

Walk:**Wollemi National Park: Colo Bend Pass and Spider Orchid Gorge****Leader:**

Yuri Bolotin

Maps, etc:

Mountain Lagoon. GPS setting WGS84.

Description:

From the locked gate on T3 Trail, walk on Gaspers Ridge Trail, then Mailes Ridge Trail and descend to the Colo River at GR 841 000 via Colo Bend Pass. Move a short distance upstream and head up a large tributary at GR 837 002, ideally to its tributary at GR 829 991, then use that watercourse to eventually reconnect with the Gaspers Ridge Trail and the vehicles. This plan may need to be modified according to the conditions on the ground. About 15 km, about half of it on trail. Scrambling and exposure. Partly 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:

2 January 2026.

The Party:

Yuri Bolotin (leader), Tom Zubrycki, Tana Folwarczna, Bernard Lo, Peter Hannam, Yin Cao, Ai Ling Lim, Heni van der Hecht, 8

The Weather:

An unusually cool for this time of the year and mostly cloudy day with light to no winds. Temperature range 15 to 24 degrees C.

Track Notes

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

Cars were left near the locked gate on the corner of T3 and Gaspers Ridge trails, and we were on our way promptly at 0830, wishing to take full advantage of the unseasonably cool morning. The forecast for the rest of the day also looked good, but I was not completely confident if that would end up being correct.

The steep and somewhat unexpected climb towards the upper slopes of Mount Conder proved to be not a big deal first thing in the morning. The trail from there on was either level or going gently downhill. As an antidote to the drudgery of trail walking, I often direct my attention to the surrounding landscape, especially flora. In this case, the stunningly beautiful Angophoras displaying their shining new orange skins, after having shed their old bark during the last couple of weeks, provided plenty of visual stimulation.



Angophora with character. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Between nature observations and chats with a few team members I had not seen for a while, the time passed quickly, and by 0925, we made it to the end of the vehicular road and the beginning of a much narrower trail, and eleven minutes later, to the point where Gaspers Ridge Trail veers east. Here, we continued north on Mailes Trail for another 1.2 kilometre or so, until 0952. I felt happy that the time had now come to finally start doing what I enjoy most - to leave the made trail and start exploring!

The off-track bit happened immediately, but the exploring would have to wait as the descent to the Colo River part was planned to be a reverse of the trip of March 2024. The group headed up past spot height 354 metres and then down to the edge of the escarpment, arriving, only ten minutes later, to a most amazing view of the Colo River from the top of the Colo Bend Pass. I can claim to have seen only a fraction of the possible Colo passes, but this one must be one of the most spectacular ones. This is how I had described my first impression of it,

...below our feet was the magnificent sweep of the Colo River as it goes around a 180-degree turn. No longer obstructed by the vegetation, it also featured that long sinuous tongue-like ridge coming towards us from Mount Townsend and separating the two arms of the Colo Gorge; further north, the bulk of Parr South dominated the horizon.



