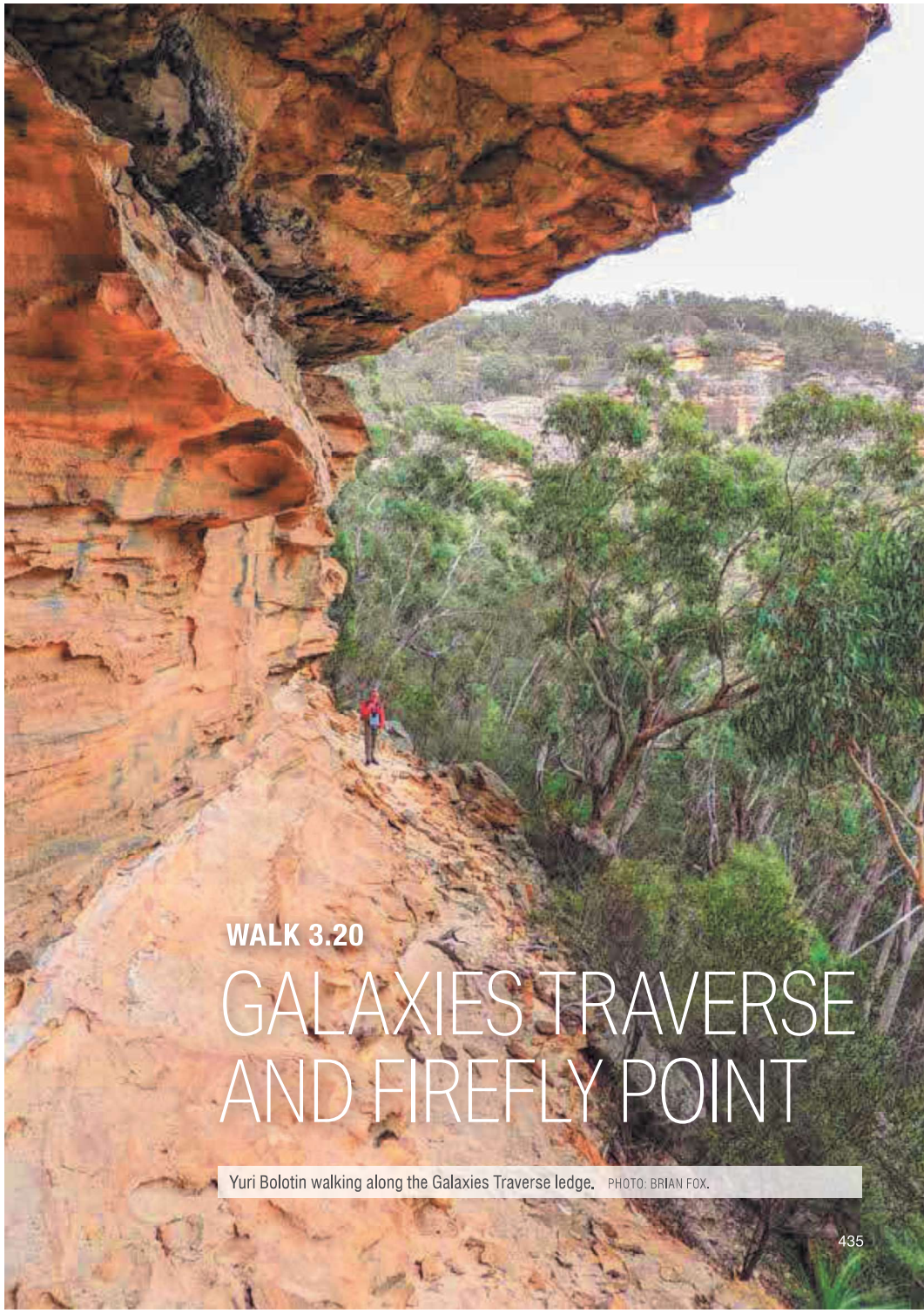
At 1411, the ribbon of rainforest that we had sighted from our lunch spot was literally at our feet – and, as we discovered, there was little else at our feet. The access route has been scoured by overuse and is now very steep in the upper sections. Fortunately, it was dry, because under wet conditions, making a controlled safe trip down would be very difficult.

The descent took over an hour. There were few diversions, but one that was quite amazing was a cluster of four mature puff balls, *Lycoperdon pyriforme*, found at 1456. These elegant natural wonders still gave out a good stream of spores when gently squeezed. The rainforest section ended at 1512, and we exited to the Little Capertee Creek Camping Ground at 1530.

Trip statistics: total distance 8 kilometres; total ascents 470 metres.

