

Ghost Town

New South Wales

I've joined Conservation Volunteers Australia in Sydney. After my volunteer induction, I'm assigned to a project at a deserted silver mining ghost town in the Blue Mountains Wilderness World Heritage Area. CVA books me a train ticket to travel west from Sydney – it's a four hour journey over the Blue Mountains to arrive at the Bathurst railway station, built in 1876 after the line was built through the mountains. After a short walk from the station through the historic streets of Bathurst, the oldest inland city in Australia, I arrive at CVA's volunteer house – it's a beautiful historic building near the park.

I meet the other 6 volunteers and our Team Leader, Wayne, who is getting ready for the long drive into the National. The park is part of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area and is one million hectares of remote wilderness, pristine rivers, deep sandstone gorges and an outstanding biodiversity of plants and animals. The area is closed to vehicles except for the Colong Stock route to our destination at Yerranderie, 160 km south east of Bathurst.

After loading our packs, enough food for a week, water, emergency equipment and tools into the trailer, we set off at 8am on Monday morning. The first half of the trip is on deserted bitumen roads through millions of hectares of radiata pine forest and sheep farms. It takes about an hour and a half, including a stop at Oberon for hot pies!

The second half of the trip is on winding dirt roads through the National Park. The whole trip takes about 4 hours after stopping to look at the amazing gorges and water falls. We also saw many kangaroos, wallabies, and a wombat along the road. The people in the front seat also had a glimpse of a lyrebird as it crossed the track. Wayne explains that it's called a lyrebird because of the male bird's ornate tail, with special curved feathers that, in display, assume the shape of a lyre. We also saw huge black thunderstorm clouds

to the south, which come up from the Southern Alps bringing regular snow falls to the Blue Mountains in winter.



A view of the old silver mines at Yerranderie

We arrive at Yerranderie for lunch and Wayne introduces us to the caretaker, Martin, who lives in an old silver miner's cottage in the main street of the ghost town. In the main street there were about 10 kangaroos waiting for us – plenty of time to take lots of photographs. Martin gives us a talk about the town and takes us to our accommodation in the old post office, now converted into a bunk lodge. There's a big wood heater in the lounge, and the lights are run from solar panels. The kitchen has gas powered fridges and stoves and an open fire outside for barbecues. We have to be careful not to use too much water, as most is rain water collected from the roof.

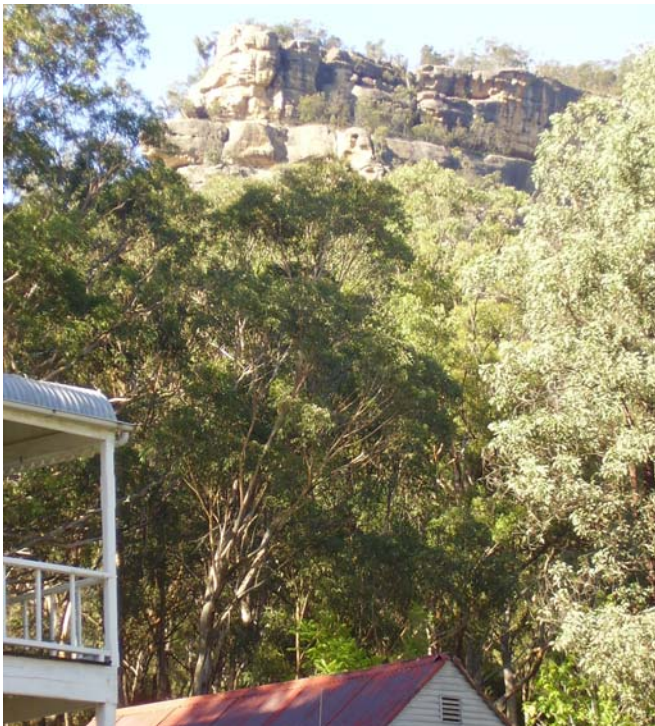


One of the historic buildings

GeoVisions

Martin explains the projects he would like us to do during the week. We will be removing berberis bush, originally imported by the Afghan traders, from the creek banks. We will also be poisoning prickly pear cactus, which is spreading along the ridge tops and getting caught in kangaroos' feet, and restoring the walking track to Yerranderie peak.

On the second day we wake early and walk the track rebuilt by previous CVA teams up to the peak to watch the sunrise. As the sun comes up over the Burratorang valley, we can see the mist rising from the distant lake which is the main water supply for Sydney. From the peak we can see wilderness in every direction - the mountains seem to go on for ever! The bush comes alive as the birds begin calling all around us. We look up to see a group of wedge-tailed eagles. These are Australia's largest living bird of prey and one of the largest eagles in the world, with a wingspan of over 2 metres. After looking carefully for a few minutes, we count 10 eagles soaring on the thermal currents.



Yerranderie peak rises above the township

When we get back to the Lodge, we have hot pancakes for breakfast, pack our sandwiches for lunch, and travel out to the ridge to remove some prickly pear bushes. Before we start, Wayne gives us a comprehensive safety briefing. He teaches us the correct way to handle and apply the low toxicity herbicide, and makes sure we are all wearing the correct protective clothing - gloves, hats, long sleeves and trousers, sturdy boots and eye protection (safety glasses supplied by CVA).

The next day, we remove berberis from bushland around the old town area. The berberis is a small tree with small, dense thorns along the stems, and spreads by seeds washed down the creeks. We have to stop it spreading into the National Park, where it will be almost impossible to control without harming the native plants.

At night we all help with the cooking, and washing up, and enjoy staying in such a unique location. Wayne arranges tours of the museum, Aboriginal art gallery and the miners huts in the town after we finish each afternoon, and that really helps me to understand and imagine what life was like back in the mining days over 100 years ago.



Checking out some of the old mining equipment

I never expected to stay in a ghost town in the wilderness, and my memories will last a lifetime. Next week, we're going to a completely different project near Bathurst - planting bursaria spinosa (native blackthorn), which is the habitat for the threatened purple copperwing butterfly. Another new experience to look forward to!

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