

Wilson's Promontory May-June 2015

Wilson's Prom is an amazing place. It offers the spectacular scenery of granite mountains, open forest, rainforest, huge wind eroded boulders, sweeping beaches, rugged coastlines, and a Light Station perched on a small peninsula jutting into the wild seas of Bass Strait.

The Prom has had an interesting history. Initially it was part of the tribal lands of the Brataualung. These people were decimated particularly by disease after the 'discovery' of the Prom by European explorers in the 1790s. George Bass first sighted Wilson's Promontory in January 1798 during his whaleboat expedition from Sydney to Western Port. He recommended that it be named in honour of Thomas Wilson, a London friend of Flinders.

Bass and Flinders were accompanied by the "Nautilus", sent to investigate the potential for sealing. The "Nautilus" returned to Sydney with 9,000 seal skins and several tons of seal oil. That set the scene for the next forty years; sealers exploited the colonies on the islands around the Prom, and by the 1830s seal numbers had declined to such an extent that the industry had ceased to be viable.

Refuge Cove was a busy whaling station for many years, but as with the seals, whale numbers declined, and by 1847 whaling activities had virtually ceased on the shores of Wilson's Promontory.

Sealers Cove attracted timber millers to the Prom in 1847, and a mill was set up some time around 1853. Staves and other split timbers were in demand from Melbourne, and posts and railings for fences were sold to pastoralists, but by 1860, the mill had closed. The industry was re-established in 1903, but abandoned when the mill was destroyed by bushfire in 1906.

A lighthouse was built on South East Point in 1859 as a guide to shipping in the turbulent waters of Bass Strait.

Grazing and mining were other industries attracted to the Prom in early years, but a campaign by the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria eventually led to the temporary reservation of 36,842 hectares as a site for a national park on 8 July 1898, the first such park in Victoria.

Further additions were made to the park, the last being in 1969, bringing the total size of the park to 49,049 hectares, 125,000 acres in the old numbers.



Original drawing from 1857. © Copyright National Archives of Australia 2015

Of course, the park is now the domain of campers, tourists and bushwalkers, just as it should be.

Our story begins here

Thursday evening

A bit of a chaotic start; six out of eight members leave Bendigo in wet rainy conditions and meet up with me in Melbourne where I've spent the day. Bob couldn't leave till Friday as he had an early morning drop-off at the airport.

The rain cleared as we journey through Melbourne, pity the same could not be said for the traffic. There is discussion about alternate routes, but we're over the Bolte Bridge, no choice now. It is not till we are approaching Koo Wee Rup for our planned evening meal that the traffic starts to thin. The South Gippsland Highway is almost free of traffic, but it is rough, especially in the back seat of Geoff's 4x4 – beats driving though. Then finally we arrive at our overnight destination – the public park in the middle of Fish Creek, complete with the biggest undercover BBQ area I've seen.

Not sure if camping is permitted here though. Rechelle spent a sleepless night waiting to be moved on or locked up as a vagrant.

Sealers Cove to Refuge Cove

Day 1, Friday

An early start and off to the Prom, the entrance to the park is just 26km away. It only took a few minutes to complete a car shuffle and obtain permits etc from the park office, and we were on the track from the Telegraph Carpark heading for Sealers Cove.

My last visit to the Prom was just after the fires in 2005 when everything in the northern part was black. Now, despite more fires in 2009, the park appears to be recovering well. Evidence of the fires is everywhere though, so to the damage from the flooding in 2011 as a consequence of 340mm of rain in 24 hours. Anywhere you look on the hill-sides there are gullies completely scoured of vegetation and soil, and on the walk into Sealers, numerous plaques with before and after photos adorn newly constructed sections of the track.

The walk up to Windy Saddle is through open forest, but then the track swaps to the southern side of the range and becomes wet; the landscape is littered with mossy rocks, the under-story thick with ferns, and there is a dense canopy of eucalypts overhead. At the bottom of the ridge a boardwalk crosses a swampy section of Sealers Creek, and just before the beach, a band of teatree and a long drop dunny. This could only be Australia.

The stroll along the beach was great but with just a hint of urgency as the tide was rising, and the depth of water in Sealers Creek where we were to cross is unknown. A classic case of "don't panic Mr Mainwaring", the water wasn't even knee deep.

