

Wild

since 1981

Issue #178
SUMMER 2020

WILD Destination: Paddling in Murchison

Tassie's Wild South Coast Track

Murray River: Source to Sea

Luxury Lodges = Wilderness Lost

Return to Lamington

Photo Essay: Powder in Japan

Hiking in NZ's Serpentine Range

Walking Corsica's GR20

Track Notes: QLD's Scenic Rim Trail



\$12.50 INC GST

ISSN 1030-469X



9 771030 469006

WILD.COM.AU

ADVENTURE

CONSERVATION

WILDERNESS

Return to Lamington

Jennifer Johnston has been visiting Queensland's Lamington National Park since childhood. Twelve months after destructive bushfires tore through the park in September 2019, she returns to its Gondwanan rainforests to check in on her treasured paradise.

Words & Photography *Jennifer Johnston*

On Friday September 6, 2019, the air was dry and hot on Binna Burra Mountain. Humidity sat at a miserly eight percent, and the usually lush forest surrounding the heritage-listed Binna Burra Lodge—which sits high within Lamington National Park in the Gold Coast hinterland—was parched.

For almost a week, since August 31st, volunteer fire crews had been battling spot fires burning since teenagers thoughtlessly discarded cigarette butts into the dry tinder. Around mid-afternoon that Friday, winds from the west-northwest gusted up to 90km/h, fuelling a fireball which rushed down the range. In just ten minutes, it moved a staggering four kilometres. Locals described the sky as 'eerie', an apocalyptic mixture of light purple and dusty orange. Ash tumbled from its inky depths, swirling, spinning, scattering on the houses and rainforest below.





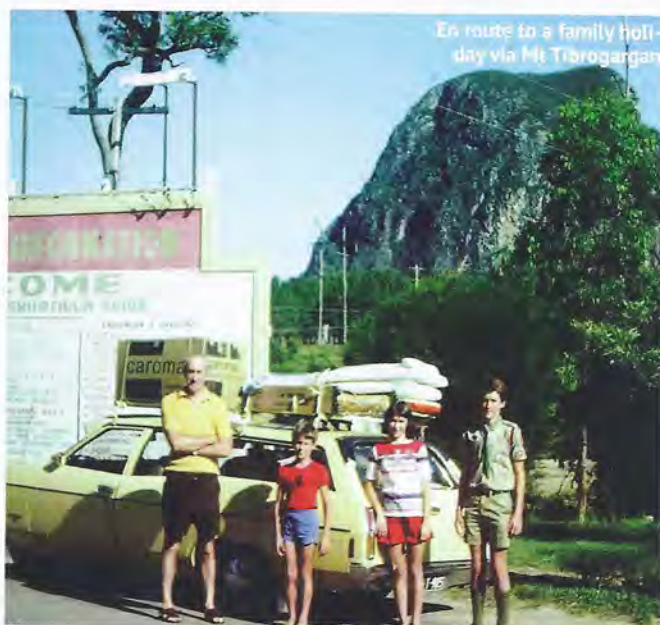


When the staff working at Binna Burra Lodge—which was 100% occupied at the time—felt the heat blow up the valley, at 3.30pm they made the call: Evacuate the lodge. Staff who lived locally had left earlier in the morning to be with family and friends, ready to defend their properties.

By Saturday, 18m high flames ripped across the tops of the bone-dry eucalyptus trees in Beechmont, a small mountain hamlet located between the Lamington Plateau and nearby Mount Tamborine. Fires continued to burn in multiple areas around Binna Burra and down the Numingbah Valley towards Springbrook. With fire trucks unable to access Binna Burra because of fallen trees, planes dropped water from the air. But when the wind picked up momentum on Saturday night, by Sunday morning, Binna Burra Lodge and eleven homes in the Beechmont community were destroyed.

That same morning, a Greenpeace helicopter landed near Binna Burra, and nature tour guide Lisa Groom and her father Tony Groom—one of three sons of original Binna Burra owner Arthur Groom—were passengers. They made the solemn walk up the road towards where the Main Lodge had stood for 86 years. The stone chimney was the only surviving structure. Some sections of the ashen rubble were still smoking.

The lodge was the first tourism structure to be destroyed in the extraordinary 2019 Australian bushfires. Nearby Groom's Cottage, however, had survived intact. The Greenpeace activists aboard the chopper unfurled a banner across the lawn in front of the cottage. The simple message: "Climate Emergency."



