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## THE BUSH CLUB NEWSLETTER



Summer 2011-2012

[www.bushclub.org.au](http://www.bushclub.org.au)

Walks Program	Summer	2011-2	p.19
Walks Reports	Spring	2011	p.13

### WALKS SUBMISSIONS

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### THIS ISSUE

This issue is the last one I shall produce because I have taken on the role of Bush Club president. I have really enjoyed putting the newsletter together each quarter and reading about the trips undertaken by our members. From 2012 the editorial team will comprise Judy O'Connor, Bev Barnett and Tam Khuat. Keep your articles and reports rolling in!

In this issue we have trips to Papua New Guinea, South America and at home in the Wild Dogs, Granite Falls, as well as Judy's memories of walking with Wilf Hilder.

### CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME

Please send anything you think will interest our members to Judy O'Connor  
[bushclubeditor@gmail.com](mailto:bushclubeditor@gmail.com)

## THE KOKODA TRACK

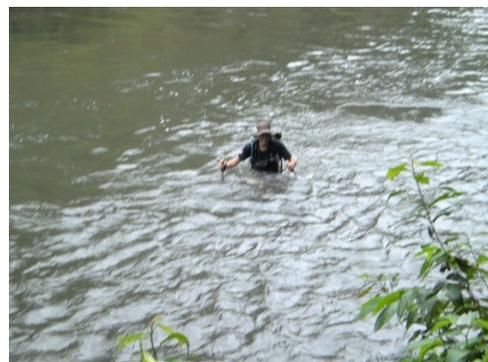
By David Cunningham

When you talk of the Kokoda Track most people think of military battles, humidity, rain, mud, misadventure and mosquitos but to bushwalkers, the thoughts should be of one of the world's iconic walks.



*Owers' Corner, start of the trek*

Adrian Jones, Hugh Thoma, Eric Easterbrook, Steven Suttor and David Cunningham arrived at Owers' Corner for the start of 9 days, porter assisted 'trikking' (as they say in NZ). The walk was with Investa Treks a budget company owned and operated by the Salvation Army. Our route was from south to north, supposedly the hard way; demonstrated immediately by a steep slippery descent through the welcome gates, leaving most of us on our arses in the first 100m. A quick introduction for what was to come!



*The author crossing the Goldie River*

Day 1 was a short walk of several hours, a descent from Owers' Corner to the Goldie River and the first of many water

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crossings. We arrived in Freshwater, a typical Papuan village of grass huts set in cleared jungle in early afternoon. There we met a group of young men on the last stage of their trip; they had all carried their own gear and looked exhausted from their efforts. Our day had started and ended with rain—a feature of our trek until the end.

The next morning started early, at 5.30am, setting our daily regime—a cereal breakfast and on the track at 7am following morning prayers! The walking every day was either steeply up or steeply down on slippery muddy paths, concentrating on where to place your feet, essential if you were to stay upright, although everyone slipped frequently. On day 2 the combination of the rain and crossing 16 creeks left clothes, socks and boots perpetually wet.

Six hours of travel through the rainforest found us in Ioribaiwa, the furthest advance of the Japanese in the attempt to capture Port Moresby (POM) in 1942.



*Kokoda mud*

Staying in villages meant that we listened to dogs barking during the night and cocks crowing at 2am. Our usual early starts gave us space at the end of the day to recuperate, rest and recount our experiences of the day.

The next few days were the usual muddy steep terrain, with the highlight, crossing the Brown River where flooding early in the morning had washed the log bridge away. The porters, who were excited with the prospect of a diversion literally leapt into the torrent, which was well above their heads and fast enough to wash them away. They rebuilt the

structure in 45 minutes to allow our forward progress.



*Making a log crossing*

All of the bridged crossings were on logs, of size varying from thigh thick to beer barrel diameter, some at water level others 3 or 4 metres above the water. The logs are permanently wet with slippery, narrow surfaces; the barefooted porters sail across with perfect balance, whereas some of us needed the guiding and steady hand of our porters.

On day 5 we climbed to Brigade Hill the site of an Australian defeat by the tactics and superior numbers of the Japanese as they pushed towards POM. Apart from the villages we passed through each day the track climbs and falls through stunningly beautiful rainforest and jungle. We experienced an array of various greens interspersed with brilliant orchids and flowers, but few insects except for the occasional butterfly. Birds were heard but seldom seen. Eric walked passed a black python, and several small lizards were spotted but the vegetation is the dominant feature.

