

Te Araroa - I'm not alone walk of New Zealand

In the South Island with Kylie Lang



Royce Mills

Tuesday 8 December

My sister Verena drove Judy Swainson and me to Christchurch airport where we met Kylie for the first time. Verena then kindly drove us to the start of our tramp at Mesopotamia Station. It was a long but scenic drive. Along the way we met up with Kevin Johnston so we were now a group of four trampers.



Judy, Kevin, Royce and Kylie

We set off walking at 1.30pm from the south side of the Rangitata River and reached Crooked Spur hut at 6.30pm (altitude 976m). This was a walk of 11.6 kms.



Bush Stream



We crossed Bush stream many times and often had to link up. It was not that deep but it was flowing quite fast (Photo: Kevin)

Kevin hoped to take us around a short cut in the stream but the flow in the gorge here was too strong and fast. So instead we had to climb up a steep spur and then descend to the stream again



Resting at the top



From the top of this spur we had to drop back down to Bush Stream, then climb up the track that can be seen on the tussock covered ridge in the middle of the photograph. The final climb up to Crooked Spur hut was a very steep 30 minute climb.



Crooked Spur hut at last!



We were intrigued by these "hobbit" dog boxes from the mustering days



8 am - about to leave Crooked Spur hut



Looking back the way we had come - Bush Stream and Rangitata River valley in the background



It was a steady two hour climb in tussock country to an unnamed saddle (1520m). We heard kea above us. Downhill stream travel followed until a second climb, again up to 1500m.



We reached this second saddle at 11.30am so took an early lunch stop enjoying the expansive views.



On towards Stone hut (Top photo: Kylie)

We arrived at the hut at 1.30pm. Here we took almost an hour's break. Kevin boiled a billy for some welcome hot drinks, even though it was a warm day.







This way from Stone hut to Royal hut

We set off for Royal hut at 2.20pm. We were now in a narrow, gorged valley, back in Bush stream again. We watched eleven very agile chamois (or were they thar?) scampering up almost vertical rock faces. Then we passed a pair of nesting falcons which started dive bombing us. We should have moved on really, but spent some time attempting to photograph them.



Photo: Kylie



It was a long, hot trek on to Royal hut. The going was easy enough but I was running out of water.

We arrived at the hut at 5pm, a walk of 16.6 km taking almost 9 hours.



At Royal hut we met a couple taking a break, Miriam and Peter. Peter is a New Zealander aged 62 and Miriam is a Dutch woman aged 32. They are walking Te Araroa, and have completed the North Island, but they are choosing to do the trail very slowly with a lot of diversions. They are living a self-sufficient lifestyle in the hills. A very interesting couple to meet! In the evening they tramped on to camp up towards Stag Saddle leaving us four to stay in Royal hut.





The name Royal hut comes from a visit made by Prince Charles and Princess Anne when they were children. I'm sure that they didn't walk in - there is a landing strip for planes. Not exactly "royal" but it was a very pleasant, roomy, comfortable hut to stay the night in, and the vast surroundings of a tussock basin ringed by mountains was a stunning and photogenic setting.

Thursday 10 December



8 am - setting off from Royal hut
Below - looking back to lonely Royal hut





Taking a break on the climb up to Stag Saddle

Looking back towards Royal hut





Approaching Stag Saddle





Although Stag Saddle is the highest point on the Te Araroa trail at 1925m, it was not a hard climb, with a couple of relatively flat terraces to cross on the way up. We reached the top at 10.50am and had a good stop here to take photos and catch up with phone calls as there was mobile phone coverage at this point! In the distance we could see the beautiful blue of Lake Tekapo, our destination the next day.





View from the saddle



Lunch on the way down

We followed a long scenic ridge (Snake Ridge) downhill. Along this ridge we had wonderful views of the Southern Alps, including Mt Cook, and Lake Tekapo too. Many photos were taken.





We detoured off the Te Araroa trail lower down to pick up a 4WD track near Rex Simpson Memorial hut. We reached our destination, Camp Stream hut at 4.30pm. Miriam and Peter were already there. They said that we had made the right route choice using the 4WD track. They had stuck to the Te Araroa trail in the valley and it was hard going - choked with tussock. We spent a very pleasant time relaxing in the sun and cooking our dinners outside around the hut, continuing our conversations with them from yesterday. In the evening Miriam went for a walk and shot a good-sized hare for breakfast. Camp Stream hut was very small, so I camped and Miriam and Peter also put up their tent.

We had enjoyed very good tramping weather, calm and increasingly sunny.

Our day's walk of 16.3 km had taken us 8 1/2 hours.







