

Walk:**Wollemi National Park: Goliath Steps – Colo River – Phantom Gully****Leader:**

Yuri Bolotin

Maps, etc:

Mountain Lagoon. GPS setting WGS84.

Description:

Park at the end of T3 Trail and take the T3 Track towards the Colo until around GR 816 015. Descend east on a spur, then south east into a gully and find a pass down to the Colo at GR 827 016. Walk upstream to around GR 825 022 and find a pass up, eventually joining the T3 Track at around GR 821 024. Reconnect with the vehicles. Exploratory. About 6 km. Scrambling and exposure, and may not be possible.

Rating:

6M. S333E

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:

17 February 2025.

The Party:

Yuri Bolotin (leader), Tom Zubrycki, Stephen Craft, Karin Schianetz, 4.

The Weather:

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

Background Notes

The 1:25,000 topographic map shows no cliffs between the T3 Track and the Colo River. If you have not visited this area before, then looking at the map, you would be blissfully unaware of the real conditions. You would therefore be forgiven for wondering why I gave this walk a Grade 6 and why I wanted to do such an easy trip in the first place. In reality, the Colo gorge is framed here (as it is along most of its length) by sandstone walls so high that, until recently, I thought it was not possible to negotiate them.

My friend and oftentimes bushwalking companion Bill Beck gave me the initial idea of this adventure last year when he sent me a LIDAR image of the area showing a couple of possible passes. One looked harder than another, as a potentially impossible narrow gorge section about 200 metres long and with a hundred metres difference in elevations needed to be negotiated. The other one looked even more puzzling, as part of that pass seemed topographically impossible. A phantom pass. More of it later.

All this was too tempting not to check out, so today's trip aimed to do just that. Bill had not fully recovered from a recent small injury, so, unfortunately, he could not join me on this occasion. I hope he would read the notes below with interest.

Track Notes

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

Cars were parked at the end of T3 Trail. During the briefing, I outlined the background information about this trip and pointed out that, whilst the estimated walking distance is quite short, it might well end up being even less if one of the sections would be found impossible and we had to turn back. The T3 Track would be used as our fallback. Therefore, contrary to the common wisdom of exploring challenging ravines in the upstream direction, we would be doing the opposite as the second gorge is a lot closer to that known exit route.

The briefing was completed at 0900, and our adventure got underway. The first part was very straightforward as it involved walking on the T3 Track. You do get a lot of bang per step here, as a four minute stroll from the cars brings you to the edge of the escarpment and a breathtaking 180-degree panorama of the Wollemi Wilderness, with the Colo gorge in the centre of your vision. Here, a white flowering bush of *Platysace clelandii* was photographed. According to some sources, it is not usually found in this area.



