

Happy Valley and Cathedral Creek

Friday 16th January 2009

Leaping Leeches, what a walk this promised to be! There was talk of debauched bees, a hint of bondage, the words 'reproduction' and 'vibrator' used in the same sentence, preening chicks and more; it appeared we were headed for a Happy Valley indeed.

Twenty-three walkers gathered at Merry Garth on a glorious sunny morning, the extreme heat of the past few days appearing to have abated somewhat. We welcomed Doug and Pam Tribe who were joining us today.

Geoff Kelly on the other hand was not joining us today, Fred Roberts explaining rather cryptically that Geoff was "tied up". As was bound to happen this prompted the wild imaginations of some in the group to run riot, jocular comments being made without restraint.

As we moved off Libby drew our attention to the tall Weeping Silver Lime or Linden-Tree near the gates of Merry Garth, its foliage shimmering in the morning light as the gentle breeze flicked the silver undersides of the leaves into view. The local bees apparently find the clusters of sweetly perfumed flowers irresistible, becoming drunk while collecting the pollen. A picture builds in my seriously disturbed consciousness of an intoxicated bee having finally managed to bumble its way back to the hive declaring to the highly unimpressed queen bee: "Honey I'm (hic) home".

We leave the road and enter the rainforest behind Campanella Cottage where the tree trunks are festooned with Rock Felt-fern (*Pyrrosia rupestris*) and Orange-blossom Orchids (*Sarcochilus falcatus*) while the ground is decorated with Rasp Ferns (*Doodia aspera*) whose brilliant red new growth light up the scene. Here Possumwoods (*Quintinia sieberi*) choose to germinate on the trunks of Tree Ferns and grow 'strangler-fashion' eventually killing their hosts. The major players in the creation of this pocket of rainforest include Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) their trunks carrying attractive blotches of lichen, Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) with their aromatic leaves and scaly bark and the giant Banksia (*Banksia integrifolia var compar*) which, unlike their cousins on the heaths, soar skyward seeking the sun.

Soon we diverted to the right and followed a track down the hill which led to a small dam that provides back-up water for nearby properties. The nest of a Yellow-throated Scrubwren was suspended above the water of this small pondage nestling in the sheltered gully. It was here that the first Leech Alert of the day occurred; it was eyes down to examine boots, socks and trouser cuffs for any sign of these much maligned little creatures.

Returning to the main track we came across a group of chickens preening themselves in their pen. They watched us pass with that look of utter disdain which only a chook can produce.

Skirting around the boundaries of the Wildenstein and Bryn Mawr properties we passed some lovely examples of Blaxland's Stringybark (*Eucalyptus blaxlandii*) beneath which was a scattering of their tightly clustered fruit. In the understorey here were many Sweet Pittosporum or Mock Orange (*Pittosporum undulatum*) with their shiny wavy-edged leaves. Also waving from among the grass were lots of small leeches seeking a meal.

Observation of the fully enclosed vegetable gardens in the properties we were passing elicited discussion of the superior taste of home grown produce; especially 'real tomatoes' as Ray Nesci

described them. Mention was made that large numbers of commercial tomatoes are now grown in artificial environments in vast greenhouses. Of course there are no insects in these enclosed spaces, no bees to pollinate the flowers. Ray assured us that vibrators are used to initiate the reproduction process.

Presently we emerge into Cathedral Reserve where we decide to have morning tea but for some that was only going to happen after another Leech Alert; boots and socks are removed this time in a determined effort to ensure none of those little critters were hitching a ride.

We wended our way through the Cathedral of Ferns to inspect the Giant Tree, now struggling to survive after suffering a lightning strike. Several Tree Ferns surrounding the base of this huge Brown Barrel (*Eucalyptus fastigata*) have died, presumably from the effects of the lightning discharge. We move on up Lamb's Hill and follow the power line easement down to the start of the Happy Valley track.

