

Walk:

Wollemi National Park: Thunderstorm Cave and Wheeny Gap

Leader:

Yuri Bolotin

Maps, etc:

Mountain Lagoon, Kurrajong. GPS setting WGS84.

Description:

Park at the corner of Old Coach House Road and Bells Line of Road, Kurrajong Heights. Walk north on the ridge along the fire trail to its end, then descend towards Wheeny Gap, visiting Matthew Everingham's Thunderstorm Cave on the way. After a quick swim, explore Wheeny Creek and the cliff line to the south of it till about GR 814 928. Find a way up from there towards spot height 537 m and walk back to the cars. Exploratory. About 13 km, some on trail. Scrambling and exposure.

Rating:

6M. 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:

19 April 2025.

The Party:

Yuri Bolotin (leader), Anton Leddin, Evgenia Obriadina, Ian Starkey, Anne Milson, Chris Barnes, Henry Lian, Stephen Craft, 8.

The Weather:

A warm sunny day with 20-30% cloud cover. Almost no wind and moderate humidity. Temperature range 18 to 28 degrees C. Pleasant walking conditions.

Historical Background¹

On 30 October 1795, three men set out from Parramatta aiming to cross the mountains. Their names were Matthew Everingham, John Ramsay and William Reid. They were not sent or employed by anyone but just wished to explore the unknown country north of Richmond Hill. Ten months after their return, the leader Matthew Everingham wrote a letter to Samuel Shepherd in England, describing their journey. In 1985, it was included in *The Everingham Letterbook: letters of a First Fleet convict*, edited by Valerie Ross and published in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society.

Everingham's account is very sketchy, and the adventurers, not being professional surveyors or explorers, *were geographically quite confused²*, so no wonder that several theories exist as to the route they took on their journey. It is agreed that the first part was from Parramatta via Richmond and then to Kurrajong Heights (the top of the first Mountain in Everingham's letter).

¹ I wish to thank John Kennett for alerting me to this story and this location, and for sharing his research with me.

² Andy Macqueen, *Wayfaring in Wollemi*, 2017, p.12.

From here, there are a few theories about the way they proceeded. One says they continued what is now known as Bells Range to Mount Tootie and possibly Mount Irvine; several others suggest that the explorers went north, crossed Wheeny Creek gorge, turned west along the ridge where North Wheeny Trail is located now, to come to Bilpin, and then reached either Mount Irvine or Mount Tomah.

The format of these track notes does not allow me to quote all the pros and cons of these theories, and I am directing interested readers to Valerie Ross's book, available from Macquarie Library or for purchase online.

The part of this attempted crossing relevant to the adventure described in my track notes below is the story of the discovery of a large cave in the cliffs on the fourth day of the explorers' journey, where they stayed overnight, witnessing a terrible thunderstorm. Everingham's account of it is beautifully graphic,

In the night there was some little Rain with a deal of Thunder and lightning. Never in my life was my soul Struck with such awful admiration, the echoing of the Thunder about those terrible Rocks and mountains was sublimely grand, how insignificant the report of a broad side of great Guns appeared to this. It was to the hearer as if the very rocks and mountains were rending from their bottoms, each flash of forked livid fire seem'd regularly to keep time with each dreadful report; when first the flash appeared I could see all the Country before Me, then in a second or two, would come rumbling along the Thunder dreadful to hear. In three or four reports I had entirely lost my hearing and was in a manner petrified. It at last ceased, & became quite calm, the rest of the night tho' we were very tired was not spent in sleep but in descanting accord'g to our little ability on the awfulness & majesty of [the] Supreme being and our littleness and insignificancy while we stood trembling under a rock at the very terror of his sounds.

I can very much relate to how Everingham and his friends felt, having experienced a similar thunderstorm during our Complete Wollemi North-South Traverse, whilst Ian Thorpe and I crouched down in a one metre high slot of a cave on the Wollangambe River near its confluence with the Colo. Here is my account of it, although it is not nearly as poetic as the one quoted above:³

We spent a fair amount of time looking around for a suitable cave but, like when we were here last, our efforts did not yield much. We then tried to put up the fly, but we could not use any pegs on the rocky platform, nor were there any trees to tie the guys to, so we gave up after a 15 minute struggle against the rising wind. Our best choice was therefore the low overhang we had found when we were here before. It had just enough room to sit in the highest point, and was considerably lower elsewhere. The good thing was that there would be enough space for both of us to sleep and store our gear, and we could have the fire just outside it, on the open platform. The overhang was about 6 m long by 1.5 m deep by 1 m high at the tallest point. Last time, we looked at it and said, 'It is going to be an emergency option'. Now, when we were tired and with the bad weather forecast for this afternoon, we thought, 'We will take it'.

In the meantime, there was a complete and sudden change of weather – the sun went behind the clouds, the wind picked up, and the temperature dropped dramatically within minutes. The plans for a swim and a sunbake had to be completely abandoned. Instead, we quickly relocated to our hideout and stored some dry wood in it as well.

The weather continued to be volatile. It suddenly became very, very dark, even though it was just past 1615. We hurried to our overhang, and sure enough, within minutes, a huge storm came in, with thunder, lightning, wind and hail. The hailstones, fairly small at first, soon became as big as large peas. Sitting in our cosy hideout, dry and warm, we were very glad we had made the right choice...

Depending on the commentator, the location of the so-called Thunderstorm Cave is either on the western slopes of Mount Tootie/Little Tootie or in the southern cliffs bordering Wheeny Creek gorge. Having studied both main theories, I side with the Wheeny Creek interpretation, for two main reasons. One, because I explored thoroughly during many trips the western slopes of Tootie/Little Tootie and did not find any

³ Ref: Yuri Bolotin and Michael Keats, *The Complete Wollemi North-South Traverse*, Day 16, 18 September 2012.

suitable caves that would fit the description; and two, if the cave was at Mount Tootie, the timing of Everingham's arrival to it does not match his account of the rest of the journey.

Until this trip, my opinion was based largely on desk research about the Wheeny Creek location, so I now wanted to visit the cave and check two things that mainly bothered me, first, was Everingham able to see the distant mountains he subsequently headed for when he was on the top of his route north from Kurrajong Heights; and second, the opponents of this route say that the cave is too small to hold '200 Men' as described in his letter, and I intended to check that by visiting the site.

Track Notes

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

Vehicles were parked at the corner of Bells Line of Road and Old Coach House Road, Kurrajong Heights, and the journey began at 0807. I had copies of Everingham's account and other information in my backpack but decided to save most of the historical briefing until a later time, when we would hopefully reach Thunderstorm Cave.

For the first couple of hundred metres, the party gingerly stepped along Bells Line of Road, busy with Easter traffic, before veering up a steep forested hill towards the top of a long north-trending ridge, but staying just below its brow on the western side in order to bypass a private property to the east. This was an idyllic-looking country, featuring mature trees scattered on tightly compacted dark brown ground with almost no undergrowth. Quaint rock gardens and low overhangs ran on the downslope side, and I even had a brief look for caves there on our way.



An idyllic-looking country at the start of the journey. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



A rock garden. Photo: Anton Leddin.

By 0852, the company was on top of the ridge, joining a wide trail right at the point where it leaves the private property and enters the national park. We now continued on this well-graded roadway, wide enough for a fire truck, through a pleasant undulating terrain.

After some time, I consulted the map and saw that we were approaching the highest point on the ridge before it commences its descent towards Wheeny Creek. This would have been the top of the second mountain in Everingham's diary. From here, he saw that *"...further to the Nthwd about 30 miles apparently was another chain more lofty and dreadful [awe-inspiring] than those we were on."*

Due to the dense tree cover, there was no visibility directly from the trail, but a five minute walk to the west brought us to a low rocky escarpment with excellent views towards a chain of high mountains, Little Tootie, Mount Tootie, Mount Irvine, and Mount Tomah, about 18-20 kilometres to the west. There was not much visible northwards from here beyond the Mountain Lagoon Range, but as I mentioned in the Historical Background at the beginning of these notes, our amateur explorers had been quite disoriented in this most complex terrain, and the account was written much after the journey, when memories would have faded away significantly.



