

## Gooch's Crater on the Newnes Plateau

Friday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2007

Turbid water and fetid mud flew into the air as we plunged headlong into the crater. This was not our arrival at the destination for today, merely our progress through the first of many crater-like hollows in the rough track which leads to Gooch's Crater.

A very big thankyou must be extended to those who provided four wheel drive vehicles to convey the twenty walkers from Clarence to the crater trackhead. To Libby, Diana Landsberg and Fred Roberts, also to Jenny Starkey and Graeme Burrell who were both joining us for the first time today, many thanks for providing the opportunity for the group to explore this fascinating area.

The journey to the trackhead was an adventure in itself; the route followed severely rutted rock strewn tracks dotted with broad deep puddles and soft sandy stretches. Safely delivered to the starting point for the walk we set off through the open woodland, initially following a wide track which eventually petered out and we continued along a narrow path.

Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*) dominated here, their trunks and limbs sculpted into fantastic shapes by the winds in this exposed area. The silver/grey satin-like bark of these trees was only lightly etched by the doodling of insect larvae while the blackened fire-induced hollows in the trunks gave these trees an eerie appearance. The brooding atmosphere created by these twisted trees was intensified by the presence of a few Broad-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*) whose dark flaky-barked limbs tipped with pointed bright green fingers reached out across the path.

Presently we arrive at a rocky clearing, an ideal spot to settle down for morning tea. Here there are Drumsticks (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) displaying their globular cones that contrast with the elongated ovoid cones of the Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*) which are also present here, not surprising as their name 'petro-phile' means 'rock-lover'. Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) carry a smattering of early flowers among the ragged remains of last seasons blooms and hiding shyly at the base of rock outcrops are a few examples of the Lesser Flannel Flower (*Actinotus minor*). Also on offer from this vantage point are uninterrupted views of Clarence Colliery and the expansive sand mining operation nearby. There is plenty of variation on show in these mountains.

Continuing along the ridge we walk atop a spine of rock protruding from the ground. This outcrop is made up of large sandstone blocks carrying amazingly intricate patterns of ironstone inclusions. A few rigid stems of the Waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*) are scattered along this ridge, their stark appearance at this time belying their flamboyance when in flower.

Soon we emerge from the woodland onto the open heath. How invigorating it is walk in this type of country with a stiff breeze whisking across the ridge tops. Here the stunted

windblown vegetation includes the Coral Heath (*Epacris microphylla*) displaying their tiny white flowers, Narrow-leaf Trigger Plants (*Stylidium lineare*) having basal tufts of tiny leaves with their deep pink flowers held aloft on wiry stems and the dwarf She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) their slender branchlets dancing in the wind. On surrounding hillsides the light green swaths of the hanging swamps, replenished by the recent rains, stand out against the duller greens of the woodlands.

As we approach the end of the ridge and begin to descend a most fantastic landscape is revealed. There before us is an amazing array of pagoda formations. These sandstone turrets interlaid with ironstone seams present an impressive sight. Some have eroded into pyramidal shapes while others have vertical walls. All have protruding ledges of thin ironstone which are curled into the most astonishing and decorative shapes, many extend for such a distance they mock the laws of gravity. Small windblown caves adorn many of these structures with some having apertures worn right through the stone. This is a truly stunning vista.

While I was still standing transfixed by the view most of the group had reached the first pagoda and were swarming all over its lower sections. Thinking this would make a good photograph I was just taking aim when Helen 'she who must be obeyed' Cardy called on everyone to wave for the camera. Now, with the group standing on this rock formation and everyone waving, it just had to be said didn't it? It was Jenny Starkey who couldn't resist and declared it to be Wave Rock.

We spent some time exploring this set of pagodas which overlooks the western edge of Gooch's Crater. Among the grandeur of these formations there were tiny gems to be enjoyed. On the first pagoda I spotted a Copper Tailed Skink scurrying to the safety of a crevice, its almost golden tail shimmering in the sun. Some of the group on an adjacent pagoda were treated to the sight of an Antichinus taking refuge from the invasion of its territory by scampering under a protruding ledge. An intriguing sight among the shrubbery surrounding the pagodas were several tiny structures built by the local ant population apparently to protect their nest entrances from flooding, narrow 'chimneys' about the thickness of a thumb and perhaps one hundred millimetres high.

Wider views from these vantage points revealed the marshy pond covered with Sphagnum Moss and Rushes which sits in the base of the crater. The cliff faces above this pond again carried convoluted patterns of ironstone inclusions which contrasted markedly with a nearby cliff face which was so straight and vertical that it appeared to have been cut with a single swipe of some gargantuan scimitar.

