



Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For:

A Night Under The Stars Near Mount Hector

by Peter Laurenson

As photographers we all love the magic hour right—dawn and dusk. But how do you get an angle not covered by lots of others? If you're willing to put your tramping boots on and are prepared to do some sweating and shivering, then a spot high above the bushline in the Tararua Range is a great bet.

One such spot is at the southern end of the Range, very near the summit of Mount Hector. It can be accessed in less than two hours from central Wellington with a choice of an easier or harder route. The less hard way is via the trail up from Otaki Forks on the western side, but this is a very well trodden route used by countless trampers. The way I chose on one recent trip was from the eastern side starting at the

Waiohine carpark, heading to Cone Hut first, then up to Cone Saddle, then Cone (1,080m). That took three hours. The next section was the hardest bit, ascending Neill Ridge, which involved constant ups and downs, all through goblin forest. As I sweated buckets, I had to concentrate to stay on route until I finally cleared the bushline beneath Winchcombe Peak (1,261m) about six hours on from Cone.

By then it was mid afternoon and a light breeze cooled things down—certainly better than the humid closeness of the goblin forest. But the going remained focussing, with several steep exposed sections to pass before I eventually reached a nice flat spot at 1,500 metres, just ten minutes east of Mount Hector. I hadn't



seen another person during the ten or so hours it took me to get there.

It was cloudy on the tops, so I settled in for a long night in my bivvy bag, perched on top of springy tussock. During the night, cloud continued to swirl. At times I got beautiful glimpses of the night sky, but I had no great expectations for the dawn.

Spot! A drop of water from one of the blades of tussock that had been tickling me throughout the night hit me in the eye. I checked my watch—5am, then looked around me to see a glorious scene. Sections of tops poked out of a sunken cloud blanket cloaking the lower slopes. The horizon showed the first crimson signs of the new day approaching.

For the next two and a half hours I captured the unfolding sunrise in pixels. The landscape was spectacular, the light luxuriant and the immediate

foreground coated in white alpine flowers. I felt rewarded many times over for the hard slog of the day before.

At 7.45am I was taking more pictures from the summit of Mount Hector beside the memorial cross, erected by the Wellington Tramping Club in memory of trampers and climbers killed in the Second World War. To return to my parked car, for the next three hours I trod familiar ground around to Alpha Hut. On that clear morning I've never seen this section in better conditions—perfect for photography and still no-one else to be seen.

From Alpha Hut I carried on to Bull Mound, then dropped directly down to Tauherenikau River and Cone Hut on its east bank. At 5pm back at my car, it felt good to get my boots off. Seven toe nails were blackening in true Tararua fashion, but the photographs made it worth it.