A partial view west from the top of the ridge. The edge of Mount Tomah is visible behind Mount Irvine. Photo: Anton Leddin.



The rock ledge on the western side of the ridge. Photo: Anton Leddin.

At 0943, just to the right of the trail, Anton discovered and photographed a large stone platform with a curious circle of stones on it. I was too far in front at that time and missed it. Something to check out next time.



Circle of Stones near the end of the trail. Photo: Anton Leddin.

Three minutes later, we came to the end of the road. From a nearby lookout, the chain of mountain peaks that could have inspired Everingham and his friends 230 years ago could still be seen. As well as that, a huge chasm created by Wheeny Creek as it flows in a deep gap between two high peaks came into the view. To give you an idea of the steepness of this gorge, it is worth mentioning that we were at this point located only 700 metres away from the bottom of it but 370 m above it. Could it be that when Everingham recollected, "*We now found the mountains were Intersected in two places by two terrible chasms...*", he was not looking at Hawkesbury River but rather at Wheeny Creek that enters the Colo very close to the Hawkesbury junction, with the second chasm being a deep gorge of Lagoon Creek?

I was amazed to find a wide, well-cleared track that ran down from the end of the road. We would soon find out the reason it exists. The only trouble, the descent was extremely steep (no surprise here, bearing in mind the numbers I quoted in the last paragraph). In many spots, it could only be negotiated by sitting down and using all fours to keep you from sliding down uncontrollably. Dry leaf litter was not helping either, and I would hate to be doing this in wet weather. On the positive side, the views down towards Wheeny Creek gorge were continuous, dramatic, stunning, and even better when admired from a couple of protruding rock platforms on the left-hand side.



The party negotiating the steep slippery track. Photo: Anton Leddin.

After making our way down this precipitous but very good track for a while, our progress suddenly came to halt on the brink of a 30 metre drop. There was no path leading down from here. We walked a few metres to a beautiful lookout in the western cliffs overlooking Wheeny Gap pool, where I noticed a tunnel leading down, but it would most likely need abseiling gear to use it. At 1020.

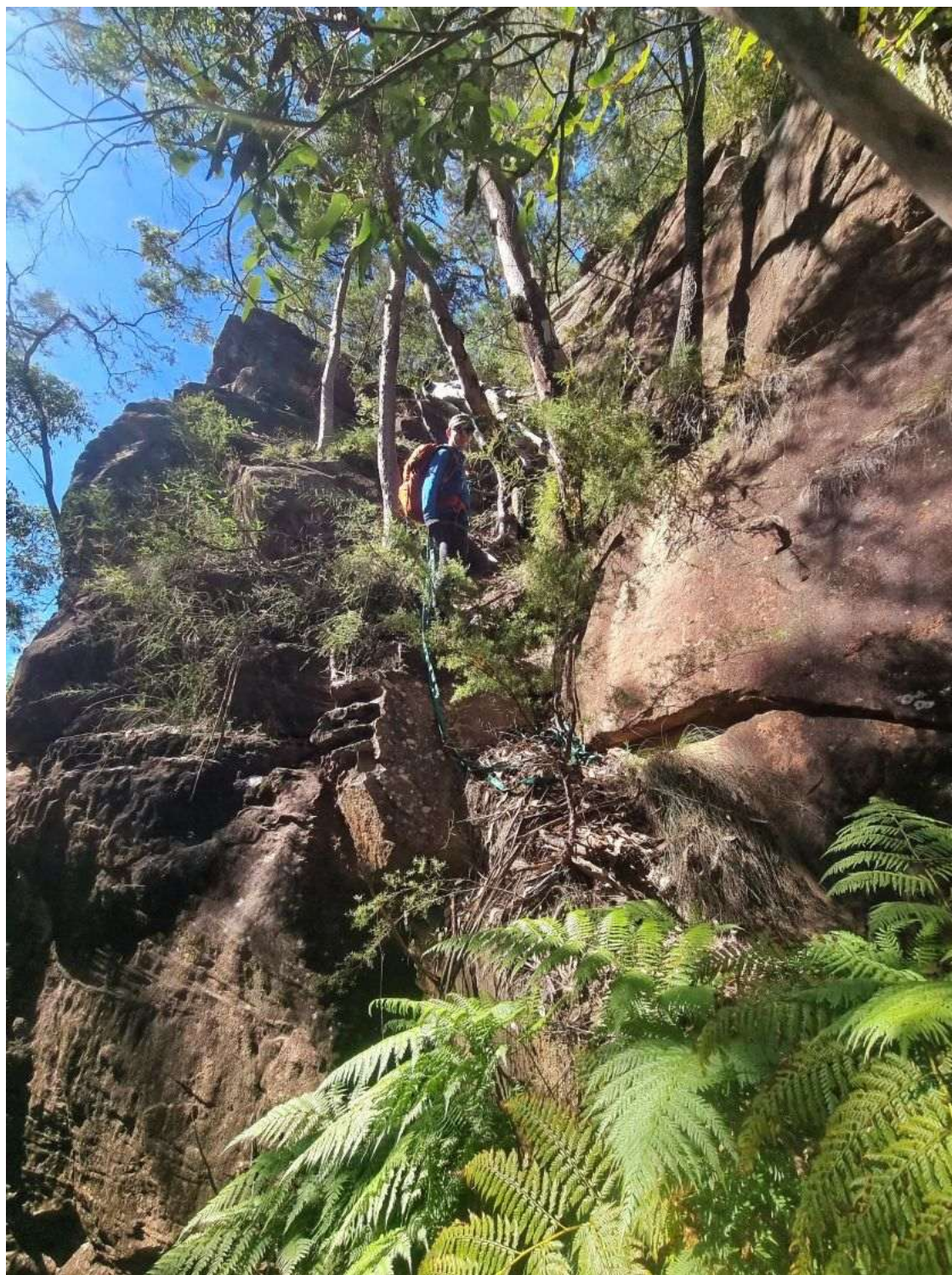


An awe-inspiring view from the top of the cliff line. Wheeny Gap pool at the junction of Wheeny and Lagoon Creeks can be seen in the middle at the bottom. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Walking in the opposite direction soon produced a better outcome, an indistinct gully, more of a twist in the vertical wall that created a very steep, slippery but doable ramp. At 1024. It required two pitches. The first one, using a 30 metre tape, which had to be tied around a solid but dead tree – not my preference, but other possible anchors were too far away. On the way down, an old rope ladder was seen dangling down, almost completely disintegrated with time. For the second pitch, we set a 22 metre tape, but 15 metres would have been enough. I told the team to take proper care with every step, so everyone did it at their pace and safely, reaching the bottom by 1050.



An old rope ladder close to the top of the descent. Photo: Anton Leddin.



Anton on the second pitch of the descent. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Walking east underneath a smooth brown wall, the party very quickly arrived at an exceptional cave. At 1055. We later measured it as 34 metres long by 6 metres wide by 7 metres high. The walls and ceiling were densely covered with beautiful sandstone weatherings in beige, orange and brown. This alone would have been enough to call it an outstanding location. There were two flat terraces/steps, the higher one is fully protected from the weather.

I was quite certain this was Everingham's Thunderstorm Cave. There is no doubt it would be '*...Capable of holding 200 Men*' as he claimed, although they would need to be standing or sitting close together. On one of the ledges, there is a log book/journal containing a brochure about a journey, organised by the Everingham Family Association in 1995, to commemorate a 200 year anniversary of his trip. The rope

ladders and the track are no doubt the remains of the infrastructure created to support this undertaking. There are only few other entries, two most recent ones being from John Kennett's and his party's two visits last year.

