

**Morning glory.** Sunlight strikes a cliff know as 'Old Baldy'. It sits above a bend of the Wolgan River and historic Newnes, found in the south-west of the national park.







# SACRED WOLLEMI

A vast tract of wilderness, just a short hop from Australia's largest city, Wollemi National Park holds treasures so deeply concealed that few will ever find them.

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STORY BY KEN EASTWOOD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN BROWN





THERE IS A PLACE WHERE,  
once a day, a single heavenly ray passes through a narrow slot  
in ancient sandstone, illuminating the darkness within.  
The beam strikes the fragile fronds of a precariously  
positioned fern as if it were a chosen child.

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Below – in the halls of polished stone and timber of this natural cathedral – canyons stop, awed, the steam from their bodies rising like the smoke of smouldering incense towards the vaulted ceiling.

There are no ticking clocks or mobile phones to measure time here; instead, time is measured against the 40 million years it has taken to carve this majestic architecture. The light picks up gentle waterfalls that form long veils over the narrow canyon's walls; individual drops appear as shining, embroidered pearls.

Into swirling, sculpted fonts, the canyons slide, emerging from the freezing water as children of the wilderness, their baptism witnessed by congregations of crayfish and celebrated by the cascading chorus of the creek. Then the canyons are gone again and the ray of light slowly climbs the wall. Just a few kilometres away, there is another canyon, and another and another – a wild, tangled maze of ravines and secret underground passages.

This area is so untrammelled, so mysterious, that it still holds infinite treasures close to its chest: new species of plant, rare animals and ancient works of art that haven't been seen for hundreds of years.

Beyond this deeply incised area are unique stone

pagodas, with ironstone steps and rounded forms like stupas. Although we are within 80km of Australia's largest city, koalas still roam here, there are creeks so pure you can drink water straight from them, and you can walk for more than a week in a straight line without encountering a road, a track or any sign of modernity. A river has gouged out a gorge so long and deep it has been called the "Grand Canyon of NSW" and the mountains are where the great Aboriginal creation figure, Baiame, stepped off into the sky.

This place is Wollemi National Park, a thriving, 5000sq.km tilted tangle of sandstone, water, basalt, scrub and thick forest, stretching from the Blue Mountains, due west of Sydney, to the Hunter Valley, more than 100km to the north.

It has mountains more than 1200m high and rain-forest gullies that haven't seen fire in millions of years. It holds the largest wilderness area on east Australia's mainland, the largest contiguous forest, and it contains the largest unrecorded area of Aboriginal art.

"If you have any sense of the sacred, Wollemi epitomises it," says the park's self-professed guardian angel, Dr Haydn Washington, who watches over it from a rock castle he built on the edge of the park. ▶

