

U3A Port Fairy
Science...naturally!
Griffiths Island – Self-guided nature walk

John Miller 30 June 2020



This is the 15th in a series of self-guided walks for U3A members around Port Fairy and district to help us get out and about safely during COVID-19 restrictions. The aim of the walks is to provide enjoyable outdoor activities that can be undertaken either by yourself or your family (with appropriate separation and other precautions).

This walk introduces you to a few of the natural features of Griffiths Island that you may have wondered about or maybe never noticed before. Remember, dogs are not permitted on the island.

This is a clockwise loop walk starting and ending at the rotunda at the start of the causeway on Ocean Drive. There are three alternatives (see map on last page):

- 1 Walk to the lighthouse along the causeway then via the “inland” route and return the same way. This is the easiest and suitable for all mobilities.
- 2 Walk to the lighthouse along the causeway all the way to the end then turn right along the beach and back to the inland route, then to the lighthouse and return via the inland route. This route is easy but does involve some beach walking.
- 3 Walk to the lighthouse by either route then back to the start via the south coast of the island. This is the longest and involves uneven ground and some rock scrambling so is a bit more difficult and not suitable for wheelchairs.

The causeway from the car park on to the island is generally safe although sometimes during high tides, with a good southerly swell, waves may power over the walkway. Pay attention to the tides, and what they will be like in an hour or so, to make sure you can get back safely and with dry feet.



At the T intersection turn left and follow the river downstream. An old quarry, used for construction of the river training walls, can be seen on your right. The low rounded leafless shrubs are Black-seed Glasswort *Tecticornia pergranulata* subsp. *pergranulata* and the smaller reddish succulents under the shrubs are Beaded Glasswort *Salicornia quinqueflora*. Collectively, these salt-tolerant plants are known as samphire.



As you walk along the causeway you may either have water on both sides at high tide or the area to the right maybe an open sand flat. The sandy area is a favourite with small migratory wading birds like Red-necked Stints and Sandpipers during the summer months. Small fishes can usually be seen darting in amongst the rocks at the base of the causeway and occasionally very large Stingrays can be seen cruising the Moyne River on your left.



As you leave the sandflat zone you will enter an area of low shrubland on your right. This low succulent shrubland has been created by birds. Each year the thousands of returning Short-tailed Shearwaters *Ardenna tenuirostri* excavate the sand for their nests and trample the vegetation which stops larger shrubs from developing within the colonies. It was even given its own vegetation class name: *Bird Colony Shrubland*.



Decision time!

Either take the “inland” route to your right or continue along the Moyne River almost to the end of the training wall then along the beach and back to the inland path. Whichever you choose you will join up a few hundred metres before the lighthouse.



Inland route: the surrounds of this route are pock-marked with hundreds of Short-tailed Shearwater burrows (nests). The birds are in residence and breeding on Griffiths Island from September to March after which they migrate north to the Aleutian Islands, a journey of around 12,000 km, then return via California for the next breeding season.

Moyne River route: follow the training wall almost to the end then along the beach to your right until you find a narrow track which will take you back to the inland route. The little sandy beach is constantly changing. Some larger, shrubs like Grey Saltbush *Atriplex cinerea*, encroach on the beach only to be washed away during large tides. You may see the exposed roots of the shrubs where they are being washed out by the tide.



This is also a good beach for finding some of the flattish sand-burrowing bivalve molluscs such as the russet coloured Double-rayed Sunset-shell *Hiatula biradiata* and the White Tellin *Tellinoides albinota* which, despite its name, is usually pink.



Walk to the end of the beach where it meets the rocks and walk up a narrow track to your right and back to the inland path.

Where the two paths unite, near a row of Norfolk Island Pine trees, is a good spot for viewing a few of the island's Swamp (or Black-faced) Wallabies *Wallabia bicolor*. Wallabies are browsers feeding mainly on shrubs and other elevated food but have been observed eating Cape Weed on the island. If they will eat Cape Weed, they will eat just about anything!.



As you approach the lighthouse you will see a large area covered by the sprawling Blue Periwinkle *Vinca major* which has a small blue flower in spring. It is an invasive weed species and probably a legacy of the lighthouse keepers garden.

