
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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CASTLE HEAD ON NARROW NECK

TOPIC

OUR AUGUST WALK

CASTLE HEAD on NARROW
NECK PLATEAU at
KATOOMBA

Friday 16th August 2019

The Narrow Neck Plateau is approximately 13 kilometres long and 2.4 kilometres at its widest point. The view from Narrow Neck Lookout is of this largely pristine landform stretching south, sitting atop vertical cliffs and clothed in dense vegetation; this view however could well have been so different.

In the early 1930s proposals were being made to build a scenic drive adjacent to the cliff lines and encircling the Plateau. Suggestions were made that it could have been a toll road and that it would become "one of the world's greatest motor drives." Thankfully this never got off the ground and the only road extending onto the Plateau is the Glenraphael Drive / fire trail; only glimpses of which break the view of the bushland from this vantage point. Vested commercial interests lost that one.

So join us dear reader as we explore just a snippet of this vast plateau which was saved from development by forward thinking people many years ago.

We only had seven walkers today so it wasn't such a brain strain for me to organise the usual vehicle rationalisation; many thanks to Anne



Spring in the Bush

Rodrigues and Des Barrett for driving us to the locked gate on Glenraphael Drive.

Once again we were blessed with an almost clear blue sky, an invigorating stiff breeze blew, so, suitably rugged up, we climbed the stile at the locked gate and headed down the fire trail.

Soon a side track led off to the left which we followed a short distance to the cliff edge, but I had turned off too early; though there were nice views from here it was not the spot where there are rather special rock

formations.

Back on the fire trail we continued on until we found the correct side track which not only led us to the magnificent uninterrupted views but here there were amazing rock formations at hand. Concentric circular and elliptical ridges rose up from the rock platform; there were shallow dishes of ironstone sitting within these ridges. Some formations gave the impression of stacks of pancakes and small rock pools nestled within these configurations.

The rock pools were bone-dry at this time however on an earlier visit to this site, ten years ago, they contained water. We were fascinated then by hundreds of what we thought were tiny spiders, no larger than a pinhead, swimming on the surface, forming small rafts. I remember Barbara Harry and Ray Nesci being particularly enthralled by the tiny creatures, kneeling beside the pool to get

a closer view as they studied their movements; I have since found out they indeed were not tiny spiders.

They were in fact minuscule invertebrates known as Conchostracans; they live in ephemeral cliff top rock pools. They survive as eggs when the pools dry up and hatch after rain; yet another amazing trick of Mother Nature.

From this vantage point we had a view along the cliff face to Castle Head, our destination for today, to Mount Solitary beyond and the Ruined Castle sitting on the ridge top in between, dwarfed in this expansive landscape. Here we were also sheltered from the wind so it was decided this was an ideal spot to pause for morning tea. Helen distributed slices of Libby's bushwalker cake and very nice it was too.

Back on the fire trail we continued downhill. To the right, across a small gully, was a series of large hanging swamps; light green treeless islands on the hillside. The surrounding trees had become the playthings of the strong wind, buffeting and jostling the canopies; the twisting leaves glinting in the sunshine. Soon we arrived at the small sign on the left indicating the track to Castle head.

This track is a narrow footpad with the vegetation pressing in on both sides; it was great to be back in an environment such as this, it elicits that feeling of being part of the bush again. The footpad led us up a slope and levelled out at a spot where a couple of tree trunks lay across the track; from this point it was a short steepish drop down to the cliff edge.

On the rock platform where the track meets the cliff was a group of about six abseilers preparing to drop over the edge; there appeared to be a lot of cheerful intercourse among the group. One wonders were they really all that happy or was it nervous chat and laughter on seeing the two hundred metre drop they were about to descend.

We continued along a more level path and diverted onto a rock overhang which gave us

an impressive view back into Pitts Amphitheatre and down onto the enclosed canopy of the rainforest tucked in against the eastern face of the cliffs; contrasting markedly with the more open woodland in the valley.

We passed a few Old Man Banksias (*Banksia serrata*), their leaves discoloured and pimply from, I assume, insect attack, something this writer has not seen in the bush before; on the plus side they also carried the classic seed cones displaying staring eyes and gaping mouths. Also here were several Heath Banksias (*Banksia ericifolia*) but these were a mere foretaste of what was to come. The occasional Black She Oak (*Allocasuarina littoralis*) stood beside the track displaying their rugged fluted bark. In abundance here were Narrow-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anethifolius*), their fresh lime green new growth carrying golden-tan tips; very attractive. Scattered among these were a few Broad-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anemonifolius*), the tips of their new growth a light burgundy; also very attractive.

The track then climbed up a rise where views opened up, across the heath, to the cliffs below Narrow Neck Plateau stretching out to Cedar Head, an unusual but striking narrow slash of pure white cloud hung in the azure sky above the plateau.

We were now walking through Blue Mountain Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*), their slim trunks bending and swaying before the strong wind. We passed a couple of carpets of Prostrate or Mountain Geebung (*Persoonia chamaepitys*) their light green foliage illuminating the ground cover. The ubiquitous Curly Sedge or Old Mans Whiskers (*Caustis flexuosa*) was also present here, their glossy green coils decorating the scene. In a protected spot there was a small shrub carrying tiny four-petalled pink-tinged white flowers, possibly *Zieria robusta*.