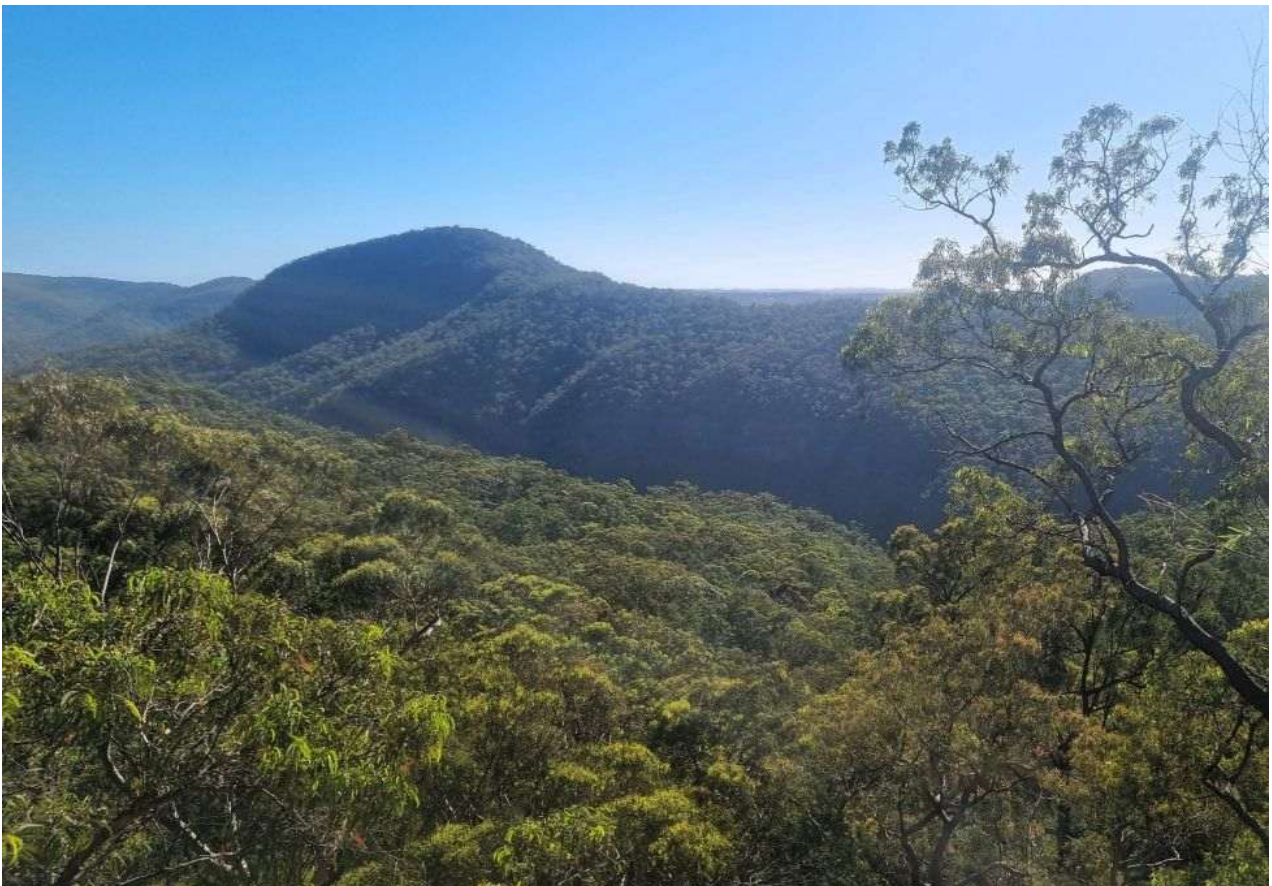
The panoramic view from near the beginning of the T3 Track. The first gorge is Tootie Creek, and the next one, Colo River. Parr South is to the left of the centre. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

The excellent views continued for the next 200 metres until the track dropped steeply to a wider terrace and away from the edge. Very soon after that, at 0914, the party headed off-track into a fairly dense but manageable understorey featuring an unusual proliferation of *Macrozamia*s. An east-trending spur emanated from around here; it was a bit difficult to locate at first due to limited visibility and shallow incline, but soon enough I knew we were on it and heading towards the Colo.

By 0933, the group reached the first cliff line directly in front of a perfect slot leading down. I cannot claim any credit here, it was just a lucky coincidence. The spur became narrow, and views of the Colo gorge opened up once again, this time towards Mount Townsend and the long, elevated ridge starting from it. The river eventually goes around it in a 180-degree turn. Next, we scrambled down through a series of drops and used a handy ramp to negotiate a ten metre cliff line. Underneath, was a sunny, dry deeply weathered overhang. At 0940.



Above the first slot. Photo: Karin Schianetz.



The view towards the Colo and Mount Townsend. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



A sunny overhang at the bottom of the cliff descent. Photo: Tom Zubrycki.

From here, the spur widened and flattened, and the vegetation became denser, as clearer patches were interspersed with the less penetrable ones, liberally sprinkled with Lawyer Vine and Devils Twine, often occurring together. Nothing unexpected for a Wollemi terrain. Also hardly surprising was a complete metamorphosis at 1002 to a beautiful open ridge, covered in short grass and large scattered boulders. A little further, our rocky walkway narrowed down to only about five metres – very scenic – and it was almost with regret that I announced the morning tea stop as I realised we must be leaving this now idyllic spur here, to avoid getting in some very serious cliffs just a hundred metres further east. At 1011.



The scenic part of the ridge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

After a relaxing ten minute break, we continued on our quest to get to the Colo River. At this point, we were less than 300 metres from it, but also more than 200 metres higher, so the hardest part of the adventure was only about to start. How incredible is this country!

