

Go, Bill! Reminiscences of a lifetime at Girraween — how one man can make a difference

By Bill Goebel, as told to Brian Egan, NPAQ Life Members

In June 2007, Bill Goebel received the Environmental Protection Agency's Excellence Award for Volunteering. His record at Girraween National Park, in the Granite Belt near Wallangarra on the Queensland/New South Wales border, would be almost impossible to beat anywhere! It's a story of how one dedicated person can accomplish so much for a national park over the years.

Bill came to the Wyberba area in 1931 when his family took up land for farming on Bald Rock Creek, 2km east of the present Girraween National Park Information Centre. He continues to live at the same site — over 77 years of continuous connection with the farms and grazing areas that have become the present national park of 11,800ha.

He worked as a management ranger in "his" park for 20 years up to 1986, then continued almost full-time as a volunteer for another 21 years. He has a wealth of knowledge of the area and its native plants and animals, that he is always happy to share with others.

This is Bill's story but re-told by me in more words than this modest man of few words would use himself.

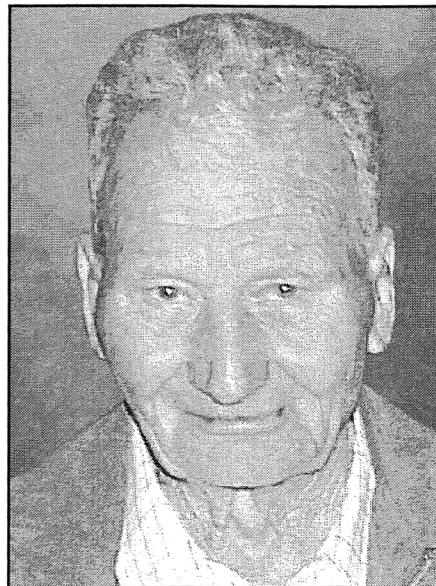
Life on the farm

I was nine when we came to the farm on Bald Rock Creek to grow fruit and vegetables. We lived too far from the nearest school so we kids were schooled at home. That was after we'd done all our farm jobs each day, of course.

In any slack periods, my brothers and I used to explore the area. The Pyramids were close, Slip Rock was at the back of the farm, up and down the creek led to lots of interesting places, and Castle Rock wasn't far cross-country. Later, when I'd finished schooling early, I had to earn money in non-farm periods at odd jobs or timber cutting. So I learnt a lot more about our area as well as the surrounding districts. This got me a reputation as a fella who knew his way around, and I met some interesting people because of this.

Conservation beginnings at Girraween

Early pre-park history is interesting but it's a story for another place. Girraween (place of flowers) has spectacular spring wildflower displays, but it was one



man's interest in lyrebirds that produced the first two small national parks in 1932. Dr Spencer Roberts set up practice in Stanthorpe in 1915, and became very interested in lyrebirds. He got the renowned naturalist Alec Chisholm interested. In August 1920 they studied lyrebirds and a wombat colony in the Pyramid/Slip Rock area.

Dr Roberts campaigned hard to get the Government to protect the lyrebirds, and in 1924 two honorary rangers were appointed. In 1932 two areas totalling 10,600 acres (4240ha) were proclaimed as Bald Rock Creek and Castle Rock National Parks, both near us and good lyrebird habitat. It didn't mean anything to me then of course. In 1944 some additional areas were joined to these parks, including the well-known Dr Roberts' Waterhole.

How I got interested in conservation

Wombats and lyrebirds

Wombats and lyrebirds were the start. Wombats weren't common but I got more interested in them about 1939 and began looking for them wherever I went. Lyrebirds became an interest later in the 1940s. We'd always known about them since the Pyramids and Slip Rock areas were prime habitat, and that was really just my backyard.

