HFNC Excursion to Wildman's Cave in Burrunj (Black Range) on 23 May 1998

Rod Bird

Participants: J & G Cayley, B & P Moon, R Bird & D Luhrs, D & L Munro

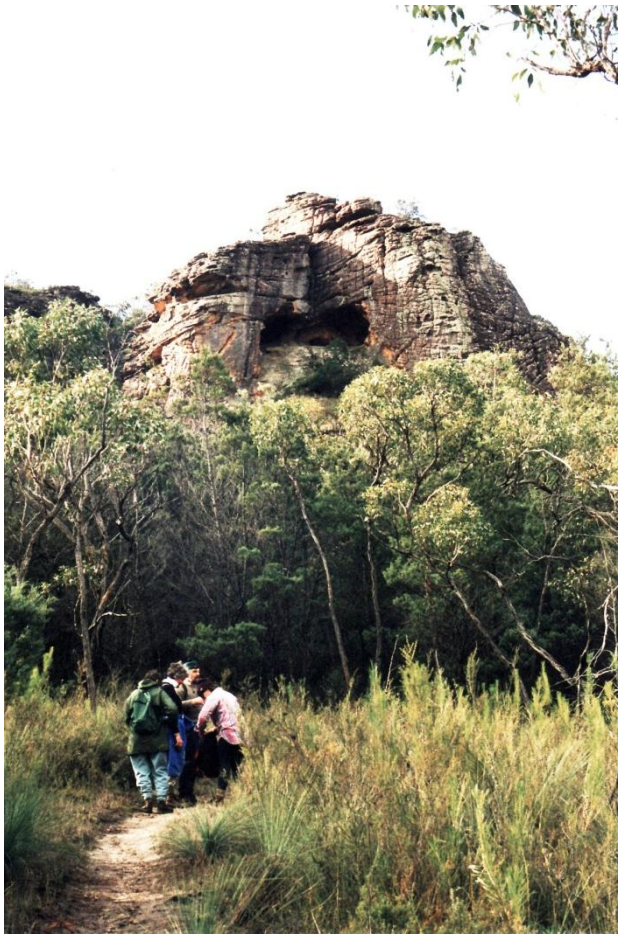
The trip started with a climb to the top of Mt Bepcha, near Rocklands Reservoir, where Penny and Brian Moon spend some time in summer in the fire-spotting tower. The view was admired by all.

The main purpose for our excursion was to visit the Wildman's Cave in Burrunj (Black Range), so we continued on to Djarabul (Cherrypool) and then west on the road to HGH Corner. This dirt road runs through attractive Yellow Gum (*E. leucoxylon*), Yellow Box (*E. melliodora*) and River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) woodlands before one reaches the range. Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*), Oyster Bay Pine (*Callitris rhomboidea*) and Varnish Wattle (*Acacia verniciflua*) are some of the other notable species to be seen.

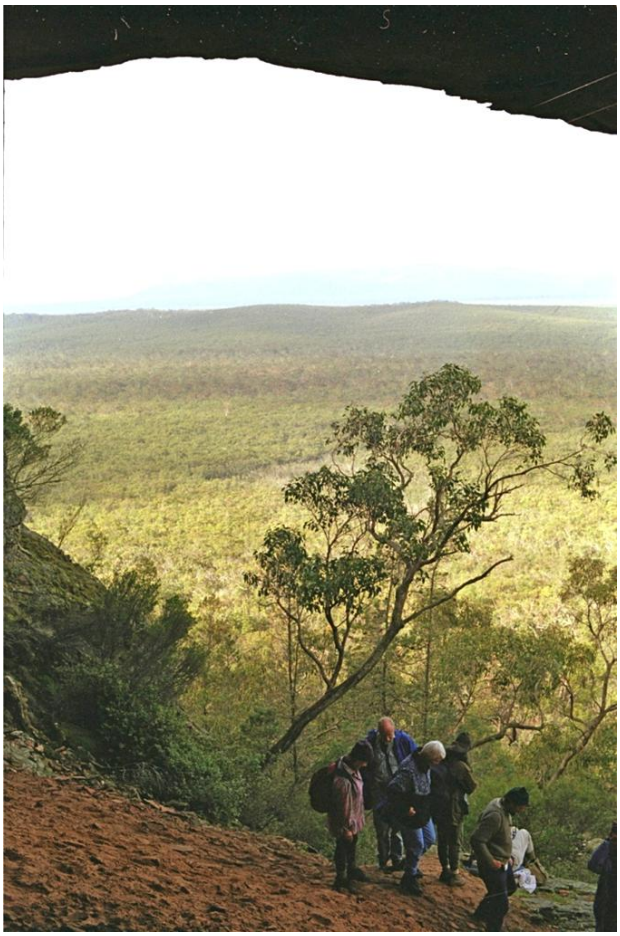
These open woodlands were grazed by sheep from the earliest days of settlement and much of that continues today. The Forests Commission claimed in the 1970s that grazing reduced the fire hazard, avoiding the need for prescribed burning that inevitably caused the loss of old, hollow trees. Given the chance, Eastern Grey Kangaroos and Red-necked Wallabies would probably achieve the same objective.

