



3: Refuge Rock Walk

Cherrybrook return

- Route:* Trevors Lane, off Purchase Road, Cherrybrook, to Refuge Rock and return
- Distance:* 2 km return
- Grade:* Easy. Suitable for families and the elderly
- Time:* Up to 2 hours
- Transport:* Single car
- Track status:* Fire trail, a little rough in parts; gentle slope

Synopsis

This is a short walk leading to an extensive sandstone outcrop, which overlooks Pyes Creek and Tunks Ridge. The area through which it passes features tracks made both to service the electrical power lines and their associated towers and to provide access for fire fighting vehicles. The destination of the walk and a good place for a picnic is Refuge Rock, an exposed sandstone

outcrop of several hectares largely free of vegetation. This natural feature came to be used as a safe haven by firefighters when carrying out controlled burns—hence its name. A spur track to the rock from an electricity authority trail originally at the end of Purchase Road was formed in the 1970s by the then Outer Sydney Bush Fire Prevention Association to enable firefighters to reach the rock quickly in an emergency.

REFUGE ROCK WALK GUIDE

The track begins at the right-hand side of the turning circle, beside houses at the end of Trevor Lane. Pyes Creek valley is on the other side of the road.

On this walk keep a careful note of which tracks you take as there are a number which leave the main track and some loop around, so a little care will prevent you becoming disorientated.

Go through the fire trail gates after walking about 30 m alongside housing on the right. Turn left after another 30 m and you will enter typical Sydney Woodland.

There are Broad-leaved Scribbly Gums *Eucalyptus haemastoma*, Red Bloodwood *Corymbia gummifera* and Old Man Banksia *Banksia serrata*.

To the Rock



Pat Flike

Banksia spinulosa



Pat Flike

The unusual Whipstick Ash *Eucalyptus multicaulis* although not common, is present at Refuge Rock.

This section of the Refuge Rock area represents less than a quarter of the extensive open rock surface of a headland with views over the upper Berowra Creek valley and the valleys of several tributaries.

Among the understorey of shrubs are other *Banksia*: Hairpin Banksia *Banksia spinulosa* and *Banksia oblongifolia*. With the rich diversity of shrubs and small plants mixed together there will always be something in flower, and between December and April at least one *Banksia* will be in flower. Look for signs of bushfires on tree trunks, or animal activity on the bark. The small rough-barked shrub with tough green opposing leaves is Dwarf Apple *Angophora hispida*: it has large white 'gum' blossoms in summer, attracting many different kinds of insects that feed on the nectar in the centre of the flower.

After about 100 m, fork left under the power lines where the track divides. Here is a dense stand of Conesticks *Petrophile pulchella*. An occasional Silver Banksia *Banksia marginata* stands among them.

As you pass under the high electricity wires, other smaller tracks go off to the right and left. Keep straight on.

As the track starts to descend, a new kind of eucalypt appears, Sydney Peppermint *Eucalyptus piperita*, and also Sydney Red Gum *Angophora costata* with its red-tan smooth bark. Some of the trees have holes in them, providing nesting sites for crimson rosellas. The scaly-barked tree Red Bloodwood *Corymbia gummifera* continues to grow down the slope. You can also see the popular native garden shrub, Christmas Bush *Ceratopetalum gummiferum*, as well as Flannel Flowers *Actinotus helianthi*.

Outcrops of Hawkesbury Sandstone, the main rock type in the Sydney Basin, signal what is soon to be encountered on a large scale. The narrow leaf shrub Carrot Tops *Platysace linearifolia* makes a delicate display when it is in flower. The diverse array of plants derives its name from the rock: the Hawkesbury Sandstone flora.

When the track forks, keep to the right both times. The track slopes downward again for a while.

Refuge Rock

The arrival at Refuge Rock is understated. The track simply blends into an undistinguished sandstone rock platform featuring isolated pockets of shrubs and moss, usually dark brown but bright green after rain. Clumps of mallee eucalypts and Heath-leaved Banksia grow out on the edge of the platform. The first reaction is: 'Is this all it is?'

Refuge Rock is a series of exposed sandstone surfaces of generally low profile, with variable textures from fairly smooth to pitted. Investigation reveals its extension for hundreds of metres in different directions. It offers numerous good spots to pause for a picnic.



Pat Flike

General Macarthur made his mark as well

Observant walkers may be puzzled by numerous markings in the rock surface showing a central pit with teardrop-shaped “engravings” radiating out from the centre. There are more than 60 of these sets of markings, many now overgrown by moss mats and the mallee eucalypts.

Closer examination may reveal fragments of the World War II mortar shells that caused them. Australian Army historians confirm that in the desperate years of the early 1940s, Australian militiamen were trained in the area under the command of General Macarthur following his escape from the Philippines. Invasion was a possibility and Australia was not well prepared. Emergency training took place wherever suitable locations could be found. The site now known as Refuge Rock was used as a target area for troops located nearby in what is now Cherrybrook. Heavier field artillery was also fired northwards into the valley from Thornleigh. Similar hurried training took place at a rifle range then located at Pennant Hills overlooking the Lane Cove River Valley.

Natural arch

At its south-eastern extremity the rock is split by a number of 500 mm wide parallel chasms before a 15 m sharp drop. The main valley separates the rock from Billarga Road, Westleigh, on the distant opposite ridge, where housing can be seen. One of the narrow outer ridges in the rock contains a natural sandstone arch known locally as “London Bridge”.

The eastern side of the Refuge Rock platforms drops away in a rough 45° slope meeting the trackless bush. Westleigh seems to be close at this point. A deep narrow section of the main valley lies in between, out of sight below the tree canopy. Also hidden in the bush below is the route of the Great North Walk traversed in Walk 4: *Elouera*, in the vicinity of the high cliff line at the junction of the side track to Elouera Road.

The northern expanse of the rock looks over the location of the Dipping Hole towards Silver Crescent, Westleigh. To the northwest is the Pyes Creek Valley. There are beautiful expansive bush views of Pyes Creek, which is to the northwest, and which joins Berowra Creek, flowing from the right. From this creek junction Berowra Creek continues in a north-easterly direction.

These bushland valleys are home to such threatened species of wildlife as the Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua*. The mallees mentioned above are called Whipstick Ash *Eucalyptus multicaulis*, and they are found along the edge of the rock platform. They are uncommon in the Park, and in the Sydney region generally.

Side-track exploration

Return to the start, being careful to take the right fork after passing under the power lines. As this is a short walk, you can spend time exploring the side tracks, nearly all of which end up at towers for the overhead power lines.



George Foster

Mortar shell impacts made during frenzied Australian Militia training during the World War II. Refuge Rock then served as a target area.



George Foster

A natural stone arch known locally as “London Bridge” is hidden below the eroded section of these unusual block formations on the eastern side of the area. The large parallel-sided features look much like the roofs of railway carriages waiting in a marshalling yard.



Paul Fredrickson

The eastern side of the formation on the left forms a vertical rock face varying in height from 1m to more than 5m at the site of the arch.