

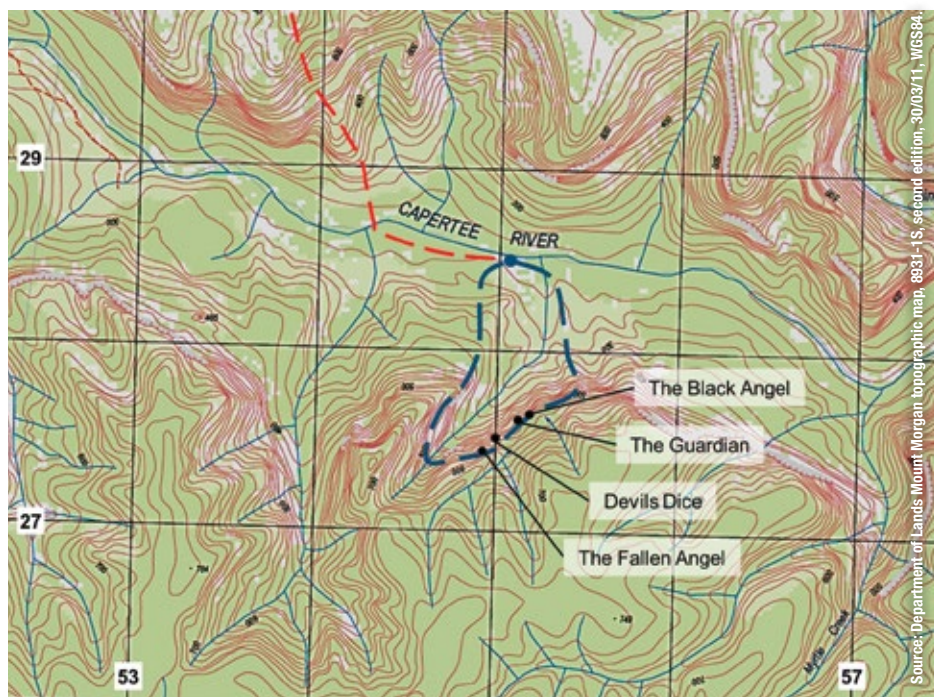
DAY : 11

Capertee Valley: The Black Angel traverse

BY YURI BOLOTIN



Southern cliffs of the Capertee Valley. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Day 11: 13th September 2012

Capertee Valley: The Black Angel traverse

Because we had arrived at the Capertee Valley camp a day ahead of schedule and needed to wait for our re-supply party that was coming early that afternoon, the day was our (well deserved) day off. However, none of us felt like a sleep in or a lie around the camp for a day. We were so energised by the Traverse experience that all we wanted to do was to go on exploring.

Coming down from the northern escarpment the previous day, we had seen some very high and fascinating

looking cliffs immediately south of our camp. We decided to explore these in the morning. Ian was happy with the ascent route he had chosen for the continuation of the Traverse; it was a little bit to the west of these cliffs, but we thought maybe we could find another way up that could be useful for other journeys.

We had spent a perfect, quiet, starry night, with no wind in our camp on the banks of the Capertee River. The main sounds during the night were of frogs in the river, although owl cries could also be heard. It was the birds who helped to wake us up this morning. If in another place we might have heard a solo or an

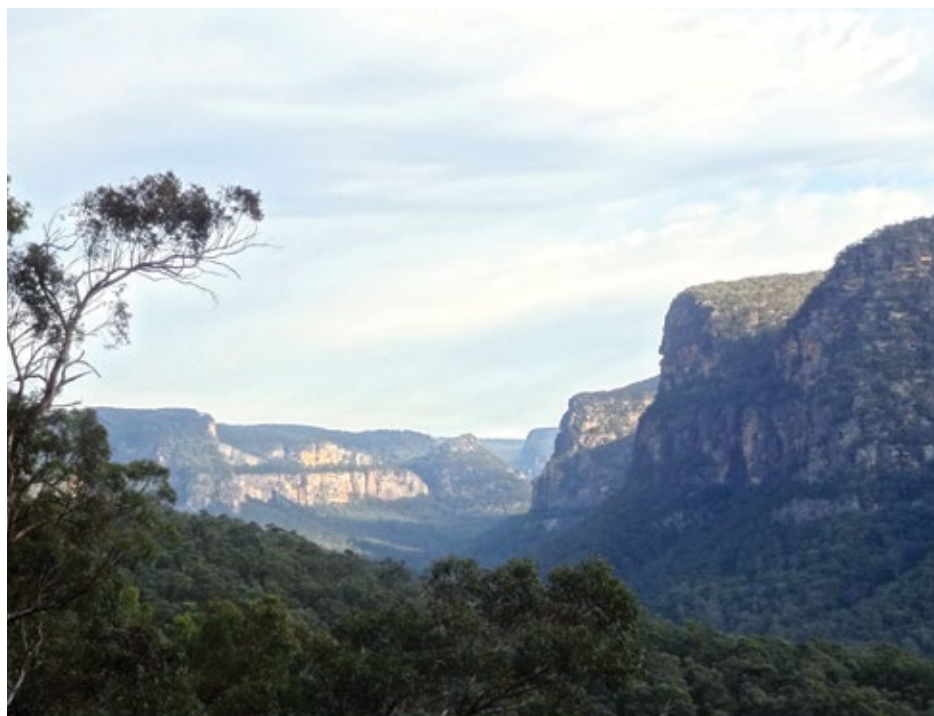


Ian underneath the Capertee cliffs. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

