

## **River Caves Canyon on the Newnes Plateau**

Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2008

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a cool dark place enclosed by tall sandstone cliffs. Picture a little stream meandering through this space burbling gently as it flows across beds of pebbles. Imagine the delicate tracery of ferns reflected in the still water of limpid pools. Envisage shafts of sunlight spearing through the narrow gaps above to illuminate the fronds of tree ferns. See fragments overhead of intense blue sky between the encroaching dark canyon walls. Do this and you will have in the mind's eye a snippet of the beauty on offer during this walk.

Surpassed only by Kosciuszko National Park the Wollemi is the second largest national park in the state covering an area of more than 4875 square kilometres. Our destination today lay just inside the southwestern corner of this great park where it borders the Newnes State Forest.

The Newnes Plateau is home to many sites of historical interest and places of sublime natural beauty. The Wiradjuri people roamed this plateau for thousands of years and though they trod lightly on the land evidence of their occupation can still be seen by those who wish to seek it out. Walls of rock overhangs protected from the weather carry stencilled images and other rock art and work sites can be found where grinding grooves and water hollows are still evident.

More recent activities have left heavier footprints yet the achievements of early European endeavours here must be admired. Take for example the railway line which once snaked for fifty-two kilometres across these lands. This line formed a connection from the main western railway at Newnes Junction to the oil shale works at Newnes in the Wolgan Valley; it was built in just twenty months. Quite an achievement considering the difference in elevation between Newnes Junction and the Newnes works is more than seven hundred metres and that two tunnels needed to be constructed. The name Newnes incidentally derives from Sir George Newnes, a prominent London publisher and a principal director of the Commonwealth Oil Corporation Ltd which developed the Wolgan Valley oil shale extraction and processing complex.

The outstanding natural features on the plateau include the various clusters of sandstone pagodas at the 'Lost World' above Marangaroo Creek, around Bungleboori Creek and near the Glow Worm Tunnel. The imposing form of Gooch's Crater, the mysterious narrow chasms in the cliffs at Deep Pass, the spectacular vistas from Bald Hill and the expanses of windblown heath are but some of the other attractions here. The area we were to explore today proved to be more than worthy of addition to the list of special places on this plateau.

A good roll-up of twenty-five walkers gathered at Clarence under a glorious clear sky to participate in what was a new walk for this group. Fred Roberts and Geoff Kelly had acquainted Libby with the venue. In her usual efficient manner Libby arranged a vehicle

rationalisation and quickly had everyone assigned a seat in a vehicle to make the twenty-nine kilometre journey over gravel roads and bush tracks to our starting point. At the Twelve Mile Pine Plantation we turned off the Glow Worm Tunnel Road and followed the Mt Cameron Fire Trail to Dinner Gully. The track became a little more challenging from here so we left two of the vehicles and clambered into the more robust four-wheel drives, some travelling 'alfresco' in John Meade's ute. After negotiating a rather steep washed-out section of track it was but a short distance to the vehicle barrier above the Natural Bridge.

As they had greater knowledge of the path we were to follow Fred Roberts and Geoff Kelly led the way which gave Libby the opportunity to move among the group as we walked, something she doesn't often get the chance to enjoy. After a short stroll down the old fire trail toward the saddle formed by the Natural Bridge we turned left dropping down into the gully leading toward Budgary Creek. Initially we passed through open woodland with a sparse understorey but soon the low growth increased both in height and density providing that rather special feeling of being totally enclosed by the bush.

Narrow-leaf Platysace (*Platysace linearifolia*) bordered the track displaying their multitude of tiny white five-pointed flowers, delicate constellations of minute pentastars. The glossy coiled stems of the abundant Curly Sedge or Old Mans Whiskers (*Caustis flexuosa*) shone in the bright sun while tufts of Blady Grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) held their deceptively sharp leaves erect tempting the unwary to grasp them for support. The Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa* var *spinulosa*) was present here displaying newly emerging flower spikes. Another Banksia in this area was similar to the Hairpin but had slightly wider leaves that were a lighter green and had a white undersurface, possibly the Hill Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa* var *collina*).