Except for two nights camping on cleared grass areas, we pitched our tents in the huts provided to give protection from malarial mosquitoes and to keep our tents dry. The food provided by the trekking company was bland and repetitive; hopefully our suggestions since returning will help future trekkers. All the tour personnel were Papuans, a quiet reticent people, polite and ever helpful. We felt comfortable and safe under their care finishing the walk without illness or injury due to poor hygiene or carelessness.

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Our trek took the Naduri path rather than through Kagi to allow us to visit to the last surviving ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel’ who is reportedly 107 years old. The following day (7) we reached the highest point of the Track and passed through the Kokoda Gap. The walking became progressively easier until we finished at Eora Creek, camping near the water in one of the prettiest places you could find anywhere. We all agreed that a rest day here would have been a highlight.

Day 9 had us walking into Isurava where fierce fighting took place in 1942 and it is now the site of a moving memorial to the Kokoda campaign. We met two groups of trekkers: one group of young adults were carrying their own packs and attempting to complete the journey in 5 days; another group were closer to our age and like us, had taken the sensible 9 day porter option. By 11.30am we headed, quickly now for the down slope was gentle and underfoot more secure, to the gateway at the end of the Track.

That night was in our first locked hut with a porter sharing the accommodation as security. The locals were rioting following the murder of a child by ‘rascals’; PNG is a destination that requires an awareness of personal safety as well as hygiene. There was some doubt whether, due to local unrest, our plane could land next day. Fortunately it did and we flew out to Port Moresby.

The Kokoda Track is set in a true wilderness area. The stunningly beautiful rainforest is basically untouched except for the activities of the local inhabitants who still live their traditional lives. Advice to anyone thinking of this adventure would be to take the 9-day option and allow time to do the walking which is tough and to rest up for the next day. Similarly hire a porter to carry your gear because the climate can be very humid. Carrying only a daypack can mean the difference between an enjoyable experience and a debilitating slog. Start at the Kokoda end, which sits under the Owen Stanley Range. The proximity to the perpetually cloudy

mountains can mean that flights don’t always arrive, a problem if you are ready to leave.



*With Ovoru Indiki, the last surviving Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel*

The track was particularly rewarding and emotional for two of our trekkers, Eric and Steven. Eric relayed the story of how his father was evacuated twice on the track by the carriers. It was a special moment for him to actually meet Ovoru Indiki, the last surviving Fuzzy Wuzzy. Steven’s connection was that a member of his wife’s family had operated on a wounded soldier on “Surgery rock”. The rock is now named Con’s rock after the medical orderly Con Vapp. Steven, an Army Reserve soldier, paid his respect by giving a salute at this site.



*The finish point at the village of Kokoda*

Finally, this track compares with the best walks in the world. The challenge of the conditions, the pristine environment and the history, makes for an iconic trek that should be recognised internationally as unique.

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## WILD DOG WANDERINGS - IN SEARCH OF GRANITE FALLS

By Dorian Broadrick

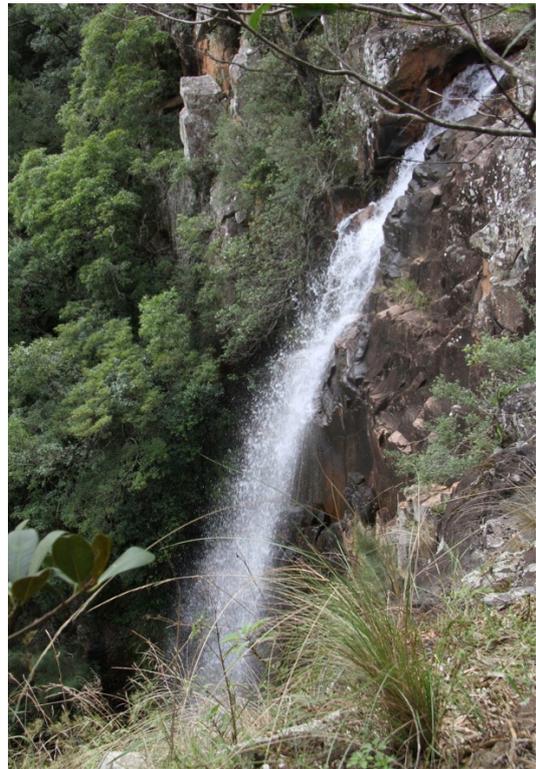
Wild Dog Wanderers: Dorian Broadrick, Melanie Ng, Cotter Erickson, Tam Khuat, Peter Van Lierop, Christine Daley, Dave Dash.