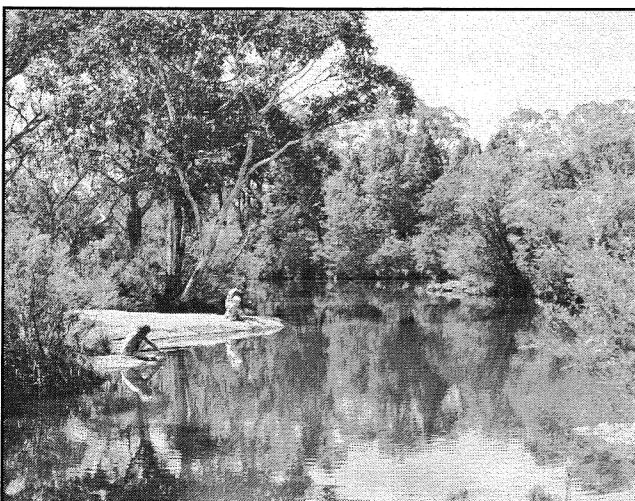
Queensland Museum people came up in the 1950s to study lyrebirds and asked me to help. I was keen to learn stuff from them. Getting to know lyrebirds better was something I never lost interest in, and over the years I got to know where most of the lyrebirds in the park lived. I wanted to photograph them and tape record their songs, and that meant developing those skills also. They're wonderful birds!

A highlight for me was in early 1965 when Sir Henry Abel Smith (Queensland's Governor) came up in his Rolls with Museum staff to see the lyrebirds and listen to their songs. They camped at the back of my house. A bit later he sent up Norm Robinson to record their songs, and we went to Sundown as well to record the different songs there. Sir Henry became a strong advocate for expanding the park, and recommended that our land must become park in due course. Well, the Government soon bought up more land, and eventually bought my land in 1976.

Bushwalking

Walking through the area was second nature to me. I'd been doing it for years when the first NPAQ party came up in 1949, to be followed by Brisbane Bushwalkers Club (BBW) in 1950. My truck for carting timber into Wallangarra was pretty useful for carting people and their gear. I also helped them with campsites and took them to interesting places to walk and climb, and to great wildflower areas in spring.

I got to love the walking and the friendships, and as they learnt about the country from me, I learnt a lot from them and got more interested in the flowers and plants. I joined both organisations, so I've been an NPAQ member for more than 50 years.



*Bald Rock Creek near the information centre,
Girraween National Park. Photo Errol Walker*

This opened up a whole new world for me where people wanted to preserve natural areas, not just for themselves or because it had a particular bird or animal or flowers in it, but because the area was worth protecting for what it was. Knowing Girraween pretty well by now, that sounded like a jolly good idea to me.

I also got to visit other great places with them — Carnarvon Gorge in the early 1950s and a bus trip to Alice Springs and Ayers Rock in 1957 stick in my mind.

How I got to work for National Parks

A lot more people were coming here to walk by the 1960s, but there was no campground, no Ranger and no walking tracks. It was hard to get to some spots as trails were indistinct or non-existent. I helped out where I could.

I was out in the bush cutting cordwood for the meat works in 1964 when a Lands ranger found me. There was a proposal to establish a shooting lodge on Block 200, he said, but it should be national park. "I'll leave it with you," he said. Me! Why me? But I thought about it for a while and told NPAQ.

I didn't hear any more for a month until Herb Hausknecht, head Ranger for National Parks, turned up and said: "Show me this block." Well, we went out and I walked him over it. "OK, it's park" he said, and within a year it was.

From 1965, the Government started buying up farms and leases for expanding the park. Herb Hausknecht was back looking for sites for a campground and information centre. The key site was Gunn's apple orchard which he was willing to sell, and this allowed the two parks to be joined up.

In February 1966, the first permanent Ranger, Tom Ryan, was appointed. I had casual work with Parks after that. My tractor and the council grader were used to pull out apple trees and level the picnic area site, then we built the first toilet block and started on a few tracks. More campers came and we built two more sets of toilets in 1969.

In 1970, Bald Rock Creek camping area was built, separating picnic and camping areas. One Easter 1970 campers overflowed into every possible place. It was a mess and so a limit on numbers and a ballot system were introduced. In 1976, Castle Rock camping area was built to ease the pressure, and an information centre was built in 1977.

Going back again to the 1960s, I was doing voluntary work for the parks by giving slide shows and taking walks. I got to know Herb Hausknecht quite well as he became a regular visitor. In 1969, it was 'Bill, go out to Carnarvon Gorge to check things out and build a few things'. In 1970, it was 'Bill, go to the Bunyas and help build the first septic toilets at Dandabah'. He also got me work at Cunningham's Gap and Queen Mary Falls. And each time I got back home, he'd give me another three months' work at Girraween, which was fine by me. But it wasn't until 1975 that I began working full-time when the National Parks and Wildlife Service took over from Forestry.