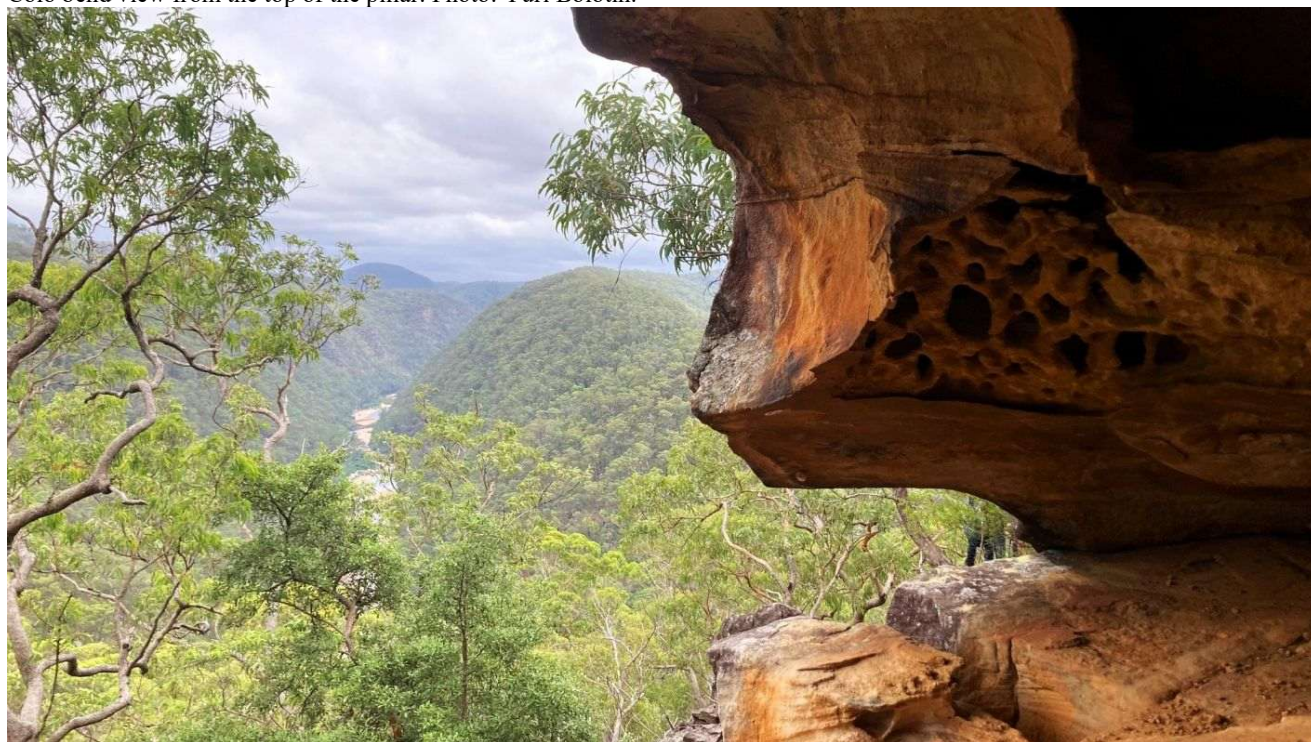
Peter on top of Colo Bend Pass. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

After a photo session, we continued above the cliff line for another 100 metres or so, then located a spur descending steeply in the westerly direction, until, at 1024, the next escarpment line was reached. The views from here were sensational, and the timing just right for a morning tea break and another round of photography. This crucially important spot in the Colo Bend Pass is where a narrow ramp/slot is located, not visible even on Lidar maps, that gives access underneath the last line of big bluffs. Whilst the team was settling down for a break on a rocky platform, I wandered slightly to the side to check that the ramp was where I thought it would be. Having found it, I could then enjoy my morning tea.

The time was 1035 when our adventure continued as we carefully made our way down the steep slippery ramp that took us below the high orange-brown cliffs. From there, the group headed further downhill to the top of a 10 metre tall pillar, reached at 1050, with more great views. Four minutes later, we stopped at the base of the monolith, to admire the onion skin weatherings on its front face and the 'hermit cave', a man-made camping site for one or two people along the ledge nearby.



Colo bend view from the top of the pillar. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Part of the hermit cave and Colo view. Photo: Ai Ling Lim.