The next task was to descend into a gully to our south, which was quickly and efficiently accomplished by 1037 due to the slopes being mostly open and the lack of any cliffs. During the preparation for today, I had concluded that the next 200 metres within this ravine would most likely determine the outcome of this entire walk.



Easy open slopes on our descent. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

We now found ourselves at the bottom of the gully, which was bouldery, had only a small amount of water running through, and to my great relief, completely devoid of scrub. Essentially, our task from here on was to negotiate a series of giant steps between flat terraces that occurred at almost regular intervals, about every 30 to 50 metres. The steps were between three and eight metres high, and the way down could be found usually in one spot only, either on the left or the right side, or through the middle. Some of the climb downs were trickier than others, but we did not need to use the tape on any of them. My non-negotiable condition was that every single one of the descents must be reversible. I think this exercise would have been a lot more different and probably impossible after a long period of rain. For me, the journey was a little heartbreaking as every time we approached the edge of the next terrace, my heart sunk momentarily, until I could see a way forward. This feeling became more acute as we progressed, because reversing and getting back up was getting to be harder and harder. But of course, there is also the adrenalin-excitement factor here too.



Terraces and pools in the gully. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



The giant steps. You never know how far down you could get. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Karin using the steps to descend. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Descending the huge staircase. Photo: Karin Schianetz.



Some steps were bigger than others. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Stephen coming down on set of steps tilted 45-degrees. Photo: Karin Schianetz.

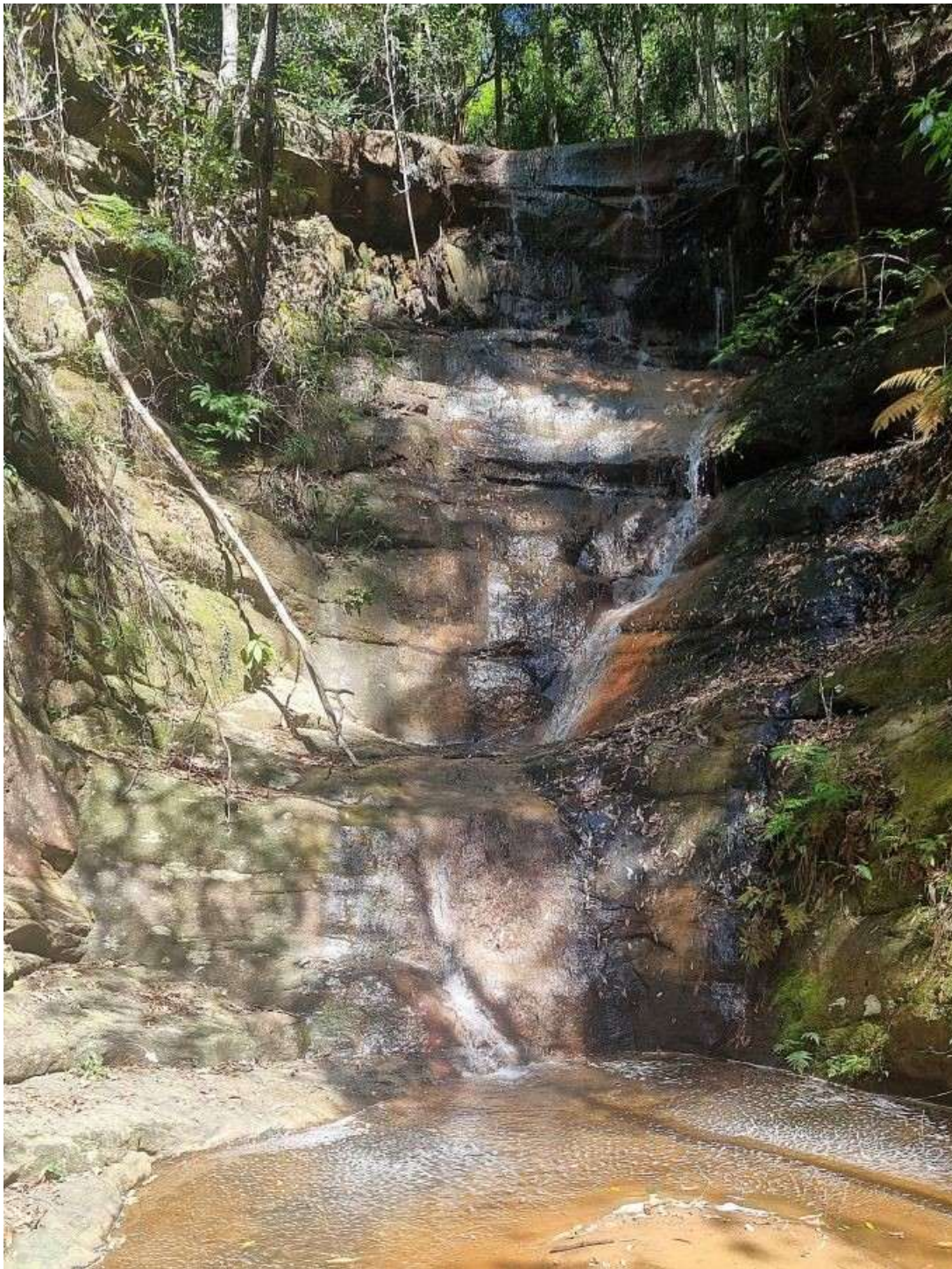
Finally, at 1118, the group reached the junction with a large tributary coming in on the right. That creek had a lot more running water, and the entire area changed now into a sparkingly green shady rainforest valley with the gurgling brook making its way through it. The gorge here was a lot wider, and my altimeter showed our elevation at 60 metres, with the Colo River being at around 20 metres high. I thought we had it all ‘in the bag’. However, I was about to receive another Wollemi lesson.