The Gangerang sketch map makes note of Granite Falls - 150ft on the Merrigal Creek system, approximately halfway between Warrigal Gully and Merrigal Gully. I was intrigued. A waterfall of 150ft sounded spectacular and yet I'd heard very little mention of the falls from fellow bush walkers. If there's two things I like, it's the Wild Dogs and waterfalls so I set about scrutinising the maps. A plan was formed, a day walk devised, and the rest - is history.

Six brave walkers put their trust in me and a little after 8:30am we were off down Carlon Creek. It was a beautiful autumn morning and a number of overnight campers had made use of the facilities at Dunphy's Car Park. I had suspected the creek levels would have dropped, despite the torrential rain the weekend before, as there had been little rain in the area during the week. Wrong! Carlon Creek was flowing, Breakfast Creek was flowing - in fact all the creeks were flowing! Luckily the crossings were still reasonably straightforward and despite "someone" (not me!) getting wet feet, good progress was made and we regrouped to de-leech at the bottom of Cattle Dog ridge an hour later. A good cardiovascular workout later saw morning tea being enjoyed at Cattle Dog lookout. The superlatives as usual cannot do justice to what is one of my favourite lookouts in the Doggies. It was with reluctance we pressed on.

Now the real adventure began. The Blue Dog track takes a 90 degree turn around 416 532, our "marker" for the descent into Merrigal Creek. The plan was to pickup Blue Pup Spur #4 and drop into Merrigal Creek at the junction of Warrigal Gully. From here a push upstream should reveal our target. After

a short side trip into a dead-end gully, the leader picked up the correct spur and the descent began. The contours had looked a little steep towards the end, but the descent proved to be quite civilised and clear and we had made the creek by around midday. As we approached the creek, a huge granite bluff hove into view on the opposite side of the valley - coupled with the sound of rushing water, the pieces of the jigsaw lead to a surprising puzzle. Not only had we found Granite Falls, we were on top of them!



Granite Falls exist. But they are not located where marked on the Gangerang map. Warrigal Gully joins Merrigal Creek just above the top of the falls. Finding the falls was a fantastic fillip for the group and an early lunch was called. It was a stunning location. A beautiful plunge pool is located at the top of the falls before they drop off the edge of the granite platform. We climbed and clambered around the adjacent cliffs, looking for the perfect vantage point. The first drop we could see would easily be 150ft. Below this we could just see the waterfall plunging off another granite shelf to form a second drop. How high the second drop is, we could not

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determine safely from our vantage point without an extremely long rope. The crystal clear water, huge granite bluffs and views down into the valley provided the perfect backdrop for our gastronomic indulgences.

Reluctantly we pulled ourselves away to continue our adventure upstream. The plan was to follow Merrigal Creek as far as the junction with Merrigal Gully and hence up Merrigal Ridge to Mobbs Soak. After heading upstream for 1 minute we encountered another waterfall. This was about 10m high and had a fantastic plunge pool at the bottom, which would have been tempting in the hotter months. The waterfall was the first of a number along the very picturesque creek. Progress was relatively easy as each waterfall revealed a way to scramble around it and despite the good flow level in the creek, feet and boots remained dry. The undergrowth on the ridges along the creek is very thick in places, due no doubt to the proliferation of water, and I was a little concerned about how scratchy our ascent out of the creek would be. As the junction of Merrigal Gully approached, the creek started to dry up and the bushes thinned out, providing an easy and fairly clear exit route from the creek. A short climb and one rock scramble later (there's always a conglomerate mass to negotiate on these Wild Dog ridges!) saw us intersect with the Yellow Pup track, very close to Mobbs Soak.

A short rest at Mobbs Soak then it was into autopilot for the slog home. Afternoon tea was taken at Black Horse Ridge lookout before the descent and retracing of our earlier footsteps back up Carlon Creek (bloody nettles!) The group made it back to the cars by 6pm - tired but satisfied by a good day out and a successful completion to the mission.

