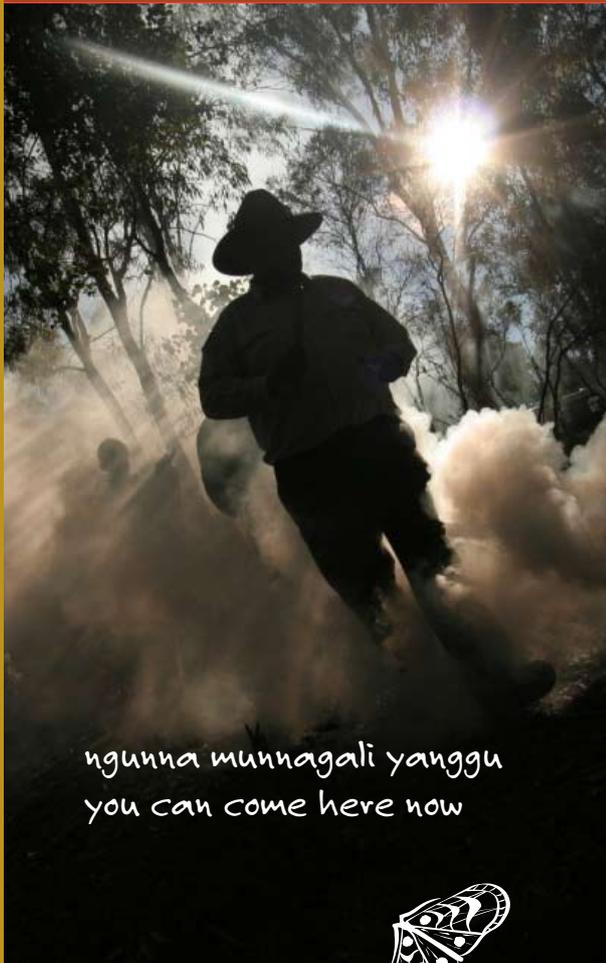


Aboriginal Cultural Heritage of the ACT

Ngunnawal Country



ngunna munnagali yanggu
you can come here now

Cover photo: Benjamin Brillante



Healthy Country
Healthy People

There is evidence that Aboriginal people have lived in the Canberra region for at least 25,000 years. Their descendants still live in the region today but not in the same way as their ancestors did.



Brindabella Range, Namadgi National Park. 'Namadgi' is the Aboriginal name for the mountains south-west of Canberra.

The Dreaming

Every Aboriginal group has its own ancestral Dreamtime stories which have been handed down through generations. These stories describe how Aboriginal people are connected to certain plants, animals and the land.

Significant Aboriginal Sites and Places

Canberra has more than 3,500 known Aboriginal heritage sites which indicate the extensive occupation of this area by Aboriginal people. It is a common misconception that Aboriginal sites are all 'sacred sites'. While it is true that some places are considered sacred, such as ceremonial or initiation grounds, the great majority of Aboriginal places, campsites for example, relate to the pursuance of everyday activities.

Many Aboriginal heritage sites have been discovered as a result of archaeological and heritage surveys and information provided by members of the local Aboriginal community. Others have been accidentally discovered by interested members of the public. New sites were discovered after the January 2003 bushfires. Since the whole of the ACT has not been subjected to a comprehensive survey, a record of all Aboriginal sites that occur here does not exist.

Artefacts and campsites

Artefacts and artefact scatters are found throughout the entire region. These are stone remnants from toolmaking.

Significant campsites are located at Pialligo and



Cutting tools



Grinding stone

The Original Custodians and Caretakers

The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the Canberra region. The region was also a significant meeting place to neighbouring clans, including the Ngarigo, Wolgalu, Gundungurra, Yuin and Wiradjuri people. Ceremonies, trading and marriages between people of different clans took place during such gatherings.

Aboriginal people regard themselves as custodians and caretakers of the land. Caring for Country involves looking after the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations of an area (Country), including the processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors as well as practices to maintain the natural resources.