The dry gully changed into the rainforest gorge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Happily strolling through the green valley, we suddenly came to the edge of an eight metre waterfall within one hundred metres from where this creek joins the Colo. At 1124. I was momentarily speechless as there had not been any indication of it on the detailed map, nor could I see any easy way to get down. The thought of turning back from a spot that was so close to our destination, we could almost smell the Colo, was unbearable, so I got busy considering our options.

We soon identified a few places where we could set a tape, but all of them looked tricky and awkward, also considering there was now plenty of water coming down, making all surfaces slippery. I weighed these possibilities briefly and decided I did not like any of them. What to do next? Whilst I was thinking it all out, I noticed a narrow ledge on the right-hand side and decided to have a look. One needed to be careful, but it was not too difficult overall to walk along it, and soon I was past the waterfall but still about ten metres above the creek bed. Here, instead of dealing with wet rocky surfaces I had to get down a very steep slope that had a few small terraces and also a variety of trees that could be used as anchors during the descent. In fact, we only employed the tape in one spot. Before it was pulled out, I went ahead and checked that there were no other obstacles, but I think it would be possible to climb this slope unassisted, at least for the first person, who would then set the tape, if this trip was done in reverse.



This waterfall nearly derailed our entire trip. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

It took 24 minutes for everyone to get below this last obstacle. We were all at the bottom by 1148. Thinking about our entire descent, nature often makes you appear so small. That is how I felt scrambling down the huge steps that looked like they were made for a giant, who would be able to simply walk down each rise. I therefore wish to call this feature of the landscape Goliath Steps and the watercourse containing them, Goliath Steps Ravine.

Shortly after resuming our trip down the Goliath Steps Ravine, the gorge walls opened up and we came to a rock platform just above the Colo River at a long straight stretch 1.5 kilometres south of the Tootie Creek confluence and 2 kilometres north of the 180-degree bend at the tip of the ridge coming down from Mount Townsend. At 1200. The first part of the quest had been accomplished!



At the Colo. Photo: Karin Schianetz.

With hardly a single cloud in the sky, and the sun being gloriously warm, but not too hot, we were looking forward to a swim, but first, I thought, we should get to the point along the Colo I had chosen for the way up. As we were making our way towards it, using a combination of water edge walking in the sand and (mostly) staying in the bush above the river bed, my attention once again turned to an issue with the potential exit route that had been on my mind ever since I started preparing for this trip.

The issue, being of a cartographic or topographic nature, simply meant that the exit gully proposed by me may be a phantom one that does not actually exist. The detailed LIDAR map indicates a thin hairline of a watercourse located more than 100 metres north of another, bigger but impassable gorge (which is the only one appearing on the 1:25,000 topographic map). Both ravines are shown to be converging about 400 metres upstream from the Colo, with no dividing spur in between but rather the second larger creek plotted as going through a spur between the two gullies, all of which would be a topographic impossibility.