It has to be said that it was lucky we ended up on top of the falls. From our initial investigations, it would be virtually impossible to get up or down the falls without significant detours, danger and/or rope. I shall certainly

return to view these spectacular falls from the bottom - I hope you can join me next time. It was a spectacular day with a great group, made extra special by the fact we had visited a place that few others ever have. Another day out in the paradise known as The Wild Dogs.

## **GEORGE DANIEL – AN EXCEPTIONAL CONTRIBUTOR TO BUSHWALKING**

*By Michael Keats*

When postulates along the lines of European knowledge of *Terra Australis* prior to Captain Cook and indigenous settlement prior to the currently accepted Aboriginal population are put on the table, I take note. Suddenly George and I were talking '1421–Chinese Discovery of the World', the famous Bradshaw Paintings of the Kimberley and similar topics with provocative connotations.

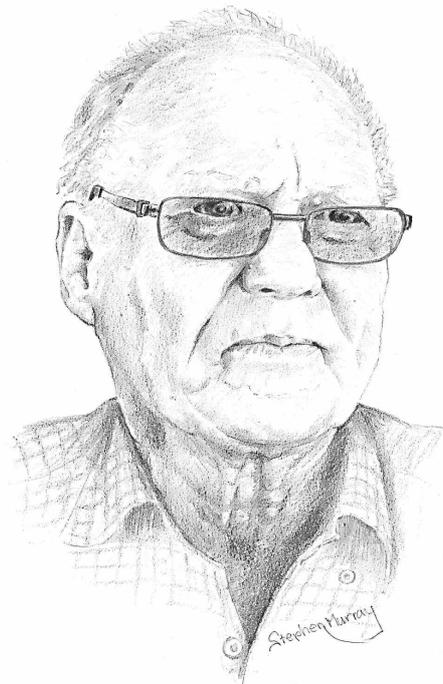
These highly controversial issues were furthest from my mind when I sought the opportunity to have a chat with highly esteemed bushwalker, author and editor George Daniel. I will return to these issues later.

Indeed our interview started off on the very tangible achievements that George has made to bushwalking through his combined editorial and proofing fieldwork with Stephen Lord in producing the two companion volumes, "Bushwalks in the Sydney Region," published by the National Parks Association of NSW. These books have run to several editions and remain 'staples' for keen walkers and group leaders in many Sydney walking clubs. Produced under the aegis of the NPA, these books were designed to generate funds for other projects as well as to stimulate interest in bushwalking around Sydney.

NPA used the funding generated from these two volumes to commission author Peter Wright to produce two definitive National Parks Guide Books. The first was issued in 1991—"The NPA Guide to

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National Parks of Northern NSW” and the second in 1996–“The NPA Guide to National Parks of Southern NSW”. Both books are now collectors’ items and sadly rather out of date. They are also very heavy and not suitable to throw into the backpack on a walk.



I asked George how he became involved in bushwalking. Cocking his head to one side, he explained; “On Monday mornings, three of my work companions who were iconic walkers in their own right—Richard Thompson, Frank Cook and Chris Maher—would gather around and talk about the stimulating, wonderful adventures they had had over the weekend. They would tell stories and show pictures. They kept it up until I couldn’t stand it any longer I had to join them. We had some wonderful walking experiences, particularly the Katoomba to Mittagong trips.”

As the conversation progressed we got down to some nitty gritty issues, such as when should a walk be called off in hot weather? George is of the opinion that 35 degrees C is a cut off point, (subject to location, etc.). Above this temperature a combination of physical exertion and progressive dehydration creates an intolerable situation where judgment can

be impaired and accidents can and do happen.

George indulged in a series of anecdotal cases; each involving different and varied situations where he as leader was forced to curtail or abort walks because of an individual’s shortcomings or denial of their real capabilities. This comment led us to a discussion on the merits of instituting qualifying processes for membership. George is of the view that the NPA is primarily a conservation movement so qualifying walks should not be a prerequisite for participation in walks that it offers. On the other hand he fully endorses such an approach for Bush Club membership, as the prime object of our club is bushwalking.

While George is an active member of the Bush Club—he joined in August 2003 and he has walks on the current program, his first allegiance is to the NPA where he has been a member since 1985 and a walks leader since 1986. George leads a variety of walks for both clubs making his total commitment to bushwalking prodigious.

