



Visiting Towra Point Nature Reserve

Towra Point is not only the most significant wetland in the Sydney region, but is also important at a national and international level as well.

Towra Point Nature Reserve is only 16 kilometres south of the centre of Sydney, at the mouth of the Georges River in Botany Bay. The Reserve includes important remnant terrestrial vegetation and wildlife habitats, and is surrounded by seagrass beds, mangroves and migratory wading bird habitats.

Towra Point Nature Reserve and the adjacent Towra Point Aquatic Reserve (managed by NSW Fisheries) form the largest and most diverse estuarine wetland complex remaining in the Sydney region.

Entrance to the Towra Point Nature Reserve is via Captain Cook Drive, turning into a short roadway and parking near the abandoned horse stables. An elevated roadway extends from the stables area out to the old oyster farms. The causeway was built during and after World War II to service the original landing signals for the airport at Mascot.



Rainbow lorikeet feed on the trees in Towra Point Nature Reserve

After leaving the elevated roadway, visitors walk through 800m of saltmarsh that at times can be inundated with either seawater or fresh, depending on tide height and flooding from heavy rain. Of the twelve species of saltmarsh flora to be observed, glasswort, *Salicornia quinqueflora*, is the most abundant species.

The initial plant community encountered after leaving the saltmarsh is a swamp oak forest, with stands of tall casuarina. This is the most widely scattered plant community in Towra Point Nature Reserve. Beyond these is a forest of swamp mahogany, *Eucalyptus botryoides*, referred to locally as bangalay trees.

The first littoral rainforest can be seen adjacent to the bangalay forest. It contains several large lilly pilly, *Acmena smithii*, trees. A variety of birds, including rainbow lorikeet, crimson rosella and Eastern rosella can be seen feeding on the purple berries during spring. The lilly pilly is a large spreading tree that grows up to 15m high. One of the permanent freshwater ponds in the Nature Reserve is to be found near the lilly pilly trees. Known as Weedy Pond, it is completely covered by exotic Lantana, *Lantana camara*. It is doubtful whether any of the freshwater plant species have survived.

The forest close to the shoreline consists mainly of tea-tree, *Leptospermum laevigatum*, and banksia, *Banksia integrifolia*. Many exotic plant species are found in the dune forests with lantana rampant. The exotic bitou bush, *Chrysanthemoides moniliferum*, also appears to be gaining a hold.

Freshwater wetlands cover only two percent of the Nature Reserve but they add greatly to the habitat diversity. The most important pond is Mirrormere, about 100 square metres and about 0.5m deep on average. It greatly increases in volume and height during heavy rain periods. Around Mirrormere is a dense stand of paper bark, *Melaleuca ericifolia*. A stand of swamp oaks borders either end of the pond. The largest pond, Towra Lagoon, contained freshwater until May 1994 when heavy waves overtopped the beach. This was caused when a combination of heavy ocean surges met with floodwaters from Georges River. Dredging Botany Bay has increased the wave height.



River mangrove

There are 400ha of mangroves around Towra. This is the largest mass stand in the Sydney region. It comprises the two species found south of Taree with grey mangrove, *Avicennia marina*, dominant. The other species, river mangrove, *Aegiceras comiculatum*, is a dwarf form seldom reaching 2.5m in height and is found in the low salinity areas.

Mangroves play an important role in the food chain for estuarine animals. Dead leaves, bark and fruit that falls from the mangroves are colonised by microscopic fungi and bacteria after soluble nutrients are leached out. The decomposed material is then eaten by small animals such as prawns, crabs and other invertebrates. These are in turn are eaten by water birds.

One square kilometre of mangroves contributes about 600 tonnes of leaf litter each year to the detrital food chain. The mangrove forest floor also supports large numbers of animals. For example, a survey at Towra Point showed that a square metre of sediment can contain up to 100 animals of 35 species. The most common are crabs and molluscs. Mangrove stands could be classed as the Twilight Zone – the upper limit for crabs and other marine animals, the lower limit for lizards and snakes.

Sea grasses are considered to be second only to coral reef communities in productivity. A survey revealed that 1.5 square kilometres of seagrass yielded 235 million prawns and 95 billion molluscs. Seagrass is the main source of detritus, producing 10 tonnes per 0.5ha per year.

Access

Before arriving at the Towra Point Nature Reserve visitors are obliged to obtain permission from the National Parks and Wildlife Service at Kurnell. Check with them also about access to private property. A narrow elevated 1km long road bisects Towra's largest wetlands.



Beach restoration on Towra Point