

3.17 ROCK ISLAND

MAPS ETC

Department of Lands topographic map, Mount Morgan, 8931-1S, 1:25000, second edition. Department of Lands topographic map, Ben Bullen, 8931-4S, 1:25000, second edition. Department of Lands topographic map, Cullen Bullen, 8931-3N, 1:25000, second edition. GPS setting WGS 84.

WALK DESCRIPTION AND ROUTE

This walk starts on the Old Coach Road. Park vehicles at the junction of Glowworm Tunnel Road and the

Old Coach Road. Walk south east to approximately GR 425 178, then head down a ravine ESE towards an unnamed tributary of Deanes Creek. At approximately GR 434 172 head NNE and explore a small, high plateau that is bisected by a knife like ravine. From this point, we will climb Rock Island and traverse it to the north east corner, where another knife ravine will be followed NNW and down into another unnamed creek, visited some years ago. From here, we will fight our way back to the Old Coach Road. About 14km. Many climbs and challenges.



GEAR ISSUES

PLB, GPS, appropriate head and footwear, 30m tape, 2 litres of water, electrolytes, camera and preparedness to have a good day out regardless. Change of gear.

COMMENTS

This walk may have challenging sections. Scrambling, spectacular cliffs and views. Possible rope assisted sections.

Date walked 19th October 2011.

TRACK NOTES

It was a glorious, fine and warm spring day, temperature range from 13 to 23 degrees, clear sky in the morning with some cloud build up in the afternoon.

Most people, when shown a topographic map, tend to see it as limited by the printed information. It

takes some conscious and deliberate effort, and some expense, to recast maps so that what is shown on the margins is now in the centre. Doing this opens a new world. The Department of Lands Raster Mosaic program helps but the distortion is unacceptable for navigation.

This walk evolved in large part from copying, and then joining the corners of Ben Bullen, Cullen Bullen, Rock Hill and Mount Morgan maps together and looking at the walking opportunities. The second element that motivated this walk was from research by the triumvirate who named the Gardens of Stone National Park.

The aerial photograph taken in c. 1948 showed the whole area appearing as single rock. The rock is surrounded on the north, east and south sides



Pagodas, Little Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

by the tributaries of Deanes Creek. The “island” is located principally in the south west corner of the Mount Morgan topographic map. Using the 900m contour, the south west corner is at GR 436 178, and the north east corner at GR 443 189.

The name Rock Island was created by the original three who proposed the Gardens of Stone National Park, Rodney Falconer, David Blackwell and Dr Haydn Washington, in November 1984. Ref: Correspondence David Blackwell, 2nd May 2010, who records,

“This name was given when spotted from the air, making a flight/air survey of the areas rich with Pagodas. Rock Island was extremely distinctive with low heath type vegetation, which was laid out with the most distinctive

top surface contours of the island just like a ‘contour’ topographical model. Small trees have grown some, but the surface has so little soil, the island is still distinctive from the landscape around.”

This walk is very easy to access, as in part it follows the Old Coach Road and the frequently used walking track to Tiger Snake Canyon. That is where the easy stuff ends.

Driving through the recently harvested *Pinus radiata* plantation, near Eastern Boundary Road, we noted a pair of wild horses grazing, a sight I have not seen in the area before. After a minor problem on the Old Coach Road caused by a stick wedged between the nearside rear wheel and the brake disc, the walk started at 0915 from the locked gate on the Old



View over Deanes Creek from the north east end of Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox



Cliff line below Little Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

Coach Road, GR 425 179. Setting the compass bearing south east, we pushed through the low heath forest understorey for about 200m, when the first glimpses of the deeply dissected Deanes Creek catchment came into view, the apparent depth of Deanes Creek is accentuated by the benched vertical cliffs on the eastern side. More immediately, we could see perched pagodas on the edge of almost naked rock that characterises Rock Island, Little Rock Island and several adjoining bluffs. The aerial photos reveal that this terrain, once reached, would be a delight to explore.

Almost immediately, we started dropping down into a narrowing canyon. The views disappeared and our line of sight was confined to taller and taller cliffs, towering trees and thickening scrub. As is usual practice, we headed to the base of the cliffs, where a dry creek bed became our pathway. Here, water erosion had created a series of vertical recesses that in a million years might become waterfalls. For now they were home to moisture loving red lichen and Pencil Orchids, *Dendrobium striolatum*.

The vegetation also changed, with tree ferns and various rainforest species,



A fern filled gully below Little Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

including Native Quince, *Alectryon subcinereus* and Guioa, *Guioa semiglauca*. Pools of water appeared, and the immediate area was very pleasant. This was all very temporary. A great tumble of huge rocks blocked the way forward, so climbing up and over followed. This was fine, as I wanted to explore the deep recesses of a stub gully/ canyon to the south at approx. GR 433 171.