Table of times, locations and grid references

TIME	LOCATION	GRID REFERENCE	ELEVATION
0900	Briefing at Newnes Hotel	4225 2542	508 m
0913	Parked vehicles and started walking	4256 2627	500 m
0935	Fell property	4333 2604	530 m
0939	Tennis court	4336 2611	535 m
0944	Cairn and leave track	4333 2623	550 m
1019	On ledge	4354 2676	640 m
1025	Morning tea in cave (Sunshine Cave), 8 min	4353 2687	660 m
1052	Climbing slot in canyon	4342 2683	720 m
1110	Commence Skywalker Traverse	4347 2674	745 m
1122	On Skywalker Traverse	4324 2654	750 m
1142	Fixed rope on ledge	4300 2649	753 m
1154	Overhang with old newspaper	4287 2660	759 m
1213	Campground Point	4280 2656	752 m
1255	Western end of Skywalker Traverse. Lunch, 25 min	4251 2687	748 m
1326	Waterfall	4263 2693	760 m
1335	Overhang	4259 2696	762 m
1348	Faberge Gully	4246 2705	766 m
1411	At edge of Cathedral Canyon	4219 2715	754 m
1456	In Cathedral Canyon	4235 2687	605 m
1512	Leave rainforest section of canyon	4234 2670	540 m
1530	At vehicles	4256 2627	500 m



WALK 3.20

GALAXIES TRAVERSE AND FIREFLY POINT

Yuri Bolotin walking along the Galaxies Traverse ledge. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

Walk 3.20 Galaxies Traverse and Firefly Point

The Weather

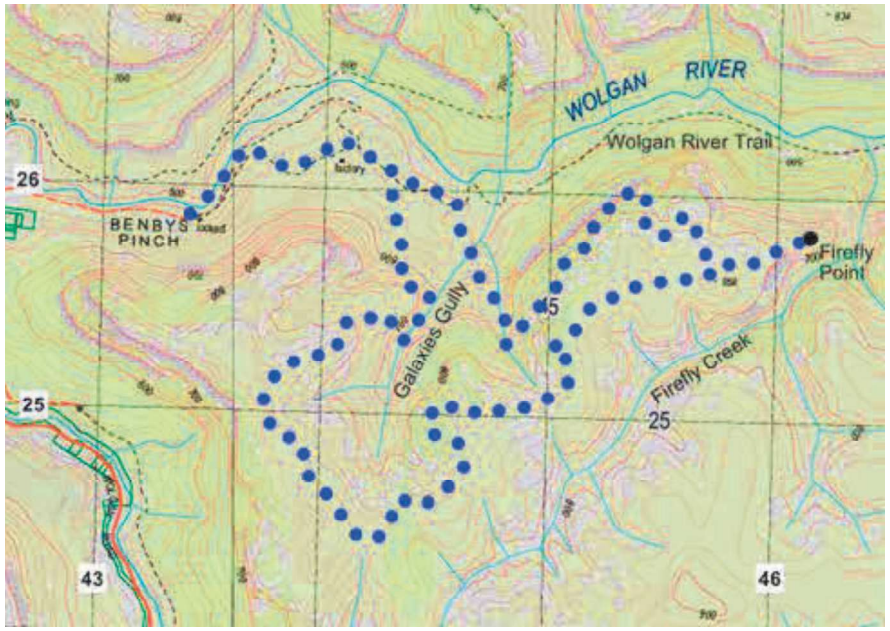
A cold day of variable weather conditions. The temperature range of 6 to 9 degrees C. In the morning, during the drive and in Lithgow, we experienced very strong winds with the corresponding chill factor. By the time we got to Newnes, the wind had died down, but the sky was grey and overcast. During the morning, there were periods of cold drizzle bordering on snow, and the wind was again being felt. However, by early afternoon, part of the cloud cover had dissipated, together with the wind, and some time was spent in glorious sunshine. There was only little cloud cover left at the end of the walk.

Track Notes

Note: *Time references in the text relate to Grid References in the table at the end of these Track Notes.*

One of the key objectives of this adventure was to explore a part of Island Mountain known as Exploding Galaxies. Less than half an hour into the walk, as we rounded a bend in the Wolgan River Trail, the enormous vertical 150 metre high walls of the Exploding Galaxies stared us in the face some 500 metres away. We stopped momentarily. My walk plan called for climbing above these walls, locating a possible ledge I had seen on aerial maps, then traversing along that ledge. I looked at my walking companions; they looked at me. No words were spoken, but the unspoken question was, *Are you serious?* 'Well, we might instead have to walk underneath, not above these

Maps	Department of Lands topographic map Ben Bullen 8931-4S, 1:25,000, 2nd ed. Department of Lands topographic map Mount Morgan 8931-1S, 1:25,000, 2nd ed. GPS setting WGS 84.
Walk description and route	Cross the Wolgan River at the ford at Newnes and park at the locked gate on the Wolgan River Trail. Walk the trail to GR 448 260, then climb south to under the first line of cliffs. Explore it in the northerly and then easterly direction. Try to find a way up to the tops. The exit options are several and will depend on what we find. About 6 km, maybe more.
Gear recommendations	First aid kit, 2 litres of water. GPS, PLB, appropriate head- and footwear, electrolytes, maps, compass, tape (leader only). Have clothes to change into in the car for afterwards.
Comments	Exploratory. Scrambling and exposure.
Date walked	1 July 2016



Source: Department of Lands topographic map Ben Bullen 8931-4S, 1:25,000, second edition. Department of Lands topographic map Mount Morgan 8931-1S, 1:25,000, second edition.



The remains of a coke oven from the industrial era. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.

walls,' I muttered. Rodney looked at the looming obstacle once again and said, 'We'll do well if we can get on top of these; let's try.' That must have summed up everybody's feelings, so with nothing more to be said, we resumed our march.

