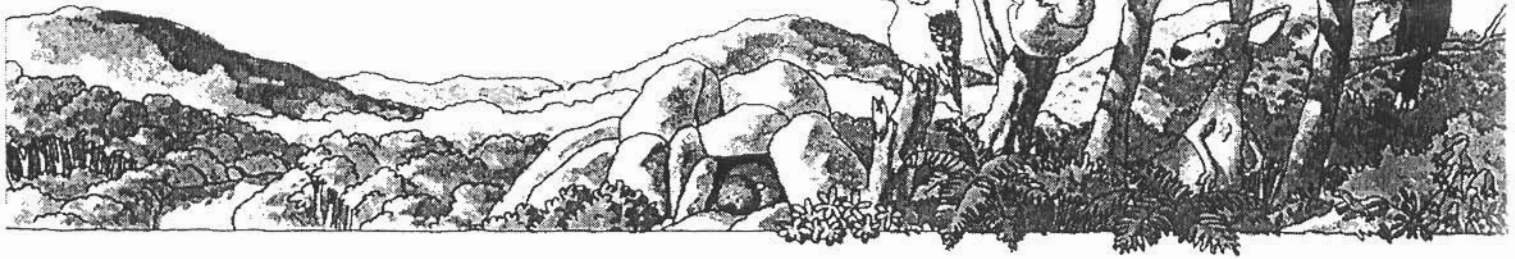


Fern Gully Nature Walk

Tarra-Bulga N.P. Bulga Picnic Area,



This walk takes about 30-45 minutes and will introduce you to some of the striking features of the original South Gippsland forest.

Less than 100 years ago, forests and fern gullies like these could be found everywhere in the Strzelecki Ranges. Now there are very few areas left.

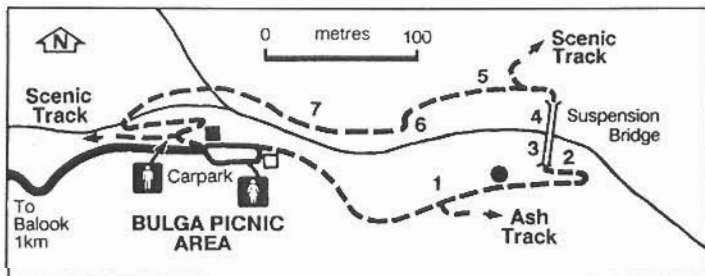
Please help to protect this area by:

- staying on the tracks
- not picking or damaging any plants
- taking your rubbish out with you.

The numbers in this leaflet refer to numbered pegs along the tracks. But don't just look for the pegs! Look and listen all the way along.

Fern Gully Nature Walk starts where the Ash Track meets with Wills Track. This is part of the track that once led to the homestead of an early settler, Sam Wills, further down the Macks Creek Valley. The bushfires of January 1939 came from the north, jumped over and missed Bulga, and went on to destroy the homestead and farm.

- Table and Fireplace
- Picnic Shelter
- ♂ ♀ Toilets
- Office
- Park Boundary



1. Giant Mountain Ash

This immense tree is over 60 metres high. Mountain Ash are the tallest hardwood trees and the tallest flowering plants in the world. Their scientific name, *Eucalyptus regnans*, means "reigning eucalypt". They were the dominant tree in the wet mountain forest which covered most of the eastern Strzelecki Ranges before European settlement.

The Mountain Ash trees at Bulga are among the oldest in Victoria. Notice that the tops of many of them are now dead. These trees were probably mature when Captain Cook sailed into Botany Bay over 200 years ago.



BUDS FRUIT
MOUNTAIN ASH BUDS FRUIT

2. Above ground plants

The large trees here are Myrtle Beech. Look up! The plants growing on the trunks and branches are not parasites, but epiphytes, plants which use trees only for anchorage and support. They take moisture from the air and can only exist where conditions are cool and moist all year round. The most obvious epiphyte here is the Kangaroo Fern. Also notice the vine growing into the upper storey of the rainforest. This is a Twining Silkpod and is probably over a hundred years old.



3. Corrigan's Bridge

This suspension bridge is named after the Alberton Shire Engineer who had the original bridge moved from Alberton West (near Yarram) in 1938 to give visitors a unique aerial view of a fern gully. Army Reserve engineers built the present bridge, a replica of the old one, in October 1982. This was done to replace the original bridge, which was becoming old and unsafe.

Look at the perfect radial arrangement of the fronds of the **Soft Tree-ferns**. These are usually found along the bottom of gullies, whereas the **Rough Tree-fern** grows on higher slopes and in more open forest.

At the start of the bridge you are level with the upper branches of a **Myrtle Beech**. In spring and early summer look for the beautiful bronze-crimson of the new leaves.



MYRTLE BEECH

Beyond the Myrtle Beech are three other species of trees common in mountain gullies. On the left of the bridge is a **Banyalla** (*Pittosporum bicolor*), with yellow to maroon flowers in spring and brown berries in autumn.

On the right is an **Austral Mulberry** (*Hedycarya angustifolia*) with leaves glossy green above with whitish veins, and paler glossy green underneath. It bears inedible mulberry-like fruit.



AUSTRAL MULBERRY

Near the end of the bridge on the right is a **Southern Sassafras** (*Atherosperma moschatum*). This tree has slightly serrated leaves shiny and bright green above the whitish beneath. It has creamy fragrant flowers on the undersides of the branches in spring.



