

Zircon Creek Circuit at Mt Wilson

Friday 18th January 2008

It was one of those marvellously moody atmospheric mornings. The foliage of the trees and fronds of the tree ferns lining Davies Lane hung low under the weight of moisture deposited by the heavy mist and light drizzle. The dark ribbon of road faded into the filmy haze as it turned toward Merry Garth, the meeting place for our first walk of the new year.

Fourteen gathered here ready to don their wet weather gear and explore this basalt capped mountain while it was veiled in low cloud. The rich basalt soils and the precipitation released from those clouds are two of the essential elements which create the enchanting lush landscapes we were to experience today, reason enough to celebrate the rain.

We welcomed Wayne and Cheryl Pascoe who accompanied Don and Anne Clarke today and Luke, Ray Nesci's grandson who joined us once more. Libby made a minor change to plans due to the weather and we drove to Cathedral Reserve where we took advantage of the shelter shed and had a warming cup of tea before setting off. Ray Harrington joined us here bringing the total number of walkers to fifteen.

The drive along Mt Irvine Road takes us past the Cathedral of Ferns where the road has that wonderfully enclosed feeling as do other sections along the way, made more so today by the overcast conditions. On arrival at Zircon Creek Ray Nesci and Luke dragged a long ribbon of bark off the road. It was fifteen metres or more in length, an indication of what was to come for the Blue Mountain Ash were shedding their bark. We walked a short distance back along Mt Irvine Road and diverted onto the fire trail at Boggy Bend.

It is a real delight to be in the bush under these conditions. The trunks of smooth barked trees take on brighter colours due to the moisture, wet leaves glisten in the subdued light, grasses carry delicate beads of water along their stems and the slender branches of the vegetation in the understorey take on an elegant weeping habit. The aromas of wet soil and moist leaf mulch waft through the air on a gentle breeze while the calm is interrupted by staccato drumming as large water drops plummet to earth, dislodged by wind gusts in the canopy high above.

A long ribbon of bark had draped itself over some shrubbery forming an archway across the track as Libby led us to a point which she assured us was a lookout. Libby guaranteed that on a clear day there was a magnificent view from this spot across Waterfall Creek to the southern fire trail, over Bowens Creek and beyond. Today there was a wall of white.

We retraced our steps a short distance, diverted to the right and dropped down a steep slope. It was quite slippery and we scrambled over the trunks of a few fallen trees. There was some frivolity as a few people lost their footing and became unceremoniously seated on the forest floor.

The view into this misty gully as we descended was rather special. The Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) towered up from the slopes, their canopies shrouded in mist. Their recently exposed smooth new bark displayed a remarkable greenish cream hue. Some lower limbs were festooned with long streamers of freshly discarded bark while elsewhere the redundant ribbons formed tangled heaps at the base of the trees. The rough bark stockings at the base of the trunks carried elegant loops of ribbon where the lower ends of fallen strips remained attached. The edges of the track here were marked by the brilliant hot pink flowers of the Grass-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium graminifolium*), as was the case in many areas today.

Soon we could hear the gentle gurgling of water as a hidden brook passed under the track. In this more sheltered area there were many Black Wattles (*Callicoma serratifolia*) their prominently toothed leaves glistening through the moisture and their spent waterlogged flower heads looking rather forlorn. At ground level there was what looked like a forest of miniature conifers, light green plants about one hundred millimetres high with right angle branching and tapering to an apex. This was a very attractive plant which stood out in the subdued light, possibly a Leafy Liverwort (*Lepidozia sp.*).

We descended a little further on a gentler slope and followed the contour of the hillside for a short distance. Then, with a warning from Libby that it was quite steep, we climbed a wooded hillside to emerge onto the Fields Selection fire trail. Here there was a profusion of Trigger Plants.

This trail led us into some beautiful areas, at times through open woodland dominated by magnificent Scaly Tree-ferns (*Cyathea cooperi*) and then into tunnels of vegetation where the stems of Lawyer Vines (*Smilax australis*) reached out to clutch passers by with their numerous thorns. Presently we arrive at the gate to Fields Selection where, Libby once again assured us, there is usually a nice view to the east. She also pointed out an area of regrowth adjacent to the gate where the Kirks once grew potatoes. Again we retraced our steps for about two hundred metres and took a right hand turn to descend toward Zircon Creek.

