

night goggles

Louise Southerden watches a different world come to life on a rainforest walk in the dark.

Almost 30 years ago Nightcap National Park hosted one of Australia's first and most fiercely fought conservation battles: the three-year Rainforest War, in which a dedicated group of activists, with then premier Neville Wran as their ally, saved the area's old-growth trees from local sawmills. Nightcap was subsequently declared a national park in 1983 and World Heritage-listed in 1989. Now it's leading the way again, as the first national park in Australia with guided night-vision bushwalks.

Former park ranger Wendy Bithell started guided night walks in Nightcap National Park in March. Originally from Sydney, she worked for the BBC in London for eight years and now lives in Lennox Head, 10 minutes south of Byron Bay.

Instead of spotlighting, which can disturb nocturnal mammals, she uses night-vision goggles – from a Sydney supplier who was pleasantly surprised when Bithell wanted several pairs of Generation 1 goggles (about \$1000 each) for bushwalking instead of surveillance, hunting, search-and-rescue work or military exercises, as his other customers did.

There are two main types of night-vision goggles – some use infrared light, while the ones used on this tour amplify any available light using a phosphor screen, which makes everything look green.

Think *Silence Of The Lambs*, Bithell says. "It's a completely new experience – most people have seen night-vision goggles only in the movies." It's also very *Blair Witch Project*, which can scare some people.

Bithell says that about one in 50 clients gets nausea from wearing the goggles. Even for the rest of us, it's disorienting, especially at first.



You can forget running through the bush commando-style. This is a peaceful, almost silent experience designed to ensure that you see some of Nightcap's main residents, its nocturnal mammals, in their natural habitat at night.

It's easy to forget all about the animal-viewing side of things, however, when you're putting on the goggles for the first time. It's like strapping a pair of binoculars to your face: there's a chin strap and a sturdy adjustable harness that fits over the top of your head to hold the goggles in place. Bithell admits they're not built for comfort: "An hour is usually long enough for most people."

If you're afraid of the dark, night-vision goggles could help – because when you're wearing them you really can, for the first time in your life, see in the dark. At one point I start believing there must be some ambient light around, perhaps from the stars, but as soon as I remove my goggles I am engulfed in complete, can't-see-a-hand-in-front-of-my-face blackness. When I put the goggles back on, it's as if the sun has come out and I am looking at life through green-tinted glasses.

Another oddity of night goggles, apart from the altered colour perception, is that, as with snorkelling, there's no peripheral vision, so it's easy to scare yourself witless by bumping into your fellow walkers when you're ambling along side by side. The goggles have a limited focal range so you can't see your feet clearly – which is why the tours operate on unsealed roads within the park instead of bushwalking tracks where you could trip or fall over.

Eventually our group of four gets used to walking with the goggles on and settles into silence so as not to scare away any nearby nocturnal creatures.

Unfortunately, we don't see any – unless you count several hundred glow worms by the side of the road, a pale-melon illum-



Caught in green headlights ... the view with night-vision goggles and, below, on the boardwalk at Protesters Falls in Nightcap National Park.



nated by our headlights as we arrive in the park and a frog we almost step on – but Bithell says they see four to six animals most nights, including wallabies, possums, spotted quolls, bandicoots, sugar gliders and the occasional carpet python.

The night vision walk ends with warming hot chocolate and marshmallows at Minyon Falls lookout. We can hear water gushing over the lip of the falls but the view is out of range of our goggles.

That's why, if you want to really "see" Nightcap National Park, the night walk is best teamed with a day trip. There are guided day walks, some run by Vision Walks, but it's easy to make your own way by taking, for instance, the two-hour walk to the base of Minyon Falls from Minyon Grass, a picnic area two kilometres from the main lookout.

Nightcap by day is a totally different world to the Nightcap we experience at night. I get to see the waterfall and the bigger picture surrounding it: some of the park's 8000 hectares of subtropical rainforested ridges and gullies, the southern rim of Mt Warning's 20-million-year-old shield volcano. In a place of such visual splendours, it is suddenly refreshing to see in colour again, though green is still the dominant hue (Nightcap has the highest annual rainfall in NSW) and to hear whipbirds, wompoo pigeons and other birds that are only active in the daytime.

There are more people about than at night but even at a popular spot such as Minyon Falls, solitude isn't hard to find.

Standing in the spray looking 100 metres up



to the lookout where I'd been the night before, it strikes me that there are at least two great things about experiencing one of Australia's most precious national parks at night: you get to see in the dark and it opens your eyes to its daytime beauties as well.

Nightcap National Park is 40 minutes north-west of Byron Bay in the state's north. Vision Walks operates Nightcap Night Vision walks, which include an hour wearing night-vision goggles, on Wednesday and Saturday nights, year-round for \$60 a head (\$44 for 10-17s; the goggles won't fit under-10s). There are also night-vision walks in a koala sanctuary near Lismore and at David Fleay Wildlife Park on the Gold Coast, for guaranteed wildlife sightings, and guided day walks in Nightcap National Park. For more information, phone 6687 4237 or see www.visionwalks.com.