

Walk:

Blue Mountains National Park: Wollangambe Minus One¹

Leader:

Yuri Bolotin

Maps, etc:

Mount Wilson, Wollangambe. GPS setting WGS84.

Description:

Limited numbers. Early start. Leave some cars at the Mount Wilson Fire Station car park. From Watertrough Hill, follow a series of ridges north east and descend into the Wollangambe River at around GR 526 916. Swim/float/walk/scramble down the gorge to either the Big Bend or, if time allows, to Wollangambe One entry. Must be able to swim well. Flotation device and helmet are mandatory. Bring dry bags. Wetsuit is strongly recommended. About 13 km. Scrambling and exposure. Exploratory.

Rating:

5M. M333E

Gear Issues:

See above for special gear. 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:

4 January 2025.

The Party:

Yuri Bolotin (leader), Andrew Mitchell, Kirsty Wulf, Carlos Jimenez, Tracey West, Ciaran Quinlan, Chris Dalton, Damon da Costa, Daniel Bolotin, 9.

The Weather:

Early morning was cool and cloudy. Blue sky and very warm from late morning till around 2 pm. Cloudy and thundery after then, but there was no rain. Very pleasant and cool in the late afternoon/evening. Light cool breezes throughout the day. Temperature range 18 to 29 degrees C.

The Colo River height gauge for the area closest to the Wollangambe was at 0.68 metres.

Track Notes

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

Having left some cars for the return trip at the Mount Wilson RFS car park, we drove to Watertrough Hill to join the rest of the group. After a quick introduction, day briefing and gear check, the journey commenced at 0811.

The morning was cloudy and it still felt cool, so I wanted to take advantage of favourable conditions by setting a faster pace. The trouble was, in my eagerness to gain time, I headed down the wrong spur and we ended up losing ten minutes or so. Fortunately, the company let me keep my job, and soon we were on the right course, walking along a north east-trending forested ridge. This part had a track that we could follow most of the time, but, in any case, the vegetation around us was quite manageable.

¹ My name for a day-walk/swim in the Wollangambe canyon west of (before) the Wollangambe One canyon.

At 0900, we passed spot height 1,019 m, and a few minutes later came to an area with expansive views that included, to the south east, Mount Banks; and to the east, Mount Tomah. The track from here was getting harder and harder to find, but it did not matter much. Half an hour later, the party enjoyed the first panorama of the Wollangambe basin, but not the sight of the big scar of the hideous sand mine in its headwaters it contained. A little further, at 0936, we noted an old cairn.



Wollangambe basin panorama. A scar seen on the horizon line (left of centre) is the working sand mine at Clarence. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

By 1011, the group made it to Bell Creek, which was only a metre wide here, flowing through an open and scrubby gorge. A very unprepossessing appearance, considering the magnificent canyon it becomes less than one kilometre downstream. The sun was quite hot by then, so we had our morning tea in the shade of the cliffs on the northern side. It lasted 15 minutes.

We now set our course northwards, up a tributary gully of Bell Creek, reaching a broad grassy saddle twenty minutes later. If we continued downhill, we could reach Wollangambe within approximately 40 minutes. I had two reasons for choosing a different route. First, because I believed the direct option would add about 1.5 hours to the planned 3 hours of creek time to the journey, and I was concerned about some of the people in the party, including myself, getting cold; and the second reason was that from my research, the gorge does not look very attractive in this additional section.

And so it was that, after a quick drink stop, we turned right and climbed towards the high country above, reaching the top of a north east trending ridge, roughly parallel to Wollangambe River, by 1112. This elevated walkway was broad, open and had 360-degree views of the surrounding areas as well as some interesting rock formations. It felt very hot here, so we paused a few times in the shade to have a drink.