Miriam prepares to fry up the hare meat for breakfast

Friday 11 December



Camp Stream hut 8am - start of a long day

Our day's walk had three parts. First it was a 12km tramp along the Camp Stream valley, then a short, sharp climb up to a terrace with great views of the Southern Alps including Mt Cook and Tasman peak. Again we were gazing down on the blue waters of Lake Tekapo.

We reached the road to Round Hill ski field at 10am. Here we were sad to say goodbye to Kevin who had been excellent company, and we all valued his local knowledge. Kevin was going to meet his wife here, but due to a communication mix up he actually ended up with the same very long road walk that we had ahead of us as well.



A view of Mt Cook

Next was a 13km walk along the Richmond mountain bike trail, easy going, but it still took 3 hours 45 minutes including a short lunch stop. My feet were getting sore with some blisters after being wet from many stream crossings earlier in the morning.





On the Richmond trail



Getting close to Lilybank road and Lake Tekapo

The third section of the day was hard, 14km on Lilybank road all the way to Lake Tekapo village. It was mostly unsealed, hot, dusty and windy. We all were tired with sore feet. Judy walked in jandals, I changed to socks and sandals (which really helped overcome my blister problems). Of course we were all still carrying four day packs. Exhausted, we staggered into Tailor Made Backpackers in Tekapo at 6.45pm.

We had walked 35km and had been on the go for almost 11 hours.



Approaching Lake Tekapo village

In the morning Kylie and I both were craving a breakfast of scrambled eggs and real coffee at one of the many cafes in Tekapo. We were not disappointed!

We both took a break after this. Kylie visited an aunty in Timaru, and I spent three nights at Lake Tekapo village - a pleasant place to relax!



I then caught a bus to Twizel and spent two nights there. Kylie arrived back on the morning of the 15th, my birthday, bringing a chocolate muffin with a candle to celebrate (thanks Kylie!!) We also went out together to a Thai restaurant for dinner. The next day Kylie set off walking again with a mother and daughter, 30km, mostly on a cycle track to Lake Ohau.



Wednesday 16 December

I caught a shuttle bus to Lake Middleton, beside Lake Ohau. Here I met up with Kylie again. Although she had already walked 30km she was keen to gain a few more kms as it was still mid-afternoon. She said goodbye to the mother and daughter that she had been walking with and we looked around for somewhere for her to have something to eat. It was very windy on the edges of Lake Middleton and the only shelter we could find was the porch of the ladies' toilets so that had to do. Mosquitoes were a problem as well. Our little feast started with crackers and camembert cheese followed by my attempt to heat up two Christmas puddings which I served up with vanilla yoghurt for custard. I certainly did not want to carry these heavy food items with me! Needless to say that food occupied our thoughts a lot while tramping and we sometimes fantasised about scrambled eggs, ice cream and espresso coffees.



Then it was on with our packs at 3.45pm and along the sealed road beside Lake Ohau for about 45 minutes before we headed off road, first Sawyers's Creek track, then the Freehold Creek track. Here we joined the Alps 2 Ocean cycle trail until we reached the Freehold Creek bridge at 5.45pm. From here there was a grandstand view of Lake Ohau with a beautiful rainbow as well.