When it comes to devising walks George is a great believer in themed walks, e.g. history (Hume and Hovel Track), astronomy (Orroral Valley), botany and climate, (Lamington National Park, Barrington National Park), gold mining, (Upper Turon River). He believes a theme tends to fire the imagination of participants and to act as a motivation to participate in the whole offering. I agree that such an approach has significant merit. Perhaps the classic example of themed walks is John Cooper’s series on The Passes of Narrow Neck in 2007, which inspired the subsequent book of the same title.

During the course of the interview George had been clutching an old envelope. As our discussion progressed into areas of exploratory walking and discovery generally, George became very animated and we embarked on a discussion about when Australia was really discovered by the rest of the

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world. At this point in the conversation we canvassed the contention of early Portuguese settlement on the South Coast of NSW (Bittangabee Bay). The envelope was now opened, and inside were a couple of significant evidentiary pictures of relict building foundations from the location. George also reported that Dick Smith had become interested in the search for evidence of “The Mahogany Ship” but the project had no clear outcomes.

The conversation then jumped to the Kimberly Region and the Bradshaw Paintings. There is some evidence that the current indigenous Australians living in this area may not be the first inhabitants. Grahame Walsh’s book on the ‘Bradshaw Paintings’—culmination of over 20 years studying this form of art – had a limited print run, and copies are now rare, except in libraries.

Then George handed me the envelope to keep. On the back is a listing of book titles, each of which I need to access a copy and try and make up my own mind about when the recorded history of Australia really began. There is a lot more depth to George than bushwalking. He is a deep thinker and interested in our heritage as one of a number of interests.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

- When travelling by train to a walk the Bush Club convention is to meet in the second carriage.
- There are very helpful notes and advice for leaders and members on the webpage. The most recent is a page of suggestions about what to pack for a day walk.
- Our recommended transport cost at present is 33.3 cents per kilometre, divided by the number of people sharing the car.

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## **IN PATAGONIA**

By Lynne Outhred

### **Leader: Yvonne Lollback**

Participants: Julie and Graham Kelly, Caroline Lee, Judith Kowalski, Flora Newsom, Julian Martin, Terry O’Brien, Erika O’Brien, Lynne Outhred

### **February 4 to March 8, 2011**

We were all excited when we met at Sydney Airport for the flight to Buenos Aires. On this trip we knew we would cover a lot of territory: five internal flights and many boat and bus trips.

On our arrival we were met by our guide and transferred to our hotel. In the evening, some of us went to a show – the tango, of course. There was also Andean music and an exhibition dance by a gaucho using boleadoras--spinning small hard balls at the end of a string and stomping/tapping with his boots. We held our breath as the balls spun so fast you couldn’t see them but you could see the effect as they grazed the hair of one of the players in the orchestra.

### **Bariloche**

The following day we flew to Bariloche, famous for chocolate shops, Mt Tronador (3454m) and the Black Glacier, which we visited in the late afternoon. It glittered in the setting sun like coal, with the pool at its foot resembling chocolate milk, with huge chunks of black ice floating in it.



*Castana Overa Glacier*

At Pampa Linda Lodge, set in a beautiful valley, we discovered pisco sours, a cocktail to which we became somewhat

addicted. We also did a day walk through stunning beech forest to the Castana Overa Glacier. It hung at the edge of a precipice from which a myriad of waterfalls cascaded to its base.

From Bariloche we went by boat through the Andes to Puerto Mont in Chile. On the way we had fantastic views of the Osorno Volcano (2652m). Next day we ascended to the snow line by two chair lifts. We descended, much more rapidly on a series of four zip lines (rather like a flying fox). I had difficulty with the brakes and accelerated at great speed towards the platform. Our trusty helper had to leap off the platform to avoid being flattened, much to the amusement of the group.

### Torres Del Paine



*The Fortress Torres Del Paine*

Another flight, Puerto Mont to Punta Arenas, then bus to Puerto Natales, and the next day, another boat trip, this time on the Ultima Esperanza Sound. The weather was cold with low-lying fog; mountains loomed out of the mist, and a weak sun occasionally shone through gaps in the whiteness. A stop to walk to the Serrano Glacier before a zodiac trip along the Paine River to Torres Del Paine National Park where we were to walk the “W-Track”.

