

## **The Lost City on the Newnes Plateau**

Friday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

Please pay attention now dear readers. Millions of years ago the sandstone of the Newnes Plateau was covered with a layer of basalt. The vast amount of water which percolated down through the basalt during those much wetter times became laden with minerals. It flowed into the faults and crevices that twisted and turned throughout the underlying sandstone and deposited these minerals. The resulting ironstone veins and plates that filled these fissures took on extraordinarily convoluted shapes.

Over many millions of years the basalt eroded away leaving only small caps on Mt Wilson, Mt Irvine, Mt Tomah, Mt Banks, Mt Hay and a few smaller peaks. The now exposed sandstone eroded at a faster rate, the erosion initially following fault lines resulting in columns of sandstone being formed. Some of these huge columns collapsed into the valleys below while others stood firm. Weathering continued, the soft sandstone eroding much more quickly than the ironstone plates. Thus these fantastic pagoda formations were created; beehive domes with intricately shaped roofs, ledges, overhangs and gargyle-like embellishments. Here endeth the geology lecture.

Sitting atop one of these pagodas on a day as perfect as this tends to wash away thoughts as to why the formations are here; the senses are overwhelmed by the grandeur of the landscape. We are at the end of a ridge which sits between two small streams that form the headwaters of Marrangaroo Creek. Below are two limpid pools of emerald green, the surrounding ridges are dotted with pagodas of all shapes and sizes; rising above a distant ridge in the direction of Wallerawang a white plume of water vapour gives the vista a primordial atmosphere.

It is priceless having an area such as this so easily accessible, let us go back to Clarence and retrace the path to this gem of the mountains.

We met at the Zig Zag Railway on a glorious morning, the sun slowly warming the crisp mountain air. We welcomed Robyn Woods back to the fold after a lengthy absence and she introduced Ross Dunstan to the group. It was great to see that Kathleen Howard-Smith was feeling well enough to come on this walk. Also back after overseas trips were Chris Weaver and Jeanie & Allan Cupitt.

Following a vehicle rationalisation we set off across the Newnes Plateau, our small convoy raising billows of dust along the forest road. We travelled past the area where the Wollangambe River rises just south of the track to the Bald Hill Trig Station, to our left the watershed drains into Farmers Creek which is dammed to provide water for Lithgow. We turn right onto the road that leads toward the Glow Worm Tunnel and very soon arrive at the Bungleboori Picnic Area. We park near here, only eleven kilometres from Clarence, to commence our walk.

I counted twenty-one walkers, someone else suggested twenty-two. Never confident when the walkers present exceed the number of fingers and toes I possess I counted again, twenty-one. Then the penny dropped, I had missed the largest target there - me!

We set off along the trail through open forest containing stands of young regrowth Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) and a smattering of Silver Top Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*); the smooth straight trunks of the former contrast with the movement in the trunks of the latter that are clothed in rough furrowed bark. Scattered sparsely through the understorey are examples of the Port Jackson Cypress (*Callitris rhomboidea*) adding splashes of bright green to the landscape. At ground level the leaf litter is spattered with purple patches as the False Sarsaparilla (*Hardenbergia violacea*) trails across the forest floor.

Soon we moved off the track and seated on conveniently placed logs and stumps we partook of morning tea. The social interaction on these stops is a pleasant and important facet of the group; news is exchanged on mutual friends, tales of travels completed and planned are swapped, jokes and anecdotes are told. These things are just as important as the physical exercise gained and the beauty of the mountains we are exposed to on these walks.

Continuing along the ridge the taller forest trees begin to diminish in number and are replaced by the Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) their slender stems and narrow leaves swaying gently in the breeze. Banksia become more prominent as Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) and Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*) appear beside the track then quite large numbers of Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) are encountered, the white underside of their narrow leaves occasionally exposed by the breeze.

As the track began to descend we encountered a small snake sunning itself on the pathway. Apparently there were two of them when the group first arrived but one had moved into the scrub by the time those of us bringing up the rear reached the spot. This one was certainly not shy for it stayed put even though we subjected it to a fairly close scrutiny. I was surprised by its narrow very pointed head and now believe it may well have been a legless lizard, though one wonders how a reptile could get itself intoxicated out here.

