

MCLEANS PASS AND FURTHER EAST

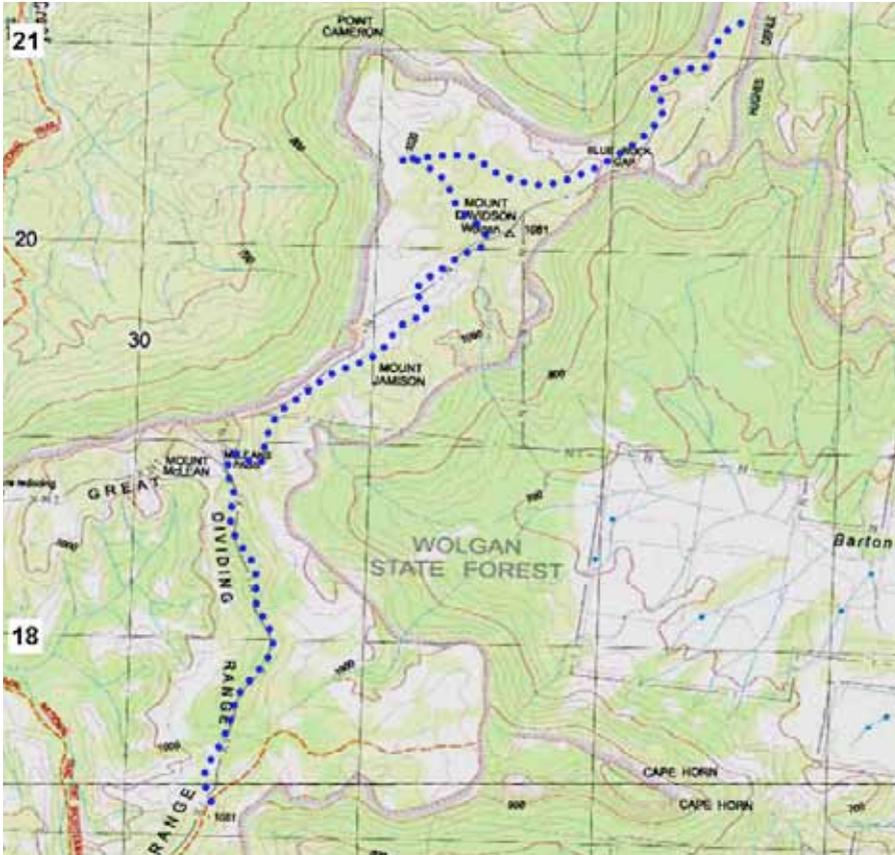
MAPS ETC

Department of Lands; Cullen Bullen Sheet, 1:25000, 8931 -3N and Department of Lands: Ben Bullen Sheet 1:25000, 8931 – 4S- both as second editions. GPS setting WGS84.

WALK DESCRIPTION AND ROUTE

This is an exploratory walk to get acquainted with some very rugged

country. Total walk length is estimated at 12km and maybe less. Most of the walk takes place between the 900m and 1000m contours and involves quite a few pagoda climbs, slots and ramps. It is planned to camp at a spot known as The Pondage near Mount Davidson. Water should not be an issue. Day two will be spent testing an off track route through to Blue Rock Gap, if we are lucky maybe making it



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to the top of Hughes Defile. Anything more than this is a real bonus.

GEAR ISSUES

Full pack. A PLB will be carried, volleys recommended, 1litre water, camera. Maps and GPS vital.

COMMENTS

This is adrenalin country.

