

A Godley Experience With Mr French



Despite a lot of sound and detailed planning, it turned out to be a spur of the moment thing. Climbing in New Zealand is so driven by the weather. And Don French's well laid plan to head up the Callery Glacier from Whataroa in the first week of Feb got blown aside by the impending nor' wester – wind, rain and snow as it turned out, for a good part of the week we had set aside to climb.

With Don were Eric Duggan, Dan Donaldson and myself. Though with not quite the climbing CV that Don has (there are very few that can claim that one), Eric is also a very experienced mountaineer. Dan and I were the relative novices of the crew.

The weather was doing its best to taunt us – it had essentially been fine all of January and another big high was looming in the second week of Feb – when three of us would be back at work. Don had his sights on the Balfour face for week two – peaks 96 and 97 on his 100 peaks list so, he at least, was pretty relaxed about the way things were panning out.



Below - north of Lake Tekapo en route to Red Stag Hut

One of the great advantages that experience brings is flexibility. Don got out his maps (we're talking many maps) and he and Eric soon cooked up a plan B. If the west coast was no good then why not head up the Godley Valley, north of Lake Tekapo, well east of the main divide and with a treasure trove of objectives to get stuck in to. We all agreed.

While Don's original plan was an exciting prospect, there were some upsides to plan B. We no longer had to lug 25kg packs up river beds for 10 hour stretches – Don's Toyota Surf was well suited to the approach up the Godley River; and our lodgings upgraded from bivvys to Red Stag Hut (3 nights) and, later, Godley Hut (2 nights). We even bought six packs of beer in – it took a day or so to get over our pangs of guilt about that, but we managed to.

Aside from Eric, whose map of this area seems to have more red lines tracing his past journeys than contour lines, none of us had visited this valley before. We were impressed, particularly as we got further up the valley to Godley Hut.



Above - Mount Sibbald, viewed from Lucifer Stream



We stationed ourselves in the four bunk (or six if you count the ground under each of the bottom bunks) Red Stag Hut and then waited out two fronts. Dawn bought a still mixed, but slightly more appealing, bag of weather lollies on Day four. Cabin fever drove us out at 4am and up McKinnon Stream in pursuit of Mount Sibbald. Through shifting cloud we had snatched a view of Sibbald up Lucifer stream earlier. From that angle it's a rugged rockscape, which I didn't fully appreciate the magnitude of until we actually got up on to it.

Dan admirably demonstrated youthful (mid thirties) exuberance by setting off across the river rocks at warp speed, still in darkness, from the hut. Eric, who I can officially report is, at forty, a machine on mountain terrain, happily tucked in behind Dan. Don and I, both north of fifty, shared mutual thoughts of the hare and the tortoise and consoled ourselves that it was just down to age.

Below - reaching the rocky ridge, at about 1,900m, leading east and up



Above - at Red Stag Hut

Our route involved plenty of river boulder hopping until we turned south up on to a wide scree slope, chasing a tussocky spur. We gained height quickly and I was gratified to be able to close the gap between myself, Speed Youth and Machine. At about 1,900 metres we joined the rocky ridge between Lucifer and McKinnon Streams, tracing this east to 2,500 metres, where we reached a sizable snow field. En route to this point the weather was still broody and we enjoyed a striking rainbow. If Don is correct that our precise route has not been climbed before, perhaps it can be known as the 'Rainbow Route'.

We gained more height easily up the snow until, about 2,700 metres, we reached the crux of the climb – a very exposed section of steep scree that sidles around and down to a tiny narrow ridge, then back up some much better quality, but still very exposed rock on to the summit.

Don and Eric shot up without batting an eyelid, but Dan and I thought a bit of protection from the yawning drops below us might not be a bad idea. So Don and Eric set up a line we could hook prusiks to and up we all went, topping out about 2pm.

I'll let the photo talk for the views we savoured at 2,811m on Mt Sibbald's rocky summit. Certainly they were sufficient reward for the ten hours we'd spent getting there. The weather had improved and, while there was still a lot going on in the sky east of the divide, we enjoyed a nice view of the Cloud Piercer among many others.

