

The Engineers Track along the Grose River at Yarramundi

Friday 16th September 2005

This walk took us into the steep sided valley cut by the Grose River as it makes its tumultuous journey through the Grose Gorge and the Devils Wilderness, dropping almost one thousand metres from its source near the Darling Causeway, to meet the Nepean/Hawkesbury system just north of the Yarramundi Bridge. It was at this bridge that nine walkers met before making the short drive to the end of Mountain Avenue where the walk began.

Initially we follow a gravel access road up the ridgeline past a YMCA facility and the road then dips slightly before we arrive at a rock outcrop overlooking the river. What better place to have morning tea with views of the Grose far below framed by the tree clad slopes.

As we sit taking in the beauty of the scene before us it is worth contemplating what may have happened to this valley if various vested interests had prevailed in bygone years. We could be sitting here doing a spot of train spotting for one scheme was to run a railway along the course of the Grose. The Engineers Track on which we were to walk today was in fact built to provide access for those surveying the railway route. There were also many proposals for dams on the Grose and its tributaries. Various mining, timber getting and grazing schemes also progressed to various degrees along the river. Happily however the Grose survived all of these assaults and the wild river still flows free through this rugged terrain.

We then follow the Engineers Track as it zigzags down toward the river. In this rather exposed dry environment there were examples of the Grey Gum (*Eucalyptus punctata*) with its hard grey bark and of the Yellow Bloodwood (*Corymbia eximia*) with its unusual soft, flaky, cream/brown bark and contorted branching. At ground level the Grey Spider-flower (*Grevillea buxifolia*) was displaying a few of its grey spidery flowers, no more appropriate way to describe them really. Also here were some Native Holly or Prickly Shaggy-pea (*Podolobium ilicifolium*, formerly *Oxyloioium ilicifolium*) its soft yellow flowers with their red keels blunting the spiky appearance of this small shrub. As we move further down the slope Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) and Forest Oaks (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) provide a stark contrast in their barks. The oaks having deeply furrowed corky bark compared with the silky smooth trunks of the apples.

Soon we were at the riverside. Here, most of the pent up energy of the river having been dissipated as it flowed through the wilder sections of the gorge, the stream formed a wide glassy pool. The clear water lapped gently onto the smooth sandy beach which extended back to the grass covered banks, spongy underfoot as they were made up of silt and debris deposited in times of flood. The beach was strewn with flat polished river pebbles and of course a stone-skipping contest was inevitable. It was fascinating to observe the various throwing “styles” and techniques with Libby emerging as champion skipper when she bounced a stone the full width of the pool.

We spent some time taking in the beauty of this spot. The towering hillsides perfectly reflected in the mirror like surface of the river in the upstream direction while only a short distance downstream the images were distorted as the smooth surface of the water was disturbed by a gentle sprinkle of rain. It was decided we would make our way along the riverbank rather than return uphill to the Engineers Track.

The area beside the river here was aglow with the golden blossom of a mini-forest of wattle that was flowering in profusion, possibly the Sally Wattle (*Acacia floribunda*). The ground below these wattles was coated in a brilliant yellow swath of fallen blossom. We picked our way along the bank past huge sandstone boulders and rock overhangs. There were many wildflowers out at this time including the red centred yellow blossoms of the *Bossiaea rhombifolia* and the showy clear yellow flowers of the Golden Glory Pea or Broad-leaf Wedge-pea (*Gompholobium latifolium*). This gilded landscape was contrasted by the clean white blossom of one of the Wax Flowers possibly *Philotheca myoporoides* (formerly *Eriostemon*, reclassified in 1998) large drifts of which grew below the taller trees.

An Azure Kingfisher was sighted darting low over the water in search of sustenance, this prompted some of us to lament the fact that these now rather rare sightings were fairly commonplace in our youth, just a few short years ago. Soon we were scrambling over a huge boulder which necessitated a jump to the ground on the other side, then a walk across a fallen log to negotiate a gap in the rock platform, real adventure stuff this! In this area there were some magnificent examples of Water Gums (*Tristania neriifolia*). They had been bent and battered by floods over many years and the resulting rugged appearance of gnarled trunks and twisted branches clad with glossy smooth bark was not unlike the Snow Gums of alpine areas.

Three Lyrebirds were sighted near this point and Libby found many birds nests along the way, some still in situ while others had been dislodged from their original positions. It is fascinating to study the intricacy of these structures and wonder at the ability of the birds in weaving them. One find was particularly interesting in that the base of the nest was formed from paper bark and was lined in a fibrous wool-like material. The answer to the source of this material lay just ahead where a long discarded and torn sleeping bag half buried in the sand was sighted, an ideal supply for the nesting season. A particularly striking little shrub in this area was the *Daviesia corymbosa* with its dense clusters of tiny yellow and red pea like flowers which emanate on short stalks from the leaf axils.

Presently we return to the Engineers Track and stop in a little gully to settle down for lunch. The view from this spot was impressive. In the foreground was a mixture of the stiff upright growth of the Burrawangs (*Macrozamia communis*) and the softer weeping foliage of Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea* sp). The vista further down the gully was dotted with Angophora, She-oaks and Yellow Bloodwoods through which glimpses of a deep pool in the river could be seen. The background to all this was the steep cliff on the other side of the river, pock marked with many caves.

After lunch we proceeded further upstream until we reached the gauging station which provides water flow information to help with downstream flood management. This point is just downstream from the junction of Burralow Creek. Here we watched a Lyrebird on a rock shelf across the river scratching through the leaf litter, occasionally stopping to strike a rather regal pose before continuing with its search for food. Several Cedar Wattles (*Acacia elata*) in this area were displaying their distinctive new growth, a striking pale yellow which stands out dramatically against the dark green mature foliage.

We then began our return journey, this time sticking to the Engineers Track, which winds along the hillside some distance above the river. In this relatively dry environment plants displaying blossom at this time included the Native Indigo (*Indigofera australis*), the Pink Spider-flower (*Grevillea serica*) and the Broad-leaved Hakea (*Hakea dactyloides*) with its white tufts of bloom sprouting from its leaf axils. There were occasional examples of the Pine-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia pinifolia*) carrying bunches of pale green grape like fruit.

As the track dropped down into a sheltered gully there were several majestic Port Jackson Figs (*Ficus rubiginosa*) growing atop huge boulders, their roots flowing across the rock faces and down to the soil below. The combination of these sinuous roots below lush canopies and the smattering of Cycads on the slopes of the gully presented a Jurassic atmosphere. No dinosaurs were sighted and I will refrain from making any comment regarding fossils.

Before long we were on the zigzag section of track leading back to the fire trail on the ridge. During the ascent of this section Fred Roberts noticed some chain and an anchor point containing part of a turnbuckle on a rock ledge. There was some conjecture regarding its purpose and I noticed while checking information for this newsletter that on a Kurrajong Topographic Map printed in 1982 a suspended cable crossing the river is shown at this point. Unfortunately no reason is given for its existence.

Once back on the fire trail we made our way through very light rain back to the cars, passing on the way a couple of grey kangaroos, one adult and one youngster, who observed our progress from a safe distance but appeared unperturbed by our presence. A nice touch on which to end yet another very enjoyable day in the Australian Bush.