

# Thredbo self-guided ecology walk



**21** Feel like a picnic? Follow the sign to Birralee Bush Camp and cross over the creek via the footbridge to enjoy this out of the way picnic table.



Gunn's Willow-herb - pink petals

**22** The track leaves the Tea-trees and Snow Gums and leads you into the open underneath Merritts Chairlift. Follow the service road to the right.

**23** Just before the top of the ridge, take the walking track to the left. Just before leaving the trees you enter a grove of Black Sallees. These eucalypts tolerate cold and wet locations like this slope. The Black Sallees are easily identified by their dark colouring, from olive green to charcoal grey with an occasional splash of mustard yellow! The Black Sallee is known locally as the Muzzlewood Tree, as stockmen used it's wood to form a muzzle, like a horse's bit, to prevent young stock from suckling nursing cows.



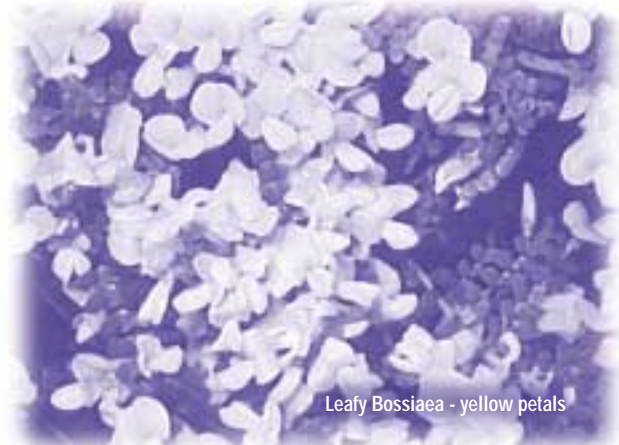
Burramys Pygmy Possum

**24** When you come out of the trees follow the service road to the left, past the bobsled and then rejoin the walk track on the right.

**25** As you approach the paved path near the Thredbo River, there is a large wombat hole on the right where you can see fresh diggings. Wombats are common in the Thredbo Valley where they find plenty of plant material to eat and soils that are easy enough to burrow in.

**26** On the left side of the track just before the tennis courts is a natural drainage area. The plants living in this location are adapted to swampy conditions, and include Alpine Myrtle Heath and several native grasses and sedges.

**27** Follow the track past the tennis courts and return to Valley Terminal for a refreshing drink or an ice cream.



Leafy Bossiaea - yellow petals

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## Thredbo self-guided ecology walk

*Please allow around two hours to complete the walk. As there are many steep sections and steps, this walk is not recommended for people with knee problems.*

This self-guided ecology walk follows Merritts Nature Track from the top of the Kosciuszko Express Chairlift to Thredbo Village. The walk highlights points of interest which are numbered on the map. Please use the map as a guide only as it is not to scale. You will find a wildflower guide book most useful on this walk. The flowers described in this walk bloom at different times of the year, so you may not see every flower on your walk.

On this self-guided ecology walk you will explore several types of plant communities as you walk down the Merritts Track from a height of 1930m above sea level to 1370m. This change in elevation is reflected by the different vegetation zones you'll walk through including Alpine (snow cover from 4 – 9 months per year), Sub-alpine (snow cover from 1 – 4 months per year) and Montane. Within each of these zones the plant communities reflect a combination of environmental conditions including: climate, soils and aspect.

As you travel up the chairlift watch how the trees become smaller and more stunted the higher you go. When you get off the chairlift at the top, you are in the alpine zone – where no trees grow at all due to the harsh climate.

### To start the walk,

follow the gravel road directly to your left as you get off the chairlift. The road does a sharp left hand bend back underneath the chairlift. You need to be careful on this first section of the track as the road is quite steep.

**1** On your left are a group of large granite rocks that are providing shelter for some Snow Gums. Notice how twisted and stunted these Snow Gums are compared to others further down the slope. At this elevation, just over 1900m above sea level, the Snow Gums are growing at their upper limit – the severe alpine conditions prevent their survival. In comparison to subalpine zones in other countries where more than one species of tree grows, Snow Gums are the only trees adapted to these conditions in Australia.