Right - climbing the last rock slabs below the summit, with the exposed scree section and Mt D'Archiac behind

Below - summit view, 2811m, Mount Sibbald



That was a fourteen hour day and involved 1,700 metres of ascent/descent from the base of the Linda, so I guess Don's claim is possible, despite his countless climbs over the years.

During the night the rattle of rain on the roof returned with renewed vigor. At our leisure we packed up and picked our way as far as we could further up the Godley Valley in the Toyota Surf. The weather continued to worsen so that, by the time we parked up and swapped wheels for boots, the sleet was driving at us horizontally from the north. While we couldn't have timed our climb of Sibbald any better, the same couldn't be said about this little leg of the journey.

Right - clearing weather at the end of Separation Stream

Bottom - killing time at Godley Hut



We were back on the snow with the crux behind us again by 3pm. For our descent we opted for the steep snow directly north, which dropped a good 500 vertical metres in short order. Then it was a case of finding a scree shoot out of the bluffs above upper McKinnon Stream.

Down at the stream I topped up my water supplies and tended to a nasty little blister that had torn open on my left pinky. Speed Youth and Machine left me in their boulder dust heading back down McKinnon Stream and the distance between Don and I extended too.

I enjoyed the serenity of the pure, babbling water after the brutishness of the rocks above. A gentle breeze coming up from the Godley Valley kept me cool in the sunlight until I rounded the bend leading back to Red Stag Hut.

It had been a fifteen hour day, involving nearly 1,900 vertical metres of ascent and descent. To my surprise, while enjoying our allotted ration of beer back at the hut, Don indicated that this may have been his biggest single height gain in a day. I thought about my climb of Aoraki up the Linda Glacier back in December 2012.



From our vehicle it was only an hour or so to Godley Hut, but route finding was impaired by the facial water blasting we received whenever we looked up. Eric and Dan shot ahead while Don and I took a wrong turn up a chunk of moraine. We could see an antenna on the top of it which we mistakenly deemed to indicate the location of the hut too.

For the remainder of that day and most of the next it sleeted. Above 1,200 metres about half a metre of new snow fell. We spent our time trying to dry gear, not eat too much of our supplies, keep warm and read last century Reader's Digests.



Day six brought a perceptible weather improvement – certainly enough to encourage us out of our four degree haven back on to the slopes. We had hoped to have a crack at the south east ridge of Mount D’Archiac, but all the new snow meant that Mount Forbes was a more realistic proposition. So, after kea-proofing excess gear at the end of Separation Stream, we headed up river to find a camping spot. At 1,300 metres we set up camp, had lunch and continued on up stream.

The new snow thickened as we approached the terminal face of Separation Glacier, which we passed on the true left. Boulder hopping isn’t my favourite terrain. Maybe it beats boulders coated in unconsolidated snow hopping though. That’s what we did up until about 1,700 metres, at which point we followed a snow filled couloir until a waterfall cut us off. Then it was on to steep and exposed, snow dusted slabs for a spell, before we leveled off at the Ballium Snowfield.



From here Machine came into his own, plugging steps in the sometimes knee deep snow most of the way to the summit. I’m not sure if he raised a sweat or not.

On the summit (2,583m) we contemplated our success on Mt Sibbald to the south and what might have been on Mt D’Archiac to the north. By now the weather was definitely clearing, but we realised that tackling D’Archiac the next day, after this ten hour effort, was probably a bridge too far – certainly my traumatised pinky agreed. New Zealand climbing inevitably involves unfinished business.

On top of Forbes and, later in my bag beside Separation Stream, I felt satisfied - a new area, two new peaks, some new friendships forged and a nice clutch of new photographs to play with on my return.

Thank you Don – a Godley experience with Mr French indeed.

Left top - Godley Hut and its beautiful setting

Left middle - beyond the terminal face of Separation Glacier en route to Mount Forbes

Below - plugging steps just before the summit of Mount Forbes

Bottom - Mount Forbes summit view (2,583m). Mount Sibbald far left and D’Archiac far right