a capella performance, here there was a whole choir of birds singing, and not necessarily in unison. It was 05:44 – an appropriate time to start our “lazing around” day. The temperature was 4°C, and it indeed felt pretty cold.

At 06:44, we were ready for our exploratory walk into the high cliffs

to the south of our camp. We walked a few hundred metres east and chose a dry ravine to go up (GR 55273 28414), at 06:50. We stayed at the bottom for a little while, until it became very scrubby, then came out of it and started to climb steeply and soon reached the first cliff line. We



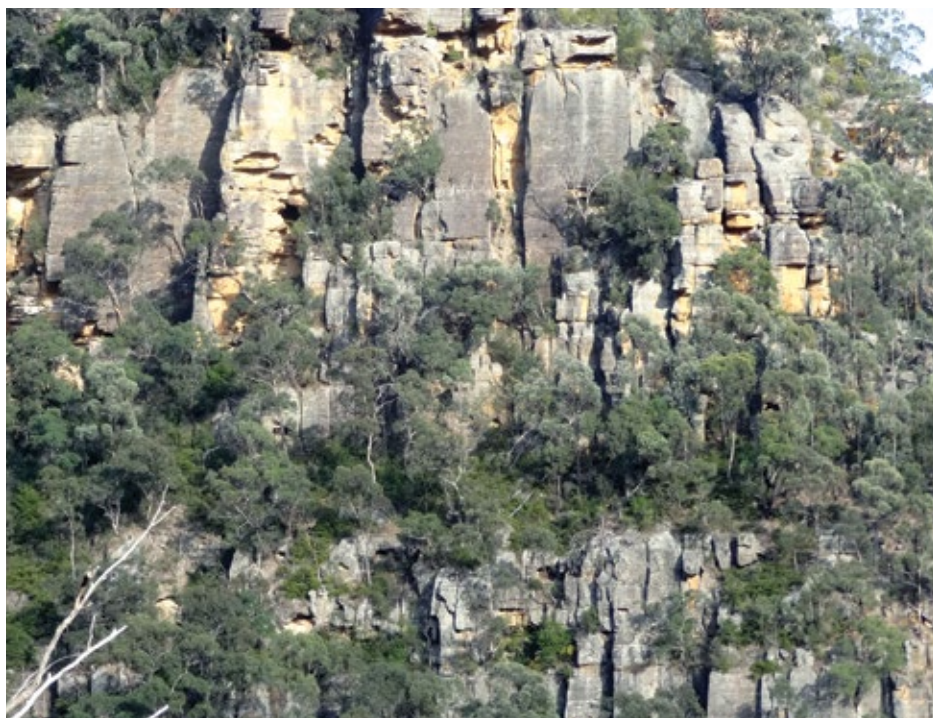
Capertee Valley view, looking west. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

scrambled through this and kept going up even more steeply, until at 07:10 we found ourselves at the base of the second, major line of cliffs – over 100 metres high and very dissected, with enormous faces of coloured sandstone rock sculpted in different planes and directions – an awesome and awe inspiring sight! (GR 55451 27821). Even though we had been in climbing mode most of the time since we left the camp, doing it with only day packs felt amazingly light, almost like flying through the air.

We scrambled a little higher, as there appeared to be a gully in the rock face that could potentially go all the way up,

but were quickly repelled by huge cliffs. Even Rodney agreed this wasn't going to work. We were now going to have to come down and traverse underneath the high bluffs, until perhaps we could find another way up.

Thus began a truly spectacular traverse that went for about a kilometre underneath the cliffs. The rocks here are of great complexity, both in colours, textures, and in the way they have eroded and collapsed over the years. Add that to the ruggedness and the enormous scale of this landscape – the sheer size of the cliffs – and you get truly amazing sights at every turn. Quite a bit of scrambling was



Cliffs on the western side of the ravine. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

constantly required to negotiate the rock falls and blockages along the way, but it was all great fun.

We did not realise it at the time, as we were too close to it, but hovering high above us during this traverse was a giant black figure with wings, perhaps 100 metres tall, painted by Mother Nature on the cliff face above. We saw the figure for the first time much later, when we rounded the gully ahead and came out on another side. I called the figure the Black Angel (GR 55185 27690), and this journey, the Black Angel Traverse.

