

WILSONS PROMONTORY SOUTHERN CIRCUIT

by Paul Ellis

Day One - Telegraph Saddle to Sealers Cove

On Saturday 25th August 2007 fellow Shoalhaven Bushwalkers Kynie Evison and Sandra Kelley and myself set off from our rented cabin at Yanakie for the thirty minute - 30km drive into Wilsons Promontory National Park for our four day hike through the Southern Prom Circuit. The idea was to drop me and the three large rucksacks at Telegraph Saddle whilst Kynie and Sandra drove to the Park Rangers Office at Tidal River to book in our permits and park the car. On our recce here yesterday, we had noticed the 3.5km road from Tidal River to Telegraph Saddle was quite steep, so the plan was for Kynie and Sandra to make quick time without the heavy burden of fully loaded rucksacks, or if they were lucky, get a lift from someone who was driving up this way as the park's shuttle bus only operates in the peak tourist season.

Whilst waiting for Kynie and Sandra to return I took the opportunity to take in the scenery from the Saddle's viewing platform and check out the trackhead. Today was cool and windy and the sky was overcast with light clouds which looked like it would clear. Within twenty minutes of being dropped off, Kynie and Sandra turned up, lucky enough to have caught a ride from a couple of day hikers and five minutes later, at 9.40am we set off along the track, eastwards towards Sealers Cove.

In 2005 bushfires (accidentally started by National Park rangers) raged through the park, destroying almost all the vegetation. Only small pockets of forest remained untouched. During the walk we would make our way through forests of blackened timber and lifeless trees, skeletons of forests once green with vegetation. Yet in the less than two years since the fires came through, it was amazing to see how well the forest regrowth had come on. In some ways the fires had made it possible to get great views that were once unseen through thick scrub, in others it was sad to be taking photographs that included blackened timber. The unburnt sections were appreciated even more whenever we came across them.

The walking track initially descends lightly through regenerating bushfire burnt forest but soon starts its steady ascent towards Windy Saddle utilising a series of switchbacks or zig-zagged tracks. We stopped on one corner of a switchback that was dominated by a spectacular 'blackboy' growing at right-angles from the wall of the track above. I felt the switchbacks made tackling the ascent much easier than utilising a direct ascent of steps or steep slope and we seemed to make good time.

The recovering forest was dominated by blackboys, ferns and paperbark trees and the forest was full of birdsong as we ascended the track. By 10.30am we arrived at Windy Saddle, an open grassy area surrounded by bush on the flanks of Mount McAlister (453 metres) to the south-west and Mount Ramsay (679 metres) to the north. Only 300 metres above sea level, the saddle really didn't offer much in views, but the lush grass and small wooden platform made for a great morning tea site where we demolished the remainder of last night's uneaten salad. By now the clouds had completely cleared, revealing a deep blue sky above. We felt blessed in this change of fortune in weather.

We continued eastwards, descending to Sealers Swamp by a long track that sidled Mount Ramsay, crossing many gullies, one with a small waterfall. This area seems to have escaped the bushfires and we passed through many pockets of sub-tropical rainforest dominated by moss covered rocks and tree trunks. After a further 4km we reached the swamp which was mostly dry. A wooden walkway follows the entire crossing.

We crossed picturesque Blackfish Creek and a large section of forest dominated by the trunks of dead tree ferns, some as high as three metres. After crossing a quaint narrow wooden bridge over Sealers Creek it was only about one hundred metres of sandy track before we stepped out onto the golden sands of Sealers Cove.

A five hundred metre walk south along the beach brought us to Sealers Creek, we removed our boots and socks and rolled up our trouser legs for the short crossing to the camping area. The water was ice cold but refreshing to our feet. On the other side we entered the bush by a narrow signposted track and fifty metres later, entered the Sealers Cove camping area, our overnight stop.