Progress slowed as we edged our way forward through scrappy heath generously mixed with sword grass. We pushed forward for about 100m hoping that the stub canyon would narrow and become a pleasant place.

Not this time. We rounded a large block of rock to be confronted with a 20m waterfall. If we wanted to explore this place, we would have to come in from the top and be equipped to abseil. There was a lot more to see, so we retraced our steps back to the big rock tumble.

It was now 1000, so the group decided to climb to the top of the biggest rock, GR 433 173, and seek a spot for morning tea. A knife edge climb led to a perfect spot with enough seating room for all, together with a view deep into the ravine down below. Twenty minutes later, we descended and commenced exploring the ravine



Pagodas, Little Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

below. It is a complex geomorphologic area with lots of bifurcating slots as well as slots making junctions, thus creating an absolute wonderland. Within this area, there are isolated pagodas, surprising slots, including an almost circular, vertical shaft with an internal waterfall, GR 436 174. Truly, it is a place full of wonders.

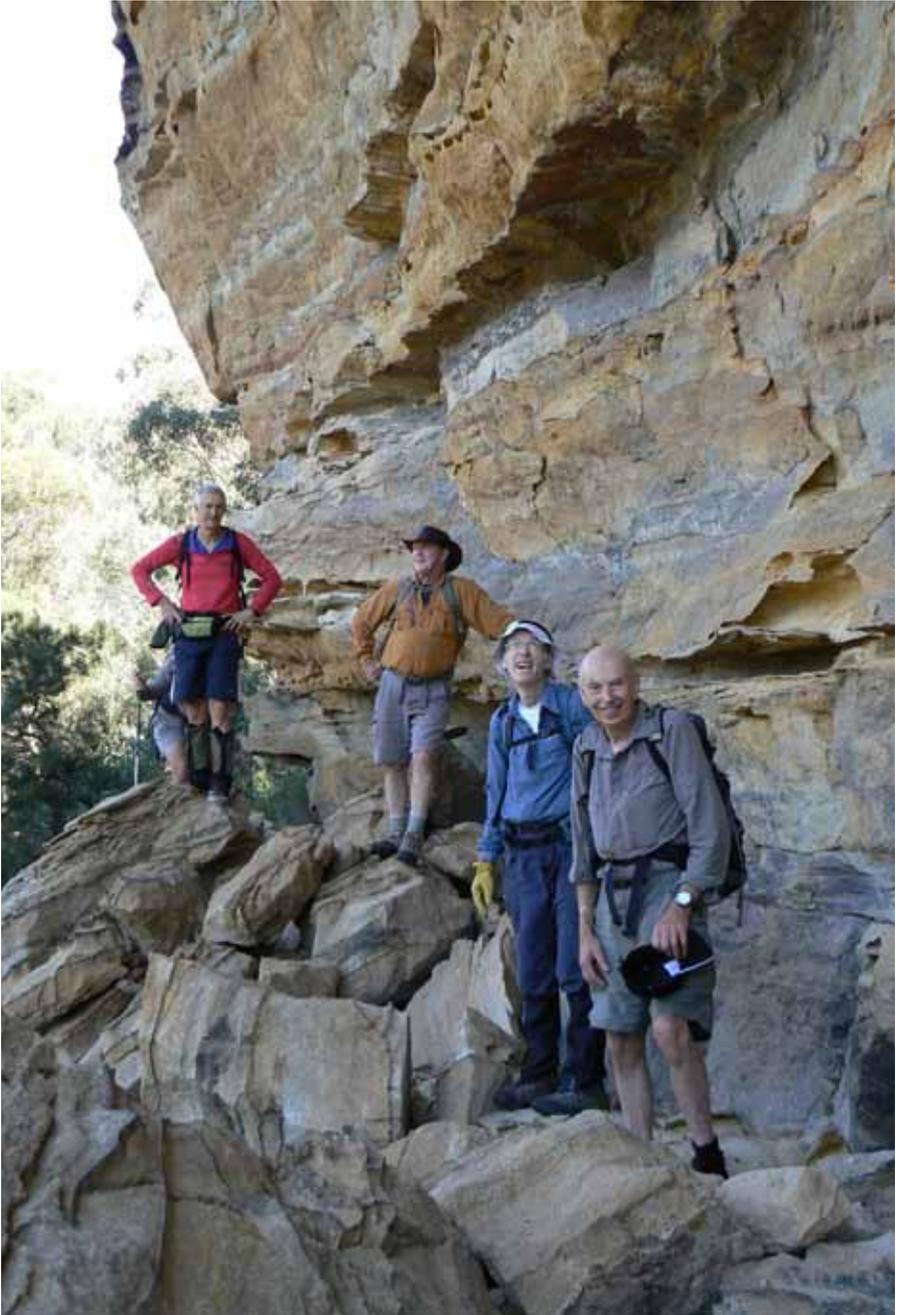
We followed a dry overhang as it twisted and contorted, opening out into caves, then neaping into a stony path, before again morphing into a canyon like slot. At every junction, a decision had to be made as to which option to follow. Somehow each time we picked well and our journey was full of delights. An isolated and elevated area I have called Little Rock Island was next in our sights. It is roughly

kidney shaped and has a top surface area of about 2,000 square metres. Like its big brother, it is essentially a large, prominent isolated rock with little vegetation. It is located immediately south of Rock Island.