From our high position, the views into Capertee Valley were

excellent, and we were able to see and photograph our descent route of the day before, as well as an alternative, basalt ridge course to the east of it called the Cattle Duffers Spur. A fellow bushwalker Roger Caffin later advised me:

There's a cattle track up/down it. Why do you think there was a dozer track south from Gaspers to there? You run the cattle up the Capertee (water, grazing), up Cattle Duffer Spur, north to Gaspers (water, grazing), east across a valley (water, grazing), south of the Army Road to Mt Wirraba (some water), and down to Putty. The Army Road overlays the old cattle route.



Wildflower fields. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

Ian had done both of those routes before and found that, whilst our previous day's descent was more technically difficult, being on the sandstone, it had a lot less *Bursaria spinosa* and other nasties.

The cliffs we were walking under now swung to the south-west, and we started to enter a wide ravine formed by the tributary of Capertee River that we had followed at the very beginning of the day's journey. The rocks on the other, distant side of the ravine were smaller in size and interspersed with miniature looking trees growing amongst them in compact groups. These cliffs were marvellously sculptured, like in a cubist

painting, with the intense morning light highlighting their complex multidimensional surfaces. All around us were magnificent spring flowers, which added bright colour and a touch of lightness to this dramatic landscape.

As we turned another corner, another amazing sight was revealed to us – a giant 50 metre-plus high rock bastion protruding from the cliff surface and crowned with a huge formation resembling a head – “The Guardian”. In a few minutes, when we stood under The Guardian and looked up, it sent shivers down my spine – up there, we saw an enormous head wrapped in a cap looking down at us with a pair of huge, empty eye sockets and a roughly



Yuri during the Black Angel traverse. PHOTO: IAN THORPE

chiselled mouth, contorted in a mocking, menacing grimace. We didn't realise it until later, but The Guardian is standing right next to the Black Angel, and he must have been telling us, "Beware!" (GR 55160 27670, at 07:56).

When we had started our walk that

morning, the sky had been totally clear, but by now it was half covered with clouds and the wind had picked up, although it was a warm wind. We were already effectively within a side creek gorge, with a lot of air underneath us. By gradually making our way south-west, we were hoping the ledge we



The Guardian. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

were clinging to would continue and eventually allow us to cross the gorge.

We soon saw another poorly defined creek bed up ahead and decided to test it for a way up through the cliffs. Again, it did not work, so we were forced to come down to the original ledge in order to continue the traverse. Along the way, there was a giant,

perfectly sliced off, leaning slab of sandstone rock, resting against the cliff, leaving a narrow gap that just allowed us to squeeze through. Lucky we only had one small pack to share between the three of us.

Soon, we entered another spectacular overhang, adorned with exquisitely shaped, multi-coloured stone



Ian and Rodney in the overhang. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

decorations. The overhang culminated in a dramatic triangular plate of rock jutting out from the cliff face at a straight angle and forming a huge canopy over the walkway. A few steps further on, there was a wonderful, oblong window eroded through the rock. “Will the wonders ever stop?” I asked aloud; and then, in a few moments, was forced to exclaim, “Obviously not soon!”, as another incredible sight came into the view: a three metre high rock, lying on its side and looking like the delicate figure of a woman who had just dropped down from the sky – the Fallen Angel (GR 55000 27545, at 08:25).

Next, we saw another ascent

possibility and climbed to a higher overhang with a ramp on it that was leading us higher again. The ramp didn’t go up, but it brought us to another jaw-dropping area. We saw that about 30 metres ahead the overhang stopped at a sheer wall that was facing us at 90 degrees. It was coloured with broad, bold grey, yellow and white “brushstrokes” worthy of Jackson Pollock. In front of it was a giant dice – a 2.5 metre high cube with straight, almost perfectly chiselled sides, one burning deep yellow in the morning sun, the other matt grey; the sharp edge turned towards us and the entire rock precariously balanced on the brink of an abyss – this was the



Yuri with the Fallen Angel PHOTO: RODNEY NELSON

Devils Dice. Wow! Wow! Wow! (GR 54963 27480, at 08:30).

After admiring this miracle of nature, we backtracked from our high level overhang and came down to our initial ledge, so as to be able to continue. That pathway, however, also ended in a long drop within the next ten minutes, so we descended to the next ledge down that was walkable only for 50 metres or so. Down again we went, to find another ledge that finally brought us to the creek level within the gorge, at a point where it looked like it was about to become either a canyon or a waterfall (GR 54691 27457, at 09:11). In fact, when we entered this rainforest clad

ravine, we realised it was both – a canyon downstream, where the creek dropped some 20 metres, and a narrow waterfall upstream, where it plunged down from a 30 metre cliff.