Climbing to the high ridge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

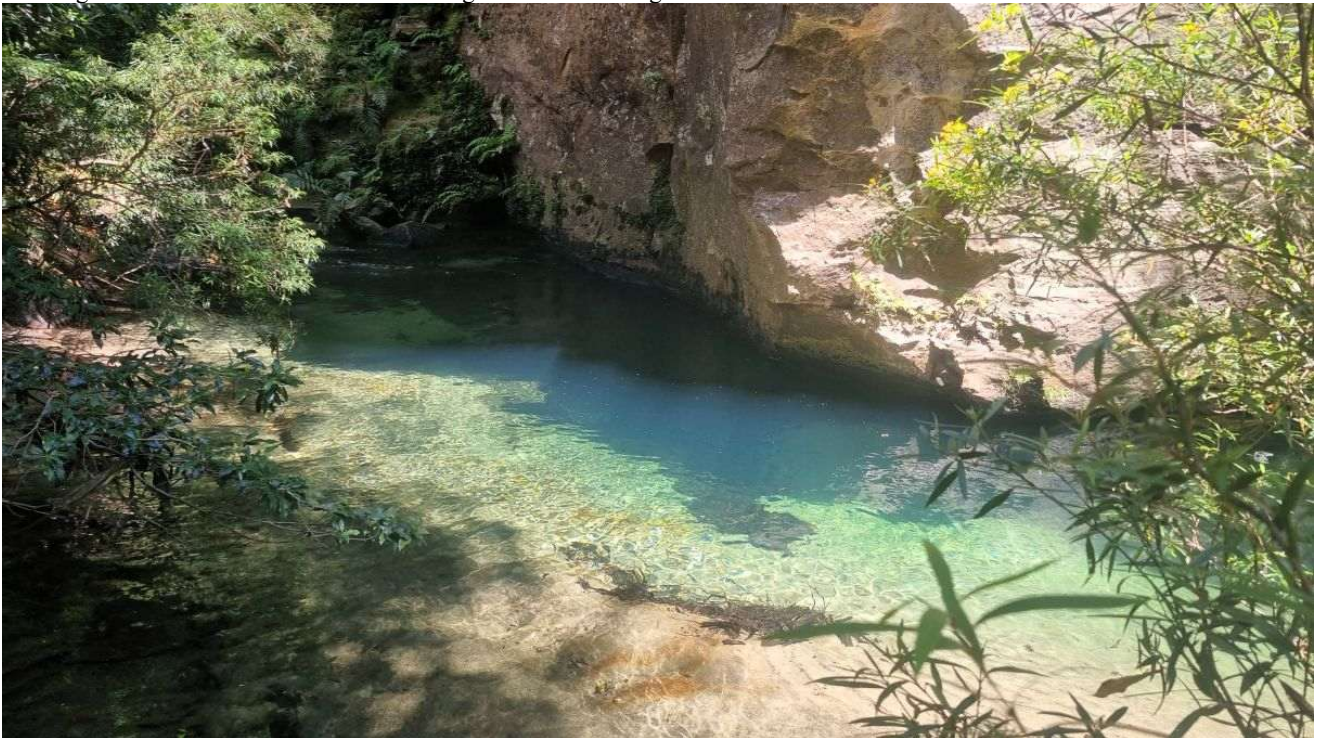


Rock formations on top of the ridge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

At 1143, it was time to leave the main ridge and find (which was a bit tricky) a small spur descending northward towards our destination. Coming close to the edge of the cliffs bordering the river, we realised that we were still located at a considerable height, perhaps 50 metres, above the bottom. I thought, *There better be a way down here, as expected, because walking all the way back to Watertrough Hill in this heat would not be much fun.* Luckily, the narrow slot leading down was very easy to find, being the only spot available as far as the eye could see. We reached the top of it at 1158. The descent had one or two little scrambles, mainly in the top part, but we did not even need to use the tape, making it down to a shallow but impossibly blue and beautiful pool on Wollangambe River fourteen minutes later.



