

COLOURED MOUNTAINS

An off-track mountain tramp in New Zealand's Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks, 2014.

by Grant Dixon



In South Westland and northern Fiordland, in the south of New Zealand's South Island, lies a large tract of wild country with no roads and few tracks. It is accessed by a long gravel road south from the west coast highway in the north, and the Hollyford road, which branches from the Milford Sound tourist road, to the south. Between lies a series of intriguing and little visited parallel mountain ranges of quite varied character, a reflection of their differing bedrock geology. Rocks have been a lifelong interest for me, but the diversity and landscape expression here is of broader interest. There is a wide range of colouration in the exposed rocks, and the vegetation that cloaks the ranges provide additional variations, and all can present with great clarity in the well-washed air. This was the setting for a four-week traverse, undertaken mostly with my mate Ian.

It was warm and humid on the gravel flats beside the Cascade River, perfect conditions to encourage a frenzy of activity amongst the local sandfly population, and we were their focus. Despite bare legs protected temporarily by overtrousers, we ate a hurried first lunch then commenced the 700 metre climb up a rocky stream and scree. As we gained height the rocks at our feet became red, and some outcrops displayed contrasting black and brown compositional banding. The presence of these distinctive ultramafic rocks here, thrust from deep in the Earth's crust, is a reflection of the ongoing activity between two tectonic plates, something "big picture" to reflect on as spits of rain drove us into the tent for the night.

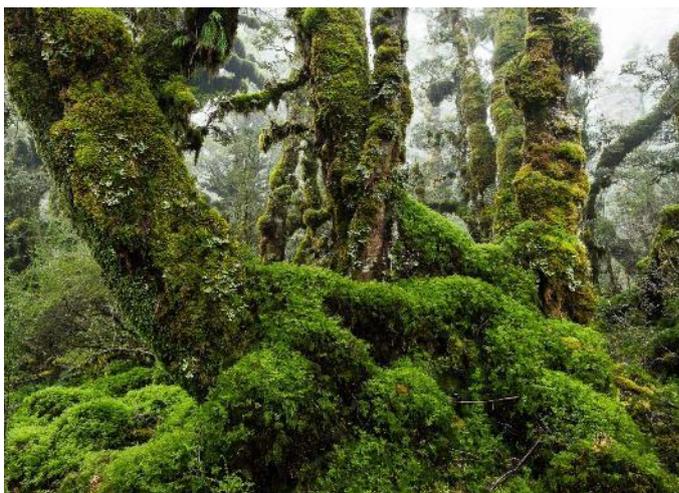
The chemical composition of these rocks discourages vegetation growth so their presence tends to be announced by stark red-brown slopes. We hauled our packs up such a slope into cloud, which soon became rain. A grovel through scrub followed by a gully with tall tussock ensured we got soaked, then lack of visibility on the ridge above forced a camp mid-morning.

It was starry by the early hours and we had a clear sunny day for the long climb to Staircase Peak. The red boulder-strewn bulk of Mt Richards dominated the view to the south and presented an amazing contrast with green forest below and the yellow tussock grass in alpine basins nearby, as well as with the schist country of the Olivine Range to the east from which it is separated by a sharp geological fault.

Our ridge gave way to bare ice-smoothed slabs, and then a short scramble to the small plateau-like summit of Staircase Peak. Lunch in the sun was a brief respite before a long afternoon, but gave time to admire the spire of Mt Aspiring towering over all else beyond the deep Arawhata valley to the east.

We now faced a complex and steep descent and sidle to gain the crest of the Olivine Range, before following the grey-green schist ridge to Tararua Peak. Energy levels were flagging notably as I dragged myself over the summit and descended to a basin below to camp amongst scattered boulders.

Signs of an imminent weather change were everywhere next morning, so we scampered (as much as possible) onwards along the sharp-edged ridge to aptly-named Bald Mountain. The dramatic views of Mt Aspiring to the east and tilted schist slabs of the Olivine Range to the south kept us company throughout, until finally swallowed (like us) by cloud. We felt our way west and down over various bumps until finding a semblance of shelter in the lee of a low ridge. We had the tent up and had lunched on the grass before the heavy rain arrived. A little later, lying inside felt like a waterbed, a reassuring confirmation of the strong floor fabric.



A brightening sufficient to contemplate moving on eventuated after midday next day. A narrow ridge led onward, wet yellow tussock and green shrubbery glowing in the mist-filtered light, until a sudden change as we crossed the geological fault and started a steep climb over red ultramafic boulders. Mt Raddle's bleak summit was no place to linger in the conditions, so we picked our way steeply down to an exposed shelf beside a small tarn. Despite the superficial barrenness,

the immediate surroundings was a fascinating natural rock garden with an array of weathered rock types, from red and black ultramafics to green serpentinite, and twisted Pink Pine and other shrubs.