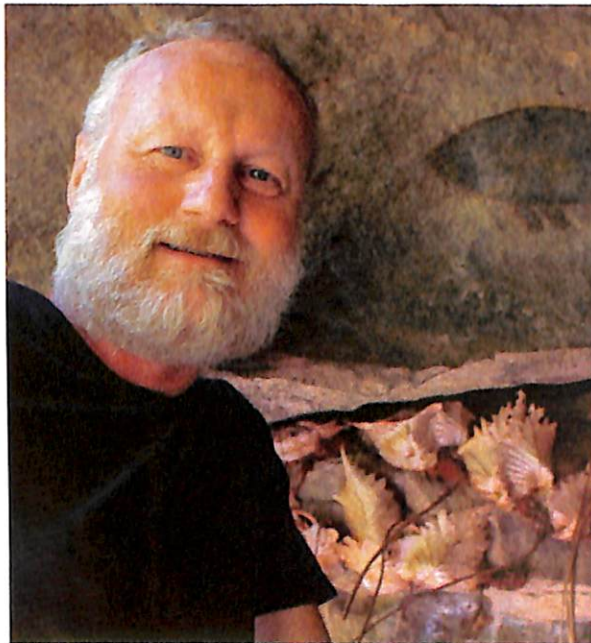




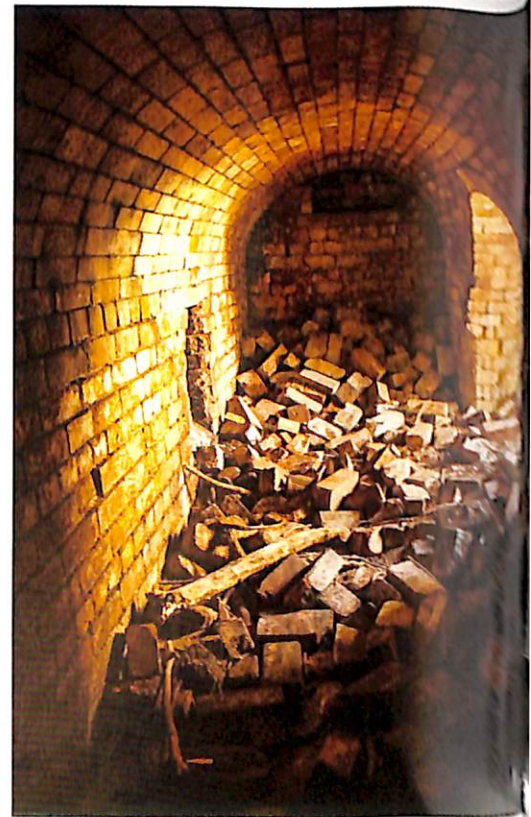
**Hollowed out.** The majestic Rocky Creek canyon twists and turns beneath lush rainforest. A female satin bowerbird (opposite) at Newnes. Males take seven years to develop their blue-black plumage.



**Laid bare.** Archaeologist Matthew Kelleher at Gallery Rock with an eagle engraving found in 2006.



**Kept safe.** Rock-art specialist Professor Paul Taçon (above) believes the images found at Eagles Reach rock shelter (left) date back 5000–6000 years and were made by up to five Aboriginal skins and clans. Ruins (right) at the Newnes shale-oil plant (1906–32), an area that is now protected from mining.







**Garden of pagodas.** The cliff line and heath above Capertee Valley on the western edge of the Blue Mountains. The landscape is characterised by its eroded ironstone rock formations.

## You step into the sacred Colo River, and you step into the Dreamtime.

A biologist and lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Haydn was one of a founding core of people who fought hard to secure Wollemi National Park in the early 1970s.

“You step into the Colo [River], you step into the Dreamtime,” he says. Like many of the baptised bushwalkers and canyoneers who explore the park’s secrets, Haydn has found many Aboriginal sites and believes he’s been drawn to others, including a spot now known as ‘Dingo Dreaming’. “I’m a scientist who’s not afraid to talk about a spiritual connection to the land and a sense of wonder,” he says.

**A**LTHOUGH LITTLE IS known about the use of the park before colonisation, it is believed that at least four Aboriginal groups – the Wiradjuri, Dharug, Darkinjung and Wanaruah – used the area, perhaps for ceremonies and initiations.

So little is known about the hidden caches of Aboriginal paintings and engravings in Wollemi, that when Professor Paul Taçon, the chairman of rock-art research at Griffith University, Brisbane, began investigating the area just 13 years ago, he was told he wouldn’t find very much.

Based on his experience in other areas, he drew nine small ovals on a map of the park, signifying the areas where his team intended to look for art.

“The plan was to look in all of them, but in 10 years of research we only got to three because we found so much,” he says. “In those three areas, all in the south of the park, we found more than 200 art sites and more than 300 archaeological sites. There’s a real mix of designs and styles and techniques, with designs typical of the coast and others typical of western styles.”