Smokers Gap on the Corin Road. Remains of campfires and animal bones have been found at these sites as well as stone artefacts.

Grinding groove sites

Grinding grooves are small depressions in rock typically formed by the repeated movement of hard stone artefacts against a softer one (usually sandstone).

This was done to sharpen stone hatchet heads, stone wedges, hand held 'axes' and wooden artefacts with fire hardened points, such as digging sticks. Grinding grass or wattle seeds over time also created grooves. Grinding grooves are almost always located close to a source of water which is used to assist the grinding process. Grinding grooves have been recorded on many creeks across the ACT. It is possible that some of the larger grooves were designed to hold water, either from precipitation or carried from the creek, to wet the stone for grinding.

Rock shelters and art sites

Overhangs under large boulders were used as shelters by Aboriginal people. Significant rock shelters include Birrigai Rock Shelter and Hanging Rock at Tidbinbilla.

The most significant ACT rock art site is at Yankee Hat in southern Namadgi National Park. Here, the artwork occurs under an overhanging boulder.

Scarred trees

Scars on trees can result from the deliberate removal of bark by Aboriginal people for a variety of reasons. Tree bark was an integral component of Aboriginal material culture. It was deliberately removed in order to:

- use the bark for shelter, canoes and domestic articles such as coolamons;
- create a marker tree;
- allow access to other tree resources—sometimes toeholds were cut into trees to assist climbers obtain bird's eggs or possums;
- sometimes carved patterns in the tree trunks served ceremonial purposes and some indicate burial sites.

Due to early land clearing practices of the early European settlers in the region, as well as natural attrition, scarred trees are not very common and are assigned a much higher significance in the ACT than they may be elsewhere in the country.

There are a few scarred trees on the property of Lanyon as well as in the suburbs of Wanniassa, Gilmore, Garran and Kambah. To date, the ACT does not have any carved trees (dendroglyphs) and these are becoming increasingly rare in other parts of south-eastern Australia.

Ceremonial sites, initiation grounds and quarries

There are many ceremonial and initiation sites in the region but many now lie beneath development and artificial lakes.

Acton Peninsula is the site of a former ceremonial ground. Tidbinbilla Mountain was an initiation site for young men.

A number of chert rock quarry sites were located in the Gungahlin and Symonston areas. These chert quarries were used to manufacture stone tools. An ochre quarry was located at Red Hill.

There are also significant Aboriginal sites where Aboriginal people made contact with Europeans including historic settlements, cemeteries, reserves and recent burial sites.

Stone arrangements occur throughout the area including in Namadgi National Park. Initiation ceremonies were held at these sites.

The traditional Aboriginal way of life

Aboriginal people moved through the land making good use of seasonal food sources. Campsites were well-protected, avoided frosts and were not far from water. Sources of stone for making tools and weapons were well known and stone was traded between groups.

Plants were a vital part of survival. Different ecosystems grasslands, rivers and lakes, wet and dry forests, swamps and woodlands—provided different types of food, medicines and materials. The seasons also offered their own range of plants to eat. During summer, the small sweet fruits of the Cherry Ballart were eaten. In spring, young fern fronds grew and were eaten. Traditionally it was the role of women and children to collect plants and hunt small game. Digging sticks, woven baskets and wooden bowls or coolamons were their tools of trade.

Please do not pick or eat native plants as removal of plant material in a national park or nature reserve is prohibited by law. Also, some plants contain poisonous substances.

Ranger Guided Activities

Interpretation of local Aboriginal culture, such as the use of plants, tools and weapons, gives an insight into traditional ways of life and builds respect for Aboriginal sites and custodians of the land. Aboriginal staff conduct regular guided walks on Aboriginal culture as part of the *Explore Program*. Aboriginal programs for schools and community groups are also conducted at Tidbinbilla, Birrigai and other parks and reserves in the ACT. For more information phone Canberra Connect on 13 22 81.