It was colder next morning, with hail and snow showers plus frozen fingers making packing more protracted. A session of slippery rocks, wet scrub then swampy flats saw us at the Cascade River, now too high to cross. We camped again, the river flats steaming in later sunny breaks.

The river had dropped 30 centimetres next morning and we judged it OK to attempt a crossing, but the turbid, cold water flowing amongst boulders was still intimidating. The shady valley floor was no place to warm up afterwards, but the 1000 metre climb onto the Red Hills straight from the river bank certainly achieved that. Much of the climb was through beautiful mossy rainforest, assisted by deer trails in places. By the time we broke out of forest onto open grassy leads, the weather was again deteriorating. The rain increased in intensity by the time the tent was up within a sheltered copse, but not so much that it precluded an afternoon stroll (now well rugged-up) amongst the surrounding colours; sphagnum-fringed pools, yellow grassy openings, and lurid green moss carpeting both the forest floor and twisted trunks.

A clear dawn and light frost made for cold feet in wet boots as we squelched up onto the open tops, and also magnificent views across rolling snowgrass basins to the rugged Olivine Range to the east and bright blue Tasman Sea to the west. We had several hours of open but sometimes tedious tussock hopping before the sudden and dramatic change to the landscape for which the Red Hills are named. The basin below contained two large lapis-coloured lakes contrasting starkly with the surrounding red and brown rock-strewn landscape with no sign of greenery, and with craggy Red Mountain towering beyond.



We started our scramble towards Red Mountain before dawn, hoping for sunrise views en route. Then, from the base of the mountain proper, it was a steep scramble, the raspy crystalline surface of the ultramafic boulders rough on bare hands, to the windswept 1705 metre summit. The glacier-draped peak of Mt Tutoko now dominated views to the south, beyond Skippers Range, our next destination. Returning to camp, we descended westwards into a scenic and slightly more sheltered tussock basin to camp, and from where the sunset light made the red and yellow landscape even more stunning.

The two-day fine spell had been perfectly timed for our traverse of Red Hills, but the overcast northerly conditions next morning warned of another imminent change. We followed a narrow winding spur up and down, part in forest, part open and grassy, until the Pyke valley appeared far below, camping early near the treeline as the world again disappeared into the cloud.

Heavy rain fell through the night, and it was too warm and sloping at our marginal tent site for much comfort. We packed inside the tent then ventured out to plunge into the wet green forest for the

steep 1100 metre descent. The ferny forest floor hid numerous rotting logs, and we had many slips and falls. I simply broke a walking pole but Ian twisted his ankle badly, fortunately relatively close to the bottom. He hobbled out onto open flats beside the Pyke River where we set up the tent to rest, trying not to think of possible implications of the injury.

Rest was a relative term. We were back in sandfly country and, in the still and humid conditions, they were numerous and ferocious, so the options were either hide and sweat in the tent or sit outside in full body armour (including gloves and head nets).



There was time for a leisurely start next day for the flat plod down gravel and grass flats beside the Pyke River, a good introductory test for Ian's strapped ankle. Still backwater pools reflected the now-blue sky and surrounding ranges. There were several fords to waist deep before lunch, but minimal river flow here, then a final one before leaving the river and trying to maintain a consistent bearing

through tangled swampy forest. We found a dry opening to camp amongst fallen trees and ferns right at the foot of Skippers Range, which reared suddenly and very steeply upwards; another 1000 metre climb tomorrow.

More rain arrived overnight. The climb was very steep and slippery, ferns, moss and rotten logs proliferated, and it was surprisingly wet underfoot (given the gradient). It was also very beautiful, but the dripping forest rich in epiphytes could only be appreciated when we stopped for a breather. Wet through, our bodies were cooling rapidly on the exposed tops until we found a rare level spot in a small hollow. We threw the tent up and peeled off sodden clothes inside, hot soup aiding the warm-up. Ian's ankle had passed the test today.

Overnight rain turned to a freezing southerly and we awoke to a white veneer of snow-dusted tops and clear skies. The frozen tent slowed packing, but we then made rapid progress along the rolling 1200 metre tops, with surf rolling into Big Bay directly below. Skippers Range stretched away southwards, with many peaks breaking the skyline, every one of them unnamed; we'd spend eight days up here and climb many of them. Cloud still enveloped the mass of the Darran Mountains beyond, but it seemed the southerly wasn't quite strong enough to push them to us, so we enjoyed cold and windy but clear walking all day.