Dates walked 13th & 14th August 2007

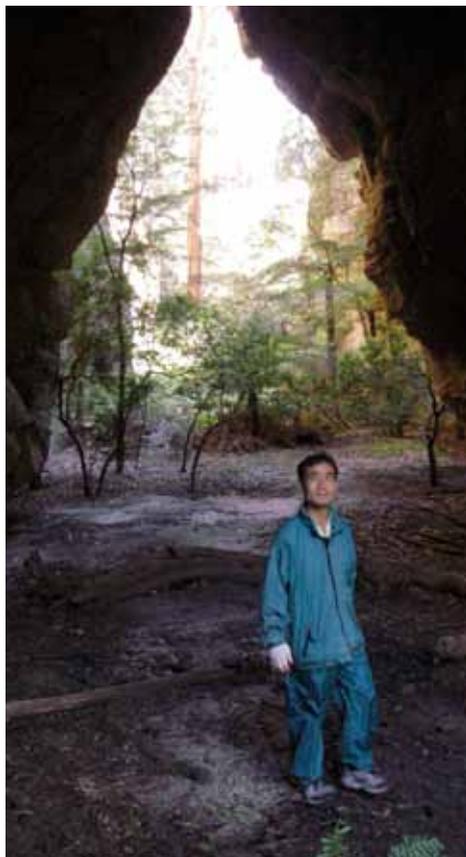
TRACK NOTES

It seemed a little out of place to turn off the Wolgan Road just north of the Angus Place Coal Mine and have the Coxs River on our left. The same Coxs River that I am so familiar with in the Wild Dog Mountains but it is here, near its source, merely a series of dry gullies, swamps and marshes. The road, (Long Swamp Road in the Ben Bullen State Forest) where it joins The Bicentennial National Trail is right on the rim of the gully where the first drops of rain start their journey as the Coxs River.

The Bicentennial National Trail hugs the crest of the Great Dividing Range. A stop was made at spot height 1055 where a walk to the cliff edge to the east presented the Wolgan Valley and associated State Forest in a spectacular fashion. About 3km to the NE the bulk of Cape Horn blocked the view of our destination. The cameras had a workout, and then it was back

into Roger's big 4WD for another 2 kilometres on a spur road where we parked on the NE, low side of spot height 1051, GR 305 175.

Putting accepted creature comforts behind us, it was time to shoulder the packs and start up a side spur to regain the crest of the Great Dividing Range. The way was through very dry, dry sclerophyll forest with deep leaf litter. This area has been spared fire for many years. In his notes Morrie



Chang Kim in Stargate Tunnel Photo: Michael Keats

Donovan mentioned that the track comes and goes. In this first section to McLeans Pass the track is currently very well defined. The only times it is hard to follow is where dead trees have fallen across the track.

40 minutes later we followed a beguiling side-track, and we think, to the top of Mount McLean, GR 303 191. Suddenly, we were looking north with Pantoneys Crown dominating the immediate scene. Beyond, and

with remarkable clarity were all the key mountains of the NW Wollemi. This was great stuff and an ideal spot for morning tea. As the cameras panned around, we could look back at Baal Bone Gap and the extended cliff line all the way to Baal Bone Point with the russet gold of the sandstone highlighted by the rising sun. Way to the north was the alluring, perfect cone of Tayan Pic. We shared the thought as bushwalkers that we were



Rounded Pagodas on Point Cameron Photo: Michael Keats

privileged although regarded by the mainstream population as eccentric. All too soon it was time to descend and tackle McLeans Pass. This is a 'V' shaped slot, one of several deep ravines that separates the Great Dividing Range from the ragged collection of wild, wild mountain country that is the Wollemi proper. The Pass is well served with a ramp down although there is one section where, with a full pack, it is a bit cumbersome. Otherwise it is an easy descent. Once on the floor of the ravine, a well worn pad leads SW through a ferny glen to the Stargate Tunnel. The Tunnel is really a short, water worn canyon with a towering ceiling and nicely sculpted walls. It has

a very good, flat, sandy floor. There is a logbook in a biscuit tin. If the entries are any guide, the 'cave' averages visitors about once every 3 months. We were the first entry for The Bush Club.