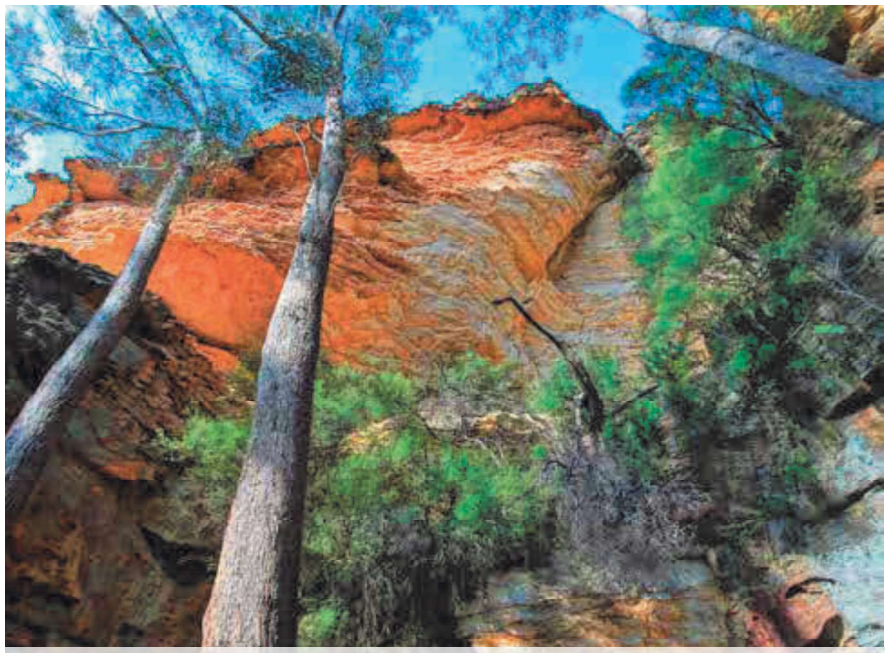
Let me start from the beginning, though. The car was parked at the locked gate, and after a quick briefing session, we were on our way along the Wolgan River Trail at 0905. This part of the trail is called The Ruins Walk, and accordingly, we had quite a few sightings of relics of the mining/industrial era, c. 1907–1920, most notably, the coke ovens with their magnificent spherical brickwork. We could only afford a very brief stop today to admire the builders' craftsmanship.

Next, the party walked past the remains of a big house with two chimneys on the opposing walls still standing, and in a few more minutes the old industrial area was behind us. Soon, our first objective was in sight – the Exploding Galaxies. After a short conversation and reassessment, we continued along the trail, our plan unchanged and our sense of adventure heightened.

At 0931, the group left the Wolgan River Trail and started to climb up the Galaxies Gully to our south. We had only walked for a few minutes when Brian exclaimed, 'Have a look at this!' He spotted yet another set of remains (of a fireplace and therefore, a house) that we had not seen before. This was at 0933. Interestingly, these ruins are within 100 metres or so from



Remnants of a house chimney. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



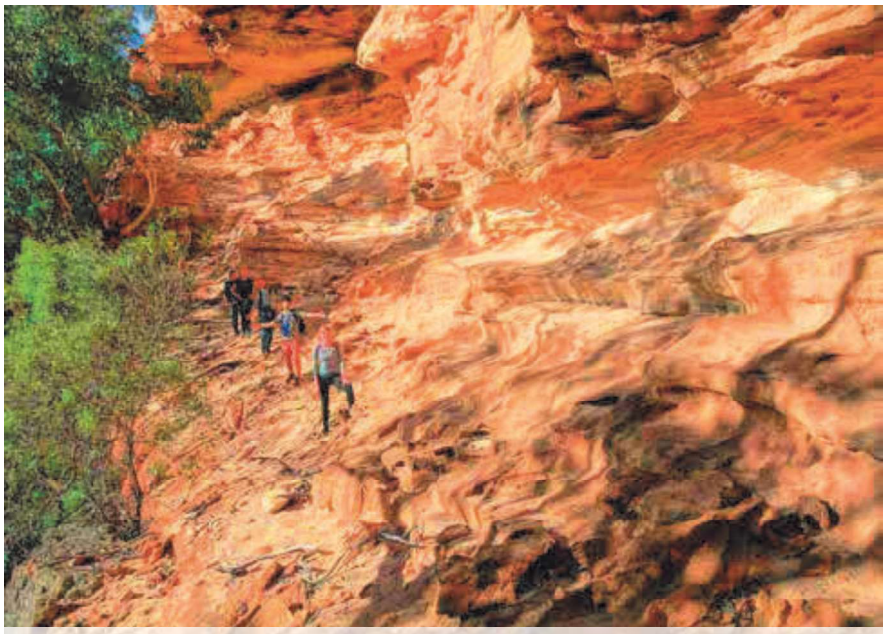
Cliffs above Galaxies Ledge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.

the remarkable cave house we had found during our walk on 26 August 2014. Even though this small valley is located a fair way east from the main works, people living here would most likely have been associated with the shale mining activity. Today's find was important as it gave us confirmation that this area was occupied in the past.

Soon after leaving the house remains, we crossed the shallow watercourse of the Galaxies Gully and proceeded on to a spur separating the main creek from its eastern tributary. Our strategy was to climb as far as possible whilst staying within the tributary gully. If we were able to get above approximately 740 metres, this would place us higher than the menacing Exploding Galaxies cliffs.

Soon, our gears were in a full ascent mode. Lurking through the trees on our left, there was a large expanse of open, orange sandstone, which would be impossible to negotiate at this stage. The slope gradient in front of us was extremely steep, but doable. Every sweaty, hard-earned metre of the climb brought us closer to our objective of getting above these vertical walls, and that thought was providing the extra energy we needed so much.

