

Budawangs: the beauty and the beast - Wog Wog to Currockbilly

By Lee Cordner

Are you thinking about hiking from Wog Wog to Currockbilly Mountain and return in 2 days? Then take a sedative, have a good lie down and think again. If you still believe it's a good idea, either seek medical advice or read this article. On the 2008 Anzac Day long weekend, six experienced members of the Southcoast and Shoalhaven Bushwalking Clubs joined forces to explore one of the great ridges in southern NSW: Lee Cordner (leader), Frank Hartigan (trainee leader), Graham Wright (President, Southcoast Club), Brett Davis (President, Shoalhaven Club), Doug Berthon and Helge Lewerenz.

The initially proposed plan was to follow the track notes titled "Wog Wog – Wirritin Ridge – Currockbilly" in *Pigeon House and Beyond: A Guide to the Budawang Range and Environs*, 2nd Edition, Revised 1987, pages 74-77. The notes suggested "2 (long) days" with "12 hours of walking" on the first day and a "water bottle is essential" (!). The recommended route went south from the Wog Wog entrance to the Budawang area, across the Yadboro River then via Wirritin Ridge to Currockbilly Mountain and return to Wog Wog via the Budawang Range. This route appeared to be very ambitious for 2 days, being approximately 46 kilometres return with considerable ascents and descents, and mostly off-track or following rarely used footpads through some tough country.

Following a suggestion by Brett, it was decided to shorten the hike considerably by planning to exit from Currockbilly Mountain to the west via Valeston Property. Permission was gained to walk through the property and park a vehicle there. This meant the overall length of the hike was reduced to approximately 28 kilometres, including approximately 1885 metres of ascent and 1830 metres of descent (the end point was 55 metres higher than the start point). We still anticipated a very challenging 2 day hike.

We car camped at Wog Wog on Anzac Day evening so people could participate in Anzac events and to enable a very early start the next day. At 6 am Saturday morning we were on the track in cool, clear conditions, with mist rising out of the valleys in the early morning light. We made very brisk progress along the main walking track through open, wooded country, crossing Wog Wog Creek, then north and east before curving south onto Corang Plateau.

Graham pointed out aboriginal artwork just off the track and everyone was travelling well. At that stage, making the recommended campsite at Wirritin Basin, some 22.5 kilometres from the start, looked possible. However, seeds of doubt were sown when discrepancies between the 2nd Edition (1987) of *Pigeon House and Beyond*, being used by Lee and the 1st Edition (1982), being used by Brett became apparent. Both editions suggested 2 long hard days and 12 hours for the first day. However, the 1st Edition recommended a start from Wog Wog property, which the 2nd Edition advised was no longer accessible. This meant that the revised walk was now 4-5 kilometres longer, but the recommended walking times remained the same!

We made very good progress east along Corang Plateau until we were fortunate to find the start of a faint footpad about 1 kilometre before Korra Hill and heading south toward Snedden Pass. We found, lost then found again the pad, which was overgrown and passing through at times impenetrable heath country. Our rate of progress reduced considerably and we took turns in leading the fight. Our labours were rewarded with the first of many spectacular vistas across the Budawangs features to the east, including Corang Peak, Admiration Point, Mount Owen, and Pigeon House Mountain in the distance. The pad became clearer and the going easier as we approached and then negotiated some short "interesting" scrambles down Snedden Pass and skirted to the east of Cockpit Swamp and Wog Wog Property.

Further dense scrub and steep, unstable descents kept our focus as we stumbled and tumbled our way southeast along a ridge until a well-made bridle trail was located that took us to the Yadboro River. The river was cool, clear and delightful in the midday autumn sun as we slipped and splashed our way southwest. We enjoyed lunch by the river and reviewed our progress and options for the rest of the day. It was clear that our initial objective of making camp at Wirritin Basin that night was not achievable. After much discussion we decided to carry sufficient water from the Yadboro River to enable progress southward along the dry Wirritin Ridge, and to camp before dark.

The Wirritin Ridge ascent provided an excellent cardiovascular workout as we climbed 550 metres up often loose, rocky ground. The lack of track fitness of some members of the party was soon revealed. At around 5 pm, after almost 11 hours of walking, we made camp in a saddle to the north of Wirritin Mountain, weary and pleased with our progress but 7 kilometres short of our original day 1 objective.