Soon a large rock outcrop loomed among the trees. Skirting this pagoda-like formation we dropped down to more level ground on the floor of the gully. We diverted to the right into a side gully. This led us to an elevated rock platform on the edge of a grand amphitheatre formed by a huge rock overhang; a perfect place for morning tea.

As we retraced our steps back to the main gully we passed a nest sitting at about knee height and fully exposed above the bracken and blady grass. It was bowl-shaped and a little less than half a metre in diameter. Its construction was reminiscent of a wicker basket, an intriguing sight. Nearby, trickles and drips of water falling from the cliff edge high above provided a pleasant musical interlude as they plummeted into a bed of ironstone shingles.

We continued downhill through masses of King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) overarched by Bottlebrush (*Callistemon* sp) carrying multitudes of seed capsules in clusters along their stems and by Bush-peas (*Pultenaea* sp) both devoid of flowers at this time. The numerous erect stems of Waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*) indicate this area would be aglow with bright red globes late in the year.

Soon the insignificant little stream we have been following reaches its junction with Budgary Creek. We veer left and a short distance upstream we are at the start of the River Cave Canyon. The initial view of the canyon is of a rather wide cavern at creek level with the stream disappearing into the gloom with the sandstone walls arching upward until, due to the curvature of the water-worn rock and the closeness of the walls, they appear to touch.

We cross the creek and climb onto a level platform in the entrance cavern. Here boots are exchanged for footwear more suitable for wading and an impromptu lovely legs parade occurs as shorts are donned for our excursion into the dimly lit enclosed world of the canyon.

Initially we wade across a fairly shallow pool which is rimmed by ferns and is fed by an exquisite little waterfall and we clamber up a small rock face. Some sunlight manages to spill into this area and forms beautiful changing patterns of light on the canyon walls as it reflects off the gently undulating surface of the water.

The light fades as we enter a vast cavern and wade through a pool which leads us around a bend in the canyon. The convoluted shapes and narrow slot left by the action of the water as it carved down through the sandstone has resulted in this section appearing to have a fully intact roof. The small patches of light on surfaces high up indicate however there are openings above. As we round a second bend a large window of light opens up illuminating the ripples on the surface of the pool.

We are now in a large chamber which opens to the steep sided gully beyond. To our left the high rock wall is adorned with a curtain of filigree ferns while a platform juts from the wall suggestive of a theatre gallery.

Crossing the creek once more we make use of a cleft between the canyon wall and a huge fallen rock to clamber up onto a narrow ledge. We sidle along to a large flat area that marks the end of the enclosed section of the canyon.

Continuing upstream through the steep sided gully we pass a small side canyon on our right from which a gentle flow of icy water trickles down the mossy rock face. We reach a gully which leads off to the left that can be used as an exit route back to the fire trail. At this junction we spent some time in the delightful copse of trees towering from an understorey of King Ferns. It was a surprise, certainly to this writer, when it was realised the little forest consisted almost exclusively of Black Wattle (*Callicoma serratifolia*). Most texts describe the *Callicoma* as a small tree however these hardly fit that description, they were towering skyward in search of sunlight above this deep gully. One very large example with a quite thick lichen encrusted trunk was initially mistaken for a Coachwood. This was an enchanting little glade.

As we made our way back through the canyon we could hear a mysterious voice from the heavens asking if we were getting wet down there. Eventually we noticed Ray Nesci

waving from a parapet high above. Ray, not being partial to wading through pools, chose not to get his feet wet and had followed our progress from the cliff tops.

Following a leisurely lunch at the canyon entrance we retraced the path back to the cars. As is usual when you walk a path in the opposite direction you notice things that were missed on the initial journey. Growing among the rocks beside the creek was some Necklace Fern (*Asplenium flabellifolium*) and back on the fire trail several late flowering Flannel Flowers (*Actinotus helianthi*) displayed their velvety bracts.

Well satisfied at having explored another of Mother Nature's gems hidden away on this vast plateau we made the return journey to Clarence. Many thanks to Fred and Geoff for introducing Libby to this treasure-trove of natural beauty; we wonder what other tricks you two have up your sleeves.