The lighthouse marks the turn in the coast, and the submerged reef that runs to the east. As a result, the area around the lighthouse has two distinct sides – a shelly beach on the northern side where it is more protected from the southerly swell and the rocky area on the exposed southern side.



The beach on the northern side of the lighthouse is littered with an array of small and mainly marine gastropod (snail) shells. The rocky reefs around Port Fairy support a wide variety of gastropods whereas the bivalves are generally confined to the more sandy areas where they burrow.



If you search through the shells on the northern shelly beach you may be lucky enough to find the Delicate Air-breather *Marinula xanthostoma* which, although being very small, is fairly easy to identify by the small projections or “teeth” in the shell opening. As the name implies, this little species breathes air so has “lungs” rather than gills. It lives in the upper tidal zone.



Have a look around on the southern side of the low wall running out to the lighthouse and you will find a small prostrate succulent plant creeping between the rocks. This interesting little plant is Rounded Noon-flower *Disphyma crassifolium* subsp. *clavellatum*. You will observe that, unlike the other “pig-faces” around Port Fairy, this species has short cylindrical leaves rather than the triangular leaves of the other species. Plus.... “our” Rounded Noon-flower is different to the others in the state as it has a white flower rather than pink. Confirming yet again that Port Fairy is different (in a good way)!

From the lighthouse you can either retrace your steps or continue west along the coastal track.

Along the coastal track you are exposed to the swells and waves of mighty Southern Ocean where the only sandy beaches are in areas protected by small islands or man-made causeways.



The coastal zonation can be clearly seen at many places between the ocean and the track. Rocks in the lower tidal zone are colonised by seaweed and other organisms that can tolerate inundation by salt water; the next level up, in the splash zone, is occupied mainly by lichens (orange and grey) and a few other small and very salt-tolerant land plants; the spray zone is occupied by mainly grey plants like Cushion Bush *Leucophyta brownii*; and, finally, the slightly less hardy green shrubs and grasses along the

track but the influence of salt and wind can be seen in both the height and the shape of the plants.



Further west, where Green Island is protecting the coast of Griffiths Island from the southern swell, sand is able to build up and create a range of other landscapes and habitats.

The Wavy Turban *Lunella undulata* is probably the most common seashell along our rocky coast. They are herbivores eating mainly seaweed.

If you look closely at shells that have been recently washed ashore you might see a Southern Bonnet-limpet *Sabia australis* attached near its mouth. The Bonnet-limpets live exclusively on the shells of other larger molluscs and get their food from scraps left by the larger molluscs.



Wavy Turbans with Southern Bonnet-limpets attached near its mouth.



As you make your way along the beach keep your eyes out for other little treasures washed in from the sea. Some of the things you might find include small bundles of what look like noodles which are in fact the egg strands of a Sea Hare *Aplysia* species, a large slug-like mollusc; the shells of Tasmanian Keyhole-limpets *Macroschisma tasmaniae* and the very common and distinctive Anemone Cone *Conus anemone* which, when alive, is highly toxic to humans.



Egg strands of a Sea Hare



Tasmanian Keyhole-limpet



Anemone Cone (with a Southern Bonnet-limpet top right)



As you head back to the rotunda check for many of the lovely bird species that use the tidal flats near the causeways. Stately Eastern Great Egrets *Ardea modesta* and the mainly grey (with yellow legs) White-faced Herons *Egretta novaehollandiae* are common year-round while an array of small migratory waders are regular visitors during the warmer months.

We are indeed blessed with the array of habitats found on Griffiths Island and the range of wildlife that can be readily observed so close to town.

There are many more plants and other good stuff to discover on the island so take your time...and your binoculars and of course....your hand lens.

If you find a plant, shell, bird, whatever, and want to know what it is, email me a picture and a short description and I will endeavour to work it out for you. Email me at: **jmiller3350@gmail.com**

Please feel free to share this with anyone else who might enjoy the walk.

Griffiths Island, Port Fairy Walking tracks



- Start and end at rotunda
- Lighthouse via the inland route
- Lighthouse via the training wall and beach
- Full circuit