BUT FIRST, SOME HISTORY

The traditional custodians of the Gold Coast and its hinterland were a family of Aboriginal people belonging to the Yugambeh language people. The custodians who lived closest to where the Park is now—the Birinburra, Kombumerri, Wangerriburra and Migunberri Peoples—believed the mountains to be sacred. For thousands of years, Yugambeh people hunted and gathered food from the area; in the early 1900s, however, European colonisation sadly displaced them. (The Yugambeh Museum and Research Centre in Beenleigh endeavours to maintain Yugambeh cultural awareness and preserve their unique language. www.yugambeh.com)

In 1878, conservationist Robert Collins began a campaign to designate the region around the McPherson Range a protected scenic area. In 1911, four years before the Queensland Government signed papers affirming national park status, eight O'Reilly men—five brothers and three cousins—purchased land on the range's northern slopes, planning to clear it for dairy farming. Younger brother Bernard O'Reilly describes the landscape in his book, *Green Mountains* (published 1941):

"The blocks were sprawled across the rugged top of a high volcanic plateau; the soil was bright red, deep and rich enough to support a lavish rain forest; giant trees stood together thicker than the pillars in a cathedral with an undergrowth of tangled vine where every step has to be won by the chop of a brush hook."

These pioneering O'Reilly's possessed an indomitable spirit, carrying all food and equipment 16 miles up the range, on a bridle path over which only the hardest of mountain horses could travel. Much of the kit was carried on the men's backs to lessen the chance of losing it over the cliffs of the steep escarpments. The brothers spent a few years clearing parts of their land Bernard O'Reilly described "as a green wall over a hundred feet high, as definite and almost impenetrable as the ramparts of a medieval city." After three years of hard labour clearing their blocks of land, the O'Reilly's faced another battle. Lobbyists who were keen to avoid potential conflict with private landlords inside a National Park were pushing for the O'Reilly brothers to sell their land to the government. The O'Reilly brothers successfully held onto their land and four years after the official establishment as a park in 1915, Herb, Luke, Mick and Bernard O'Reilly were appointed honorary park rangers, with the unique status as private landholders within a national park.

Tom O'Reilly instigated the building of a 'proper' guest house. He saw the opportunity to capitalise on the steady stream of nature lovers making the precarious journey up the mountain. From Easter 1926, when the O'Reilly Guesthouse officially opened, visitors have continually made their way to this side of Green Mountains, as the western section of Lamington is known. In 1955, second-generation O'Reilly brothers, Peter and Vince, took over the running of the guest house; now Peter's son Shane manages the family property, along with other O'Reilly family members.



Forest bathing on the Border Track



Groom's Cottage



Border Track
← Green Mountains 0.7 km
Binna Burra 20.7 km →



Taking time out on the Etabana Falls Trail



View from Python Rock

“As a kid, I didn’t know of shinrin-yoku. I doubt many in Australia at the time, child or adult, had ever heard of the concept.”

On the northern side of the range at Mount Roberts, Romeo Lahey and Arthur Groom purchased 178 acres of native land (without access). In 1933, they founded Binna Burra Mountain Lodge. Beginning as a tented site, they charged visitors five shillings a day, and provided accommodation, food and guided walks. Permanent log cabins were added in 1939, to accommodate up to 54 guests. And the intentions for Binna Burra were the same as for O’Reilly’s Guesthouse—for people to stay and experience the magic of Lamington National Park.

MY OWN MAGICAL MEMORIES

In August 2019, four weeks prior to the fires that would soon reduce the sections of the park to ashes, I was back in the heart of Lamington National Park. I wandered down to Python Rock Lookout. Clouds hung low in a misty veil, shrouding the jagged peaks of the Scenic Rim. Looking at the scene before me, stirred my senses. My memories were stirred too. Childhood memories.

My childhood was interspersed with long walks in nature. They may not actually have been far in distance, but on little legs and with a short (ish) attention span, they felt long. I have memories of family adventures. My parents, the initiators; my two brothers and I, the reluctant tag-alongs. Growing up in Brisbane, we wandered through Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve near Maleny before a picnic lunch gazing out over the array of ancient gnarly volcanic peaks belonging to the Glass House Mountains, named by Captain James Cook (in 1770) because they reminded him of the glass furnace chimneys from his homeland of Yorkshire. We explored trails in the Gold Coast hinterland on Mount Tamborine and inside Lamington National Park. And closer to Brisbane, we took Sunday morning strolls through D’Aguilar National Park.

As kids we failed to fully appreciate the majesty of our surroundings. These outings were ‘just’ an adventure in the bush, usually associated with a fair amount of whinging.