Turning south on the Rocklands Rd at HGH corner, after about 10 km we reached Muirfoot Track. A few kilometres along that 4WD track, we found on the north side the start of the short walk up to the cliffs and Wildman's Cave.

After a fairly sharp ascent to near the top of the range we located the cave at the base of a small sandstone cliff facing to the SW (that is not the cave in the cliff shown in the photograph below – Wildman's Cave is found a short distance to the right on the range).



HFNC members approaching Burrunj Range



View from the mount above Wildman's Cave

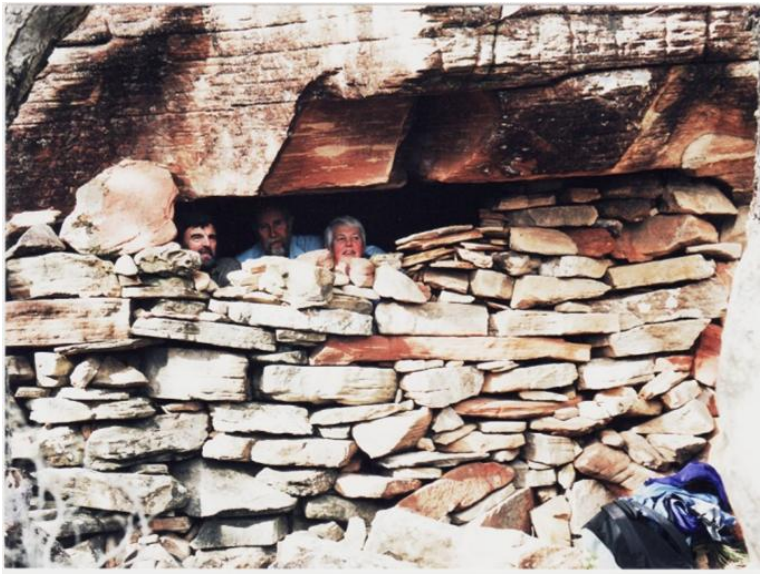
A brief history of the occupant of this cave may be found in *LCC Historic Places Special Investigation in South West Victoria. Final Recommendations* (January 1997). Two caves were reputed to have been occupied by David Ross, an itinerant shearer, from 1850s to 1880s. For most of the year, when he was not away shearing sheep, he lived in the caves. He poached sheep, from the adjacent 'Glenisla Run', and prospected for gold in the range. The dry-stone rock walls at the opening of the caves were reportedly partially reconstructed in 'recent' years.

Oddly, an interesting account can be seen in an obituary for Samuel Carter of 'Glenisla', published in the Horsham Times. It seems that Ross had fenced a small paddock nearby for 'his' sheep and had dug a well to supply water for sheep, garden and cave. Apparently there was a track leading up from the garden to the cave. At some stage his theft of sheep for his meat supply was discovered and a trooper was sent to apprehend him. Ross was described as 'a big, powerful fellow, over 6 feet in height, about 40 years of age'. He was fined in Balmoral for illegal possession of mutton (there were drums of salted mutton and smoked mutton hanging on wires in both caves). About 2 years later he disappeared from the district, never to return.

We did not see any original refuse of occupation (e.g. harness, old cooking utensils or general rubbish from that era) so presumably it had been cleared away in later years. We wondered where the 'hermit' found water – the nearest may be from a stream on the south side of Muirfoot Track.

We looked at the wall of rocks across the lower three quarters of the entrance of the shallow cave and considered that there probably had been some reconstruction. This cave had head space of nearly 2 m, a depth of about 5 m and frontage of about 4 m.

We did not note a second cave with a walled front that the Wildman was reputed to have also occupied. However, we were not expecting to find one and may have missed it.



Dave, John & Glenys look out from Wildman's Cave

A short climb took us to the top of the small cliff in which the Wildman's Cave was located. This gave a great view to the Gariwerd mountains to the east and Rocklands Reservoir further south.

We walked perhaps 300 m along a faint path at the base of the east side of the range, finding a very pleasant shelter where we had lunch.

No Aboriginal art was seen although there appeared to be some suitable rock surfaces.

At this season there were few wildflowers in bloom. Only one fungus was recorded, an Orange Jelly Fungus, growing on a dead *Banksia marginata* branch.

We returned to Hamilton satisfied with having located the Wildman's Cave and enjoying the day's activities.

Note – this report was compiled in 2023 from notes in the 1996 HFNC Minute Book, scanned slide photos from that excursion, information from the Land Conservation Council (LCC) report and an obituary for Samuel Carter of Glenisla that was posted in the Horsham Times (see Obituary – Samuel Charles Carter – Obituaries Australia (anu.edu.au).