

# Highlands Boom

**MANY ARE ALREADY FAMILIAR WITH THE TRAILS OF WINGELLO STATE FOREST IN NSW, BUT THIS AREA HAS A LOT MORE TO OFFER—NEWLY ADOPTED BUNDANOON LOCAL JOE WARD REVEALS ALL.**

Over the past four years a small revolution has been taking place in the normally sleepy villages of NSW's Southern Highlands. Since the inception of the 'Highland Fling' marathon event, mountain biking has been rapidly embraced by the locals, councils and land managers alike. Bundanoon is now enjoying the economic and health benefits of mountain biking, with increased visitor numbers and a surprising upsurge in cycling within the local community. The historic 'Ye Olde Bicycle Shoppe' now buzzes on Thursday mornings as the locals assemble for the weekly shop ride and post-ride coffee. But unlike most shop rides, the average age is well over 50 and women outnumber the blokes! It's a sport that has been embraced by all!

For more than a century, Bundanoon has been a popular weekend retreat from Sydney with attractions like the Morton National Park, spa resorts and quaint antique shops, that's all kinda lovely but it's sweet singletrack that now makes Bundanoon an ideal base for a mountain biker's dirty weekend!

So how did this all come about? With the co-operation of Forests NSW who manage the nearby Wingello and Penrose State forests, a small but enthusiastic band of volunteers under the guidance of Wild Horizons' Huw Kingston have been instrumental in the development of a now extensive trail network. The Highland Fling's full route takes riders through the best that the southern villages have to offer with the waymarked trails of Wingello and rolling terrain of Penrose. Not content to sit on their laurels, plans are afoot to add yet more flowing singletrack to the Wingello trail system and the local trail advocacy group are currently talking to the National Parks managers about creating multi-use and mountain bike trails in the park close to Bundanoon. As is the case in many regions nowadays, the wheels of advocacy never stop turning. Also the RTA and local council are getting behind cycling by funding a guide to recreational and scenic rides around Bundanoon.

## Highland Fling

In just four short years the Fling has established itself as a key event in the enduro race calendar. The route takes in much of the great trails the region has to offer... so much in fact that the 100km event is actually 110km long! Huw just couldn't bear to have us miss out on all of that good stuff! The course is constantly evolving as the local trails do, and in conjunction with the Highlands Trails crew and generous local land owners, they're planning to build some exciting new sections. Last year's race sold out in just two weeks, so once entries open on July 1st, get in quick!



These days Bundanoon has an enthusiastic band of local riders who meet up regularly for social rides.

## Where to Ride

### Wingello State Forest

Wingello is the place to go if you're looking for a morning or a whole day of riding with over 50km of waymarked trails and plenty more if you know how to use a map. The three marked out loops offer plenty of variety for the novice through to the racer, or do all three back to back if you're keen!

While the routes are well marked with the red, yellow and blue trails, it's a large area and a map is still advisable. They're readily available to purchase from Ye Olde Bicycle Shoppe in Bundanoon, the Wingello General Store and local bike shops. Recently green arrows have been added, which indicate exit routes should you

need to bail-out and get back to the car in a hurry.

The 'forest camp' in the Wingello State forest is the place to start. Turn down Forest Road near the Wingello General Store, it's mostly dirt but fine for 2WD cars. After 4km you'll find the Forest camp. As the name would suggest you can camp here if you want; there's little in the way of facilities but it has a toilet and tank water.

From here, pick a colour and follow the arrows! The 25km 'Red Loop', as used in the Highland Fling, is predominantly singletrack and includes great sections such as the Great Wall, Tangles and Bayliss Beauty, definitely the destination for the singletrack junkie. The trails drain well after rain and with a little moisture in the ground become super tacky and great fun on fast, low tread tyres.

The adjoining Morton National Park was the location of a slow

burning and largely inaccessible bushfire for over two weeks early in January. While the fire remained in the deep gorges to the east of the trails, as a precaution, the forest managers and Rural Fires Service needed to clear some of the fire roads used in the Red Loop that had almost become singletrack. A pity, but understandable and not all bad as some of the rutted climbs like The Wall will become a little easier, however some lovely spots like Fern Gully aren't quite as beautiful as they used to be. The singletrack was completely unaffected, so if you're looking for maximum fun packed into an hour or so, consult your map to connect all the singletrack together into a best of Wingello mega-mix—15km of pure bliss!

The Yellow and Blue trails offer less technical riding suitable for the novice rider or those preferring scenery over thrills. They haven't



Looking off into Morton National Park.

been touched by the blade of the bulldozer, so remain just as fun as ever, the descent down Running Creek Road after the feed station in the Highland Fling being a particular highlight!

