

21 Trailside points of interest for the Gulugu Loop Walk

Gulugu - Gathang language - 'into the rainforest' (Pronounced Goo-loo-goo, emphasis on first syllable)

Gulugu Loop is an easy 800-metre circuit walk along a forested section of Common Creek. There are 21 numbered points along the route with information for each set out below. Along the way you will be introduced to words in the Gathang language as spoken here by the Gringai people. The walk is classed as Grade 2 (Australian Walking Track Grading System).

Directions: Coming from Dungog town follow Common Road to Sheltons Bus Depot, then turn left onto the gravel road; proceed 1.1 km and park in The Ruins parking area (on the right). Then walk 100 metres further on to the entry sign where the Loop starts and ends at the roadside. Proceed in a clockwise direction around the Loop.

1. *Gathay bali gulugu* - Let us come together to the brush (rainforest)

Welcome to the Gulugu Loop, a half-hour relatively easy circuit walk that takes you through a streamside environment little disturbed since European settlement.

Twenty-one information points along the route describe significant natural features, with an emphasis on Indigenous culture and values. You are walking in Gringai country.

There are creek crossings along the way, and the track may be slippery after rain. Be alert! There's plenty to see, to hear, to smell, to feel - even perhaps to taste....

2. *yabang* - path, road, track of a foot

You are taking a 'clockwise' path around the Loop. There are marker pegs with the paperbark tree logo to guide you all the way.

The trees right here - and further along - are prickly paperbarks (*Melaleuca styphelioides*), identifiable by the spiky leaves. Scientific names have two parts - first a 'group name' and then a name for an individual species within the group. (These names are typically derived from Greek and Latin.) Then there is a common name used locally. And you may also learn the name, in the Gathang language, that the Gringai people would use.

3. *duliyn* - brush myrtle tree

These two tall gums are of a rare kind listed as a threatened species. They are called slaty red gum (*Eucalyptus glaucina*). Actually they are quite widespread on the Common, noticeable particularly as young seedlings due to their roundish juvenile leaves of blue-grey colour. Scrunch up a young leaf and smell the eucalyptus oil....

The smaller 'understorey' trees here are grey myrtle (*Backhousia myrtifolia*). The myrtle is a slow-growing tree creating a shady canopy along many sections of Common Creek. The leaves make a pleasant herbal tea, and can add flavour to a soup, stew or curry!

4. *girripun* - spotted gum *djariibiyn* - sandpaper fig

The two eucalypts here are spotted gums (*Corymbia maculata*), a widespread species on the Common. The timber is excellent for flooring and decking, and the tree is recommended for commercial farm forestry plantations.

25 metres further on is a track on the left down to the creek. Here in the creek bed there is a sandpaper fig (*Ficus coronata*). Feel the leaves of this tree. Silica deposits in the leaves enabled their use for smoothing the chipped wood of a coolamon, or sharpening the wooden tip of a spear.

Straight sections of branches can be used as fire generation sticks; and the purplish ripe fruit is pleasant to eat.

5. *dhurrung* - mopoke

Both the smallest and largest owls in Australia are present on the Dungog Common. A powerful owl (*Ninox strenua*) uses this paperbark tree as an occasional roosting place. An adult bird is about 60cm in length. Brush-tailed possums would be its principal prey here. The closely related boobook owl or mopoke (*Ninox boobook*) is in this habitat also. Its length is around 30 cm and it feeds on insects and small mammals including marsupial mice. Walking the Gulugu Loop at night with a spotlight is the best way to locate these nocturnal animals. Owls are easily identified by their distinctive calls.

6. *ngurra* - camp

In the early 1830s it was recorded by anthropologist Dr E. McKinlay that the number of Aboriginal people in the Williams valley was 'about 250' with the population already dwindling. First-hand accounts by settlers at this time convey only very limited information about Indigenous life and culture in this valley. It appears the Gringai people of this locality lived in small communities or 'ngurras', and built family shelters using locally available materials.

