

## The Wollangambe River and Joe's Canyon at Mt Wilson

Friday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2006

The sound of an unseen waterfall permeates the vastness of this cavernous cathedral-like space. The gentle curves in the sandstone walls, sculpted by swirling waters over millennia, are mirrored in the shallow pool. Tree ferns line the base of the scarp while towering coachwoods grow straight and true, seeking sunlight above the cliff line. This tranquil awe-inspiring reach of the Wollangambe, upstream from The Beach, was just one of the magical areas we would visit today.

Fifteen gathered at the Walkers Car Park in Mt Wilson on this sunny but windy morning. We welcomed Alison and Alex Halliday who were joining us for the first time today and welcomed Barbara Harry back to the fold. Diana and Joe Landsberg also made a welcome return after not being able to attend the last few walks. Helen Robbins also joined us today providing a 'blast from the past'. Helen was a regular walker with the group before moving to the north coast in 1999. It was a great pleasure to have her join us once again. She (along with my better half) was one of the notorious 'Three Helens' in the group. Helen Freeman, fully occupied with preparations for her daughter's wedding, was unable to attend today thus preventing a full reunion of this 'Terrib -- er -- Terrific Trio'.

At the start of the Wollangambe Track occasional creaks and groans were heard as the trees moved to and fro in response to the wind. (The creaks and groans emanated from the trees, not members of the group.) We descended the hill comfortable in the knowledge we would be protected from that wind once ensconced in the depths of the valley.

Initially the track passes through an open understorey containing Prickly Current Bush (*Coprosma quadrifida*) while Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) and Blaxlands Stringybark (*Eucalyptus blaxlandii*) provide a thin canopy. Soon we are walking in a more enclosed environment where the Bush Pea (*Pultenaea* sp) and young regrowth of a broad leafed Wattle (*Acacia* sp) press in on the track. On the northern side of the Wollangambe, highlighted by the morning sun, several cliff faces can be seen protruding between the ridgelines which extend into the distance.

As we begin to descend more steeply the understorey becomes increasingly open below a canopy of Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*). Writer's block is obviously not as big a problem here as it is with the author of this newsletter for the smooth silver trunks are absolutely covered in coded messages. The Prickly Shaggy-Pea (*Podolobium ilicifolium*, formerly *Oxylolium*) is present here with its prickly holly-like glossy leaves. (Surely there must be some authority this hapless plant could appeal to, not only regarding its unfortunate common name but also having its scientific name changed, the old and new both being almost unpronounceable.) The Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) is in this area displaying flower spikes with dark hooked styles which result in the common name. Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) is also present here, not in flower

just now but carrying many bristly old Banksia Men peering out from among the foliage. A softening effect is provided in this rather dry situation, perhaps appropriately, by the Old Mans Whiskers or Curly Sedge (*Caustis flexuosa*) with the sun glinting off its shiny convoluted branchlets.

Soon the rugged parapet of Halfway Rock appears above the surrounding foliage. Near this landmark is an example of the *Leptospermum macrocarpum*, an uncommon Tea-tree which carries relatively large flowers and seed capsules as the name implies. Though not in flower at this time the sizeable seed capsules are attractive in their own right as they take on a metallic appearance. Here we take the left hand track which drops down through a rift in the rock platform and then tends to follow the contours of the hillside. We pass a flat saddle at which we will turn off later in the day and continue on to a rock outcrop which affords a view into the depths of the valley.

As we approach a knoll around which the Wollangambe flows on its tortuous path we turn left and begin the final descent to the river. At this point there is a Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) displaying a profusion of its rather short flower spikes. We make our way down a short gully and reach the stream which we cross to arrive at The Beach. In this glorious environment we settle down for morning tea.

With spirits and stomachs replenished we set off to follow the river upstream. The rather indistinct path leads us along the bank above the clear rippling water. The main ground cover here is the exquisite Umbrella Fern (*Sticherus flabellatus*) which thrives in this shady bower. The vegetation shielding this area from the sun includes Pepperbush (*Tasmannia insipida*), Scrub Beefwood (*Stenocarpus salignus*) and Bush Muttonwood (*Rapanea howittiana*) - sounds like a roast of the day menu.

Soon after passing the point where Bells Creek joins the Wollangambe we cross the stream at a ford consisting of a bed of black pebbles, pick our way between some King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) and carefully scramble over a tract of huge slippery boulders. This brings us to that enchanting area described at the beginning of the article. It is a spellbinding experience to spend time here absorbing the beauty and tranquillity of this natural wonder.

