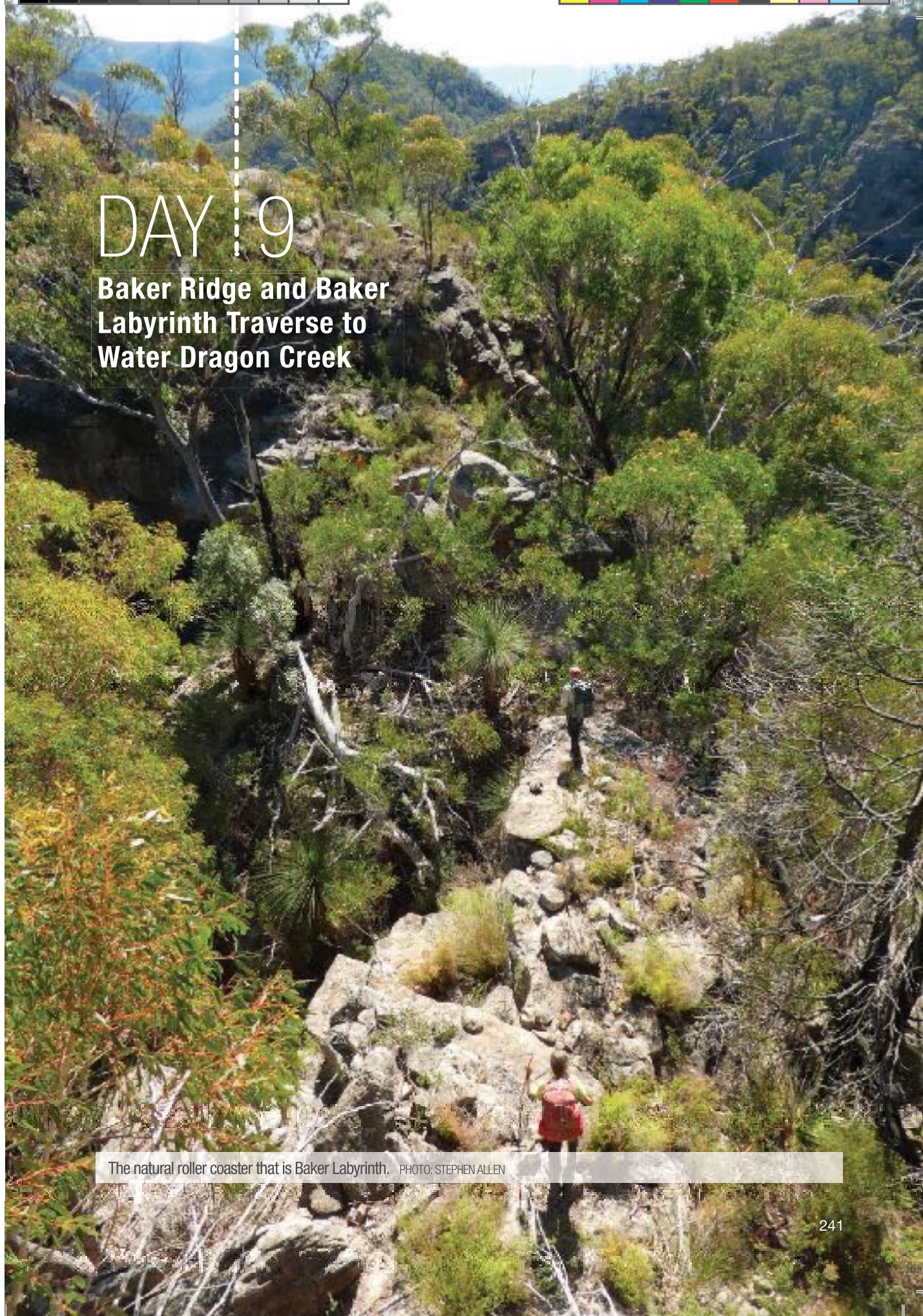




DAY 9

Baker Ridge and Baker Labyrinth Traverse to Water Dragon Creek



The natural roller coaster that is Baker Labyrinth. PHOTO: STEPHEN ALLEN

Day 9: 16th April 2018

The weather

A clear, warm and sunny day with moderate winds and light cloud cover in the morning, which dissipated by early afternoon. Temperature range 9 to 24 degrees C.