The park expanded

In 1976, the Government decided to expand the park up to the NSW border. Syd Curtis came up to look at several blocks including one with South Bald Rock. I showed him the tunnels and other things there, and it was bought. Then John Churchward came up to buy farms in the valley and I helped because I knew all the farms and owners. I helped later with Sundown purchases too.

Well, the first farm to be bought was the Goebel's block, and I was happy with that. I continued to live in the house and small area around it, as long as it was managed according to national park principles. Heck, that was no problem for me!

Work as ranger to 1986 and then as volunteer

The need for decent tracks to replace old trails became more urgent as visitor numbers grew. Track building was a lot of hard work at times, and I was in the thick of it.

Bald Rock Creek and The Junction tracks were done in the early 1970s, then the one to Castle Rock. In 1982 the Dr Roberts' Waterhole and Underground River track was done. We extended Castle Rock in the 1980s to The Sphinx and Turtle Rock, and a bit later to Mt Norman. The track up Mt Norman from the back road soon followed. Meanwhile we upgraded the Pyramids track in 1984.

A lot of Ranger duties are pretty ho-hum, day-to-day stuff but have to be done — maintenance work around the main complex, along the track system and internal management 'roads' and fences. I liked getting out to check these and making sure everything was OK throughout the park. And then there were bushfire times. We sure had a few scary episodes there, and it was sad to see the devastation from the bad wildfires. But I've seen Girraween's ability to recover too.

I enjoyed leading trips for our park's walks program. I like helping genuinely interested people learn more about our flowers, birds and animals. My colour slide collection was pretty good by now and that helped with my talks.

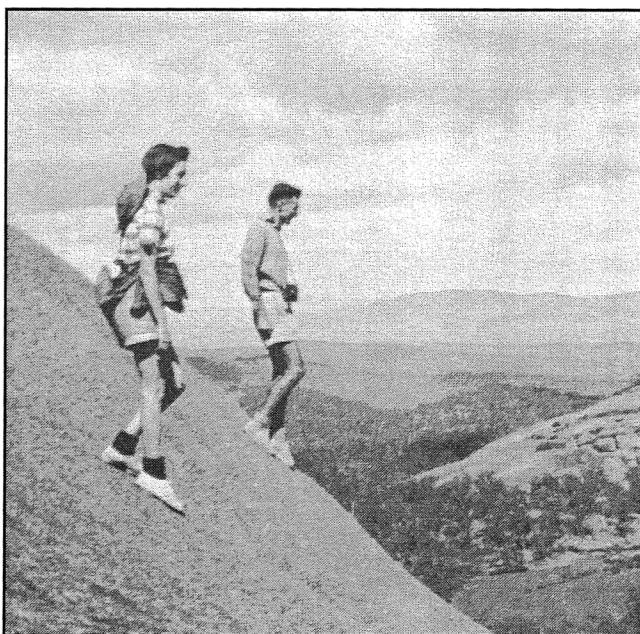
There have been a lot of staff changes in my 40 years, so I've helped them to know the park better also. You get to meet some interesting visitors as well as higher ups in the Service and Government, and some had to be taken into the back blocks.

Weekend camps by NPAQ, BBW and other clubs were always welcome, and I took them into otherwise pretty inaccessible areas. That was good for everyone.

So what changed when I retired in 1986 and became a volunteer instead? Nothing much really, except I didn't have the official responsibility any longer. I still turned up for work most days, and helped with whatever I was asked to do. And I'll probably continue as long as I'm able to do it.

Conclusion

I was pretty happy to get EPA's 2007 Excellence Award for Volunteering. Working there wasn't just a job, I did it because I love Girraween — the big granite rocks, the lyrebirds and wombats, the flowers and all the other inhabitants of this beaut place.



Not all the walking tracks in Girraween National Park observe the gentle grade standard. Some traverse extensive granite slabs thus testing the skills of the sure-footed.

Photo: Wendy Bell