

Walk:

Wollemi National Park: Wheeny Gap and the Gorge Upstream

Leader:

Yuri Bolotin

Maps, etc:

Mountain Lagoon. GPS setting WGS84.

Description:

Park at the locked gate on North Wheeny Trail and walk down to Wheeny Gap and Pool. From there, follow Wheeny Creek upstream to a tributary at GR 778 916. Walk up that tributary, exploring for caves and other points of interest. Exit near the trail and return to the vehicles. About 15 km. Wet feet and more. Scrambling and exposure. Mostly exploratory.

Rating:

5M. M333E

Gear Issues:

2 litres of water, GPS, PLB, appropriate head and footwear, electrolytes, maps, compass, first aid kit, tape (leader only). Change of gear for afterwards.

Date walked:

24 December 2024.

The Party:

Yuri Bolotin (leader), Kirstie Wulf, Zaid Mohsen, Paul Lynch, Irina Sorokina, Ian Starkey, Han Qing, 7.

The Weather:

A chilly morning (for this time of the year), followed by a warm, sunny day with occasional cool breezes. Temperature range 13 to 25 degrees C. Perfect walking conditions.

Background Notes

After the installation of the locked gate at North Wheeny Trail last year, the journey to Wheeny Gap was made a lot longer and less interesting. I can certainly see (both metaphorically speaking and physically, when walking through that area now) some good sides to it, but I cannot bring myself up to traipsing for extra twelve kilometres on the made road (to the end of the trail and back again), even if it is for a nice swim. As much as I dislike walking on trails, I could put up with it one way, but not both. So, I thought, on the way back, how about exploring the Wheeny Creek gorge upstream, something I had not done before, then walking up a tributary that runs parallel to the North Wheeny Trail, for as long as possible? If it worked, not only would this cut the return road trip to just a kilometre or two, it would also keep the party in shady gorges with opportunities for dips and swims during most of the way. The big IF is the wild Wollemi terrain. I was well aware that either the Wheeny Creek upstream of the gap or its tributary I was aiming at, or, very likely, both, could end up being so terribly scrubby and slow that I would wish I had gone back using the 'boring' road. The only way to find out was to do it, and this is how the trip outlined below came to be.

Track Notes

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

The vehicles were parked at the locked gate on North Wheeny Trail. At the pre-walk briefing, I kept the group expectations intentionally low. My own assessment of our chance of encountering an agreeable terrain during the entire return trip was around 20%.

Our journey began at 0757. A lot of sounds accompanied us on this beautifully sunny and cool morning. The birds were out, singing solo interludes over the constant hum of the Cicada chorus. Along the road, we noted and photographed a shiny golden Australian Christmas Beetle, *Anoplognathus sp.*, appropriately out and about on this Christmas eve.



Australian Christmas Beetle, *Anoplognathus sp.* Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

It took the group just over an hour to cover the 5.7 kilometres of the trail to the take-off point. We made it there by 0902 and paused for a quick drink and change of wardrobe. A much more exciting part of the trip could now begin! The trail down to Lagoon Creek is reasonably easy to follow. It descends very steeply through a number of smaller cliff lines before entering a beautiful rainforest. Some brainless person has defaced many rock faces and trees with pink chalk arrows, a good justification for the imposed access restrictions. At least they did not use paint, so these awful marks could hopefully be washed away by rains, but it would take some time before they disappear.

In the early parts of our way down, we noticed several old cut stumps – the proof that timbergetters had worked these forested slopes before and the reason the trail was put in here in the first place. The giant Turpentine we stopped by at 0937, at two metres in diameter, would have been too big to drag out to the road, so, luckily for us, we can still marvel at its magnificent presence.

Four minutes later, the group was down at Lagoon Creek. This section of it, particularly the opposite bank, is strewn with fallen tree debris, making it look wild. It is probably the result of rain, flood and high wind events of the last 6-12 months. From here, it is possible to continue on the same side of the stream or cross

on to the other one. Both ways quickly lead out of the dense forest to a huge rock shelf rimmed by an amphitheatre of very high eroded white cliffs on its far edge. At 0947. ¹



Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

The creek spreads out here and splits in several streams, making its way to the eastern end, where it plunges six metres into a big pool. These are Lagoon Falls. At 0955 (western edge). A cute Blue Mountains Tree Frog, *Litoria citropa*, was photographed along the way. Less than 15 minutes were spent in this entire area. Cruel, but I remembered we had a much bigger agenda and an uncertain time frame for the second part of this trip.

¹ Some time ago, bushwalker John Kennett alerted me to an article in *Australian Town and Country Journal*, of 13 May 1871, page 16, A Visit to Kurrajong, by “Our special reporter” [name unknown]. It describes a walk from *Northfield*, one of the estates located at Kurrajong Hills. The article states, *inter alia*, “*The White Cliff Glen*” takes its rise from a lofty wall of light coloured rocks, at the bottom of which flows a crystal stream, which at one place leaps over some rocky boulders into a natural basin, known by the name of the “*White Cliff Fall*”. I agree with John that this description matches closely the remarkable wall of high white cliffs near Lagoon Falls, so I am proposing to use the name, White Cliffs, in describing this place from now on.