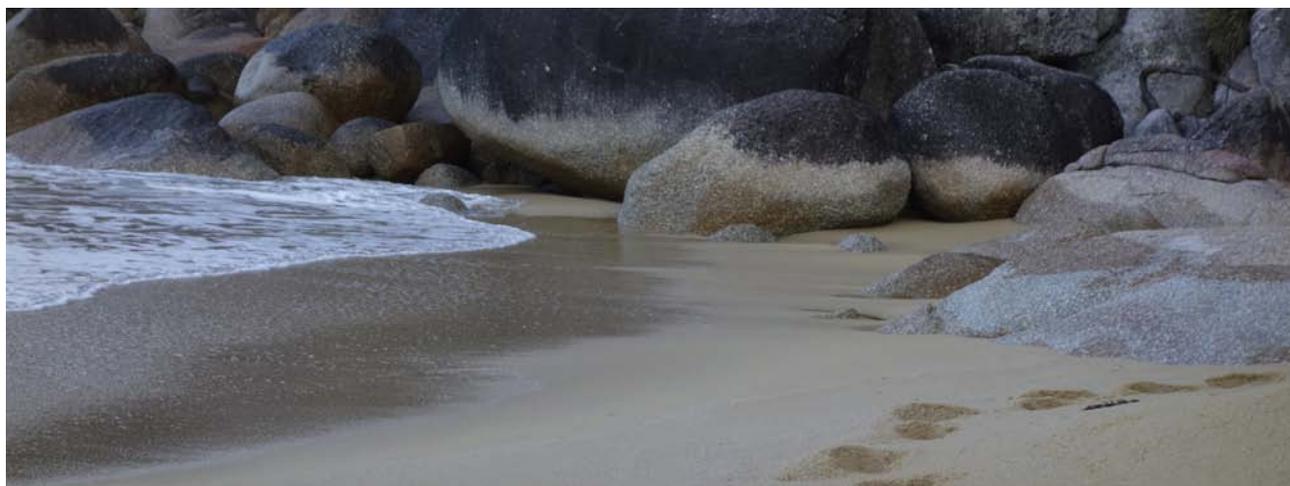
With more than half the days walk completed, it was time for a leisurely lunch, and the obligatory swim for Rechelle. Bob almost caught up with us here, he was spotted on the beach just as we were leaving. He had instructed me not to wait, so we didn't. The creek was much deeper when he crossed. Apparently his shorts were hitched as high as they would go to keep them dry.

From Sealers to Refuge Cove the track is rocky, undulating, and offers some great views of the eastern coastline and beaches. The camp-site at Refuge is large and sheltered with lots of tree cover. In my view, the pick of places to camp at the Prom.

Rain clouds had threatened all day, but we were still dry. The evening was very cold, so after dinner we had a chat on the beach then early to bed.

Stats: Day 1

*Distance 17 Km, Bobs pedometer, 29,080 steps.
Elevation rise for the day – 805m, loss – 991m.
At the Lighthouse weather station,
Strongest wind gust – 81km/h, Rain 9mm*



At Sealers Cove

Refuge Cove to the Light Station

Day 2, Saturday

Sometime during the night, or at first light, a yacht had snuck into the bay and was anchored on the far side from the camp area where there is the most protection; an idyllic setting indeed.

The climb out of Refuge Cove is steep and rocky – just the thing to get the heart pumping first thing before you warm up.

The consolation is the fabulous views back down to Refuge Cove and out the sea to the east. After a bit we dropped packs and wandered out to Kersops Peak. The Light house was in clear view to the south nestled under the ever threatening dark clouds. Low clouds were flying past overhead driven by strong winds from the North West, but we were completely sheltered [for now anyway] on the eastern side of the range.

We walked back down to sea level on a well graded track for morning tea at Nth Waterloo Bay, then on to Little Waterloo Bay and a chat to some “thoroughly de-krauted” Germans camped there [their words], then over a headland for the 1500m walk on the beach at Waterloo Bay. The end of the beach was a good place for lunch. A pair of Ravens kept us well entertained with their efforts to open packs, and their antics trying to distract us with the clear intention of stealing food.

From the beach it is then a steep climb for two kilometers for a gain in altitude of 300m, but from there it is downhill all the way to the Light Station. Well, almost to the Light Station; if the last 300m were any steeper it would have required steps, or better, an elevator.