Silver Snow Daisy - white petals



Dusty Daisy - white petals

**2** Here the terrain opens, offering no shelter for Snow Gums to grow. Instead, the tall alpine herbfield community covers the slope. There are large patches of Silver Snow Daisies growing amongst the Snow Grass and several clumps of Ovate Phebilium (green shrub). The rocks on your left provide shelter for Tasman Flax Lilies to grow – they are more common at lower elevations.



Tasman Flax Lily - purple petals

**3** As you get to the sharp right hand bend in the road, look ahead to Merritts Creek cascading down the mountainside. The creek flows down an old block stream, which is a corridor of rocks formed during the last glacial period.

**4** The Merritts Nature Track branches off to the left near the top of Snowgums chairlift. Just before you leave the road, look at the heath-bog community to your right. These plant communities require permanently wet sites such as spring-fed hillsides like this and are characterised by sphagnum moss (often yellow – gold or lime green in colour). Sphagnum plays an important role in absorbing rainfall and snowmelt and slowly releases water throughout summer. From this point you can look back up the hill and see the changes in plant communities, from the heath-bog complex at your feet to tall alpine herbfield and tall heath at the top.

**5** Take a seat! This great location has lovely views of Merritts Creek. Look around at the variety of sub-alpine and alpine plants sheltering under the Snow Gums. Here you will find the summer blooming pink flowered Grass Trigger Plants, Silver Snow Daisies and the Dusty Daisy Bush. Flowering in December is the Purple Hovea and the yellow-flowered Alpine Oxylobium. The Tasman Flax Lily, noted earlier, has dark green, sword shaped leaves and purple flowers with bright yellow anthers. At the end of summer it produces green berries which ripen to a deep purple colour. Local aboriginal tribes ate these berries as well as the bases of the leaves.

**6** Another seat where you can sit and listen to the Merritts Creek.

**7** Here is a section of forest where the Snow Gums have succumbed to dieback. This is caused by a combination of factors including damage by wood boring insects such as the Cossid Moth and the impact of wind, ice, and snow accumulation. Frosts in autumn and spring may also contribute to dieback when the leaf tissue is not fully hardened.



Grass Trigger Plant - pink petals

**8** As you follow this winding section of steps, stop about halfway down at the granite boulder on your right. Why stop – it's just a lifeless lump of rock? Or is it? Take a closer look at the rock starting at micro level – how many different types of lichen and moss can you count? Lichen is one of the first life-forms to grow on a rock face where it slowly breaks down the surface. Eventually other plants such as mosses, grasses and larger shrubs and trees can grow on the rock too. Look at how many plants are growing in higher cracks in this boulder.

As you drop in altitude, you'll start to see different types of shrubs growing. The main ones you'll see now are Alpine Orites (creamy flowers in Summer), the Tall Rice-flower with its sweetly scented, pink to white coloured flowerheads and the Leafy Bossiaea which becomes a mass of tiny yellow flowers in Spring.

**9** Here the walking track crosses the Village Trail ski run (only used in winter!) At the large boulder on the right stop and have a look around for any wildlife. It's unlikely that you'll see any mammals during the day, however, there are plenty of birds and reptiles to be seen if you're observant. The birds that are most easily seen are the glossy black Little Ravens and the red and blue Crimson Rosellas. Other birds you are likely to see and hear are a variety of little brown birds which are small, quick moving and hard to distinguish from one another. They include Scrubwrens, Thornbills, Pardalotes and Tree Creepers. As for the reptiles, you are more likely to see a variety of skinks than snakes. Each species of skink has its own specialised habitat as suggested by their names including: Alpine Water Skink, Mountain Log Skink, Southern Tussock Skink and Mountain Swamp Skink. There are only two species of snakes that occur in sub-alpine ecosystems like this, they are: the White-lipped Snake and the Highlands Copperhead. Both snakes are venomous but shy, so you are unlikely to see them.



Mt Hickory Wattle - yellow bloom

**10** A scenic place to stop for a break! A picnic table located on a rocky outcrop, overlooks Merritts Creek and there's a seat a few metres down the track. Many of the plants around here are the same as the ones you've seen earlier in the walk. Notice anything different? They're getting bigger! As the elevation decreases, growing conditions become more favourable and plants can grow larger.