We now made our way to the eastern edge of the crater following a narrow path which wound its way through Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*), past a few examples of that uncommon Tea-tree (*Leptospermum macrocarpum*) displaying its large grey almost metallic looking seed capsules and pushed our way through some stunted Silver Banksia or Honeysuckle (*Banksia marginata*) carrying a number of newly emerging slim candles.

Once again we were on exposed rock shelves. To our left there was a deep narrow canyon which curved sharply away from us creating that air of mystery and instilling a desire to explore its course. A Eucalypt rose from the depths of this canyon leaning on the steep walls for support, its smooth brilliant white trunk and limbs starkly highlighted against the dark rock face. To our right was a peephole through the top of the cliff giving a view to the fern covered ground far below.

That fern covered ground was where we were heading however there was a smooth steep rock face between here and there. No worries; a length of rope was produced, probably to the initial consternation of some in the group and looped around a convenient tree, thus giving us a means of safe passage down the rocky slippery dip. Libby explained several methods which could be employed in making the descent and people were stationed at strategic positions down the slope to lend a hand. There were no protests or refusals and everyone made it safely to the bottom, I feel sure enjoying the challenge on the way. Libby was certainly proud of the way everyone handled the task. Speaking of bottoms, Helen C positioned herself at the lower end of the rope ostensibly to assist people down the final vertical drop. Her outstretched hands got to the bottom of things on a number of occasions; we have the video as proof thanks to Geoff Kelly.

At the base of the cliff, everyone having regathered his or her composure, we made a short walk down the slope to a huge open gallery formed by a long rock overhang. This was a spectacular space which must have provided shelter in the past to the original inhabitants as evidenced by the presence of a few very faded hand stencils. At a lower level was a smaller moist cave that contained a large mound of red mud about a metre diameter at its base. This silky smooth mud had oozed from a crevice in the cave roof obviously picking up some iron oxide on the way. It appeared that it had started as stalactite and stalagmite which have eventually joined and formed a column between the cave floor and ceiling, a very unusual sight.

As we made our way toward the entrance to the crater we brushed past a number of King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) and walked below a large vertical rock face that carried a hanging garden consisting of mosses, lichens, tiny filigree ferns, a tapestry of Rock Felt-fern (*Pyrrosia rupestris*) and was dotted with a large number of Grass-leaf Trigger Plants (*Stylidium graminifolium*). Just past a second rock face embellished with dozens of Dragons Tails (*Dracophyllum secundum*) we arrived at a small cave overlooking the lagoon enclosed within the walls of the crater. What el fresco restaurant could compete with this spot as a place to lunch? We looked across a clear pool, over the rushes waving in the breeze to the rugged cliff face and pagodas beyond while being serenaded by the local frog population. Couldn't fault the self-service either.

Following lunch we made our way around the edge of the lagoon, our feet sinking into the spongy layer of Sphagnum Moss. A bank of Pouched Coral Fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*) extended along the path here and my better half must have found it soft and appealing as she toppled into it not once but twice, providing a little impromptu entertainment for the group. As we approached the far end of the lagoon I noticed a number of our group in a clearing stamping and jumping up and down. I assumed they

were testing the flexibility of the sphagnum moss however they were actually trying to dislodge swarms of ants whose territory they had stumbled upon. One of the advantages of being the 'Tail-end Charlie' is that perils such as this are discovered and dealt with before I arrive on the scene.

We climbed out of the crater and made our way up to the ridge which led back to the vehicles. When you return along the same path you often notice things you missed on the initial journey and today was no exception. A tiny terrestrial orchid was noted beside the path, possibly Parsons Bands (*Eriochilus cucullatus*) its two pink sepals appearing to me as inverted rabbit's ears. A lone Small-leaved Boronia (*Boronia microphylla*) carrying a number of tightly closed deep pink flower buds nestled against a large rock. Scattered sparsely throughout the landscape were a few Lance-leaf Platysace (*Platysace lanceolata*) their tiny white flowers displayed in hemispherical clusters at the tips of their stems. I noticed too that the ants in this higher territory are also expecting more rain as they have constructed conical mounds around their nest entrances; these structures appear as Lilliputian volcanoes.

On our return journey to Clarence we made the short diversion to Bald Hill Trig Station marked by the rather kitsch 'wedding cake' concrete structure. The views on offer here are spectacular. The landscape in the middle distance is dotted by innumerable pagoda formations while in the far distance the elongated form of Mt Irvine, the curved profiles of Touri, Smiths Hill and Lambs Hill along with the conifer-spiked line of Mt Wilson are silhouetted on the skyline.

Back at Clarence we were pleasantly surprised to meet Ellis and Mary Reynolds who joined us for the usual end of day cup of tea. This was a particularly enjoyable and diverse walk; the enthusiasm generated in the group today indicated that Gooch's Crater was something really special.