

Olivine Wilderness Expedition, Aspiring NP, 22 December – 02 January 2013

James Thornton and Nina Dickerhof (scribe)

Fotos: http://ninadickerhof.smugmug.com/TrampingandmountaineeringinNew/Aspiring-Region/Arawhata-Cascade-feat-Mts/27446755_gdxzwg#li=2311625197&k=7Q89DnB

Day 1:

Early in the morning on the 22 December, James Thornton and I met John from Waitototo River Safari at the Arawhata Road Bridge. John was to jet-boat us up the Arawhata as far as Ten Hour Gorge. He did an impressive job navigating us up this braded river and only took a wrong turn once. While waiting for John to haul the boat free from the gravel, we enjoyed the scenery and after the last couple of stressful days of trip organizing. We finally started to look forward to this 12 day adventure into the Olivine wilderness that lay ahead of us. Unfortunately, shouldering our almost 30-something kg packs wasn't delayed for much longer as shortly after we found ourselves being dropped at the true right of the Arawhata just at the Fez Creek confluence. We had no time to loose. Ahead of us lay a good 1600 m of height gain with our 12 day packs, out of which the first 1000 m would be through thick West Coast bush. And of course instead of the 4h stated in Moirs we took 7h just to reach bushline. Here however, all the pains and groans that are to be expected on day 1 of every big trip were forgotten as soon as we enjoyed a stunning panorama of the Olivines Range with the Arawhata deep in the valley below. Although our plan for the next 12 days wasn't set in stone at this stage, we knew that we were going to traverse or cross over this range somehow. But for now we focussed on getting to our campsite below Turks Head, from which we would climb Mt Ionia the next day.

Day 2:

An alpine start allowed us to watch the first sunrays illuminate the Olivine Range as we cramponed our way up towards Mt Ionia. After navigating a few crevasses and mastering an awkward and exposed pitch around a gendarme that required squeezing through a 'shrund we found ourselves on the summit, from where we enjoyed magnificent views of Mt Aspiring, the head of the Waipara Valley and the Snowdrift Range. The rest of the day was spent descending from Turks Head to Williamson Flat featuring some very thick scrub and some less thick bush. Williamson flat is a spectacular place and we both wish we would have been able to spend more time here.

Day 3:

Early this day we were to face one of the major obstacles on this trip: The crossing of the Joe River. Moirs had warned us: "The Joe is a big dirty river, cross with care." Running high with snow melt this time of year and being only a party of two, this obstacle had worried us and we were relieved to find ourselves on the other side. It had indeed been a difficult crossing with James losing his footing momentarily. Our enthusiasm was dampened shortly after as we plunged into the bush once again to climb up to Camp Oven Dome. Lots of boulders and thick scrub at bushline delayed progress. We had hoped to get to Andy Flat that day, but only made it as far as a campsite at 1400m above Andy Flat. With views of Andy Flat, Lake Williamson and the Andy Icefall, this wasn't a bad thing. The Olivine Range was now only a day's effort away, or so we thought...

Day 4:

In the morning we reached Andy Flat by directly descending a steep slip that would lead into an easy creek bed that we followed all the way to the flat. Finally arriving at Andy Flat, a place both of us had read and dreamed about for a number of years, we had to sit down and take a few deep breaths. Being 5 days walk away from the nearest road end, it felt overwhelmingly remote... The travel down the true right of the Williamson was good and progress reasonably fast. Naturally, we started talking about how far we could make it that day. However, when we reached the Williamson River 200m downstream of the Tornado Creek confluence, we soon realized we weren't going anywhere that day. The Williamson was in high flow from the snow melt and although trying to ford, we sensibly gave up and decided to wait until early morning hoping the river would drop a fraction overnight.

Day 5:

It had been a warm night and the Williamson had not dropped, so we started bush bashing upstream to find the natural rock bridge mentioned in Moirs. I was sceptical as this rockbridge was reported in 1999, some 12 years ago. But it was worth a try. Half a day later, not having found the rock bridge, we found ourselves discussing our options: Going back the way we had come would mean crossing the Joe again, going up the Andy Couloir to the Olivine Plateau or travelling down the Williamson hoping to find a good crossing at McArthur Flat at the Arawhata Confluence? All along we were teased by the blue skies above us wishing we were up on the tops by now. We decided to try our luck going down the Williamson. We reached what we called the Williamson middle flats early afternoon, where we were once again lured into thinking that there was a good crossing if only the river would drop slightly overnight and so we put up camp at this charming flat.

Day 6:

Of course we found the river running at the same level the next morning, and so we kept trudging downstream. We found the travel delightfully fast thanks to all the deer, of which we even saw and greeted two. Luckily there was a reasonably good crossing of the Williamson just at the Arawhata confluence. Once across, we then turned upvalley and backtracked to the Tornado Confluence on the other side of the Williamson. Again travel was unexpectedly good and not any slower than the other side. However, in spite of the very obvious deer trail, someone had decided to mark the trail with strips of plastic packliner, which soon disappeared in James' pack. A huge rock crevasse added some interest to the final bushbash up to the Trinity Col Rock Bivvy, where we settled down for some well-deserved sleep.