Track notes

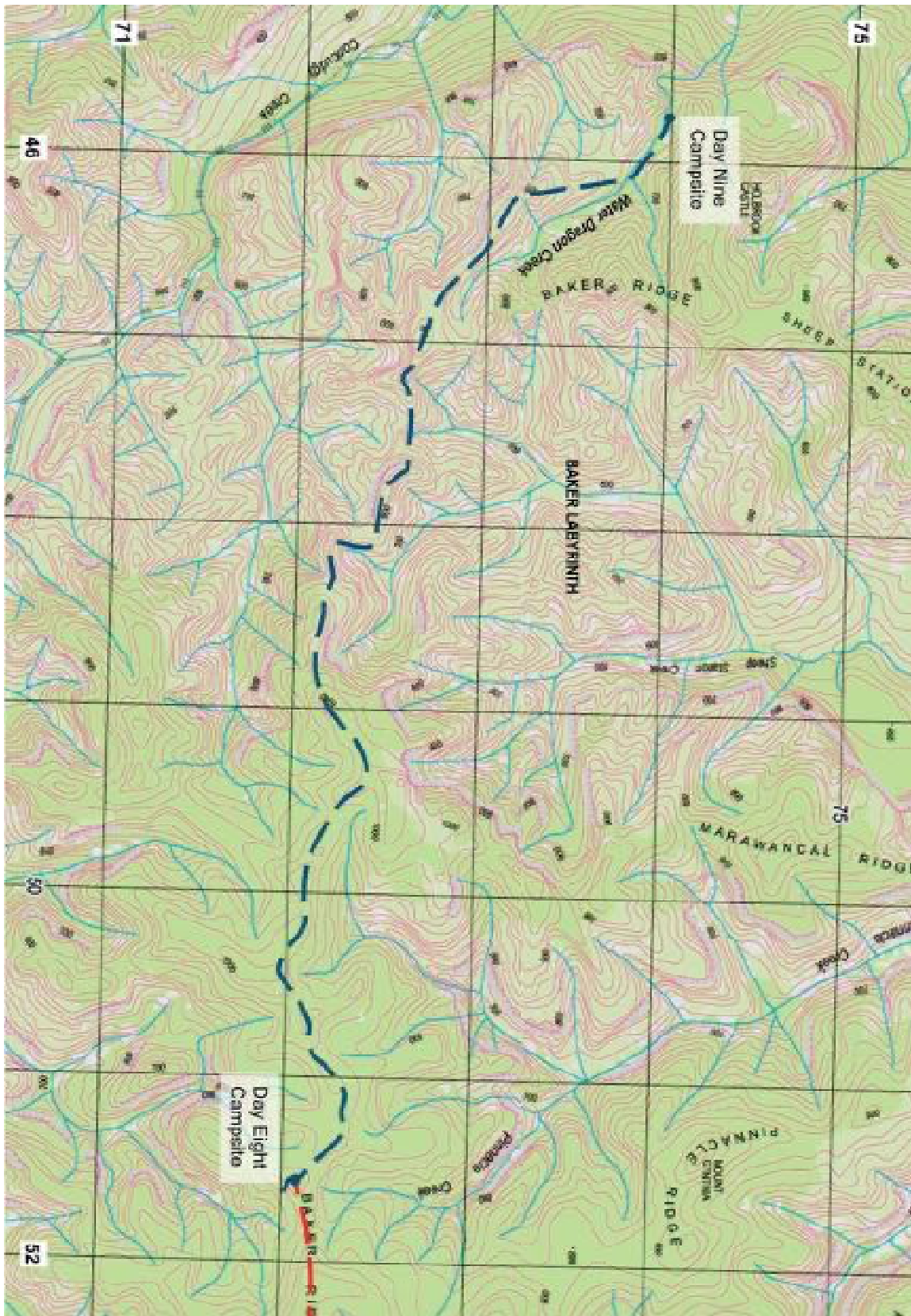
Last night had been cold and windy with the passage of a gusty southerly change. It seemed to have moved on by early morning, leaving a clear, deep, dark sky behind that was only just getting lighter by the time I opened my eyes, quickly shaking off the sleep, at 0525. The continuing strong gale made the air temperature of nine degrees C, the lowest so far on this Traverse, feel more like two or three degrees C.



Stephen recording a navigation note. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Prickly Starwort, *Stellaria pungens*. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Source: Department of Lands. Coricudgy Topographical Map 8932-2N 1:25000
Source: Department of Lands. Mount Pomany Topographical Map 8932-1S. 1:25000



View from the start of the Baker Labyrinth traverse towards Sheep Station Point and Mount Cox. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

During the night, my mind had been very busy thinking about the coming day's proceedings. Based on our pace going through the dreadful scrub of yesterday and my knowledge from the reconnaissance walk done a few weeks ago of the extremely difficult, labyrinthine terrain ahead, I was very concerned that we might not be able to reach Water Dragon Creek (the only known water source in the area) by tonight. There was not really anything that could be done about it now, except for starting as early as possible and being very focused on navigation during the day, so as not to waste any time.

At 0630, the camp was struck, which included levelling off the makeshift fireplace we had constructed for wind protection, and the party headed along Baker Ridge in a northwesterly

direction. Compared to the landscape during most of yesterday, which had fluctuated from dreary to ridiculous, there was a complete and very welcome change of scenery.

