

5: Blue Gum Walk

Joos Mountain circuit

Route:

Rosemead Road return

Distance: 4.3 km

Grade:

Moderate to hard

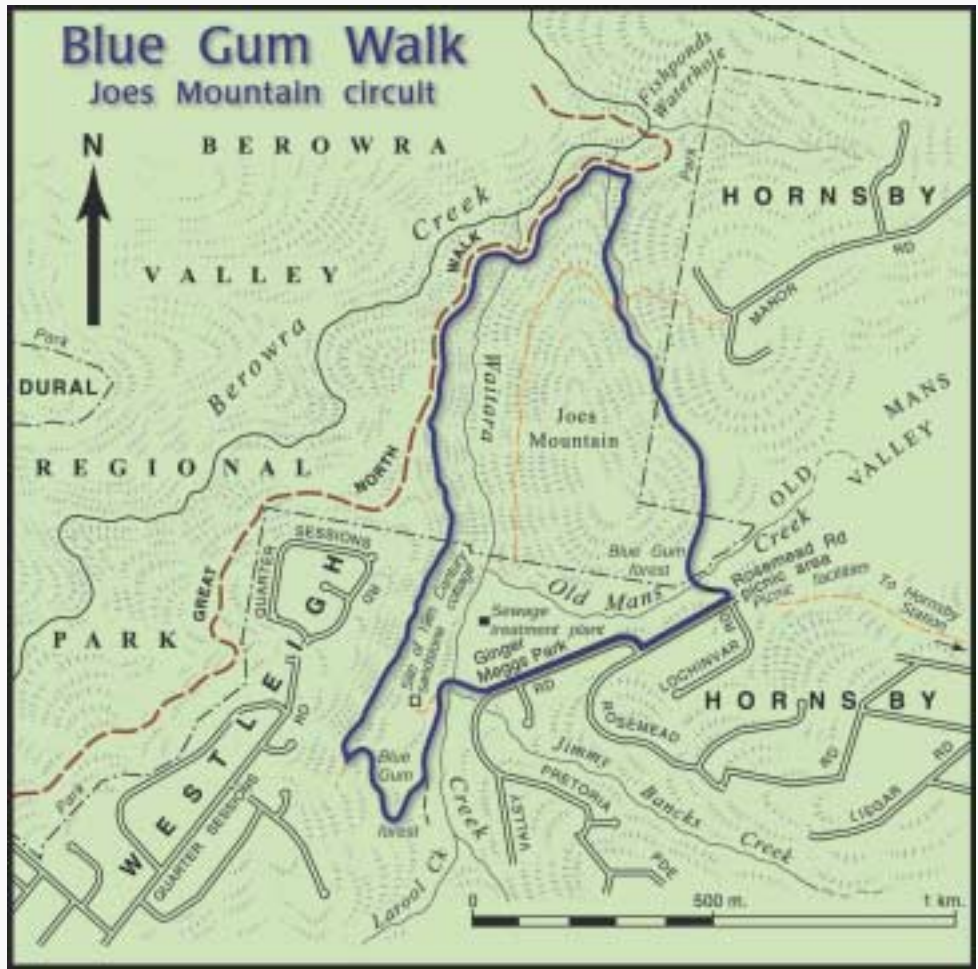
Time: 2.5 hrs.

Transport:

Single car, or train and 20-minute walk from Hornsby station following marker posts

Track status:

Official track with fire trail sections



Synopsis

This is a two-hour circuit around Joes Mountain, in three parts. The first part uses the trackhead to the Great North Walk, the second the Great North Walk itself, and the third a former sawyers' track. The walk traverses the major land gift by Dr Joyce Vickery that was instrumental in the creation of the original Park. It takes its name from the what is one of the largest remaining Blue Gum Forests in the Sydney region.

BLUE GUM WALK GUIDE

Rosemead Road

The Walk officially begins in the small park at the bottom end of Rosemead Road, Hornsby, at a boulder bearing a commemorative plaque stating that the walk was opened by the then Mayor of Hornsby, Councillor Chris Meany, on 31 October 1993. Beside the boulder a National Parks and Wildlife Service signboard marks the Great North Walk, which the Blue Gum Walk partially overlaps, with destinations shown including that to Newcastle, 220 km. Most people arriving by car normally set off from the green fire trail gate at the end of Rosemead Road, a few metres away.

Old Mans Valley has what is reputed to be of the best stands of Sydney Blue Gums *Eucalyptus saligna* in the Sydney metropolitan region. The stand is a glen forest unlike the Blue Gum High Forest on the ridge tops. The origin of the soil is the reason these trees have flourished here. The soil derives from another significant, though less obvious characteristic of the valley as the site of an ancient diatreme. (For an account of volcanic activity here, see Chapter 3: Landscape.) Just out of sight to the north of the park lies the former bluemetall quarry that also exploited this resource.