We had late morning tea in the cave, as well as the readings from Matthew Everingham's letter (his description of the thunderstorm). Although it was a wonderfully sunny, sparkling day, it was easy to imagine what it felt like to be here on a dark stormy night, as your insides shuddered with every peal of thunder and flash of lightning, not knowing what tomorrow would bring, when the descent into this deepest gorge had to be continued.



Thunderstorm Cave. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



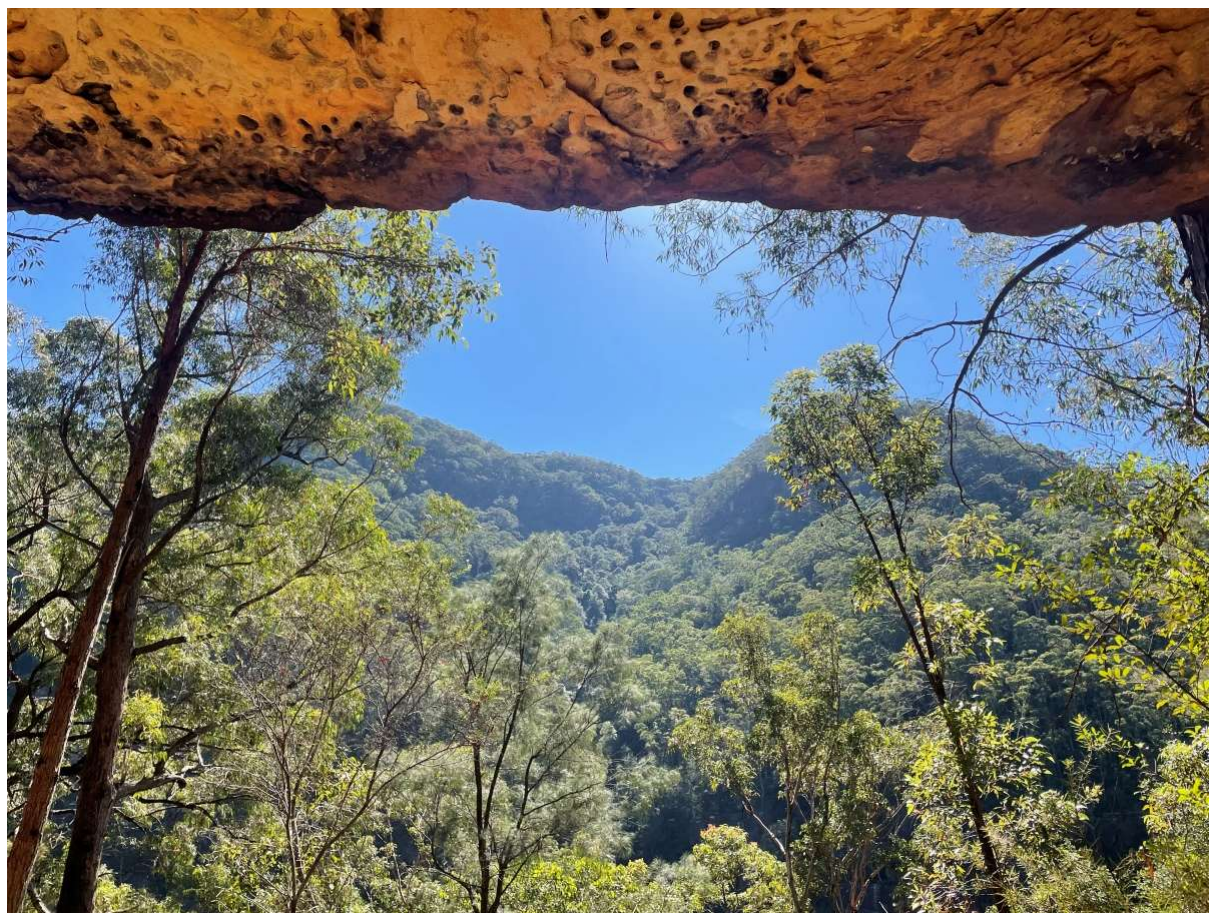
Wall detail. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



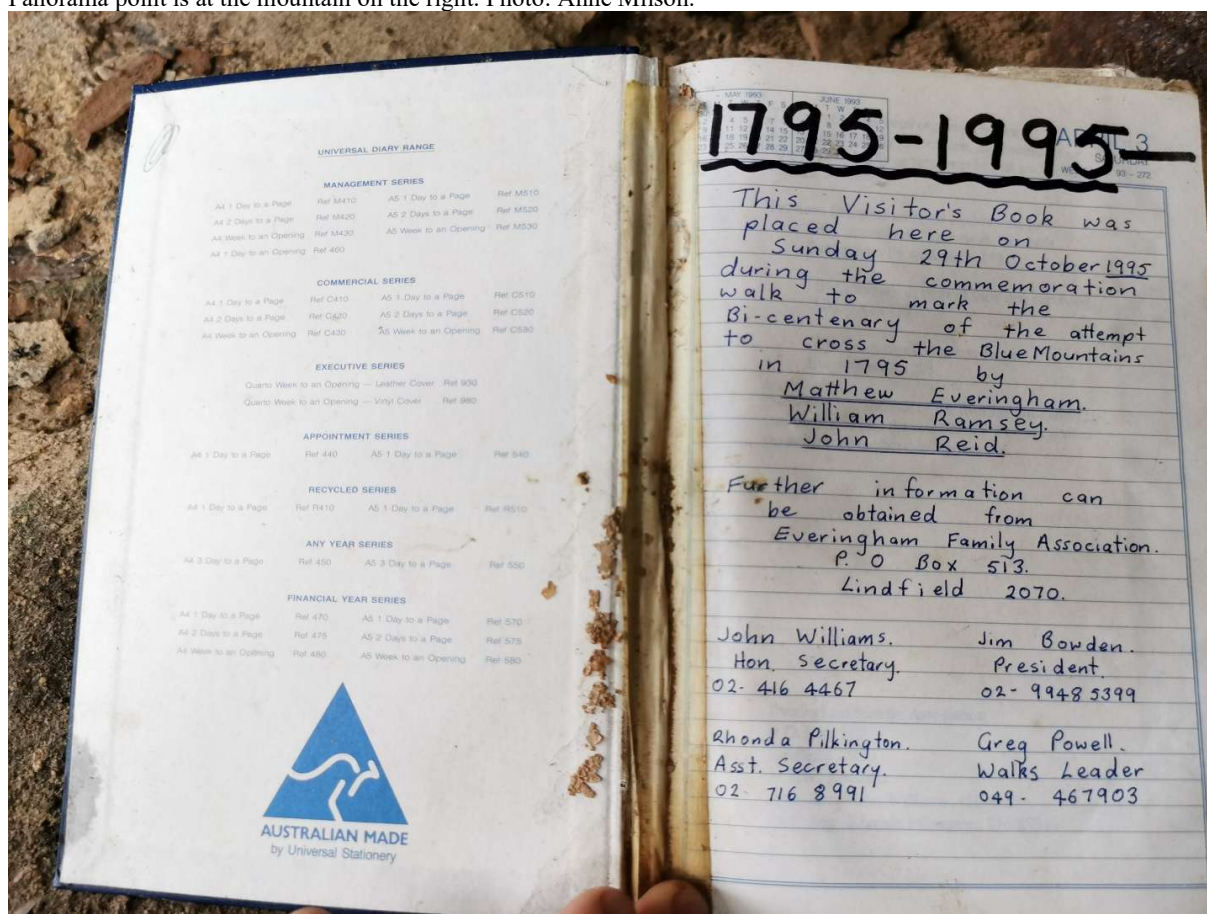
Wall detail. Photo: Anton Leddin.



Yuri in Thunderstorm Cave. Photo: Anton Leddin.



The view from inside of Thunderstorm Cave towards the mountains rising on the northern side of Wheeny Creek. Wheeny Panorama point is at the mountain on the right. Photo: Anne Milson.