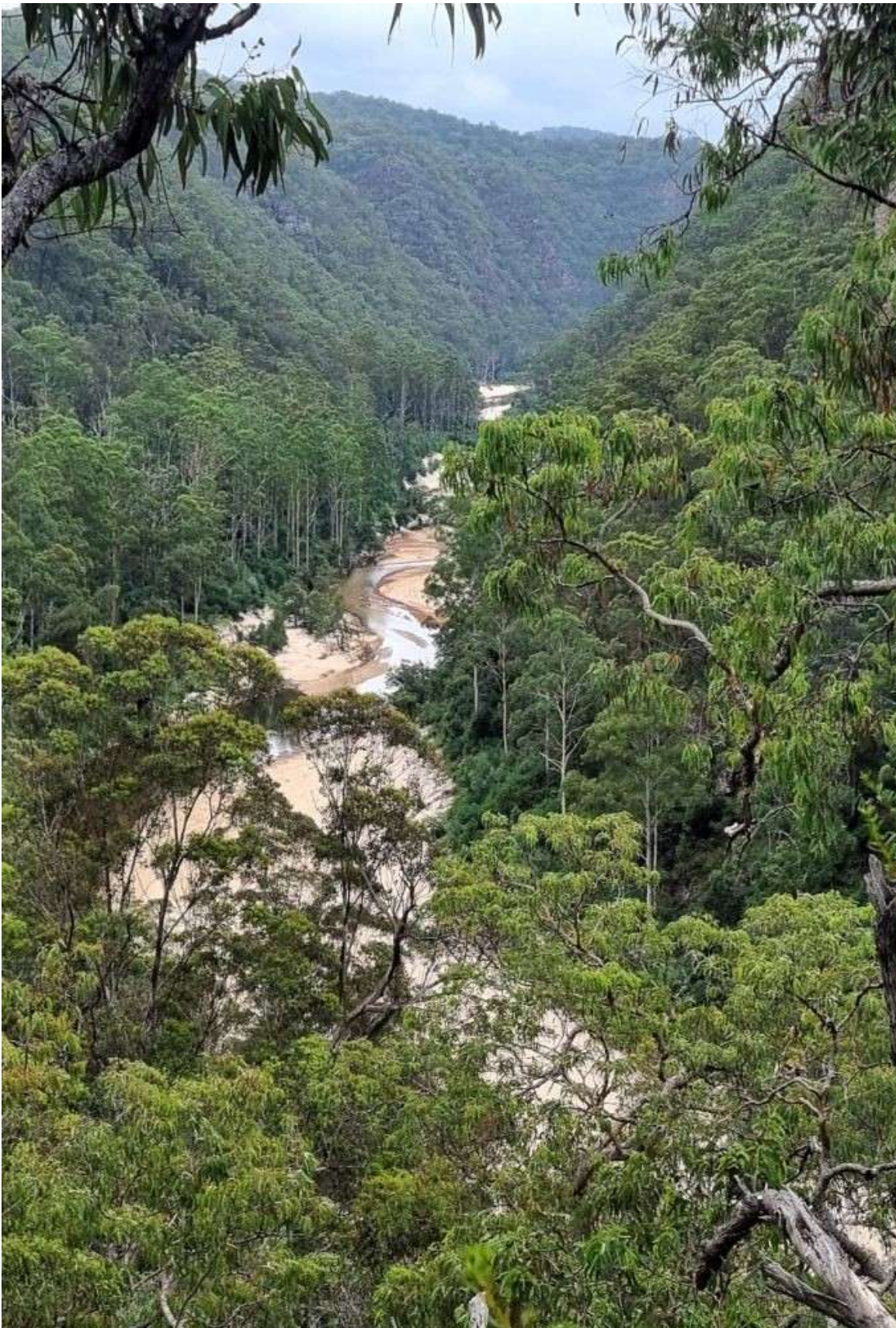


Heni below the pillar, with its onion skin formations. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

From here, the group continued our journey for about 400 metres along a gradually descending spur with tantalising glimpses of the Colo River along the way, coming to, by 1128, to the last, very steep part, consisting of a series of smaller cliff lines. A bit of zigging and zagging was required here. On our way, at 1137, was a small but beautiful 'Wasp Nest' tafoni cave where had stopped for late morning tea on the last trip, when doing the pass in reverse.



'Wasp Nest' tafoni cave. Photo: Ai Ling Lim.



The last view of Colo, through the trees. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

1147 saw us all the way down to the Colo River. I was happy with how the day was going so far. We now needed to move about 500 m upstream to the start of the exit tributary, and because of the river bend and the steep bank on our side, the easiest way was to cross, walk on the opposite bank and then re-cross, which we proceeded to do. The river level was down, but still waist-high wading to the other side and ankle-high

whilst crossing back. The Colo gorge is stunningly picturesque here, the water was warm, and getting a little wet was an enjoyable experience and something we had been looking forward to.



Crossing the Colo. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Crossing the Colo. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

At 1206, the group stopped at the junction with our target ascent gorge for lunch and more watery delights (one would probably call it dips rather than swims). The next part of the walk was completely exploratory for me. Brian Corlis in his book¹ mentions Pass 34 (Spider Orchid Pass). You are advised to use the first part

¹ Brian Corlis, *Colo River Passes and Routes*. 2005.

of this tributary but then exit up a spur at the first significant branch and continue towards the T3 Trail. This was about a third of the way I was planning to explore along this significant gorge, plus we needed to get back to Gaspers Ridge Trail, not T3, so I expected it would be quite a different trip. I will nevertheless from now refer to this entire long watercourse as Spider Orchid Gorge/Creek, even though we ended up not seeing any Spider Orchids, *Caladenia sp.*, on this occasion. It may be due to the season or other factors.