Soon this track leads us into a pocket of 'fairytale' rainforest where trees drip with Hanging Moss (*Papillaria sp.*), tree trunks are encrusted with lichens and their buttressed bases are encased in velvety moss. The limbs of many of the smaller trees here droop eerily while spider webs suspended from the foliage sparkle with pearls of moisture. In this dark enclosed space rows of bracket fungus on decaying logs complete the elfish scene.

Further down the slope the vegetation becomes more open. There is a lone large Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) sporting a huge boll which almost encircles the trunk, the pinks and greys are intensified on its moist bark. Nearby a couple of Sweet Pittosporum (*Pittosporum undulatum*) display clusters of green fruit among their wavy-edged leaves.

As we rounded a slight bend in the track the rippling waters of Zircon Creek came into view flowing beneath a group of Soft Tree-ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*). On crossing the stream with its muddy banks we entered a magical area of rainforest. Here, on this steep hillside, the lofty Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) and Lilly Pilly (*Acmena smithii*) form a dense canopy shutting out much of the light. There is very little understorey thus a clear view can be had through the columns of massive trunks and across the ground cover of ferns. As we continued through this enchanting forest we crossed a little rill burbling its way down the hillside to join Zircon Creek.

Presently large sandstone outcrops emerge from the gloom, the forest becomes more open and we reach Mt Irvine Road. From Farrer Road East, after many in the group carry out a thorough leech inspection, we proceed along the 'Bush Run Track' that takes us past the Gowan Ross dam which was full to the brim and we reach the road at the bottom of Smiths Hill. Here we turn left and continue up the hill along Farrer Road West and just short of the hill top we divert into the rainforest above the source of Zircon Creek.

Here we enter a stunning area, a gloomy brooding atmosphere exists below the thick canopy. Vines loop through the trees, some large and smooth, curving gracefully into the treetops and across the bare ground. Others are thin and knobbly hanging vertically from branches. A circle of thin trunks surrounds a decaying stump, the coppiced remains of a forest giant. The horizontal patterns of pale grey lichen on the smooth trunks of the Coachwoods contrast with the vertical arrangements of grey/green medallions of lichen decorating the rough bark of the Sassafras. There are some huge tree ferns here, some tall and straight others slanting precariously with gently curving trunks. The extravagantly buttressed trunks swathed in dark green moss complete the aura of fantasy.

So we slipped and slid down the steep trackless slope growing taller with each step as the sticky soil built up on the soles of our boots. Soon we reached the small dam which sits above the parking area at the Zircon Creek bend. We clambered down the embankment and were back at our vehicles. Once again a search for leeches was carried out before we boarded the cars and headed back to Merry Garth where the leech search continued. Young Luke scored well but I believe George Knott topped the count claiming the leeches found his vintage blood irresistible.

This was a wonderful walk on which to gain an appreciation of the beauty of the rainforest in the conditions that lead to their creation. The near views partially masked by mist and the sublime atmosphere within the enclosed forests, dripping with moisture and darkened by the cloud cover, will linger long in the memory.

What better way to end a walk such as this than to have lunch on the back veranda of Merry Garth looking out across the rock garden to the ghostly veiled outline of the mountains beyond.

A few words before closing in defence of the humble leech (*Hirudo medicinalis* to give it its more regal name), that much maligned little creature. Today and on other walks of

late, following the breaking of the drought and with moister conditions prevailing in the bush, we seem to have encountered these unpretentious little critters more frequently, much to the consternation of many in the group. The leech however has suffered undeservedly from a bad press, being compared to the most unscrupulous people in society. This reputation is totally unwarranted. True the leech is a type of worm and does rely on suckers, just like their human namesakes. However it is really quite an obliging creature. It has razor-like jaws within the front sucker to ensure a neat incision is made and before biting the host's skin it thoughtfully applies an anaesthetic. It then uses an anticoagulant to ensure the blood flows freely and only relieves you of a very small amount. Having partaken of its fill, unlike its human namesake, it will simply let go and fall off; what could be more unselfish? It is said that the leech is attracted to humans by body heat and vibration.

If this short treatise has not convinced you to look more favourably on the humble leech and you still wish to reduce your chances of being their target then remember; next time you are in leech territory simply stay cool and stop vibrating!