The Lighthouse was completed in 1859, built of granite from a nearby quarry at a cost of £15,572. The four cottages adjacent to the Lighthouse were built to accommodate the lighthouse keepers and their families. Some of these buildings also date back to 1859. We stayed overnight in one of the cottages; well appointed with a good kitchen, two bathrooms and HOT showers – bliss.

Part of the deal to stay at the Light Station is the ranger guided tour of the Lighthouse. Our guide Andrew gave us the full tour – access to everything except the lamp room atop the tower [no-one gets in there except the people from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority], and information on all aspects of the Light Station. There is also a small Museum with displays of early equipment including an extraordinary Fresnel lens dating back to when the light was powered by kerosene.

There was no mortar used in the construction of the tower, and the balcony relies on gravitational force on the the structure above it to hold it in place.

Even with the strong wind blowing the balcony felt absolutely stable. The same could not be said for our cottage though. Wind gusts overnight were so strong that the building seemed to shake and the noise was very loud; I thought any moment the roof would come off. I had been banished to sleeping in the sun room on the veranda because of a vicious allegation related to snoring. Apparently this was to ensure the rest of the crew would get an undisturbed night sleep. Ha, fat chance. Not with that wind blowing; no one slept well.



David, Rob and Robs reflection in the Fresnel Lens

Stats: Day 2

Distance 17.8 Km, Bobs pedometer, 32,474 steps.
Elevation rise for the day – 1120m, loss – 1055m.
At the Lighthouse weather station
Wind gust [to midnight] – 98km/h, Rain 3mm.



Light Station to Oberon Bay

Day 3, Sunday

There must be something in the water at the Light Station. Everyone was up early, breakfast over, cottage cleaned and on the track 10 minutes early. That wasn't the half of it though. We all seemed to have the skates on making really good time to Oberon Bay. In fact we covered the 15kms in time to have lunch there. On the way we checked out Roaring Meg Falls [more trickle than roar], and Halfway Hut which, as the name suggests, must be half way to somewhere.

It was good to get into camp early though. We set up camp in the shelter of a band of tea trees, then had time to explore the beach and surrounding area. The sea was very rough, with wave after wave breaking simultaneously on the

shallow beach. Flotsam on the beach was mostly large cuttlefish bone.

In the evening the talk turns to astronomy; attempts are made to locate and identify planets and signs of the zodiac. We also attempt to calculate the time of the low tide in the morning. We know the time of the high at Sealers the previous Friday, but is the tide actually an hour later each day, and what effect will being on the other side of the Prom have? The consensus is that the low tide should be at about 7am.

Stats: Day 3

Distance 15Km, Bobs pedometer, 28,348.

Elevation rise for the day – 582m, loss – 641m.

At the Lighthouse weather station

Wind gust – 113km/h, Rain 3.5mm



he obligatory sunset - Oberon Bay

Oberon Bay to Tidal River

Day 4, Friday

All too soon it's time to pack up on day last. Even though we were very protected from the wind last night, sand covers everything inside the tent. No-see-um mesh might keep out the bugs, but not this fine wind blown sand.

It is right on low tide as we walk along Oberon beach, so the hope is that we won't have to take our boots off to cross Growlers Creek. The wind is blasting sand into our faces, and it is not particularly pleasant. In no time though we have tiptoed across Growlers, and for a short time are in the shelter of a ridge from Mt Oberon. Here there is more evidence of the damage from the floods, and it gets worse as we trek around towards Norman Beach. Some gullies have been eroded so greatly that Parks have built bridges to span the gaps, others have piles of rock pushed into them to restore access.

When we arrive at Little Oberon Bay, the wind has picked up and is ripping the tops of the

waves, blasting a shower of spray back out to sea.

By 11am we are in Tidal River, hot showers get rid of the invading sand, and hot coffee clears out the cobwebs. Then it's time to head home.

Stats Day 4

Distance 7.6Km, Bobs pedometer, 16,902.

Elevation rise for the day – 254m, loss – 254m.

At the Lighthouse

Strongest wind gust – 94km/h, Rain 18mm.

*Thanks to Rechelle, Bob, David, Kerry, Geoff, Andy, and Rob.
Garry.*

Post script. *It is interesting to note that at no time were we more than 12.5km from the Light Station ATRF [as the Raven flies], and although the Light Station recorded 33mm [1½ inches] of rain during our time there, we stayed dry for the whole weekend. How lucky is that?*