My ideal scenario was to stay within Spider Orchid Gorge for 2.5-3 kilometres, but knowing only too well that a stroll along a lovely creek could turn into a nightmarish scrub crawl within a few minutes, I had identified several potential escape points along the way; most of them looked hard or problematic, but that might end up being our only choice.

After a 34-minute rest on a sandy Colo beach, we were off to face the unknown, at least, to us. Having cleared the usual sandbank and accumulated debris clogging the junction, we quickly emerged in a wide, open gorge. The stony creek bed was perfect for walking. It was dry at the very beginning, but as the map showed an extensive catchment, and I was sure we would find water here very soon. This indeed happened after the first 50 metres. Thick rainforest framed the gorge on both sides, and the most remarkable feature of the landscape here was the abundance of Mountain Blue Gums, *Eucalyptus deanei*, with their striking trunks of pale blue to brown, some of the trees soaring 40 to 50 metres above the ground.

In a few spots, we had to clamber over or crawl under some giant fallen logs, but otherwise this part of the journey was easy and scenic. At 1254, the party stopped to hug and take photos of an absolutely enormous, straight Mountain Blue Gum; it would have to be at least 1.6 metres in diameter as it would require four people to join their embraces around its circumference. The creek now featured plentiful pools of running water and cascades gurgling down green mossy rocks.



Tana in Spider Orchid Gorge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Yuri, Yin Cao and Heni in a tree-hugging mood. Photo: Tana Folwarczna.

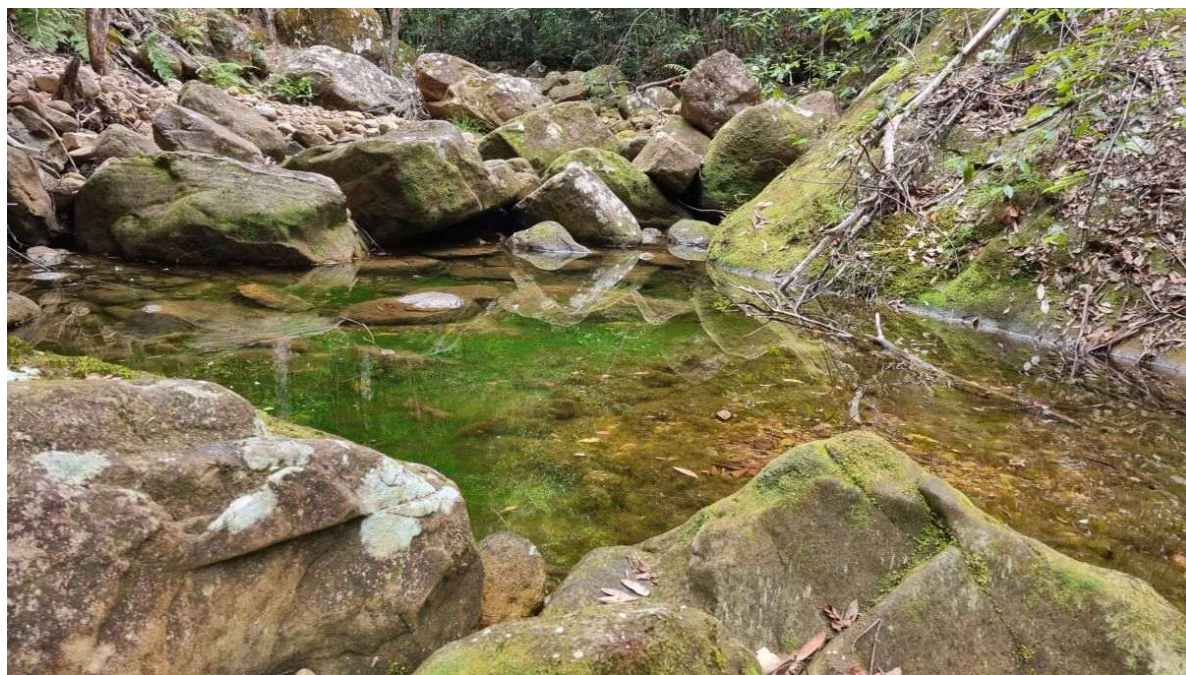


The journey through the lower part of the gorge. Photo: Peter Hannam.