To assess our chances of climbing Little Rock Island, Brian climbed a nearby pagoda and pronounced the views would be good if we could find a way up. Meanwhile, the rest of the group had found an interesting slot going down to the base level of this isolated island. In search of a way up onto the top, another overhang was explored in the internal curvature of Little Rock Island. Adjoining it, was a stepped pagoda that allowed us to almost walk up onto the top.



Boronia sp., Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox



Below Little Rock Island. Left to right, Ian Armstrong, Gary Monks, Chris Dowling and Michael Keats
Photo: Brian Fox

What a different world awaited us on the top! It was a veritable garden of spring flowers. What really amazed me was the vast number of intense blue Sun Orchids, *Thelymitra* sp. These spikes of blue contrasted with huge spreads of pink Boronias and a raft of different yellow and white flowering species. What made the area so special was that everything was less than 1m tall, compact and with a minimum of foliage. To give focus to this riot of colour, there were two or three climbable platy pagodas balancing on the cliff edge.

Lifting our sights beyond the confines of the immediate area, we could look north to the equally stunning, garden topped Rock Island, and east into the deep trench of Deanes Creek. When we climbed one of the pagodas on the eastern edge of Little Rock Island, there were visuals down more than 100m into the creek, and views upstream for several kilometres. The actual trace of Deanes Creek was outlined with a richer and darker ribbon of rainforest species.



Stalagmite in the Valley that Time Forgot Photo: Brian Fox



Air shaft, Little Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

When we walked north east across Little Rock Island, the illusion that we could easily get to Rock Island was shattered. There was a 50m + deep ravine. Fortunately for us, the western side of Little Rock Island is more benign and a doable challenge. We found another slot that led down into an enclosed valley with some of the largest eucalypts I have seen anywhere. These forest giants have survived because it is just too difficult to extract them. From this enclosed area, no less than seven deep, mysterious slots can be explored.

As our objective was to traverse Rock Island, we chose the tightest, narrowest and most immediately attractive one. It is oriented north - south and the entry is filled with ancient tree ferns and fallen logs. What light does get through has to compete with a dense canopy of Coachwood and Sassafras. A grey sand wash against the eastern wall identifies an intermittent watercourse. The sandstone walls are a rose pink, the air cool and the ambience church like.

Moving through, we came to a rare sight, a semi-circular embrasure



The ravine north of the access slot up onto Rock Island Photo: Brian Fox

maybe 6m high, and equally as wide and deep, with a centrally located, very fine dripping water source. This mineral rich water had built a magnificent, rich red stalagmite about 50cm high. It had a small depression in the top and was in active growth phase. All around the skirt of this single feature was red flowstone. What an incredible find! A lot of camera time was invested here.

Further up this remarkable slot, a tree had sent out a root in search of nutrient rich water. Amazingly, this root had traversed more than 3m of open rock to tap into this water source. The place is another natural wonder. We called it the Place That Time Forgot, GR 436 179. The narrowing northern end of this slot was followed upwards and still further north. Within it a watershed was crossed, and another open slot led out into a small valley.

We were now separated from our objective, the top of Rock Island, by a

seemingly continuous 10 to 20m high vertical rock wall. It was decided to follow this rock wall until we could find a way up, or be forced to abandon the project.

Unbelievably, at GR 436 183, we spied a narrow cleft, where the rock wall had cracked vertically and opened up a 30cm wide space. Over time, this cleft had filled with broken rock and debris and was now a very narrow staircase and way of access. In minutes, we had all made the transition from being down in a rather ordinary valley to the top of the highest pagoda on Rock Island, GR 438 182. If we thought that Little Rock Island had the 'wow' factor, this ten times larger exposed area was very special. Every flowering plant was in bloom; scents and nectars filled the air. This was a piece of paradise to be savoured and enjoyed.

It was now just after midday and time to walk the traverse, encompassing



Pagoda Daises, *Leucochrysum graminifolium* Photo: Brian Fox



Within the Valley that Time Forgot Photo: Brian Fox

the three high points that stretch along the north east to south west axis of Rock Island. It was a slow progress, as views were captured on camera and the sheer joy of being there was appreciated. At 1229, GR 441 186, under the only trees on Rock Island, we sat down for lunch. The aerial photo shows a series of parallel slots in the north east corner cutting through Rock Island like pieces of bread sliced off a cottage loaf. It was agreed that after lunch we should go and see whether we could find a least one of these.

