

Dunkeld-Mirranatwa Gap Circuit

General description: An excellent way to experience a range of land-forms in the southern Grampians is to drive around the circuit: Dunkeld → Victoria Valley → Mirranatwa Gap → Dunkeld. The variant taking in Cassidy Gap is given here, as it includes a quiet track through the bush. The track, Cassidy Gap Rd, is rough (gravelly) in some parts and sandy in others, but is easily negotiated provided due care is taken. Distances given in this guide are from Dunkeld *via* Cassidy Gap Road.

Dunkeld to Victoria Valley Hall: From Dunkeld; set your trip meter to zero at the turn-off to Halls Gap and head north.

At 2.0 km you pass through a small cutting with rock on the right. This is basalt, resulting from a lava flow that occurred when the Grampians were much the same as they are now. This basalt filled the old valley of the Wannon River, diverting it to the west, where it flowed around the south-eastern and southern slopes of Mt Sturgeon, and thence across the plain to Cavendish to the west.

Continue onwards to the turnoff to Halls Gap (2.6 km). Take this road and drive north along the Grampians Tourist Rd towards Halls Gap.

You pass the turn-off to the Piccaninny (3.8 km) and at 7.6 km the parking spot

(on the right) for the walking track up Mt Abrupt (steps on left).

Cassidy Gap: At 10.2 km turn sharp left (opposite the sign on the right to Wannon River Tk) and follow the gravelly Cassidy Gap Rd to the top of the Serra Range. Some sandstone is exposed here (take a short walk along the sandy track to the left). This is a good place to explore on foot or to have a picnic.

There are great views of nearby Signal Peak. Continue west through the floristically rich heath-lands (including Flame Grevillea, pictured below, DL) and stands of Brown Stringybark, Oyster Bay Pine and Cherry Ballart. There are a few patches of soft sand before the plain of the Victoria Valley is reached. Keep the cleared paddock on your left. The sealed Victoria Valley Rd (and the Victoria Valley Hall) is reached at 16.1 km.



Victoria Valley: From the Victoria Valley Hall follow the signs to Mirranatwa and Halls Gap. As you travel north up the Victoria Valley, the Serra Range is to the east and the Victoria Range to the west. Soils of the southern Victoria Valley are derived from basalt, which flowed up the Valley from the south about 2–3 million years ago. These soils are more fertile than the sandy soils derived from the sandstone and mudstone rocks of the Grampians, and support a different flora. The southern Victoria Valley was a savannah (grassland with trees). The main trees present were mostly River Red Gum and Black Wattle. Most of the wattles were felled soon after settlement. The bark was stripped off, and sent to Portland, where it was exported for the tanning industry. Many of the magnificent old River Red Gums remain. The southern Victoria Valley has been settled, and supports many properties producing superfine wool.

When you reach the brick gateway of the property “Sierra Park”, there are some gently rounded hills ahead and to the left. These are granitic. Magma was intruded into the sedimentary rocks of the Grampians from beneath and cooled to form granite, which has been exposed over millions of years of erosion. To the left, through a gap in the distant Victoria Range, a steep sandstone tower can be seen. This is known as the Chimney Pot or Temple.

Mirranatwa Gap: At 32.3 km take the right fork in the road to Halls Gap. The

vegetation changes when you leave the flat valley-floor. The sandy soil here is derived from weathered sandstone and mudstone. At 35.8 km there is a dirt track to the right where you can find wildflowers in spring. At 37.7 km Henham Track leads off to the left. Park here and look for wildflowers. This is a particularly good area for heath plants and orchids. Two special orchids may be seen here in spring: Grampians Greenhood (below left, DL) and Grampians Spider Orchid (below middle, DL). There are also usually many flat, heart-shaped leaves of the Red Beaks (below right, DL).

At 38.1 km an old quarry can be seen on the right side of the road. The light-coloured freshly-exposed, sandstone has had insufficient time to be colonized by lichens, so is not yet the dark grey colour of the rest of the Grampians’ outcrops.



Mirranatwa Gap (39.0 km from Dunkeld) is on the crest of the Serra Range. The valley below to the east is that of the Wannon River, and the mountains beyond are the Mount William Range, where the Grampians' highest peaks are found. A walking track from the viewing-point gives access to the nearby peak of Mt Burchell, about 1 km away to the north. From Mirranatwa Gap, continue on down the road and turn right when the T-intersection is reached (41.3 km).



Grampians Tourist Road: Watch out for wallabies (Red-necked Wallaby with joey pictured bottom right, RB) and kangaroos as you drive along this section. You return to Dunkeld *via* the southern section of the Grampians Tourist Road (constructed following the 1967 drought as a drought-relief project). Before this, the main route between Dunkeld and Halls Gap was over the Mirranatwa Gap. Excellent views of the eastern aspect of the Serra Range are to be had to the right. The east side of the Serra Range has horizontal banding: trees on steep slopes, vertical rocky cliffs, followed by more trees near the top. This banding is associated with beds of differing sedimentary rocks (cliffs of sandstone, and steep forested slopes from mudstone). Continue south, past the Cassidy Gap turnoff (58.4 km). The big cliffs of Mt Abrupt are particularly impressive from this vantage point. Return to Dunkeld (68.8 km).