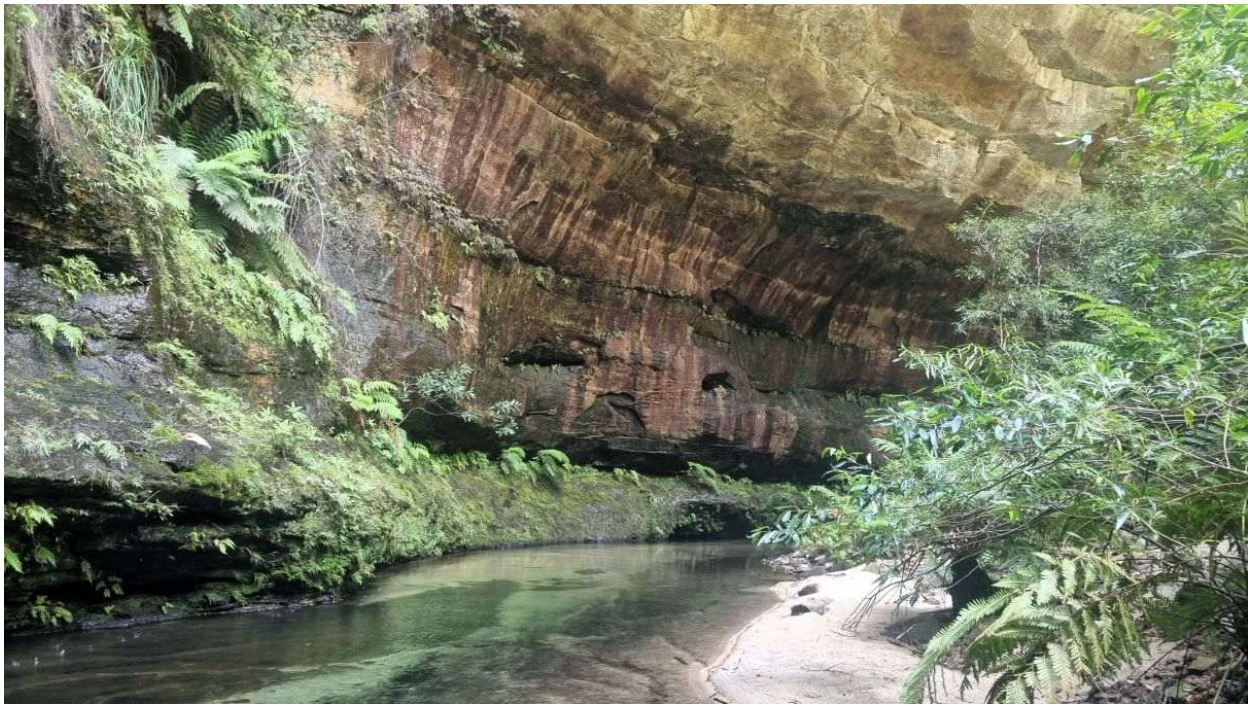
Wollangambe River below us. The slot leading down is on the right. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



The first pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Here, we had lunch and changed into our canyon gear. As I could not yet see any sustained pools, I suggested that people who brought water floatation devices (including myself) would inflate them further downstream.

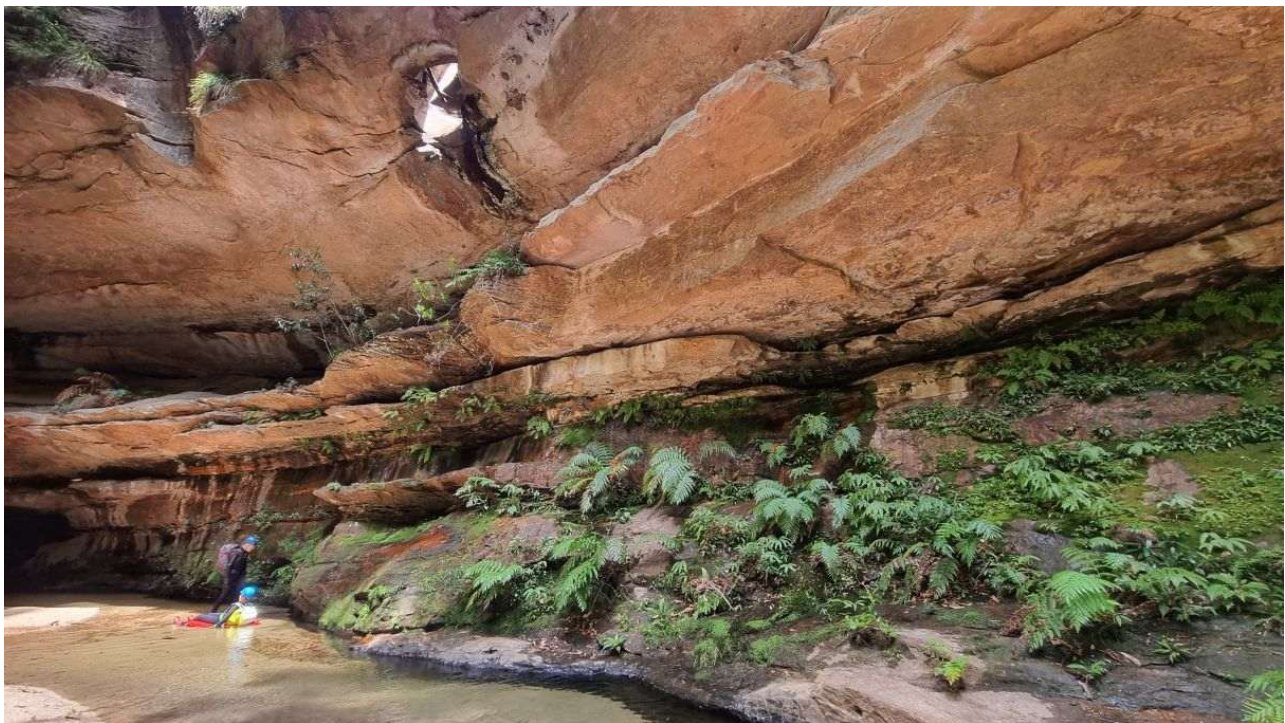
At 1250, our river journey commenced. The beautiful part of the gorge started after less than 50 metres, when we came to a stunning, high, Fern-lined amphitheatre on the northern side and a significant stretch of deep water. This was the first of the many sharp, snake-like bends that the river makes as it flows through this area. A few minutes were spent getting the lilos ready, before we continued downstream.