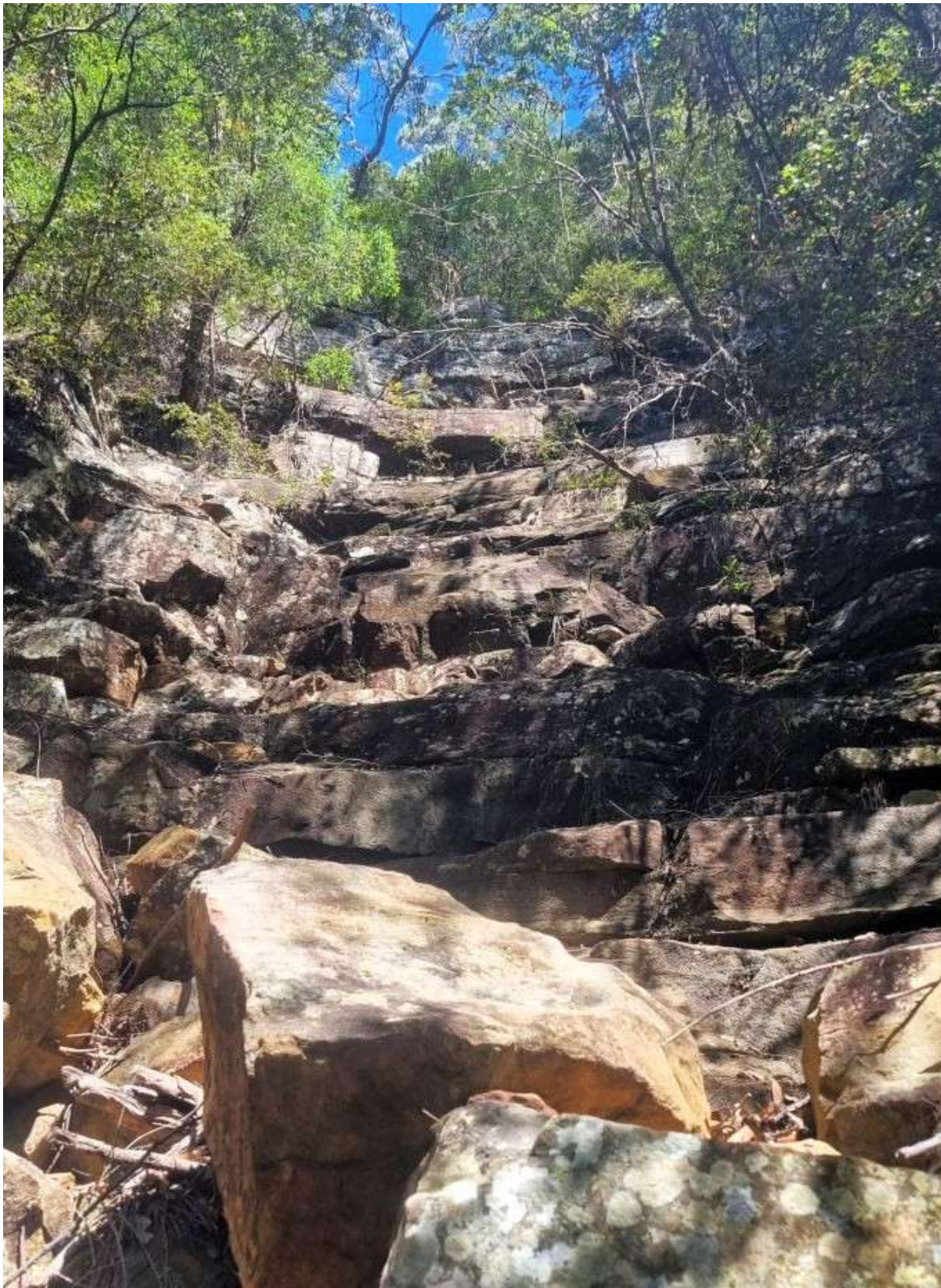
Well, I thought, the T3 Track was not too far and would serve as a contingency exit. In any case, we would soon find out the answer to this puzzle, but for now, as we reached the point where we would need to leave the river, a stop for a lunch and a swim was the highest priority. Between 1230 and 1300, we had a very enjoyable time dipping into the river from our base in the shade on the bank of the Colo. The water and air temperatures were just right, and we were serenaded through that whole time by a Lyrebird hidden somewhere nearby on the opposite side.