The only way to progress from here was to try and sidle on the western side of the ravine, all the way to its nose, some 500 metres away, and then see whether that would lead us safely down. We had a drink from a crystal clear, cold pool of water under our feet and went to find our way out of the gorge.

The going was slow, with a totally different environment on this side of the valley: dense scrub, lots of roots, little terraces that start and



Devils Dice. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

stop very quickly, and no overhangs at all. At one point, we had to squeeze ourselves through a small hole, to get underneath a rock blockage. Definitely an easier thing to do without the backpacks!

We stopped for a quick rest at a rock platform, when all of a sudden I saw it. On the enormous canvas of the tall, yellow, pockmarked cliff opposite us, which we had walked under about an hour or so earlier, was now clearly visible, a giant, black figure, perhaps 100 metres high by 30 metres across, with a conical hood, slitted eyes, and huge outstretched raised wings, looking towards us – the Black Angel. The figure is a random result of dark



Detail of Devils Dice. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



The Black Angel. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

cliff erosion that has revealed the light sandstone texture underneath. This is the prosaic explanation. However, this feature had a mesmerising and deeply emotional effect on me and the others as we watched it, with bated breath, for what seemed like an age (GR 54900 27736, at 09:48).

As we were now positioned very near the nose at this point, with still only the vertical cliffs underneath us, we were keen to press on, to find out whether we would be able to get down. We wanted to be back at the camp before our re-supply team arrived (we had worked out it might be about



Yuri and Ian opposite the Black Angel. PHOTO: RODNEY NELSON

midday), and the concern was that if we could not descend on the nose, we would have to go back all the way we had come, which would take quite a long time.

It was amazing to observe that as we emerged on the spur, the situation changed within less than 50 metres – from impenetrable cliffs underneath us to a very easy descent route (GR 54940 27880). Elated, relieved, and now with lots of time to spare, we decided to have morning tea, from 10:08 till 10:25. The wind had picked up quite a bit, and there was a lot of high cloud in the sky. The temperature was 20°C. It felt like a cool change was coming. During one of the strong gusts of

wind, Ian nearly lost his map and map case, but they were rescued after a fast dash down the slope.

The end of the journey was very straightforward, coming down the nose into the valley. We even managed to avoid most of *Bursaria spinosa* and were back at the camp at 10:48. In the end, we didn't find another pass up from the Capertee – in fact we proved it doesn't exist from the gully we explored. However, this was a fantastic outing, and highly recommended in its own right.

I photographed Sow or Milk Thistle, *Sonchus arvensis*, which Rodney found near the camp. He informed me this plant is good for salads and cooking.

At about 12:15, we heard the noise of the car engine, and our re-supply party appeared from around the corner. Even though this fire trail is closed to other vehicles, Michael Keats had enlisted the help of the NPWS, who agreed to drive our supplies, together with the three members of the re-supply party – Michael Keats, Brian Fox and John Cooper. The vehicle was driven by Sterling Wardell, a contractor in charge of the feral animal baiting program, who re-set his baits, had lunch with us and went back the same afternoon.

It was so good to spend time with our friends, exchanging stories and hearing the news from home.

The cool change came straight after lunch, bringing a short spell of rain and lower temperatures (14°C), and then quickly moved away before dinner time. That night, we again

had an amazing feast provided by our backup team, accompanied by the second bottle of red wine. Many wonderful stories and conversations later, it was bed time at 20:05. The final scores for Wollemi Yahtzee Championship were: Ian, 6 ½; Yuri, 4 ½; and Rodney, 4.

The temperature was 10°C. The next day, the re-supply party, together with Rodney, planned to walk out to Glen Davis and attempt to climb the Glen Trig. Ian and I would continue on the last leg of our Wollemi Traverse.

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Total distance for the day was 6 km; total ascent was 491 m.
Stage 2 (Days 6 – 11): distance was 109 km; ascent 3,994 m.
Stage 2 per-day averages: distance 18.2 km; ascent 666 m.
Cumulative distance was 172.5 km;; ascent 8,322 m.

TABLE OF TIMES, LOCATIONS AND GRID REFERENCES: DAY 11, 13TH SEPTEMBER		
TIME	LOCATION	GRID REFERENCE (WGS84)
06:44	Left the campsite	GR 55135 28467
06:50	Turned south, up a dry ravine	GR 55273 28414
07:10	At the main cliff base	GR 55451 27821
07:50	The Black Angel	GR 55185 27690
07:56	The Guardian	GR 55160 27670
08:25	The Fallen Angel	GR 55000 27545
08:30	Devils Dice	GR 54963 27480
09:11	In the unnamed ravine	GR 54691 27457
09:48	The Black Angel viewpoint	GR 54900 27736
10:08 – 10:25	Morning tea	GR 54940 27880
10:48	Campsite	GR 55135 28467