

Leura Cascades, Leura Forest, Federal Pass and Scenic World

Friday 16th February 2007

At the base of the vertical scarp below Cliff Drive, nestled on a natural bench about two hundred and fifty metres below road level, is a small area of exquisite rainforest; this is the Leura Forest, one of our objectives for today. Along the way however we will experience many works of Mother Nature and of man which will gladden the eye.

We gathered, twenty-five in all, at the picnic grounds adjacent to the Katoomba Cascades. Edith Dreyer from Switzerland joined us today. Edith spent some considerable time in Australia many years ago and is reacquainting herself with the country, staying for the moment in Mt Wilson with Suzzane and Denis Daly. We also welcomed Ann Daly who is keen to walk with the group on a regular basis; she is using this walk to determine whether her legs share the same enthusiasm. Graham Tribe was also a welcome first time participant today. Libby quickly had everyone allocated a seat for the short drive to the Leura Cascades car park while leaving enough vehicles here to transport drivers to retrieve their cars at the end of the walk. (A gentle reminder here that this shuffling of cars is but one of the reasons it is important to ring in and let Libby or Mary know, preferably early in the week, that you intend coming on a walk.)

Making our way past the pseudo stone shelter shed and toilet we pass under the mock rock arch and emerge into the real world beside the Leura Falls Creek. How pleasant it is to see the bush dripping with moisture once again. The creek is now running freely while debris stranded on the banks and in the shrubbery is evidence of the torrent which rushed down this watercourse during the recent welcome downpour.

This section of track was upgraded in 1993 and no trace remains of the lampposts and floodlights which illuminated the old track and the cascades during the heyday of the guesthouse trade in the mountains. At the base of the cascades the group crowded into the small cave which affords views back upstream of the sparkling waters tumbling down the slope. The track near this point was decorated with fallen blossom from the towering Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) the tiny white flowers surrounded by deep red sepals. Near the top of Bridal Veil Falls the creek flows beneath a group of King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) before plunging over the cliff edge on its way to the valley floor far below.

We then made the short climb to a vantage point which gave views of the Bridal Veil and the escarpment beyond. While we were looking into this chasm a flock of White Cockatoos flew toward the face of the falls far below us; a cheery though cacophonous addition to the scene.

Our intention was to head down to the base of Bridal Veil Falls and continue on past MacKillops Lookout and The Amphitheatre toward Leura Forest. This plan, like the bank above the track, came unstuck as the route was closed due to a landslip, no doubt caused by the recent heavy rain. Plan B was to continue along the Round Walk to link back onto

the Prince Henry Cliff Walk and access the forest via the Fern Bower. Along the way we diverted to a vantage point overlooking The Amphitheatre where we had morning tea. Here we had expansive views of Mount Solitary and beyond and immediately below us a pair of Black Cockatoos frolicked in the treetops.

Continuing on we called at Fossil Rock Lookout. The rock formation here was for many years thought by some people to be the fossilised remains of some prehistoric aquatic being. One section does indeed appear as a large flipper extending from a backbone. In fact the shapes are formed by ironstone inclusions in the sandstone; a less exciting prospect yet a fascinating geological quirk.

A short stroll along Cliff Drive and we plunge back into the bush taking the track which drops down into the deep gully cut by Linda Creek. This is a magical area. We wind past rock overhangs and huge sandstone blocks that have broken away from the cliffs above in the distant past. Growing on a vertical face of one such monolith, to paraphrase Les Murray's poem "Creeper Habit" is a 'two-dimensional tree, self-espaliere, having height and extent but no roundness'. Initially this area is shaded but relatively dry however the environment becomes much more moist as we drop deeper into the valley. Soon we are looking down into a vast expanse shaded by the canopy of tall trees reaching for the cliff tops in search of sunlight. There is no understorey here and virtually no ground cover giving the impression of standing in a giant pavilion.

Soon there is a tiny stream burbling along beside the track, at times unseen then revealing itself to display miniature cascades and falls, yet all the time providing that pleasant musical accompaniment as we enter the Fern Bower. Initially we are looking down on the Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) their spreading fronds forming intersecting circles of lush greenery. The path then dives in under dripping rock overhangs housing miniature gardens of ground ferns and mosses. Some tree trunks in this domain have taken on fantastic shapes as they have looped out from under rock ledges or recover from falls on the steep banks. The tracks in this locality were first constructed in the 1890's and restored during 1999, what a privilege to have the opportunity to experience the beauty of this little glen.