Once we had selected a suitable site for our tents we explored the area, locating the toilet block and an ingenious running water set-up next to the creek where a pipe emptied fresh running water into a hollow log before running down the bank and back into the creek. We found all the campsites bar Roaring Meg Creek had these contraptions and they proved to be most useful during our hike, though we played it safe by boiling or treating the water first before drinking. It was just after 1.00pm, so we enjoyed an appetising lunch during which we were visited by a couple of very inquisitive Crimson Rosellas who were certainly not afraid to come very close to where we were sitting. After lunch we unpacked our rucksacks and pitched our tents.

With the bulk of the afternoon still ahead of us we decided to explore the area. We walked back down to where we crossed Sealers Creek, the tide low enough for us to walk about 200 metres upstream where, apart from getting some excellent water reflections, we spied two black swans in the water further upstream.

We then decided to walk the entire length of the beach to the rocks at the northern end of the cove. The sand was very firm under our bare feet and the cold water most invigorating. We passed remnants of an old jetty, just wooden stumps protruding from the sand, but extremely photogenic with the fading light from the setting sun. As we made our way back to the southern end of the cove we noticed the tide was coming in, though not fast enough to worry us. We still had enough time to check out the boulder strewn coastline at this end of Sealers Cove with its red and green lichen coverings.

Upon returning to our camp we were surprised to find that a large group of scouts had set up camp right next to ours. They had carelessly left their tents and gear open and the Crimson Rosellas were having a field day attacking their supply of plastic bag covered food. A large crow was also present and Kynie soon discovered it had removed part of the blue plastic cover she had placed under her tent and had torn it to shreds. The crow was now perched on top of the large rock next to Kynie's site, admiring its handiwork. Once cleaned up we prepared our dinner and out came the possums which were quickly shooed away. With darkness upon us the scout group went for a spotlight walk, giving us the chance for some peace and quiet for the time being as we cleaned up our cooking gear and got our bedding ready. By 8.00pm we had decided it was time to retire for the night.

Sunday 26th August 2007 - Sealers Cove to Little Waterloo Bay

We were all woken up at 6.30am by activity from the Scouts nearby. Despite this I had received a peaceful nights sleep, being woken only once by the sound of possums fighting outside my tent. A well-thrust trekking pole in their direction had put paid to that disturbance. We fixed ourselves breakfast, dismantled the tents and packed the rucksacks and by 8.30am we were walking to the trackhead at the eastern end of the campsite. Today we knew we had a reasonably hard day ahead of us, though not as hard as tomorrow would be, according to the track notes. There was some low cloud about but we could see it was breaking up to reveal another perfect blue sky as we followed the track as it ascended towards Horn Point. Again this section seems to have avoided the devastation of the 2005 bushfires, even some of the wildflowers were out early, adding some colour to the track. It took just one hour to reach the rock platform above Horn Point. From here we had great views back north over Sealers Cove to The Cathedral, the mountain on the northern end of the cove and a reasonable view of Refuge Cove to the south.

We now descended through thick forest and patches of sub-tropical rainforest to come out onto more golden sand on a small beach on the northern end of the cove. We crossed the sand and entered another track which ascended then descended over the rocky point in the middle of Refuge Cove to the Boat Camp on the southern beach. This camp was remarkable. It featured a wooden fence which had signs with the names of boats carved by the owners of the many vessels that had moored here over the years. These were intermingled with carved whale bones and even footwear depicting boat names.

We now followed the beach south and found the track to Refuge Camp. We arrived at 10.45am and stopped for morning tea. Like Sealers Camp, this site had a similar toilet block and piped creek water supply. However, the site itself looked very poor in comparison to Sealers Camp. It was very open and offered little protection from the elements and other sites, but it would do for our short break.

With morning tea finished we started the hard gruelling ascent to Kersops Saddle, and that it was. Along the way there are a couple of granite slabs where great views can be taken of Refuge Cove while you catch your breath, then it's on and upwards two hundred metres up along more switchbacks, an ascent that seems to just keep rising until finally, just after midday we stepped out onto an open rocky area that afforded a good view south of Waterloo Bay. We had arrived at Kersops Saddle. A signpost here informed us it was a short three

hundred metre walk to the summit of Kersops Peak so we decided to have lunch there. The ascent was only another forty metres and it was well worth the little effort.