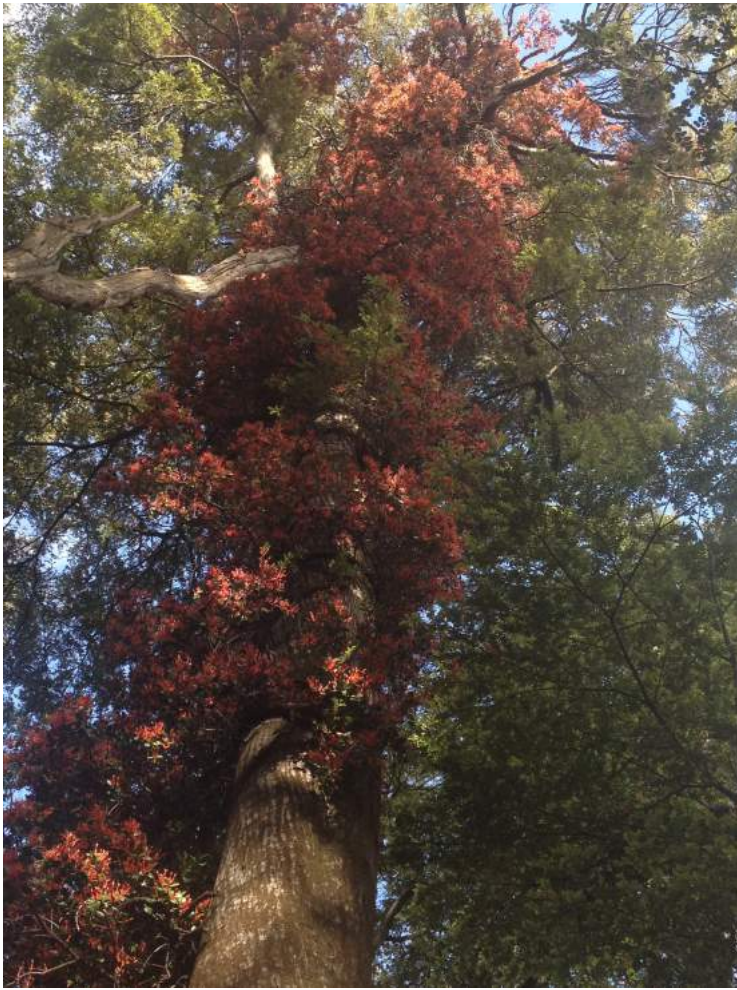


Another delight here was an abundance of NZ mistletoe flowering as a parasite plant in the native trees. The brilliant red flowers were amazing.

Rain set in just as we were setting up our tents, which made cooking dinner a bit tricky. In fact my dinner that night was just a cup of soup and crackers and cheese in my tent.

This afternoon's walk for me was 2 hours, a distance of 7.4 km. Kylie had walked about 37km!





New Zealand mistletoe



Thursday 17 December

It rained steadily during the night, but it stopped some time before daylight. Our tents were quite wet. Mine was a fly only, but things inside had stayed mainly dry. A beautiful dawn chorus from the bellbirds started our day and the cloud lifted to show new snow on the surrounding hill tops.

We started tramping at 7:50am up the Freehold Creek walking track. This is a popular day walk and it was through pretty bush (more red mistletoe) and was a fairly easy gradient. We reached the bush edge after an hour and continued on through tussock and shrubs, including the ever present sharp Spaniard. It was cool, with snow on the mountains above us as we climbed gently to reach the saddle dividing Freehold Creek and the Ahuriri River East Branch. There was a sprinkling of snow on the ground and some very light snow flurries.





Looking back the way we had come - Lake Ohau

Now it was a long but pleasant walk down the Ahuriri river East Branch. Steep, scree covered mountain slopes rose up each side of us. We took a short lunch stop along the way.





I knew of a small un-named musterers' hut in the valley. A group of four of us, including Owen, had walked to it on a day walk in March 2015 and we had lunch there before returning to Quailburn Station. This hut was a welcome rest stop at 2.30pm and I heated up a hot drink for us both and Kylie found some chocolates to share!



Looking back up the East Ahuriri valley



Ahuriri River

We set off from the little hut at 3.10pm. The walk was pleasant enough until we reached the flat terrace of the Ahuriri River. Now we had a long slog walking beside pine forests to reach the river, finally at 6pm.

Crossing this river had been on our minds very much. Our group had managed it with care in March, but we were not so sure about December as many smaller streams before this had required linking up. We spent some time researching possible crossing points and in the end used the two islands that can be seen in the left of the photograph.

We linked up and were able cross without getting our shorts wet. Although the water did run strongly in the middle section I always felt safe with Kylie, she is strong and has a background in swimming too. It was a huge relief to cross this barrier. Otherwise we would have had to walk 5km downstream to a bridge, then 5km return on the other side.

It was now 7pm and still sunny and warm. Our efforts had not finished for the day yet. We had to find our way up a large, steep river terrace and then another long plod along a flat terrace of stunted tussock to reach Birchwood Road and our next track entrance. Once that was achieved all we wanted to do was find a stream to camp beside. We stopped at the first stream we found on Station land, at 8pm and camped for the night. Never mind the cowpats beside the stream - just boil or treat the water!

We had covered 27.5 km and it had been just over a 12 hour day.

Friday 18 December

We set off from our farmland campsite at 7.20am. It was pleasant walking through Station farmland on a bulldozed farm track with an easy gradient. Following the Avon Burn valley we took a rest stop about each hour and reached a small, historic musterers' hut at 10 to 10. After a ten minute stop we set off and our climbing now started, but still on a bulldozed track.





Avon Burn valley





Our first view of Mt Martha saddle was at 11.30am



We reached the top (1680m) at 12.45pm



Incredibly, the bulldozed track goes right over this saddle (1680m) and continues on down the Timaru River valley almost all the way to the Top Timaru hut.

We had our lunch at the saddle enjoying amazing views, including the spectacular sight of Mt Aspiring - mid right in the above photo.

We set off downhill at 1.20pm following the bulldozed track zig zagging down through huge rock scree from the surrounding mountains. This section took us 50 minutes to reach the Timaru Valley floor. I was glad it was a wide, bulldozed track in this steep scree.



