

The Colo River and Tootie Creek Confluence Near Mountain Lagoon

Friday 17th August 2007

In wild mountainous country twenty-two kilometres east of Newnes the Capertee and Wolgan Rivers converge to form the Colo River. Over millennia the waters of the Colo have carved a deep tortuous path through what is now designated the Wollemi National Park. This action has created a spectacular eighty kilometre long gorge; the longest of its type in New South Wales.

Today we were to venture along a ridge that leads to a lookout above the Colo and then descend to the junction where Tootie Creek joins the river. This is approximately forty kilometres upstream from the point where the Colo spills the runoff from a vast watershed into the Hawkesbury at Lower Portland.

We gathered near the intersection of the Bells Line of Road and Mountain Lagoon Road at Bilpin and were entertained by the tinkling of bellbirds while a vehicle rationalisation was organised by Libby. The journey of fourteen kilometres to Mountain Lagoon took us past many attractive rural properties, several with large dams reflecting the morning light from their glassy surfaces. On arrival at John and Kay Meade's lovely property near the lagoon a further rationalisation saw the seventeen walkers set off in five vehicles to travel the remaining six kilometres to the starting point for the walk. Many thanks to Libby, Meri, Graham, Geoff and John for providing the transport.

The trip along this fire trail took us through some wonderful tall open forest dominated by Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) with in places a few majestic Smooth-barked Apples (*Angophora costata*) their pinkish grey trunks conspicuous among the more numerous fibrous barked trees. The understory contained many Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea sp*) with their characteristic skirts of long narrow leaves cascading from their stout trunks. As the trail twisted and dipped into a shady gully the hillside above was draped with a shawl of ferns, their brilliant green fronds illuminating the scene. A short climb up a steep hill and our small caravan of vehicles arrived at the track head.

We set off knowing that after a trek to the end of the ridge we would be treated to spectacular views of the Colo. A surprise awaited. After less than fifty metres we emerged onto a rock outcrop and 'whammy', there before us was a spellbinding vista. The view was across the never-ending creases and folds of the ridges and valleys of the Wollemi Wilderness. Included in the span of vision was the only evidence of human occupation, the cleared farmland at Mt Tootie and Little Tootie. Mount D'Arcy and Parr South, both about the same elevation as our vantage point, were prominent on opposite sides of the Colo Gorge which twisted across the landscape. Immediately below us was the course of Cabbage Tree Creek as it headed toward its meeting with Tootie Creek. On a day as clear as this the truncated forms of Mount Yengo and Mount Wareng could be seen to the north, around fifty-five and sixty-five kilometres away respectively in Yengo National Park. This spot certainly rates a very high 'WOW' factor.

How could one resist lingering here awhile allowing this spectacle to saturate our minds while other parts of our bodies absorbed morning tea? As is usual Mother Nature provides little gems to enhance the big picture and nestled against the unusually patterned sandstone on which we rested was a Sydney Boronia (*Boronia ledifolia*), in full flower it stood out like a beacon against the muted tones of the rock and leaf litter.

Reluctantly we dragged ourselves away from this scene and continued along the ridge. Our walk leader today, because of his local knowledge, was John Meade. This allowed Libby to circulate among the group during the walk, an unusual treat I feel sure she enjoyed.

It became apparent on the drive out to this spot and in the early stages of the walk that this area has an amazing diversity of vegetation. We encountered examples of the Narrow-leaved Ironbark (*Eucalyptus crebra*) with their hard deeply furrowed almost black bark that contrasted with the light coloured flaky soft bark of the Yellow Bloodwoods (*Corymbia eximia*). Christmas Bush (*Cerapetalum gummiferum*) was prominent in the understorey displaying their sets of triple leaves, finely toothed and very glossy. As we skirted around a rocky bluff the distant views were framed by the gracefully curved lower branches of a pair of Narrow-leaved Apples (*Angophora bakeri*) with their abundant drooping narrow leaves dancing in the stiff breeze.

We dropped down onto a saddle where the main vegetation was a mix of Burrawangs (*Macrozamia communis*) of the cycad family and Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea sp*) presenting a primeval atmosphere. The grass trees displayed a variety of scapes and spikes; some were new some were spent, some were straight while others were bent. In this area we noted a large nest of red bull ants. The side of their low mound showed signs of having been recently scraped away, possibly by a peckish echidna.

The bush now enclosed us as we moved into an area populated by Egg and Bacon shrubs (*Dillwynia sp*) and Bush Peas (*Pultenaea sp*). These plants carried a smattering of yellow and red pea-like flowers however the main flush of blossom was yet to emerge. By contrast some of the wattles were ablaze with golden flower heads. The most prominent were the low growing Heath Wattle (*Acacia brownii*) with their abundant deep yellow flower heads while a few Prickly Moses (*Acacia ulicifolia*) displayed their pale cream blossom. Also putting on a spectacular show were taller more erect wattles, possibly the Box-leaf Wattle (*Acacia buxifolia*), their golden-yellow flowers held aloft on vertical stems. The Native Holly or Prickly Shaggy-pea (*Podolobium ilicifolium*) was also present in abundance. Another jewel of nature was noted here; nestled against an old stump was a thick mat of moss, its velvety deep green against the black charred timber was stunning.

