

Lunch Rock Near Bell

Friday 16th May 2008

Like so many other precious jewels the Blue Mountains are multi-faceted. The variation in landscapes, presented in an array of diverse moods, appears endless. On recent walks we have explored moist shady gorges and mist shrouded rainforest. Today by contrast we would mostly follow the ridges. Here we would be treated to a more exposed and dryer environment. The rugged beauty of this face of the mountains has resulted from the frequent battering by strong winds and the ravages of fire; the last of which occurred in this area in 1997. Join us then while we explore this impressive stretch of elevated bushland and heath.

A chill breeze and threatening skies greeted the twenty-four walkers who gathered at the Bell Railway Station. It was pleasing to see that Kathleen Howard-Smith was able to join us today and we welcomed Robbie Harricks, a friend of Alison Halliday. A few drops of rain fell as Libby organised the group into a reduced number of vehicles to transport us a few kilometres further along Sandham Road to our starting point.

We set off across a transmission line easement and skirt around a property containing an amazing stockpile of paraphernalia. When we last undertook this walk in September 2000 I described this collection as “things which might come in handy one day”. It appears obvious that particular “one day” has not come to pass during the ensuing eight years.

Soon we leave this treasure trove of odds and ends behind and follow a long disused fire trail through open woodland of Brown Barrels (*Eucalyptus fastigata*) and Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus scerophylla*). The cloud cover was now beginning to break and the sun glistened off the wet leaf litter on the track. The soft light of this morning sun illuminated the white trunks of the Scribbly Gums beautifully. Individual Scribbly Gums are a delight; here there are masses of them presenting a magnificent spectacle. They range from aged trees having distorted fire-scarred trunks through clusters of thin trunks arising from naturally coppiced bases to the sinuous trunks of young saplings; a wondrous sight to behold.

As we move higher up onto the ridge distant views emerge through the trees giving a tantalising glimpse of the expansive vistas to come.

Closer at hand are examples of the Broad-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*), dark flaky bark contrasting with bright green foliage among which clusters of green berries and yellow flowers are nestled. The glossy green gracefully arching leaves of a Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea media*) catch the sun and some Small-leaved Boronia (*Boronia microphylla*) displaying a few tardy bright pink flowers are scattered among the carpet of Curly Sedge or Old Mans Whiskers (*Caustis flexuosa*). The flower buds of many Wattles (*Acacia sp*) that are beginning to expand and show some yellow will soon explode into masses of golden globes.

Soon after passing a rocky knoll which carries the spindly trunks of a coppiced Scribbly Gum we come across the little stone cairn that marks the point where we leave the old fire trail and divert right onto a far more indistinct track. Presently this track leads us out of the open woodland onto extensive heath land. This expanse of low growing vegetation is occasionally punctuated by little islands of sandstone, bare except for sparse patches of moss and lichen.

Here the dwarf She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) flourishes; the reddish-tan male flower spikes borne on the ends of the stems provide an attractive variation in the tapestry of plants spread before us. This carpet of colour contains Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) with a smattering of young yellow flowers, Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) with many hairy-faced Banksia Men peering out from among the branches and a lone Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) displaying many small golden flower spikes. The most prominent of the Banksias however were the many Heath Banksias (*Banksia ericifolia*) which at this time were carrying their conspicuous long orange-red flower spikes.

Soon the form of Lunch Rock appeared on the skyline. We skirted around the base of this impressive formation and continued on to another lower formation nearby. Here we paused for refreshments, as it didn't seem at all proper to be having morning tea on Lunch Rock; actually the second rock provided more space and afforded a better windbreak.

The views from this elevated spot are superb. The Wollangambe can be seen coursing its sinuous way between the ridges. Sandstone pagoda formations and sheer cliffs dot the landscape. The conifers of Breenhold and on the Dennarque hill can be seen on the skyline at Mt Wilson to the east. The near and middle landscapes take on a degree of animation as the rather chill wind imparts a swaying motion to the crowns of the trees. What a wonderful environment in which to while away a little time.

The next part of this walk was to follow the ridge which runs NNW and leads us to a rock platform overlooking the Wollangambe, we would then return to Lunch Rock to ---- well ---- have lunch. It was suggested that as we were returning to this spot those who wished could leave their haversacks here; they would be quite secure as the Banksia Men are only interested in pursuing Gum Nut Babies and have no interest in packs.