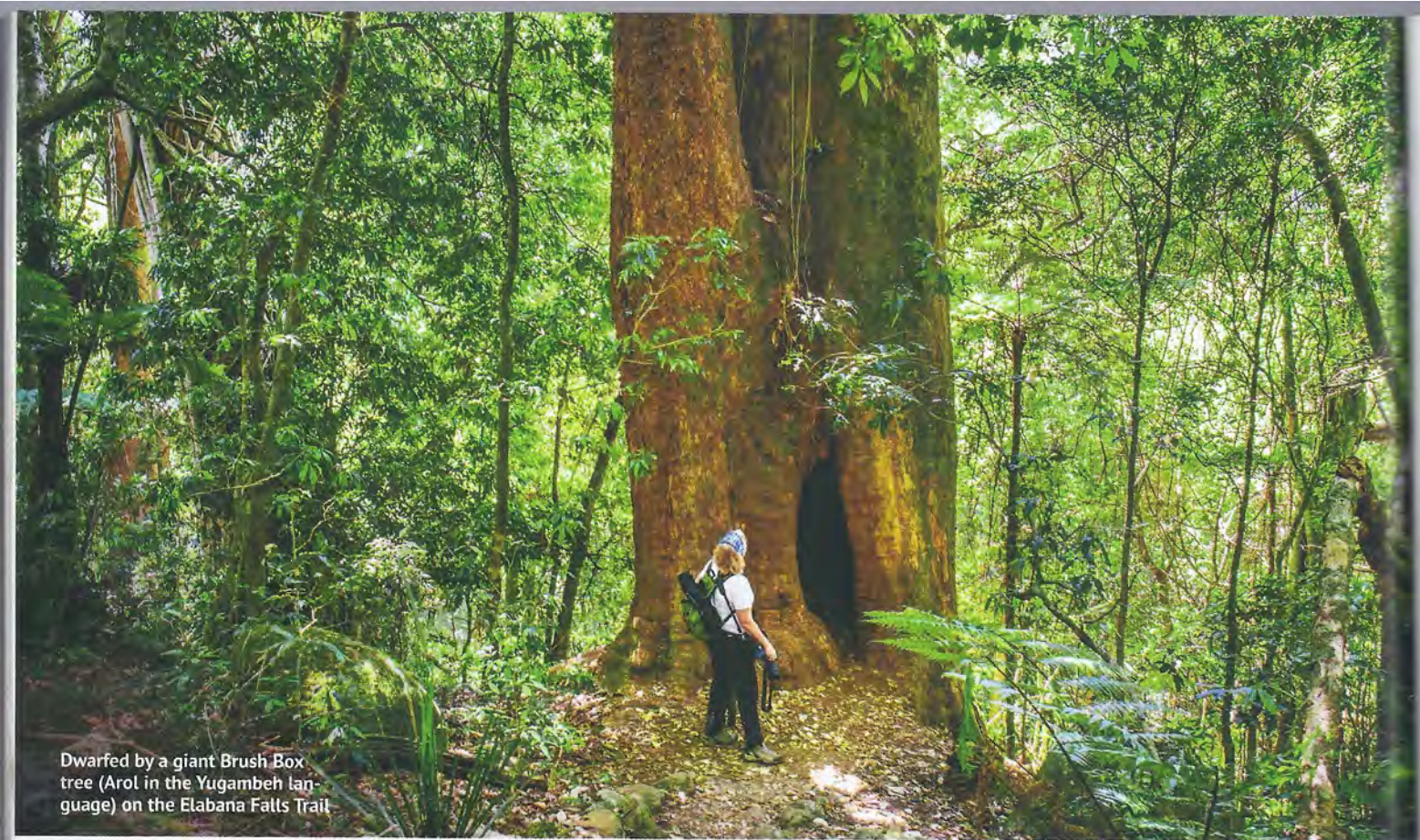
“Do we have to go?” But reluctantly we went, bribed with the promise of an ice-cream afterwards—the simple pleasures.

These walks, however, were transformative. As a kid, I didn’t know of shinrin-yoku. I doubt many in Australia at the time, child or adult, had ever heard of the concept.

“Listen to the birds singing and the breeze rustling in the leaves of the trees. Look at the different greens and the sunlight filtering through the branches. Smell the fragrance of the forest, breathe in the natural aromatherapy, and taste the freshness of the air as you take deep breaths. Place your hands on the trunk of a tree. Dip your fingers in a stream. Lie on the ground. Do all these things and you will feel a sense of joy and calm. This is your sixth sense – a state of mind.” (Excerpt from *Forest Bathing* by Dr Qing Li.)