Perhaps a ngurra can be imagined here on the level ground above the creek, stepping 250 years back in time... or thousands of years...?

7. *wira* - crayfish

Tributary streams of the Williams (*Dhuribang*) River are home to the spiny crayfish (*Euastacus spinifer*), a freshwater relative of the common yabby (but much larger) and of particularly fearsome appearance when 'cornered'. The soft soils here along Common Creek enable the crayfish to dig burrows down to water when the creek dries up. They are 'bush tucker', but rarely seen.

Streamside vegetation here provides habitat for at least three species of frogs. The eastern water dragon also favours this environment.

8. *gandjiwang* - fruit bat/flying fox

Nature is an enormously complex, interacting web - long recognised and deeply respected in Indigenous culture. Here a strangling fig tree (*Ficus* sp.) is, over a timespan of many decades, growing at the eventual cost of the life of the tree around which its latticed trunk is developing. A bird or fruit bat has deposited fig seeds on an upper part of the paperbark trunk. The seed sprouts, and feeder roots head downwards, dividing and rejoining along their way to the soil. As they thicken, the fig tree foliage spreads above, while roots spread in the soil. Slowly the host tree is 'strangled', starved of nutrients. Tiny wasps enter the fig fruits to lay their eggs, pollinating the minute fig flowers as they do so.

9. *girrga-baa* - honey place

These large trees are a rainforest species - hard quandong (*Elaeocarpus obovatus*). It blossoms in spring, carrying thousands of small creamy-white bell-shaped flowers that attract many kinds of insects including native bees.

Australia's native stingless bees are important pollinators, a key element in maintaining the health of the Common's diverse plant life. The hives of these tiny bees produce a honey called 'sugarbag'. An intimate local knowledge and sharp observation enabled Indigenous people on this country to locate the hives and harvest the richly flavoured honey.

10. *bakan* - stone or rock

Rocks within rock. This bedrock is called puddingstone, or conglomerate. It is formed when fragments of ancient rock types from different locations are transported by water currents, rolling

until they are eroded into smooth rounded shapes. Where these stones are eventually deposited a slurry of fine sand and silica forms a cement around them, which in time hardens into puddingstone rock. Like currants in a fruit cake....

Other parts of Common Creek have a very hard form of sandstone in the streambed. For Aboriginal people an understanding of different rock types was critical for choice of stone for spear-heads, stone axes and cutting tools, and surfaces suitable for seed-grinding and shaping one stone against another.

11. *bilbuuribith* - paperbark tree

For the Gringai the *Melaleuca* bark served as a kind of cloth. It could be shaped into a bowl or coolamon, using beeswax as a glue. There are records of Aboriginal people using sheets of paperbark to wrap a body for burial. Fish wrapped in paperbark can be steamed under hot coals. It can be used in sheets to make a waterproof roof for a shelter, or laid in layers on the ground as soft bedding. These trees are about as big as the species is known to grow.

How old are these paperbarks? 200 years? Older?

12. *djuri* - grey shrike-thrush

Here the rainforest vegetation that grows alongside the creek meets the hill forest of open eucalypts and grassland. For birdwatchers this meeting of two ecosystems provides a rich area for sightings of birds from both territories. Stop for a few quiet minutes here and listen to the diversity of bird calls. (Early morning is the best time.) Birds regularly sighted here include the satin bower bird, the grey shrike thrush, Lewin's honeyeater and the white-browed scrub-wren.

13. *wambay* - wild yam

This low vegetation right beside the track looks a jumble of greenery - but the more you look the more different things there are to be found. Indigenous gatherers identify a plant, and its usefulness, from a single leaf - and there are perhaps twenty different flowering plants and ferns in this small patch.

A university-educated botanist is trained to rely on the structure of flowers and the form of fruits to 'key out' one species from another. Indigenous gatherers rely on patterns of plant structure, shape, colour, smell, movement in the wind - just 'the look' - and that is enough for identification.