Here Libby gave a short history of the establishment of this track, which revealed why she regards it as very special. Tom and Peter Kirk first formed the track around 1920. Due to lack of use it became overgrown and effectively hidden from sight, buried beneath the leaf litter of the forest. The Cathedral Creek section got more use by people collecting water to use at the nearby picnic area and therefore remained open. Libby had a strong desire to rediscover the route of the track to the valley and eventually did so after finding the zigzag section and working her way back up the hill. She was thrilled to have finally succeeded in her search and could not wait to tell of her discovery. As she emerged from the forest a young man called Keith Raines happened to be walking along the road. Libby excitedly told of her find and her desire to clear and re-establish the track. Keith offered to help her and over several weeks they worked together in clearing the way to Happy Valley and the rest, as they say in the classics, is history. Aaaaaah!

A sign was erected but was quickly souvenired, probably due to the interesting name. Usage of the track increased following the erection of more permanent signage around 1990 and the Raines connection continued when, in more recent years, Libby and Keith's son Peter installed the steps and retaining structures that exist today on the steeper sections of track.

Buoyed by this charming story we entered the fairytale rainforest. There is very little ground cover and only a sparse understorey here which allows an almost clear view through this wonderful wildwood area. Lichen smattered tree trunks supported on buttressed bases draped in moss march across the hillside. Intricately coiled vines reach up to the treetops as if to prevent the green canopy from being lifted by the wind. Filigree parasols of ferny fronds are held high atop the trunks of Rough Tree Ferns (*Cyanthea australis*) while the fine wiry stems of the Purple Twining-pea or False Sarsaparilla (*Hardenbergia violacea*) creep along the forest floor in search of support. The shell of a decaying tree trunk lies on the slope encrusted with fungi and mosses mimicking an ancient battle-scarred war canoe abandoned on some foreign shore.

Soon the track descends more steeply zigzagging past a number of two-tiered rock overhangs. The upper tiers are quite dry and devoid of any growth while the lower tiers are carpeted with ferns, including the Strap Fern (*Blechnum patersonii*). Rock Felt-ferns occupy many of the rock faces and tree trunks here.

Presently the temperature drops noticeably and we are welcomed into this Happy Valley by the sound of water burbling across the rocks and tumbling into the limpid pool. The beauty of this secluded little retreat is overpowering. Beneath a ceiling of fern fronds provided by the numerous

Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) the waters of Waterfall Creek course over beds of pebbles before entering a narrow channel carved into the rock base and leaping over the cliff edge to the tiny pool below. The views downstream with the dark rock faces and shadowy pool in the foreground and the bright sun highlighting the foliage in the background were stunning.

After some time here to allow all twenty-three walkers the chance to see the views and absorb the beauty of this rather confined place we reluctantly began the climb back up the incline. A short distance up the slope we stopped for lunch under a large rock overhang beside the track. A fortuitous choice for here we could look down on the sunlit tracery of overlapping wheels of Tree Fern fronds while listening to the distant sound of running water providing background music for the birdsongs closer at hand. A glance upward revealed one of Mother Nature's tapestries, woven from the forest canopy and the azure sky beyond, a magical sight.

As we climbed higher Jenny Starkey's eye was drawn to a fern sitting atop a rock shelf which after some thought she identified as the Mother Spleenwort (*Asplenium bulbiferum*) that produces tiny plantlets toward the ends of its fronds, thus the common name. This fern is uncommon in the bushlands of the Sydney district but it is noted as occurring in Mt Wilson.

Soon we divert onto the track that leads down to Cathedral Creek and pass a magnificent giant Lillypilly (*Acmena smithii*) whose straight columnar trunk towers into the rainforest canopy. On reaching the creek we follow its line up the gully carefully picking our way around moss beds and past many Tree Ferns of all shapes and sizes, trunks contorted into amazing shapes as they recover from downhill tilts and falls. We leave the creek line below an outcrop of basalt and make our way up the slope eventually emerging back at Cathedral Reserve.

Following a short rest and yet another Leech Alert we strolled up to Hill Crest Lane and along Davies Lane to make our way back to Merry Garth, so ending a wonderful day exploring more of the treasures of Mt Wilson.