The southeasterly gale continued next day, as did our clear conditions. We sidled steep tussock slopes and traversed rocky knolls, with spray blowing from a large lake in the valley below. The afternoon provided some particularly spectacular travel on a knife ridge followed by a steep scramble above a notch to outflank an impassable bluff. A tarn on a lee-side shelf caught our eye

mid-afternoon and we descended to camp there. Even here there was the occasional gust, but it remained sunny.

We left early for a scramble up the steep rocky ridge towards a cluster of high summits. A delicate climb on loose rock led to one castle-like peak, and we then spent time exploring the rock basin below. Glacier-smoothed hummocks of volcanic rock, with a wide variety of colours and textures, cradled many small tarns. Small masses of white and yellow Edelweiss flowers sprouted from fissures where soil had accumulated. After some fun slab climbing, we reached the highest (1648m) summit for lunch, with views across a much of our route, past and yet to come, the distinctive Red Mountain now receding to the northeast.

Back at camp, we were tempted to stay but, in this country, if the weather stays good one shouldn't waste it. We packed and crossed the arête above before descending 600 metres over boulders and scrub to the low saddle between two sections of Skippers Range. An opening with tiered, vegetation-dammed tarns amongst tussock grass and shapely rock peaks above, preceded a welcome campsite for tired bodies.

Deer trails and open leads led back up to an alpine tussock basin on the southern section of the range. The gleaming bulk of Mt Tutoko was now close, rearing beyond green forest and yellow tussock ridges. It was calm now but, fearing more high winds, we found a small hollow in which to pitch the tent after only a couple of hours walking, the surroundings a "garden" of prostrate shrubs and blue-green rocks dotted amongst the tussocks. After a satisfying afternoon scramble to a peak directly above camp, then dinner back at camp, we were treated to a spectacular sunset light show.



The clouds dissipated overnight and we made another short camp relocation, to a small tarn in a basin near the crest of range. It provided yet-another delightful setting; not just because of yet-more multi-coloured and textured rocks, clusters of green Dracophyllum heads, and the ubiquitous yellow-green snowgrass, but the grandstand views of rising valley cloud amongst the peaks. The cloud dropped again in the cool of evening to reveal brooding peaks in the blue light of a cloudy dusk.

Mist and light drizzle next morning reinforced our decision to stay put, our first rest after five consecutive full days on the go. After lunch, an increasing blueness in the grey mist preceded an atmospheric breakup. Anticipating a spectacular sunset, we climbed to a summit above camp and were not disappointed. Across the deep Hollyford valley rose the steep wall of the Darran Mountains, with a wave-like cloud mass breaking over an outlying ridge. The long and narrow Lake McKerrow lay 1400 metres directly below, and in the lakeside forest down there was the Hollyford

Track, the only formed track I'd walk in four weeks (and then for just a day). We stayed to see the post-sunset pastel shades light the sky and clouds, before scampering back to camp in the gathering dusk.

On another fine day, we crossed transverse schist ridges, another basin of small lakes, then undertook a steep side and climb to the range's final high peak, a 1552 metre summit of shattered red and green volcanic rock. A steep descent led to another amazing lake and snowgrass basin, but there are few superlatives left now; turquoise lakes filled basins amongst red rock ice-scoured ridges, partly clothed in yellow tussock. The weather remained clear and still so we chose to camp in the most exposed spot imaginable for our final night on the range, with an incomparable view of Mt Tutoko rising 2700 metres directly opposite.

Pink dawn light brushed the summit of Tutoko and its companion, Madeline, long before the other surrounding summits, and the Hollyford valley was filled with cloud, mimicking the massive glacier that flowed here during the last ice age. After breakfast, we tore our eyes and camera lenses from the view to focus on the 1300 metre final descent from Skippers Range direct to the Hollyford valley



floor. The valley cloud slowly rose and we soon descended into it, the strident calls of a Kea farewelling us from the tops. Convex glaciated rock ribs fell away increasingly steeply below, and the mist-filtered views increased the level of intimidation. We stayed near the vegetation, and hence at least psychological handholds, as much as possible. The descent was continuously steep, the vegetation changing as altitude

decreased. Lower down we were back in forest floored by ferns obscuring numerous trip hazards. We reached the Hollyford Track early in the afternoon and, after three weeks together, Ian and I bid farewell to each other; he had work to return to but I had another week to go.

Thanks to a now-light pack and the fitness that comes from weeks of walking, the ups and downs of the Demon Trail along Lake McKerrow passed relatively easily, so I reached the coast at Martins Bay by the end of the next day. Since soon after we'd left the tops the mountains had been immersed in clouds, and would remain so for several days yet - more great timing.

At Martins Bay I had a rest day, camping on the beach at the mouth of the Hollyford River to maximise sandfly-discouraging breezes and watching the antics of Fur Seal pups at nearby Long Point. The river mouth was a site with great geological variety in foreshore rocks and boulders,

sourced from throughout the glaciated catchment, and I spent some time marvelling at the colours and textures of rock and lichen.

