

A TRAMPERS' GUIDE TO THE OTAKI CATCHMENT by Tony Gates

THE SOUTHERN CROSSING

Because of the importance and popularity of The Southern Crossing Track, the route deserves a separate chapter of its own. For convenience, it is traversed from north to south (from Otaki to Kaitoke). Approximately half of the track, the northern half, follows the eastern side of the Waioatauru Catchment, with Penn Creek then Hector River draining to the east. The remainder overlooks the Hutt and Tauherenikau catchments. Approximately half of the track is above the bush line: the rest is a mixture of thick leatherwood or pleasant beech forest. The Southern crossing is perhaps best known for the sweeping tussock basins draining to the east, into the Hector River, and beyond Mt Hector, somewhat steeper slopes draining into the Tauherenikau. Precariously craggy gulches to the west overlook the Waioatauru Catchment as far as Aston Peak, where one can similarly look over the Hutt Catchment. Once back in the bush on the slopes of Mt Alpha, the track soon finds Alpha Hut, then after a couple of ups and downs, follows the seemingly never ending Marchant Ridge to the Raitoke Shelter.

THE ROUTE

The Southern Crossing Route usually commences at Otaki Forks, crossing the swing bridge at the main picnic area, then climbing up the hill past the old Parewai Hut. Cars can be safely left at the ranger station, a couple of minutes' drive to the south (upriver). High grassy terraces characteristic of Otaki Forks blend into overgrown scrubby ridges, as the track winds up Fields Track on Judd Ridge. Joe Gibbs, the builder of Field Hut and Kime Hut during the 1920's made this a pack track (horse pack, not human pack). It was once steep on the farmland, and muddy on the flats in the bush, so during 1992/ 1993 DOC realigned and metalled most of the track up to Field Hut. The track gradient levels out on the crown of the ridge, at the top of the overgrown farmland. There once was an old hut here during the 1920's named Te Moe Moe. Mixed Kamahi forest blends into Beech forest as the track winds slowly up to Tirotiro Knob, then over some small forested knobs with an understorey of pampas grass to the welcome shelter of Field Hut. Some consider this hut to be poorly built, but it has been used and appreciated for nearly 75 years. I wonder if the modern mansions we see in the DOC estate will last as well or as long. A friend once ran from the car park to Field Hut in just under one hour, and Kime in a similar time. But three hours would be a more respectable time to Field Hut, and a further three hours to Kime Hut after a good rest. The farmland/ forest edge represents a little under half way to Field Hut.

The track above Field Hut was once notoriously muddy. It was partially re-aligned and metalled during 1993/ 1994, speeding tramping times considerably. A few zig-zags up the prominent ridge soon puts trampers in the leatherwood, and the first of many unrestricted views. There is a short flat section of the track, then it sidles the western slopes of Table Top along Joe Gibbs's pack horse trail, soon to emerge on the muddy tussock flats of Table Top. Here is where you most appreciate the new metalled track, because there are parts not yet metalled, and it is unlikely to be metalled in its entirety. There was a gentle uphill section of the track that follows a 2 metre deep trench, worn down over the decades by trampers' boots and the forces of erosion. This section has now been bypassed by a luxuriously metalled track. More leatherwood is bypassed under Dennan, some of it overhanging the track, then tussock becomes prevalent. A little up and down on the track, then a sudden grunt up onto Bridge Peak.

The rolling tussock basins behind Bridge Peak are a feature of the Southern Crossing route, and appear quite suddenly for the uninitiated. They are a pleasant respite from the steep grunt up from Dennan. A few marker poles, and a well-worn trail mark the track across the flats and over the peak to Kime Basin, Kime Hut, and possibly more importantly, Kime Tarn. Buffeted by

the alpine weather, with its temperature extremes, Kime Hut provides shelter from winter weather and summer heat alike. Every time I have been there it has been messy, a tribute to the users. However Kime Hut provides roomy shelter, and sees many visitors. During (rare) fine weather spells, a two minute jaunt up behind the hut rewards you with a fine view of the Waioatauru Catchment, the Hutt Valley, and Wellington. And the other way, from the hut door, is over easy tussock slopes, and the distant Wairapara. If you visit during winter, you will understand why Kime Hut was built for skiing. A magic spot. The track ambles across Kime Basin to the slopes of Field Peak, a further 15 minutes on. Then the ridge narrows, (and the track becomes more pronounced) dropping down to a marked saddle before the grind up onto Mt Hector. Kime Hut to Mt Hector one hour.

Mt Hector, at 1529 metres altitude, is a famous peak at the top of the Southern Crossing. The memorial cross, to those who perished in the war, is the main landmark, stark in its outline. The ridge drops steeply south from Mt Hector to the aptly named "Beehives", then winds along to Atkinson. The well-worn track should not be difficult to follow, however, there is "False Spur" leading off Atkinson and into the depths of the upper Tauherenikau. Deer knew the ridge well before the days of the helicopter, the deer knew the trampers wouldn't go down there! It's only 15° of (compass) angle off the main ridge, but descending in misty conditions can be difficult. The well-worn track underfoot on the main ridge unfortunately is also well worn down a false spur, from generations of trampers making the same mistake. Check your map and compass, and pull back before it is too late. Once past Atkinson, the track drops gently down the ridge 100 or so vertical metres to the Dress Circle, where gentle tussock basins resume. The track follows the ridge around to Aston, and Renata Ridge, rising steeply up from the forest. Pleasant, easy tussock ledges with a smattering of leatherwood lead up to Alpha Peak, approximately two hours from Mt Hector. From Alpha, the track curves slightly to due east and drops 15 minutes down a tussock and gravel ridge to the open beech forest, then Alpha Hut.

The Marchant Ridge always feels like it takes ages to tramp! A fair estimate of the total time is six hours, road end to Alpha Hut, but this is very variable. Tramping either to the north or the south, it is time consuming and tiring. Boring, too, if you miss out on the good views. The forest is mostly open beech, which is quite pleasant, ghostly, mossy stuff. From Alpha Hut, the track winds north-eastwards for 15 minutes, dropping steeply, climbing, and then dropping again to cross "Hells Gate". The track turn off to Cone Hut is reached just before Omega Peak, just in the tussock, then there is another track dropping down Omega Track to Tutawai Hut, far below. Alpha Hut to Omega one hour. Block XIV Track goes similarly from half an hour further south. All three tracks are well marked. The Marchant Ridge track winds on and on. DOC propose to construct a large new hut somewhere along here, I guess approximately halfway from Alpha to the road. There is a short grind up onto Mt Marchant, basically the only uphill, then the clearing known as "the axe hole", a pleasant place to rest with water in a tree stump if you are lucky. Otherwise, it can be a very thirsty ridge. Omega to Marchant one hour. Clearings and open patches of "the burn", immediately south of Marchant Peak, give good views of the Hutt Valley. The ghostly dead trees are familiar to all who have been there, and can be seen on the distinctive skyline when viewed from Upper Hutt. The track drops down to Dobson Hut (site) [never a tidy spot], then follows an eternally muddy track to the top of "The Puffer" and the Kaitoke car park. An alternative, safer car park can be found at Kiwi Ranch. Marchant to road end two hours. The track always seems to drag on a bit from Dobson's if you are at the end of your tramp, and are feeling the effects. That's it, the Southern Crossing of the Tararua Range, in a nutshell.