We are now in true heath land with the dominant Dwarf She-oaks (*Allocasuarina nana*) displaying their tiny female flowers, starbursts of red filaments. The windblown vegetation here contains Broad-leafed Hakea (*Hakea dactyloides*) and its bristling brother the spiky Needle-bush (*Hakea sericea*), Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*) are common as is the Lance-leaf Platysace (*Platysace lanceolata*) whose leaves when crushed have a distinctive carrot-like aroma. Here and there the brilliant white flowers of the Coral Heath (*Epacris microphylla*) punctuate the scene.

One small plant which demanded some attention and discussion carried many tiny pink-tinged white flowers each with many stamens, it had tiny stem hugging leaves. We could not identify it from the field books though a couple of possibilities were noted. With later

reference to Fairley and Moore's extensive identification guide it appears it was a Short-leaved Heath-myrtle (*Baeckea brevifolia*), a showy little undershrub.

We were at a vantage point at the end of the ridge and when we lifted our heads from the intensive plant identification activities there before us was an amazing spectacle. Everywhere you looked there were pagoda formations. Some were clustered together while others stood in magnificent isolation. Some had relatively uniform profiles with a layered appearance caused by the ironstone plates separating the thick sections of sandstone. Other pagodas were more complex in shape with ironstone plates extending horizontally to such an extent they appeared to defy gravity. The turrets, canopies, nooks and crannies on these formations gave them the appearance of Oriental temples. One pagoda across the valley to the west was topped by what appeared as a couple of smoothly rounded chimney pots, the variations in form were endless.

The walkers scrambled onto one of the pagodas to gain vantage points from which to take in the dramatic views on offer. Some found sheltered sunny spots out of the rather chill breeze in which to enjoy an early lunch. Others decided to explore the vicinity in more detail and followed the rock ledges across the contours and dropped deeper into the valley. The small dam below which formed one of the emerald pools beckoned but the cliffs became too steep to negotiate.

The ironstone sculptures in the area were amazing. One appeared as the head of a Chinese dragon rising out of the rock platform, another mimicked a window and sill on a vertical sandstone cliff face. The rock shelves here were exquisitely decorated with the tiny basal tufts of the Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*), diminutive silver/grey spiky looking balls clustered together in groups.

Two plants with very restricted distribution also occur here. On the ledges of these formations the Pagoda Daisy (*Leucochrysum graminifolium*) grows, one was in early flower on the pagoda that we clambered onto. The flower is a bright yellow paper daisy. The pink flowered form of the Flannel Flower (*Actinotus forsythii*) has also been seen here however it appears only sporadically. After flowering the plant dies off leaving only seeds that require just the right conditions to germinate so it can be seen in fairly large numbers in some years and be completely absent in others.

While perched on the pagoda we were visited by a Rock Warbler (*Origma solitaria*), this is the only bird which is endemic to the Sydney region. It landed on a rock ledge displaying its russet breast and flicking its tail from side to side while checking out these intruders into its territory. It then flew off without so much as a warble.

Spending some time sitting on this rock in the glorious sunshine makes one realise just how sensible the average lizard is. Reluctantly we get to our feet and begin the three-kilometre walk back to the cars. We make a short diversion that gives a clear view of the second dam on Marrangaroo Creek and of the remnants of the ventilation shaft that once serviced the coal mine which stretched under this area.

Back at the cars we decided to make the short side trip to Bald Hill Trig Station on the way back to Clarence. We had been here fairly recently but the view is so spectacular it was well worth the second visit. The pagoda formations in the Bungleboori Creek area are something special and the distant views to Mt Wilson, Mt Irvine and beyond are superb.

Back at the Zig Zag Railway at Clarence, while we were indulging in the usual end of day cup of tea, Mary and Ellis Reynolds called in on their way home from Lithgow. It was really good to see Mary back on deck after having been recently indisposed.

So we headed off on our various paths back home after another wonderful day in a very special part of these mountains. The 'Lost City' - an ideal place in which to lose your cares.