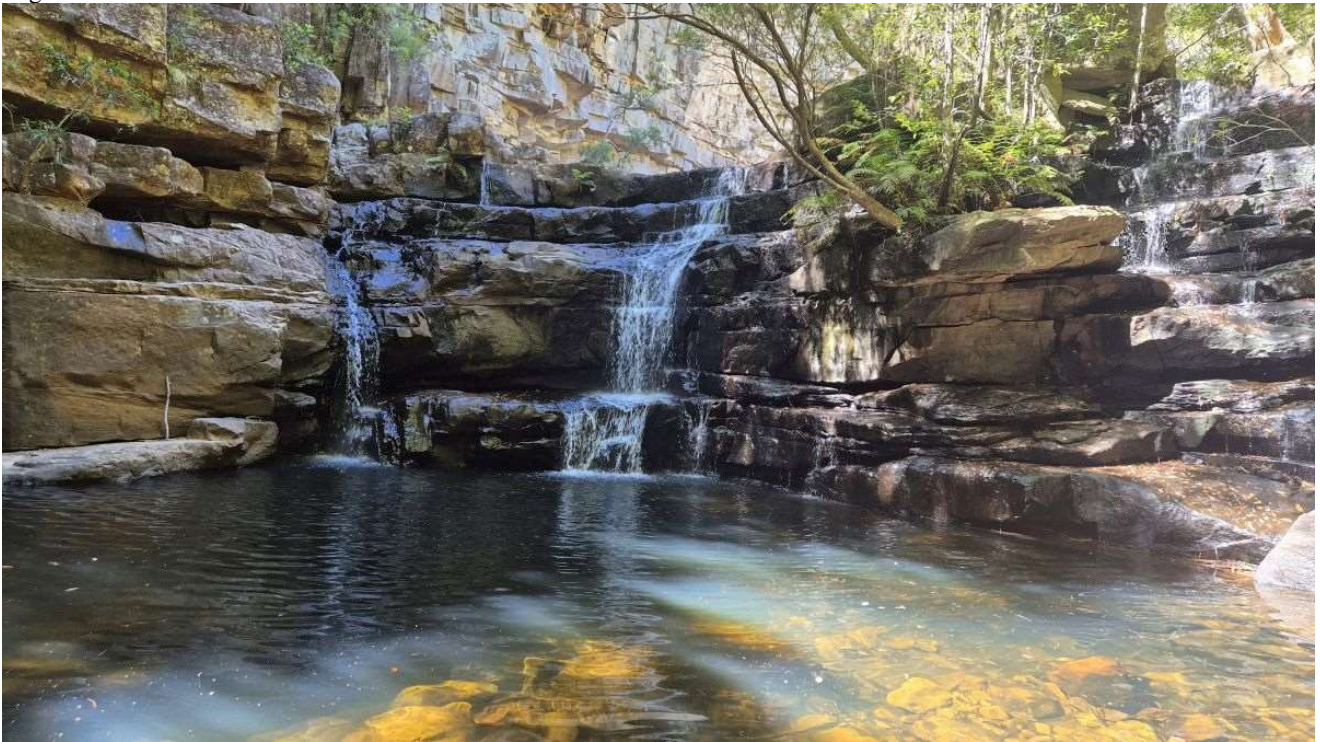
Blue Mountains Tree Frog, *Litoria citropa*. Photo: Irina Sorokina.