At the beginning of the fire trail some black rock in the roadway — unless placed there as part of the road bed — tends to confirm the presence of volcanic activity. After about 100 m Old Mans Creek is crossed by means of several concrete stepping stones. Normally a trickle, this creek cannot be safely negotiated after heavy rains.

On the other side the fire trail rises sharply. The Eastern Whipbird *Psophodes olivaceus* usually makes its presence felt. Other plentiful birdlife includes the usual: magpies, currawongs, cockatoos, galahs, rosellas, wrens, willy wagtails, whipbirds and others. Residents report seeing lyrebirds here. All signs of volcanic rock have disappeared well before you reach the creek.

Joels Mountain

Near the top of the hill the fire trail and Blue Gum Track swings to the left. (The side path to the right, or eastwards, leads to the former CSR bluemetall quarry boundary fence.) At the top the track passes between the summits of uninhabited Joels Mountain to the left, and Hornsby Heights, where glimpses of rooftops reveal urbanisation not far away.

At the top of the rise a flat cleared section marks the site of a shack used in the filming of a minor bush-horror drama, *Spook*, a film made by Tesha Media Productions, with the cooperation of the Elouera Bushland Trust, in 1988.

A hundred metres on, to the left, is a small stand of Turpentine trees *Syncarpia glomulifera*, many about 200 mm thick. These are recognisable by their shaggy stringy bark in 25 mm wide strips, and their dark green oval-shaped pointed leaves with lighter backs about 75 mm long. Turpentine was widely used for piles for harbour wharves. Grass trees, too, are evident. Sydney Red Gums *Angophora costata* begin to appear, with a landmark specimen over 1 m in diameter occurring halfway down the slope on the right-hand edge of the fire trail.

So far the fire trail has been broad, almost a country road, with tumbled truck-sized sandstone boulders dotting the slopes to either side. Varieties of wattle proliferate.

When the track divides, leave the fire trail (which swings to the left for a kilometre or so before coming to a dead end not far from the West Hornsby sewage treatment plant) and keep straight on.

After 50 m, ignore the sign on the right marking an alternative route to Galston Gorge, developed in 1995 by the Hornsby Shire Council to avoid the hazard of the rifle range on the other side of Fishponds. Carry straight on as this diversion is not relevant for the present walk.



Lyndel Wilson

Typical stand of Blue Gums *Eucalyptus saligna* showing the signature black "stocking", blue-grey mottled bark and clear understorey.



Jeremy Steale

Grass trees *Xanthorrhoea arborea* and Sydney Red Gum *Angophora costata* are often seen together.



Val Williams

Dense stand of young Turpentines *Syncarpia glomulifera*

Old Mans Valley

This valley was logged by the Higgins family for over 100 years for its Sydney Blue Gum *Eucalyptus saligna*, Blackbutt *Eucalyptus pilularis* and possibly Red Cedar *Toona ciliata*. The Sydney Blue Gums in the park at the end of Rosemead Road are regrowth trees. The name of the valley may derive from the large male Eastern Grey Kangaroos *Macropus giganteus* seen by early settlers in the valley or be a reference to 'Old Man Higgins'.

Joes Mountain

Much of the land in this vicinity, including Joes Mountain, was a 100-acre gift from Joyce Vickery in 1967 to the Elouera Trust for inclusion in the then Elouera Bushland Natural Park, to secure access to the Park and to protect the area in perpetuity. Joes Mountain is almost encircled by creeks and is relatively unaffected by development. Fire trails have been constructed around most of the mountain's perimeter as a safety precaution.

Joes Mountain was preserved from fire for over 30 years from 1957, until November 1990 when a bushfire swept over it and down to the fire trail close to Old Mans Creek. As a consequence it has a different vegetation structure from that of surrounding areas.

How did Joes Mountain get its name?

According to the book *Pioneers of the Hornsby Shire*, Thomas Edward Higgins (1800-65) was the first permanent resident in Hornsby Valley, also known as Old Mans Valley. The valley was settled in 1825.

It is not known whom Joes Mountain is named after, but if it were a member of the Higgins family the only likely contender would seem to be Joseph, born about 1890, who worked in timber in Old Mans Valley. He was the son of Edward, Ned (Boomy), Higgins, sixth child of Thomas Higgins III. A photo on p. 202 of *Pioneers* shows Joe Higgins in a saw pit, with father at the saw and mother and brother at its edge. Further information is given in Doris A. Davidson, *A Tree from Old Mans Valley* (private publication, 1977), p. 47.

The track, now a path, with single-file walking for most of the rest of the way, soon crosses over rocks with small chiselled steps. The valley drops away to the right, in which a creek, like the track itself, heads towards Fishponds.

