

Foreword

The Ruahines are a fearsome range, characterised by sharp, tussock clad peaks surrounded by dense and varied valley greenery. Flat streams snake their way through the lowlands, crossing vast stony floodplains reminiscent of the great South Island rivers.

From the steeply sloped tops, ancient rockslides tear gashes in the landscape, sometimes providing access to cautious travellers, and sometimes gouging any path from the face of the Earth. Scarce is the trace of humanity, a hut here, a marker there. Through this forlorn and windswept place of awe and beauty, a group of four would tramp. Four would return, richer in spirit, wiser in mind and sorer in leg for the experience.

Ruahines Ramblings, 10th - 19th of December, 2012



Team Ben Duggan, Matt Lillis, Hamish Carter and Richard Hosking set out to tame the tameless, and cross the Ruahines Range from North to South, starting at Comet Road and finishing at Toka. This trip was funded entirely by the Federated Mountain Club's youth scholarship, and we are very grateful to their contribution.

Our story begins at the Comet Road carpark. To the North, the Kawekas grinned invitingly to us, but it was South that our hearts lay, among the woods, forest and innumerable ascents of the Ruahines. Ben packed lightest. As a dedicated trail runner and gear freak he has some of the best lightweight gear known to man including a 500g sleeping bag and a ruthless ethos of if it doesn't serve a purpose, it doesn't get packed. My pack was the heaviest because I was carrying 15 Footprints magazines, the annual publication of the Auckland University Tramping Club, which I intended to donate to huts along the way (and earned me no sympathy from my fellow trampers).



Hamish's secret? Loreal. Because he's worth it.

We began after midday at Comet Rd. The first kilometre featured a sharp, switch backed ascent into the bush, giving me some cause to regret my decision not to pack light. Calves burned, an omen of what was to come over the next 10 days. However, we were blessed with perfect weather. A few hours of walking saw us crossing and swimming in the Taruarau River. After another climb into the bush we found ourselves standing outside the most character filled hut I have ever lain eyes on. With stone walls and roughcut manuka bunks, Shutes Hut is a real beauty.



Shutes Hut is one of the oldest in the Ruahines, with walls of stone, bunks of Manuka logs and more character than a Belgian beer .

5AM. Our first alarmcall of the trip beacons us from beds. By 6AM we had said our farewells to Shutes, and were well on our way up the morning's climb. Fresh legs saw us to the top in relatively good time, and we walked across flat tops, that nevertheless posed a mighty challenge due to the track, or lack thereof. The glorious thing about a 6AM start is that by 2PM we had smashed out an 8 hour day, and spent the afternoon relaxing in No Mans Hut. By relaxing I mean Ben and Hamish and I went for a run in the gathering mist. Ben and I had brought our Vibram Five Fingers in addition to the more running shoes and boots we were wearing for the tramp.

Day 3 the tracks were substantially better than the previous day, and although the distance was similar, we walked the beastly in a fraction of the time. Again we had started walking at 6AM, and judging our day to be halfway done, I insisted we partake of our lunch at 8:30AM (to some bemusement from the rest of the party).

A mixture of exposed tops and forested ridgelines led us hastily towards our goal, Parks Peak hut, where we found a group of trampers not even out of bed yet. From Parks Peak, we descended to Upper Makaroro hut, where we encountered a group of DOC workers. The highlight of this day was when the chief DOC worker was draining the water from his boiled vegetables outside, and spilt some carrots and pumpkins on the ground. Like a flash, the four of us pounced on the still blistering hot food, and put it down with reckless abandon. Tramping is hungry work.

In the course of our conversation with the DOC workers, we established that the Southern part of our journey would take us through some really nasty bush. We had originally intended to come out of the very Southernmost point of the Ruahines and end in Palmerston North. With the advice we reconfigured our route to spend more time in the mountains of the Northern and Central Ruahines. The plan now was to finish at Toka, leaving many kilometres of low bushclad and

untracked hillcountry out. As always, flexibility was an essential aspect of our plan.

Day four. This is where it starts to get interesting. We had a mighty mornings climb of some 800 metres. From the top of Mount Tupari we sidled along a narrow ridge. On the left, massive landslips cut deeply into the landscape. What track had once been there had fallen into the abyss long ago, leaving nothing but a narrow and fragile stitch to clamber over. Every so often I would dislodge a large clod of earth which would sail hundreds of metres down the gulley, spinning and picking up speed as it went. Not a place to fall, nor traverse in bad weather! Fortunately our luck held, and there was no wind to speak of. After a long and nervous traverse, we finally got off the tops and made it to the most well appreciated hut of the journey, Maropea Forks.



A wise man once said "the best cups of tea are brewed on open fires"

We had the option to push forward, but a number of factors conspired to convince us this was not the best course of action. The main one being that Maropea Forks Hut is located a beautiful spot in a clearing beside a stream, deep in a valley. We spent the afternoon brewing and consuming copious quantities of tea (with lots of sugar and milk powder to replace lost calories)



Quintessentially Kiwi.

At Maropea Ben asked me if we could stock take our food. He had a feeling that something was not right with the number of dinners we had packed. I realized with a sinking feeling and a certain degree of embarrassment that 2 of our 10 dinners had been left behind. They were found at the end of the journey buried under a pile of clothes in the car.

