

The Red Hill Fire Trail – Our Christmas Walk

Friday 16th December 2005

We assembled for this walk on a rather warm afternoon and although storm clouds were gathering in the distance we were confident of remaining dry, as before we left Merry Garth, Keith Raines had assured us it wasn't going to rain. We chose to ignore his rider that his weather forecasts were very rarely correct.

Following our encounter with a few flies on the last walk which prompted discussion about the various fly nets available Rosemary Knott decided to take action. She delved into her store of netting material left over from ballroom dancing days and created a net to fit over her broad brimmed straw hat. Today was the unveiling of this creation. Perhaps 'veiling' would be a more appropriate expression for there before us was an apparition in white, a gauze envelope dropping from her hat brim and enclosing her shoulders, one would not have been surprised to see a pastor appear ready to perform the nuptials.

Among the thirteen who gathered for this walk we welcomed back Jeanie Cupitt and once again welcomed Ray Nesci's grandson Luke. And so the bridal party -- er -- bushwalking group set off along the fire trail which follows a ridge that is a watershed feeding both the north and south arms of Bowens Creek. The tree cover here consists mainly of Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*), their deformed trunks and sinuous branches bear witness to the effects of frequent strong winds in this exposed area. In some cases the trunks have been carved out by fire and the resulting black hollows contrast with the smooth silver/grey bark shining in the afternoon sun. The brilliant light colour of these trees is a perfect foil to the dark flaky bark and bright green foliage of the many beautiful examples of Broad-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia levis*) in the understorey.

Along the edge of the fire trail near the start of this walk were herbaceous plants which carried tiny white three petalled flowers in clusters of three or four atop very slender stems. I believe these delicate looking plants were *Xanthosia atkinsoniana*. A short distance further on there is an example of that shrub which caused me some angst on our last walk, the *Atkinsonia ligustrina*. The second of these plants was discovered by and named for Louisa Atkinson the remarkable nineteenth century botanist and author who once lived at Kurrajong Heights and who made many journeys into these mountains during the 1860's searching for botanic specimens. I will risk a wild guess and assume the species name for the *Xanthosia* also relates to that lady, Mary may be able to confirm or reject that assumption.

At this time of early summer the landscape before us was splashed with colour. Bright red flecks were provided by the flower combs of the ground hugging *Grevillea laurifolia* and the tubular flowers of the Mountain Devils (*Lambertia formosa*). Blue, mauve and purple were provided by the low growing Blue *Damperia* (*Damperia stricta*), the Slender Violet (*Hybanthus monopetalus*) which occasionally peeked out from among other foliage and the taller growing Purple *Damperia* (*Damperia purpurea*). A blush was added

to the scene by the pale pink of the Black-eyed Susans (*Tetradlea ericifolia*) and the brash bright pink of the Trigger Plants (*Stylidium graminifolium*). The newly developing flower heads of the Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*), looking like miniature corn cobs, added a touch of cream and clumps of Sprawling Coneseeds (*Conospermum tenuifolium*) provided a hint of lilac. Broad-leaved Hakea (*Hakea dactyloides*), Dagger Hakea (*Hakea teretifolia*), Silky Hakea or Needle-bush (*Hakea sericea*), Mountain Heath-myrtle (*Baeckea utilis*) and the ubiquitous Tea-trees (*Leptospermum* sp) contributed a white background to this canvas of colour.

As always Mother Nature provides little points of interest as we make our way along this track. A cluster of plump caterpillars was seen in the middle of the trail, possibly larvae of one of the Sawflies which feed on Eucalypts, they all waved their bodies in unison when disturbed and exuded a thick fluid. A little further on there was a young Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea* sp) its pale green radiating leaves silhouetted against the stark white trunk of a Scribbly Gum and off to the left the dark brooding form of Wynnes Rocks could be glimpsed through the trees.

Soon the track descended slightly and we arrived at a point overlooking Bowens Creek with a view across to Mounts Charles, Bell and Tomah. We rested here awhile, partook of some of Libby's Bushwalkers Cake and then retraced our path to the cars. As we neared Mt Wilson Road a Broad-leaf Drumstick (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) was noted, its many flowers on the wane, a fitting symbol as we neared the end of our last walk for the year.

Any year spent exploring these mountains results in the accumulation of many wonderful memories; the year just past however had a couple of very special happenings. The month of June gave us the walk from Govetts Leap to Evans Lookout and return, a walk which presents magnificent views into Govetts Gorge and the Grose Valley beyond. The most pleasing aspect about this month however, indeed for the year, was the announcement that Libby had been awarded the Order of Australia Medal recognising her many years of dedicated service to the community of Mt Wilson.

Then on our May walk at Deep Pass we experienced those narrow passages deep inside the sandstone cliff, the multi-coloured dry rock overhangs and delightful little rock pool where Nayook Creek emerges from a narrow canyon. More importantly however this walk marked the fifteenth anniversary of the formation of this walking group. The foundation and continued leadership of this group is just one small facet of Libby's contribution to the community. On the way home from this walk we visited a reminder of the original community which inhabited these mountains - some magnificent examples of grinding grooves and water hollows on an elevated rock platform.

The first three months of the programme for this year had decidedly Gothic undertones as in January we headed to The Throne overlooking Bowens Creek, February had us exploring the spectacular pagodas and clambering over the rocky ramparts of The Lost City on the Newnes Plateau and in March we would have visited The Ruined Castle in

the Jamison Valley except for the cancellation of that walk due to inclement weather, a very unusual occurrence for this group.

April took us to the Wollangambe, that wild river which slices through the rugged landscape on the northern edge of the Mt Wilson village. We explored the canyon country both upstream and downstream from "The Beach" which necessitated some rock scrambles, wading and minor bush bashing, a small price to pay to experience this special place. Jenolan Caves was the destination when we walked the last section of the Six Foot Track in July. The caves area evokes a mystical feeling for yours truly, one of my favourite places.

The southern side of the Blue Mountains was our venue for August when we enjoyed the waterfalls, panoramic vistas and deep valleys of the National Pass and Valley of the Waters at Wentworth Falls. In September we headed to the eastern fringes of the mountains to walk in the footsteps of the Royal Engineers Corps as we followed the track which they cut along the valley from Yarramundi in 1858. We stopped along the way to skip some stones across the glassy waters of the Grose, the Royal Engineers probably didn't.

Two cancellations due to wet weather in one year would be unthinkable so Libby changed the October walk to the Northern Fire Trail which provides easy exits should the weather worsen and six hardy souls set forth. The weather held and after experiencing the spectacle of crimson Waratahs among the gold of Pultenaeas along the fire trail the group visited Du Fours Rocks, Pheasants Cave and Chinamans Hat before returning via the tree lined avenues of the village. Rain was the furthest thing from our minds for the November walk along Ikara Ridge. The kaleidoscope of wildflowers we were presented with here was laid out under a cloudless sky, a truly wondrous sight. How appropriate that the nearby cave is called Girraween which loosely translated means "Place of Flowers".

It seems such a short time since we gathered in the gardens of Merry Garth to begin our first walk of the year and here we are once more in this Blessed Enclosure to celebrate yet another twelve months of the friendship and camaraderie that pervades this group. Once again our heartfelt thanks to Keith, Libby and Beth for their hospitality in welcoming us all into this enchanted garden for our Christmas Barbecue and Keith, that was one afternoon forecast you got right!