Yuri on top of a giant tree trunk. Ai Ling looking on. Photo: Tom Zubrycki.

As we continued upstream, the gorge became tighter and the flat creek bed was soon replaced by extensive boulder fields. Another huge Blue Gum precariously perched on river boulders was photographed at 1309. Because of the extremely dense rainforest on both sides, we still had to stay within the creek bed, but so far, the scrub was minimal and the main challenge was clambering over boulders and around large pools of water. I thought both these activities were very enjoyable. At 1319, we passed the exit spot up the ridge indicated as Pass 34 in Brian Corliss's book, but my plan was to continue much further, especially as I was finding the journey up so far scenic and easy.



A pool in the creek. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

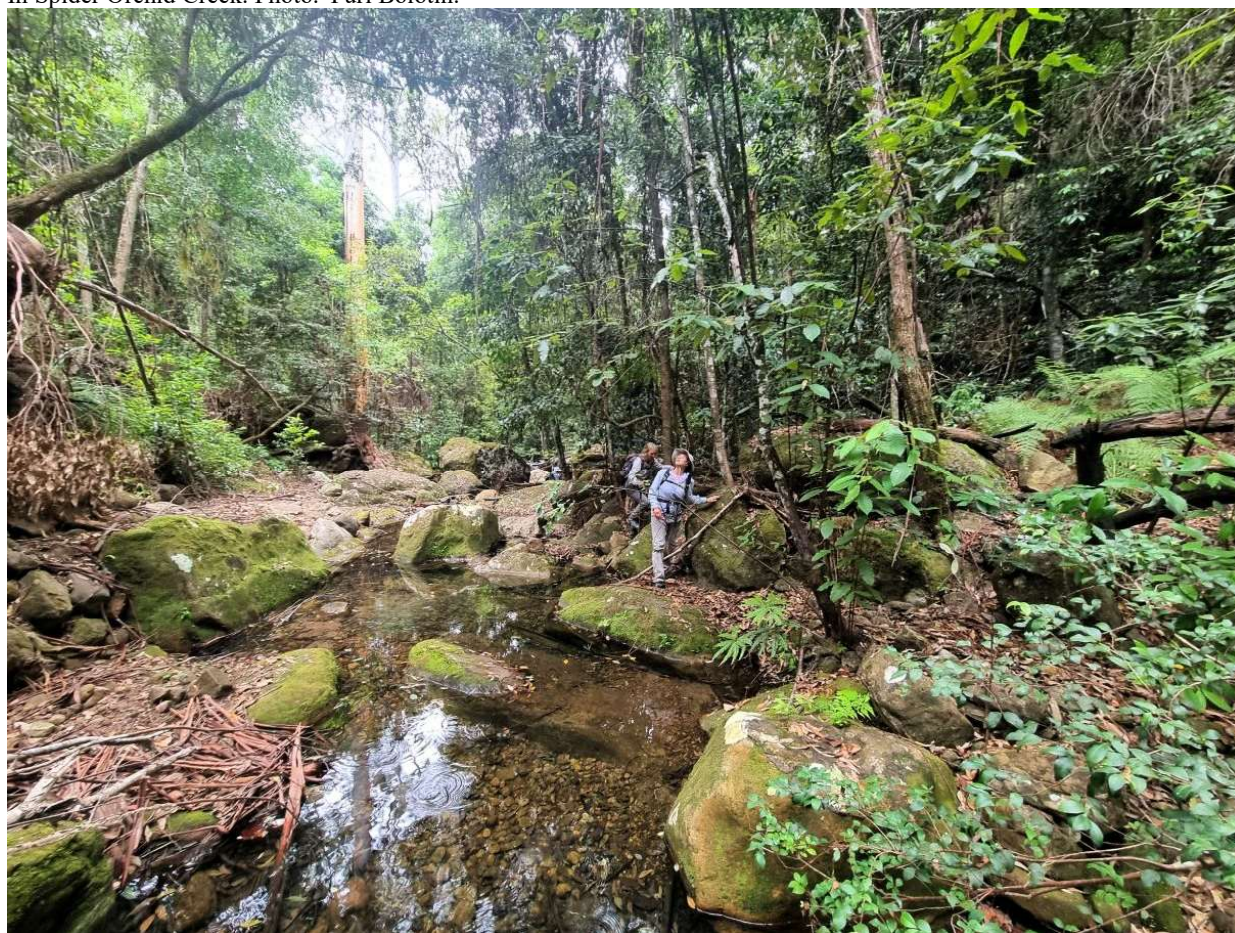
Time flew quickly as we were having fun, but our progress was probably slow and characteristic of canyon walking. Yet another giant Blue Gum was recorded at 1340. Sixteen minutes later, the group came to a spot where Spider Orchid Creek splits in three almost equal branches. We were going to take the easternmost branch as it would offer the easiest exit opportunities, should the going get too tough for our liking. It was interesting to note that we had only ascended just over 100 metres during the 1.5 kilometre trip from the Colo River. The map showed that the next 100 metres of elevation would be gained within about 300 metres of distance, signaling a much steeper gradient ahead.



