

Wombat magic

A family tour with Tasmania's flora and fauna is a revelation to one and all, writes **Briar Jensen**.



Our children's initial horror at watching their aunt crumble wombat poo between her fingers (the same fingers that had earlier prepared lunch) gradually transformed into genuine interest as they listened to her describe the different characteristics, habits and droppings of the local wildlife.

Their aunt, an education officer with the Parks and Wildlife Service of Tasmania, and guide for our walk around Lake Dobson, had the kids identifying wombat, possum and wallaby dung within minutes. Realising this walk was going to take considerably longer than planned if

it has two main sections, the first, near the park entrance, houses the visitor centre where you can collect brochures and track notes. It also features an interpretation display, cafe and shop, though the most welcome feature was an enormous fireplace that we used to warm up after our very wet walk to Russell Falls – a 30-minute return trip through a giant fern forest.

This three-tier waterfall has been described as the prettiest in Tasmania. Obviously that author hadn't been there in the rain. We encountered an avalanche of water boiling down the mountainside – spectacular is more apt than pretty. The spray, together with the rain, ensured our inadequate mainland clothing was drenched and prevented us from taking any photos of the raging torrent.

The second section, the alpine environment around Lake Dobson, is linked by a 16-kilometre winding, unsealed road. Had we not been following experienced locals, we would have thought twice about tackling the slushy road in our hire car but despite the rain, sleet and mud, it was quite passable.

This area includes some longer walks and is an access point to skiing areas. Wanting to show off Tassie's most unusual scenery to her northern relos, our guide selected the Pandani Grove walk, which meanders along the edge of Lake Dobson. The field notes state this is





we stopped to investigate every piece of excrement we came across, I was relieved when she proclaimed, "But you must never touch carnivore poo." As if we would know the difference.

I was contemplating this instruction when our son shouted, "Mum, did you know that wombats do square poos?" Ignoring his father's comment about the fact they must have square bums, our eight-year-old went on to tell us why their droppings are cube-shaped. I was hoping he wasn't going to secret a sample in his pocket to take back to school for news.

Lake Dobson is in Mt Field National Park, just over an hours' drive from Hobart. Proclaimed in 1916, it's one of Tasmania's oldest national park.

Destination

Mt Field National Park, Tasmania

■ GETTING THERE

Mt Field National Park is 75 kilometres from Hobart, via New Norfolk. Take adequate clothing. Sun, rain, hail and snow are possible at any time of the year, including in the same day. Walks led by rangers are available in summer.

a one-hour return walk, though we went right around the lake, which took longer, even without allowing for dung-inspections stops.

We were enthralled by the unexpected appearance of the vegetation here. The alpine pandani plant (pictured), the world's tallest heath plant, found only in Tasmania, looks remarkably like tropical pandanus. It seemed incongruous to see their strappy leaves draped in freshly fallen snow. Ancient pencil pines towered above giving the grove a mystical, almost magical feel.

"Walk quietly and keep your eyes peeled for what looks like a log in the water," the aunt said, "though we're unlikely to see one as they feed mainly at dawn and dusk." Having only seen a platypus in captivity I was excited at the thought of seeing one in the wild. As it was the middle of the day, albeit overcast and snowing, I was telling the kids not to get their hopes up when one of their cousins whispered, "There's one over there."

■ WHAT IT COSTS

Park fee: \$20 a vehicle a day. Holiday Pass for eight weeks unlimited access to all national parks \$50.

■ INFORMATION

Visitors' Centre (03) 6288 1149. www.parks.tas.gov.au
Why do wombats do square poos? They like to deposit their droppings on top of things like logs, rocks and even mushrooms, so the cube shape means they are less likely to roll off.