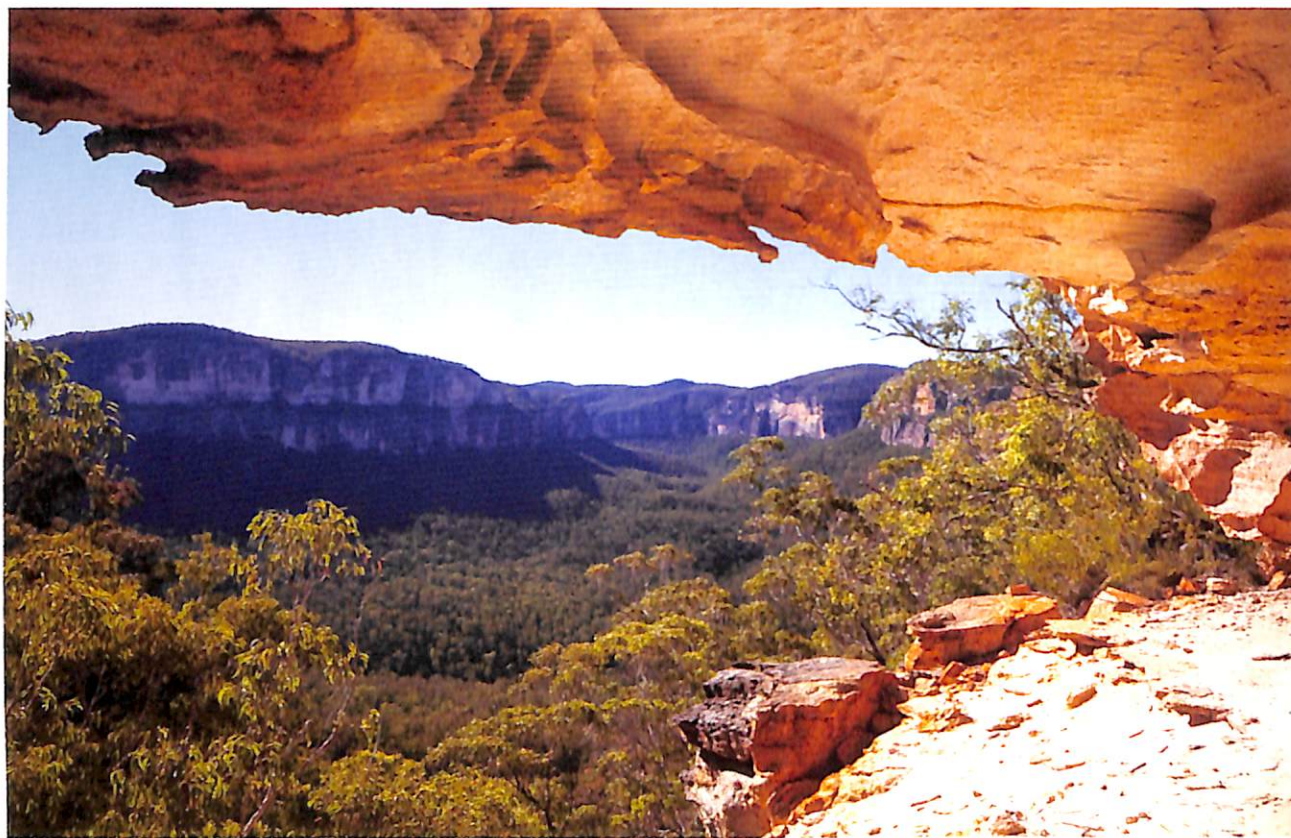
On one platform, they found an incredible site with 60 engravings, with all the major ancestral beings shown in the one place. Nothing like that has been seen elsewhere. “Even in 2013 we discovered new sites. There is so much rock art out there,” he says. Perhaps indicating a role in initiations, some sites are exceedingly difficult to reach, such as an artwork of a giant white kangaroo, which requires a leap of faith across a 20m-deep chasm.

Paul has studied indigenous art all over the world and says Wollemi is the toughest place he’s worked. Most of it is too rugged for helicopters, so gear must be carried in. In summer, running out of water, bushfires and heat exhaustion are major risks and he’s had to keep one researcher alive overnight after he was bitten by a brown snake. At other times flash floods and  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperatures can catch out the unwary.

“I reckon the most rugged, physically challenging place to do archaeological research is Wollemi National Park,” he says. “You experience all ▶



**A tangled, wild heart.** A spectacular view of the park's cliffs and gorges from a sandstone overhang, high above Rocky Creek and the Wolgan River.



extremes of weather, and sometimes all in one day.”

Evan Yanna Muru is one of the Aboriginal people who worked with Paul on an expedition to document a legendary art site dubbed Eagles Reach, the location of which is kept secret. The extraordinary cave has 166 drawings, 39 stencils and one painting.

“One of the main characters is this eagle, with a stencil of a boomerang and a tomahawk on each wing. This symbol is one of the representations of the sky boss, Baiame,” Evan says. “It’s in pristine condition – you go in there and it’s like it was done yesterday. It’s a very deep cave, so it’s well protected from the elements. There are easily 10 layers of different art over the top of each other.”

Evan says that whether the art sites show hand stencils, thylacines, tally marks, spirit figures or humans with their hands raised, they are all richly significant. “They’re all sacred sites – they’re the equivalent of a modern-day cathedral and a university wrapped in one.”