In the mean time, this gave us huge pause for thought. We had emergency food to cover the carbohydrates for one of the days. We also had personal emergency food (mostly in the form of excess cheese and salami) which could cover the protein component for one day. That still left a fair amount to be made up somehow. Options to solve this included cutting a day out of our journey, and picking up extra food at huts along the way. This second option was obviously dependant on finding food at the huts. We therefore tightened belts, and prepared for a potential shortening of our adventure.

Day five, we began with a sharp climb. From Maropea Forks hut we climbed Piringa, a bushclad mountainlet. We descended to Wakelings hut (where no food was to be had for any money) in another river valley, before storming the height known only as Rongotea. On any other day, two such huge climbs would have signalled the end of the tramp. Not today. From Rongotea we looked across the river valley to Mckinnon hut, our objective for the day. A five hundred metre climb awaited our battered bodies. We descended in good order to Crow hut, where we stumbled upon a few packets of mi goreng noodles and some long life milk, a welcome addition to our stocks. From there, the final climb awaited. Shattered and exhausted, we slowed to a gentle meander, while minimalist legend Hamish shunned his shoes altogether and climbed in socks. The cloud built around us and the weather looked to be turning when finally we spied the hut, and crashed through the door. Ten and a half hours of hauling ourselves including nearly 2ks of climb in a day had left us exhausted and hungry. The hut would provide. Oodles of oats, much milk powder, sachets of soup, plenty of pasta. The alliteration could go on. We had a predinner porridge, and then dinner, and then post dinner porridge, before stocking our packs with food, and yet left kilos of food in the hut. No treasure hunter can have been more happy than us that fateful night.

An easier day met us as we traversed from Mckinnon to Waterfall. This day is most auspicious for the summiting of Mangaweka, highest peak in the Ruahines. It was also paradoxically the day with the least amount of climbing to date, as we had done most of the ascent the previous day. We spent the night in Waterfall hut.

From Waterfall we were offered a choice. Sawtooth ridge has always appealed to me, for its accurate visual representation of that name. The scarcely travelled ridge would lead us to Howletts hut. The alternative was a Southern route, technically easier though longer and with a mighty climb of some 800m thrown in for a bit of

a laugh. Our decision not yet made, we began one of the most fateful climbs of the trip, that up Pinnacle Creek.

Pinnacle creek ascends directly South West of Waterfall hut. It begins inauspiciously, with a gentle climb that gradually gets steeper and steeper. This is also a moderately well used, albeit unmarked route.

I watched Hamish climbing above me, already nearing the top of the climb. He had stayed on the true right of the gully, and was met with hard rock and tussock for his troubles. Myself, Ben and Richard had edged into the true left of the gully. Three hundred metres from the summit our trouble began, when the terrain swiftly began to change into loose scree and crumbling schist. By this stage we were committed to the climb, and although somewhat uncomfortable, I found a safe route and made it to the top in good time. Behind me, Ben and Richard had dropped out of sight. A minute later Ben popped round the corner, but Richard wasn't to be seen. I clambered down a little to get a view, and saw him trapped halfway across some of the most uncomfortable terrain imaginable, trying to cut steps with his bare hands into gravelly clay, which would not arrest a fall the way scree would, nor provide footing the way rock would. The result was a surface where loss of footing could easily send a tramper tumbling.

I took my pack off and headed back down to Richard. On closer examination he had taken a small fall further down, and had bloodied palms. He looked somewhat shaken. Unencumbered by my pack I clamber to just below him to see how I could help. We decided I would grab his pack off him to give him a chance to get to firmer ground. As he handed his pack over to me I found myself in exactly his situation, barely able to find the friction to keep upright with the added weight. The only solution I could find to my rapid loss of footing, was to press myself into the ground, spread eagled, with my guts as far into the hill as I could manage. I snaked my way across the slope for a few metres, where some proper scree would arrest any fall. Richard had a rock, and was cutting himself some steps, so I joined him in this from my safer vantage point. Finally we got him across, and finished the ascent, both of us worse for the wear.

Upon making the top, Ben and Hamish applied some first aid. The decision was made by unspoken consensus that we would not be crossing Sawtooth ridge that day. No sir!

After a descent and another climb, we made our way into the river valley where we found Triangle hut, and began our ritual of brewing tea.



Day 8 saw us meandering down a stream in the early light, to Iron Gate Hut. From there, we climbed to the top of the main Ruahine Range, a climb that had turned me back on a previous expedition due to high winds. Again, perhaps coincidentally we were attacked by high winds, however the weather remained warm and the ridge was one of the most beautiful parts of a beautiful park. Longview hut met us well, showing off her glorious view and shapely bunks. Spectacular shapes were churned in the clouds overhead by the growing wind.

Our second to last day passed quickly, with a late (6am rise) start at Longview hut. At noon we made it to our destination, Leon Kinvig, where we found a party of DOC workers about to head off to look for whio. 5 minutes after our arrival, and on the dot of their departure, the rain came bucketing down, making up for 8 days of flawless weather in one afternoon.

The last day consisted of another climb, albeit with empty packs and anticipation of our impending drastic calorie recharge on meeting civilisation. The weather bombed in, hitting us with no visibility, heavy rain, and winds that would knock an unprepared trumper over. Knowing this was our last day, we relished the wild weather, running into it, hooting and laughing. Mount Toka was stormed far quicker than I had anticipated, and the descent on the other side was also fast, so that soon we were waiting for our pickup. Bens dad Nick had volunteered to drive the entire way from Auckland to get us, and we were very grateful for this, though my gratitude was even more inspired by the beer and bakers delight he plied us with on our journey home.