Straight away from the campsite, we descended into a picturesque saddle filled with big smooth boulders, which required us to manoeuvre our way through small passages between them, sometimes climbing on top. After a short distance, the ridge changed direction to south west, undergoing a series of small rises and falls. We had to keep a close watch on navigation to avoid accidentally going down one of the many spurs that ran in different directions off the main one. The strong wind of the early morning had died down, or maybe this was due to us being in a more protected area. The tall, well-spaced trees and moderately



Yuri inside the abandoned Termite mound. PHOTO: STEPHEN ALLEN



Anna at the red saddle, looking towards Mount Cox and Mount Pomany. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

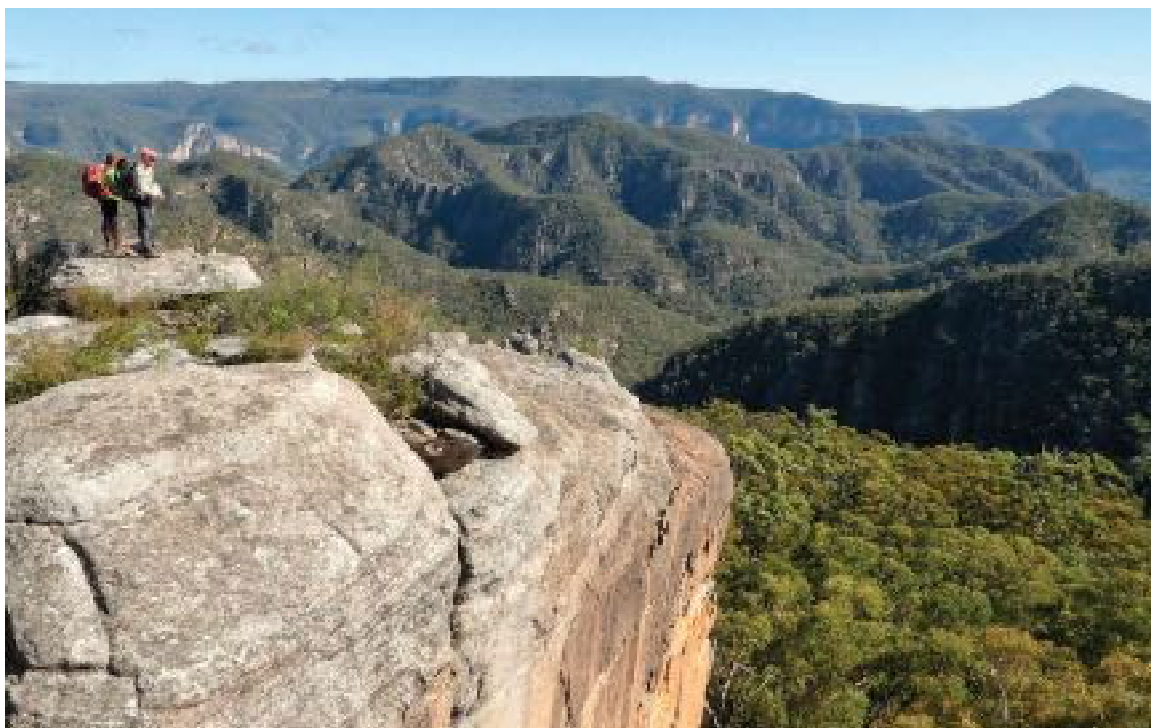
dense understorey made us feel as though the walking conditions had become almost luxurious – such a relief from the unrelenting scrub of yesterday! There were not many flowers around, but I noted a small bush of Prickly Starwort, *Stellaria pungens* covered in white blooms. In one spot, we came across a Termite mound with a collapsed roof. As there were no inhabitants inside, some of us felt compelled to climb in for a photo.

At another hill, at 0731, the ridge swung again, this time north west, and soon a high, dark-green profile appeared above the horizon less than a kilometre ahead. This was Marawancal Ridge¹¹, our next destination. After descending a saddle, it was time to

start climbing that ridge. The gradient was fairly steep, but the ascent did not present any difficulties. Not far from the crest, at 0820, a high, craggy rock outcrop invited us to pay a visit. Wow, this was a taste of things to come – a view of Coricudgy Creek gorge to the south, and beyond, to the south west, the bulk of Mount Never Never and the sharp peak of Mount Wilworril. The wind must have blown away any humidity, as the atmospheric conditions were now ideal for photos.

Instead of climbing to the top of the hill where Marawancal Ridge peels off from Baker Ridge in a northeasterly direction, we sidled just below the high point – a decision I perhaps regret in hindsight, as later on, from a remote

¹¹ Marawancal is the name of the Aboriginal tribe that had occupied this area.