**A**ROUND ITS RAGGED fringe, Wollemi National Park has a few friendly, fairly accessible places for the uninitiated to taste its tamer offerings. On the western edge, north of Lithgow, at Ganguddy (Dunns Swamp), Newnes and Glen Davis, campers descend by the thousand during school holidays and on long weekends.

They clamber through the maze-like pagoda country, walk on one of the few maintained trails to admire glow-worms in an old railway tunnel, tick off the 235 species of bird, including the rare glossy black cockatoo and critically endangered regent honeyeater, and camp and play in the rivers and creeks. In the east, kayakers and canoeists wait for the snaking Colo to rise and then come out to play on its rumpled back.

But the untouched, tangled heart of this wilderness is not suited to casual dalliance. It is a place where wizened greybeards and a few young, bold adventurers undertake multi-day expeditions, overcoming difficult navigation over 700m changes in elevation, loose, friable sandstone and a host of other obstacles. Maps don’t show the detail of myriad jagged, broken cliff lines, chasms and pagodas.

In the riverbeds, quicksand seizes people up to their thighs, stealing their shoes, and perilously slippery rocks threaten ankles and bones. In the forests, mountain holly, hakea, acacia stakes, prickly Moses, lawyer vine and blackthorn spinosa tear holes in clothes and exposed flesh; the vegetation is at times so dense that the only place to walk is above the ground, on a pathway of rotten, fallen logs.

In the canyon country, adventurers fix ropes to saplings not much thicker than their thumbs, before abseiling into ravines and underground water systems, not knowing whether they will be able to ▶



# WOLLEMI NATIONAL PARK



## STATS

**80KM**  
NORTH-WEST  
OF SYDNEY

**COVERS MORE THAN  
5000SQ.KM**

**235 SPECIES OF BIRD**

**55 SPECIES OF  
BUTTERFLY**

**46 SPECIES OF MAMMAL**

## DIRECTORY

### GETTING THERE:

The park has many access points that are a far apart. Driving from Sydney, popular sites on the west include Dunns Swamp–Ganguddy near Rylstone (about a 3.5-hour drive) and Glen Davis (a similar distance). Some of the more accessible canyons can be reached on State Forest dirt tracks via Clarence. In the east, kayakers and canoeists can gain access to the Colo River at Canoe Creek and Upper Colo.

### WHERE TO STAY:

Camping grounds with picnic facilities are available at Dunns Swamp–Ganguddy near Rylstone (about a 3.5-hour drive) and Glen Davis (a similar distance). Some of the more accessible canyons can be reached on State Forest dirt tracks via Clarence. In the east, kayakers and canoeists can gain access to the Colo River at Canoe Creek and Upper Colo.

### MORE INFORMATION:

Call 02 4787 8877 or visit:  
[www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/wollemi-national-park](http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/wollemi-national-park)

## POINTS OF INTEREST

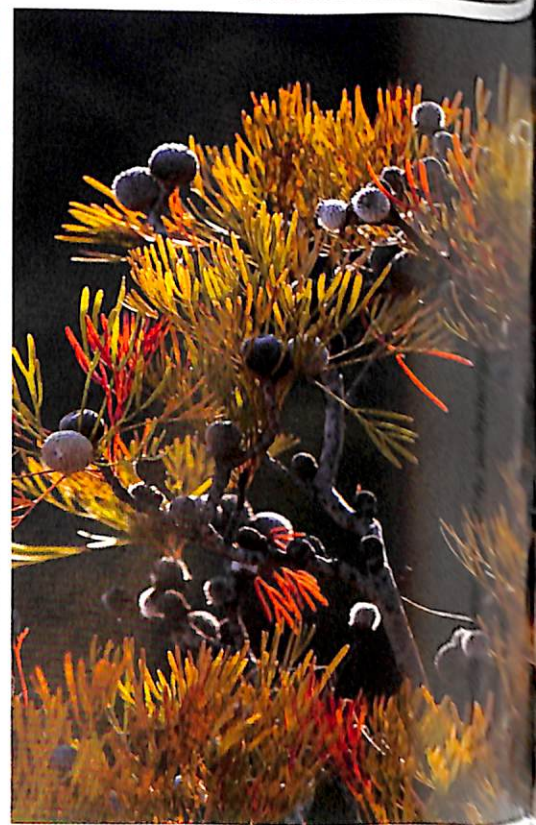
- 1 The Livery Stable (Aboriginal site)
- 2 Dunns Swamp–Ganguddy campsite
- 3 Coorongooba campsite/Capertee Valley
- 4 Newnes Industrial Ruins
- 5 Glow-worm tunnel
- 6 Rocky Creek canyon
- 7 Crawford's Lookout
- 8 Hollow Rock lookout
- 9 Colo Gorge
- 10 Canoe Creek walking route
- 11 Colo Meroo campsite



**Bush ablaze.** In October 2013 fires destroyed parts of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, including areas of Wollemi National Park.