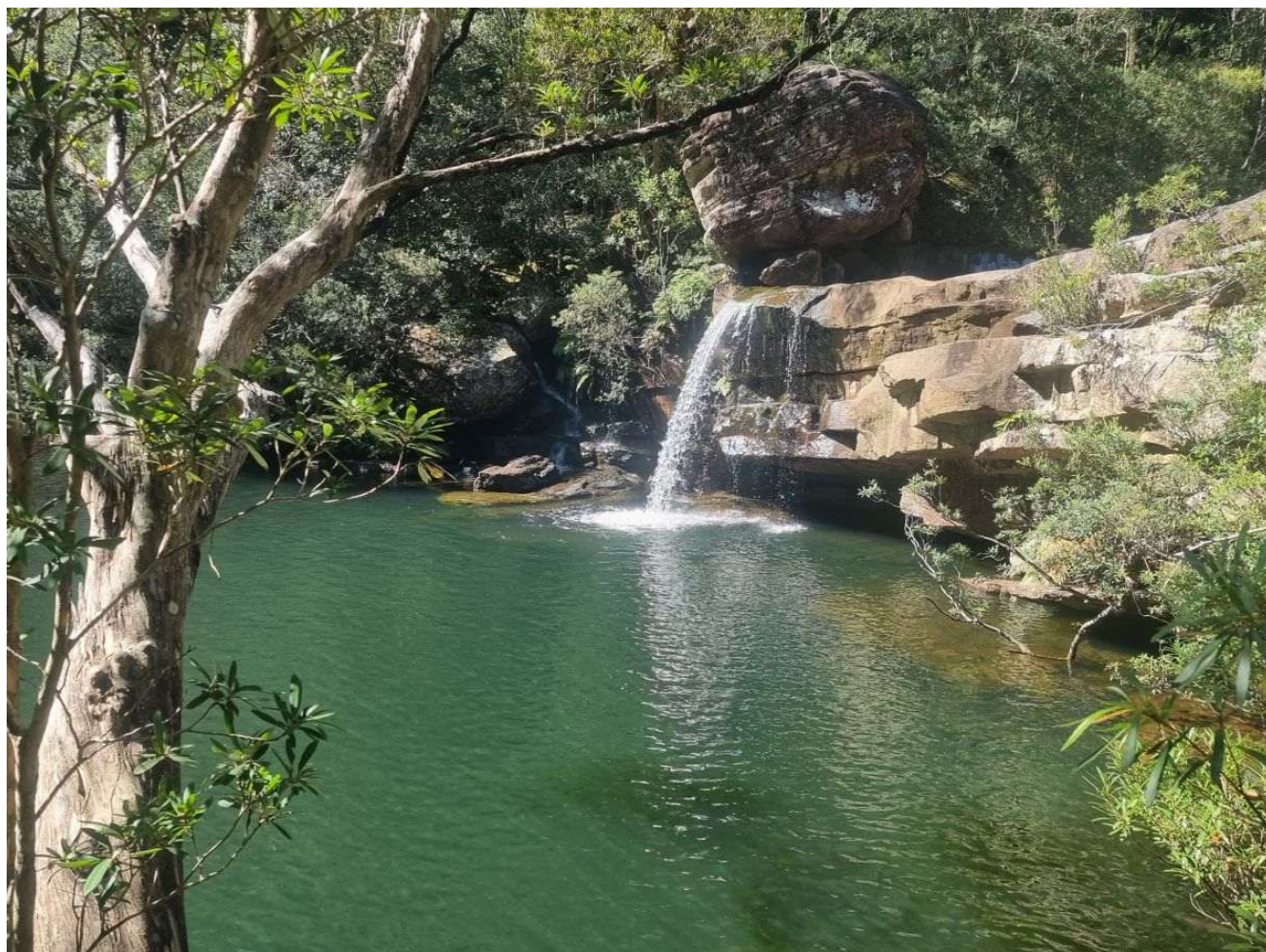
Thunderstorm Cave logbook. Photo: John Kennett (24/02/24).

After thirty-eight blissful minutes in this most auspicious location, our expedition team followed in the footsteps of the explorers of 230 years ago to Wheeny Creek. I do not know where exactly they descended, but the topographic map shows a convenient spur coming down in a northwesterly direction. There was a scramble or two along the way, closer to the bottom, but by 1158, we made it to the fabulous pool at Wheeny Gap.

The air temperature at midday was more than warm enough for a swim. The same cannot be said for the water temperature, but most of us managed to have a swim, some longer than others. I did no better than a quick dunk, and it was very refreshing; freezing would be a better way of putting it. There was a discussion about early lunch here, but I knew there was still a lot that we needed to do in this adventure and suggested that we should take it later.

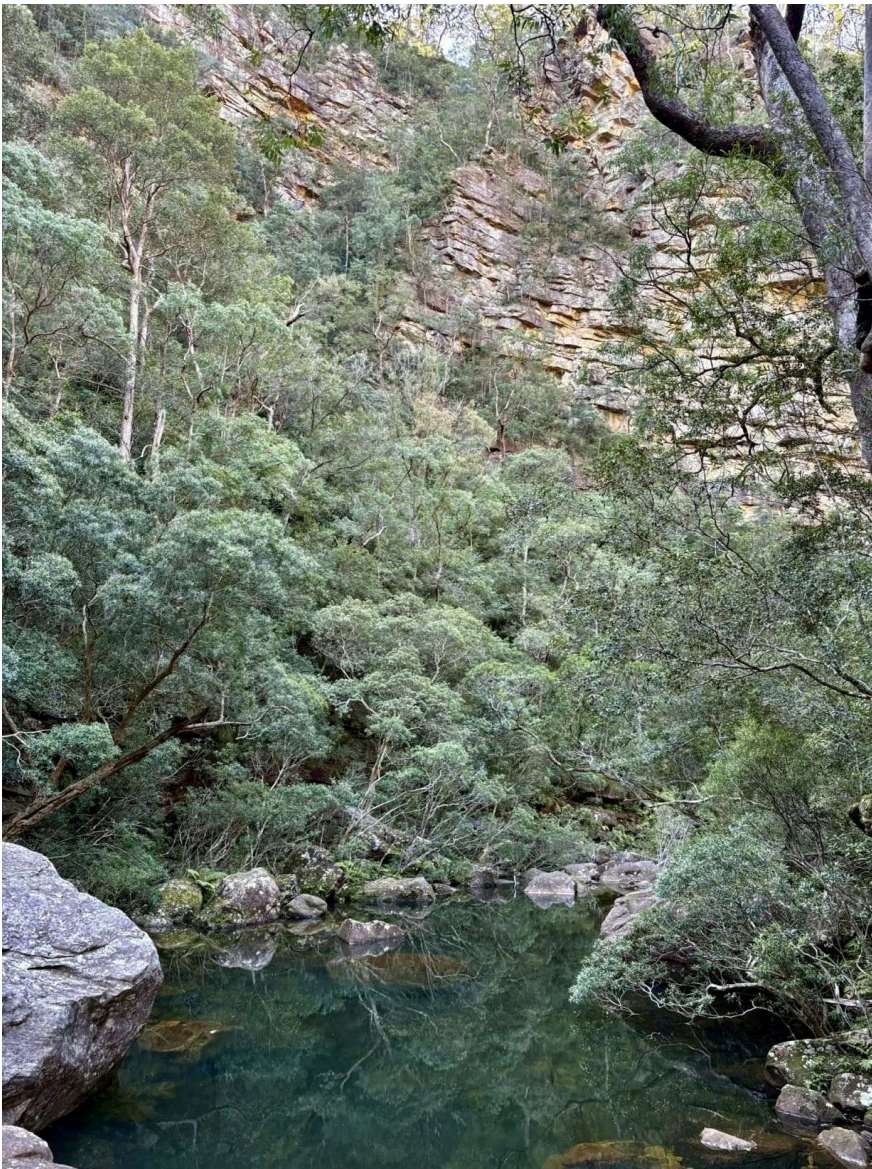


Wheeny Gap pool. Photo: Anton Leddin.



