

Avoiding the weather – a slow trip in the Caples

Ray Hoare, February 2017

Brent, Lisa and I decided we would do another of our alpine adventures again this year. The plan was to catch the bus to Makarora, get the jet boat across Lake Wanaka, tramp up the Albert Burn and camp on the saddle for a couple of nights while we climbed Dragonfly Peak. Then into the East Matukituki and out to the Wanaka – Mount Aspiring road. It would have been great, but not with the weather that was forecast for that week. The dates were fixed, so we needed a plan B.

The Greenstone and Caples seemed to be the best bet for finding sheltered tracks and huts, so we went and chatted to the knowledgeable people in DOC's Queenstown office. I should add, "patient" people. We wanted to know about alternatives to just up one river and down the other, and just what was the weather going to do, and when. We first found out that the upper Caples hut was no longer a DOC hut, but was a deerstalkers association hut that could be booked through a shop in town. Then we saw on the wall map Steele Creek hut, and the track from there back to the Caples.

So the plan evolved – we would go up the Caples, stay at the Mid-Caples hut on Sunday night (15 January), a short day then to upper Caples, then over McKellar Saddle to McKellar Hut in the Greenstone, down to Steele Creek hut, and over the saddle at the head of Steele Creek, back to the NZDA hut. Timing was flexible – the long range forecast suggested that Thursday would be the best (only fine) day, which we needed to get up Steele Creek, and we had plenty of days to complete the necessary distance.

The shuttle dropped us at the road end mid-morning, in overcast weather, and we made our way up the very good track. We were in no hurry, and were not surprised that we took much longer than the posted couple of hours.



Tanya, the hut warden, was very chatty, and Brent and Lisa got on very well with her. She told us about a swimming hole in the river about a kilometre up from the hut, and since the afternoon was still young and the weather clear we went and found it. The pool was at the end of a gorge, very deep, perfectly clear, with two trout about a metre below the surface, holding position as food was swept into their mouths. Lisa eventually managed to submerge herself, after many minutes of torturing herself with small amounts of water.



Monday dawned damp, but OK for our intention, which was to only tramp a couple of hours up to the NZDA hut. We got there for lunch, and were delighted with the place. Gas cookers, LED room lighting, just us present. Great stove, with ample wood and coal. Mouse-proof cupboards, with leftover food helping us to vary our diet. Collecting more wood kept us active.



In the middle of the night, we were woken by sounds that were hard to place. Was it the wind at hurricane force? Torrential rain? No – it was a large helicopter, at 12:30am! We got up and turned on the lights, and welcomed 3 paramedics who were being dropped off while the helicopter flew up into the tops to try to find the party who had called in on the mountain radio about a hypothermic woman in their group. Being unsuccessful, the chopper returned half an hour later and picked up its crew. We never did find out what was the end of the story.

The weather next day (Tuesday) was clear enough for it to be not unpleasant tramping, so we set off for McKellar pass and then McKellar hut. The track was broad and well graded – we later read that some in the tramping community think DOC went over-the-top in improving it, but in my view it makes for very pleasant walking. There are plenty of rough tracks around for those who like that sort of thing!



Wednesday morning was not great weather, but we decided that as we did not want to get down to Steele creek too soon, we could spend a second night at McKellar hut, and occupy the day by going back up the Greenstone past Howden hut to Key summit. We got to Howden OK, but the weather closed in so much that Key Summit would be a very wet and viewless experience. We did get to see the updated weather forecast at Howden, and it promised fine weather for Friday, when we planned to go over the saddle at the head of Steele Creek.



We ambled down the Greenstone on Thursday, wading much of the way through shallow side streams. I did not think much of the track quality on this side – we are improving the tracks in the Kaimais to a better standard than that part of the Greenstone track. Lunch on the verandah of the Ultimate Hikes hut (with permission) kept us dry for a while, and then up Steele creek.



Steele Creek hut was a pleasant surprise. It is small, and very “rustic”, having a visible frame of beech branches inside, and a covering of sheet steel. It was very well constructed, and most of the gaps were sealed with polyurethane foam.



The fireplace drew very well, and since there was plenty of good quality firewood within 100m of the hut we luxuriated in the warmth of leaping flames and glowing embers. (You can burn dehy packages if you get the fire hot enough!)



We woke to a cold hut, and when we looked outside we discovered why – there was a hard frost! The sky was clear, and when the sun eventually reached us we knew we were in for a great day.



The track was marked, but not maintained. It was obvious where we had to go – up the valley to its head, but sometimes it was just a case of pushing through the scrub and avoiding the Spaniard Grass. (Its genus name *Aciphylla* meaning needle leaf is very apt.)



Because the weather was so great, and we could actually see some views, I was frequently using my phone to take photos, as well as to locate us on my mapping app. In between doing this I carried the phone in my breast pocket. Then, well up the valley in the tussock country, I went to get the phone and found it was not there. Nor had I put it anywhere else! I had lost it somewhere, and since I had not been on a defined track my hope of finding it was quite low.

I figured that when making the insurance claim I had better be able to say I at least tried to look for it, so I dumped my pack, and made my way back to where I could last remember using it. Or back so far I must have used it somewhere. Then returned, trying to decide where I would have gone – between these bushes or those bushes? When I came to a small side stream my eyes lit up! I remembered the rock in the creek that I had stood on, and that I had stumbled forward. Sure enough, my phone was still sitting on the bank of the creek where it had popped out of my pocket.

Lunch was a much happier affair than it could have been.



Views from the saddle were great, but so was the wind. It was a good thing that we had lunched in the valley. The track on the other side of the pass was easy to follow, and quite different from Steele Creek. A long exposed sidle, with Spaniard cleverly placed every time you needed a hand hold, was slightly challenging, but then once we got down to the treeline there was an easy to follow steep track to the valley bottom just where the deerstalkers hut is located.



Saturday was to be an easy day, except that the clock jumped when chatting to Tanya, the ranger, over lunch at Mid-Caples hut, so we had to rush to ensure we reached the road end before the shuttle driver gave up on us.

This was not the trip we had planned, but given the weather that week it was much better than we expected. I would recommend it to others, especially if you can get fine weather.