**On the job.** Senior NPWS ranger Neil Stone (above and left) checks a wildlife surveillance camera and counts rock-wallaby scat. Neil runs a survey of brush-tailed rock-wallabies twice a year. Nepean conebrush (right) is endemic to the ranges west of Sydney.







**Hidden away.** Wollemi has proved a safe retreat for an estimated 160 brush-tailed rock-wallabies. This marsupial is under threat from habitat loss and introduced predators.

“The canyons for me are one highlight – we’ve found some absolutely amazing ones.”

keep going, or whether they’ll have to beat a retreat, scrambling back up the ropes and waterfalls down which they came.

The best known of these modern-day explorers is David Noble, an NPWS ranger who, in his spare time, explores the wildest, most inaccessible canyons in Wollemi. In 1994, on such a trip, he made one of the most incredible botanical finds of the century: a 30m-high Wollemi pine, a 150-million-year-old relic of ancient Gondwana known only from fossils, growing in a grove in one secret canyon (AG 80).

A couple of other groves of the pine have since been found in the national park and security cameras and warning signs deep in the bush help to protect them. Now, through a carefully managed cultivation program, Wollemi pine seedlings have been planted all over the world (see “A forest of fossils”, page 67).

“The pines have been a distraction in a way...and yet the pines put the park on the map,” says Andy Macqueen, author of several books on the Wollemi and vice-president of Friends of the Colo, which runs multi-day weeding programs in the park (see *Killing willow*, AG 70). “That’s all a lot of people know of the

park, but it’s full of rare species – plants and animals – and offers great opportunity for conserving them.”

Wollemi holds more than 40 rare plant species, one-third of which are found only in the park, including a red-flowering tea-tree discovered near the Colo River by another adventurer, whose name (by a strange turn of fate) is also Dave Noble.

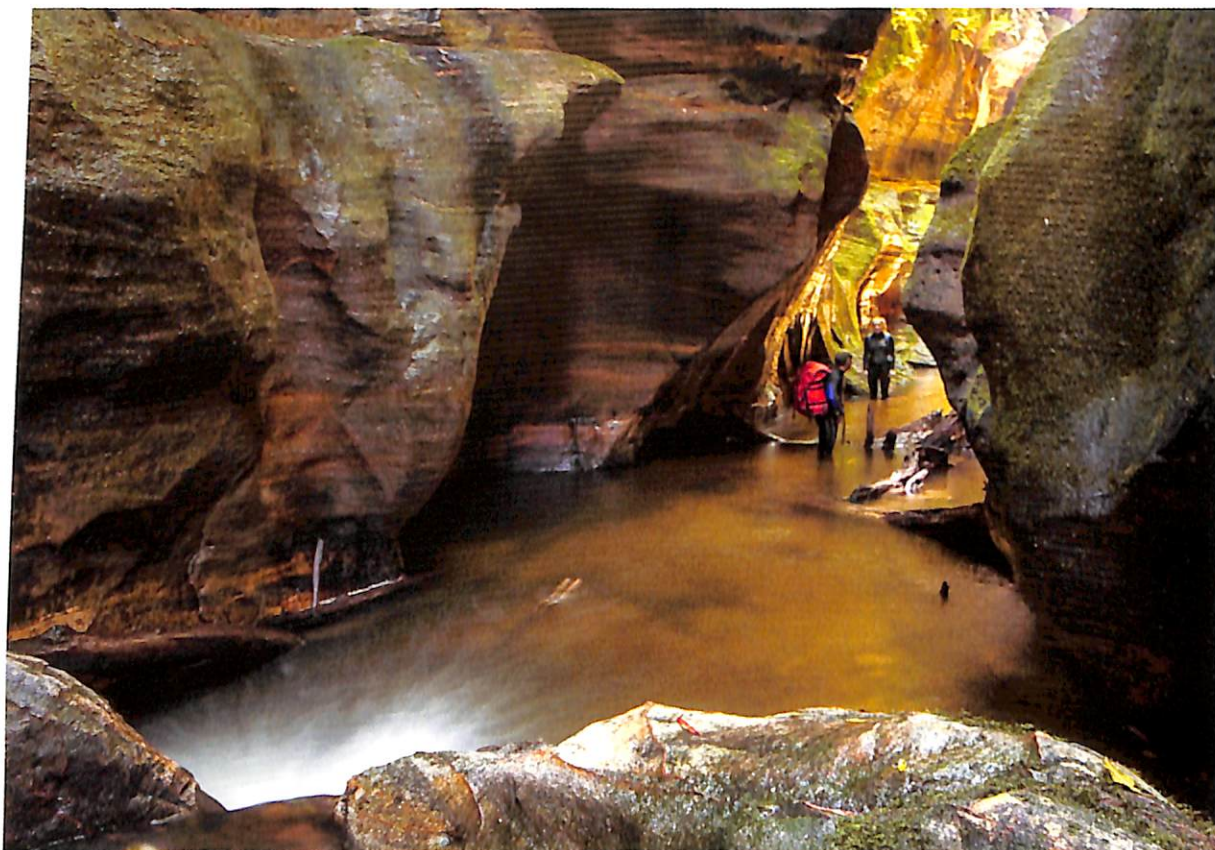
“I’ve found a few rare and unusual plants and quite a few of my bushwalking friends have found interesting plants over the years,” Dave says. “Two days ago we found another art cave. It’s so good to have a big area where you don’t know what’s there... All you need is a good skill set and the ability to route-find.”