Wheeny Gap pool and waterfall. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

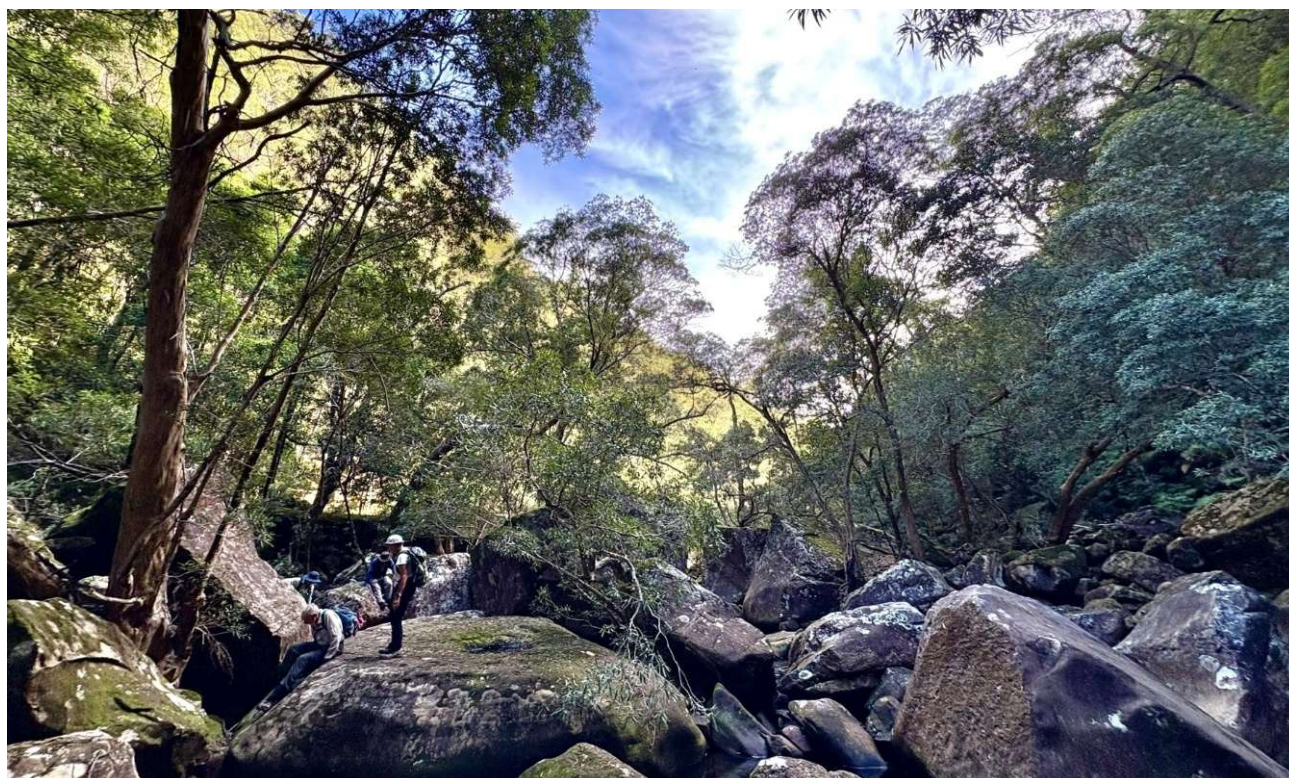
At 1230, we saddled up and headed downstream. The gorge is so deep here that it hardly gets any sun, except in summer months, so all surfaces were very slippery, including the river boulders. The party crossed to the northern side once but mainly stayed on the southern bank. Sometimes, the creek came right up to the rocky ledge we were following, forcing us to maneuver around some semi-submerged boulders in order to keep our feet dry, or to climb higher and make our way above the riverbed. It was a slow but very pleasant and scenic journey. We were in the shade most of the time. Tranquil pools filled with wonderful reflections, gurgling noisy cascades, green mossy rocks, gnarly Water Gums a variety of Fungi – there was so much here to see and enjoy.



Wheeny Creek gorge. Photo: Anton Leddin.



Chris and Yuri looking for Aboriginal grooves. Photo: Anton Leddin.



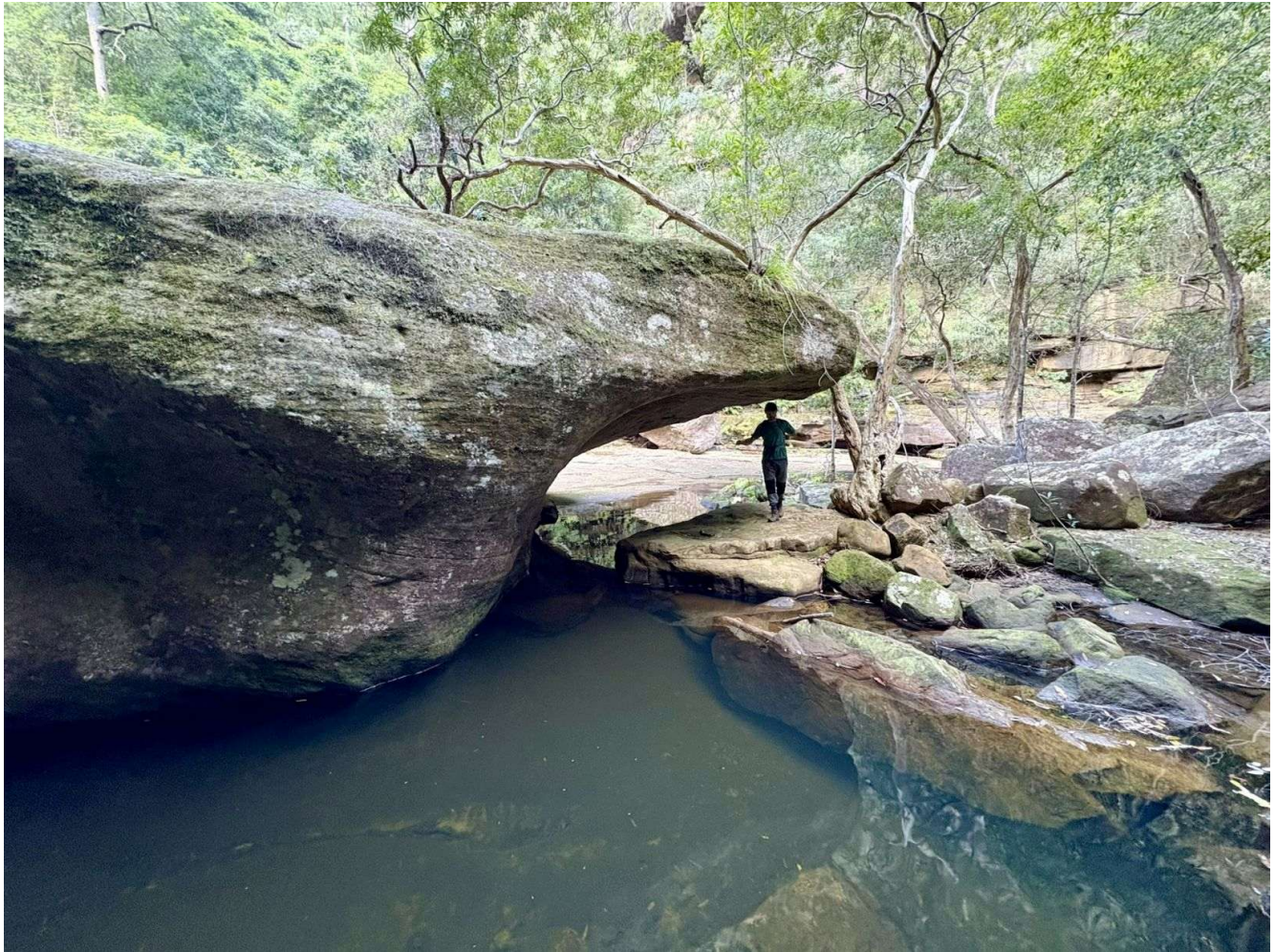
Negotiating the gorge. Photo: Anton Leddin.



