

# Walk in Lane Cove National Park

Before starting today's story, we would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Lane Cove National Park Land, the Cammerraygal Clan of the Kuringgai Tribe, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

It is a beautiful Saturday morning in the late spring. You awake in the early morning with the cockatoos singing outside. As your mind slowly starts to recognise your surroundings, the sensation in your body starts to come back. The feeling is like you have come back from a deep meditation. You start to move your toes and fingers, waking up every muscle. Gently, you stretch your hand overhead, trying to shake the sleepiness sensation and start your day. It is your first free Saturday for so long. Your schedule is free. You do not need to work or meet with anyone. It is a self-caring day. You get up, put on your slippers, and go to the kitchen to make your favourite caffeinated drink. After that, it is time for breakfast, and because you have all the time in the world, you can spend a little more time preparing the food. You decide to fry red capsicum in a little bit of olive oil with some feta cheese, smash an avocado and toast two enormous slices of sourdough bread. It is a sunny morning with a clear light blue sky, so you enjoy your food outside on the terrace, under the shade of a big orange umbrella. The spring breeze makes the day perfect for a bushwalk. While dressing, you decide to walk one of the short segments of The Great North Walk. This 260 km hiking road links Sydney and Newcastle and has diverse fauna and flora. On this potentially hot day, it would be nice to hide from the sun in the eucalyptus forest of Lane Cove national park.

You park your car on the street leading to the path's beginning. The street is 2 ways and only 100 metres long with two store buildings on both sides. The end of the street leads to a narrow tunnel under the M2 motorway. The highway is elevated, and it has noise-cancelling panels over it, transforming the cars' engines to a quiet whine. A yellow sign with black letters warning the cyclist to be careful with pedestrians is placed at the tunnel entrance. The tunnel is only 20 m long, and a sign warns you that CCTV surveillance is in use at the entrance. You can see the light on the other side, and when you put your feet inside the tunnel, the vibration of the passing cars above slowly relaxes your body. You can see water drops coming from a

small fracture on the right wall in the middle of the tunnel. While you look at the drops slowly falling and splashing on the floor, the water drops echo in the tunnels, isolating you from outside sounds. The only sound you can hear is the plip...plip...plip...plip of the water. Gradually, the water noise makes the heaviness in your chest just slightly lighter.

When you remember where you are, your body starts to take control of the movements, taking you out of the tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, the path takes a sharp left. You can see a metal fence and a gate on your right side. The fence is covered in Dusky Coral Pea plants. The dark red flowers are dying, giving way to small green pods. Your eyes follow the twinned stem of the plant along the fence until the fence transforms into a gate. There is a metal sign near the gate indicating that the gate should be used only by cyclists to access the motorway, and all other access is prohibited. You have completely forgotten that cyclists are allowed on the motorway in Australia. Your mind drifts with this thought to all the strange laws in Australia. As the one that prohibits flying kites or playing games in public that annoy people or the one that prohibits a person from having more than 50 kg of potato in their possession.

You are taken to the present by a red sign on your left. It is made of wood, warning you there can be an authorised vehicle used on the track. So, you know that no cars are allowed on this road, and you can enjoy the walk because the only motor vehicle will be of the fire department, and they will be in the area only in case of fires. Between the two signs is a Spiny-headed Mat-rush plant. The plant is half a meter wide, and its green leaves are flat with a pointy end and almost 1 m tall. In front of this plant is a wooden sign that welcomes you to Lane Cove national park and gives you information about the length of the different paths in the area.

The path goes downhill, and you can see different plants and flowers on both sides. The biggest plant is the Old's Man Beard. This particle plant has grown almost 10 m tall and at least 3 meters wide. Each vine has 5 palm-size green leaves, and a big part of the plant is covered with white flowers, each 2 cm wide. The flowers are numerous, and you can almost detect their almond sense. It is amazing how big this type of plant can grow when left alone. Although it is one of the climbing native plants and a gorgeous one, most people do not like to have it in their backyards. It grows fast in intertwining stands composed of thousands of individual plants joined together in a chain. With time the plant can smother the host, which is used to climb and covers other plants stopping their exposure to the sun.

On the other side of the road, there are several small plants. Common lantana is everywhere. A high-pitched buzzing sound of a teddy bear bee drives you to the lantana's pink and white flowers. Although these bees prefer nectar and pollen from blue and yellow flowers, they collect pollen from any garden flower for their nest. It is a fluffy bee, similar to the

bumblebee in shape, and covered in golden brown fur. Almost 15 mm big, this solitary Australian native insect is found in all Australian states except for Tasmania. When the bee flies away, you can see its extraordinary long tongue.