SOUTHERN SASSAFRAS

The track divides just past the bridge. The nature walk continues along Fern Gully Track;

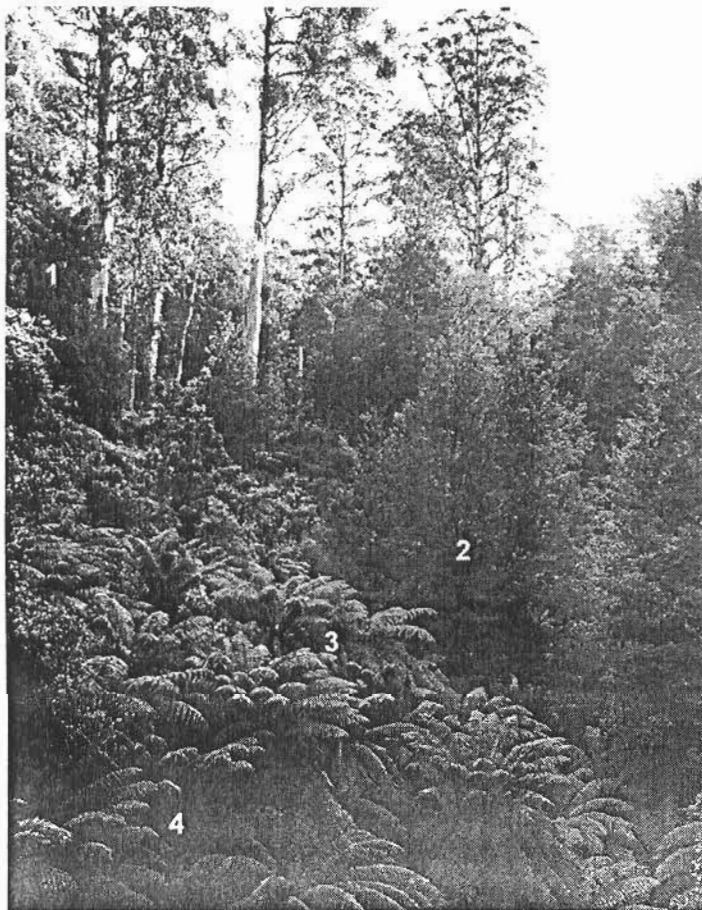
the Scenic Track takes you to the higher, drier gully slopes, through mountain ash forest and past some very tall trees.

4. Forest profile

The plants that make up the forest form layers called storeys. Looking up the gully from here, you can see a cross-section of storeys in Mountain Ash forest.

1. Mountain Ash of uniform age, making a canopy over 60 metres above the ground.
2. Myrtle Beech (dark green, small leaves), Southern Sassafras (a cone-shaped tree), Silver Wattle (grey-green), Blackwood (a wattle with dark yellow-green foliage), and climbers like clematis and fieldia, up to 30 metres.
3. Tree-ferns and other small trees and bushes, up to about 10 metres.
4. Plants of the damp forest floor - ferns, mosses, fungi. This lowest storey receives only 5% of the sunlight falling on the canopy.

The forest will not retain this form indefinitely: nature does not stand still. Either the Mountain Ash will die of old age and be replaced by a forest of Myrtle Beech and other trees, or an intense wildfire will allow a new Mountain Ash forest to grow.



VIEW OF THE FOREST PROFILE FROM CORRIGANS BRIDGE

An interesting situation arose in May 1977. A heavy snowfall broke down the tops of many trees, admitting more light to the forest floor and allowing understory plant seeds to germinate. Mountain Ash seeds need rich soil and sunlight to germinate and grow, and these conditions are only provided by a fire.

5. Ferns and fungi

Three frond generations can be identified on tree ferns in spring: the bright green new fronds, the dark green of last year and the brown of old fronds. In spring, look for the tightly-curved new fronds, like a bishop's crozier.

Among the many plants growing on tree ferns is Filmy Fern, with translucent fronds only one cell thick.

Fungi of different kinds can usually be found on tree trunks and branches and among plant litter on the forest floor. Over 200 species of fungi have been identified in Tarra-Bulga National Park.

6. Ancient trees

Here the track goes between two large Myrtle Beech trees *Nothofagus cunninghamii*. (*Nothofagus* means "false beech", though they are related to the European Beech). They are the remnant descendants of extensive beech forests which flourished in the cooler and moister climates of former times. The Otway Ranges, Mount Baw Baw and the Cumberland Valley are other places in Victoria where Myrtle Beech trees still grow, but 10,000 years ago, during an Ice Age, they grew where Melbourne is today.

See how the gnarled roots of these trees provide a home for a variety of delicate mosses and fungi.

Between stops 6 and 7 you may see holes 2-3cm across in the ground. These are made by yabbies, freshwater crustaceans. Though they can move on land they must stay near water, as they are gill-breathing animals.

7. Lyrebird Pool

Water falls into this pool all year round. Superb Lyrebirds drink and splash here in summer. You may already have noticed places where lyrebirds have scratched about in the soil looking for small insects.

It's likely that you'll hear a lyrebird - their clear, loud, strong imitations of the calls of the Grey Shrike-thrush, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, Crimson Rosella, Pilotbird and Eastern Whipbird are unmistakable - and if you walk quietly you may see one.



Have you noticed the climate in the fern gully? Wind barely penetrates, most of the sunlight is filtered out by the various vegetation storeys, and humidity is high. During the day and in summer it is cooler here than in the open; overnight and in winter it is warmer.

Continue along the track to the car park. Please return this leaflet to the leaflet box if you don't want to keep it.

Further Information:

Extra notes on the flora, fauna and history of the park are available from the visitor centre.

Suggested reading :

- **Birds of Victoria - 'The Ranges'** (Gould League)
- **Trees of Victoria** by L. F. Costermans (some illustrations in this leaflet are by courtesy of Mr Costermans).

We hope you have enjoyed your walk in Tarra-Bulga National Park and invite you to visit other parks and reserves.

Gillian Johnson, Westall High School, prepared the original draft of this nature walk.

For further information on other Parks
call the Parks Victoria Information line
13 19 63