For the zodiac trip we were arrayed in ankle-length bright orange waterproofs with a red life jacket over the top. We resembled some bizarre form of penguin. I must admit that for an adrenaline rush, the zip lines and the zodiac trip were highlights of our time in Patagonia.



### Walks in Torres Del Paine Park

The landscape of the park is dominated by the Paine massif, which is an eastern spur of the Andes, located on the east side of the Grey Glacier rising dramatically above the Patagonian Steppe. Small valleys separate the spectacular granite spires and mountains of the massif including *Valle del Francés* (French Valley). On our first day we hiked up Ascencio Valley to the Miradel de Torres where there was a very brief period of sunshine to admire the famous towers. Unfortunately, Julie fell early in the day and, as we found out much later, fractured her ankle. As Julie could not continue the five-day walk, our guide modified our itinerary.



*End of the Valle del Francés*

Over the next few days we walked along the shore of Lago Nordenskjold, to the Grey Glacier—28km long, covering an area of 280km<sup>2</sup>— and lastly to the end of the *Valle del Francés* where we had spectacular panoramic views of Los Cuernos del Paine, the granite peaks of Espada (Sword), Hoja (Blade), Paine Grande, Catedral (Cathedral), and the magnificent Fortaleza (Fortress).

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## **El Calefate and the Perito Moreno Glacier**

Another bus and a catamaran trip to our next destination, El Calefate—on the way we saw 6 to 8 condors majestically circling overhead. Condors have the largest wingspan (3.2m) of any land bird. We also visited Milodon Cave Natural Monument, a huge cave where the well-preserved remains of a milodon were discovered in 1895. Over 10,000 years ago, milodons (giant sloths) roamed Chilean Patagonia.

After the mountains much of the country we drove through was flat and monotonous. There are no trees because of the high salt content of the soil and the rainfall is very low, especially compared to the Patagonian ice fields (6 to 7.5 meters per year). From El Calefate we visited the Perito Moreno Glacier, a glacier that is still growing.



*Ice fall on the Perito Moreno Glacier*

The end of the Perito Moreno Glacier is 5 km wide, with an average height of 74 m above the surface of Lake Argentino, and a total ice depth of 170m. We walked very close to the glacier and also took a boat trip, which was fantastic. From the boat we watched huge chunks of ice fall from the glacier, creating a large wave in the water.

## **El Chalten**

A bus again, this time to El Chalten where we were staying. On day 1 we hiked to Loma Del Pliegue Tumbado (24km and over 1000m ascent) where there are fantastic views of mountains Cerro Torres, Cerro Fitz Roy and Cerro Solo. Luckily the weather was superb.

On Day 2 we hiked through lenga forest to the base of Rio Blanco and some of us continued to the Laguna de los Tres, at the base of Cerro Fitz Roy. From the end of the walk we looked down on two glaciers, one above a green lake, the other above a cobalt-blue lake. It was an amazing walk, but unfortunately, Cerro Fitz Roy was shrouded in cloud.



*Yvonne at Laguna de los Tres*

## **Ushuaia**

Our final destination in Patagonia was Ushuaia where we took a boat trip on the Beagle Channel and admired colonies of seabirds and sea lions as well as a zodiac trip to Isla Redonda where we did a short walk. The return trip was exciting as the boat's engine stopped in a large swell. Luckily the engine started and we thumped across the waves, landing each time with a loud thwack.

At Ushuaia airport we found that a number of flights had been cancelled, including our flight to Salta and the airport was chaotic. At times like this a guide who speaks the language is a godsend. However, we eventually reached Salta and the Atacama Desert in the north, but that is another story.

Overall, I loved Patagonia, the scenery is outstanding with mountains, glaciers, volcanos, lakes, rivers and beautiful forests. We saw a variety of wildlife including condors, guanacos, vicunas, lamas, alpacas, rheas, an armadillo, and a pygmy owl.

We saw little evidence of native culture and I was surprised by how European Patagonia seemed in terms of food, buildings and people. We had very

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comfortable hotels, good food and well-informed and efficient guides and all the arrangements flowed smoothly (except for Ushuaia). Go if you can.



*The Beagle Channel*

## **WALKING THE ROAD TO ENLIGHTENMENT**

By Judy O'Connor

Every walk seems to take on its individual flavour as the terrain and countryside unfold, and the group dynamics fall into place. No walks I know of fell more into this category than those of our own national-treasure-bushwalker, the late Wilf Hilder.