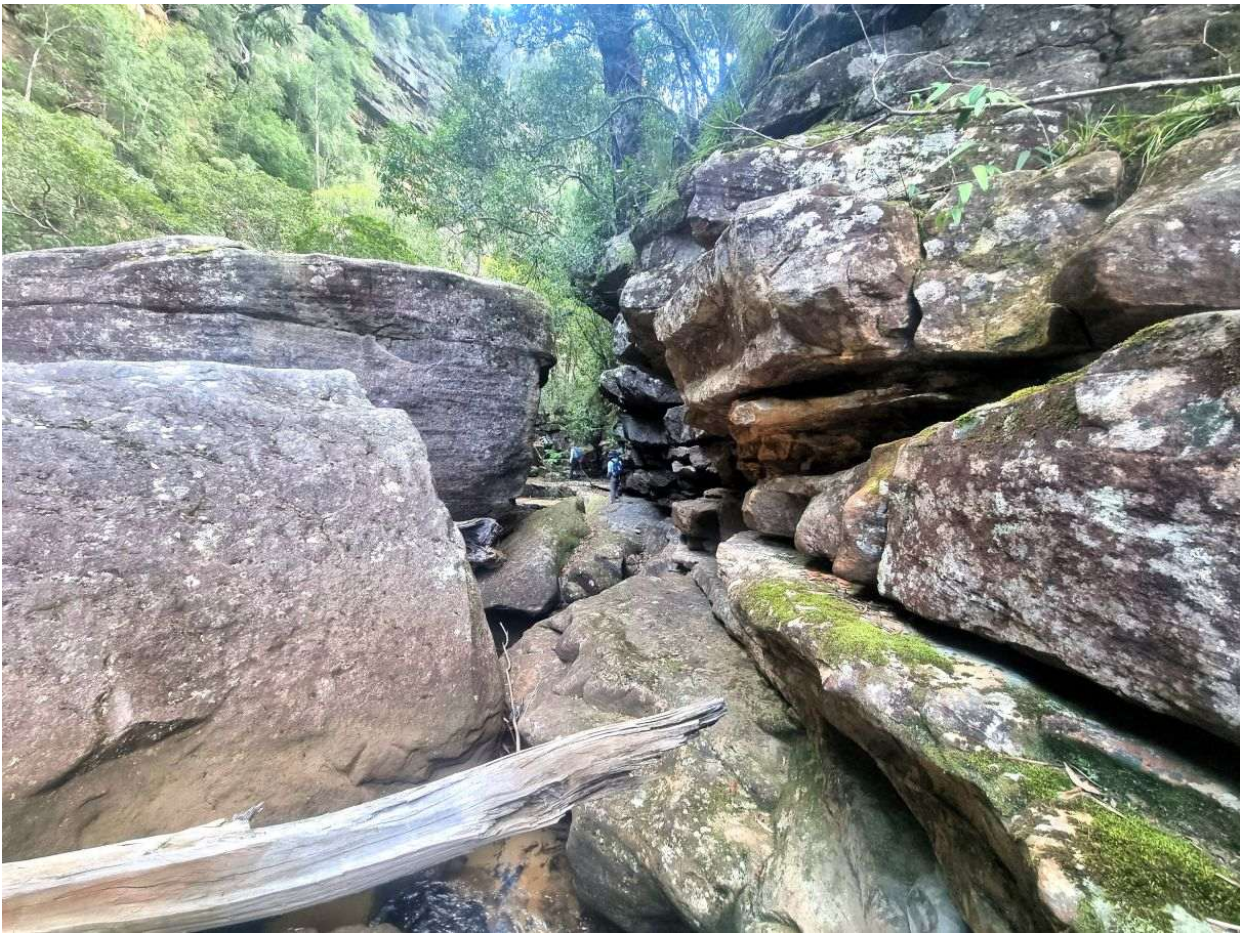
Fungi, *Pycnoporus coccineus*. Photo: Anton Leddin.

Along the way, we checked a couple of cliff lines to the south but found very little in terms of overhangs, and nothing that would have been nearly as good as Thunderstorm Cave. The cliffs were mostly smooth with no display of surface weathering. There was plenty of scrub, though.

Between 1320 and 1333, the group had a quick lunch by the water. Proceeding, at 1404, we paused by a magnificent blue pool, as big or perhaps even bigger than the one at Wheeny Gap, but rectangular, not round like its rival. It was about 50 metres long and had a set of cascades at its western edge.



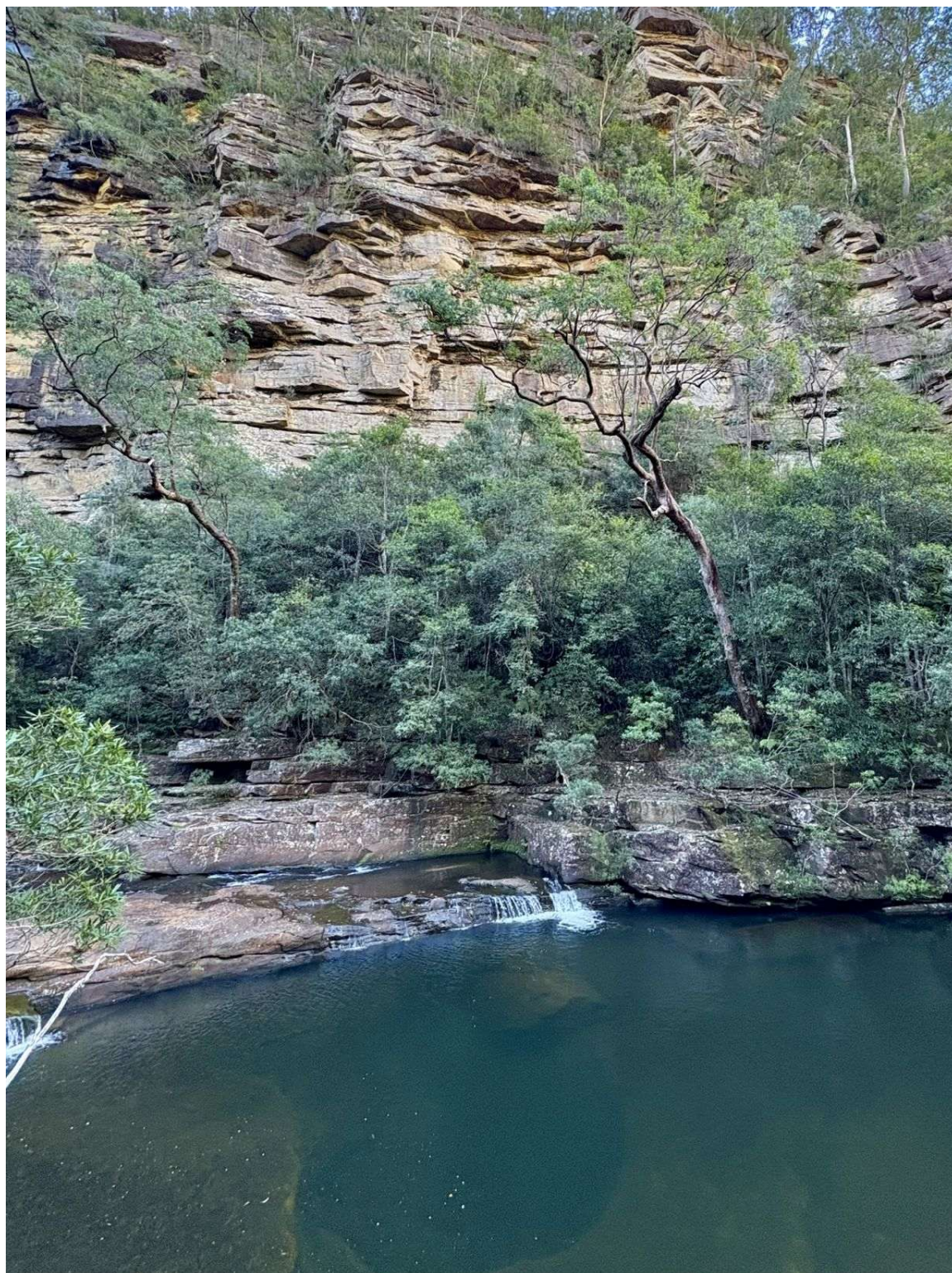
Chris under a boulder overhang. Photo: Anton Leddin.