14. *burangirrbang* - lilly pilly

Two noteworthy trees are alongside the track here - this one is a lilly pilly (*Syzygium sp.*, with edible fruits). Lilly pilly has been developed as a horticultural plant popular in home gardens and 'bush tucker' parks. There are recipes online for lilly pilly jams and chutneys....

25 metres further on you will pass right beside a big stringybark eucalypt. The dry underbark of stringybarks makes a useful tinder for generating fire traditionally through friction methods.

15. *durung* - grass

Up the slope here is open eucalypt forest with many kinds of native grasses (and a few weed species...) as a ground-cover beneath. The Gringai followed practices that used slow-burning fires to maintain areas of grass cover rather than allowing shrubs and seedlings to grow - thus ensuring plentiful food for wallabies and kangaroos, and also the development of grass seeds that could be harvested and ground to make flour. Might cultural burning be beneficially brought back for the management of some sections of Dungog Common?

16. *birrambilra* - bird's nest fern

The bedrock here is a form of shale. But further up the creek the bedrock is puddingstone - hence the name Puddingstone Creek. Different rock forms different soil, and here the rich earth grows grey myrtle and other rainforest trees that form a dense canopy. In the deep shade beneath is habitat for at least eight kinds of ferns, as well as mosses and lichens. Plus you may be able to find a young elkhorn fern - an epiphyte that 'hitch-hikes' on the trunk or branches of a tree.

Does this place fit well the modern-day concept of 'wilderness' - the wild beauty of nature?

17. wambuyn - female kangaroo

Clear grassy patches like this might be as a result of historic traditional burning, of clearing by settlers for cattle grazing, or just through a process of nature. Today it is these areas that provide feeding grounds for the Common's grey kangaroo population, for red-necked wallabies, and for feral animals such as fallow deer and the larger sambar deer (sometimes carrying wide multi-branched antlers). Australian native rats, introduced rats, rabbits and hares - all favour grassy habitats on the Common.

18. galangan - green tree snake

An elegant and beautiful reptile found around this area is the green tree snake (*Dendrelaphis punctulatus*). These slender, agile snakes may climb among leafy branches or hunt at ground level, feeding on frogs, skinks and geckoes. They are not venomous. Brown snakes and red-bellied black snakes are occasionally encountered on the Common.

A recorded Indigenous approach to surviving a bite from a venomous snake was to remain perfectly still for four or five days while food and water was brought to you. Walk watchfully!

19. Waa! Daan gatjil durung! Look out! Skin-cutting grass!

Blady grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is abundant here and its fine 'saw' edges can easily cut human skin. It spreads by underground stems that send out roots and new shoots. Blady grass grows in many parts of the world. Grass clumps can be twisted together progressively to make a strong rope, can be woven and can be used as roof thatch. The root has antibacterial qualities. A recorded Indigenous use is that the ash of the plant is used as a salt substitute.

20. guula - koala

The tall eucalypts here are large-fruited grey gums (*Eucalyptus canaliculata*). Their leaves are favoured by koalas. The closest relative of the koala is the wombat. These two marsupials are unique in that they have a downward-facing pouch. A new-born koala is the size of a jelly bean. It crawls through the fur to the mother's pouch and milk supply, and spends six months there until it can emerge and travel on the mother's back. Koalas are occasionally sighted on the Common. A good way to know a koala is above you is by the sweet eucalyptus smell of their droppings on the ground!

21. Bakangang withangga narayga - Rocks near the creek

Can we call this The Puddingstone Parliament? How did these boulders come to be here and arranged as they are? Were they positioned here in settler times, or perhaps long before that by the Gringai people? Or are they somehow like this from natural forces of erosion and flood? Geologists, ethnologists, archaeologists - each might make a contribution to an answer. When natural areas are not disturbed there is opportunity for research - and the Common provides this now and for generations to come. The Dungog Common is for all to enjoy, and for all to protect.

Do come again to the Gulugu Loop - and please introduce others to the Dungog Common.

With acknowledgement to advisors from Karuah Local Aboriginal Land Council, Dungog Commoners Landcare and Local Land Services, Tocal.

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