The following recollections are from two separate walks (one around the Georges River and one on the south coast) that I did with Wilf in 2000. Through the mists of time, they merged into one in my mind. The following article was first published in *The Sydney Bushwalker* in 2000. Flexidays had just been introduced and Wilf used the opportunity to put on a series of day walks

### **Early warning sign**

Perhaps it was having to get up at 5am to get to the meeting place in time or maybe my bewilderment when I arrived at the car park to find we were right in the middle of a Buddhist temple or maybe it had all been preordained. Whatever the case, I was completely unprepared when Wilf strode up and handed me the Buddha's book on *The Four Noble Truths* adding 'when the pupil is ready, the master will appear'. I said I'd think about it.

We headed straight for a 'Wilf-tunnel' ('I know it's here somewhere') and, of course, it was blocked by a wire gate with a big lock on it. With a twinkle in his eye, and a wicked smile on his face, Wilf squared his jaw and said he'd bring bolt cutters next time. For us, however, it was 'up and over'. Somewhere in the process, the rain started falling. Wilf cheered us up by elaborating on the *Four Noble Truths* and engaging us in long and meaningful discussions about things like Right Mindfulness, Wisdom, the Five Precepts and the Theory of Dependent Origination.

### **Freedom walkers**

Later when we ran into a group of Tibetan freedom walkers coming up from Canberra, we knew this was going to be no normal walk. A spiritual awakening was definitely in the air. Wilf decided it was a good place for morning tea so we sat in the wet paspalum behind the guard rail on one of the busiest corners of the highway eating our muesli bars and turning our faces away from the steady stream of cars that went past just in case, as some sort of Karmic-payback, there'd be someone we knew in one of them.

The rain got heavier and Wilf wandered over to talk to the freedom walkers. Next thing he was on camera being interviewed by a television crew about a range of questions for broadcasting on who knows what airwaves. The record having been set straight, Wilf rounded us up and we started off again. Looking like the *Phantom of the Opera*, with his flowing poncho, handsome profile, striking hat with perpendicular feather sticking up at the front like a mast, he led us on to the next step in our journey into our inner lives.

### **The bare truth**

By lunch time the sun had come out and we took a skinny dip in a beautiful rocky swimming pool which Wilf told us was called *Nirvana*.

Obviously inspired by this, he cast his eyes over the natural beauty of the scene

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and, against a fitting backdrop of a towering rocky cliff, half covered (fortunately the lower half) by the water, he threw us some pearls of wisdom on Acquisition, Attachment, Understanding and Craving as taught by the Dalai Llama. Who could resist? We were all overcome and, like hostages who have undergone sensory deprivation and intensive 're-education', we were ready, as one, to see it Wilf's way. And didn't this prove the point? Wasn't this pool called *Nirvana*, wasn't this a portent? Wasn't this meant to be? We'd arrived at the end of our journey already.

'Wait a minute,' Wilf said. 'I've just realised.

'The map's wrong. These people can't get anything right these days. This isn't *Nirvana*. This is middle *Nirvana*. *Nirvana's* further up the river.

'Too far to go today,' he said, before we could ask.

'Never mind. Maybe I'll put it on the program another time. I'll have to give it some thought.'

Well, at least it wasn't lower *Nirvana*.

## TUNNEL VISION

By Judy O'Connor

I thought when I found myself teetering precariously on top of a three metre high hurricane fence, one leg on either side of the curled barbed wire, that I had reached, quite literally, the summit of a Wilf Hilder walk. The moment was indelibly etched in my mind because of, let's face it, the absurdity of the situation.

In a sort of out-of-body flash, I saw our bedraggled group as a total stranger would. Not only were we risking broken bones by trying to make those triangles of hurricane fit the toeholes of our oversized boots, it was clear to see from the wobbly top of the fence that there was a perfectly good bitumen road a few metres along which we could have used.

A road was not surprising, of course, given that we were scaling the fence of

the Westmead Hospital's nursing quarters and nurses are not stupid. They don't go 'up and over' when they can go straight through. And even if they were, they have unions to protect them and tell them their rights. Unfortunately, bushwalkers don't and, even if they did, I've got a feeling Wilf would not curb his passion for finding adventure in the suburbs without a fight.