Surrounding the rock outcrop is a collection of Mountain Plum Pines. These shrubs can grow up to 7m high in ideal conditions, while in the alpine zone their growth is slowed by the cold into bonsai forms. These hardy plants are the oldest living organism in the alpine area, with some specimens estimated to be 800 years old. Plum Pines that grow over and adjacent to boulder fields are the major habitat for the threatened Mountain Pygmy Possum that mostly lives above the treeline.

**11** After descending some steps, the walk heads right along a winter trail. Follow the trail under Snowgums Chairlift and out to the top of Bunnywalk Station. Creeping along the side of the track here are masses of the Ivy-Leaf Goodenia plant. It has glossy dark green leaves and is covered with golden flowers in Summer. As a ground cover, the Goodenia is very effective at protecting soil from the eroding forces of wind and rain. Colour is added to the surrounding Snow Gum forest in Spring by the creamy yellow flowers of the Mountain Hickory Wattle.



Ivy Leaf Goodenia - yellow petals

**12** Turn left onto the service road and continue under Snowgums Chairlift. Walk to the side of the road to avoid traffic.

**13** Near Bunnywalk Station on the Snowgums Chairlift there is a great view of the Thredbo valley leading up to Dead Horse Gap. Have you noticed how straight the Thredbo River valley is? It runs in a north-east direction for more than 30 kilometres – how does the river manage this through hard granite rock? With the help of geological forces that have weakened the rock over time and created a fault for the river to follow. To continue, follow the track between Bunny Walk Station and the road.

**14** As you re-enter the trees, you can see that the Snow Gums grow densely in even-aged stands (notice how the trees are all the same size?) with multi-stemmed mallee-like growth. This form of growth has resulted from an increase in fire frequencies since European settlement. Prior to this period, Snow Gum woodlands were more open and older than they are today. In this section the Snow Gums have formed quite a closed canopy that limits the variety of plants growing in the understorey. The two main plants that thrive in this shady, moist and sheltered habitat are the Leafy Bossiaea and the Tasman Flax Lily.



Tall rice flower - white petals

**15** Cross over the service road and follow the signs to continue the walk. Watch for passing traffic.

**16** As you walk down this steep section, there is a dramatic change in the trees – the towering, straight trunks of the Alpine Ash indicate that you are now leaving the Sub-alpine zone. The majestic Alpine Ash is half covered in fibrous brown bark and favours moist, sheltered south-east slopes and elevations between 1,100m and 1,400m above sea level. These ideal growing conditions allow the Alpine Ash to live for up to 500 years and to grow up to a height of 90 metres! When you are travelling along the Kosciuszko Alpine Way from Thredbo to Jindabyne, have a look across the valley and see if you can make out the patches of Alpine Ash amongst the Snow Gums. In Spring, the new leaf growth on the Alpine Ash is an easily visible reddish colour. Listen for black cockatoos in the Alpine Ash forest.

**17** The track climbs for a short distance and you leave the sheltered location of the Alpine Ash and are back in Snow Gum woodland. Edging the track in this shady section are many smaller herbs including Native Raspberry, the mauve to pink flowered Gunn's Willow-herb, Rosetted Crane's-bill and the mat forming white flowered Wreath Pennywort. Along the uphill side of this section are well camouflaged wombat holes.

**18** At the track junction, take the left fork to follow the Merritts Nature Trail. A few metres down the track you re-enter the Alpine Ash community. There is a seat here where you can rest your feet and take in the damp smells of the Alpine Ash forest. There are three large Ash trees nearby which have fallen down – notice how small the root system is in comparison to the size of the tree!

**19** Another seat to have a rest on your descent to Merritts Creek. Why not take the time to listen to the sounds of the forest? From here you can see a small diversion structure on the creek for the village water supply.

**20** As you cross Merritts Creek you are surrounded by Mountain Tea-trees growing along the edge of the water and moss covered rocks. The Tea-trees have distinctive flaky, paper-like bark and white flowers in Spring. After crossing the creek you return to Snow Gum woodland and many of the plants you have seen before. Follow the track as it crosses Sundowner ski run and returns to Snow Gum woodland.



Purple Hovea - purple petals