A Fern-lined amphitheatre at the river bend. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

At 1315, there was another big bend followed by an 80 metre pool. We did not know it then, but it was the longest one of this entire trip. One needs to bear in mind that the river level was generally down.²

About 50 metres after the long pool, at the next sharp curve, we admired a remarkable feature - a large round hole, about a metre or two in diameter, in the roof of the overhang, 15 metres above our heads. There was no water pouring through it, only the sunlight, and this aperture looked as if might always stay generally dry. At 1330.



A hole in the roof of the canyon. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

² The Colo River gauge nearest to the Wollangambe junction that I use as a yardstick showed that the creek was 30 centimetres lower today, compared, for example, to the adjacent Wollangambe One Canyon we did last summer.

After another 100 metres or so, the blue pools suddenly gave way to a rocky section. It was not too large, and soon we made it through to the junction with Whirlpool Canyon. At 1400.



A blue pool next to the roof hole. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Following that, the party had to tackle an extensive boulder field cluttering the river bed. Our water floatation devices were a liability here, but picking our way over and around enormous rocks was a lot of fun. After that, the beautifully high narrow gorge continued. At 1456, the company passed another bend and a particularly narrow section, where it looked like the river was entering a tunnel (this was an optical illusion).

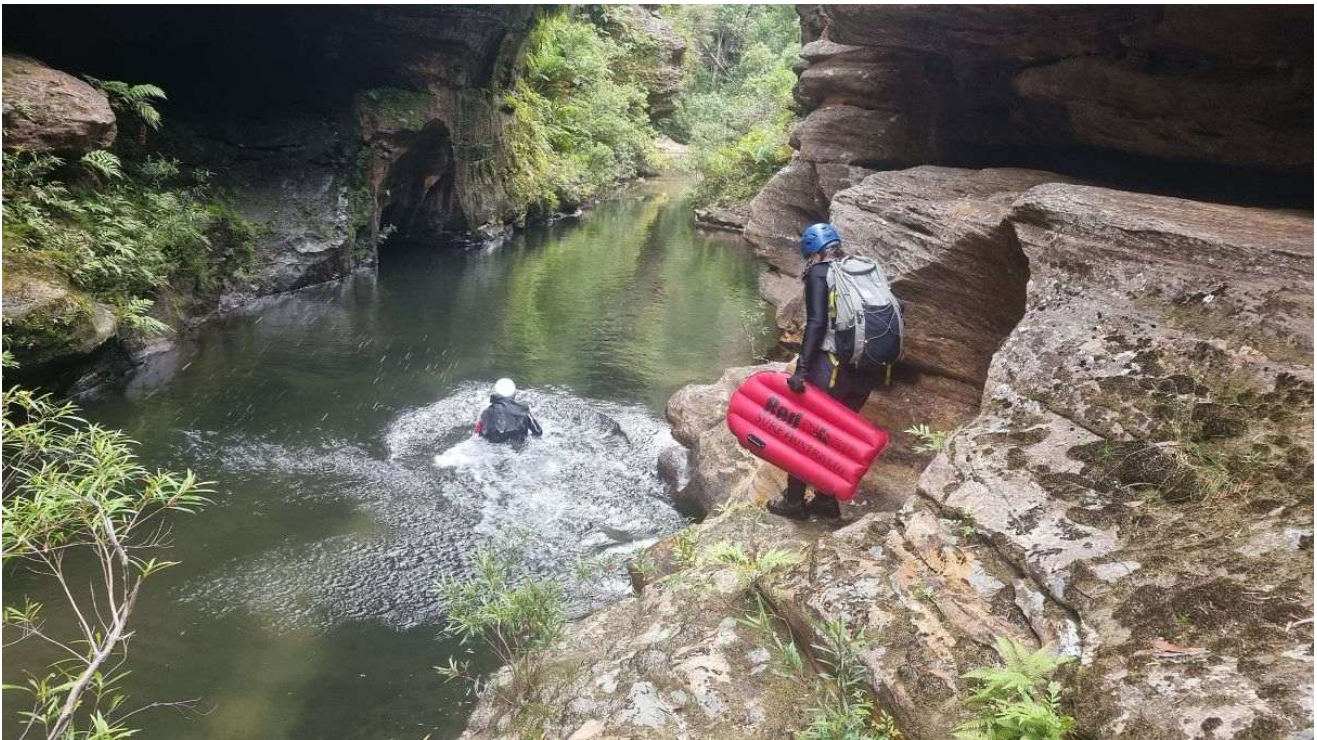


Daniel and Tracey at the block-up section. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Tracey near the narrow tunnel-like section. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Yet another boulder field followed, giving way to a long green pool. We were happy to deploy our lilos as they only were only having a limited use today. 1528 saw the group at the Geronimo Canyon exit. The trip down from here was familiar to me, as I had done this canyon a few times before. One of my favourite sections lies about 200 metres downstream, where a crawl through a short, low, dark tunnel between the boulders leads suddenly to a majestic open space, with both walls of the gorge soaring sixty or more meters into the sky, and the flat smooth sandy canyon floor accentuating the feeling of being inside a grand cathedral. At 1537.



Using the lilos was fun. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Chris in the cathedral-like section. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

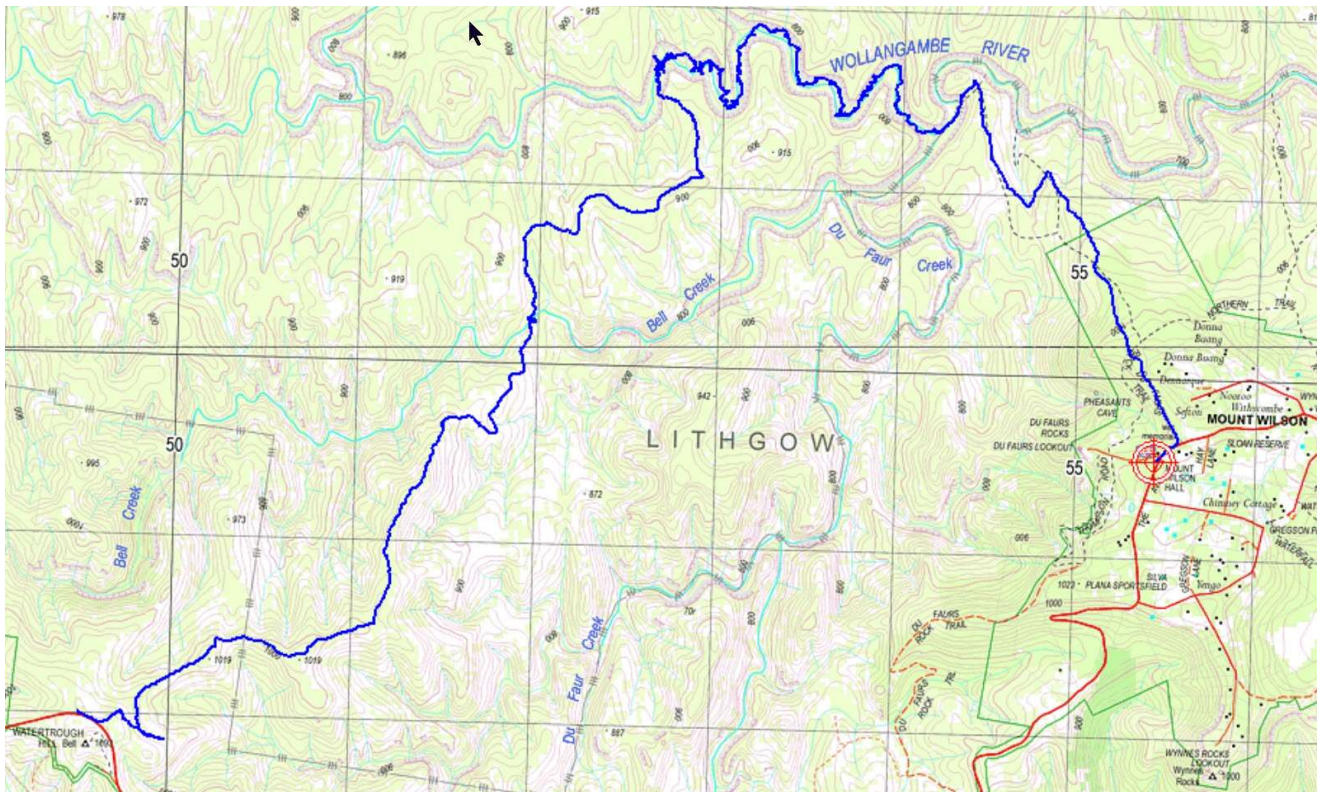
From here, it was only another twelve minutes to the junction with Bell Creek. On this second encounter today, once again, the creek again looked very unremarkable, hiding all its wonders in the part between here and our morning crossing point. We reached the Big Bend, the end of our river trip, by 1601.