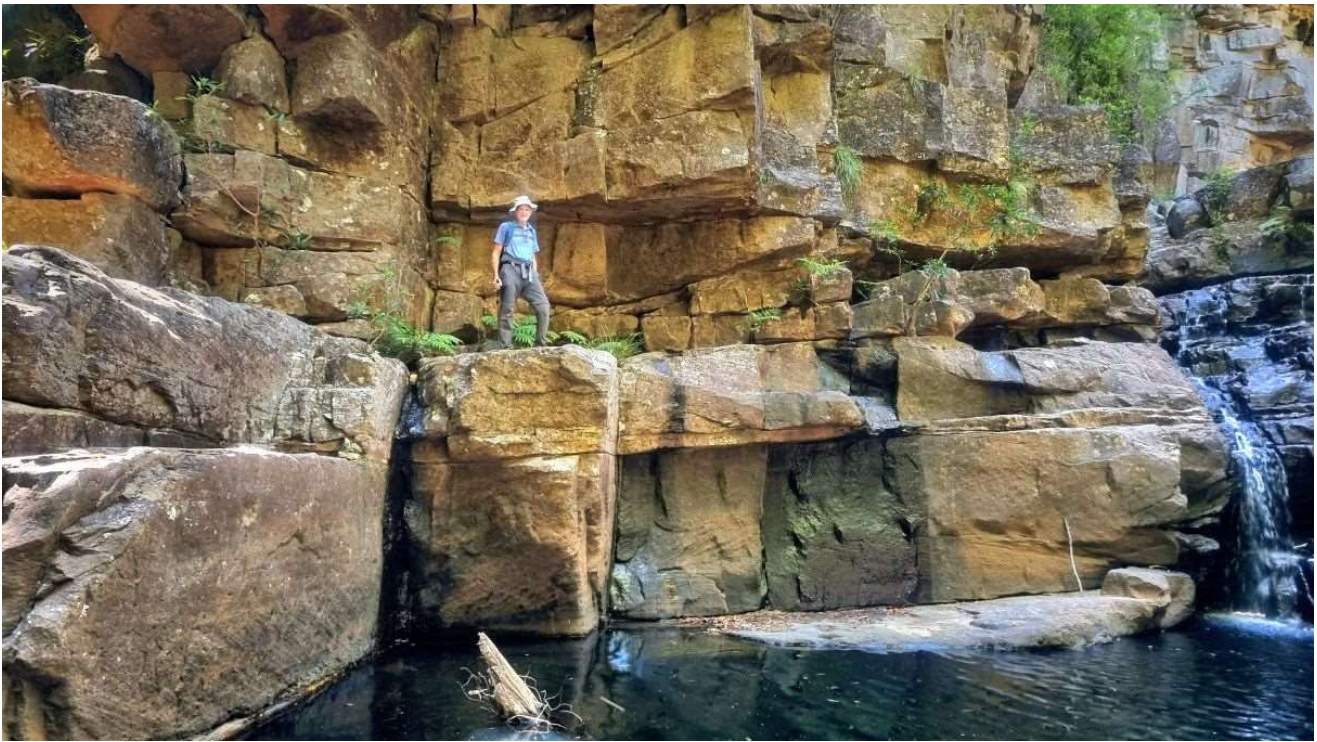
Lagoon Creek at White Cliffs. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Lagoon Falls. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

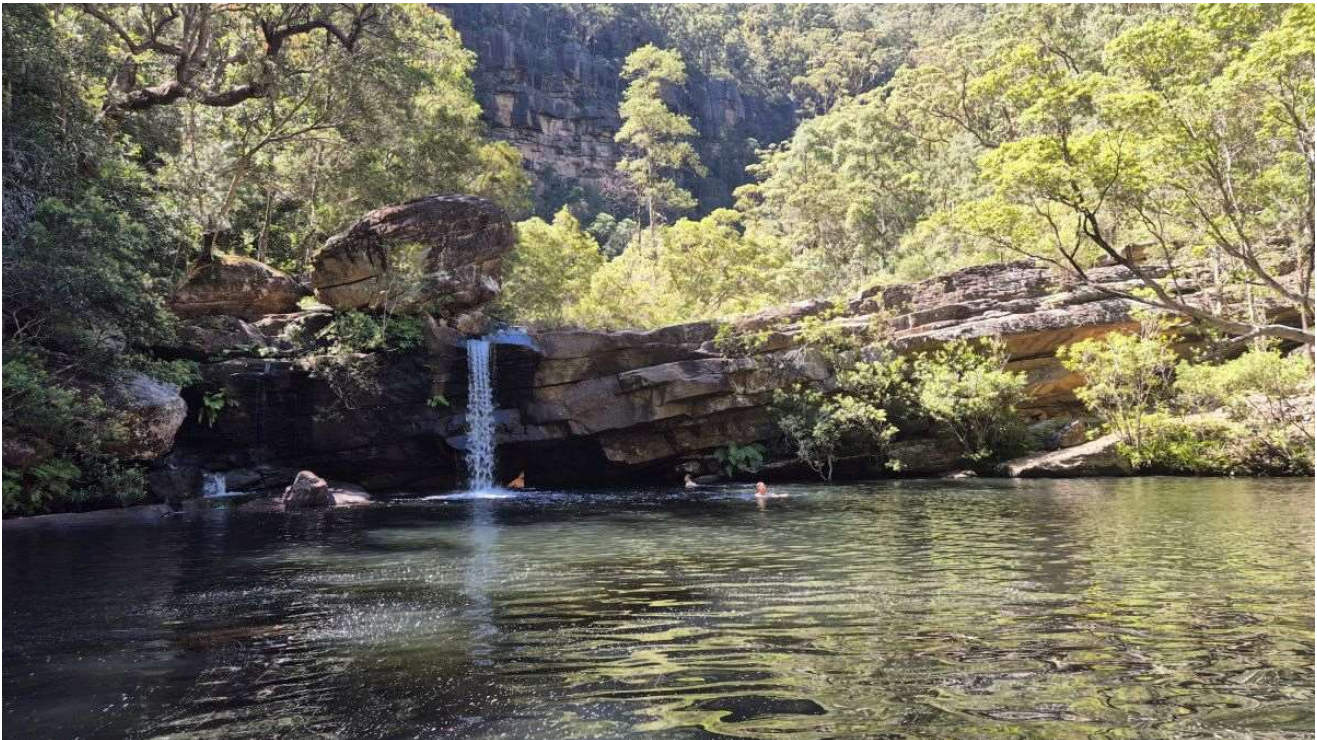


Lagoon Falls. Photo: Irina Sorokina.