By 0938, the bottom of the first cliff line on the western side of the tributary creek was reached. We needed to keep climbing but also



A large overhang at the start of Galaxies Ledge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



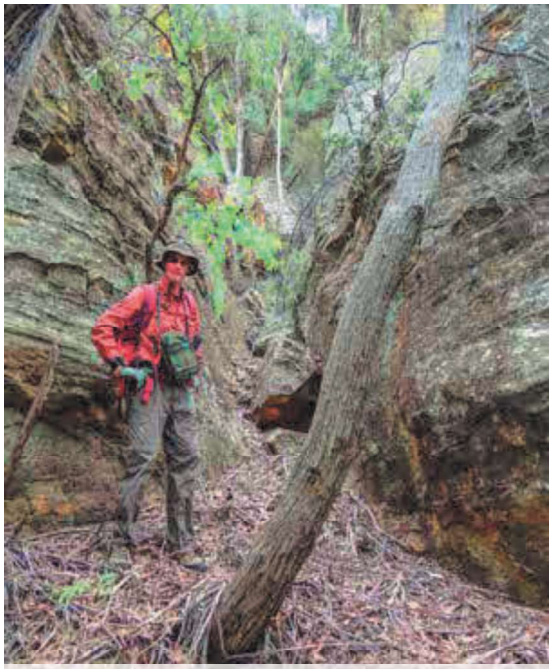
A recently formed rock face, Galaxies Ledge. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

to migrate to the eastern side. The problem was that the creek by then had developed a little waterfall, and the easiest way to get around it was up a very steep, muddy and slippery scramble, about 10 metres high. A small 'off and on' drizzle that had taken place in the last half an hour made our task even more difficult. Being a small and agile group of four, we managed to do it unassisted, from 0950 to 0955. For larger groups, though, I would strongly recommend setting up a tape at this point.

From here, the gradient became more manageable, but our ascent was still rather slow and messy, because the gully was covered with many giant boulders and fallen trees. As we climbed, the freezing winter wind returned. We needed to get a bit higher yet, to be sure we were above the walls and on the right ledge. In a few more minutes, a tall secondary cliff line above us and on our left signified that we had probably attained the right elevation, so finding a shelter from the wind for morning tea became the next priority. At 1015, a suitable nook was found underneath the cliff line. No views, but no wind either.

From 1025, the group began travelling north on what we were hoping would be a ledge above the Exploding Galaxies walls. We later called it Galaxies Traverse. Within the first few steps, we realised it was not going to be a straightforward level walk. The terrace we had our morning tea at had suddenly run out on us, necessitating a sharp 20–30 metre descent before we could regain more reasonably level ground. Our reward was a large, powerfully sculptured and beautifully eroded overhang, where we stopped briefly to take photos.

Just north of this overhang, we came to the first part of the cliff line along our way having deep, visible fractures running within it that resulted in a number of significant rock face collapses. These looked



Harold Thompson at the bottom of the first slot. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

reasonably recent. In addition, the wide, sloping ledge we were walking on was covered by a jumble of giant (car- to house-sized) boulders that seemed to be quite old, certainly 50 years or more, judging by the size of the trees growing amongst them. The collapsed area continued for about 500 metres. What caused the original large-scale subsidence? Is it related to the recent more limited collapses? I would like to know the answers to these questions. Seeing these shattered walls certainly gave the name Exploding Galaxies another meaning that reflects a brutal physical reality as opposed to it stemming from a pure fantasy world, as I had been thinking before.

Next, the ledge plunged another 30 metres or so, causing me to worry about whether or not we were still on top of the Exploding Galaxies walls. We could not climb higher at any point, so there was no choice but to follow the ground level down and hope for the best. But I had no need to be so concerned, as soon we were ascending again to pretty much the same level as before.

This area certainly had an eerie, haunting beauty about it. Where the cliffs remained intact, they were deep dark chocolate-coloured and covered with red and yellow Lichen; while the broken areas were pale cream, patterned from white to brown, and with fascinating jagged forms. And if you looked away from the cliffs, you could admire a sea of giant boulders scattered on the densely forested slope below.

In one spot, a particularly big and imposing shard of rock was too tempting for Rodney. It took him just a few seconds to climb all the way to the top, where there was room to lie down only. That made for an interesting photograph. Looking up from this spot, one could see another tall vertical spire, which was beyond even Rodney's capacity to climb. All this was at 1050.

