

Seeing Red

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<http://www.traveller.com.au/seeing-red-21vow>



Our three walkers in red - Michael, Sarah and Ruby Photo: Tim the Yowie Man

Each year in the lead-up to Mother's Day, I'm asked by readers for suggestions of where to take mum for a fun day out in the fresh air with the caveat that it's not too far away and that it's also close to creature comforts.

Owing to its proximity to the city, stunning autumnal vistas, native wildlife and its knock-out cafe to boot, one of my perennial suggestions is Red Hill. And this year there's even more reason to make this much-loved nature park the place to take mum, because a new walking track that explores the hill's fascinating natural and cultural heritage through the theme of the colour red has just been completed. Earlier this week, I took Sarah, my four-year-old daughter, whose favourite colour just happens to be red, to check it out.

Sarah had been preparing for the Red Track for days – not by increasing her walking endurance, rather by ensuring she had adequate (read: from head to toe) red clothing to wear, and of course enough red food (read: lollies) to stash in her backpack.

Even her pre-school teacher called me aside at pick-up on Wednesday to express her concern at Sarah's sudden obsession with all things red. It was suggested that perhaps I should actively expose Sarah to a broader spectrum of colours.



King Parrot on the Red Walk Photo: Miranda Gardner

On the morning of the walk, Sarah is up early and refuses to use anything but a red crayon while scrawling in her scrap book. Even kangaroos and the sky are decorated in various shades of red. On the way in my (thankfully!) red Jeep, Sarah cheers at every red light – that's when she isn't raucously singing along to The Wiggles' *Big Red Car*, which she demands remains on constant repeat for the entire trip.

At the lookout we meet our guide Michael Mulvaney, who is resplendent in a red jacket, and his nine-year-old niece Ruby (yes, that really is her name) Taplin. Michael is a founding member of Red Hill Regenerators – a Park Care Group that's been busy beavering away, weeding and caring for the iconic hill for 23 years in an attempt to return it to the woodland it was before European settlement.

“Most Canberrans don't appreciate that the woodland on Red Hill is of national importance and we came up with the sign-posted walk as a means of conveying this message and encouraging people to experience this magnificent woodland and picture what most of the south west slopes once looked

like,” says Michael as we head off down the eastern side of Red Hill. Within minutes Sarah and Ruby have raced ahead – they’re on a mission to find a picture of a red-coloured bird that is hidden on each of the many interpretative signs spread along the track. It’s refreshing to be on a walk where the kids are leading the way, instead of you dragging them along.



The black and yellow banded centipede Photo: Miranda Gardner

Although the Red Track will probably be at its reddest in spring and summer when native raspberries and other flowered plants are in full bloom, there’s still plenty of redness to observe. Sarah and Ruby squeal in delight each time they spot a red-coloured bird. First it’s a crimson rosella and then it’s a pair of king parrots.

But the red isn’t only around us in the trees, it’s also beneath us – even the meat ants appear redder than normal and, according to Michael, they are all sisters derived from one super mum: “Given that one colony can have 64,000 ants, that’s quite an effort by mum.”

“Wow – think of all the presents she’ll get on Mother’s Day!” quips Sarah.

Meanwhile, underneath rocks near the summit lurks the black and yellow banded centipede that grows to 10 centimetres long. It is “the top insect predator on Red Hill”, announces

Michael, as he peels back one of the reddish rocks to reveal one of the creepy-crawlies. Despite its name, it is actually quite red in appearance – perhaps from crawling through all the red soil, which is thought to have given the hill its name.

“Early on she is an excellent and protective mum, curling her body around her eggs and the newborns. However, after a few weeks the young scatter and if the mother encounters them again she’ll eat them,” explains Michael, who adds, “well, I guess that’s one way of preventing your kids of returning home.”

We finish our walk with a feast of watermelon. Sarah complains that I should have cut the green rind off because “don’t you know, everything has to be completely red Daddy!”

However, Sarah does leave with a big smile on her face and on the way home even lets me play my own music – a sure-fire sign that she’s had a good time. I flick through my pile of CDs and pick out my Split Enz compilation. I skip forward to track No 4 and turn the volume to full – it’s their 1978 hit *I See Red*.

I shudder to think what Sarah’s pre-school teacher is going to say to me on Monday if she reads this. Perhaps it’s time for Mrs Yowie Man to do the school run.

FACT FILE

The Red Track: 3.2-kilometre loop track around the eastern and northern slopes of Red Hill. Allow one to two hours for a leisurely ramble with many stops. Suitable for most ages with a basic level of fitness. Park at the main lookout car park and look for the Red Track map on a sign near the picnic table behind the cafe. As the track is new, a couple of the markers are still to be installed, but the route is reasonably obvious and, to ensure you don’t take the wrong turn, the Red Hill Bush Regenerators have kindly marked the track with ribbons (red, naturally), especially for Mother’s Day.

Mother’s Day tip: Take a picnic – there are plenty of gullies to shelter from the predicted cool breeze (perhaps buy mum a

new red scarf!). Alternatively, treat mum to a lunch at the Red Hill Lookout Bar and Cafe before or after your walk, but be sure to book first on 6273 2915 to avoid disappointment.

Did you know? The kangaroo mums on Red Hill should be an inspiration to all Australian mothers, with Red Hill's population of eastern greys jumping (or should that be hopping?) from 447 in 2010 to 757 in 2012.

More: [Red Hill Regenerators](http://www.redhillregenerators.org.au) (www.redhillregenerators.org.au)