We had great views of Waterloo Bay with its aqua blue water and white sandy beach. Further to the south we had a tantalising view of South-East Point and the lighthouse. Behind us to the north were magnificent views of the coastline and the lake-like Refuge Cove. We enjoyed our lunch in the warm sunshine while an occasional sea breeze cooled us down. It was 1.00pm by the time we were refreshed enough to continue. We returned to the track and prepared for our descent to Waterloo Bay.

We descended through the forest quite quickly to North Waterloo Bay, stepped out onto the tiny beach which we crossed to find another track which initially headed inland. This track is quite narrow but very scenic. It was also very undulating as it skirted the ridge above the coastal rocks. Eventually at 2.45pm we descended onto the white sand of Little Waterloo Bay and quickly found the track to the campsite, our stopover for the night. We were the only people here so we were able to pick out the choicest campsites and found the best to be just twenty five metres from the now expected water pipe on the creek, though it was a decent two hundred metre walk to the toilet block which featured a rare flushing toilet instead of the usual composting pit set-up.

We pitched our tents, then went for a stroll along the beach. The water was freezing but it soothed our tired and sore feet. I noticed I had acquired a small blister on the ball of my right foot and Kynie had similar on her toes. These would have to be taped before we set off the next day. One foray through the camping area past the toilet block revealed where the track started for the walk to Waterloo Bay. We returned to camp by 4.30pm and started to prepare our dinners. We had the usual suspects hanging around, this time a crow and three magpies. We had finished eating before it got dark and with light fading it started to get quite cold. All three of us are feeling stiff and sore from the day's exertions and we were certainly not looking forward to more ascending tomorrow. Sandra got us up doing stretching exercises and even a little Thai Chi - I found it a bit too violent for my liking, but the stretches seemed to help relieve some of the stiffness and pain. By 7.30pm it had become so cold we all decided to retire to our tents for an early night.

Monday 27th August 2007 - Little Waterloo Bay to Roaring Meg Creek

After a great night's sleep we were up by 6.30am. By 8.20am we had eaten breakfast, packed up our gear and were heading through the campsite to the track that would take us over the rocky coastline to Waterloo Bay. It was already a bright sunny day with absolutely no cloud in the sky at all. It was going to be a most unseasonably warm late winter's day. The short track had a few ascents, just enough to warm up the muscles and before we knew it we were standing at the northern end of the beach at Waterloo Bay. We had over one kilometre of soft white sand to negotiate and by the time we had reached the southern end of the beach our calf muscles were quite tight. The only witness to our crossing the beach was a lone wallaby sitting on the grass atop a dune at the back of the beach.

The track recommenced just fifty metres from the southern end of the beach, heralded by yet another signpost. It felt good to be standing on solid ground once again. The track, known as 'The Lighthouse Track' soon started to ascend, away from the coastal heath and into the now familiar badly burnt forest as it started to climb up to the Boulder Ranges - so named after the granite tors and boulders seen throughout the ranges, up and up it went until we were above Home Cove, then in another series of switchbacks, climbed further upwards past blackened trees and white granite boulders. Only the ground cover was green as the vegetation has just commenced its regrowth here. Many rest breaks to catch our breath and admire views were taken until suddenly the track levelled out and we found ourselves on top of the range. Less than one hundred metres further on we came to a large rock slab, high above the ocean which gave some magnificent views. At 10.20am it was definitely time for morning tea. We had climbed two hundred and eighty metres since we left the beach at Waterloo Bay.

The rock slab gave us views of almost all the coastline to the north and it felt like we were almost looking down onto South-East Point and the lighthouse. The sea was eerily calm and Kynie made the comment that it "looked as flat as a millpond" - there was hardly a wave breaking. One advantage of the bushfire is that it burnt much of the vegetation that would have impeded many of our views as we made our way to this point, but the forest on the hills in front of us looked untouched. We moved on twenty minutes later. The track now moved inland and started to descend into thick forest. We crossed a couple of gullies containing creeks of fresh water which we stopped to dip our cups in to take a drink.