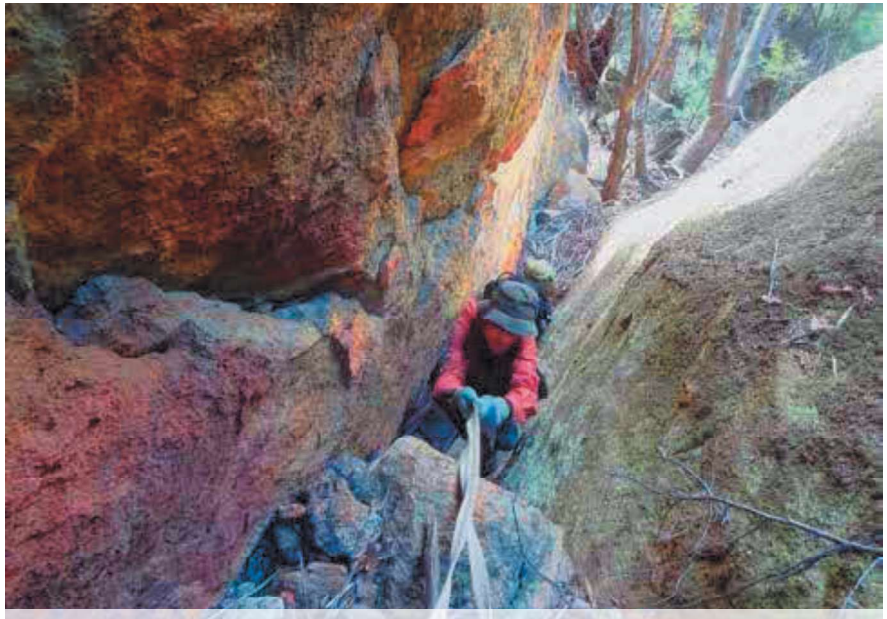
Sixteen minutes later, we came to the first slot that I had detected on the aerial maps whilst preparing for this walk. Rodney went up to investigate and pronounced it 'doable with a tape'. He did not go to the end of it. As there were a few other slots to explore along the way, I thought it would be premature for us to get to the top – let alone the prospect of being blown off the cliffs by a fierce Antarctic wind – so we continued at our level.

Another slot soon presented at 1111. It looked OK but had a large chockstone in the middle that would be quite difficult to climb around. This way up was dismissed for the same reason as the first one.

Straight after it, we came upon some footprints left in the fine dust of an overhang by a feral dog or a cat. There were also some scats nearby. The group was now walking directly above the Exploding Galaxies walls, but they were not visible from our position. I descended the sloping ledge



Harold Thompson on the first tape ascent. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



Harold Thompson on the second tape ascent. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



Rodney Nelson at Firefly Point. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



Yuri Bolotin, Harold Thompson, Rodney Nelson and Brian Fox at Firefly Point. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX (SELF-TIMER).

to the very edge, but even from there, I could not see the vertical cliff face underneath me; however, I took photos of the Wolgan Valley through the fine mist far below, with a distant cliff face of Old Baldy and Skywalker Traverse ledge directly to the east.

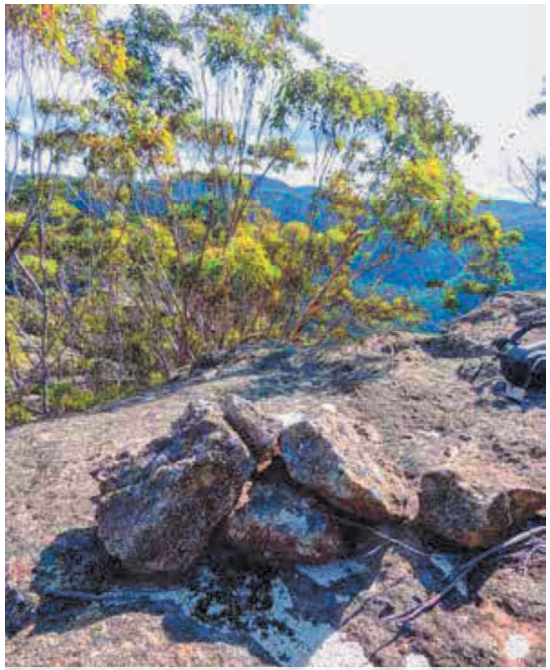
Whilst I was exploring precarious edges, my team carried on the traverse. I caught up with them a few minutes later at 1123. They were contemplating another break in the cliffs for a possible way up. I knew from my aerial map that about 50 metres ahead should be a major gully, so why not take a look at it? We proceeded in that direction, and sure enough, there was a big slot there, but instead of going all the way to the top, it stopped at a five-metre non-negotiable waterfall, at 1127.

I paused and pulled out the aerial map to consider our options from this point. We had by now passed most of the major slots I had identified; everything is of course possible in this country, but I could not see anything obvious until we at least advanced for over a kilometre to the southern side of the cliffs we were currently traversing. Our progress in doing that would probably be very slow, because the ledge kept going up and down. This may jeopardise plans for the rest of the walk, so I made the decision to turn back and retrace our steps for a few minutes to the previous possible ascent point.

At 1130, we were back in front of this last slot, which appeared to be doable. The first obstacle was just a couple of metres along our way up, where a large protruding rock had blocked all other means of progressing except for stepping on the tiniest of ledges around it, with nothing much to hold on to. Many readers would be familiar with the feeling you get whilst trying to negotiate such spots, when your centre of gravity is so displaced (albeit only for a short moment) that even the lightest backpack feels like a deadweight anchor pulling you down towards a possible disaster. Phew, I was glad when all of us were safely around that one! But it was certainly not the end of the challenges. Almost straight away, we came to a precarious steep incline, about 10 metres long, that only had a few small foot- and handholds in it. A tape was set up there to enable a safer ascent.

Were we at the top yet? It certainly looked close. Brian and I went ahead on a steep but easy slope. We rounded a bluff and beheld an almost vertical corner where two walls came together and blocked our progress. To make the challenge even more interesting, a rather large rock was jammed high near the top of these walls. Brian, as only Brian can, went up and with some considerable effort made it to the top. I do not know where he gets his friction from!