Ian at Lagoon Falls. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Next, we followed the creek down to arrive at the Wheeny Gap, with its magnificent pool, at 1014. It was a perfect day for a swim and a perfect time for morning tea. During the second part of our break, we climbed to the extensive rock platform above the falls, to enjoy the 360-degree view of the area.



Wheeny Pool. Photo: Irina Sorokina.



The party above Wheeny Pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

The ‘easy’ section was over by 1044 as we departed on the exploratory (and lots more exciting for me) part of the trip². We did not have to wait long for thrills to come along. Immediately up from Wheeny Pool is a magnificent area of huge rock block-ups interspersed with blue-green pools. A fair amount of scrambling was required here, all of it was great fun.



Negotiating block-ups near Wheeny Pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

² A much more detailed description of the terrain so far can be found in the track notes for Wheeny Gap and Waterfalls in *Wollemi National Park: Walks from Bilpin, Book 1*, Walk 1.25.

I had declared at the outset that I was not going to worry today about wet feet or more, as it is often safer and faster to walk through water. For today, though, I drew the line at about knee-deep. With that in mind, it was only a matter of minutes before the first direct pool crossing took place. This was the order of the day.

But there was still more. The giant boulders soon gave way to an area of wonderful cascades gurgling down amongst large pools and rock platforms that stretched for about 80 metres. At 1101. I called this location Wheeny Cascades.



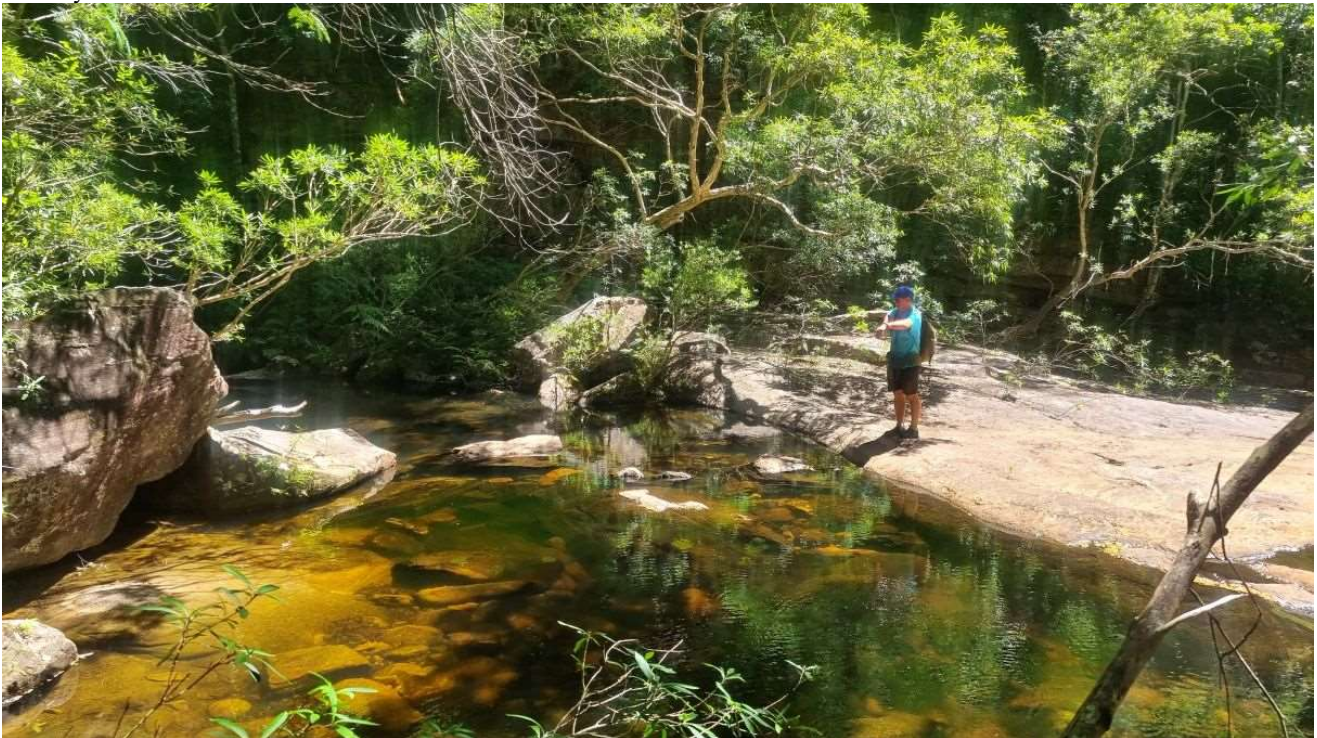
Wheeny Cascades. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Wheeny Cascades. Photo: Irina Sorokina.



Wheeny Cascades. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Paul at Wheeny Cascades. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Straight afterwards, the gorge narrows down to only about 20 metres and is framed by huge cliffs on the northern side that at the lower level become a wall of exposed eroded rock. It looks like a smaller version of White Cliffs. The creek does a 90-degree bend via extensive rock shelves and dark green pools.