Anna and Yuri at the western tip of the red saddle. PHOTO: STEPHEN ALLEN

vantage point, we saw some marvellous pagoda towers there, but at the time it meant a fair amount of extra effort and distance, and I felt we needed to be focused on the planned route.¹²

After another 90-degree swing, we continued walking on Baker Ridge down a rather scrubby spur with no views, reaching a high point at 0844. Through the trees, we could see glimpses of the country just ahead to the west that we needed to cross. It is a maze of short interlocking spurs running in all directions, crowned with high cliffs and separated by deep, narrow ravines. As Baker Ridge traverses this entire area of several square kilometres, I will refer to this part of the Wollemi as Baker

Labyrinth. On the eastern side, it begins at the junction of Baker Ridge and Marawancal Ridge; on the northern side, it extends to Sheep Station Point; and on its southern and western sides, it is bordered by Coricudgy Creek and Widden Brook.

We had experienced the first intoxicating foray into this spectacular and challenging terrain several weeks ago during an exploration trip for this Traverse, approaching it from the opposite direction, but the time and the complexity of the area had not allowed us to achieve the full crossing. This was our 'do or die' task for today.

The traverse of Baker Labyrinth continued by coming down from the high point to a stunning flat, level,

¹² In April 2019, I led a walk in that area, which indeed proved to be a spectacular destination. The account of that adventure will be part of a future book.



View towards the Widden Valley, with Sheep Station Point, Hool 'Em Boy Point, Mount Cox and Mount Pomany visible.
PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

narrow saddle, 250 metres long by about 40 metres wide, covered in red soil and studded with *Xanthorrhoeas* (at 0858). The scenery looked so perfectly arranged and manicured that we might have been excused for thinking it had been created here by a famous landscape designer.

As the saddle has only a few trees, the views from it are absolutely jaw-dropping, especially the panorama to the north towards the Widden Valley. The central part of our vision was occupied by Sheep Station Creek gorge, its western side framed by Sheep Station Spur, ending at Sheep Station Point; its eastern side by Marawancal Ridge terminating with South Head Mountain and Marawancal Head just poking out behind it; further on, the bright, almost unnaturally green ribbon of the Widden Valley, guarded by the Pomany Range, with Mount Cox and Mount Pomany dominating the far

northern horizon; and in the distant west, Hool 'Em Boy Point, on our route tomorrow, and the high plateau of Nullo Mountain.

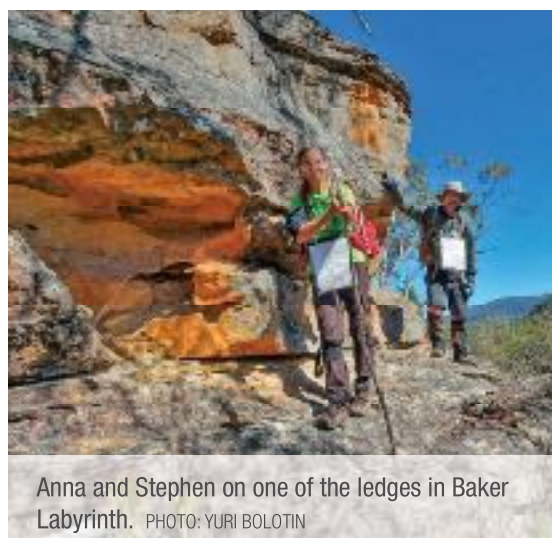
A good amount of time was spent here, taking photos and slowly walking westwards, until we reached a large flat stone terrace at the terminal point of the saddle, at 0917. We had just been taking in some of the most amazing views anyone could hope to see on any trip in the wilderness, so you would think that our senses would by now be a bit jaded, but we all agreed that we were just now looking at one of the best panoramas of the Traverse. Added to the expansive vista of the Widden Valley to the north was a sweeping view of Baker Labyrinth to the west and south, which made for a 300-degree helicopter-ride perspective of this incredible area.

Many photos later (at 0925), we realised we needed to move on and attend to the next challenge – how



to get off this terminal point to the continuation of the ridge, which was some 30 metres underneath us. This seemed a bit impossible for a minute or so, until we found a narrow slot, just south of the lookout. It was very steep but went nicely until an awkward two-metre drop in the middle, where Anna and I passed the backpacks down, and Stephen scrambled with his pack on. This was followed by a convenient side slot that led all the way underneath the cliffs, at 0932.

From here, the descent continued along the main spur, taking us to a spot above a tiny narrow natural stone bridge, about two metres wide and 20 metres long. After lowering ourselves down onto it, we scrambled up again and forward to a small cliff edge platform above a six-metre drop onto another, even narrower saddle, more like a notch. In order to cross it, we had to move back towards the right



Anna and Stephen on one of the ledges in Baker Labyrinth. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

and use the tape to descend slightly underneath the level of the saddle, then climb back onto it (at 0957).