Soon we were in tall heath protected from the wind as it rustled across the surface of the thick vegetation above our heads. The track began to descend and we arrived at the Castle Cliff Trig Point 986 metres above sea level,

now redundant, replaced by GPS technology; a short scramble further down the slope and we were on the edge of the cliff at Castle Head. Here we were looking down onto the Ruined Castle formation; across to Mount Solitary and beyond to the headwaters of Lake Burragorang; the blue waters of which were rimmed by a wide swath of bare ground indicating the depleted state of the storage in Warragamba Dam.

When viewing Mount Solitary from this vantage point one can see, even more so than from other prospects, why it was given that name. From here the formation stands out in splendid isolation between the cliffs of Narrow Neck Plateau and the Cedar Valley on the right and the Kedumba Walls and the Jamison Valley on the left; indeed a monumental formation sitting in solitude above the tree-clad talus slopes.

Here we paused for lunch and what better outlook could you wish for. The heath protected us from the wind, though Helen chose to sit in a more exposed position, well rugged up and turning her back on the strong gusts which tossed the branches of the She Oak that stood near her. With the small number of walkers present we were able to indulge in second servings of the Libby bushwalker cake. Yum!

It was with some reluctance that we turned away from the splendour before us and retraced our steps back to the rock platform which was occupied by the abseilers on our outward journey. Along the way we paused at a projecting rock outcrop, the end of which had some resemblance to the head of an Iguana (pareidolia strikes again). It was also noted here that the slash of pure white cloud seen earlier had transported itself to the eastern side of the plateau, maintaining its striking shape along the way. There was no sign of the abseilers now, one assumes they abseiled down to the base of the cliff and then made their way down the talus slope to pick up the Ruined Castle Track and exit via the Golden Stairs.

We paused here to take in the view across to the sheer vertical cliff left by the Dog Face Rock, or Giant Landslide; the sandstone face still golden after almost ninety years of exposure to weathering. It gives some perspective as to how long the well-weathered cliffs in the mountains must have been exposed. There was some conjecture about the 'structure' sitting below the spoil from the landslide; about the size of a small cabin it appeared to have a couple of windows in its side. A zoom camera shot revealed it was a huge sandstone block obviously dislodged by the landslide; the 'windows' being colouration on this giant tor. Further to the right was a rather different view of the Three Sisters; further still the Kedumba Walls stretched to the south.

We then made the short climb back to where the two tree trunks lay across the track; we rested here awhile, taking advantage of the tree trunks for seating.

Here we had the choice of returning along the same track we used this morning or taking an alternative route which would take us back to the fire trail further south. This track was indistinct at the point where we rested but a closer check revealed it was still visible; we opted to head that way.

Along this route, no doubt due to much lesser usage, the vegetation crowded in on us and the track disappeared completely at times but was easily recovered. We passed a grassy spot where we paused for lunch on a walk led by Libby twenty-one years ago; an image came to my mind of dear departed Ern Morgan laying in the soft grass to have a nap, as was his wont on a few of our walks back then.

After a further minor indecision we regained the track and it led us to the most amazing examples of Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*). Huge densely branched and leafed domes appearing as though they were clipped by the most fastidious gardener; but then of course, Mother Nature is a most meticulous landscaper. These wonderful large autumn and winter flowering shrubs (when does a shrub become a tree?) carried many reddish-orange

spikes partly hidden amongst the foliage; a veritable goldmine for the many honeyeaters who inhabit this plateau.

Soon we reached the point where the track began to descend towards the fire trail. A short distance down the hill a minor track led off to the left. This took us past some Dagger Hakeas (*Hakea teretifolia*) with their sharp needle-like leaves and pointed dagger-like fruit; a shrub to be passed with care, to a vantage point which gave us a great view into the Cedar Valley and to Cedar Head. Just up the slope from this point stands, and I use that term advisedly, an ancient Heath Banksia clinging precariously to the edge of the cliff; it has been battered by strong winds and ravaged by fire yet clings to life. It looks much worse for wear since the last time I saw it, perhaps ten years ago, yet remains a magnificent gnarled old methuselah of the bush.

We then returned to the main track and headed toward the fire trail. For the first time, on the many visits I have made to this venue, the track was completely dry. It usually has at least a trickle of water running down to a swampy area beside the fire trail but not this time; indeed the swampy area was also bone-dry.

It was then just a walk back along the fire trail to the cars to end this really lovely walk. Magnificent scenery, amazing rock formations, sublime weather and good company. What else could one wish for?

John Cardy

OUR SEPTEMBER WALK

FRIDAY 20th SEPTEMBER 2019

**Panoramic Views, Windblown Heath,
Precipitous Cliffs and an Enclosed Little
Grotto**

Walls Lookout, Rigby Hill and Fairy Grotto

The Group last visited Walls Lookout and Rigby Hill in December 2011, and the Fairy Grotto in March 2000. It is a relatively easy walk of about 6 kilometres; it could be extended by walking part way down Pierces Pass and return if the group wishes on the day.

Meet at 10.00am at the upper Pierces Pass carpark just off the Bells Line of Road, a little over 2.5 kilometres east of the Mt Wilson turnoff. (Do not drive down the hill to Pierces Pass Picnic Area.)

Those wishing to car share from Mt Wilson should meet at St Georges Church for a 9.45am departure.

Bring morning tea, lunch and plenty of water.

Contact Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0400 444 966.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 18th October – Evans Crown at Tarana

BUSH CARE

Bush Care is held on the second Friday of each month from 9am to Noon. Any help, even for a short time, would be appreciated.

Friday 13th September – Meet at Wynne Reserve

Friday 11th October – Meet at Wynne Reserve

Mt Wilson contact Alice Simpson 0414 425 511 or 4756 2110

Council contact Tracy Abbas 0428 777 141