Dave has written guidebooks to some of the estimated 300 canyons in Wollemi, but stopped writing them because many Wollemi canyons and bushwalkers follow a code of “show but don’t tell”. They get upset when routes to special places such as the Totem Pole are published in magazines or online.

“The canyons for me are one highlight – we’ve found some absolutely amazing ones,” he says. “One has half-a-dozen tunnels, one after another. Deep slots, and deep committing canyons – those with ▶



**Narrow and deep.** Writer Ken Eastwood, left, and fellow canyoner Lauren Jacobs at Rocky Creek. The route starts with several dimly lit swims and climb-downs, followed by a waterslide.



six or more abseils." Some discoveries have been made by rangers' on fire patrols in helicopters. For example, former ranger Chris Pavich first spied Tweeters Canyon – less than 10m across at its base – from a chopper. "I think it's the narrowest, deepest canyon in the whole Blue Mountains," he says. "It's on the border of three maps so others may have missed it."

Chris says Wollemi offers so many opportunities to be a "true explorer", without a guidebook and not knowing exactly what you'll find. "It's really exciting not knowing what's around the corner... It's so easy and so quick to get away from everyone – there are many, many places where you won't get anyone there throughout the whole year."

He says that the park's size is a great strength. When it was declared in 1979, the area of national park in NSW increased by 25 per cent. "The sandstone has so many nooks and crannies and places for species to find shelter – both plant and animal. There's so much diversity, it's so detailed, so intricate."

In 1994, shaggy-haired ranger Neil Stone discovered populations of the endangered brush-tailed rock-wallaby by helicopter. "Twenty years ago we didn't have any knowledge of wallabies here in this part of Wollemi," he tells me at a rough camp on the Wolgan River. He visits here – a stronghold for the central subspecies – twice a year with volunteers to

count wallaby scats and leave bait for foxes.

An estimated 160 rock-wallabies live here in rock jumbles around vine forests and Port Jackson fig trees, at the base of eroded, 200m-high cliffs. Some of the rock jumbles form underground cities of suitable habitat and the wallabies surface to feed on grasses and dried fig leaves. Neil says one reason brush-tailed rock-wallabies have survived here, even though they are extinct in so many other places, is the size of the wilderness area. "It's got more integrity than the other parks," he says. "It's like the Blue Mountains National Park's bigger, wilder brother."

And it isn't only the rock-wallabies that benefit, he adds. "The guys assessing the Wollemi to become part of the [Greater Blue Mountains] World Heritage Area noted the diversity of eucalypts... It's good for arboreal animals such as possums, yellow-bellied and other gliders. That also makes it the best owl habitat in the Greater Blue Mountains."

