

Climbing up away from the river on an old farm road.

# Gateway to Gondwanaland

The New England Wilderness Walk takes you back to an Australia before Man set foot on the continent.





“The track down to Sunday Creek and then on to the Bellinger River junction is all true wilderness”



MAIN: Negotiating the final Bellinger River crossing at Dardanelles Creek.  
ABOVE: A nest of diamond or carpet pythons under a log at Scraggy Creek clearing.  
LEFT: A completed satin bowerbird's bower on the trail ready to attract females, complete with decorations of lichens and blue feathers.

**T**wo hundred million years ago, Gondwanaland was the southernmost of two super continents. A large portion of it was made up of dense rainforest, with evergreen and hardwood trees reaching up 40m into the sky. The only evidence of Gondwanaland now left is a mighty strip of land known as the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia – the most extensive area of subtropical rainforest in the world. Clustered around the NSW-Queensland border, the area covers almost 4000 sq km, with New England National Park right in the middle of it.

One trail that showcases the mosaic of forests and diversity of species that make up the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area is the New England Wilderness Walk (34km/2-3 days/moderate), bisecting New England NP from west to east. It stretches from just below Point Lookout (starting at 1370m) on the New England Tablelands, down to Darkwood in the Bellinger River Valley (at 100m), and via the Robinson's Knob Trail, Grasstree Ridge and Bellinger River. The walk drops over 1200m along its length, and links the New England plateau with the coast. Most of the drop in altitude is in the first 14.5km, making for quite a strenuous but satisfying first day.

The trail commences in the sub-alpine woodlands near Point Lookout, which have adapted to the colder and more wind-exposed conditions and occasional burns. It then travels through the ancient, moist and misty Antarctic beech cool-temperate

rainforests, to the lowland subtropical rainforests and riverine woodlands in the valleys below.

#### Untamed beauty

The first day down to Sunday Creek and the welcome camp at Scraggy Creek is characterised first by breathtakingly quiet trails with trees dripping in lichens and surprising views across vistas at points where the track sometimes emerges suddenly from the canopy. Then there are steep sections with abundant grass

trees, some fairly overgrown sections with lawyer vines and brackens, and a welcome stream-bed scramble along the crystal-clear Sunday Creek to the junction with the upper Bellinger River. Trekking poles helped prevent some stumbles that would have otherwise resulted in scraped knees or a total soaking.

We only encountered one other walking party on the track, comprising five fit women from Armidale all in their sixties, and they were having a ball.

Once at the river it's fairly flat going of course, although some track sections do follow old overgrown logging/cattle roads which climb quite steeply out of the river gorge to avoid some choked river loops. We took these “shortcuts” and some of them yielded beautiful views of the riverbed some hundreds of feet below.

The track down to Sunday Creek and then on to the Bellinger River junction is all true wilderness, but from there the riverscape has some pockets of once-cleared country dating as far back as indigenous settlement and then more recently for cattle grazing. These clearings are slowly being reclaimed by the scrub since some original grazing settlements were abandoned in the 1950s, as well as more recent acquisitions of properties by National Parks to be absorbed into the New England NP.

In 2010, the park celebrated its 75th anniversary. The park

was officially opened by the Governor General of Australia, Lord Gowrie, in April 1937. During the opening a downpour forced the large crowd to wait at the end of the road some kilometres from the park, while the small official party proceeded to Point Lookout by motor vehicle, pulled by horse up the steep track to the summit. The opening ceremony was repeated later in the afternoon on the banks of the Serpentine River for the benefit of the gathered crowd.

We came across various forms of wildlife – numerous birds higher up including superb blue wrens, lyrebirds and satin bowerbirds. We also saw lace monitors and red-bellied black snakes along the riverbanks.

The most spectacular find was a “nest” of pythons at Scraggy Creek clearing – we estimated about seven to 10 in number – all intertwined under a log both to conserve body heat as well as to breed. There was debate whether they were diamond or carpet pythons as the markings seemed reminiscent of both, and apparently the breeds do hybridise quite readily in these parts of eastern Australia.

There are numerous possible camping spots along the river, some better than others, and we spent a couple of comfortable nights enjoying the still wilderness around the campfire. Meals varied quite considerably between the party members – one even carried a jaffle iron and enjoyed cheese and salami jaffles each



night – while others feasted on carbonara pasta, couscous with onion, salmon, beef jerky and dried peas or cook-in-the-bag dehydrated casserole dishes.

### Tracks of tranquillity

The second and third days of our walk were quite relaxing in contrast to the first very strenuous day's descent, and we had the chance to explore and soak up the atmosphere. The track here mainly follows disused farm roads and was quite choked up in places with lantana, especially in the lower reaches. The valley widens out as you descend the river and the close, steep hills give way to wider river valleys. Hats off to NPWS for their long-term concerted weed-control effort in reducing the lantana and blackberry which dominated the river flats when the area was first procured, and which is quickly becoming reduced to more isolated pockets of infestation. Native regrowth is being encouraged through the strategic use of native brackens and wild tobacco bush as pioneering species in areas previously choked with exotic environmental weeds.