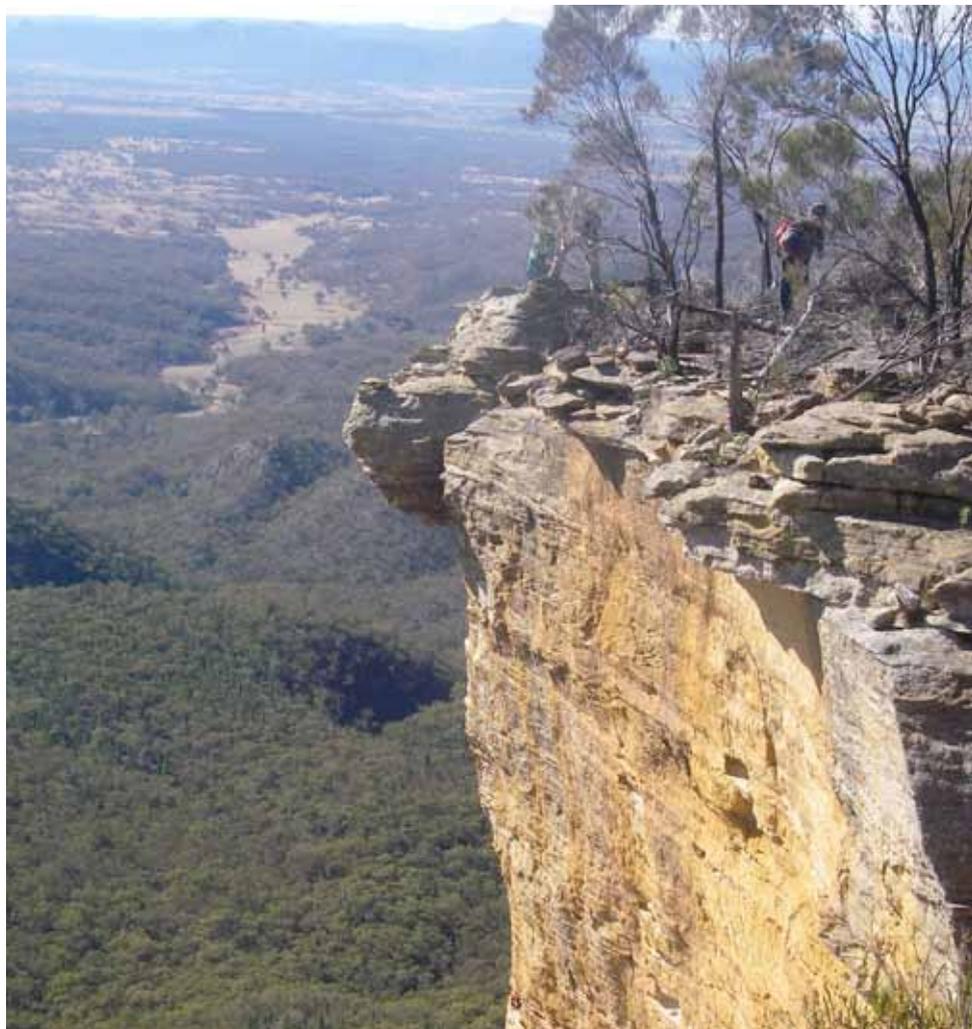
Spent a bit of time exploring, as there is a side exit as well as the two ends. Our next objective was to climb up the eastern side of the ravine and head for Mount Jamison. Morrie's notes refer to 'a ramp up 60 –70m on the right'. Well, we discovered later that there are at least 3 ways to climb up this wall. We took the hardest one first which was a lot of fun so long as you didn't look down. It is a long slope all the way up a 40m pagoda with a full pack...



Pagodas deep in Hecates Cauldron Photo: Brian Fox

The ridge forces you north and once out of the forest and onto the rounded rocky plateau the views over the vast expanse of the Capertee Valley were again stunning and brilliantly clear. Mount Jamison is skirted to the north. Soon after a deep chasm with

parallel sides has to be negotiated. Again Mother Nature has provided at least two options down from south to north. The climb out on the northern side is a bit of a scramble but nothing to get concerned about. We were soon motoring along well



Northern cliff edge near Mount McLean Photo: Michael Keats

on the 'tail' or ridge that leads NE to Mount Davidson. From this ridge 'Nipple Rock', GR 311 206 is an unmistakable landmark. The big dead tree that identifies the campsite is also easy to see.

A cairn has been placed at an unusual spot on the ridge. Perhaps it is due to the fact that from this point there is an old pad that leads up Mount Davidson to the Wolgan Trig (now decommissioned and lying in ruins). It is certainly not useful for striking out to the campsite, as the undergrowth of leptospermum is a horror. Morrie's notes say to go a further 400m north before cutting across to the campsite. Let me record that later we found a much better route out than in!



Steve Murray above McLeans Pass
Photo: Michael Keats

Arrived at the famous 'Pondage' at midday, GR 311 204. Unfortunately it is not all-pristine white sand at present. Recent rains have floated a layer of charcoal fines over a lot of it and the same rain has given the leptospermum scrub a real boost in growth. There are a few acacias about to bloom and plenty of firewood. The area of white sand is probably about 40m in length and perhaps 25m at its greatest width. It is wonderfully flat and the NW wall of pagodas makes it an excellent campsite.