Before we realised it, we had reached the intersection and descended to South-East Point, and the ascent to the lighthouse itself. We could see it straight ahead, a long strip of narrow concrete rising at what looked to be a 45 degree angle. It was only going to be a one hundred metre ascent, but all in the space of about three hundred metres. We ascended a short slope to the helipad, past some amazing rock formations. Then it was onto the main ascent, and what an ascent this was, rest breaks were taken every twenty five metres or so but eventually we reached the top and made our way past a complex of colonial looking buildings to the lighthouse proper.

We chose a grassy open section for lunch that gave us not only great views of the lighthouse, but also the coastline along the southernmost tip of mainland Australia and all the surrounding offshore islands (which we later learned, belonged to Tasmania, even though many of them were no further off the coast of Victoria than twelve kilometres). Kynie and Sandra decided to take a look around after they had eaten lunch. They met up with the caretaker who gave them some quick information on the complex. It was built in 1859 and the complex includes a school and some of the cottages can be rented for overnight stays by hikers.

We headed off again at 1.40pm. The descent to the helipad was almost as challenging as the ascent. It was so steep we had to tread carefully for one slip would find us tumbling to the bottom with bruises, cuts, grazes and probable broken bones. There was evidence here that the bushfires had made their way right up to the lighthouse complex itself and a pile of broken masonry was evidence that one building had been destroyed. We eventually made it to the trackhead and headed west. Again we found ourselves ascending, this time along a very long 4.4km track and 240 metres, the only respite being a short fifty metre side track for a wonderful lookout that gave us views of South-East Point and the lighthouse from a western angle. We continued onwards and upwards through the burnt countryside, wondering when we would reach the intersection of the Telegraph Road. It was also the hottest part of the day and we seemed sheltered from the prevailing winds which would have cooled us.

Eventually we arrived at the dirt road known as Telegraph Road. We turned right and headed north along this winding road for about 700 metres until we came to a track on the left side. This is a short cut to Roaring Meg Creek campsite but it does descend quite steeply to a side creek before crossing two small ridges and descending to Roaring Meg Creek. That meant two more ascents, only small, (eighty metres and sixty metres high) but after today's ascending they were more than enough.

During this section we found the clearest water at one of the small creeks and took the opportunity to top up our hydration bags. The track passed through more fire blackened forest. Eventually we crossed a new wooden bridge over Roaring Meg and arrived at the lower campsite at 3.50pm. The sites themselves weren't very good so we climbed the ridge to the top campsites which weren't much better, the ground was very hard and the bushfires had been very fierce here as evidenced by a photo display at the campsite entrance.

We wasted little time in getting our tents pitched, and prepared dinner as darkness was fast upon us. It was 5.45pm by the time we got the stoves lit and then the possums came and joined in. The next couple of hours were spent in between stretching exercises and chasing the pesky possums away from our tents and gear. We took the extra steps of making sure all our food was doubly secured in plastic bags, put in our rucksacks and placed in our tents.

It was 8.20pm by the time we had run the possums out of our camp and we wasted little time in retiring to our tents for the night. Our night wasn't over just yet. We were all awoken after midnight, first by the rising full moon which gave the effect that it was morning and then after 1.00pm by the sound of roaring winds coming through the gullies. We had wondered how Roaring Meg Creek got its name and we now believed we had found out why. We later learned that the creek actually got its name from a cannon used in the siege of Londonderry, as the sound of the creek surging through a narrow defile just before it enters the sea resembles the sound of the cannon (so says the official paper on park name origins).