The crew from Highlands Trails, the local advocacy and trail building group are busy planning more singletrack in conjunction with Forests NSW who are happy to see the benefit in allowing recreational use of their working forests. The trails at Wingello should be long lived too, as they have been built in native bush corridors and not in plantation as some of the great but now lost trails of Penrose Forest were.

## Penrose State Forest

In the last 10 years there have been two great tracks in Penrose State Forest but both are now hidden and forgotten under felled timber. While there's not much in the way of singletrack, Penrose makes a great training ground for the enduro monkey, with endless rolling fireroads and the inexplicable 'Yacht Club' where a 40-foot steel yacht sits mournfully on its side in the middle of the forest. There's also a nice little downhill after that which finishes up at Stingray Swamp, which is great for a quick dip on a hot day, though thankfully no stingrays have ever been spotted lurking in the depths!

## Welby

The Fling isn't the only racing going on in the Highlands with the long established Southern Highlands Cycling Club (SHCC) having produced riders like Solo 24 hour World Champion James Williamson, Shaun Lewis and the fast developing under-23 rider, Charlton Durie. Faced with a lack of riding opportunities near the major population centres of Mittagong and Bowral they lobbied to establish a new track on land reclaimed from a closed rubbish dump. So while it doesn't quite rate in terms of scenery, Welby is a short but sweet singletrack oasis and a great example of reusing degraded land for public recreation.

Welby is on the southern side of Mittagong and the trail head is located across from the cemetery on Meranie Street. Start at the gate and follow the yellow arrows. It's generally well marked and the trail is well defined, though the markers can be difficult to spot at speed. The trail is flat to begin with a series of fast, swoopy corners to get the legs and handling skills warmed up, but the



A bit of open 'slick rock' at Welby.



The various trail loops around Wingello are well marked but a map is still advisable.

trail becomes gradually more technical, with rocky slabs, short grunty climbs and a couple of fun downhills! All the scary bits are roll-able or if you have a need to test your suspension, there's a few air-time opportunities. At only 6km in length, it's worth heading straight out for a second lap so you can nail those sections that defeated you or to relive the fun bits!

Welby is just a short deviation off the Hume Highway and a great way to break up the drive to Bundanoon, Canberra or Sydney. There's also a major shopping centre just two minutes away if you are in need of supplies. Web search for 'Welby Mountain Bike map' to get more information.

### Fitzroy Falls

Not only a tourist destination for the beautiful falls and scenic bushwalking, Fitzroy Falls is a classic mountain biking local, with lycra bandits and gravity grommets alike taking to the epic descent of McPhails pass which takes riders from the rim of Kangaroo Valley, all the way to the floor, 400 vertical metres below! Those adverse to fighting the effects of gravity will want to arrange a shuttle and turn left when they reach the bottom, whereas those looking for a solid 50km epic ride can turn right to regain lost metres with an ascent of the scenic Meryla Pass.

The McPhails trail isn't all downhill, but the steep uphill section in the middle is short enough to make pushing your long travel bike a reasonable proposition. To find the start look for a large green locked

gate about 4km south of Fitzroy Falls on the Nowra Road. This is the only gate you should cross, as the surrounding area is Catchment Authority land and you could get slapped with a hefty fine, so stick to the access road!

McPhails itself starts on the right at the bottom of a long downhill section of the access road around 3km in. The sign is overgrown and the entrance is easy to overshoot. Once on the trail, you'll pass through scenic rainforest while whooping off nicely shaped water bars, though watch the leaf litter as it remains greasy even during summer. Unfortunately after the big winds last year, quite a few large trees now block the trail across the ridgeline. Some are clearable with reasonable technical skills but chances are you'll be walking a couple of times and some are straight after

## General Information

### Location

Bundanoon is almost equidistant from both Sydney and Canberra at 160km and 166km respectively. It's also just over an hour or 87km west of Wollongong on the coast. Wingello Forest camp is 19km south of Bundanoon on the Highlands Way and Forest Road.

### Climate

Bundanoon and Wingello sit at an elevation of around 700 metres and consequently the weather is highly variable, the climate can be best described in one line, 'Don't forget your woollies!' Summer can range from high 30s through to needing arm-warmers and it has been known to snow in winter, so the best advice is to check the weather report and come prepared for everything!

### Bike Shops

Bundanoon's Ye Olde Bicycle Shoppe has recently come under the Wild Horizons banner. While the 'shoppe' has always done bike hire, Huw is upgrading the fleet with far more singletrack-worthy models. While it won't become a full scale bike store, they're currently expanding the range of spares, accessories and clothing to keep you hummin' on the trails.

