbourne. They sought some information about the track from Libby and she invited them to join us for the walk to the Valley of the Waters.

Spectacular is a gross understatement for describing this track. After crossing the creek a short climb through a steep rainforest clad slope brings us to the level ledge half way up the cliff along which this track runs. This two kilometre long balcony provides uninterrupted views into the Jamison Valley and far beyond while weaving its way along the cliff face to the Valley of the Waters. As the track rounds a point which juts out into the valley a fine view is obtained of both the upper and lower sections of Wentworth Falls. Just past the Slacks Stairs junction we enter an area which is kept constantly moist by water dripping from hanging swamps above. Here there are expansive moss beds undulating from the track back to the cliffs.

As we progress along the track we weave in and out of huge semi-circular amphitheatres which give the impression they were formed by some colossus having taken bites out of the cliffs. Some of these are quite dry and the rock faces above glow in various shades of yellow, orange and gold. Others are very moist and the horizontal bands in the cliffs carry masses of ferns and a diverse collection of lush vegetation that cascades over the rock face bringing to mind the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Just at this time I could hear my beloved better half Helen bending someone's ear about some of the world's problems and thought perhaps we could name these the Hanging Gardens of Babble On.

In the interests of self-preservation I kept these thoughts to myself as we proceeded toward the Valley of the Waters. Soon the track enters an enclosed forest and the song of the wind that has just sprung up is accompanied by the water music rising from the valley. Moving further into the head of the gully we note the forest becomes more dense with the appearance of Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) and Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*). The sound of rushing water increases and suddenly we are at the creek crossing near Sylvia and Lodore Falls. Here we bid farewell to Vu and Trin who continue on while we settle down for lunch in this delightful spot.

Suitably refreshed and nourished we set off on the rather steep climb back to the cliff top. One cannot help but feel the Valley of the Waters is a most appropriate name for this area as we begin the climb past Sylvia Falls, streamers of white water plummeting over the glossy black rock face. All around us there are little mossy alcoves and fern filled grottoes. Then there is the spectacle of Empress Falls. High above us the falls begin as water emerges from a slot canyon as a narrow band that immediately widens to a diaphanous flared skirt before hitting the first rock platform. It then plunges via a series of terraces and rock pools and spreads into a wide cascade before dropping into the pool adjacent to the track crossing. After climbing a set of stairs above these falls we are presented with another of Mother Nature's gems. Beside the track is an exquisite garden of mosses and ferns literally dripping with moisture and decorated with the brilliant white five pointed star-like flowers of the Rock Sprengelia (*Sprengelia monticola*). The gentle tinkle of a tiny rill running through this cameo scene completes the picture perfectly.

Suddenly we are back in the drier environment of the upper cliff area. We make the short diversion to Queen Victoria Lookout which gives us the opportunity to view some of the path we took today and to once more take in the distant views. Just visible in the haze is the distinctive outline of "The Gib" – Mount Gibraltar at Mittagong almost 80 kilometres away. Closer at hand we are treated to the beauty of the *Boronia thujona* just coming into bloom.

Back at the Conservation Hut, as seems to happen on these occasions, a cake miraculously appeared to celebrate Rosemary Knott's imminent birthday. So ended another wonderful walk, in this case a very special experience.

PS: It was mentioned, to the disbelief of some participants, that the circuit we had just walked was about 4 kilometres - (Only 4 kilometers?!). It may be some comfort to those who insisted it was more likely 14 kilometres that I have been able to track down a document which states this circular walk is 6 kilometres.