We now moved up to the left bank walking through a very pretty, flat grassy area that would be good for camping. At 1114. I had been here in February this year, when we came down from Kurrajong Heights and then went back again using a nearby gully. After 50 metres or so, the walls of the gorge close in and the magic stops.

For the next section, we had to stay within the creek, pushing through low scrub growing here in abundance in between small boulders. It was slow but not too painful and only lasted for a few hundred metres, giving way to wide forested terraces covered in low understorey and dotted with enormous trees. A few huge old Turpentines were photographed here. At 1140. As the creek was snaking its way via a few wide bends in this area, we were able to save some distance by changing sides and taking the inside curves.



A giant Turpentine. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

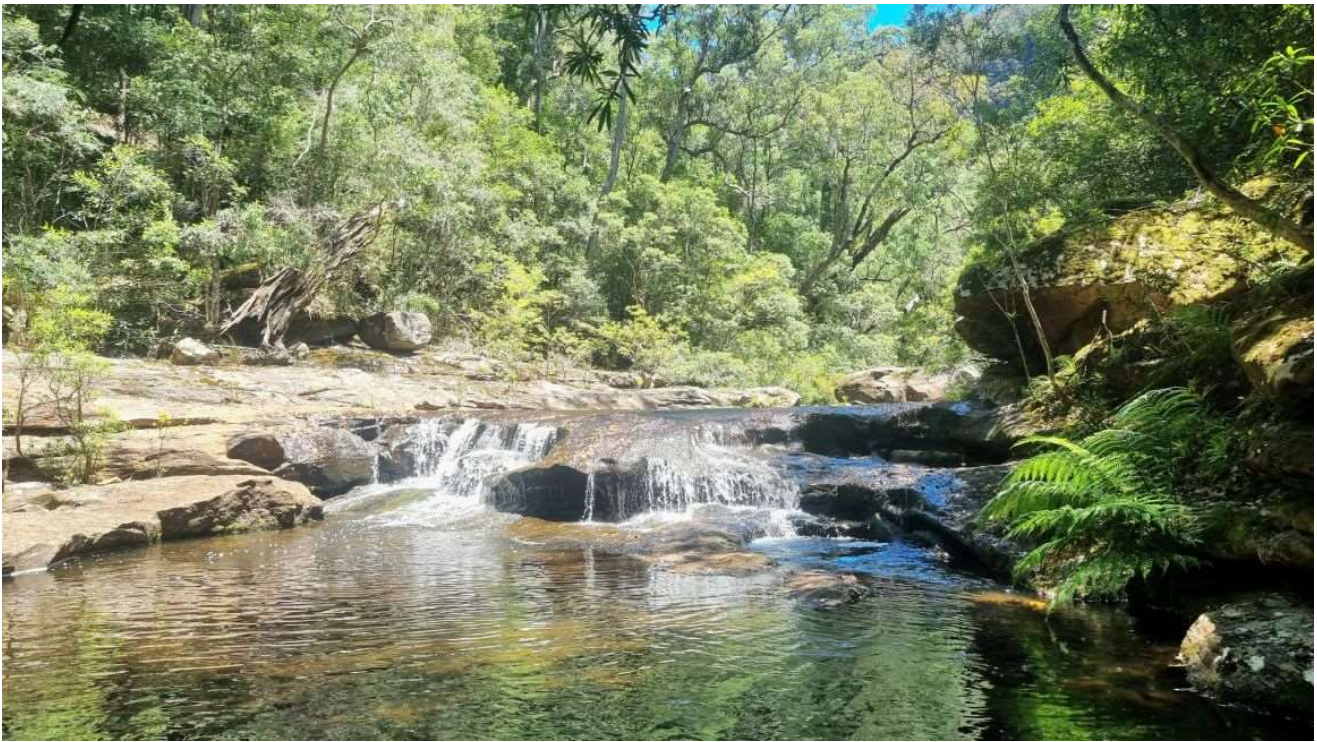
Not far after the beginning of a straighter section of the creek, at 1154, the group came by a gorgeous 50 metre pool. A swim was a tempting proposition, but we were less than halfway of the distance we needed to

cover up the Wheeny Creek, so I said, *No, let's get most of it out of the way before we stop. There will be another pool.*

As it often happens, the big pool was followed by a block-up section. It was much shorter than the one up from Wheeny Gap but still provided a nice variety to the journey. At 1221, walking on the northern side, we entered an interesting part that began by crawling through a short tunnel and continued with a series of rock platforms, pools and cascades for almost 250 m. We came to the end of it at 1231. I called this area Small Wheeny Cascades.



A short tunnel crawl. Irina in action. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Small Wheeny Cascades. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Straight after that, we clambered over a big landslide on the right-hand side, at 1235. The following bit was slow as the gorge had steep slopes here and the creek itself consisted of a sequence of medium size deep pools, not good for walking. We mostly kept on the northern, shadier bank. From 1258 till 1325, the party enjoyed a lunch and dip stop. The pool here was not extensive but perfectly adequate, and the water temperature seemed cooler than at Wheeny Gap. There was still about 800 metres to go on Wheeny Creek, and I hoped that section would not be too slow.



