

5 Passes via Lake Nerine NZ South Island Feb 2013

Following on from the 9-day St Arnaud-Lewis Pass tramp and a 2-day break in Christchurch to clean up and resupply, we bussed to Queenstown and repacked for an early departure the next morning. Quite popular amongst off-track trappers decades ago, the 5 Passes has again become fashionable – with even small guided groups tackling the 65km loop.

We had planned to deviate from the standard tramp and exit via Lake Nerine (a high alpine tarn with views of hanging glaciers and snow-capped ranges) and North Col (the south side of which has been known to harbour



snow and ice throughout summer, making passage problematic). Compared to the first tramp, on paper this looked the easier – 3700m up and down, shorter distances each day, more of it tracked - or at least cairned.

We had a spare weather-day at our disposal but again the forecast was superb – were we bending the odds to hope for 20+ days of fine dry and cool conditions?

All running to plan, we hit the track at Lake Sylvan and enjoyed a gentle stroll through very open Beech forest to the lake before striking up the gullies to the

Rockburn Hut (somewhat compromised by a large tree some months ago) and the first of many river crossings. Kiwis chuckle at Aussies for our reticence for wet boots – perhaps born out of our dry continent. We, however, took the Kiwi approach and just ploughed through. The lack of rain in recent weeks gave us low streams and easy walking across the grassy flats of the Dart River almost up to the Beansburn, our next major crossing, only a short but slow section through the forest. The noise of jet boats on the river and helicopters ferrying tourists to and from the West coast glaciers were in contrast to the isolation of the first tramp. At least the jet boats would be left far behind as we climbed the Beansburn to the first flats and our campsite for the night. Sandflies seem to live below the 1000m contour in this region – sadly, we were only at 500m. Face-nets were de rigueur.



Day 2 was a straight-forward tramp on track through Beech forest and avalanche chutes of boulders and scree, gradually climbing to the 900m contour (not quite leaving the sandflies behind) and the Beansburn Biv – a jumble of very large boulders that provide good



shelter from the elements. We arrived in good time and managed a dip in the stream and some relaxation before the inevitable swarming at dusk.



The following day included one of the two major climbs of the trip – the ascent to Fohn Pass and Lakes. This is a sidle/climb, initially in a gut of rocks, on snow-grass and steep slopes – an unrelenting 500m. From a distance, it looks forbidding but we scaled it's heights in just 2 hours. Then a sidle to the lakes and a stunning campsite. We had set up camp by 1130 and, after lunch, 3 of us were ready to tackle Sunset Peak, towering 350m above the lakes. It was a delight to be climbing without packs



and we scaled the peak in just an hour to be greeted with sweeping panorama of glaciers, ranges, valleys all topped with blue sky – stunning beauty.

We had been told to expect slow progress through the next section – descent to the Olivine Ledge, then up and over Fiery Col and down to Cow Saddle and Hidden Falls Creek. Just a distance of 10km, I had allowed 8hrs of walking – a long day. In practice it was comparatively easy – just 6hrs. As we were now a day ahead of schedule, we decided not to push on the next (better) campsite an hour further down the creek. Instead, we contented ourselves with a dip in a beautiful pool, deep, clear and cold!



With another big climb in front of us, another early night seemed a common plan. We awoke to thick cloud in the lower valley which rose up and receded several times before dissipating as we set off at our usual time of 8am. Initially in the boulder-filled creek, soon we were back on a marked track through the moss-draped Beech and racing toward the climb to Park Pass – 600m at an average of 38deg! A strenuous 90 minutes sees us at Park Pass and we settle into the grass behind a small rise, sheltering from the cold breeze. We had a decision to make.

The potential for ice in North Col is a worry. If we discover we can't proceed (we don't have ice axes or crampons), we don't have time to return to Park Pass and escape down the Rockburn. I had expected to get an update on conditions before starting this walk from a guy doing it a few weeks before. Unfortunately, he was washed out by rain. Just as discretion was about to best valour, a group of 4 appeared above the Pass – could only have come from North Col! Armed with their advice that the ice was easily avoided, we decided to go with the original plan – and because we had a day



up our sleeves, we set up camp on the Pass and used the afternoon for a climb to the Park Pass Glacier – the highlight of the trip. The equal of the more well known West coast glaciers, Park Pass Glacier was ours. Terminal lake, calved icebergs, hanging snow and ice, crevasses and moraines, boulder moonscapes punctuated with colourful daisies growing in improbable niches – all on a scale that is hard to comprehend. A steep ascent (and what look like, from above, an unlikely descent) was again a joy without packs – a 3hr round trip.

The wind dropped, mists swirled and the night was clear and bright with a full moon. In the morning, we struck



off on the snow-grass side/climb towards Lake Nerine. I had expected this to be technically challenging but the cairned route, whilst requiring care, was straightforward and we took the time to breath in the scenery, views of the Park Pass Glacier across the valley revealing the full extend of the ice-field. After only 4 hours, we descended a steep gut to Lake Nerine and selected some very comfortable (but exposed) sites on the edge of the lake. In the afternoon, a stroll to the lake's outlet was rewarded with amazing views to Theatre Flat far below and back to the glacier, sparkling in the sun.

The penultimate day dawned, a cold stiff breeze whipping across the lake – no evidence of a rockfall heard during the night. There are (at least) two routes to North Col – high and low. We went high, the more difficult

and probably slower route but it gave us views into the Hollyford Valley – full of thick white cloud. Trampers there would be thinking the weather was murk but here, on top of the world, the blue sky and cool breeze was simply perfect. We hit the Col and began the steep descent to the Nth Routeburn floor. The advice was correct – no ice problems. More boulders, scree, some short bush-bashing sections, easier travel on the edge of the river and finally marked track, we made our campsite just a km from the famous Routeburn Track mid-afternoon.



We found, on the edge of the Beech forest, a delightful site beside the river, under trees and well protected- promising dry tents for the morning and our last day. However, with an unbridged crossing of the Routeburn River necessary, we didn't expect to have dry boots.



With another comfortable night and, as hoped, dry tents, we set of for the Routeburn Flats Hut and civilisation. Surprise and pleasure greeted us at the river as the dry spell had reduced flow to a quick few steps and boots remained in good condition. From here it was a quick 90min along a veritable highway to the Routeburn Shelter (we enjoyed striding out on the easy surface) and the conclusion of another fabulous SI tramp.

As anticipated, this second tramp was probably more scenic but also less physically demanding - perhaps as a result of the fitness, skills and confidence we all gained on the first tramp.

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