Our greatest concern was to find water on top of this high and very dry looking plateau 1000m above sea level. To the SW of the campsite there is a canyon; in fact it is quite an impressive walk through about 200m of tortuous defile up to 50m deep and only 100m or so from camp. Our first priority was to establish that water was available so after dumping our gear we set off to reconnoitre the area.

From being on a delightful black and white sand beach, within metres you enter a canyon that plunges down and down. A large cave guards the opening at the top and the remains of a campfire shows that it has been used in recent times. From the cave there is a steep ramp and then a flat section with a sand floor and King Tree Ferns (*Todea barbara*) at elegant intervals. The sculptured walls are special and made more so by a series

of chock stones that break up the light. The first signs of surface water are about 100m in and are quickly followed by a shallow pool and then by a small running stream. It is cool and delicious. Eager to find out where the canyon flows we kept following it down until it entered a huge cavern open to the west and the water dropped down perhaps 10m in the first fall and then a lot more. Towards the mouth of the canyon several tall tree ferns *Cyathia australis* stretched upwards into the void.

It all seemed a bit of a comedown to have to think about collecting water but without it we would have had to curtail our activities. As it was, we had plenty for all our needs. In summer this water source could be unreliable and carrying total needs would be essential.

On return to camp we set up our accommodations (ranging from basic flies to hammocks and tents), collected firewood, had lunch and at 1330 set out to explore the immediate area. The Nipple was close by and in less than 15 minutes we were on top of it. The views are hypnotic. Not being burdened with full packs, we made it right out to the end of Point Cameron. Looking NE we could see Mount Stewart and kilometres away Mount Canobla and Red Rocks. The afternoon sun really made these features glow.

Our way of route back to camp was around the cliff edge to the west of Point Cameron. There were great views of Baal Bone Gap and closer in we could see where our water supply canyon was discharging from the cliff – a good 50m down from the top of the plateau and about the same distance from the talus slope below. Back at camp the air was starting to chill so boiling the billy was



Niche above McLeans Pass Photo: Michael Keats

a priority. The fire was popular and soon we launched into happy hour. The brie, camembert and biscuits and exotic morsels from Korea were laid out, the wine selection (3 reds and a white) was agreed and so the evening passed very pleasantly. The antics of bush cockroaches and a large phasmid walking provided entertainment. By 1930 the fire was out, the camp was quiet and remained so until the wind set in. I slept soundly not being conscious of the cold until Chang lit the fire at 0600 the following morning.

It was a leisurely start to the day. Breakfast was savoured. Chang gave us a Korean morning call at about 0730. He climbed lightly up an adjoining pagoda and facing the sun he let out a mighty but melodic 'Ya hoo', holding the extended "oooo" sound for a long time. The echoes reverberated around the Pondage for some time. It was a very different experience...

Then it was a matter of striking camp, dousing the fire and making our way out towards Mount Davidson. In



Chang Kim on Pagoda, Point Cameron Photo: Michael Keats

choosing a route we did a lot better than our way in – the forest was more open and with somewhat lighter packs it took less than 25 minutes to reach the top of Mount Davidson. Here we switched down to day packs and set off to Blue Rock Gap. There is no track but just a series of pads that look as though they have seen some traffic. The way chosen, along a narrow ridge, took us right to the southern edge of the towering cliffs. The views continued to inspire. This is a pagoda lover's paradise. Making the views even more dramatic are the serried and hauntingly beautiful columnar formations of the cliffs on the east side of the Blue Rock Gap above the Wolgan Valley. It is heady stuff to just be there. Took great shots from GR 317 201.

Then headed north where the first of several deep, parallel slots define Blue Rock Gap. Blue Rock Gap is very special. It is a place where due to elevation and geomorphology it is possible to look with a left turn of the head and survey the Capertee Valley; a turn to the right enables you to survey the Wolgan Valley. Below, the rocks drop away tens if not hundreds of metres. Taking the wrong medication at breakfast put me out of action for the next section. My head was spinning. I just had to sit down.