I threw up the tape to Brian. This corner was so tight and awkward



Survey cairn for a mineral lease, July 1906, ML S1780.
PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

that it took me a few attempts to get it to him. Finally, the tape was fixed around a large tree that was luckily available right at the top of the ascent. I grabbed the tape and tried to get up, but there was absolutely no grip on my Volleys, and I helplessly slid down the smooth wall. Not perturbed by this failure, I dropped my pack onto the ground and tried to do it again, but it was once again unsuccessful, as my arms pulling the tape and my feet could not hold the weight of my body. Then, I remembered how Brian did it, and it dawned on me – I had to use the rest of my body, most importantly my bottom, as the anchor to stop me from sliding down. I jammed my back against the wall on my right and pulled myself up on the tape to the bottom of the protruding rock, then in one more big push, over the rock, grabbing its slippery surface with my fingernails. It worked! Using a similar technique, the rest of the team followed up. The top of this last climb was all ours by 1146.

Even though there were still some ledges above us to negotiate, I was really hoping that now we were finally within easy reach of the top. Just as we were packing up the tape, a couple of magnificent Wedge-tailed Eagles, *Aquila audax* soared up within a few metres of our ledge, greeting us with an effortless tilt of their enormous wings. Wow! They were so close and gave us only a split second's notice, but Brian managed to capture a good shot.

The really good news was that instead of subjecting us to cold, fierce gales and sleet, as I had been expecting, the weather suddenly turned to beautifully sunny with little or no wind! Whilst we were picking our way through the landscape of magnificent wild pagodas and slots, I was thinking about the exhilarating ascent experience we had just had, with the Eagles and the benevolence of the weather gods. I felt on top of the world in every sense.

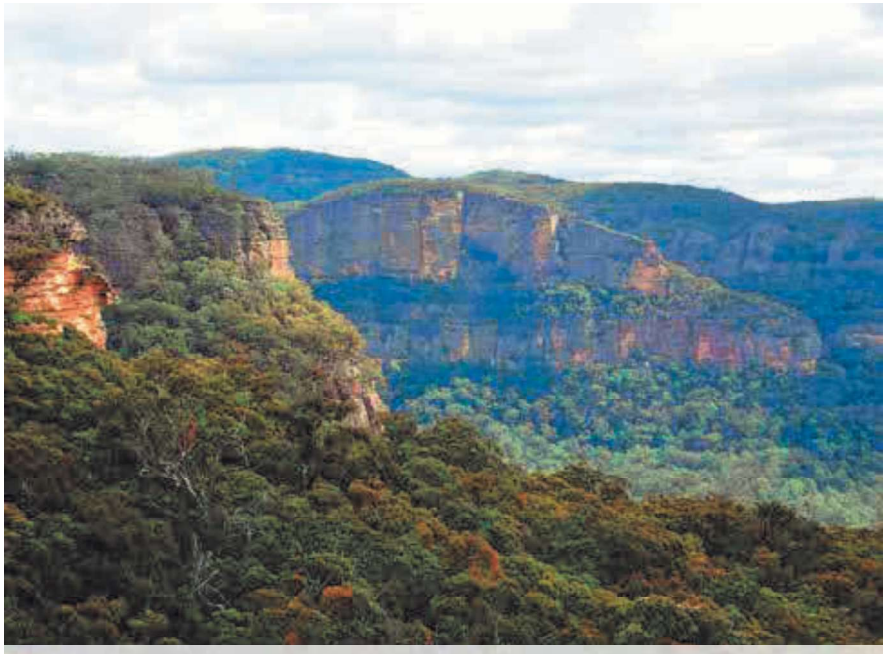
By 1200, we made it to the top of Island Mountain plateau. My plan from here was to visit a narrow rocky promontory located about 800 metres away at the eastern edge of the plateau. It would have to be an 'in and out' exercise as this would take us away from our return route. I needed to be very convincing in talking up the possible view, which I only knew about by looking at aerial maps. I also had plans of visiting another potential viewpoint at around GR 4560 2605, but on the approach, the ground leading towards it started to fall away a bit too much, so I decided to give that a miss in the interest of reaching the narrow promontory to the east.

Luckily, this part of the plateau was very easy going on flat dry ground covered with tall Ironbarks, Stringybarks and Grey Gums. There was very little undergrowth. Just before the end, there was a deep slot, which was negotiable by descending to the left and clambering up immediately onto the other side.

By 1230, we reached what was to be the highlight of a day filled with memorable adventures. We stood on a narrow platform with drops on three sides. To our east and west was the magnificent expanse of the Wolgan Valley, with the river visible



View north into Galaxies Gully and Wolgan Valley from the return ridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



View north west into Wolgan Valley from the return ridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.



Pagoda country above Galaxies Gully. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

300 metres below us. A huge isolated and unclimbable pagoda was glowing golden in the sun immediately to our east. Casting our eyes to the far west, we could see the profile of Old Baldy. Deeper down, to our east and south east, clad in a characteristic vivid green rainforest, was a deep canyon. Our spot was directly above its final course on the way to meet with the Wolgan River. The canyon already has a name – Firefly Canyon – so I called this spectacular spot Firefly Point. From this amazing spot, a canyoning enthusiast can view at least seven of the Wolgan canyons: Firefly and Looking Glass on the southern side of the river; and on the northern side, east to west, False Teeth, Starlight, Devils Pinch, Nightmare, and Pipeline. *Where are you, Geoff and Kent?*[63], I thought. I wished you were here with us.