Dr Li, a 54-year-old physician and President of the Japanese Society of Forest Medicine, suggests by allowing nature to enter your senses—via your ears, nose, mouth, hands and feet—you unlock the power of the forest. The Japanese call it *shinrin-yoku*: *shinrin* means “forest” and *yoku* means “bath”—forest bathing. Li’s research indicates there are health benefits associated with shinrin-yoku, including reducing blood pressure, lowering stress levels and boosting your immune system.

As a nine-year-old, while I never consciously thought about shinrin-yoku, I did practice my own form of it. During walks I would stop regularly, to stare upwards without stumbling. Through my young eyes I thought those lanky straight tree trunks reaching skywards, their tips touching the blue expanse, were soldiers, standing guard. I always felt secure and safe in their presence. Many decades later, as I walked a forest trail inside Lamington National Park (no longer as a reluctant tag-along) I found myself stopping, shifting my gaze to the tops of these towering giants, seeking out those interconnecting leafy fans which mesmerised me as a child. Although my shoulders were now much higher from the ground, these ancient trees appeared taller, growing as they clamoured with their neighbours for rare pockets of sunlight.



Dwarfed by a giant Brush Box tree (Arol in the Yugambah language) on the Elabana Falls Trail

I breathed in the familiar fragrant rainforest smell. That combination of damp soil mixed with vegetation and decaying timber triggered childhood memories of ambling along Lamington's well-trodden paths. Not that nature aesthetics were of interest to me as a kid. My recollections of Lamington are of the dinner bell at Binna Burra Lodge announcing meal-times and the brightly coloured friendly birds flocking to the plates of bird food purchased at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat.

THE BORDER TRACK

My August 2019 trip to Lamington was with a group on a two-night, three-day tour with walking adventure company, Life's an Adventure. On the first night, after walking the Dave's Circuit trail, we stayed at the historic Binna Burra Lodge, blissfully unaware we would never see it again.

The next day, we walked the Border Track to O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat. This 21km track is one of Lamington's oldest paths and is dubbed the 'backbone' of the park's 150km trail network. The Border Track name is apt; it travels up the McPherson Range crossing the NSW-Queensland border several times, following the route surveyors Francis Roberts (from Queensland) and Isaiah Rowland (from New South Wales) set out to create in June 1863. Their respective surveyor-generals requested they establish an 'intercolonial' boundary line for early settlers (landholders) to know which 'colony' they had to pay rent to for their pastoral leases. Navigating through virgin rainforest and rugged mountain terrain presented challenges - Rowland completed his survey in 1865 and Roberts in 1866. Nowadays the average completion time walking the Border Track is around six to seven hours, short enough for us—we hoped—to reach O'Reilly's in time for sunset cocktails.

We entered the trail at the Binna Burra car park. At the 1.7-kilometre mark, we veered off to the Box Forest Circuit, then switched to the West Canungra Creek Circuit. We walked through temperate rainforest, dappled sunlight breaking through the trees throwing golden highlights across the path, a mixture of rocks, tree roots and spongy soil. My eyes

remained fixed downwards, focusing on the ground's unevenness. Our first break of the morning came at Wanungara Lookout. Despite its 1,192m elevation, the lookout—with its views of Limpinwood Valley—was sheltered, chosen specifically as a refuelling spot by our guide, Kate Jones, to hopefully avoid the windy gusts picking up on the more exposed western side.

"You can see where we've walked," Kate said, gesturing towards the Binna Burra Ridge.

With the higher altitude came the cool temperate rainforest where southern or Antarctic Beech trees (*Nothofagus moorei*) reside. These mystical giants—with shamrock green, moss-coated limbs—are rainforest patriarchs; estimated to be around 2000-5000 years old, they are present-day links with ancient Gondwana. The ground around the knobbly, gnarled roots of one of these magnificent trees near the Wanungara Lookout was dusted with a layer of leaves, and I peered into one of the darkened chasms caused by decay, wondering how many storms this ancient relic had weathered.

Just over halfway, we stopped for lunch on the park's highest peak, 1,195m Mount Bithongabel. The clear day offered vistas overlooking the north eastern corner of New South Wales. In between overgrown trees, I glimpsed the patchwork of the Tweed River Valley below and the misshapen tip of Mount Warning, the remnants of an ancient shield volcano that erupted repeatedly 20-23 million years ago. To the east were ocean glimpses, and to the south, Byron Bay. Wary of the hour and the ground yet to cover, we continued our gradual descent, before weary legs propelled us into O'Reilly's in time for dinner, followed by a glass (or two) of red relaxing in front of the library's fireplace.

