

Left, looking north to the Sphinx from Turtle Rock. All photos by the author

Girraween National Park

Andrew Willis outlines the various adventures you can have in this beautiful park in southern Queensland.

Home to cascading mountains of granite, underground streams, mysterious caves and some seriously scary rockclimbing, Girraween National Park stands proud in the region known as the Granite Belt. Hugging the Queensland side of the Queensland – New South Wales border, this granite-strewn national park is ripe for the picking if you are searching for adventure. It offers near endless opportunities for exploration and play among the myriad of boulders, often piled high and appearing to defy gravity. On, within and around the roughly

textured stone a diverse and dramatic landscape awaits walkers as they cast a wide eye over the chaotic beauty surrounding them.

HISTORY

The first European to enter the area later known as Girraween National Park was explorer and botanist Allan Cunningham in 1827, but due to the relative harshness of the landscape no one attempted to settle there until 1843. Sheep stations, dairies and fruit and vegetable farms eventually dotted the landscape as various periods of

settlement brought families to the area keen to try and tame the rugged granite wilderness.

During the 1920s Dr Spencer Roberts, who was the local general practitioner from Stanthorpe, began visiting the area. He soon became concerned with the welfare of the superb lyrebird and the common wombat and started lobbying the government to protect the area. His work paid off when in 1930 the Department of Forestry started acquiring land for national parks. In 1966 Girraween National Park was formed and the land it protects now spans 11 800 hectares.

The area has a rich Indigenous history but sadly the stories and the names they gave to places have been lost. Evidence of their existence comes in the form of artefacts left behind. Marked trees, tools, rock markings, camping places and ceremonial sites all hint at a culture stretching back to a time untold.

GETTING THERE

Girraween is 260 kilometres southwest of Brisbane, a pleasant three-hour drive. Follow the Ipswich Motorway on to the Cunningham Highway and head through to Warwick. From Warwick head south on to

the New England Highway, passing Stanthorpe. Twenty six kilometres after Stanthorpe take the signposted left-hand turnoff to Girraween National Park. After a few kilometres driving you will find yourself at the campgrounds and information centre.

WARNINGS/SAFETY

There are some environmentally sensitive areas within the park, so tread lightly wherever you go. Some of the caves harbour delicate glow worm and bat colonies and these shouldn't be disturbed.

BUSH CAMPING

Remote bush camping is available for the more adventurous. Set your tent up by a quietly bubbling brook or roll out your sleeping bag in a sheltering cave and enjoy the serenity and solitude of remote camping. There are conditions placed on camping in the park and you are best to seek advice from the park rangers.

MAPS

The best maps are *Girraween, Bald Rock and Sundown National Parks* by Hema and Sunmap's *Girraween* (9240-21).

THE WALKS

THE PYRAMIDS

If you do nothing else when you visit Girraween you must visit the Pyramids. This is an easy walk from both campsites on well-maintained tracks so there is no excuse not to.

The Pyramids are two large domes of granite standing side by side and rising high above the tree line. The first Pyramid is accessed directly from the track. When you hit the steep bare granite slope the way up is indicated by white markings on the ground.

At the top there is an impressive array of large scattered boulders. In defiance of gravity these boulders refuse to tumble down the steep sides of the dome. One resembles a giant distorted peanut balancing on its end – scarcely a walker would leave without a photo of themselves holding this rock up. When you tear your eyes away from the boulders you will find it impossible to miss the stunning vision of the second Pyramid. It almost appears close

enough to reach out and touch. Also visible is the large bare surface of Slip Rock to the northeast and the Sphinx and Turtle Rock to the south.

This can also make a great night walk. Arm yourself with a torch, warm clothes and some good company, then wander on up and appreciate the glorious night sky from the best seat in the house.

The untracked second Pyramid isn't quite so easily tamed, sitting just northeast of the first Pyramid. A tricky descent from the first Pyramid is necessary and then a walk through the scrubby bush skirting the base of the second is taken to its north side. Here a series of fissures that are not easily found and quite difficult to negotiate are used to scramble up to the peak. The top of the second Pyramid affords terrific 360° views of the surrounding countryside.

THE SPHINX AND TURTLE ROCK

The Sphinx is a distinctive landmark that keeps a watchful eye over the surrounding territory. The track in is an easy 7.4 kilometre return journey, but you should leave at least four hours up your sleeve – keeping in mind that it's easy to get sidetracked.

At the Sphinx you are met by a tight cluster of monoliths sitting on a large granite slab. While all of them are impressive, the feature standing at the heart of the cluster stands tallest of all: the Sphinx proper has at its apex a massive boulder balancing precariously on its edge, making

Clockwise from right, exploring a chasm at Turtle Rock. Climbers below the Sphinx. A tight squeeze at Turtle Rock.



it resemble its famous Egyptian namesake from a distance.