In Wheeny Creek gorge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



This overhang cannot rival Thunderstorm Cave. Photo: Anton Leddin.



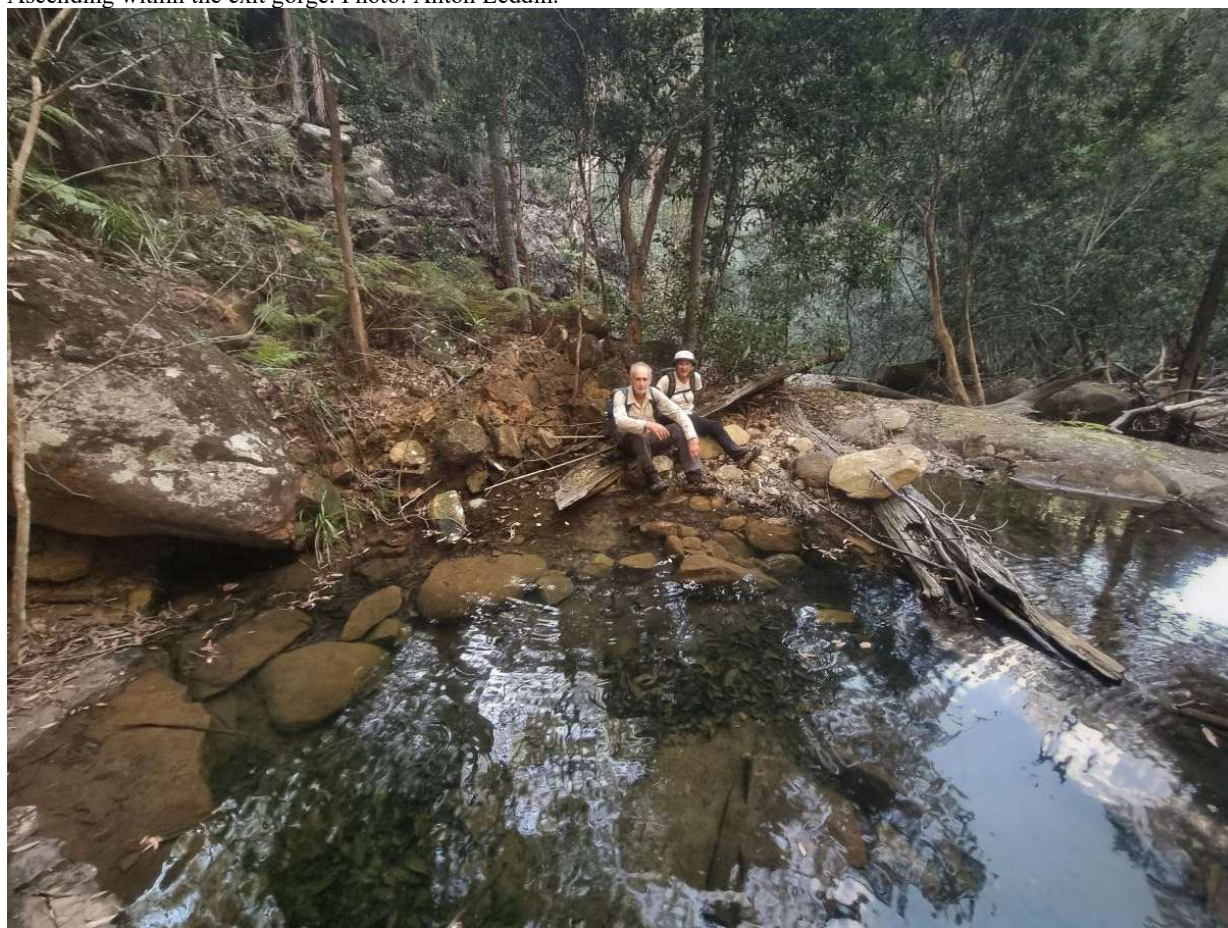
The blue pool. Photo: Anton Leddin.

1426 saw us at the gully I had earmarked for climbing out. I had no idea how well it would go and, judging from the map, expected some interesting bits. A nearly 500 m ascent would also be a challenge by itself at this stage of the trip. But first, we checked our water supplies as this tributary watercourse seemed to be dry at its junction with Wheeny Creek.

Only a few minutes into the climb, large pools of clear running water appeared and continued whilst we stayed within the gully. This part of the ascent was picturesque and fun, with stone terraces and large steps, plus a scramble or two, but nothing too hard. Further up, we mainly kept above on the eastern side of the gorge, where progress seemed to be easier.

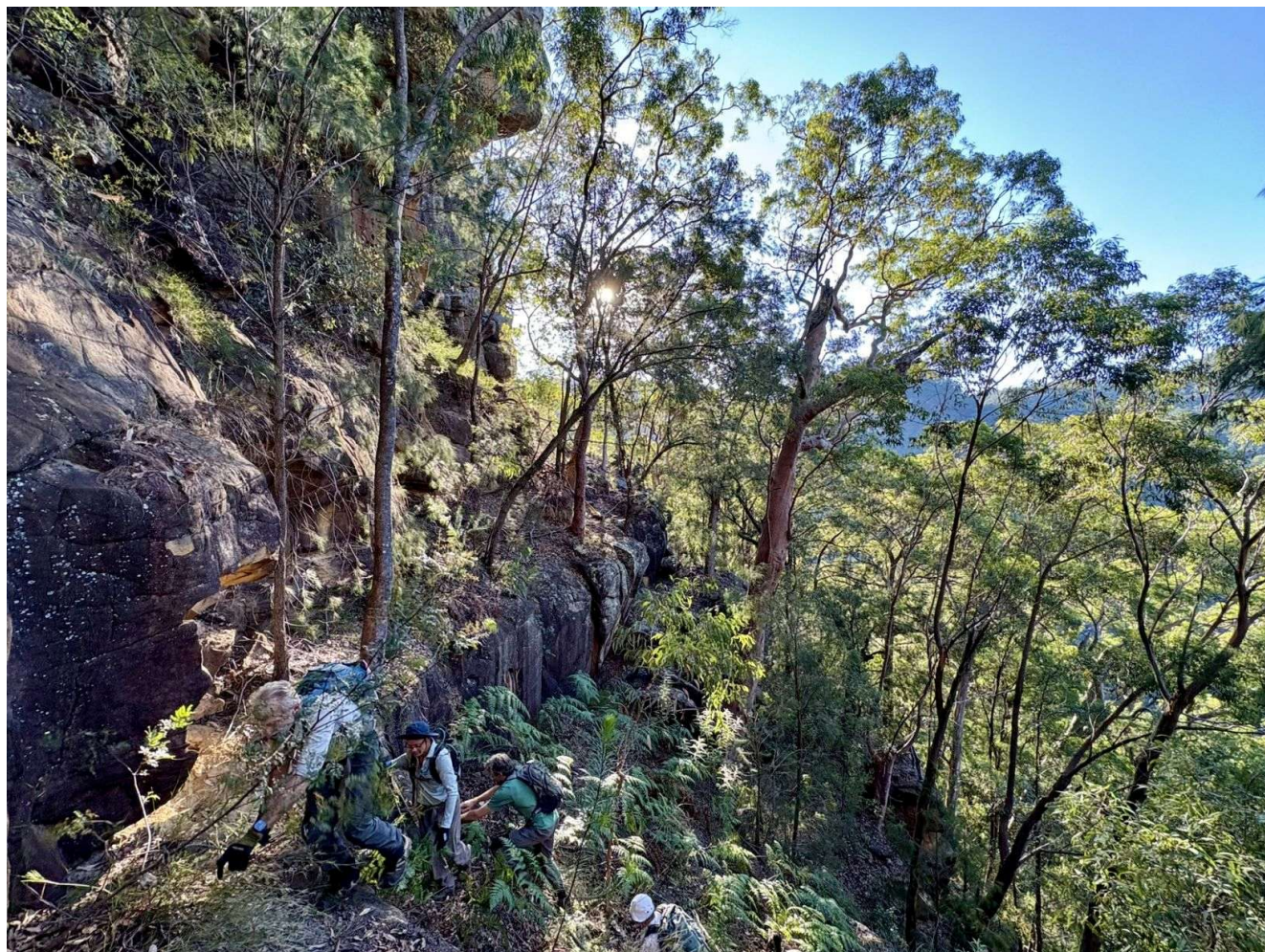


Ascending within the exit gorge. Photo: Anton Leddin.