Bush Tucker

Yam Daisy *Microseris scapigera*

Indigenous Name: Mewan (Ngarigo), Murnong

Description: Small daisy to 30 cm

Flowering/fruiting: Flowers summer to autumn

Habitat: Subalpine Snow Gum forests

Uses: The radish-shaped tuber was cooked and eaten



Bulbine Lily *Bulbine bulbosa*

Indigenous name: njamang (yam) (Southern Ngarigo)

Description: Bulbous plant with succulent, linear leaves to 40 cm

Flowering/fruiting: Flowers appear October-November; late summer on high mountain ridges

Habitat: Grassy woodland areas up to highest elevations

Uses: Tubers were cooked and eaten



Cherry Ballart *Exocarpus cupressiformis*

Description: Small tree 3-8 m

Flowering/fruiting: Summer fruiting

Habitat: Dry sclerophyll forests to montane levels especially on shallow soils

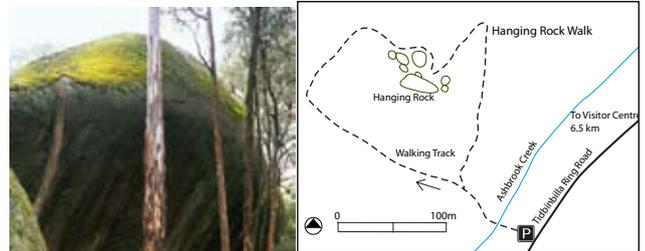
Uses: Fleshy pedicels of fruit were eaten raw; wood used for spear throwers and bullroarers



Walks that explore Aboriginal cultural sites

Hanging Rock, Tidbinbilla 500 m—Easy

On the forested slopes of the Tidbinbilla Valley, lies a large impressive undercut boulder known as Hanging Rock. Over 400 years ago, small family groups and male hunting parties of Aboriginal people regularly camped beneath it. They were on their way to the mountain tops to gather Bogong Moths which flocked to the area in summer. Hanging Rock provides shelter from three directions, thus providing protection from wind, rain and heat all year round. The surrounding forest also yielded food such as Yam Daisy roots, wallabies and possums. Hanging Rock also has the advantage of being close to fresh running water. With ample food and water nearby, the people were able to congregate in large numbers over the warmer months, allowing celebrations, trade and marriages between different groups to occur.