Swimming in the Colo. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

And now, to the challenge at hand! Packs shouldered, the party headed towards the high cliffs rising directly to our west, where an extremely narrow shadow of an opening could just be discerned through the dense vegetation. The first obstacle was tearing through a dense Blackberry patch. Not only was it painfully prickly, but it also completely obstructed our vision. It was as if Wollemi did not wish to reveal its secret. Luckily, we emerged out of it after only about twenty or so metres and could now see that, indeed, we were at the start of a very steep, tight, dry, rocky watercourse. This was the gully that does not exist on the 1:25,000 topographic map.

At this moment, I thought I could guess the answer to the cartographic puzzle (and I am sure some of the readers can do it too), but I decided to wait until we had better explored the terrain upstream before saying anything. Our progress was very good, as initially this shady ravine did not contain any water or any steps higher than a metre or two, and most of them were lower than that. A bit further up, there were a couple of taller walls, about seven metres high, but all easily negotiable on the side.



A rocky, easily negotiable gorge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

At 1331, we stopped at a point from where some attractive cliffs above on the southern side were visible and decided to investigate, hoping to get to some views we had so far been deprived of. “Some view” it was! Coming out, after a short scramble or two, to the top of a narrow rocky promontory, we were presented with a stunning panorama of the Colo gorge, viewed north towards Mount Townsend. This would have to be the view of the day!



The Colo gorge view. Mount Townsend on the far left. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Leaving this magical spot behind, it was possible to descend only slightly to a ledge that took us a fair way upstream in the gully, without having to go down and then back up. At 1410. Our journey continued from here without a hitch. After seventeen minutes, the company came to a small deep cave on the side of the creek bed, with a hole in the roof. One could crawl inside and then scramble out through the hole. Of course, the temptation was impossible to resist!



Stephen and Karin approaching the cave. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Tom in the cave. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Five minutes later, we arrived at the spot where, according to the detailed map, two ravines were supposed to meet, both descending towards the Colo from here. I would have been very surprised if this happened, but it did not, because, as I had been expecting for some time now, there was no second ravine! The gully we were using for our ascent is the only one that exists, and its entire downstream stretch is incorrectly shown on the 1:25,000 topographic map. When it reaches the Colo, the error is about 120 metres south of where it should be.

As we were having an easy time ascending so far, plus keeping ourselves in the shade, I thought, why not continue for as long as the conditions remain benevolent? At 1453, a small eroded cave was examined, which had a bright isolated patch of red ochre on the back wall; however, it did not look as if there had been any human intervention there. A little further, we finally reached a spot where the stony bed of the gully became very narrow and choked with scrub. Time to get out! At 1500.

This ravine had been an excellent way up through 300 metres of elevation. Most of the time whilst being within it, I had a weird feeling of walking through a space that was not supposed to exist, because its long critical section starting from the Colo is not shown on the topographic map. I therefore would like to call this entire watercourse Phantom Gully.

