

Vertigo

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A climber enjoys dawn from Fantham's Peak, Mt Taranaki [More here](#)

Trip Reports

Thin and hard

A winter climb of the south face of Mount Taranaki, July 2019

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It was insidious - a gradual tensing and focusing as I climbed higher. The morning was clear and calm, but the hardness of the mountain's surface barely yielded to my crampon points. Forget about self arresting. Today the usually straightforward south face of Mount Taranaki was definitely a no slip zone.

Here, inside the crater, heading for the main summit out of picture left. The Shark's Tooth looms in swirling cloud

As my climbing buddies Shaun Barnett, Darryn Pegram and I geared up earlier at the Dawson Falls visitor centre carpark, it was already apparent in the predawn gloom that the snowline on the mountain was high for July. 'Thin conditions' was how some were describing it – a situation consistent with reports across the country of unseasonably low snowfall.

This would be my tenth climb of Mount Taranaki and the fifth via Fantham's Peak, my favourite route. Being a Saturday, we'd gotten away early in the hope that we'd beat other weekend climbers, also taking advantage of the fine weather window, to sleeping spots in 12 bunk Syme Hut.

Despite being over a thousand metres above the carpark, the hut is very accessible. It only takes three hours to reach, with most of the impressively scenic climb above the tree line.

In the conditions we encountered though, the steepest section, 300 or so vertical metres beneath Fantham's Peak, demanded care and respect.

Despite earlier spotting a head torch high on the mountain, we were the first to the hut. A group of eight Taranaki SAR volunteers were hot on our heels, but they didn't plan to stay overnight. As it turned out, my concerns about a flood of weekend warriors was unfounded. We three had Syme to ourselves from early afternoon on. For me, Syme is one of the brightest gems of our extensive backcountry hut system. Perched at 1,950 metres, near the northern edge of Fantham's Peak, it commands perhaps the best view anywhere of the top 600 metres of the mountain. This is particularly so at dawn on clear mornings when the sun, rising in the east, paints everything in view purple, then mauve, then deep red, fiery orange and finally golden yellow as the sun breaches the distant horizon, taking its place next to Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu.

A gem it is, but a cold one. In such a spot there is no fuel for a wood burner. I've been at Syme before when the entire hut was thickly encased in rime ice – so much so that I cramponed up one of the outrageously ice encrusted weather stabiliser cables on to the roof.

That time we had to make a considered guess about where the door was and start hacking with our axes. This time the hut was only partially coated. It still had its magnificent, ghostly west-end formations in place, but the east facing split door was mostly clear. We climbed in via the free swinging top half of the door and later, with a bit of toil, I was able to free the bottom half of hard ice, permitting normal entry and exit.

Though the morning had been beautifully clear, by late morning clouds were billowing up and over the summit. We debated whether or not there was any point going for the summit that afternoon, or if it would be better and safer to have a crack at dawn next morning. About 1pm just enough swirling light above encouraged us back in to our crampons.

We had our harnesses on and carried a rope, snow stakes and ice screws. The SAR boys had told us to leave the snow stakes behind due to the hardness of the surface – ‘You’ll never bash them in mate!’ We knew they were probably right but took them anyhow. Actually, apart from a tense 20 or so metre front point to breach the crater rim, the surface was slightly more forgiving up high than it had been on the steepest section beneath Fantham’s Peak in the morning. The warmth of the day probably helped a bit.

Free of exposure up in the crater, we relaxed, strolling through a fantastic rime encrusted world. Cloud constantly swirled, making photography tricky, but adding to the otherworldly atmosphere. After a 20 minute spell on the main summit, waiting for clearances in the cloud, we had to get going down again to make sure we reached the hut before nightfall.

Back at the hut in time for sunset, Shaun and I in particular felt the joy of the hills, as we took shot after shot in lovely light. Next morning was even better. If you’re a photographer, a Syme Hut dawn should be on your bucket list.

We were in no hurry to descend, but Darryn had to get back to the Auckland rat race that afternoon, so we set off down about mid morning. At the junction where the Fantham’s Peak trail meets the Upper Lake Dive trail, we bid Darryn farewell and began a sometimes quite iced up traverse westward around to Lake Dive. Down at 900 metres beside the Lake tranquil conditions rewarded us with mirror perfect reflections of the southern side of Mount Taranaki. We enjoyed another peaceful evening, with Lake Dive Hut to ourselves. Next morning the weather was still fine as we made our up and down way around the rugged base of the mountain, back to the carpark.



Looking north and east from the southern edge of Fantham's Peak to Mt Taranaki, at sunrise
The shadow of Mt Taranaki is far left



The south side of Mt Taranaki, reflected on Lake Dive. Fantham's Peak is closest
For more captioned images and a route map
www.occasionalclimber.co.nz

