

A PLEASANT ADDICTION – By Stephanie Jackson

A passionate portrait of the natural wonders of Dunn's Swamp, a secluded corner of the Wollemi National Park, NSW, Australia

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I'm not ashamed to admit that I have an almost uncontrollable addiction, but my craving is not for narcotic drugs, nor for alcohol. Mine is a more pleasurable addiction that can only be satisfied by a regular dose of the awe and wonder that engulf me whenever I step into a wild corner of the world where nature is dressed in her most elegant garb, and where the wildlife that hide among her cloak of vegetation parade before me.

Dunn's Swamp, formed when the Cudgegong River was dammed in the 1920s, lies on the western edge of the Wollemi National Park that, covering almost half a million hectares, is the largest wilderness area and the second largest national park in New South Wales. And within moments of my arrival at this stunning location, I was brimming with confidence that, with its great diversity of wildlife, its vast forests, and its rugged rocky landscape severed by the river's tranquil waters, this would be an ideal place to feed my addiction.

With everything that nature had to offer literally on my doorstep, I had two options. The first would involve doing nothing more than watching and waiting, and at Dunn's Swamp, such inactivity would be a pleasurable and far from tedious experience. The second would involve the more strenuous activities of bushwalking, rock climbing, and kayaking - and I'd do them all, for each would enable me to unveil more of nature's beauty and to satisfy my addiction with a generous dose of pleasure.



I set up camp in the heart of the forest, yet close to the water's edge, one winter's evening, and woke at 5am the next morning impatient to glimpse the new day in its shivering garb. And when dawn finally arrived, I was not disappointed.

From the river's bank, I watched and waited in a silence so intense that I could almost hear gnawing grubs making their mark on the forest's scribbly gums. Finally, the sun, making a timid entrance, peered through a veil of mist draped across the dark water, sent low clouds tumbling, like a silent avalanche, down over hillsides freckled with sandstone boulders, and chased them through forests that had snatched a toehold in every rocky crevice.

Dunn's Swamp came to life with a hustle and bustle of activity as its varied residents emerged from beneath the grey blanket of night. Moor hens brawled among the reeds; crimson rosellas chattered as they pecked at frost coated grass; a heron peered at its image mirrored in a shallow pool; a kookaburra watched and waited for a meal to crawl below its lofty perch; a gaudy king parrot fluttered among wattle blossoms; and a kangaroo and her joey warmed themselves in a fragment of sunlight that had sneaked through the dense foliage.

As a gentle breeze sent ripples skimming across what had, at first light, been calm and undisturbed water, I headed back to my campsite, but with my addiction giving birth to an impatience to explore the landscape, breakfast was erased from my agenda. I tossed a bottle of water, a packet of biscuits, and some fruit into my small backpack, knowing that once I left the campsite it could be several hours before I returned, even though I might not walk very far.

And as a chorus of avian twittering, the thud of kangaroos bounding through the bush, and the reptilian voices of frogs that croaking among the reeds began, I headed off along a narrow trail that sliced through the forest.

This vast wilderness park can be explored on foot along trails that range from 500 metres to 5.5 kms in length, by boat, and by car, with a four wheel drive required to access the most rugged and remote areas.



I dawdled through the labyrinth of gigantic boulders and sandstone formations, known as pagodas due to their distinctive shape, that are a prominent feature of the landscape and that shelter delicate ferns and lichens. I peered into caverns, sculpted by wind and rain, where people of the Wiradjuri aboriginal tribe, for whom the area had been a popular hunting and fishing ground, had left their now faint mark some 7,000 years ago.

Where the wide waters of the Cudgegong River revert to a shallow stream, I squelched through mud and water before stepping onto a welcome mat of emerald moss laid out across the rocky terrain. I followed a faint trail that, beyond reed cloaked banks, snaked through a forest of peppermint gums, acacias, banksias, cypress pines, tea trees, and aromatic mint bushes. But the trail was nothing more than a wombat highway linking the burrows of the world's largest burrowing animal, a contorted track that wound past wattles drenched in golden blooms; through heath lands freckled with delicate wildflowers that



bloomed in defiance of winter's icy hand; into a clearing where kangaroos grazed on emerald grasses; and on to its conclusion at the summit of a rocky outcrop from where the view was of the forest, the mountains, and the river that lies at their feet.

Exploring the swamp in a boat is the best way to have a close encounter with the river's varied inhabitants. Canoes are available for hire, but I had brought a kayak with me, and made my way back to my campsite to prepare for another phase of this quiet adventure.

The kayak's leisurely progress fractured the river's mirror surface as I paddled slowly along the meandering waterway discovering, around every bend, a new and stunning scene in which birds, from the familiar to the unusual, inevitably featured. At Platypus Point, a low rock shelf that juts out from the shore, cormorants were waiting for their plumage to dry. Moorhens drifted silently across the dark water; swans, startled by my presence, took to the sky; and a musk duck splashed among the reeds before vanishing beneath the water's surface.

I paddled slowly through the stately avenue of high boulders that line the river as it nears the weir that confines it, oblivious to the changing weather conditions. But as the sky became as grey as granite, and wind whipped the water into a frenzy and peppered the air with falling leaves, it was impossible to ignore the hints of an approaching storm that signalled that it was time to make a hasty retreat back to the camping area.



Back on terra firma, and with the brief storm merely a grey haze on the horizon, I lit a fire to boil the billy for a well-earned cup of coffee, and as the first flames sputtered from damp and sizzling wood, those perennial scroungers - currawongs and magpies – arrived. Black cockatoos fluttered down, like falling ash from a wild bush inferno, onto a nearby tree, and blue wrens danced across the picnic table with unfamiliar audacity. Then, as the billy rattled its lid with the first puff of steam, the wrens fled in a blur of blue tinged feathers, and the cockatoos screamed as they left the scene, but the currawongs and magpies remained unflustered by human activity.



As dusk fell, I wandered into the forest once again, stepping slowly and quietly across the debris that nature had strewn across the track. It was the time when wombats would be on the move, and all I could do was watch and wait until, with the rustle of fallen leaves signalling its presence, a wombat waddled into view, stared momentarily at the human intruder in its domain, and made its shuffling retreat back into the undergrowth.

Elated at having seen yet another of the park's elusive residents, I made my way back to my campsite and settled down beside the fire to watch and wait for the emergence of other creatures of the night. Possums snarled in the darkness, and the repetitious calls of a boobook owl echoed through the forest, but neither they, nor the greater gliders, flying foxes, and quolls that call Dunn's Swamp home, put in a personal appearance.

Successive days brought new pleasures as I continued to explore this stunning national park that once seen is never forgotten. When I finally and reluctantly farewelled Dunn's Swamp, I headed off to explore the nearby villages of Kandos and Rylstone that ooze with olde worlde charm. The towns of Mudgee and Gulgong, with their 19th century architecture, museums, and wineries, and that lie only an hour's drive away, were on my itinerary too. But it was the beauty of Dunn's Swamp and its native inhabitants that would inevitably beckon me to return when another dose of the natural wonders of the Australian bush was required to satisfy my pleasurable addiction.