Changing into the bushwalking gear and packing up took until 1635. The trip up on the well-trodden and very familiar track was pleasant, especially with the cooler evening temperatures. We made it back to the cars parked at the Mount Wilson RFS by 1750, and the shuffle to Watertrough Hill took another 15 minutes.

Thinking of this trip and with the current water levels in mind (see under The Weather at the start of the notes), I did not really need the lilo today, but it was still useful at times, and with more flow in the river, could be helpful.

Coming back to a possible alternative route directly down to the Wollangambe from the saddle at 1046, I have no regrets about not taking it. This option would have made the trip today about 45 min longer, and we would have less variety, having to spend an extra 1.5 hours in the river instead of walking on the scenic ridge. However, we would have saved a 100 metre climb. Maybe something worth doing on another occasion.

Trip statistics: total distance 16 km; total ascent 560 m.



Walk topographic map. Recorded and prepared by Yuri Bolotin.

Table of Times, Locations and Grid References

Time	Location	Grid Reference	Elevation
0745	Cars parked at Mount Wilson RFS car park	GR 5543 8954	1,005 m
0811	Walk started from Watertrough Hill	GR 4950 8800	1,060 m
0900	Spot height 1,019 m	GR 5072 8836	1,019 m
0930	Wollangambe view	GR 5136 8931	970 m
0936	Cairn	GR 5140 8943	960 m
1011-1026	Bell Creek and morning tea	GR 5195 9024	810 m
1046	Saddle	GR 5195 9075	850 m
1112	Top of the ridge	GR 5219 9072	930 m
1143	Turned off onto a spur	GR 5289 9108	900 m
1158	Top of the slot	GR 5263 9154	824 m
1212-1250	Wollangambe River. Lunch and change.	GR 5264 9167	773 m
1315	An 80 metre pool	GR 5292 9168	770 m
1330	A hole feature	GR 5301 9147	766 m
1400	Whirlpool Canyon junction	GR 5316 9186	758 m
1456	A very narrow section	GR 5365 9144	750 m
1528	Geronimo Canyon junction	GR 5396 9171	741 m
1537	Cathedral-like section	GR 5400 9143	736 m
1549	Bell Creek junction	GR 5421 9135	734 m
1601-1635	Big Bend and change	GR 5432 9155	732 m
1750	Mount Wilson RFS car park	GR 5543 8954	1,005 m
1805	Watertrough Hill	GR 4950 8800	1,060 m