From the bottom of the V-shaped notch, it was possible to ascend slightly and traverse for a while on the northern side around and underneath the next high point, gradually gaining height, until, once again, we were on top of the main ridge, which is very narrow at that point and has more



Anna on a knife-edge blade, part of the sandstone bridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

amazing views of the convoluted spurs that still had to be negotiated.

Next came an abrupt five-metre drop onto another short narrow walkway, followed by a sharp rise on the opposite side. It took some time to figure out what to do there, but it all worked out nicely in the end. If this all sounds like a roller coaster ride, it really was, with the noted distinction that we had to power ourselves along and to keep ourselves safe, without being strapped to our seats and whizzed away by an electro-mechanical device.

The top of the next knoll served as an ideal spot for morning tea, from 1015 till 1034. Only a few clouds were wandering across the deep blue sky above; the air was cool and clear, and

the wind only slight, which amounted to very comfortable conditions. The views were out of this world.

Resuming, we walked sharply down a spectacularly narrow, rocky, north-trending spur with a lonely tall *Callitris* tree growing in the middle of it, but we were soon stopped at an eight-metre drop. This obstacle was circumvented by finding a ramp on the western side, then sidling on a narrow ledge through a beautifully weathered orange-coloured overhang and returning onto the spur. Looking back, it seemed that we could also have descended on the eastern side.

Our way forward was now via another amazing feature – a narrow bridge composed of several enormous blocks of bare sandstone. The builder of the bridge left crevasses between



Yet another drop in the ridge, followed by a short saddle. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Picturesque rocks on Baker Ridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Stephen in Baker Labyrinth, with the first part of the traverse route behind him. Marawancal Ridge can be seen on the horizon line. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

the blocks that had to be crossed by jumping over (luckily, nothing too hard). More great photo opportunities here. After the crossing, we went up a small rise, before finding another great slot to get down to the lowest saddle along the ridge, which was about two metres wide and 15 metres long, at 1058.

Next, a 90-degree turn was required to begin ascending a sharp, rocky, knife-edge spur trending westwards. By 1118, we made it to a flat open terrace with another spectacular 360-degree view of Baker Labyrinth, including the area we had just traversed. This was the point we had reached on our previous reconnaissance trip only a few weeks ago, in March 2018. In my track notes from that trip, I had written,

We stopped because we did not want to lose any more height, but mainly because of the arresting view in front of us, which has got to be, in my opinion, one of the best in the entire Wollemi. Standing on the edge of a narrow, long and precipitous outcrop, we were treated by a breathtaking 360-degree panorama of the extremely complex labyrinth of ridges and spurs around us, encircled by high peaks. To the east, we could see a series of tall buttresses ascending towards Marawancal Ridge, culminating with two enormous stone fortresses. The view to the north was of the headwaters of Sheep Station Creek, towards Sheep Station Spur and Sheep Station Point to the left, South Head Mountain to the right, as well as a spectacular unnamed pyramid in the



Spectacular panorama looking north towards Widden Valley from Baker Labyrinth traverse. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

middle, and much further, the bulk profiles of Mount Cox and Mount Pomany; the emerald green pasture land of the Widden Valley in a far distance provided a brilliant contrast to the austerity of the barren tall cliffs in the foreground. The maze to the west is dominated by the deep gorge of Coricudgy Creek, and to the south, it is framed on the far horizon by a number of high mountains – Mount Kelgoola, Mount Midderula, Mount Wilworrl and Mount Coricudgy.

Today, we had only a brief photography stop at this remarkable location. From here on, we knew that despite a few challenges ahead, we could be quite confident we would be able to complete the crossing of Baker Labyrinth.

The highest point of the ridge was attained by 1135. The way down from here was initially southwards through a very steep, shallow gully, then coming around to the west, whilst still descending, and finding another, very narrow, long and almost vertical dry watercourse. We stopped at the head of it, on a small stone platform, at 1141. The next part of the descent was so steep and full of loose rocks that we had to do it one at a time to stay safe. When everybody had made it down to the bottom of the negotiable part of the gully, we exited it on the left and used a series of narrow ledges to keep losing elevation all the way to a low saddle at the base of the ridge, at 1215.

Although it was nearly lunchtime and a stop felt like a great idea, we



Stephen and Anna walking on narrow connecting ridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Stephen stopping in an overhang during the Baker Labyrinth traverse. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

decided to keep going until the top of the next high hill and have a rest there. The ascent was straightforward albeit very steep, but at this time of the day it was exposed to the full brunt of the midday sun reflecting off the hot rocky surfaces. Completion of the first section brought us to another narrow, nearly level and very scenic spur that was followed before the last, sharp, hot, sweaty and painful dash towards the summit. Somehow, in the rush of the climb, I had missed another wonderful lookout near the top that we had visited on the previous trip (at GR 4722 7256, 810 m). Oh well, we had all been there and also, arguably, there had



Noisy Friarbird, *Philemon corniculatus*. PHOTO: GRAHAM GROVES

already been almost an over-supply of amazing views today.