The path leads you down to the first river, which has a concrete bridge over it. The bridge is wide enough for a firefighter truck to pass over it and 4 meters long. On the other side of the bridge, a Water Dragon is enjoying the morning sun in the middle of the road. Even from far away, you can see the angular shape of its head and the brown and dark-grey spinose scales that run from its neck to the tail. The lizard is in its usual position, head up in the air and body stuck to the ground. It looks like he was asleep, and suddenly someone called its name, so the lizard is trying to figure out who spoke. As you draw closer to it, you can see clearly the 5 claws and the extraordinarily long tail. The Australian Water Dragon is a semi-aquatic lizard with fully developed limbs, its tail is longer than its body, and the males can grow up to 80 cm long. The lizard standing almost 1 meter across you is around 20 cm, so it must be a juvenile. Only when you are a few centimetres away from it the lizard decides to move and runs towards the bushy riverbank.

Soon after, you cross the second bridge. The path has an elbow shape, turning sharply to the right. The water is slightly reddish due to the area's iron-rich soils. A slightly dried *Eucalyptus Preissiana* leaf is slowly taken by the river's flow. The water speed is so slow that it took almost a minute to cross the 4-meter-wide bridge. On the other side, a Giant Dragonfly comes to rest on the leaf. The brown and black of the insect camouflage it immediately, merging with the leaf colours. The only clue that something is on the leaf is the shining of its transparent wings responding to the sunlight.

The path after the second bridge bifurcates. A wooden sign shows that the path to the left will take you to Great Northern Walk from Marsfield to Thornleigh. It is only 6.1 km long, mainly a riverwalk with occasional additional walks to small view lookouts on the way. The last time you took that road, the banana trees growing on the riverbank were starting to grow fruits. This path will lead you to the stunning City View Lookout. You can stop there for a quick rest. The wooden bench placed inside a tree provides the perfect place to sit comfortably while enjoying the contrast between the extensive green patch of Lane Cove Park and the tall and majestic Sydney buildings. It is incredible how you can see the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Tower Eye from this distance. Afterwards, you can walk to Thornleigh, have a lovely Indian meal, shop in your favourite Sri Lankan shop, and get the train or bus back to your car.

The right path can take you all the way to Chatswood if you want to walk all 13 km. Also, this path gives you the advantage of taking the Macquarie University exit, spending only a few hours in the national park, walking back to your car, and going home before lunchtime. You can stop in the Macquarie University courtyard for a cup of coffee and enjoy it under a tree near the lake. The thought of a second coffee makes your decision very easy. So, you turn to your right and slowly start to go uphill.

The park is full of life. The white cockatoos are resting on the eucalyptus trees and talking with each other. Macleay's Swallowtail butterflies with vibrant green and black wings fly around, protecting their territory. Suddenly, a brush turkey slowly crosses the path in front of you. When it sees you, this ugly bird starts to run, disappearing in the bushes. It is a big bird, can grow up to 75 cm in length. The contrast between the black plumage, bold red head, and large brownish feet make this poor bird ugly and, at the same time, fascinating to observe.

All the beauty and nature's sounds around you make you lose the notion of time and space. Somewhere in the path, the bush vegetation clears, and you can see a small patch of the river. On the riverside, a Swamp Wallaby is eating from a fern. This marsupial's distinguished dark brown fur helps it merge with the grey limestone margin and the shadowy patches of the bush vegetation. You try to be as silent as possible because even a tiny noise can scare it. The excitement of seeing this rare animal makes your heartbeat accelerate immediately, making your breathing rush and sound. It is time to calm down. You breathe deeply for 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Again breathe in for 1, 2, 3, 4, and breathe out for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. When your breath normalises, you slowly take your phone out of your pocket. A head appears from the wallaby's pouch when the phone is in your hands. A joey climbs out of the pouch and goes to the river to sniff the water. It is the perfect photo of a small wild nature in the suburbs of Sydney. Suddenly, the wallaby stops eating and gets completely still. The wallaby turns its head towards you, and its big black ears look as if they are scanning the air. And before you realise it, the joey climbs back into the pouch, and the wallaby disappears into the bush. The wind brings a low laugh down the path a few seconds later. Not long after that, you can hear the jolly chatter of two people, and soon after, they appear on the path.

