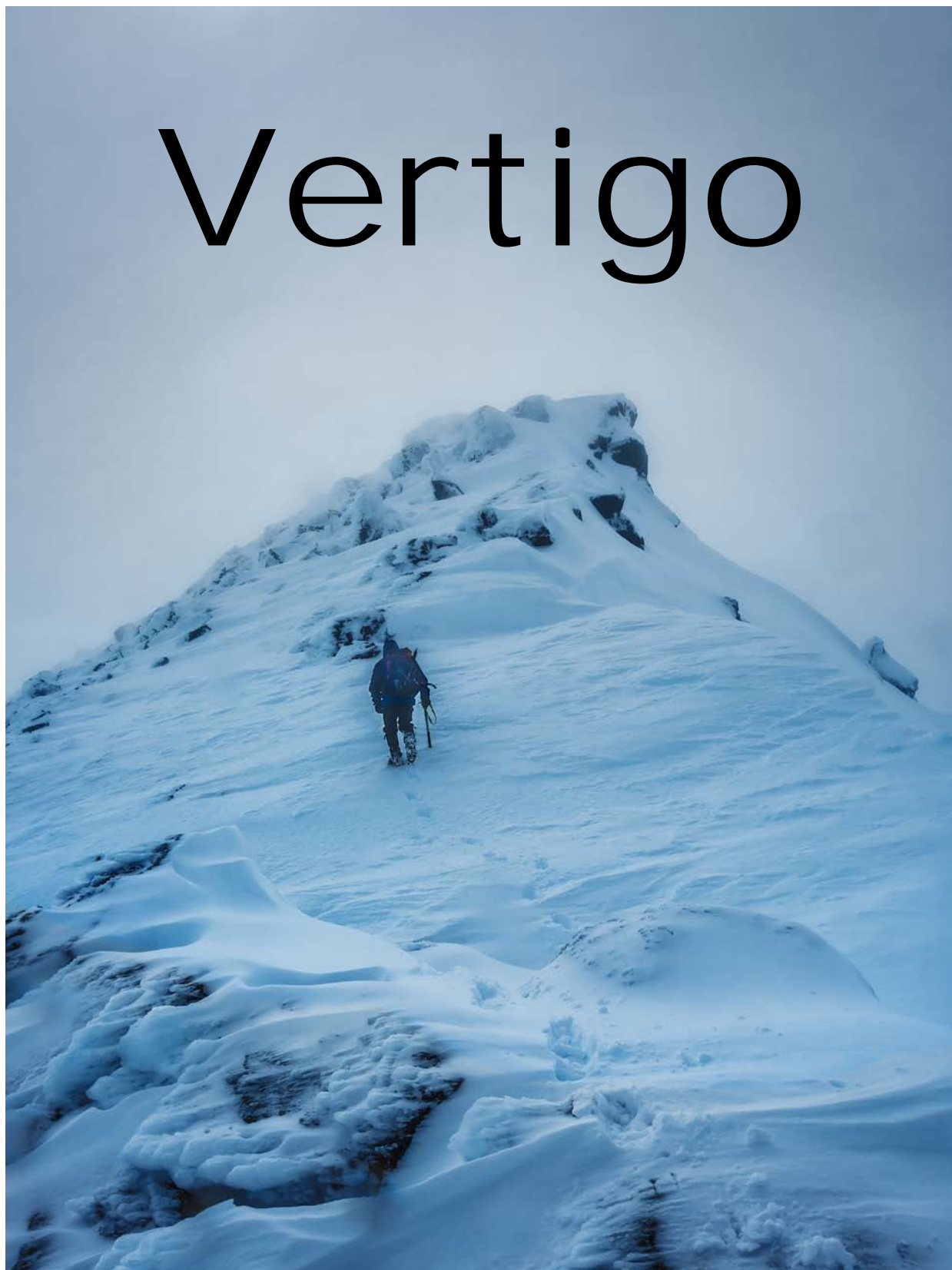


Vertigo



Approaching the summit of Tongariro (1,978m) from the west (photo by Peter Laurensen)

Newsletter of the New Zealand Alpine Club - Wellington Section

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Patience is a virtue

Words and photographs Peter Laurenson

They came, one after another, with barely a day of settled weather between them. Endless fronts surging across the Tasman. And they still come. Freezing then unseasonably warmer temperatures alternating. Gale force winds. Complex snow conditions with no consolidated base and avalanche risk seesawing between low and extreme, also on a daily basis. What the!