By 1257, we made it to the tree-covered summit, with limited views but a distinct advantage of having plenty of good shade. It was our lunch spot and the end of the Baker Labyrinth traverse. This intoxicating roller coaster journey with its many challenges and incredible views at every step must be rated one of the top Wollemi experiences.

At 1330, after a good rest, it was time to resume our adventure. The next goal was to reach Water Dragon Creek, where we had found water during an exploratory trip a few weeks ago.

We began by walking westwards, then, at 1342, dropped onto a long

connecting ridge trending north west. This narrow undulating ridge is covered by dense but manageable vegetation, including bright patches of red and yellow Dillwynia, probably *Dillwynia floribunda* var. *teretifolia*. Very soon, distant views of Widden Valley cliffs and the Nullo Mountain plateau appeared on the western horizon. At 1419, we reached a large flat balancing rock with more views. From here, a steep but easy descent towards Water Dragon Creek commenced.

Without much effort, we got down to the bottom of this dry watercourse dotted with large Eucalypt trees at 1456. A flock of Eastern Rosellas, *Platycercus eximius*, was making a racket in a bush



Old Gum tree on the descent towards Water Dragon Creek. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Widden Valley cliffs from the narrow connecting ridge. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



View of the Widden Valley and Nullo Mountain from the descent into Water Dragon Creek. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

nearby; they were accompanied by the competing choruses of Noisy Friarbirds, *Philemon corniculatus* and Bell Miner Birds, *Manorina melanophrys*.

At 1503, we dropped our backpacks and with containers only started to make our way towards the water collection point, located below a non-perennial waterfall at the end of a small canyon-like tributary of the creek. On the way, I stopped to take a few photos and was walking about 50 metres behind Stephen and Anna. As I was entering the narrow part of the canyon, I heard their loud and animated voices ahead as though something was happening, then the thick bush just in front of me abruptly parted, and a

large animal jumped out and ran past me, nearly pushing me off my feet. It was a Wild Dog, brown and yellow in colour, and in size close to a medium German Shepherd, only thinner. The beast had obviously been drinking at the waterhole, felt trapped by our arrival, and now was simply trying to get out of our way as quickly as possible. It all happened so fast, there was no time to take a photo. This was my first ever sighting of a Wild Dog, close and almost personal.

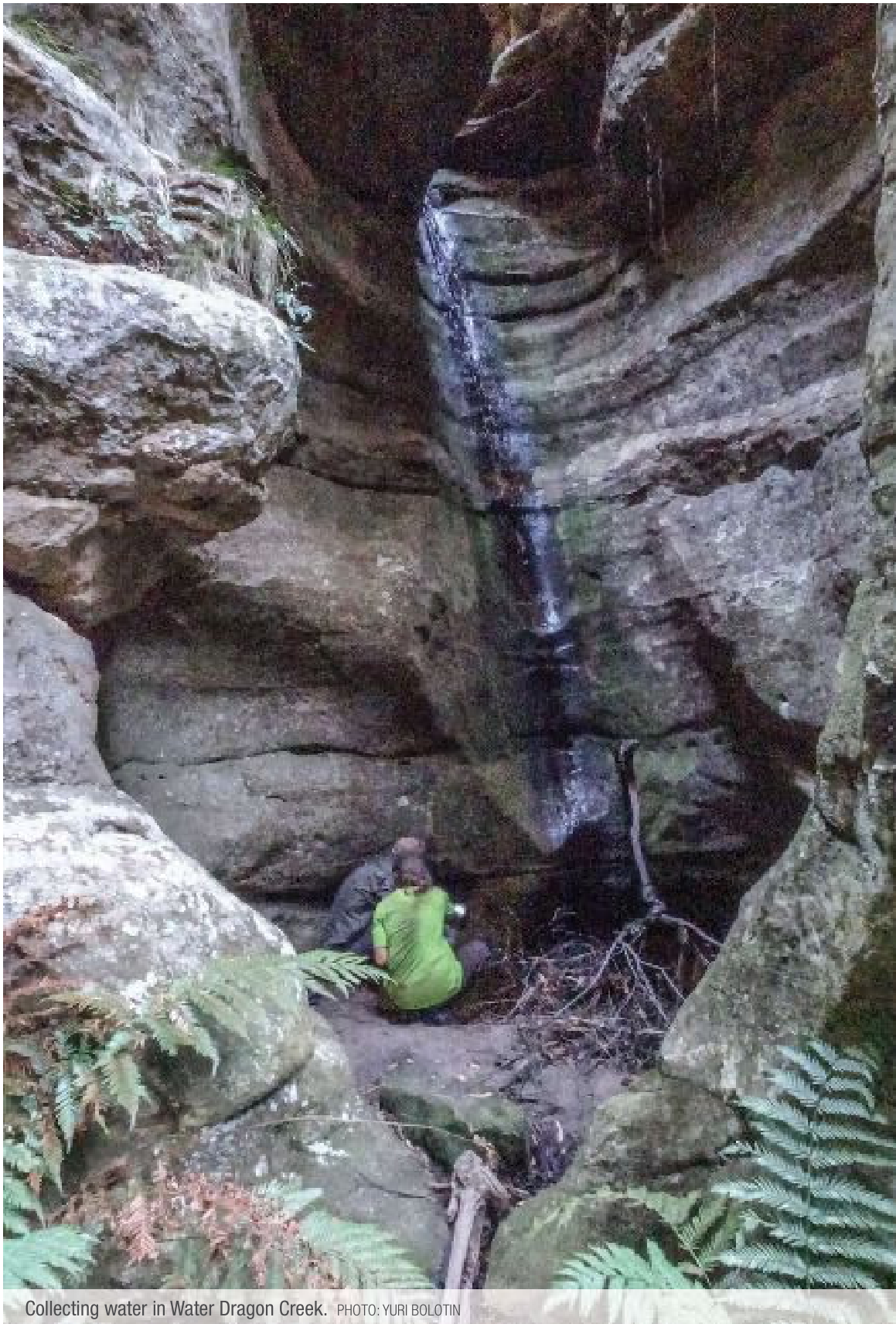
A lot of lively conversation flowed when I joined the other two at the pool, at 1515, although it seemed that I was the one who had had the closest encounter. This was not our