Wild nature does not tolerate humans and retracts as soon as it can detect us. Hundreds of years ago, all this land was full of wild animals. Wallabies and kangaroos were freely jumping around, occasionally bothered by small parties of aboriginal hunters. The koalas were enjoying dinner or napping on all those giant eucalyptus trees. You can imagine them sitting on a tree with their white bottom logged between two branches. These marsupials are so different from the rest of the animals in Australia. With big round heads and grey-brown fur

with white patches on their fluffy ears, chest, inner arms, and bottom. Their black nose and the palm of their paws are furless. It is said that the word koala comes from the Dharug people and means “no drink”. They eat up to half a kilo of eucalyptus leaves daily, providing enough water so they do not need to come down to look for water sources. In vain, you look up to try to find those cute animals on the gum trees. Sadly, they are long gone from this area.

What you notice is a spiral wheel shape web. In the web centre is a 2 cm female orb-web spider. Its silky web is lodged between two eucalyptus trees and has almost 1 m in width and height. The silk shines on the sun making the spiral pattern of the web sublime. The spider's colours are a mixture between light brown and orange, with bright red on the upper parts of its legs. This would make a perfect picture, but when you take your phone out, a Noisy Miner appears from nowhere, takes the spider and leaves a hole in its place. The bird just flies to a tree, eats the insect in a few seconds, and starts singing its high pitch song worthy of its name. The yellow colour around its eyes, beak, and legs and its grey plumage make the bird look a little bit cynical. After it was done with its meal, the Noisy Miner flew away, leaving behind the damaged web. It is amazing how nature continues its path even though humans are slowly destroying it. Wild animals fight to survive in the small nature reserves, even in the middle of Sydney's urban area.

It is getting late, so you take the path leading to Macquarie University Hospital. A sharp right from the main path takes you to the Lane Cove River. Several big stones are placed in a row for the people to cross the 3 m width section of the river. Today the water level is low, so you have no problem walking over the stones. Sometimes, it is almost impossible to cross it, especially after heavy rains. Or you take your shoes and try to guess where the stones are, or you simply need to go back. After crossing the river, the path goes up with a steep slope of almost 50% inclination. The forest is thick on this path, making the day look gloomy and to feel cold. But this sensation disappears when you are out of the path, out of Lane Cove Park, and at Christie Park. You are at a small green field. In front of you, there is a vast parking area, and on your right is the soccer field, or as called in Europe, a football field.

The car park is almost empty, and no one plays on the field. This is rare at this time of the year and on a Saturday morning. A Laughing Kookaburra is sitting on the metal field fence, and when you are out of the shade and under the sun, it starts laughing. You look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. It has a large, stocky body, almost 45 cm long, a huge brown upper beak, and a large head. This kingfisher species has a creamy white head and body, with brown stripes over each eye and on the top of its head. The brown is spread over its wings and

back, and small bars over its reddish-orange tail. The laughing sound is for the bird to establish its territory, but it is like it congratulates you for spending the morning in the park.

You slowly start to move into the so-called civilisation. It is easy to forget that we live in a concrete jungle when you spend even 1 hour inside a national park. A huge bridge passes over the 7 lanes of the M2 motorway. The traffic is still low, so the noise is not too bad. The sun is up in the sky, and there is no shade at this part of the road, so you speed up your pace. Last 100 meters, crossing Talavera Road, and you will be at the Macquarie University campus. It is one of the most beautiful campuses in Sydney. Many big green patches are spread over the campus, and it is also a sculpture park. 130 original sculptures from Australian and international sculptors are placed all over the campus, representing the artists' visions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a perfect place to look for inspiration on a sunny day or just walk, enjoy and interact with the art.

You start walking towards the food courtyard that is only 5 min walk from the hospital. Several cafes and restaurants are open on Saturday, so you will have plenty of choices. You buy a coffee from the first open cafe shop you see and slowly go down the stairs towards the lake. This 30-year-old lake is classified as a reserve due to the enormous variety of fauna and flora. The lily pads and lake reeds are visible even from a distance. You sit under a tree on the grass and start to observe the birds. The dusky moorhens play in the water, and some ducks peacefully eat grass. It is time to relax and prepare mentally for the following days. So, you just close your eyes and relax all your body. Focus on your breathing. Inhale deeply through your nose, pause for a few seconds and exhale from your mouth. Breath in for 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Again 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Intake for 1, 2, 3, 4, and exhale for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Start to let go of all the noises around you and mentally count. Intake for 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Intake for 1, 2, 3, 4, and release for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Again, inhale for 1, 2, 3, 4, and exhale for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

(My voice will slowly disappear on the last sentence, and only music will sound for one more minute)