Soon we caught glimpses of water through the trees and after clambering down a steep embankment we emerged onto the Colo River Lookout. What magnificent views. Far below us the river coursed over sandbanks and across stony rapids as it flowed between long deep pools. The cliff face opposite was a mosaic of huge red orange cream and grey sandstone blocks and was pockmarked with many small caves. Vegetation dotted the cliff and vertical scars of landslips accentuated the height of the scarp. The section of the Colo

that we were looking down upon stretched between a point just downstream from the end of the Bob Turner Track (which the group walked in August 2006) and a spot where it makes a 180 degree turn and heads north, a reach of about five kilometres. What better place to have lunch?

Decision time! The sandy beaches about two hundred metres below beckoned. Thirteen couldn't resist the lure while four decided they could and opted for a more leisurely afternoon amble back along the ridge.

The track to the river initially sidled along the edge of a drop then zigzagged steeply down to an intermediate rock ledge where the sound of the flowing water could be heard. Beside the track in this area were two examples of the Native Iris or Dwarf Purple-flag (*Patersonia longifolia*) displaying their showy but short-lived purple flowers. A less steep incline took us through a more sheltered environment where the Grey Myrtle (*Backhousia myrtifolia*) thrived and tucked in against a rock face was a small shrub carrying mauve pea-like flowers possibly the Velvet Hovea (*Hovea purpurea*).

Presently we emerged onto the sandy riverbank. What a special place; the cliffs towering above us, our lunch spot just visible through the trees and that wonderful sound of a wild river. Some removed shoes and socks to dip toes into the chill water while others pushed through the River Oaks (*Casuarina cunninghamiana*) to explore along the banks. The course of Tootie Creek as it ripples over a rocky bed just before it joins the Colo is through a tunnel of Water Gums (*Tristania neriiifolia*) their roots exposed by the action of the water flow; a magical scene. The debris high in the trees indicates what an awesome sight the river must be in a large flood.

We were loath to leave this little piece of paradise however we had a long climb in front of us up to the ridge that led back to our start point. On this return walk we noted examples of the Wedge-leaf Hop Bush (*Dodonaea viscosa*) with, as the name implies, glossy truncated wedge shaped leaves and interesting small fruit which has three vertical wings. Also sighted were some *Platysace clelandii* a variety whose distribution is restricted to the Hornsby Plateau and the Colo/Wollemi area; it has small fan-like leaves. Small herbaceous bushes carrying many pure white star-like flowers, possibly the Prickly Starwort (*Stellaria pungens*) caught the eye and a tufted grass which was present in most areas of this walk and attracted some interest was probably Wiry Panic (*Entolasia stricta*) though what caused it to become alarmed I have no idea.

So we arrived back at the cars, well satisfied with another great walk through an area with an amazing variety of vegetation and breathtaking scenery. Victoria was quite chuffed to have made it all the way down to the river and back up again but was a little deflated after having asked what the difference in elevation was and discovering it was 'only' about four hundred and eighty metres. It may boost your spirits Victoria to know that is more than one and a half times the height of Centre Point Tower.

John and Kay Meade invited the group back to their home for afternoon tea and very pleasant it was to sit on the deck in the tranquil surrounds of this property, many thanks

to you both. I must also thank John for leading the group today, sharing his local knowledge and assisting with plant identification.

Finally, if you were disappointed Victoria with the heights you reached today then ponder this. According to our resident philosopher Rob Bearup if you start at an elevation of five hundred metres, descend to twenty metres then climb back to five hundred metres you have neither gained nor lost anything, the status quo has been maintained. I gave up trying to get my head around the proposition the instant I drove out of John and Kay's gate, others may wish to give it further deep consideration and discuss it on the next walk – with Rob, not me!

Some of you may not be aware that Mary Reynolds, a foundation member of the group, editor and producer of our newsletter has had a stint in Lithgow Hospital. Mary initially caught the dreaded lurgie which developed into pneumonia and she was forced to surrender and allow an ambulance to be called. Following ten days of treatment and forced rest she is now recuperating at home. Flowers and a get-well card were sent on behalf of the group and I'm sure you all wish her a speedy return to full health. It was fortuitous that Mary was able to complete the production of the last newsletter before she succumbed. Knowing Mary's tenacity and commitment one can easily imagine her insisting the ambulance officers wheel her out past her computer while she ran spell check on the document and then getting them to stop at C & W Printing on the way to the hospital. We all wish you well Mary!