Diamond Python, *Morelia spilota* at the pool in Water Dragon Creek. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

last close brush with the wildlife today, though. The round reservoir we were collecting from was about two metres across and had a small five-centimetre diameter fallen tree spanning it, positioned half a metre above the water level. For quite a while, we were busy gathering water and did not notice anything unusual. Then, almost towards the end, we suddenly saw it – a one and a half metre-long Diamond Python, *Morelia spilota*, coiled around the small tree above the pool less than

a metre away from us. The snake slowly slithered towards the far end of the tree that was resting against the wall at the bottom of the waterfall. Like the Wild Dog a few minutes earlier, it was trying to get out of our way. Unfortunately, the slimy rocky surface of the waterfall proved too slippery even for the Python, so the creature's upper part kept sliding down back towards the rest of its body, which was still maintaining a firm hold on the tree. As soon as our water collection was



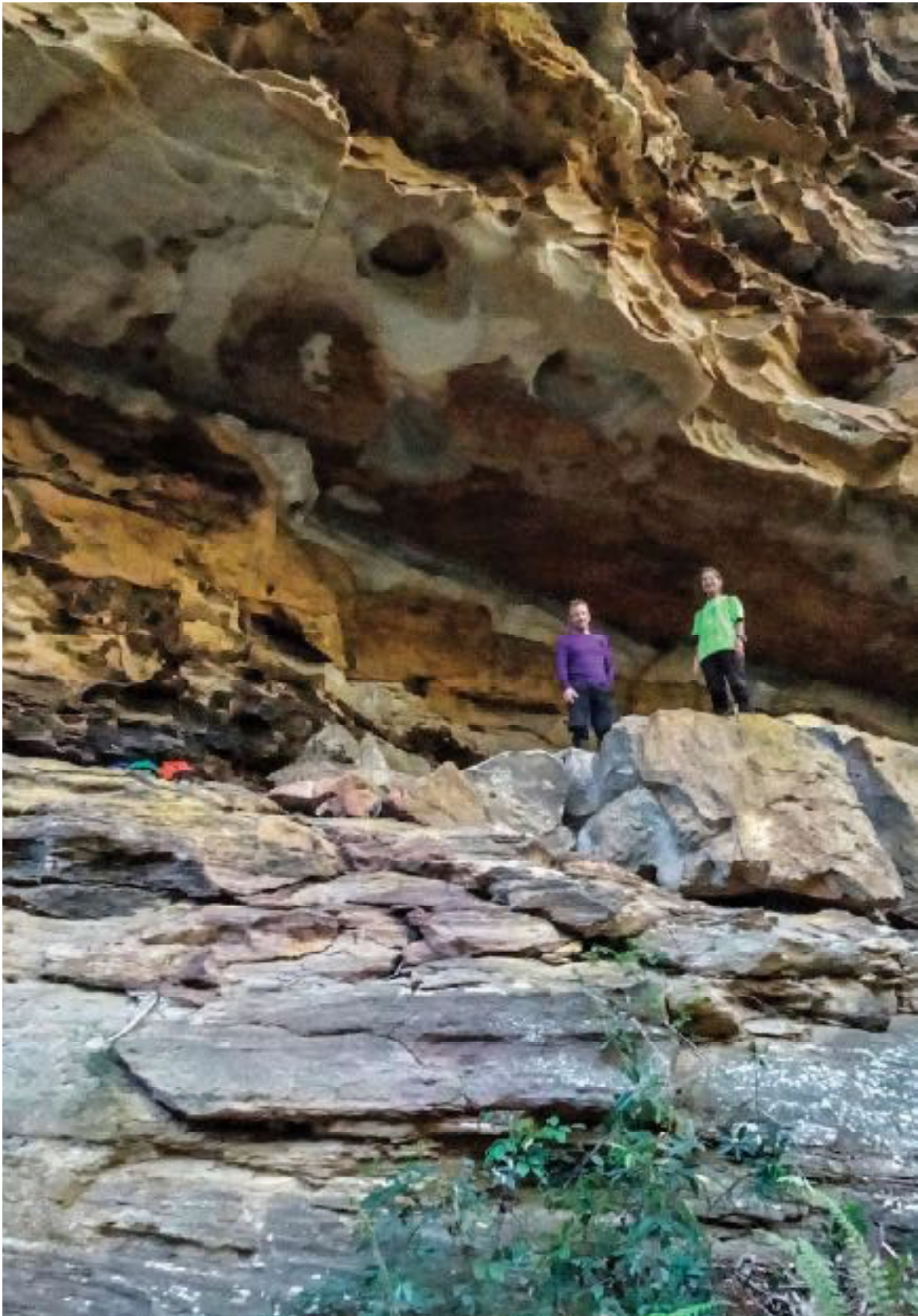
Collecting water in Water Dragon Creek. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN



Yuri doing yoga stretches at Camp 9. PHOTO: ANNA OSSIG-BONANNO

over (at 1528), we left the Python in peace and headed back, shortly after (at 1541) arriving at the spot where we had dropped our packs. This pool on the tributary of Water Dragon Creek, being one of the few permanent sources of water in the area, is obviously very popular with all wildlife, especially at this very dry time. Interestingly, on this occasion we did not see the reptile I had named the creek after.

Loaded with water, we staggered down the dry creek bed, which was covered in Bracken and Ferns spread amongst a forest of tall Gum trees, until we arrived at our camping cave, at 1555. This is a long, flat and narrow overhang in the cliffs about 10 metres above the creek level, with plenty of room for the three of us and a great view out onto the gorge below. The level floor was ideal for yoga stretches before dinner.



Stephen and Anna at Camp 9 cave. PHOTO: YURI BOLOTIN

We had had a phenomenally interesting and thrilling day and felt delighted to have successfully crossed Baker Labyrinth and obtained water. The Wonderful Wow Fairy of the Wollemi had indeed smiled at us today, gifting us an unforgettable experience. And the

Savage Scrub Monster had not been seen all day long!

Tomorrow promised to be another exciting adventure.

Day statistics

Distance 10 km; ascent 414 m; descent 660 m; time taken 9 hr 25 min.

TABLE OF TIMES, LOCATIONS AND GRID REFERENCES			
TIME	LOCATION	GRID REFERENCE	ELEVATION
0630	Left Camp 8	5156 7207	950 m
0731	High point, ridge swings north west	5042 7194	1,000 m
0820	Lookout	4946 7234	1,010 m
0844	High point	4900 7219	1,024 m
0858	Saddle with views (eastern end)	4876 7211	968 m
0917–0925	Lookout at the western end of the saddle	4851 7217	961 m
0932	Underneath the cliffs	4846 7214	936 m
0957	V-shaped notch	4828 7219	874 m
1015–1034	Morning tea on top of knoll	4810 7218	870 m
1058	Saddle	4808 7237	775 m
1118	Terrace with views	4783 7247	830 m
1135	Top of the ridge	4771 7255	850 m
1141	At the head of the descent watercourse	4767 7253	795 m
1215	Saddle	4747 7256	740 m
n/a	Lookout (missed on the day)	4722 7256	810 m
1257–1330	Lunch at hill summit	4705 7266	870 m
1342	Start of connecting ridge	4678 7270	850 m
1419	Balancing rock and start of descent	4619 7332	790 m
1456	In Water Dragon Creek	4609 7377	665 m
1503	Dropped backpacks and went to collect water.	4605 7387	660 m
1515–1528	At water pool	4629 7391	690 m
1541	Back at our backpacks	4605 7387	660 m
1555	At Camp 9	4579 7398	660 m