They're also soon to offer 'bling-bling' demo bikes, like the Ibis Mojo and the BMC Trailfox that you'll be able to hire for the day; something that's common in the USA but a relatively new concept in Australia. It's a great opportunity to test ride your dream bike, one that could be a major investment, under real trail conditions. And the fun doesn't just stop in daylight; you could go to the pub ... or head out again and demo some trail riding lights as they have just become an Ay-Up lights demo centre.

Ye Olde Bike Shoppe is also a hub for organised rides, with groups heading off a couple of mornings a week, ring ahead for details. And with legendary outdoors-woman Karen Wilson at the controls of the espresso machine, it's also the place to go for all your pre-ride caffeine and post-ride refueling needs!



Ye Olde Bicycle Shoppe is part bike shop and part café—just the place for lunch or a caffeine fix.

Ye Olde Bicycle Shoppe is open seven days. Call (02) 4883 6043 or go to [www.wildhorizons.com.au](http://www.wildhorizons.com.au)

The larger towns of the Southern Highlands all host well equipped and knowledgeable bike stores with workshops should a major mechanical mishap strike.

McGees Cycling - Bowral: (02) 4861 5005  
Bong Bong Cycles - Bowral: (02) 4861 1419  
Cycliste - Moss Vale: (02) 4868 3606

### Accommodation

There's plenty of choice for resting weary bodies after a ride. Hotels, motels, guesthouses, YHA and camping. Go to [www.southern-highlands.com.au](http://www.southern-highlands.com.au) for details and bookings or phone 1300 657 559

### Twin Falls Bush Cottages

This 50 acre property with its tight and twisty singletrack trails, tennis court and pool has five secluded self-contained cedar cottages.

Call (02) 4887-7333 or go to [www.fitzroyfalls.com](http://www.fitzroyfalls.com)



Fear not, you are unlikely to be the only one on the trail at Wingello. On any given day you may encounter riders from Canberra, Sydney, Wollongong or a local Highlands rider.

If you've ever been in a hot tub with something that doesn't belong there, then you know how dangerous the indoors can be. The solution: Jump behind the wheel of a **New Look RAV4** and get outdoors. With a choice of advanced **3.5L Dual VVT-i V6** or **2.4L VVT-i 4-cylinder engine**, you can leave the big smoke far behind.

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Owned by Tour de France rider Brad McGee, Twin Falls cabins offers secluded accommodation and singletrack from the front door.

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corners so ride with caution. The descent starts getting a little hairy after this as the trail becomes a long, steep section of water bars and switchback turns that you really don't want to overshoot! There's a nice grassy area at the bottom to relax and meet your driver if you're getting shuttled but please consider the local residents as they probably live there for the tranquillity.


If it's climbing you crave, then Meryla

Pass has it in spades! From the parking area at the end of Jacks Corner Rd, pass through the gate and onto undulating fire road until you get the Yarrunga Creek crossing. It's not rideable but with good balance you should get across with dry feet on the small rocks. Enjoy the kilometre of undulations along the creek because it's soon time to bolt on your climbing legs as it is all uphill from here! Meryla involves a solid 8km grunt to the top but it's a good surface and a reasonably constant gradient all the way. There are great views as you get up high, and even a lovely spot for lunch about two thirds up to break up the climb. A fast and flat traverse around the valley rim on the Wombat Hill, Meryla, Link and Red Hills fire trails will see you back at the car in around four to five hours. It's not overly difficult to navigate but as always, taking a good topographic map is essential.

### Twin Falls

A new option for those looking to spend a weekend in the Highlands is the accommodation - with trails on the doorstep - offered at 'Twin Falls'. Owned by legendary Tour de France rider and Olympian Brad

McGee and managed by his 'mountain bike mad' brother Craig, Twin Falls is nestled close to bush walking trails and the falls, and they've recently put in 6km of mountain bike trail within their own property, so you can roll out of your cabin and straight onto singletrack! Why can't all holidays be like this? While the track is still new and a little raw it's gobs of fun, with easy climbs. Southern Highlands Cycling Club (SHCC) will be running some club races over it which should buff it up a treat. On-site trails and quality self-contained accommodation combined with a location central to the rest of the riding the Southern Highlands has to offer, makes for a great place to base yourself for a two or three day break.

With the efforts of the McGee clan, SHCC, Highlands Trails and Wild Horizons, the Southern Highlands is becoming a very attractive proposition as a day or weekend destination and despite its close proximity to the major metropolises of Sydney and Canberra, it feels a world away in the pace of life, climate and importantly the friendly locals. 

Article by Joe Ward

Photography by John Hardwick



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## CHASE THE SUN MTB SERIES

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