The group approaching another giant Mountain Blue Gum. Photo: Tom Zubrycki.



In Spider Orchid Creek. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Ai Ling and Heni in the creek. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Before continuing, we replenished our water supplies from the large pool right at the junction, as I was not sure if we would find any in the tributary. As before, we had to stay within the creek bed to avoid the worst of scrub. A few 3-6 metre high waterfalls along the way did not present any problems, but the progress was slow due to many stretches where fallen trees and debris have clogged the bottom of the ravine, turning it into an obstacle course. Soon enough, the stream was running again through small clear pools, a great sight for any Wollemi adventurer.



Refilling water at the junction pool. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.



Clambering up the steep section of the creek. Photo: Tom Zubrycki.



Tom in the Spider Orchid Gorge. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

When, at 1526, we arrived at a Y-split and I decided to exit via a spur in between the two branches, there was, remarkably, still plenty of water in the creek. A short distance up, I spied an attractive cave to the left and went to investigate. This 10 metre long overhang had beautiful tafoni formations of the quality we had not seen on this trip. At 1532.



Cave detail. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

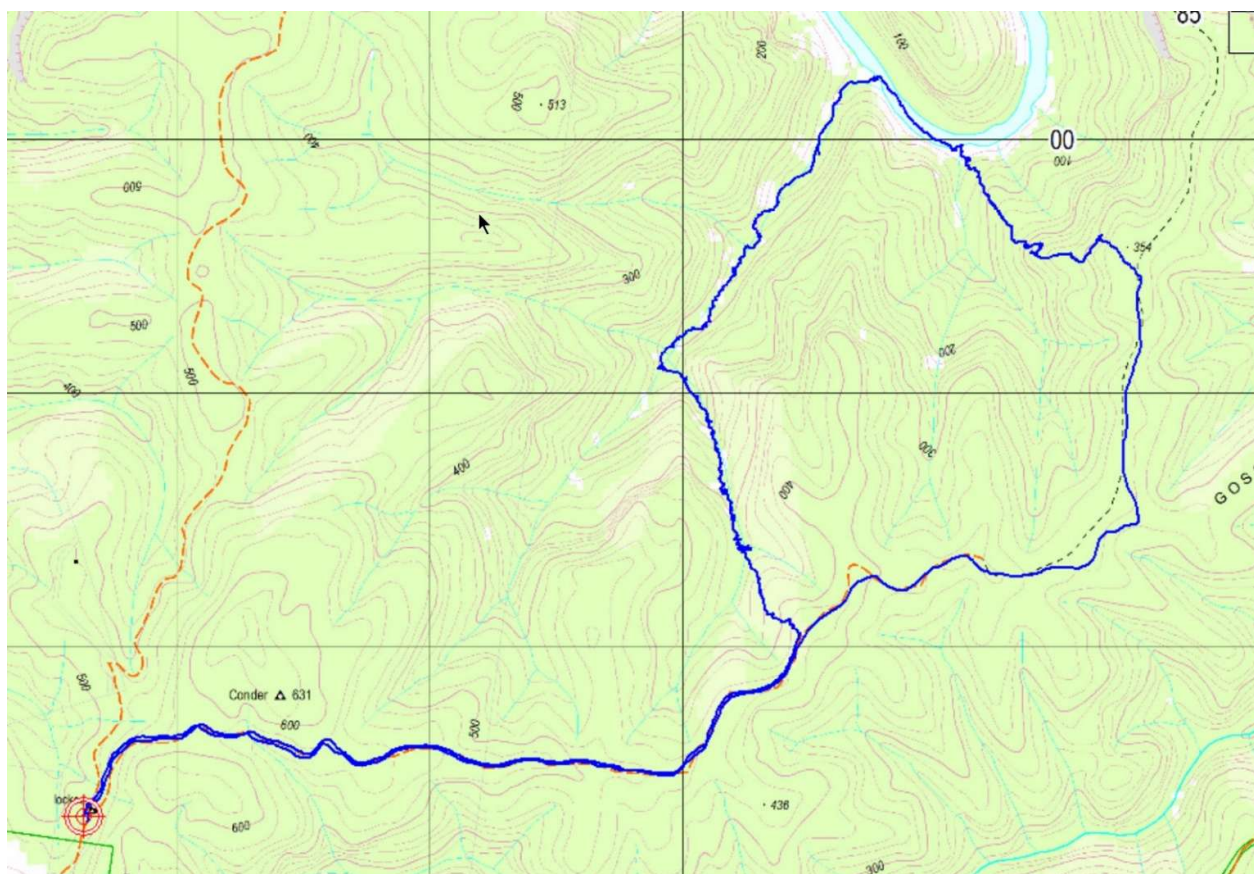
After a few minutes in this geological paradise, I re-joined the group as they were making their way up the spur. The spur was easy and not too scrubby, but another 100 m of altitude still had to be gained before, at 1605, Gaspers Trail was reached. From here, we headed west along the trail for about three kilometres, arriving at the locked gate and the cars by 1700.