There is, of course, always a bright side. In this case, there were no guard dogs waiting on the other side, although the nurses sunning themselves on their balconies were looking pretty hostile.

### More to come

So, it was with some surprise, and not inconsiderable awe, that I found Wilf surpassed himself on his recent flexiday walk from Waterfall to Otford. It completely dispelled my association of flexidays with rest, relaxation, spoiling oneself, the luxury of the day off, etc.

Six of us took off for what turned out to be an experience straight out of the *X Files*. (*The X-Files* was a top rating science fiction television series about the paranormal world of aliens and unexplained events. It ran on Australian television between 1993 and 2002.) It's true the walks program said something about a tunnel or two and it's true I only spoke to Wilf via answer machines and it's true I thought he was joking when he said 'bring a torch', but I never thought we'd be doing a sort of combination 'great railways/disused tunnels of the world' tour over 22km of the south coast. Silly me, I'm sure the clues were there if I'd been clever enough to switch to 'Wilf alert' mode.

We started at Waterfall rock hopping at a fast pace along piles of gravel spaced out alongside the main railway line to Otford which got the adrenalin going, I can tell you. Not the rock hopping, but the thought of random trains hurtling past. At some point we veered off and, next thing, we were into our first tunnel.

Altogether we entered the dark, damp and chilled interior of six separate

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disused train tunnels, all featuring slushy mud, running streams, unexpected jugular-height coils of wire, broken bricks, glass, holes, musty air, eerie echoes and heaven knows what unseen creepy crawlies.

Walking through them was not as bad as it sounds, the worst part was getting to the far end and finding the exits were blocked up and having to turn tail and walk back into the blackness.

### **The best one**

My favourite was the one that we approached through silent expanses of paddocks littered with rusted machinery, disused equipment and broken fences. Everything was old and run-down. A series of open sided sheds led up to the tunnel, which was approached via an ancient, narrow track that once shuttled coal into the depths of the tunnel. Makeshift open drainage spilt polluted water around corners and onto uneven levels of earth, ingrained with countless layers of metal and stones.

Smells were everywhere, but there was a particular indescribable earthy odour that needed a clothes peg on the nose to avoid. As we didn't have any, we tried to stop breathing which only turned our faces bright red and intensified the smell when we inevitably had to gulp in huge mouthfuls of oxygen moments later. To this day, I don't know what it was.

There was a loud humming noise coming from some unidentifiable piece of vibrating machinery in the last shed we passed, which showed strange signs of recent habitation. Lights were on, bench spaces looked used and a notice-board had a few scribbled messages on it. It was as if the place had been busy with activity only minutes before.

### **Not a human in sight**

But there was not a single sign of human presence. It was a pure ghost town, something straight out of the *'X Files'*. Wilf plunged into the tunnel and we obediently followed in his footsteps. It was a long tunnel illuminated by a few sparse bare light bulbs which dotted its

length until the eyes could no longer focus. Jumbo size clear plastic tubing hung from the ceiling, like a huge transparent sausage pulsating with a life of its own, as it laboriously pumped air or some sort of gas, to somewhere in the hidden, empty blackness of the tunnel.

Rickety scaffolding leaned against the walls in the distance. Obviously something was going on, some sort of operation, but what? Where were all the people? Not a single human being was anywhere to be seen. Had they all been beamed up to an overhead satellite from some foreign and hostile planet for which this celestial backblock was home? That's what happened on channel 10 anyway.

What sinister schemes and secrets were being planned and plotted by the aliens in the depths of the tunnel? Was the clear plastic tubing pumping some sort of life support breathing gas to them?

We attacked the problem by doing what all bushwalkers do – we turned our anxious and bewildered faces to the leader and asked him. With a look that clearly did not invite follow-up questions, Wilf declared they were growing mushrooms. As for the people, well, they were probably on a flexiday, he said.

We trudged on, past deserted, ugly depots full of sky-high mountains of jet black coal (we breathed a sigh of relief when Wilf didn't insist we walk over them), more railway lines, sidings, a deserted railway platform. We eventually passed a suburban house with two barking dogs protecting their swimming pool while their owners were at work (I swear Wilf was eyeing the backyard off for lunch) and then back to the station.

Coming home on the train, Wilf became wistful and confided there was, in fact, a seventh tunnel which we hadn't had time to explore.

It's always good to be left wanting more...