Aboriginal Ranger conducting a guided walk to Yankee Hat

Earliest confirmed Aboriginal occupation of Australia

Earliest known occupation of Lake Mungo

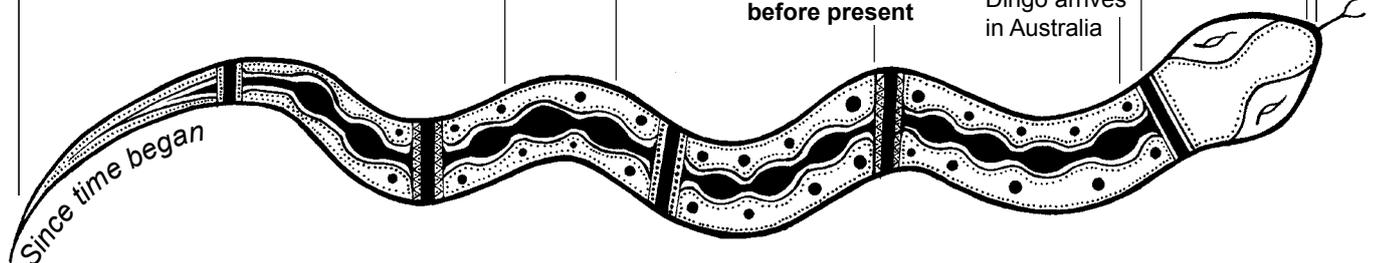
30,000 years before present

Birrigai Rock Shelter occupied over 21,000 years before present

Dingo arrives in Australia

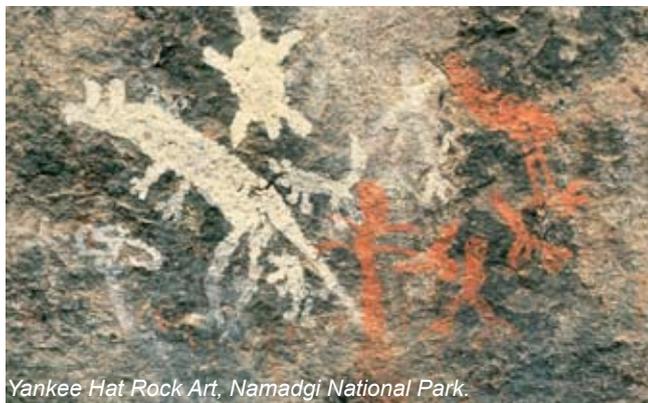
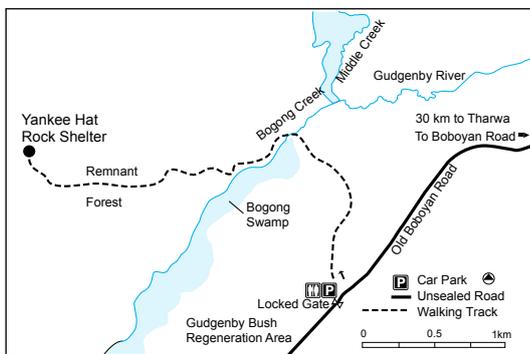
Pyramids built

Present day Captain Cook lands in Australia



Yankee Hat, Namadgi National Park 6 km return—Easy

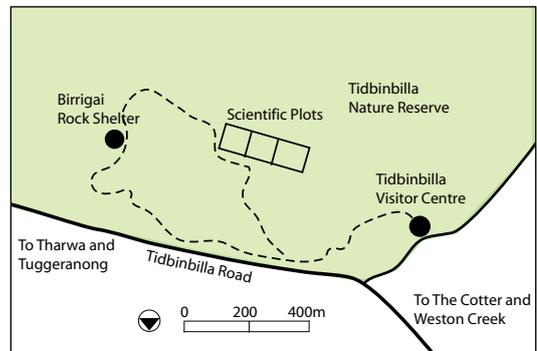
The only currently known Aboriginal rock art sites in the ACT occur in Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The Yankee Hat art sites are located within Namadgi in the Gudgenby Valley, (approximately 30 km south-west of the town ship of Tharwa and 90 mins drive from the centre of Canberra) in a complex of boulders situated at the foot of Yankee Hat Mountain. Carbon dating of the camp-site deposits in the Yankee Hat rock shelter show that Aboriginal people began using the shelter earlier than 800 years ago. Evidence from nearby sites suggests that people were camping in the area, and presumably painting, as long as 3,700 years ago. See the *Yankee Hat Self-guide Brochure* and the *Namadgi Map and Guide* for more information.



Yankee Hat Rock Art, Namadgi National Park.

Birrigai Rock Shelter, Tidbinbilla 3 km, 1 Hour—Easy

Birrigai Rock Shelter provides strong evidence, both scientifically and culturally, for continuous human occupation of the Southern Highlands areas of Australia from the Late Pleistocene age. This evidence was provided through radiocarbon dating of charcoal recovered from archaeological excavations at the shelter. It also demonstrates that the people successfully adapted their cultural practices in accordance with the changing climate and environment. Occupied over 21,000 years ago, Birrigai Rock Shelter is the oldest known Aboriginal site in the ACT. It is therefore an extremely important site. To the Ngunnawal people, Birrigai Rock Shelter demonstrates the long association they have had with the highland environment of the ACT. Birrigai Rock Shelter can be accessed via the Birrigai Time Trail self-guide walk which starts from the Tidbinbilla Visitor Centre.



Aboriginal Ranger at Ribbon Gum Theatre, Tidbinbilla

Canberra Tracks

For more insights into Aboriginal history in the ACT, take the self drive *Ngunnawal Country Track*.

Information is available from the Canberra and Region Visitor Centre and the TAMS website. www.tams.act.gov.au



Further Information

Canberra Connect: 13 22 81

Website: www.tams.act.gov.au

Produced by the ACT Government.