A better spot for a lunch break could not be found in the entire universe. We spent 15 glorious minutes here (including an obligatory group photo session), basking in the sun and marvelling at the incredible view, but this was all the time we could afford, as we knew that our route back was going to be new, exploratory and, most likely, not easy.

It seemed a pretty straightforward journey, first to the spot height 858 metres, then heading west south west and finally swinging to the south. It took us about half an hour to travel a distance of 1.5 kilometres from Firefly Point to an area above the eastern branch of the Galaxies Gully, where I was hoping to find a way down. We passed within less than 200 metres of our morning tea spot, but I must add that a third of this distance consisted of vertical cliffs. I had planned to start looking for a descent point a couple of hundred metres further south of our present location, closer to the headwaters of the gully, when an attractive rock platform lured me slightly off course. Soon, I was happy it had done. At 1317, we walked onto a very old cairn – a mark left by a surveyor who had visited this very remote and hard-to-reach spot, carrying heavy equipment, many years before us. Brian's research yielded the following information:

Mineral Lease applied for by G Anderson, 3rd July 1905, for Shale. Area surveyed 21st July 1906. Ref: NSW DIGS, S1780. On the Survey Plan, the location of the area is recorded as Wolgan or Newnes. This was the time period when the town originally called Wolgan was changed to Newnes after Sir George Newnes.

[63] Geoff Fox and Kent Dwyer are principally responsible for me falling in love with the wonderful world of canyoning.



Rodney Nelson above Galaxies Gully, looking towards the Wolgan Valley. PHOTO: BRIAN FOX.

Wow, this find was the real icing on the pretty yummy cake that this walk had turned out to be. This was the good news. The bad news was that from our position we could not see any way down. We tried to follow one slot, but it ended nowhere good. Never mind – we climbed back up to the top and pushed along to the start of the gully, as per my original plan. It only took us 15 minutes to reach the target location, and Rodney went quickly down to check it out; his verdict was 'no go'.

Ok, our next move was to try the western side of Galaxies Gully. During our walk on 26 August 2014, the group had been able to descend from it, but we were much further downstream on that day. At 1400, we stood on the eastern edge of this ravine and stared into its inky depths. A sympathetic Lyrebird was heard calling us from far below. We could see rocks – many rocks – but there was no visible way down in between them. It is interesting to note that the topographic map shows rather gentle contours and no cliff line at this point; however, the cliffs can be clearly seen on the aerial map.

Time to make a quick stop, have a drink and evaluate our situation. We estimated we had about two hours of available daylight left. Having just spent nearly an hour trying to find a way down, we were still as far away

from the bottom as when we had begun our search. The progress on top of the plateau was relatively easy, but searching for ways down could be lengthy and laborious. Our energy resources were already depleted, and each foray up and down consumed more and more of what was left. I told the team about my misgivings, and we decided to take a somewhat boring but more risk-averse strategy: Rather than spending the ever-diminishing daylight time on trying to find a way down in this unknown area, we would walk back to the top of the plateau and make our way around Galaxies Gully and all its tributaries to a known descent point from the walk of 26 August 2014.

From here, our progress was good, despite us feeling somewhat enervated. I needed to be extra vigilant with the navigation, as any error at this stage could cost us dearly. Most of the territory along our way had very little scrub and featured Ironbarks, Grey Gums and Casuarina groves. There was an abundance of Mint Bush, *Prostanthera sp.*, in the undergrowth; its aroma, always welcome, today felt positively therapeutic. At 1445, we reached the spot from where our group had been able to descend nearly two years ago. I had on my map plotted our course of that day in a red line, and we were now on it! I could breathe a sigh of relief.

During the initial stages of our descent, we were able to look back at our route around the Galaxies Gully. From the distance, I could see at least two possible ways down – one through a tributary at around GR 444 248, and another one, at about GR 443 245, following the eastern side of the main gully. It is unknown whether Galaxies Gully itself contains any waterfalls until much further downstream, where we had visited before, but I wished I had an extra couple of hours to investigate this option. For any aspiring explorer reading these notes, this would be my recommended way, which would make for a more interesting, elegant walk route – but do make sure you allow sufficient time for any unforeseen circumstances. Then again, I could be easily convinced to redo this trip when the daylight hours are longer.

By 1511, we entered the very dark and beautiful rainforest of Galaxies



A tree trunk in Galaxies Gully decorated with Gold Dust Lichen, *Chrysothrix candelaris*. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN.

Gully – a critical point on our way down. I thought it was not a minute too early; we would be needing torches here within half an hour. The party followed the creek, which had running water, for a short while before climbing out on its western bank and sidling for a few hundred metres to avoid the last cliff line. At 1525, the cliffs stopped, and we began a steep descent towards the Wolgan River Trail. The trail was reached at 1542, and the vehicles at 1557. It had been a much bigger and more difficult day than I had anticipated, but we all had a great time. I was glad the party was small so that we were able to complete the route and return to our vehicles before dark.