Tuesday 28th August 2007 - Roaring Meg Creek to Tidal River

The worst sleep of the entire trip had us awake and out of our tents by 6.00am. The sky was clear and the winds had died down, but there was some ominous looking clouds to the south that were not to bother us today. By the time we'd had breakfast and packed up it was 8.10am and we set off on the track behind the toilet block. Again a much shorter and more scenic option than walking the full length of Telegraph Road which also comes by the campsite. Initially taking us through what remained of the forest for 500 metres the track ascended onto scrubby heathland, dominated by the still upright but now unused steel telegraph poles and undulated its way for just

over 2km to join up with the Telegraph Road just south of Martins Hill. We now followed the Telegraph Road for some distance northwards as it descended towards Halfway Hut.

Halfway Hut, originally called Martins Hut is a solid stone building which was originally built for workers servicing the telegraph line to the lighthouse. Built halfway between Telegraph Saddle and the lighthouse, it is partially hidden in the forest and features a picturesque camping area complete with fresh water tank and a pit toilet. We arrived there at 9.20am and explored the area making a mental note to consider this as a definite campsite for a future hike in Wilsons Prom. Being made of stone, the hut has survived numerous bushfires in the area over the years.

We continued northwards along the Telegraph Road which now took us through badly burnt Ti Tree forest. Instead of walking through a tunnel of green we now passed through a forest of black lifeless trees surrounded by a carpet of green undergrowth of ferns and weeds. Just over one kilometre later we passed the track to Waterloo Bay and one hundred metres further on, was the left hand track to Oberon Bay. This was a similar road to the Telegraph Road, especially the burnt out Ti Tree forest, but the track was very sandy and thankfully was mostly level as it made its 3.5km journey to the beach.

We finally arrived at Oberon Beach at 10.20am and located the camping area on the brackish Frasers Creek where we stopped for morning tea. We still have a long coastal walk to go to finish our trip but thankfully we had the open uninteresting dirt roads behind us. We made our way onto Oberon Beach and headed north. We had to wade across Growler Creek at the northern end of the beach. Luckily the water level wasn't too deep and my gore-tex boots kept my feet dry, though Kynie and Sandra took no chances and removed their footwear for the crossing. North of the creek along the coastline were more boulders with the orange red lichen, similar to those found on the eastern side of the Prom. The track quickly ascended around the headland to Little Oberon Bay. The bushfires had been pretty fierce here too and the vegetation has not recovered so well, though it is making some slow progress.

The track soon descended to Little Oberon Bay and we crossed a small beach of soft white sand, taking a detour only to look at some sand sculptured erosion behind the beach. Not far away we again climbed a long dune and found the track which climbs high above and around a small peninsula known as Norman Point with Little Oberon above us, a tall hill featuring more granite tors and boulders. As we commenced the descent to Norman Beach it was decided to take lunch at 12.45pm on the track, where the scenery would be better than the camping village of Tidal River.

We found a spot on a large rock slab perched above the ocean, a cool breeze welcome in the hot afternoon sun. The views of the offshore islands to the north-west complimented the scene. There was only one incident during lunch - a lone Pacific Gull decided to very accurately crap on Kynie from high above. It was a very good shot as Kynie's left arm was covered with reconstituted anchovies and it took quite some cleaning up. Even Sandra caught a splash or two. My thoughts were of the Pacific Gull flying off to its mates to boast of its accuracy.

At 1.15pm we set off for the final short leg of our four day hike and 10 minutes later had stepped onto Norman Beach. We then followed the main track behind the dunes which followed a tunnel of unburnt Ti Tree forest, giving us an insight into what the Telegraph Road section may have looked like prior to the fires. At 1.45pm we arrived back at Tidal River, loaded our rucksacks into Sandra's car and handed our permits back in at the Ranger Station. It has been a most memorable four days of hiking with very good company. We wasted little time driving back to our cabin at Yanakie for well-deserved showers and a couple of drinks.

Postscript: On our return drive home we were just south of the township of Sale when we noticed something crossing the highway. It turned out to be a large Koala. Our very first sighting of one in the wilds. We quickly pulled over to the side of the road, grabbed our cameras and raced into the forest where the Koala had started to ascend a small gum tree. Despite our presence, the koala did not immediately move and we were able to snap off a number of photographs. Another highlight to an excellent week away.