Ian and Anne by a large water pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

At 1456, the group reached a 40 metre high bluff with a waterfall coming down it as a wet lick on the vast surface of the brown wall. We headed west, looking for a way up and soon found a place where the height of the obstacle was around four metres – still a formidable climb as there were no easy hand- or footholds. I thought I should investigate further, and only after walking for about 50 metres found an easy ramp. At 1505. The problem was, these 50 metres were densely covered with extremely thorny Wild Raspberry. I thought, if I drop the tape down from the top of the four metre wall, the assisted scramble would be easier than the Raspberry torture. However, in the end, the climb proved to be very difficult (even with packs hauled separately), and the whole procedure took twenty minutes.

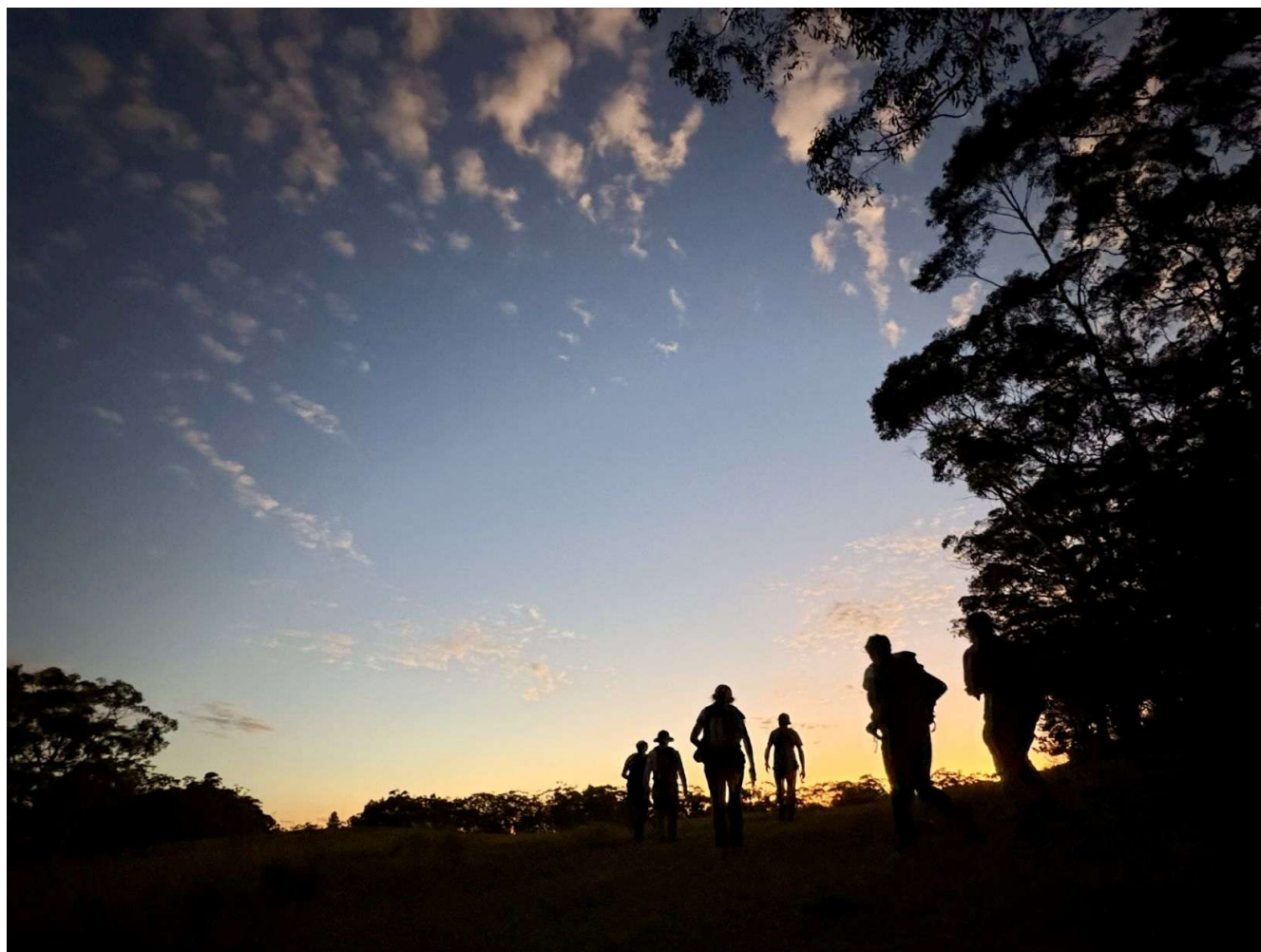


Scrambling up the steep slope. Photo: Anton Leddin.

The steep climb continued beyond the wall, but there were no more technical bits. By 1552, straight after clearing the last constriction within the tributary gorge, the group left it and began a long ascent towards the top of a significant spur to the west.

We reached spot height 537 metres thirty-eight minutes later, after a steady but unrelenting upward march, made more bearable by a couple of short drink stops. As the sun was setting down quickly, I had to pay particular attention to navigation during the next stretch. It was more difficult as we mainly walked in head-high scrub (but not awfully dense), in the dusk, and there were very few sightlines.

Finally, at 1713, the group made it back to the trail we had used this morning, stopping for a short breather. From here, we still had to cover about 3.5 kilometres (the last part off track) to get back to the vehicles. The last half an hour or so of walking was whilst using the torchlight.



The party at the last stage of the journey. Photo: Anton Leddin.

At 1815, our adventure was over as we arrived at our parked vehicles. It had been a hard but wonderfully interesting day, following in the footsteps of Matthew Everingham and his friends and then experiencing the delights and the challenges of the Wheeny Creek gorge.

Trip statistics: total distance 13.5 km; total ascent 620 m.



Walk topographic map. Recorded and prepared by Yuri Bolotin.

Table of Times, Locations and Grid References

Time	Location	Grid Reference	Elevation
0807	Cars parked and started walking	GR 7960 8870	550 m
0852	Top of the ridge, joined the trail	GR 7965 8989	590 m
0943	Stone circle	GR 8043 9169	570 m
0946	End of the trail	GR 8040 9181	550 m

1020	Lookout	GR 8019 9227	305 m
1024	Top of the double-tape descent	GR 8022 9228	300 m
1050	Bottom of the double-tape descent	GR 8019 9229	274 m
1055-1133	In Thunderstorm Cave and morning tea	GR 8024 9203	275 m
1158-1230	Wheeny Gap pool. Swimming	GR 8004 9235	190 m
1320-1333	Lunch	GR 8074 9249	160 m
1404	Blue pool	GR 8100 9282	150 m
1426	Exit gully	GR 8138 9285	135 m
1456	Waterfall	GR 8140 9262	260 m
1505-1525	Slot up or tape-assisted ascent (not recommended)	GR 8135 9260	265 m
1552	Left the exit gully	GR 8146 9243	360 m
1630	Spot height 537 metres	GR 8108 9216	537 m
1713	On trail	GR 8052 9119	570 m
1815	Back at cars	GR 7960 8870	550 m