**E**VEN IN THIS SANCTUARY, where natural forces are allowed to reign, humanity's tarnish can still be seen. There are old four-wheel-drive tracks, areas where logging occurred and stock were grazed and, around Newnes, the ruins of old shale-oil mines. Tiny private pockets used for grazing have been excised from the park, and, in places, the ▶





## A FOREST OF FOSSILS

**T**HE MAJESTIC WOLLEMI pine, which grows up to 40m high and has unusual pendulous foliage, is one of the world's oldest and rarest types of tree. It is an ancient variety of conifer that hails from the time of the dinosaurs, more than 100 million years ago. At this time, conifers were the most common kind of tree, and were yet to be replaced in dominance by the flowering angiosperms.

Twenty years ago, when canyoner David Noble stumbled upon an unusual species in Wollemi National Park, it was soon recognised to be of a variety known only from fossils and presumed extinct. Today, fewer than 100 adult Wollemi pines remain in the wild, and they are carefully guarded in secret locations deep within the park to protect them.

Although the pine is a hardy plant, it is a challenging tree to cultivate and its seedlings require much care. However, thanks to a successful conservation program coupled with an unprecedented commercialisation effort, Wollemi pines are now distributed as potted plants and adult trees. David Van Berkel, managing director of Wollemi Australia, which propagates and sells the plants, says thousands of the pines are now growing in the gardens of enthusiasts all over the world.

SIGNE CANE



**Lone survivor.**  
The oldest fossil of a Wollemi pine relative has been dated to 200 million years ago.

### FAST FACTS

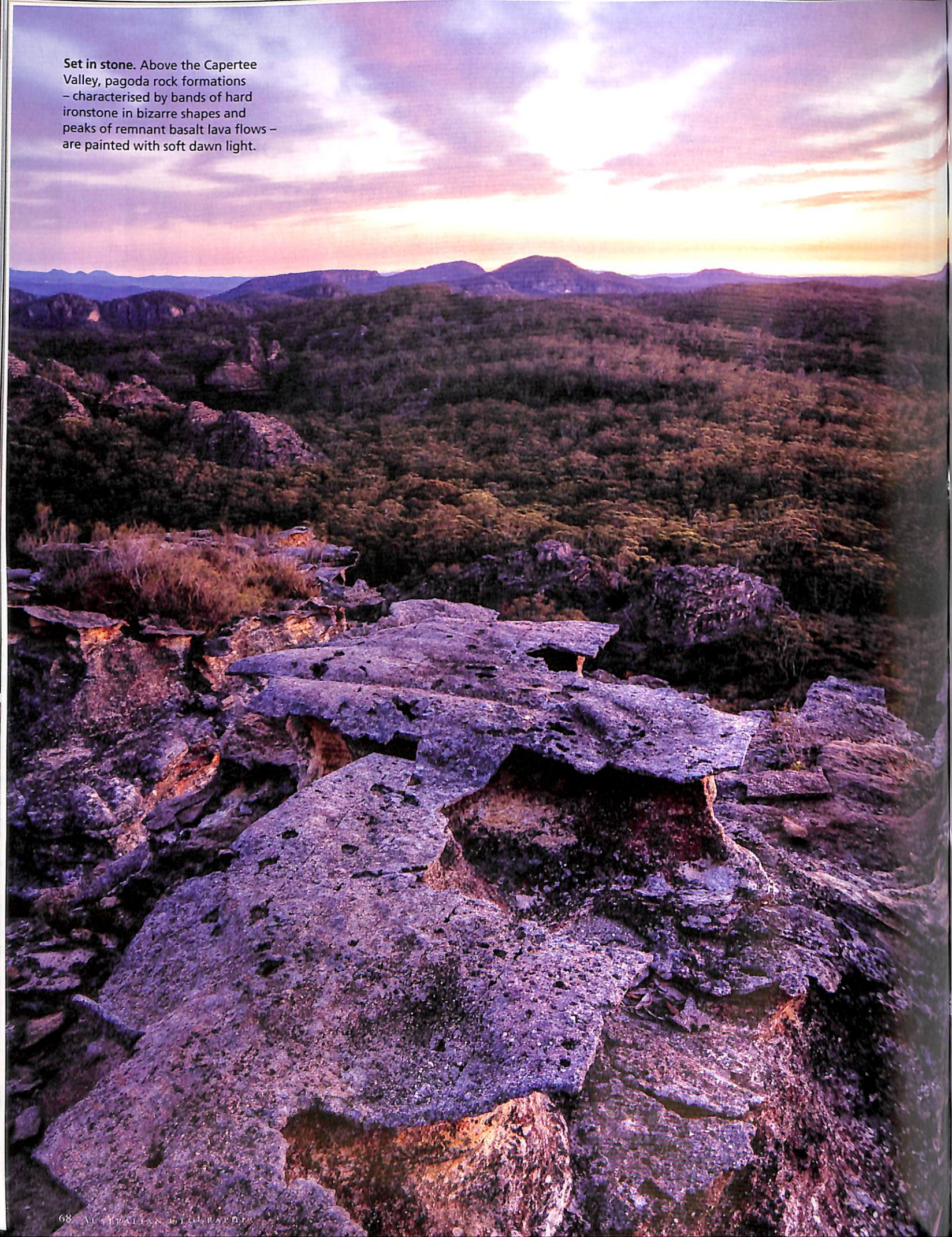
The oldest living Wollemi, 'King Billy' is thought to be more than 1000 years old.