Although loath to leave this place we have other treasures to explore and make our way back downstream. The various methods used to climb over and between the boulders were interesting to observe to say the least. Hard to believe there could be fifteen different ways to cross a cleft between two boulders or negotiate a passage along a rock ledge. Presently we are back at The Beach where we retrieve our packs. After walking a short distance down the valley to view a magnificent deep pool we once more cross the river and retrace our path up the gully.

Back at the flat saddle that we had passed this morning we turn right and follow a track which leads us toward Joe's Canyon. As we descend into a gully the trackside is decorated with Fuchsia Heath (*Epacris longiflora*), their white tipped red flowers hanging in clusters from stems crowded with tiny sharp pointed heart-shaped leaves. The eye is

also drawn here to a few tussocky plants with light green long slender leaves which cascade down the creek bank on which they grow. This is perhaps the relatively rare *Lomandra fluviatilis*. Libby suggests a sun drenched rock outcrop above this gully would be an ideal spot to partake of lunch before venturing into the canyon – there were no dissenters.

As we continued further down this gully we passed an embankment clothed in bright green Pouched Coral Fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*). Clinging to tiny pockets of soil on the rock face were some tufts of the Grass-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium graminifolium*) their leaves ranging through various shades of pink to deep purple. Soon the gully narrows and becomes more shaded. The lower walls are now decorated with Dragons Tail (*Dracophyllum secundum*) while the higher rocks carry pendulous bunches of the Dagger Orchid (*Dendrobium pugioniforme*).

We now enter Joe's Canyon. This is a dry canyon, very narrow with its floor paved in river pebbles, evidence of a much wetter era when rushing waters cut down through the sandstone to form this mystical place. The walls are sculpted into the most amazing patterns of intersecting smoothly curved depressions, the remnants of channels and swirl pools of long ago. Spears of sunlight randomly penetrate the eerie gloom illuminating and enhancing the patterns on the walls. We squeeze through a particularly narrow passage and wander slowly along the course of this canyon absorbing the unique atmosphere which exists in these places. Presently we emerge onto a platform overlooking a beautiful rock pool. This is the junction with Du Faur Creek.

Some time was spent at this spot relaxing in the warm sunshine, listening to the soothing rhythm of running water and watching the water boatmen scudding across the pool. It is always with some reluctance that we turn to leave these areas. I have found however that you never truly leave it all behind. You carry with you the spirit of such places, spirits which sustain you and beckon you to return.

On these walks we quite happily follow Libby, confident in her intimate knowledge of the mountains generally and of the Mt Wilson area in particular. It was therefore with some surprise and trepidation that we had noticed Libby refer to her compass as we earlier moved down the gully toward Joe's Canyon. The reason now became clear. Rather than return to the track we had used to access the area this morning we were to 'bush bash' up the spur toward Du Faur's Rocks. We exited the gully at a point determined by Libby and headed up the hill.

Soon we are in open woodland populated by Scribbly Gums having the most remarkable spreading bases to their trunks, some of which have blackened hollows and cavities adding an air of mystery. Rock platforms carry large numbers of the tiny spiky balls of foliage which form the base of the Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*). In this area there are also many examples of Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*), Broad-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) and Broad-leaved Hakea (*Hakea dactyloides*).

We arrive at an impressive rocky crag that displays many examples of fantastically shaped ironstone veins and outcrops. This vantage point affords great views back into the areas we had traversed and explored today and across to the seemingly never-ending ridges and valleys beyond. Here there were a couple of examples of She-oak (*Allocasuarina* sp) which really stood out as they were the only instances of this species in the vicinity.

Off to the left as we continued up the spur Esme's Lookout loomed above us. The group visited that spot on our Christmas walk way back in 1996. That walk was memorable for many reasons not least because forty three walkers attended! The lookout was named after Esme Mann whose family owned the nearby property of Dennarque from the 1890's until the early 1930's.

Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*) and Hairpin Banksia surrounded us here. It was instructional to note, walking in this trackless but not too dense understorey, how easily one could lose sight of others in the group. We were certainly in no danger of losing contact with each other however, though we were never separated by more than about forty metres, at times I could not see any other member of the group. It was a demonstration of how easy it would be to become separated in the bush.

Soon we were on the track which runs along the base of the cliff line below Du Fours Rocks. We turned right and headed up past the Chinamans Hat and across to Du Fours Rocks Road to return to the cars. This was an especially interesting and enjoyable walk. We encountered an amazing variety of environments, places of great beauty and just a little extra challenge in the climb back up the hill. Many thanks Libby for your thoughtful planning and leadership.