Mount Conder. Photo: Yuri Bolotin.

Intending walkers, please note that with the knowledge of today's journey and of our first use of Colo Bend Pass in March 2024, I recommend that this walk should be done in reverse. The Colo panorama is much more spectacular gradually revealing itself as you ascend. Without the prior knowledge of the terrain, I had made the right choice today, not wanting to be stuck in the possible thick scrub in Spider Orchid Creek during its long passage down to the Colo. As I know now, this was not a problem, and the gorge ended up being scenic and well worth exploring, especially in its lower part.

Trip statistics: total distance 16.2 km; total ascent 680 m.



Walk topographic map. Recorded and prepared by Yuri Bolotin.

Table of Times, Locations and Grid References

Time	Location	Grid Reference	Elevation
0830	Cars parked and started walking	GR 8065 9735	540 m
0925	End of vehicular road	GR 8415 9834	375 m
0936	Trail junction, continued on Mailes Trail	GR 8480 9850	330 m
0952	Heading off-track	GR 8481 9945	343 m
1002	Lookout	GR 8466 9960	305 m
1024-1035	Lookout, morning tea and top of the slot	GR 8439 9956	230 m
1050	Top of 10 metre high pillar. Lookout.	GR 8435 9958	200 m
1054	Underneath the pillar	GR 8435 9958	190 m
1128	On top of the last steep descent	GR 8417 9988	60 m
1137	Tafoni cave	GR 8412 9992	30 m
1147	Colo River	GR 8411 9998	15 m
1206-1240	Junction with Spider Orchid Creek and lunch	GR 8375 0025	16 m
1254	Giant Mountain Blue Gum	GR 8353 9996	30 m
1309	Another giant Mountain Blue Gum	GR 8331 9971	60 m
1319	Spider Orchid Pass exit	GR 8326 9958	65 m
1340	Another giant Mountain Blue Gum	GR 8311 9930	90 m
1356	Creek junction	GR 8293 9911	120 m
1526	Y-junction, exiting Spider Orchid Creek	GR 8324 9839	320 m
1532	Tafoni cave	GR 8325 9840	330 m
1605	Gospers Trail	GR 8346 9804	430 m
1700	Back at cars	GR 8065 9735	540 m