The track zigzags down the slope and presently we are at the base of Lila Falls. Here the water has spread across a wide rock shelf dropping from ledge to ledge in a myriad silver trickles forming a liquid curtain on the rock face. At the next creek crossing we are at Linda Falls, a white ribbon of water dropping vertically into a rock pool surrounded by ferns. A pleasant walk beside the creek then leads us to the beautiful Marguerite Cascades at the last crossing before we enter the Leura Forest.

This is a magnificent space. Lofty rainforest trees comprising Coachwood with their lichen blotched trunks, Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) with their serrated aromatic leaves, the corky barked Possumwood (*Quintinia sieberi*) and Lillypilly (*Acmena smithii*) with their rough flaky bark. Scattered among these giants of the forest are titans of another kind; huge sandstone tors cloaked in moss and lichens sit as silent sentinels. A fallen tree trunk lies on the forest floor encrusted with fungi, each white bracket having

the appearance of a delicate seashell. The day is still young but how could one pass up the opportunity to settle down in this enchanting environment to have lunch, soak up the atmosphere and recharge the batteries of life.

Following our repast we set off along the Federal Pass Track which was completed in 1900 and headed toward Katoomba Falls. Here the burbling of the brook was replaced by the no less pleasant musical tinkling of the Bell Miners. Soon the rainforest gives way to tall open forest and eucalypts such as the Sydney Peppermint (*Eucalyptus piperita*) begin to dominate accompanied by the occasional Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) with their thick stringy reddish bark and the dark-trunked Cedar Wattle (*Acacia elata*). At the margin of the rainforest Rough Tree-ferns (*Cyathea australis*) are prominent and Lawyer Vine (*Smilax australis*) twines through plants of the understorey.

The track winds past a group of smooth-trunked Mountain Blue Gums (*Eucalyptus deanei*) and the cracking call of a Whipbird could be heard. Past a small creek crossing Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) appear, at this time shedding their mature bark to reveal silky smooth reddish/orange trunks in some cases carrying many knobbly protrusions. Near this spot a large Goanna, disturbed by our presence, climbed a couple of metres up a trackside tree and kept a wary eye on the group as it moved past. When I arrived it obligingly moved around to the sunny side of the trunk to pose for a photo. We briefly encounter another small pocket of rainforest as the track crosses a gully and then we gradually climb up the talus slope to the junction with the Dardanelles Pass.

We rested here awhile; some in the group spent the time carrying out a detailed leech search and we then headed to the base of Katoomba Falls. The display at the falls was quite spectacular following the rains and the not so distant thunder indicated the show might very soon get even better. An interesting contrast exists near the viewing platform here at Cooks Crossing. The very common Black Wattle (*Callicoma serratifolia*) grows side by side with a tree which is rather uncommon in this region, the Black Sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*) that only grows in deep gullies at higher altitudes of the mountains. With the thunder still reverberating and a few drops of rain falling we made our way up to the lower platform of the Scenic Railway. Here the seductive call of a refreshingly cold ice cream was too much for Geoff Kelly to resist and he jumped onto the first train out of here; the rest of the group carried on to the boardwalk circuit.

The transformation on entering the Scenic World area is amazing. For most of the day we had encountered perhaps a dozen other walkers; here visitors from every corner of the globe crowd the boardwalk. A huge amount of money must have been invested in this project in recent years. Many tourists who would not normally venture into the valley have now been given the opportunity to experience this unique domain. Even if only a small percentage of these people gain a better appreciation of natural environments in general and rainforests in particular the complex has served a useful purpose. Of course the size of the crowds diminish quite markedly the further you move away from the railway and cableway stations and wandering along the lower portions of the boardwalk which stretches for two and a half kilometres provides a pleasantly relaxed atmosphere.

Following a short rest in the Rainforest Room at the lowest point of the boardwalk we make our way up to the cableway station where the progressives in the group ride the Scenic Cableway to the top while the traditionalists carry on to ride the Scenic Railway out of the valley. Not far from the old coalmine entrance where crowds of tourists were snapping photos and generally milling around, Libby spotted a Rufous Fantail quite unconcernedly flitting among the shrubbery just above the boardwalk handrail.

With the group as large as it was today and with the distinct possibility of rain it was decided, so as not to have people waiting for long periods at the top, that we would all ride out of the valley rather than have some walk up the Furber Steps. Given the choice, I of course would have opted to walk up the one thousand and forty steps but sometimes sacrifices simply have to be made!

A short stroll had us back at the meeting place of this morning, the cars were collected from Leura Cascades and we of course had the traditional after walk cuppa and natter. It was a glorious time to undertake this walk with the bushland rejuvenated by the recent rains which also intensify the earthy aromas of the forest. A wonderful way to spend a summer day.