THE RETURN

In early-August 2020, the COVID travel restrictions having eased in Queensland, I couldn't wait to return to Lamington for some much-needed forest bathing. O'Reilly's thankfully hadn't been touched by the bushfires that struck Binna Burra. Over two days, my 21-year-old son, James and I explored a few trails, indulging in mother-son time.



Hot cuppa at Mt Wanungara Lookout on the Border Track



King parrot crown



Patchwork shadows and the crooked peak of Mt Warning from the Border Track



Green shoots near Binna Burra



Antarctic beech tree on the Border Track

We walked the Border Track to the Wanungara Lookout. The trail (at the time) was closed on the Binna Burra side, still being cleaned-up by Parks and Wildlife. James strode ahead, and I did 'my thing,' stopping regularly to look up and to allow nature to permeate my senses. As a child, birdcalls were of no interest, but with 'maturity' I've become fascinated, loving nothing more than hearing the ear-piercing whipcrack of the iconic eastern whipbird, calling out to his female companion. Near the top of Mt Wanungara, I heard an unfamiliar bird call. I recorded it on my phone, intending to ask the guide who takes the morning bird tour at O'Reilly's to identify its sound.

We lunched at the Wanungara lookout. The day was less windy than it was 12 months ago, but the views towards the ocean were equally spectacular. A low-lying horizontal bank of clouds cast a crazy collage of shadows on the valley below. This section of the Border Track was opened up by Herb, Mick, and Norb O'Reilly in 1912, and I wondered how different their view would have been to the one we looked out towards.

The following morning, our guide on the bird walk was Mary O'Reilly, one of Vince and Lona O'Reilly's ten children, and a third generation of the mountain family. I asked her about the birdcall and held my phone to her ear.

"That's the Albert lyrebird," Mary said without hesitation. "It's so clever it can mimic the call of other birds, and has even been known to replicate the sound of a chain saw."

I was chuffed, and told James about it later. He didn't share the same excitement, but I know his day of birdcall appreciation will eventually come.

THE HEALING PROCESS

Twelve months after my group walk, I return to Binna Burra a few days prior to its official re-opening on September 1st. (The Sky Lodges, campground, safari tents, the renovated Tea House, Groom's Cottage, the Barn and Pottery Shed are now open to visitors.)

The demolition work clearing the remains of Binna Burra Lodge is complete, the site now an open space. Where the lodge and cabins once stood, the ground is flat; the uninterrupted views to the escarpment east and west are breathtaking. For safety reasons, I am escorted to the site, accompanied by Louanne Byrnes, the HR and Compliance Manager for Binna Burra Lodge, along with a handful of volunteers from 'Friends of Binna Burra.'

“A massive smoke cloud completely blocked out the sun. It was probably the scariest and most incredible thing I've ever seen.”

Louanne was at Binna Burra that ominous Friday in September, and helped evacuate guests and staff. "A massive smoke cloud completely blocked out the sun," she recalls. "It was probably the scariest and most incredible thing I have ever seen."

Steve Noakes, Chairman of Binna Burra Lodge Limited, is confident the lodge will return. "Just like Daydream Island did after Cyclone Debbie decimated the resort in 2017," he says. "It took them over two years to rebuild, but they are back. And will we be too; this area is too special for people not to return."

Earlier in the day, I elect to walk the Ships Stern Circuit, to check on how the mountain had fared twelve months on from the bushfires. The entrance is opposite the driveway that lead to the old lodge. About 500m in, I see a few blackened trees, some discarded charred logs on the ground, and a couple of rainforest trees' buttresses showing burn scars. These were burned from 'ember drift' emanating from the intense fire that ripped through the other side of this walk. I come across the tall 500-year-old Tallowood tree rangers affectionately refer to as "Big Foot." Defiantly he stands, a small burnt section behind his misshapen 'toes' the only mark of the fiery wrath that destroyed larger sections of Binna Burra.

My gaze wanders up the trees with their blackened trunks. I note their tops are green. The area took a beating, but nature's resilience is evident. I breathe a sigh of relief. Binna Burra is regenerating.

As a child I never expressed gratitude towards my parents for 'forcing' me as a gangly kid to take those walks. But I know their persistence has helped create within me a deep affinity for being in nature. I hope my kids and their kids will eventually have the same experiences I had as a child, and ultimately feel the familiar sense of calm that forest bathing here in Lamington brings me. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Brisbane-based freelance writer and mother to three much taller sons, Jennifer finds any excuse to escape outdoors to flee the noise of her testosterone-filled home.