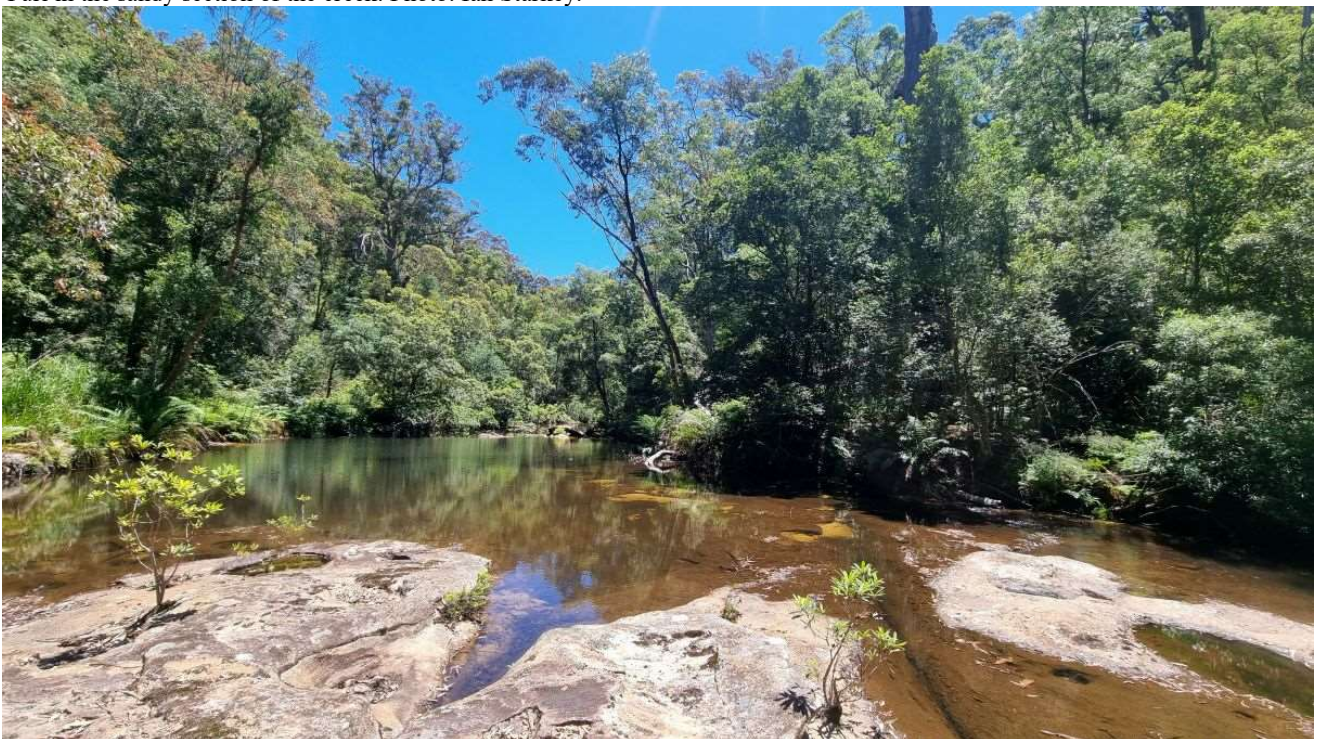
Paul at the lunch time pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Eleven minutes after resuming, we reached a stretch where the creek flows through a wide flat bed of yellow sand, reminiscent of some sections of the Colo River. I did sink once, at the very start, into a spot of

quicksand, but it was just up to my knees, so getting out was easy enough. After a very pleasant 200 metres long walk in warm water covering the soft river bed, we came to a rock shelf, and on the upstream side of it, a huge pool, about 40 metres long by 20 metres wide.



Yuri in the sandy section of the creek. Photo: Ian Starkey.



A very big pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

The company made it to the junction with the exit tributary by 1402. Right at the confluence, Wheeny Creek forms an enormous body of water, at least 100 metres long. Whilst we were getting organised for the next stage of the adventure, I reflected on our journey so far. As I had planned, it took us over three hours (including lunch) to cover the three kilometre stretch, but contrary to my low expectations of the terrain, it ended up being a very scenic and enjoyable trip. I would do it again any time!

Whilst preparing for today, based on my previous experience of this area, I had even greater misgivings about negotiating a long ravine chosen for the exit. Right here, at the Wheeny Creek junction, this rainforest-clad open gorge looked strikingly beautiful, but having seen enough horrible gullies covered in thorny wall-to-wall scrub in this general area, I reminded the team we had to be ready to leave this creek as soon as it gets too hard and to push our way out to the ridges.