Sunday morning dawned cool and clear after a night of strong winds, and we were underway by 7 am. Our plan was simple: bag 3 summits; Wirritin Mountain, Mount Roberts and Currockbilly Mountain, then exit via Valeston Property. Wirritin was soon achieved and we enjoyed the first of many magnificent vistas of the Budawang area: Pigeon House and Talaterang Mountains, Byangee Walls, The Castle, Mounts Nibelung and Owen and other features were spectacularly silhouetted to the northeast, north and west in the morning light. However, progress was already slower than desired due to thick scrub and much loose rock.

As we approached Mount Roberts, Brett and Frank decided to continue to the summit (to allow Brett to consummate his “conceptual” passion for summit-bagging) while the remainder of the party took a high-level traverse, following the 850 metre contour. The traverse proved to be slow going across steep and crumbling rock. The party was reunited in the saddle below Mount Roberts. We enjoyed a second morning tea then commenced a tough scramble through sometimes dense scrub for the 350 metre ascent until we were above the 1000 metre contour line on Wirritin Ridge. We had lunch on the ridge and enjoyed views seaward to the coast, with Jervis Bay and Tuross Heads clearly visible.

In an effort to avoid some of the steeper climbs and thicker scrub we tried contouring to the north into a copse of trees. However, we were soon confronted with a long and slow obstacle course through a tangle of fallen timber. One saving grace was that we found the upper part of a small creek with good water; our first chance to replenish since lunch the day before. We pushed through dense scrub up to the spine of Wirritin Ridge, where the going was a little easier. Our final scrub bash for the day occurred when we decided to traverse to the south east of a knoll, where we again plunged in to extremely dense, over head high scrub, for a further energy and time consuming struggle, taking an hour to cover 500 metres. By this stage it was late afternoon, very dark clouds were building to the north and west and the decision was taken to find a suitable campsite. We were able to get a strong mobile telephone signal from the ridge top to inform our families that all was well, and that we would be spending another night in the bush.

The going finally became easier, with a clearly defined footpad leading along the spine of the ridge towards Wirritin Basin, with Currockbilly Mountain visible a little over 2 kilometres to the southwest. However, the “mountain gods” were not yet done with us. In fading light, the dark clouds to the west rapidly closed bringing spectacular lightning and strong, gusting winds. Suddenly we were pelted with horizontal sleet, as the temperature plummeted. Fortunately, we only caught the tail of a storm that passed to the south, and we were soon on our way to the illusive campsite. Lee received a scratch in the eye from a grass tree, adding to a scratch in the other eye from the previous day, so the hike became the “blind leading ...”. As darkness was closing in we made rough camp amid bracken in Wirritin Basin. We were able to collect good water from soaks near the source of the Yadboro River and shared some of our scarce food, before settling down for a cool and occasionally showery night above 1000 metres.

Monday morning was cold and misty. We slept in to 6.30 am before sharing our remaining food, so we all had something for breakfast. We were on the track by 8 am, and after a short bash through dense scrub, we found a footpad that took us on to the ridge line. We climbed to the Currockbilly trig point, at 1132 metres, for a photo opportunity, although views from the summit were very limited by trees and scrub. A chilly, westerly wind kept us moving briskly in the bright sunlight as we descended along a well-defined footpad, then fire trails and farm tracks to arrive at our vehicle at 12.30 pm.

As we enjoyed meat pies for lunch at the Nerriga pub we reviewed our “2 long hard days” hike that had become “2.5 long hard days”. Our total walking time was about 26 hours for a hike much reduced in length from that suggested in the track notes. Although there were few new lessons, several old lessons were reinforced: be wary of track notes written 20 plus years before, “saplings” can grow to be big trees, “footpads” become overgrown and disappear, and dense scrub can eventuate where none existed; in high country, always carry appropriate clothing and shelter, as the weather can (and does) change very quickly (we learned there had been widespread dustings of snow across the tablelands overnight); it is useful to carry some extra food; carry sufficient water; make the decision to camp earlier rather than later; eye protection is a very good idea when scrub bashing; a GPS and mobile phone are very helpful aids; and the Budawang remains one of the most beautiful, spectacular and challenging hiking areas in Australia.

We'll be back.