What follows is compiled from notes prepared by Steve Murray on the

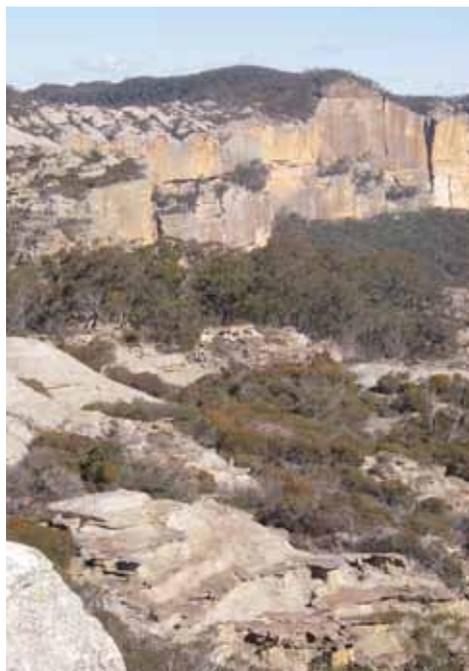
section between Blue Rock Gap and Hughes Defile. “We went down a slot on the left (north), then around to the left a bit further to another big drop. A ramp provided a walk up on the Capertee side (0952)– Blue Rock Gap? At 1005 we had made such good progress we were on a high point above the southern end of



Blue Rock Gap looking north over Pantoneys Crown.
Photo: Michael Keats

Hughes Defile”. It is unnamed, and is far removed from the place where you can breach the cliffs and descend into the defile. Said Steve to me on his return “we went there to have a look, it was terrific.”

We returned to the place where we had left the packs at 1105. From here we climbed to the very top of Mount Davidson where the Wolgan Trig used to stand. Multi-stemmed regrowth from old stumps has revegetated the top. The pierced metal vanes of the old trig now lie rusting on the ground. The access route however is largely intact and this made our descent much easier and faster than I had



Cliff line looking SW towards Mount McLean from Point Cameron Photo: Michael Keats

imagined possible. Thirty minutes later we had crossed the big parallel chasm and stood above the descent into the Stargate Tunnel. For a while the way down eluded us. We were for some reason too far north. Then exploring enabled us to find the best way down - GR 231112 6319655. Just before the descent we noticed an incredible formation on the cliffs opposite in the McLeans Pass. It looked like a stonemason had hewn from the living rock, a very tall niche for a statue. It is 6m high, about 2m wide and is perfectly symmetrical with a semicircular top – all that is missing is the statue.

At 1235 we were having lunch on the south side of McLeans Pass looking at a sea of pagodas. At 1300 we headed on back. There was now little challenge and only a couple of small hills to surmount. Brian somehow missed seeing but nearly trod on a magnificent specimen of a Sand Monitor (*Varanus gouldii*), its distinctive creamy yellow body slithering under a rock just in time. It would have been nice to get a picture of this 1.2m reptile.

At 1325 we were back at Roger's vehicle. To round off our appreciation of the area we drove to the end of the track that finishes at the top of a great cliff about 850m from Cape Horn. A clamber to the top of a pagoda enabled us to get a panoramic view of

the cliffs from Mount Jamison, Mount Davidson, Blue Rock Gap and Hughes Defile. Woolpack Rock and Woolpack Gap were outlined as silhouettes.

TABLE OF TIMES, LOCATIONS AND GRID REFERENCES.

Date	Time	Location	Grid Reference
13/08/07	0900	Lookout off The Bicentennial National Trail	
	0905	Parked vehicles	305 175
	0912	Start walking	305 175
	0950	McLeans Pass	303 191
	1013	Stargate Tunnel	302 190
	1220	Genowlan Point and lunch 25 mins	268 359
	1026	Ravine crossing	305 189
	1037	Lookout over the Capertee Valley	313 201
	1142	"Taking a reading"	312 205
	1200	Campsite (big dead tree and nipple shaped rock). Set up tents and lunch (90 mins)	311 206
	1345	At Nipple Rock	311 206
	1400	Point Cameron	310 210
	1530	Camp	311 206
14/08/07	0830	Break camp	

0845 Mount Davidson (Wolgan Trig) 315 201

		Explored ridge overlooking the Wolgan Valley	317 201
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To Blue Rock Gap 322 205

	0952	Peak above Hughes Defile	325 207
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1105 Blue Rock Gap 322 205

	1135	Exploring ramps	231 112
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1235 Lunch south side Mount McLean 302 191

	1325	Return to vehicles	305 175
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1410 At Cape Horn Lookout 315 175



Mount Davidson from Cape Horn Photo: Brain Fox