After you've explored the various nooks and crannies at the Sphinx, Turtle Rock is just a short walk away. Yet another giant dome of granite, Turtle Rock offers fantastic views north back over to the Sphinx and beyond to Castle Rock and the Pyramids. Turtle Rock can consume a lot of your time. The site is teeming with holes, cracks and tight squeezes that are just crying out to be squeezed into.

DR ROBERTS WATERHOLE, WAVE ROCK AND UNDERGROUND CREEK

While this area is not extensive it is well worth a visit. The track starts at Dr Roberts car park and travels gently uphill through the woodlands. After 1.2 kilometres you reach the still, mirror-like surface of Dr Roberts Waterhole. This forms part of Bald Rock Creek and is a popular home for many varieties of bird species along with an assortment of swamp-loving plants.

Branching off from this track is a path leading to Wave Rock and Underground Creek. This will extend the trip a bit but the effort is well rewarded.

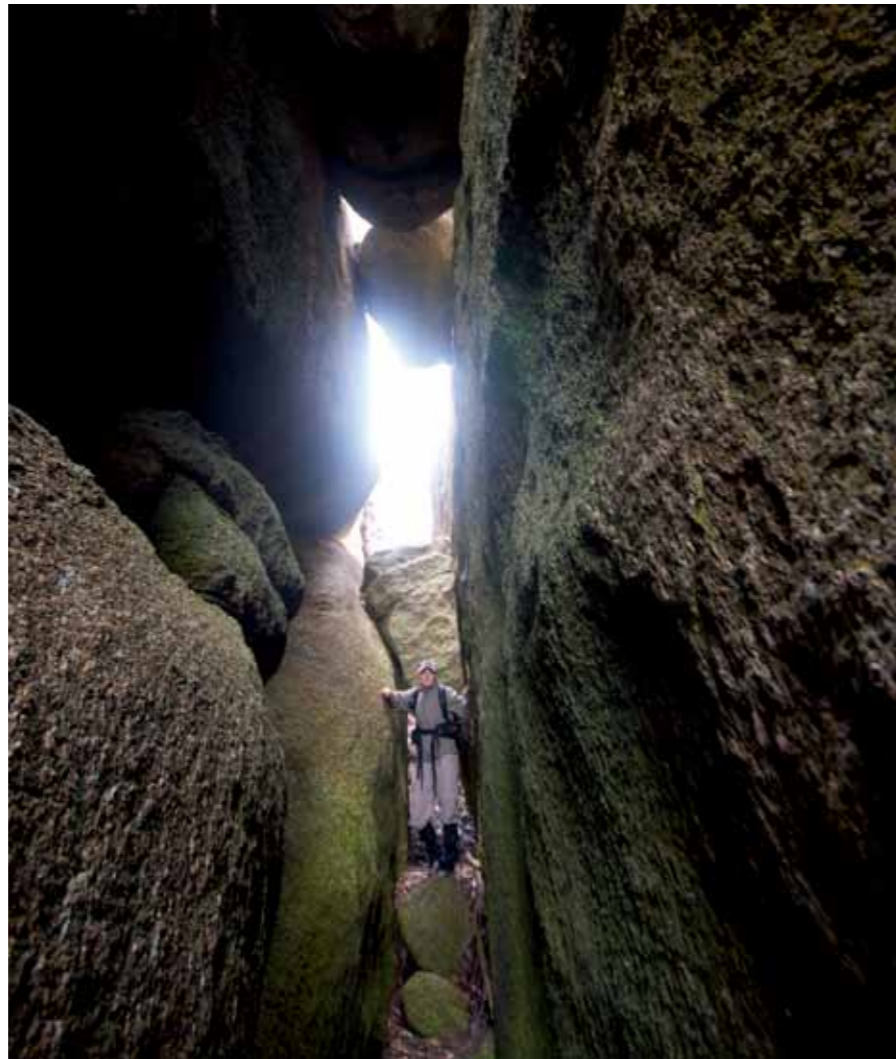
The track terminates at a great wave of

solid granite, frozen in time and streaked in rich earthy browns and oranges as it leans over a jumble of granite slabs and boulders. Wave Rock masks some more interesting features down below. Bald Rock Creek disappears into the mess of boulders and has created a small network of chambers. Shaped and smoothed over the millennia by cool flowing water the chambers are abstractly sculptured and vividly coloured. Although fascinating it is cramped, wet, slippery and potentially dangerous down there, so enter at your own risk.