Sotheby's sold the first 292 cultivated plants for **\$1.06m** in 2005.

The Latin name for the tree comes from the park and its discoverer: *Wollemia nobilis*  
To find out more about the Wollemi pine, visit [www.wollemipine.com](http://www.wollemipine.com)



**Set in stone.** Above the Capertee Valley, pagoda rock formations – characterised by bands of hard ironstone in bizarre shapes and peaks of remnant basalt lava flows – are painted with soft dawn light.







**Watching brief.** A parks service helicopter crew circles over Wollemi. Dry lightning ignited eight fires in the park in December. Six were contained but 15,000ha were burnt out.

“It’s a tremendous legacy – an area that is not chopped up into small parcels.”

boundary follows a jagged line excluding the most productive basalt soils. Popular Dunns Swamp is itself a dam, built in the 1920s to provide water for concrete works at Kandos.

In the heart of the park, occasional ration and ammunition tins, unexploded ordnance and other items are evidence of the Vietnam War exercises that former army captain Bob O’Neill and an estimated 800 others carried out here in 1966.

“There still is a fair-sized airstrip in the park, which was used as the ‘enemy base’. We first had to reconnoitre it, estimate the number of people there, then work out approach routes and our attack,” Bob says. “It was very hard physically, because it was late February. It was hot and we were doing a lot of climbing in and out of gorges and canyons. To get water resupplied, guys often had to go down into gorges 700ft [213m] deep.”

Bob says the training wasn’t particularly practical as the Wollemi bears little resemblance to the jungle. “It was hot and dry and vertical,” he says. “We enjoyed being out there... [But] it helped us get fit rather than teaching any of the tactics we were to use in Vietnam.”

Just a few years after those exercises took place, an 18-year-old Haydn Washington and four mates set out on a five-day hike down the Capertee River to the Colo. “There’s this amazing wild river that no-one’s been down,” he was told. Within a month,

he was honorary secretary of the Colo Committee, campaigning for the protection of the area from the threats of mining, power stations, railways, logging, grazing and development. In 1979 he took then-premier Neville Wran for an overnight hike to secure his support. “When we started, no-one had even heard of the Colo River,” he says. “No-one knew it was the largest wilderness in NSW.”

Forty years later, still a keen solo walker in Wollemi, Haydn considers his role in establishing the national park the most worthwhile thing he’s ever done. The park is not only protected underground, to prevent mining, but is now World Heritage listed and largely a declared wilderness area so future state governments will find it harder to interfere. “It’s a tremendous legacy...being an area that is not chopped up into small parcels,” he says.

Haydn emphasises his spiritual connection to the place, which began at dawn four decades ago when, deep within a labyrinth of canyons and gorges, he came face to face with a lyrebird. “It made me realise that this bird – the greatest mimic in the world – had no ‘human voice’ to plead its case; that its home, the wonderful rugged wilderness of the Colo, should be protected,” he says.

And so now Wollemi National Park – a vast wild place, impenetrable to most, adored by an adventurous few, protects the sacred treasures of its catacombs, hopefully forever. **AG**