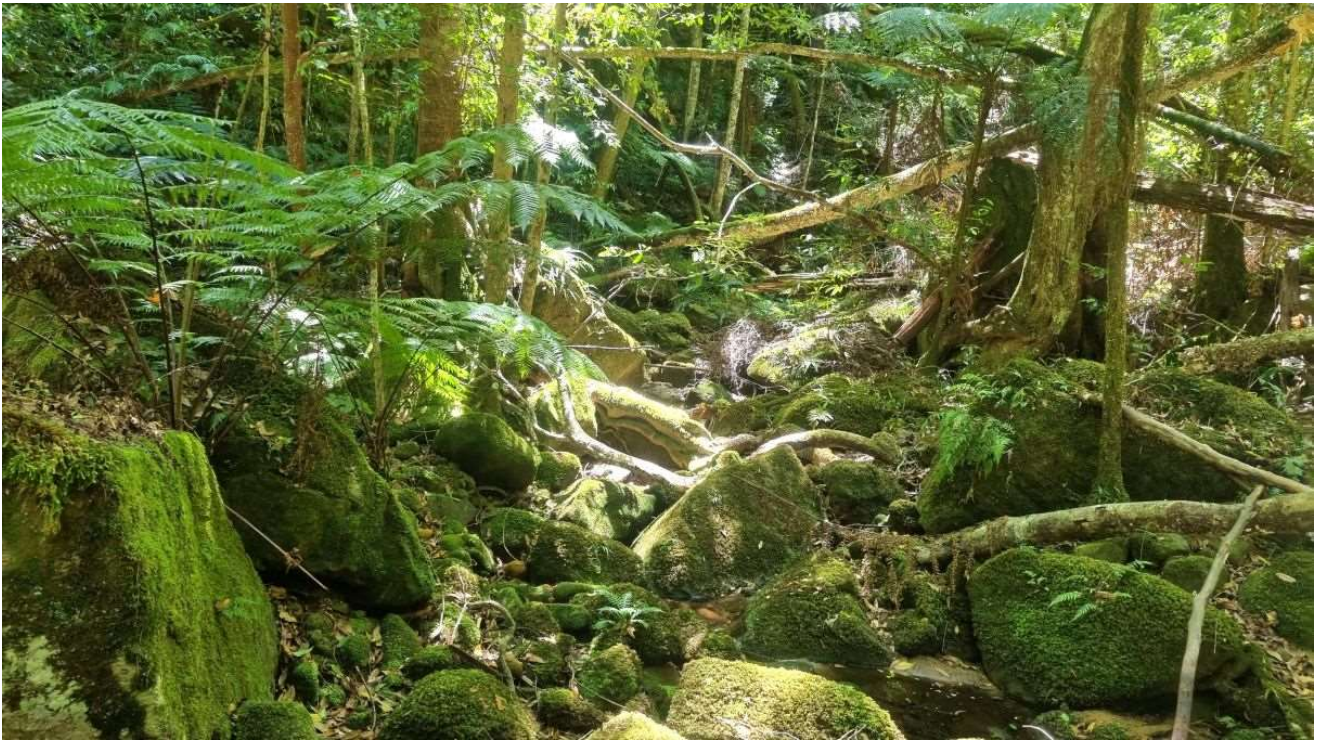
At 1410, we began to make our way upstream through an enchanted emerald rainforest world of Ferns, Moss-encrusted trees and boulders, with a burbling brook flowing between dark brown rocks. Patches of brilliant sunlight lifted some areas out of the deep shade, accentuating their beauty. No scrub was to be found in the sparse understorey. In this part, the walls of the ravine were almost vertical on the right-hand side and very steep on the opposite one. The rate of ascent felt steeper compared to Wheeny Creek, but quite measured. At 1434, passing through a constriction, we inspected a 50 metre long overhang with a small area of tafoni formations.



Emerald Brook. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Emerald Brook. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Emerald Brook. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Tafoni formations in a cave. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

The magic continued after that. Every time we would reach a small bend that restricted our vision, I expected the conditions to suddenly deteriorate, but, to my continuous amazement, they did not. The water along the way was also plentiful. I had originally thought, as a way of escape, of climbing 60 metres or so on the left, in order to walk along and explore a cliff line shown there on the detailed map, but this brook had us all spellbound, and I decided to stay within it for as long as the excellent scenery continued.



Emerald Brook. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Zaid at a low rock pile-up. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Kirstie and Zaid in Emerald Brook. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Finally, at 1534, the party came at a ten metre waterfall in the creek. We had a five-minute stop here in the shade of the rainforest, to drink, rest and consider our options. This creek during its entire course runs parallel to North Wheeny Trail, but the exit options downstream had been very few (and why would you want to?), whereas from now on, they were plentiful. On the other hand, I wanted to continue exploring, and, by doing it, we would be minimising the road bash at the end.

The team was happy with the plan, so we climbed steeply towards the cliff line on the left-hand side and quickly found a ledge there that took us upstream of the waterfall. When we came back down to the creek bed, the gorge here was only a few metres wide and filled with scrub. Fifty metres or so further, it widened out and became quite good-looking again, but not of the same standard as the section before the waterfall. A

Red-bellied Black Snake, *Pseudechis porphyriacus*, crossing the rocky creek bed, was briefly seen and photographed here.