We make our way down the ridge following a narrow path through the abundant growth of the heath. A plant which is considered to be uncommon in the mountains, the *Leptospermum macrocarpum*, is certainly not uncommon here for it makes up a sizeable portion of the heath. They have finished flowering at this time and carry large almost metallic looking seed capsules; closer to the river there was one plant with a single late flower which showed these to be the lemon-yellow form. Also prominent in this area were the aptly named Needle-bush (*Hakea sericea*) displaying their woody globular fruit and Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*) carrying numerous egg-shaped cones. Lower down the ridge were some Broad-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) with their more rounded cones.

On reaching the end of the ridge we gathered on a rocky bluff high above the river. The crystal clear waters of the Wollangambe followed a circuitous path between the sheer cliffs far below. A long fern-filled cave below a rock overhang swept along the curve of the opposite bank. Portions of the rock platforms here carried an unusual deeply embossed knobbly surface; one section had an intriguing pattern of fist-sized spheres that gave the appearance of having been fused together. In a sheltered nook on this rocky crag a lone *Epacris reclinata* displayed its clusters of tubular red flowers.

After some time taking in the sublime beauty of this spot we retraced our path back to Lunch Rock. Along the way the distant views across the heath and through the Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) showed the shimmering paths of water seeping from the hanging swamps and spreading across the dark rock faces on the hillsides. Smaller gems of nature decorated the path. The little grey-green spiky tufts of the Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*) gather in clusters along the edge of the track and here and there the tiny four-petalled white flowers of the Mitre Weed (*Mitrasacme polymorpha*) are held aloft on their thin stems.

Back at the rock formations, because a cool breeze was still blowing, most opted to settle down at the morning tea spot. Helen and I decided Lunch Rock was the place to be and scrambled onto this exposed edifice. At an elevation of nine hundred and ninety four metres the extensive views from here are striking, especially so today with white fleecy clouds skimming across an intense blue sky. Two things closer at hand however caught my attention. From this height you could see a quite definite line where the woodland gave way to heath; there was no tapering off at all, the Scribbly Gums just suddenly stopped. Secondly the breeze blowing today created rolling waves which travelled across the heath as the underside of the leaves of this carpet of vegetation were exposed; a wonderful sight to behold.

Inevitably we have to leave these special places and head back to the cars. Shortly after leaving Lunch Rock we divert to the left and drop down into a gully through a tunnel formed by Hakea, Conesticks and Tea-Tree. We follow a creek line and arrive at a delightful spot beside a tiny brook burbling across a bed of pebbles as it hurries toward its meeting with the Wollangambe. A high sandstone cliff sits on one side of this brook and there is a level area on the other with evidence of people having camped here, what an idyllic spot.

The track now once again follows disused fire trails as we climb back toward Bell through open forest. Back at Sandham Road we walk along the access road beside the railway to cover the short distance to Bell Station. This affords an unusual end to a bushwalk as we wave to the driver of a passing coal train.

Seeing this juggernaut with three diesel locomotives pulling a string of huge coal trucks prompted thoughts of the contrast to one hundred and thirty three years, one week and four days ago. It was on the 5th May 1875 that the Mt Wilson Platform was opened a short distance east of the present Bell Station. This proved to be the catalyst for the

development of properties at Mt Wilson. Sixty-two portions at Mt Wilson had been surveyed by Edward Wyndham in September 1868 and put up for auction in 1870 with no interest shown. The improved access provided by the existence of this platform prompted many to purchase land in this beautiful but then remote area and the rest, as they say, is history.

The cars were collected from the starting point and we indulged in the usual after walk cuppa and chatter after a wonderful day experiencing a different face of these mountains. The 'Cherylometer' had recorded an enormous number of steps taken today which translated into a distance of approximately seventeen and a quarter kilometres! I checked the map with a distance wheel and with a set of dividers and couldn't find more than about eight and a half kilometres walked. Perhaps the wearer of the 'Cherylometer' spent some time jumping up and down with excitement. Sorry Cheryl, I'll pick on someone else next month.