Steve, my climbing buddy until he shifted across the ditch a few years back to the warm end of this weather madness, was back in town. He'd put aside a two week stretch to climb and do family stuff. Our objective was Mount Rolleston, a climb we aborted near the bottom of the Otira Slide the year before due to knee and waste deep powder and extreme avalanche risk. Surely we'd get a decent day somewhere in fourteen. We watched the Metservice and Mountain Safety websites with growing dismay. Graeme Kates, our local mountaineering expert based at Arthurs Pass, reported the worst climbing conditions he'd endured in 23 years. The days rolled by with the fronts. Not a sausage!



Plenty of weather about – Ruapehu from Waiouru

The trouble was that even applying a flexible attitude to our climbing objective drew a blank – everywhere was much the same. With just a few days left our mountaineering aspirations fell away and we went tramping. Steve had never summited Mount Matthews in the Orongorongos. We and my youngest son Will made it in actually quite pleasant conditions. I enjoyed a chocolate éclair on the 970 metre top while also enjoying a much better view than I'd had eleven years earlier. The trees on the summit have been chopped back so you can see much more of the surrounding landscape these days.

What's this? A glimmer of semi clear weather over Tongariro National Park the day before Steve's departure. And the avo risk had dropped to low under 2,000 metres. We'd never played around in the terrain around the North Crater beyond Tongariro. And a circuit around the Blue Lake, up over Rotopaunga (1,856m) and along the ridge to the Emerald Lakes looked like fun. The forecast hinted of some clearings during the day so we could enjoy the fabulous scenery up there.



Across Mangatepopo Stream with the Hut behind

Setting off for Mangatepopo Hut we didn't bother taking rope or harnesses, but at least we'd get some cramponing in.

Not surprisingly, a winter Monday night was quiet at the Hut, just two others in the opposite bunk room. It sleeted and snowed much of the night and dawn revealed a universal dusting of powder. At least the wind had dropped.

We dropped down from the hut, crossed the Mangatepopo Stream and began our snow plug up the ridge toward the summit of Tongariro 800 vertical metres above. Until about 1,700m there was no consolidated base to the snow and visibility was poor in the micro droplet saturated cloud. There were also constant snow flurries. Arduous going.



Approaching the summit ridge of Tongariro at about 1,940m

I was reminded just how much more intimidating these conditions make the terrain feel, compared to a lovely bluebird day. What looks on the map to be very straight forward required the use of a compass in the poor viz. What would normally take under three hours took us four, but we eventually reached the summit ridge – which is a section of the South Crater rim. Up there the rime looked beautiful, partly draped in drifts of fresh powder.

The wind had increased to about 40km on top and that clearing we'd hoped for was nowhere to be seen. As the spindrift stung our faces we agreed that there was no point at all in delaying our descent for some sightseeing up there. So off we trudged around the poled route tracing the crater rim back to the cattle route of the Tongariro Crossing. I bashed the rime off each of the poles as I went so that the next party up would find it easier. It was also something to do because there wasn't much to look at.



Near Tongariro's summit (1,978m)

At the Red Crater we could see the DOC sign but not the crater. After a bite to eat we began our descent along the cattle route and it wasn't long before we met the first of three guided groups. In the hostile, icy conditions around the Red Crater we were very surprised to meet lines of nine or so tourists with just a guide at front and rear. No one wore crampons and only the guides had axes.

Back down at Mangatepopo Hut we grabbed our sleeping bags and other bits and bobs and headed on down to the car park. Our patience over the two weeks had not been rewarded with anything special mountaineering-wise, but it was still nice to get the crampons out, do a bit of low viz navigating and to just be in a raw alpine environment. Leaving the carpark I discovered that Steve had never stayed at the Chateau – that grand old alpine retreat of a bygone era, just down the road. Rude not to really - our virtuous reward.

For more

<http://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-north-island/tongariro-and-ngauruhoe-browse/tongariro-august-2017/>