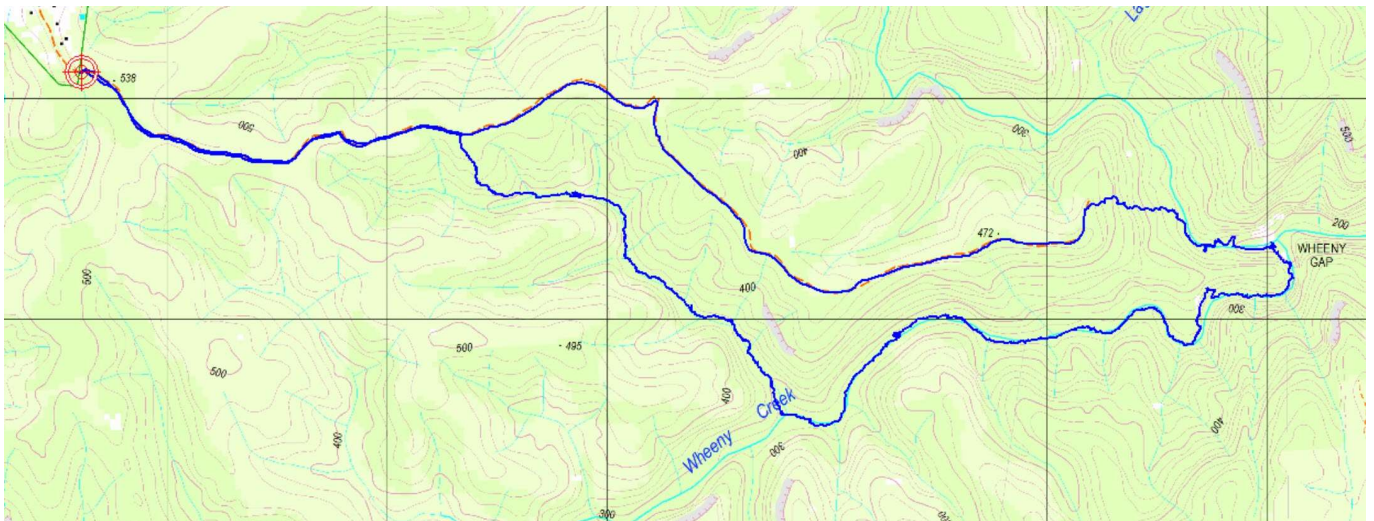
At 1558, we decided to exit the creek and start climbing out. I must say, I now regret that we did not follow it for another kilometre or so. It still had running water and offered reasonably easy going. If we had, we would have significantly cut the road trip - potentially halved it, from two to one kilometre. I intend to do it next time. This tributary of Wheeny Creek far exceeded my wildest expectations. The amazing rainforest section from the start till the waterfall is about 1.7 kilometres. I asked Ian when did we last experience such long, wonderfully sustained, scrub-free, scenic rainforest gorge, with running water along its entire length, and neither of us could remember the occasion. I called this watercourse Emerald Brook.

The 400 metre or so long climb to the road had the densest scrub of the trip, but it was still quite manageable. Interestingly, from where we were, the ridge to the east of the one we took appeared to be much more open, at least in the lower sections. Both spurs look exactly the same on the topographic map, but this is the Wollemi for you.

The North Wheeny Trail was reached at 1630, and the vehicles, at 1658.

This had been a wonderful adventure that explored a very viable (and desirable, in my opinion) option for visiting Wheeny Gap.

Trip statistics: total distance 16.1 km; ascent 350 m.



Walk topographic map. Recorded and prepared by Yuri Bolotin.

Table of Times, Locations and Grid References

Time	Location	Grid Reference	Elevation
0757	Cars parked at North Wheeny Gap Trail and walk started	GR 7460 9315	535 m
0902	At the take-off point	GR 7918 9250	430 m
0937	Giant Turpentine	GR 7958 9250	240 m
0919	At Lagoon Creek	GR 7962 9245	235 m
0947	White Cliffs	GR 7972 9232	215 m
0955	Lagoon Falls (western edge)	GR 7973 9234	215 m
1014-1044	Wheeny Gap. Swim and morning tea	GR 8003 9235	190 m
1101	Wheeny Cascades	GR 8002 9211	210 m
1114	Grassy glade	GR 7973 9210	230 m
1140	Old Turpentines	GR 7953 9202	240 m

1154	Big pool	GR 7923 9145	245 m
1221	Start of Small Wheeny Cascades	GR 7889 9191	250 m
1231	End of Small Wheeny Cascades	GR 7868 9196	260 m
1235	Landslide	GR 7862 9201	262 m
1258-1325	Lunch and swim	GR 7832 9193	270 m
1336	Sandy stretch	GR 7818 9180	272 m
1402-1410	Emerald Brook junction	GR 7780 9158	275 m
1434	Overhang	GR 7765 9187	330 m
1534	Waterfall	GR 7686 9257	380 m
1558	Exited Emerald Brook	GR 7668 9256	395 m
1630	North Wheeny Trail	GR 7634 9285	490 m
1658	Vehicles	GR 7460 9315	535 m