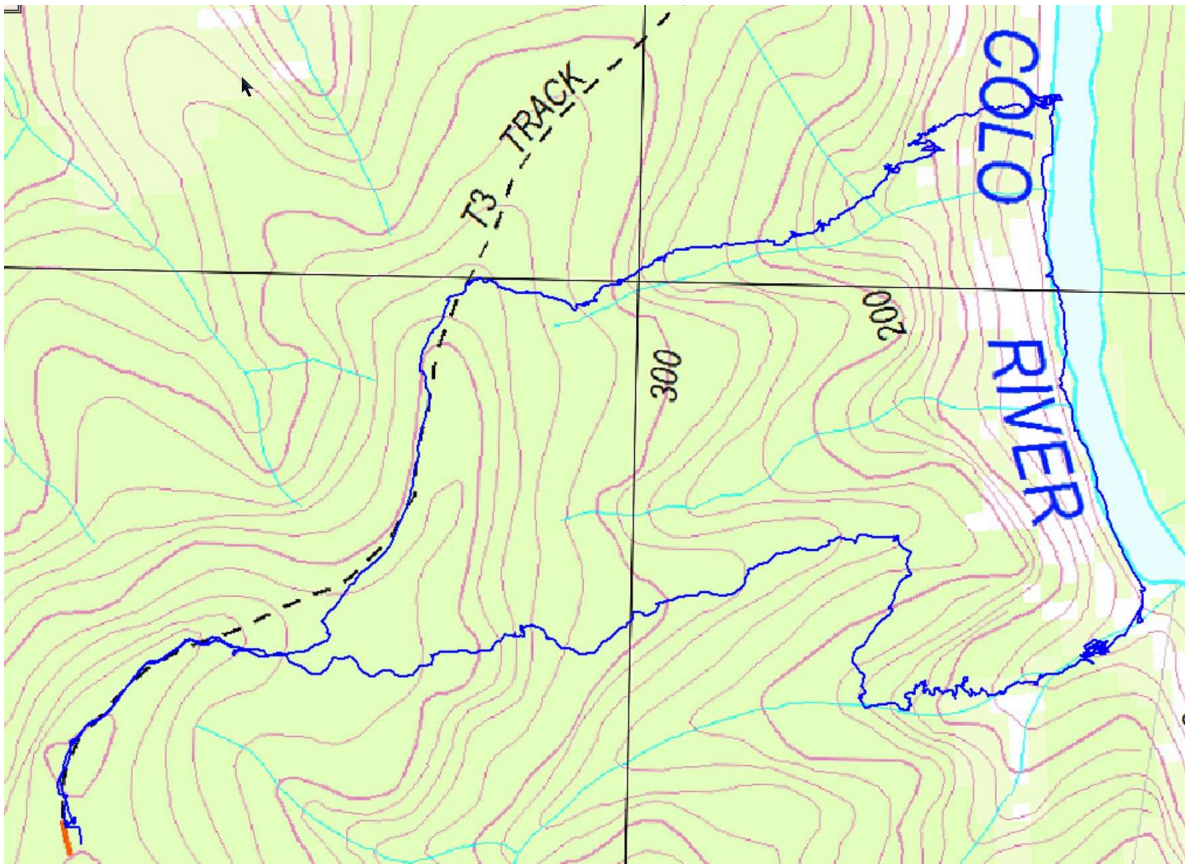
Leaving Phantom Gully behind, the group headed up a fairly steep and well-vegetated slope. We had a drink stop along the way and made it to the T3 Track twenty one minutes later. There was still a fair amount of climbing left to be done until we reached the wonderful lookout at the very top (visited this morning), at 1558. Seven minutes later, our trip ended at the parked vehicles.



The panoramic view towards Tootie Creek gorge, and, further beyond, the Colo gorge. Cascades Peak is just to the right of the centre. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

This had been a wonderful adventure, as we discovered two new passes to the Colo River, whilst having a great time in the process.

Trip statistics: total distance 6.5 km; total ascent 520 m.



Walk topographic map. Recorded and prepared by Yuri Bolotin.

Table of Times, Locations and Grid References

Time	Location	Grid Reference	Elevation
0900	Cars parked and started walking	GR 8126 0121	495 m
0904	Lookout	GR 8124 0135	500 m
0914	Left T3 Track	GR 8153 0148	440 m
0933	First cliff line, slot	GR 8181 0149	390 m
0940	Below the next cliff line	GR 8185 0152	350 m
1002	Open ridge	GR 8216 0160	280 m
1011-1021	Morning tea at the turn off point	GR 8236 0166	245 m
1037	In Goliath Steps Ravine	GR 8232 0144	160 m
1118	Tributary junction	GR 8254 0146	60 m
1124	Waterfall (top)	GR 8263 0150	40 m
1148	Waterfall (bottom)	GR 8265 0152	30 m
1200	Colo River	GR 8270 0159	19 m
1230-1300	Lunch and swim near the start of Phantom Gully	GR 8256 0226	20 m
1331	Start of lookout detour	GR 8238 0220	110 m
1340-1345	Colo panorama	GR 8241 0219	140 m
1410	Back in the gully	GR 8234 0216	130 m
1427	Cave with a hole	GR 8222 0207	180 m
1432	“Phantom” point	GR 8220 0206	183 m
1453	Cave	GR 8198 0200	290 m
1500	Left Phantom Gully	GR 8191 0196	320 m
1521	On T3 Track	GR 8176 0198	370 m
1558	Lookout	GR 8124 0135	500 m
1605	Back at cars	GR 8126 0121	495 m