A deep crossing at Dardanelles Creek ended the bushwalking section of our walk and the last few kilometres were along a well-formed country road. We arrived at Cool Creek Crossing, the uppermost public vehicular access point, mid afternoon on the third day. We had plenty of time to enjoy another swim in the Bellingher before the organised 4pm lift back up the mountain (96km) to Point Lookout and to our vehicles. An afternoon storm was brewing and started to rain just as we loaded up the van. We shared our experiences with the driver, Daniel, from Bellingher Canoe Adventures, and vowed to make the walk an annual event.



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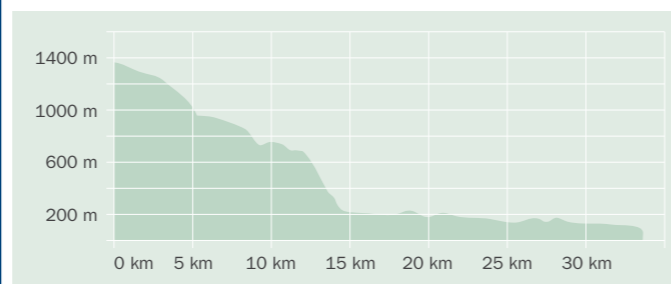
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## Walk notes NEW ENGLAND WILDERNESS WALK

Time/distance: 3 days/34km | Grade: Medium



### Walk Notes

**1. 0-1.5km:** Note turnoff to Robinsons Knob Trail at Wrights Lookout junction. Very slippery underfoot when wet.



**2. 7km:** Turnoff to left: Grasree Ridge

**3. 9.5km:** The turnoff to the old antimony mine goes down to the left while the trail continues quite steeply up to the right. A small yellow forestry sign points the way along Grasree trail.

**4. 9.5km-12.5km:** Spectacular views of the wilderness from areas along the trail where the canopy has been breached.

**5. 14.5km:** Sunday Creek: After a steep descent, time to rest and change footwear before the 2.5km stream-bed walk to first night camp.

**6. 15km:** Watch for the fluoro tree marker on left marking up-and-over shortcut avoiding 300-400m of river at U bend.

**7. 17km:** Scraggy Creek clearing – good first night's camp here and at 17.5km after river crossing.

**8. 19km:** watch for road deviation avoiding Woods Camp loop (unless you have plenty of time to spare!).

**9. 20km:** popular camping here at Woods Creek junction.

**10. 26km:** good riverside camp after Winch Flat on inside bend of river.

**11. 30-32.5km:** hard going with heavy undergrowth and lantana. Look for fishermen's trails alongside river in approach to Dardanelles Creek flat.

**12. 32.5-34km:** After a final deep crossing, easy walking from Dardanelles Crossing to Cool Creek Crossing for pick up. Pick up and shuttle back to Point Lookout (road distance about 96km) can be organised by arrangement with Bellingher Canoe Adventures on 02 6655 9955 – talk to Daniel or Jodie.

## NEED TO KNOW

### Getting there

From Armidale travel 68km east along Waterfall Way to the entrance of New England NP (Point Lookout Road). Alternatively from Pacific Highway at the Urunga /Waterfall Way turnoff, travel 102km, west through Bellingen, Dorrigo and Ebor to the turnoff at New England NP. The start of the trail is off the Point Lookout Road at the Wrights Lookout parking area, some 11km from the Waterfall Way turnoff.

### When to go

Pretty much any time but mid-summer has storms and in winter the river water is cold. Keep an eye out on weather and river levels since multiple river crossings are required. Check with the NPWS office in Dorrigo ([www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nationalparks](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nationalparks) or 02 6657 2309).

### What they didn't tell you:

1. On the upper trail slopes it can be wet and very slippery.
2. Some of the shortcuts to avoid river loops comprise overgrown disused roads and are easily missed, but are recommended because they often climbed quite sharply out of the river gorge.
3. Vegetation gets very thick along the river's lower reaches. Missing a shortcut can cost time in extra bushbashing and river crossings.
4. Leeches and march flies are a nuisance in the warmer months.
5. Watch out for snakes in the spring.

### Maps

Complete walk covered by 1:25,000 topographic maps: Hyatts Flat 9336-1-N; Ebor 9337-2S; Darkwood 9437-3S

An excellent brochure has also been produced by the Office of Environment & Heritage: New England Wilderness Walk – from subalpine to subtropics – New England National Parks from Dorrigo NPWS. It contains a wealth of information on tips, history, geology, flora and fauna as well as a map and walking notes.

Campsite end of day 1 at Scraggy Creek clearing.



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