Day 7:

In contrast to the last 5 days of perfect weather, we woke up surrounded by mist. However, we were both determined to climb Mt Temple, which we reached in poor visibility from Trinity Col via some exposed slushy snow and a few rock steps. Aspiring and Ionia greeted us by kindly poking out above the cloud. We then made our way towards Trinity Pass, down Trinity Stream and up to a camp below Pt 1309m. By now the weather had cleared and we enjoyed a wonderful sunset over Little Red Hill and Pyke camp.

Day 8:

We had started to become suspicious of the weather as it hadn't rained in 7 days. Wasn't this unusual for South Westland? Not carrying a mountain radio, little did we know that we had yet to meet the challenges of a major flooding event that would take out the Wanganui Road bridge. But that morning we woke up to a warning drizzle and so we hurried to Simonin Pass, where we marvelled at the contrast between bush and non-vegetated red ultramafic rock. More of this rock in the form of large boulders, slippery from the drizzle, accompanied us all the way down to flats in the Cascade. The drizzle had now turned to a persistent rain and for the first time on the trip we had a lengthy discussion about our next move. We had hoped to gain the Northern Olivine tops from here via Holland Creek, traverse it to McTavish Creek and come out the Arawhata. With four days' worth of food left and having to be back at work in Christchurch on day 5 from now, this proposition seemed ambitious given we didn't know what the weather was going to do. And in the end I gave in to the sensible option of travelling directly down the the Cascade to the Matyr road end, although with a heavy heart. We pitched the tent and listened to the rain, finally having a chance to read our well-travelled books.

Day 9:

First sleep in in 9 days. Still raining. Then sudden clearing. Hopes up. Tent down. Maybe we can still come out via the tops, if not the Olivine tops, maybe the Red Hills range, which would be slightly shorter? We quickly climbed to Barrington Creek above bushline, only to find the rain starting up again. We discussed our options over a rather damp lunch under the overhang of a large boulder: Shall we go back down to the reasonable safety of the Cascade Valley or push on along the Red Hill Tops. We thought, statistically we were probably in for a bigger front, so we decided to head down to the flats above Durwood Falls. Flowering rata and a couple of blue ducks, cheered the otherwise uncomfortably wet bush-bash.

Day 10:

Some time during the morning, a break in the rain and a drop in the river level as indicated by a rock cairn built the night before, allowed us to cross the Cascade. Soon after we reached the impressive Durwood Falls, which plunged down 50 m as we plunged into the bush for another wet and gloomy couple of hours battling thick vegetation in the Cascade Gorge. The rain was now heavy again. Once past the gorge we just made it across Falls Creek, which was swollen with all the rain and we lost no time putting camp up.

Day 11:

Thanks to the sound of heavy rain threatening to flatten our tent roof and that of boulders moving in the nearby Cascade, we passed a sleepless night. At the first light we finally got a glimpse of the Cascade, which had turned from a clear gentle river into a raging torrent transporting masses of water towards the Tasman Sea. At about this time, Joseph Conrads "Heart of Darkness", my pit day book, appropriately read "The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness". We spent the day hoping that the river wouldn't move up above the bank much further and flood our tent, quivering under the frequent thunder and lightning, mopping up the water droplets penetrating our

tent roof and holding each other back from eating all our left over food. James bluntly remarked: "This trip has definitely had the highest number of anxiety producing days than any other trip."

Day 12:

The rain seemed to have eased from very heavy to heavy, so we started our way down the Cascade. Five minutes after leaving camp, we realized we had camped on a large island. And what was an otherwise dry flood channel had become a major river crossing. Undeterred we pushed down valley following the flooding Cascade river that kept forcing us into the bush, where in normal flow one could have followed the river bank with every side creek being difficult to cross. What seemed like an eternity later, we finally reached the Martyr Road, absolutely soaked to the bones, but relieved and thrilled to be out. And as we were deciding who would ride the bike we had stashed here 12 days ago to the get our car from the Arawhata Road Bridge 14km away, a car appeared out of the sheets of rain and picked us up. They were as incredulous to see us as we were to see them as they informed us that several fronts had hit the South Island the past couple of days and that the bridge across the Wanganui had been washed out. The latter unfortunately meant that the phone line was dead and being reliant on Eftpos for the purchase of after trip food, we remained hungry for longer than desired.

Thanks FMC for sponsoring this incredible trip. The Olivine Wilderness has captivated and attracted us for a number of years and this trip enabled us to satisfy some of our longings, and certainly can't wait to go back.