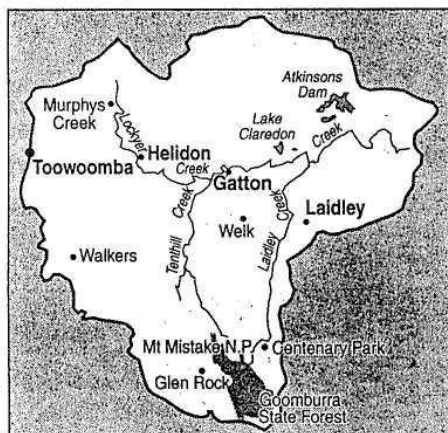


# Hidden valley



Philip Hammond

F ALL goes to plan, by this time next year bushwalkers will have more places to explore in the Lockyer Valley — just over an hour's drive west of Brisbane.

While only one application has so far been registered with Gattton Shire Council for a guided walk venture, Lockyer Landcare co-ordinator Bruce Boyes reports much behind-the-scenes activity.

Hideaway cabins are being built and plans finalised which will open the valley's profuse spring wildflower displays and other little-known natural attractions through eco-tourism.

It is easy to drive between Ipswich and Toowoomba and think that the Gattton area is totally given over to agriculture.

Across the Lockyer Valley the landscape is often a patchwork of flat fields, rich soils ploughed close to the roadside, irrigation systems and no room wasted on hedges or windbreaks. From the highway, it looks like wall-to-wall farming.

But according to local tourism officer Robin Hyde, only 10 percent of the Lockyer Valley is under cultivation, and 65 percent of the Gattton Shire remains remnant forest.

With the National Trail weaving through the Dividing Range foothills, bush parks below Toowoomba, and state forestry north of Gattton, the area's natural attractions are, to some extent, already accessible.

Hyde is hopeful that growing local awareness in the benefits of eco-tourism will help make the valley "Brisbane's backyard".

A Queensland Parks and Wildlife survey found a curious mix of plant life in the area.

Wildlife surveyor Paul Grimshaw has identified native species growing in the Ma Ma Creek area, south-west of Gattton, such as mugga ironbarks and Baker's mallee, which might be expected to be found in drier country further west around the Inglewood district.

In the Helidon Hills across the northern part of the district, in acidic, coarse sandstone country, he has found plants which normally only grow in the coastal wallum heathlands.

These include a couple of vulnerable species and a rare plant: grevillia singuliflora. More than 300 bird species have been recorded in the Lockyer Creek catchment since 1973.

Lockyer Landcare's project co-ordinator Bruce Boyes said landholders were really only beginning to see the potential of their natural bushland.

"There are a number of landholders in the Helidon Hills area who are in the process of getting themselves established with eco-



On track: The National Trail weaves past many of the Lockyer Valley's natural attractions.

## checklist

### Lockyer Valley

Ring the Lockyer Valley tourist information office at Gattton on (07) 5462 3430 or Laidley on (07) 5465 7642 for information on bed and breakfast accommodation, drives, four-wheel driving, camping, picnics and dining in the area. Laidley Bushwalkers Club: Monthly half and full-day walks. \$12 a year for families, \$10 for individuals. Inquiries: (07) 5465543. Lockyer Discovery Tours: (07) 5466 1818. Murphy's Creek bush camping; \$5 per night for adults; \$3 for children aged 2-11 and for pets. (07) 4630 5353.

tourist ventures and they will be hosting wildflower walks and other outings. At the end of the year, there are going to be quite a few places open."

Some already are. George and Jean Elson cater for campers on their 50ha of largely bush-covered land adjacent to state forest at Murphy's Creek.

The property contains some interesting sandstone cliffs and rock formations which

the State Emergency Service has used for practice rescues.

A 7m-deep swimming hole is fed from a spring where platypus and turtle have been seen. With open camp fires permitted and the added bonus of pets being allowed, Murphy's Creek is popular with families — and their dogs, Jean said.

Laidley Shire Council allows free camping for the first three days on its Centenary Park camping ground. This is on the banks of Laidley Creek, 15km south of Laidley between Mount Mistake National Park and the Little Liverpool Range.

Also to the south of Gattton, Brisbane Forest Park has the Department of Natural Resources contract to develop the 6300ha Glen Rock regional park, which sits adjacent to the national parkland of the Scenic Rim. The property is a former station, with homestead intact, and later this year the area will be opened up with new walking tracks, a camping area and an interpretive centre.

South of Gattton is the "Welk Remnant" — a small patch of softwood scrub which escaped the controlled burning and tree felling activities of the early settlers. The privately owned tract, which contains more than 40 species of trees, shrubs and vines, has been accessible for nature study, through Lockyer Discovery Tours.

## Family forest kept intact

Philip Hammond

DOWN a long, single-track hill road, through a barbed-wire gate and across grass paddocks, we followed the tomato grower.

Neville Walker, 68, a friendly, agile figure with mobile phone lashed to a strap across his chest, and a wide brimmed hat held by string firmly beneath his chin, was guiding us into a wild, hidden away place.

Barefoot with a bleeding scar on his shin from catching the barbed wire, Neville cut the engine on his yellow farm bike and set off walking at a lively pace into his very own pristine rainforest.

Climbing over more fencing, bobbing and weaving across a luxuriously deep carpet of dead leaves, Neville pulled up to show off a towering, arrow-straight silky oak. A little further and he paused, proudly displaying the spectacular form of a giant Moreton Bay fig, its ancient buttressed roots merging into a lichen encrusted cliff of sandstone.

In the 1890s, Neville's grandfather George Walker paid half a crown per acre for a selection in the Great Dividing Range, somewhere to the west of Gattton.

"Nobody was interested in conservation in those days, but my grandfather decided this 150 acres (61ha) should never be touched," explained Neville. "He wanted young people of the future to be able to see what this country used to be like."

George Walker's son, Alexander, maintained the family tradition, refusing to cut any of the enormous, valuable trees which shade the gorge-like valley.

And now, after a life-time on the farm, and several skirmishes with cunning staghorn poachers, Neville has applied to Gattton Shire Council for a permit to conduct enviro-tours into his verdant sanctuary.

By September, he hopes to offer guided walks for groups.

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service naturalist Paul Grimshaw spent a day in this forest last year and later provided Neville and his wife Shirley with a list of 43 species of birds and 192 plants, some of which were rated endangered.

A century of souveniring by generations of visitors has meant that in most forests, the only elk horns, staghorns and orchids to be seen are inaccessibly high up.

In this forest, Neville stops at chest-high rock faces to show off, like an adoring parent, baby staghorns which he has watched develop over the months.

At one place, he has installed fencing to hold back the leaves of 3m-wide crows nests, which spread over the track.

We are shown scrub turkey mounds, enormous treetop growths of orchids, a frog-populated rocky creek, fully mature red cedars, and a dramatic wall of delicate ferns.

Thank God for people like the Walkers.