CASTLE ROCK

Access to Castle Rock is by the same track used to get to the Sphinx and Mt Norman. As you approach Castle Rock a large bulging wall of granite closes in on the right. From here you pick your way through the boulders until you come to a large fissure in a towering block of rock. At this point it turns a little 'Indiana Jones'. The track goes through this shaft as boulders jammed in the space above hang threateningly.

When you pass to the other side a vista opens up with glorious views to the north, including the Pyramids and Slip Rock.



Follow the white marker lines to the right past some short cliffs, then pass through some trees and scramble to the top.

At the summit the view is revealed: Bald Rock, Mt Norman, the Sphinx and Turtle Rock are all displayed in a line from left to right. This has got to be one of the best vantage points in the park.

MT NORMAN

To get to Mt Norman you continue along the track that leads past Castle Rock. This is one of the longer walks in the park being 10.4 kilometres from the Castle Rock Campground. You should leave yourself about six hours to complete the walk.

As you approach Mt Norman a long, bulging slab appears before you. Skirt around to its left then head up on an expansive dome of granite, speckled with an assortment of weather-worn boulders resembling abstract sculptures. After reaching the top of the dome you look up and in the distance higher ground beckons you onwards.

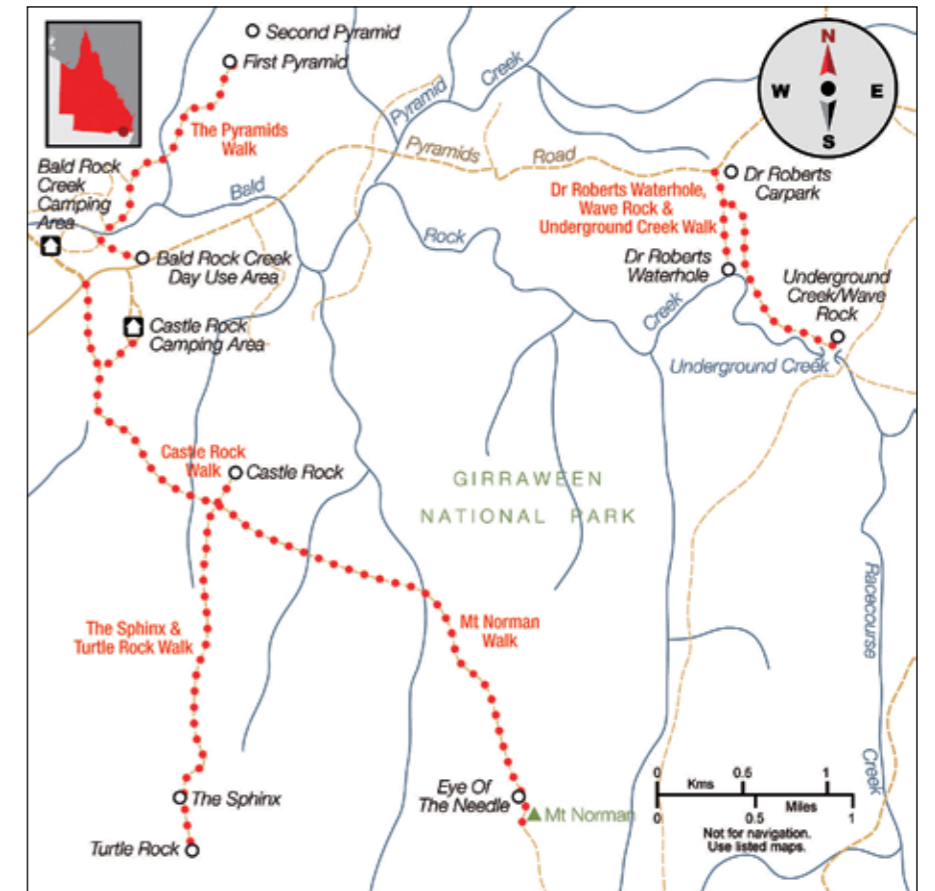
As you continue on past giant balancing rocks it's hard not to stop and stare, in awe of both the beauty and the physics of the landscape. The white markers urge you on as the track cuts through the scrub and past more great slabs with large fissures dissecting them.

Finally, you reach the walker's summit (the very top is unreachable without climbing gear). It is littered with great

stone boulders piled very close together and often on top of each other. The track guides you around the mass and through the chaos. Prominent on the north side is the Eye of the Needle. Funnily enough, when viewed from the correct angle it resembles a giant needle eye.

From the east side of Norman you take in some great views of Twin Peaks.

Impressive views are obtained from the western slopes to the north and west. The main interest here however is the rocks surrounding you. Surreal and beautiful, they wrap their arms around you in a cold yet heartwarming embrace. [W](#)



Below, looking towards the Second Pyramid from the First Pyramid.