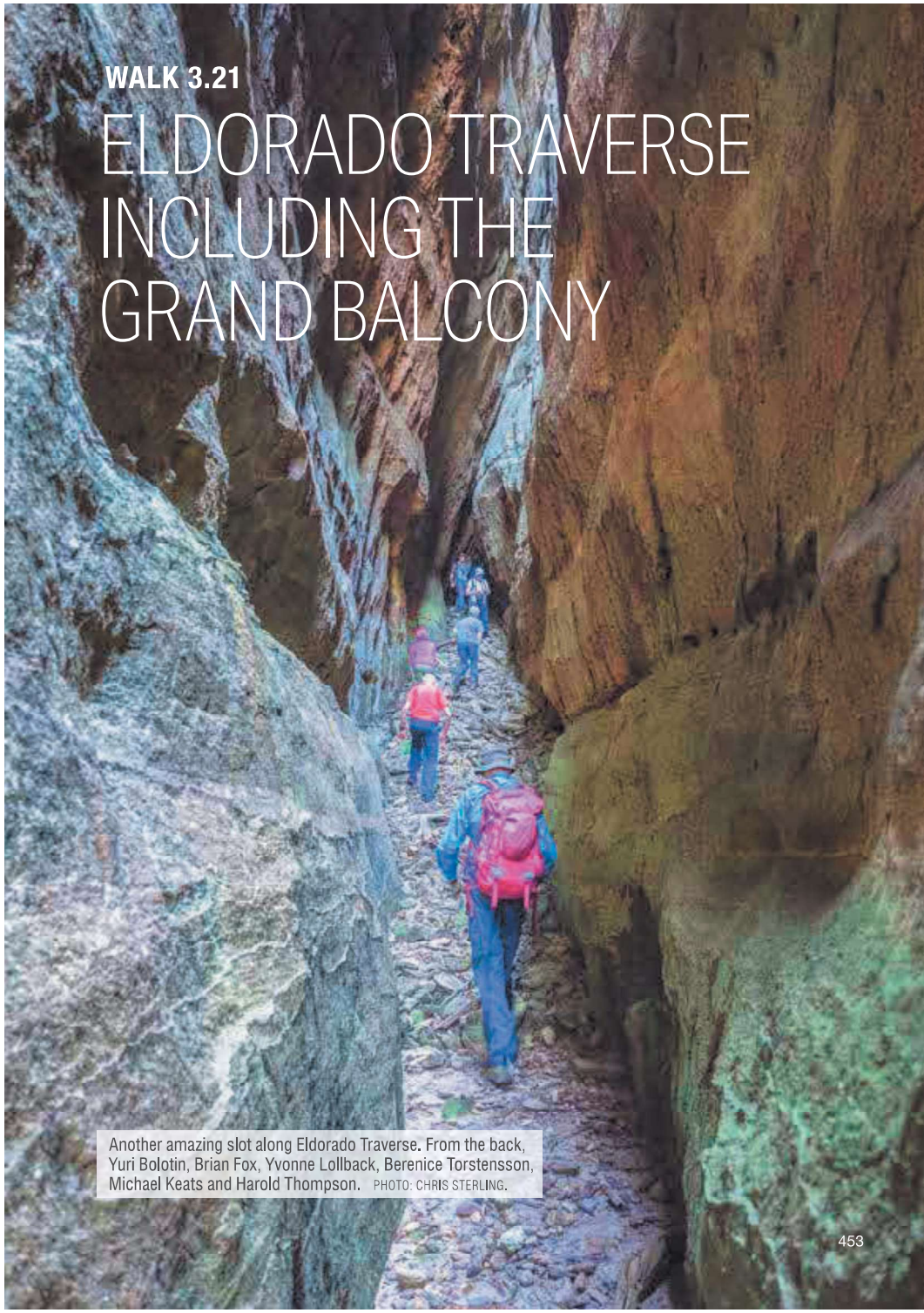
Trip statistics: total distance 14 kilometres; total ascents 760 metres.

Table of times, locations and grid references

TIME	LOCATION	GRID REFERENCE	ELEVATION
0905	At the locked gate, started walking Wolgan River Trail	4343 2585	505 m
0931	Left Wolgan River Trail, ascending Galaxies Gully	4459 2590	523 m
0933	House ruins	4461 2583	538 m
0938	Bottom of first cliff line	4476 2557	615 m
0950	Steep, slippery ascent, 5 min	4477 2552	630 m
1015	Morning tea at Galaxies Traverse, 10 min	4495 2540	745 m
1050	Huge rock shard	4505 2565	753 m
1106	First slot	4521 2586	749 m
1111	Second slot	4528 2596	745 m
1123	Third slot	4542 2597	755 m
1127	Fourth slot	4549 2598	746 m
1130	Back at the third slot, start of the ascent	4542 2597	755 m
1146	Top of the ascent	4528 2586	796 m
1150	Wedge-tailed Eagles, *Aquila audax*, sighting	4528 2586	796 m
1200	Top of Island Mountain plateau	4547 2580	830 m
1230	Firefly Point, lunch, 15 min	4612 2582	758 m
1317	Mineral lease surveyor's cairn, c. 1906	4500 2528	854 m
1400	At the head of Galaxies Gully	4450 2495	853 m
1445	Known descent point	4388 2523	852 m
1511	In rainforest, Galaxies Gully	4436 2531	683 m
1525	Start descending towards Wolgan River	4437 2560	639 m
1542	On Wolgan River Trail	4421 2612	548 m
1557	At the locked gate	4343 2585	505 m

WALK 3.21

ELDORADO TRAVERSE INCLUDING THE GRAND BALCONY



Another amazing slot along Eldorado Traverse. From the back, Yuri Bolotin, Brian Fox, Yvonne Lollback, Berenice Torstensson, Michael Keats and Harold Thompson. PHOTO: CHRIS STERLING.