At 1250, the search began. It was fruitless, so perhaps these slots are very shallow and are not structural faults at all. There was a school of thought that suggested we could descend the north east corner and then make our way up the deep ravine before attempting to exit via one of a dozen slots leading back to the Tiger

Snake Canyon Track. One cursory look at the first of two major cliff lines put paid to this idea, we would need at least 60m of rope and a lot more time than was available.

From our position at GR 442 188, there appeared to be possibly three ways of route through the cliffs and off Rock Island. To test this idea, we walked to the northern cliff edge wanting to see and do as much as possible. Noteworthy was the number of places where running water was available. In one such spot, Brian found a live worm that was duly recorded. After assessing several possible sites as 'no go,' we found a stepped pagoda leading down to a lower level. A line of sight from this lower level seemed as though we could make it down to a dry creek bed.

This worked well as the secondary cliff line at this point was small

enough to slide down without serious consequence. We made it into the dry creek at 1330, GR 437 191. Earlier plans to climb up a slot opposite our position were abandoned when it was realised that, whilst it was an interesting climb, it was also very possibly another island. A further change was made to plans and we walked up the dry stream bed for a distance. Like with many apparently dry streams in this terrain, we found flowing water up higher, and, further upstream still, a tributary stream was also flowing, GR 437 190. This water must disappear into a very porous substrate.

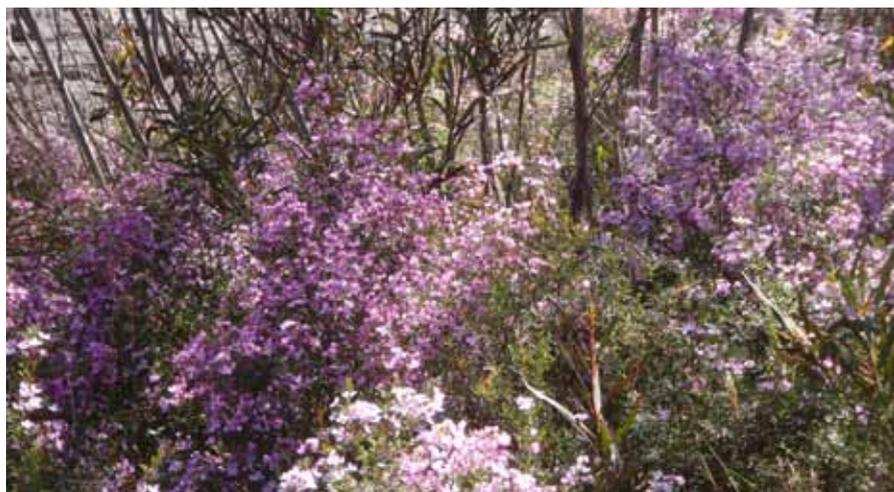
A great tangle of fallen logs persuaded us to leave the stream bed and try our luck climbing the western cliffs of a multibranching slot system. We did well finding a ravine that gained us about 40m of vertical advantage. Testing the north end of this ravine proved it a 'no go' option, as it ended in a 20m waterfall. Now it was time to test the south end. This proved to be a winner, with a steep climb up a platy pagoda making it an easy exit from the slot system. This was at GR 436 190. It was now 1354. A course due west was set and at 1410 we intersected with the Tiger Snake Canyon Track, GR 432 191. From this point it was an easy 1.5km walk back to the vehicles.



Within the Place That Time Forgot Photo: Brian Graetz

TABLE OF TIMES, LOCATIONS AND GRID REFERENCES

Time	Location	Grid Ref			
			1139	Stalagmite in tight ravine	436 179
0910	Park at barrier on the Old Coach Road	425 179	1151	North end of tight ravine	436 181
0915	Commence walk	425 179	1200	Slot up onto Rock Island	436 183
0923	Commence descent	429 177	1229	Lunch on crest of Rock Island, 21 min	441 186
0937	Huge overhang	431 176	1257	East Rock Island	442 188
1000	End of stub canyon waterfall	432 172	1318	Gully down off Rock Island	439 190
1008	Morning tea on rock, 12 min	433 173	1325	Water source on lower slope of Rock Island	438 191
1029	Slot	434 173	1330	Dry creek bed north of Rock Island	437 191
1035	On pagoda	434 174	1339	Creek junction	437 190
1042	Vertical shaft	436 174	1350	Up ramp and cliff face	436 190
1102	On a point	436 174	1410	Tiger Snake Canyon Track	432 191
1127	Slot down off Little Rock Island	436 177	1430	At vehicles	425 179



Boronia sp., Rock Island Photo: Michael Keats



Climbing to the top of Rock Island Photo: Ian Armstrong