After a pre-arranged boat drop-off on the far side of the wide Hollyford River early next morning, I trudged south through the extensive Martins Bay dune field, amongst splashes of orange Pingao grass. The leaden sky above was soon again spitting rain. With my pack heavy once again, it



was surprisingly tiring rock hopping and traversing soft gravel beaches around the coast, so I was easily distracted by patterns in the sand-polished outcrops of pearly-white limestone.

Rain was falling heavily by the time I reached the mouth of the Kaipo River, with even the low coastal hills now in cloud. In these bleak conditions, I headed inland up the Kaipo valley, fording the rising river multiple times and climbing over forested ridges when river flats and terraces were unavailable, barely stopping in order to maximise progress before being trapped by flooded streams. Late in the afternoon I approached a rustic hut at the edge of the final flat. Unexpectedly for both of us, it was occupied Bill, a deer hunter, who had the results of his efforts spread around the hut drying. It was interesting talking into the evening from the perspectives of two very different lives.

Continuing overnight rain ensured the bush remained saturated but there were blue patches in the sky by dawn, perfect timing for another high crossing. I had a challenging day navigating a confusing array of streams, ridges, bluffs and scrub, eventually climbing almost 1200 metres to the crest of a narrow snowgrass-clad ridge. I found a small flat to pitch my tent near the only tarn, and spent the final hours of the day taking in the magnificent view, enhanced by a full moon rising at sunset. My spur was an outlier of the Pembroke range, the westernmost bastion of the Darran Mountains, and I had a clear and close view of its western face; a sweep from grey bluffs and yellow tussock gullies below its craggy 2000m crest through dense green forest canopy to blue sea. The rock tower of Mt Grave protruded beyond the range and beckoned tomorrow. The scale of the landscape I had been traversing had gone up a notch.

The slow build-up of threatening cloud during next day discouraged much lingering as I was keen to cross to the relative shelter of the Harrison valley. This involved a precipitous plunge into a small hanging basin, a steep side below bluffs, then a long climb back up a large boulder gully. The dramatic Harrison valley was hidden until the final crest. This once-heavily glaciated valley is carved in crystalline gneiss and granite rock and so has a classic U-shaped form, with cut-off convex spurs; spectacular, but potentially challenging to traverse.

I spent a day around the head of the Harrison valley, climbing the rock spire of Ongaruanupu and broad dome of Te Hau, and again fascinated by patterns in the banded gneiss bedrock, with shades of grey sometimes dotted with red garnet crystals or cut with white quartz veins, the greens and



yellows of lush vegetation rimming small tarns, or reflections in blue Lake Pukatahi. The dark tower of Mt Grave brooded across the valley and later became the focus for building hogsback cloud formations. My weather window was ending again.

The rain became heavy just after an early pack up next morning. I followed an initially-improbable

route down a steep system of vegetated gullies, down-climbing in trees at times, then outflanked a series of bluffs hidden in forest to reach the Harrison River. In good weather rock hopping provides relatively rapid travel here but the river was rising fast and, where exposed, the boulders were wet. As a slip on my own here would not be healthy, I mostly stayed in the forest. It was rough going, with many small hummocks and swamps, and deep moss often hid holes and fallen logs.

When I reached the spate of Pembroke Creek, I knew a dry shelter was not far away. I was tired, but soaked now anyway, so I threw myself from a midstream boulder towards the far bank. This was perhaps a questionable action given the proximity of the now-flooded Harrison River, but 20 minutes later I had the stove going and was peeling off wet clothes in the shelter of the Grave bivi rock. I pitched my tent beneath the massive shelter (to protect against drips) and warmed and dozed in my sleeping bag to the roar of the nearby river, acoustically amplified by the overhanging rock.

The river rose another metre before dark. I tried to sleep, nervous about the prospect of being flooded out, but the flood roar decreased during the post-midnight hours and by dawn the river had fallen substantially. It only took a couple of hours of slippery cobbles and riverside forest to reach Harrison Cove, an isolated inlet and one of the few flat areas around Milford Sound. Clearing cloud hung about Milford's signature Mitre Peak and a procession of tourist cruise boats motored by well offshore, oblivious to my presence. The Milford Sound underwater observatory was within hailing distance so I gave it a go, despite seeing no movement there, and someone soon responded. I asked them to contact a kayak tour company that I knew had a small boat tender and, within 30 minutes, it appeared around the point (having been on a tour at the time). I waded out to meet it and was suddenly returning to a different world, after four weeks where the only concerns were route finding and staying alive.

First published in [Wild](#) magazine, issue 155 (2016).