Timaru River valley



We followed the Timaru River valley and were very pleased to see the toilet of Top Timaru hut eventually come into view. This 6 berth hut is a modern one for Te Araroa walkers, replacing an old one on the other side of the stream.

We arrived at 10 to 4pm and had walked 22 km in 8 1/2 hours.

Saturday 19 December

After enjoying a night in this modern hut we set off at 7.38, knowing from previous reports that this was going to be a hard day, and it was. We followed the Timaru River all day, but often we were on side tracks, going up high above the river and then down again. We crossed the river many times too, it was just a small stream mostly until we were well down stream. A couple of times we had to do a bit of rock climbing with our big packs on. It was a hot day but at least we were in bush all this time.



Kylie crossing the Timaru River



A delightful spot for a morning snack

Then mid afternoon there was a scary scree slope to cross. Just the tiniest of narrow foot tracks to use, and a 45 degree angle drop of loose gravel to the river far below.

At last a key destination was reached at 3.23pm - a track junction. Here we would leave the river valley at last and climb up very steeply to above the bush line and Stody's hut. Kylie climbs much faster than me so I told her to go on ahead. It took me two hours to reach the edge of the bush. About half way up I found a chocolate and a note from Kylie. That was so welcome as it was too steep for me to get my pack off easily to get at my snack food.



Out of the bush!



We had climbed
from the valley far below

At last I was out of the bush and it was an easy walk in the tussock to Stody's hut arriving at 5.45 to find Kylie relaxing and three young people already there, two from the USA and one from Poland. This is a really tiny musterers' hut with a dirt and stone floor. It only sleeps four people. There were no suitable camping places either. Kylie and I decided to have our dinner here and stock up with water and carry on to freedom camp. It was still pleasantly warm and sunny.



We set off at 7.30pm and climbed on up a 4WD track through the tussock to reach a high ridge (1400m). It was exciting to get our first glimpses of Lake Hawea, and also Mt Aspiring again. Where to camp? The ground was covered with rocks or lumpy tussock. In the end we just set up our tents at 8.30pm on the 4WD track. The evenings this far south are long but I noticed an orange glow in my tent just as I was getting into my sleeping bag - a wonderful sunset! We were lucky to have a fine, calm night as this open ridge would be very exposed in bad weather.

Top Timaru hut to Stody's hut 16 km, 10 hours
Stody's hut to freedom camping 2.2 km, 2 hours



Up in high tussock country looking back where we had come from - Timaru River valley far below



Sunday 20 December

We were keen to reach Lake Hawea in good time, so planned to make an early start, getting away at 6.45am. We continued along the 4WD track, still high, but with ups and downs. Unfortunately morning cloud obscured our view of Mt Aspiring.



We reached Breast Hill at 9am. I had been looking forward to this very much, as Geoff Chapple, who started Te Araroa, described this view as the “jewel in the crown” of Te Araroa.

We both gasped at the amazing view. We were looking down on Lake Hawea, Lake Wanaka and many surrounding mountains. Half an hour was spent taking photos and eating snacks!





We set off again and made a small detour to Pakituhi hut for a short break, another modern hut purpose-built for Te Araroa. We left the hut at 10.30 am for what was to be a very steep downhill taking almost 3 1/2 hours.



We were following a narrow rocky ridge downhill, sometimes quite comfortably, other times clinging to an old fence line (as many others obviously have too!). Sometimes we had to do some rather scary rock climbing or cross loose scree tracks with drop-offs. We both were quite out of our comfort zones at times. The last part of the descent was in a valley where the track zig zagged incredibly, eventually reaching the road beside Lake Hawea. It became noticeably hotter as we descended!







Back to civilisation at 1:50pm. We were pleased to be out earlier than we had expected. It was a short walk along the dusty lake-side road to Gladstone Reserve, completing my walk at 2:10 pm. Here I had arranged for our son Fraser to meet me.

A 7 1/2 hour day, walking 14.8 km.



Kylie, in true Te Araroa spirit, was going to continue on walking the lake side another 6.8km to Lake Hawea township. Fraser and I drove to the township and waited for her. We then drove her straight to the ice cream shop and her camping ground for the night at Lake Hawea.



Kylie, thank you for allowing me to share these two memorable tramping adventures with you.

You are a wonderful companion - always good company - well organised, warm, good humoured, patient and thoughtful.

You have dedicated your walk to raising funds for the Mental Health Foundation and through your efforts, and your fellow walkers, an impressive amount has been donated to this very worthy cause. I now have a better idea of how this Foundation reaches out to the needs of many people.

Thank you so much!