Fishponds to Waitara Creek

The Rosemead Trackhead joins the Great North Walk proper at Fishponds Waterhole on Berowra Creek. First-timers will find it worth their while continuing for the 200 m down to the stream, crossing it by stepping stones, to take a close look at the waterhole, once favoured for swimming and still used by local youths for this purpose, perhaps inadvisedly given the questionable degree of purity of the water. (

According to one of the signs at the junction, Newcastle is 210 km away and Galston Gorge 5.8. Old carvings scored into the rocks, perhaps by the makers of the track years ago, give arrows to P.H. (Pennant Hills), G (Galston and H (Hornsby). Take the left (westwards) fork to PH, and follow Berowra Creek.

A Blue Gum Walk sign shows that 2.8 km of the walk remain. After about 20 m a second wooden footbridge crosses the usually dry creek bed that you followed earlier. At the weekend, shots from the nearby rifle range can be heard.

Soon the track narrows, hemmed in with ferns and foliage, and you make your way over and among tumbled rocks and boulders, the creek bubbling away on the right. The most scenic part of the walk begins at a sandstone sculpted eroded defile, where you wend your way below its overhang. Along this stretch dominated by rocks, the creek and the Sydney Red Gums, Berowra and Waitara Creeks diverge below a flat rock expanse. A few hundred metres later, cross Waitara Creek at the natural swirling 'washing tubs' in the rocks and at once climb upwards.

To the Blue Gum turn-off

At the top amidst the taller gums, *Banksia* and Fannel Flowers *Actinotus helianthi* dominate in a sandy, stony flat terrain. The path then rises further, at one point assisted by a flight of 24 stone steps. On the summit of the ridge separating the valleys of Berowra and Waitara Creeks the track is strewn with needles below a stand of casuarinas.

About 1 km from Fishponds, the paths divide at a broad rock outcrop. The Blue Gum Walk heads left, due south, away from the Great North Walk, through a sheoak grove. The back of Joes Mountain looms up across Waitara Creek valley on the left, with the Berowra Creek valley on the right.

Sawyers' route

The Blue Gum Track now follows an old sawyers' route used in the 1800s by the Higgins family to transport timber out of the valley.

Soon the ridge is dominated by tall trees, mainly casuarinas with their rough bark and leaves emulating pine needles, as well as Turpentines *Syncarpia glomulifera* and the occasional Blackbutt *Eucalyptus pilularis* and Sydney Red Gum *Angophora costata*. As the

track begins to descend, large Sydney Blue Gums *Eucalyptus saligna* begin to join the other timbers. High overhead on the right, houses in Westleigh reveal the closeness of suburbia. Below this Westleigh ridge, as the frequency of Sydney Blue Gums increases and with them an increasing density of bracken and ferns, matching rooftops across the valley in Valley Road, Hornsby can be spotted, as further evidence that this semblance of limitless bush is illusory.

Fire trail back to Valley Road

After a considerable distance through this upper shady forest, a flight of timber formed steps down brings you onto a fire trail. At once the route descends steeply.

Leave the wilderness and rejoin suburbia at a tubular gate and metal stile. (After a short distance a diversion to the left of about 50 m leads to the site of a sandstone cottage.) Cross over Waitara Creek by means of the concrete ford and stepping stones, and look out for the ducks. Follow the final few metres of the walk alongside Jimmy Bancks Creek to rejoin the "real world" of Valley Road, at Ginger Meggs Park.

Ginger Meggs Park

Jimmy Bancks (1889-1952), creator of the cartoon character Ginger Meggs, arrived in the Hornsby area in 1892 when his family moved there to live in a railway cottage between the present Main and North Shore rail lines, his father being a railwayman. He was to stay for about twenty years. Bancks' childhood range included Old Mans Valley, and Fishponds on Berowra Creek. Fruit-raiding exploits of the comic strip characters are believed to have been based on the Higgins family orchards in Old Mans Valley. The park was officially named Ginger Meggs Park on 26 July 1997.

Rosemead Road

Ginger Meggs Park is about 400 m from the Rosemead Road starting point, which can be reached by following the road leftwards.

The rifle range

Downstream from Fishponds the Park is intersected by Hornsby rifle range and its safety zone. Although the butts are some 160 m above the creek, walkers are advised to take the clearly marked by-pass route via Manor Road when firing is taking place. [For details, see the information box in Walk 7, *Heritage Bridges*.

Sandstone ruin



Remnants of an earlier dwelling.

George Foster



Ginger Meggs bronze memorial in Hornsby Library

Jeremy Steele



Courtesy, Hadley, Somerville

Ginge wasn't the only one keen on Fishponds