



# Tararua tops feast



Sunset view from near Tam Ridge Hut south to Girdlestone (far left), Adkin, the Three Kings, Broken Axe Pinnacles and McGregor

AN EXTENDED VERSION OF THE TARARUA NORTHERN CROSSING THAT TAKES IN THE MOST SPECTACULAR PEAKS.  
BY **PETER LAURENSEN**



**SSSSUCK.** The sound of my boot being extracted from another micro-swamp as Simon Williamson and I slithered our way up Gable End Ridge, had me cursing.

After four or so hours, we'd reached the highest section of the ridge. At 900m, the trees were stunted, permitting glimpses of Waiopahu Hut nestled beneath the apex of the adjacent ridge to the west. It was drizzling, adding to the muddy conditions.

"Worst mud I've seen in the Tararuas," cursed Simon.

"Sure hope this doesn't persist higher up," I replied.

We had both pinned our hopes on the mud-fest ending once we had passed the Te Araroa Trail junction, but that would be found out about the next day.

For now, our objective was Te Matawai Hut, perched on a level section of ridge at 900m and beyond Butcher Saddle. The saddle required giving up 300m of hard-won height and descending in the muted conditions, which seemed to accentuate the injustice of the height loss. But we both knew that winning the Tararua tops is about persistence and a couple of hours later we trudged onto the deck of Te Matawai Hut – my first visit to this large 18-bunker.

We'd been stalking the Metservice for nearly two months leading up to this trip. The weather had been so unsettled that fine days wouldn't open for us. But just before Christmas, from the deck of Te Matawai, we enjoyed a striptease act laid on by Lancaster and Pukematawai just to the east as clouds seductively fell away from their flanks with a promise of an improving forecast.

The next two days – when we'd be almost exclusively on the highest of the Tararua tops – would be clear, with a nice touch of southerly air-conditioning.

It was great to be up in the hills just before Christmas, but we felt pangs of guilt. Simon's partner Caro, as much a hill-lover as us, was stuck at work but she'd selflessly dropped us off at the road end near Levin and had agreed to collect us again at the Holdsworth Road end in three days' time. Her only request: "Don't brag about it when I see you next."



Arriving at Arete Biv with  
Twins and Bannister beyond

Neither Simon nor I had completed the Northern Crossing of the Tararua Range. We'd both done the Southern Crossing long ago. That route seems to be the best known, but many trips into the Tararua Range since then had suggested the northern route would be even more spectacular. It's in this part of the range that all the highest peaks can be found. Of the 15 points shown on the topo map to be at least 1500m, our route would climb over eight.

It is entirely feasible to do a northern crossing in just two days by heading east over Bannister to Cow Saddle and out to the Kiriwhakapapa Road end. Indeed, there are several different routes on offer. However, due to the favourable forecast, Simon and I planned to enjoy a tops feast by heading south along the main range, linking Arete with Girdlestone and McGregor. In doing so, we would

encounter some of the most spectacular Tararua terrain on offer.

We shared Te Matawai Hut with three others – all south-bound Te Araroa Trail walkers and all, not surprisingly in a pandemic-hit world, Kiwis. It was interesting hearing about some of their experiences on the trail. Their route would take them south, just beneath Pukematawai (1432m) the next morning, leading down a long bush-clad ridge for the most part, to an exit at Otaki Forks. In my opinion, a much better option would be to just hold an easterly course over Pukematawai, thereby encountering what Simon and I were champing at the bit for – heavenly untracked tops.

The clouds had all but dissolved as we set off in fresh morning conditions. The mud remained until a little before the TA turn-off at Pukematawai and conditions underfoot suddenly became surprisingly dry.

**DUE TO THE FAVOURABLE FORECAST, WE PLANNED TO ENJOY A TOPS FEAST BY HEADING ALONG THE MAIN RANGE, LINKING ARETE WITH GIRDLESTONE AND MCGREGOR**





A foreshortened view of the crux of the Broken Axe Pinnacles

Soon we were over Pukematawai and making our way along a craggy section of ridge beneath Arete, our first 'fifteen-hundreder'. On Arete, the air was crystal clear and the southerly breeze gentle and cooling – perfect Tararua tops conditions. The intimidating bulk of Bannister loomed to our left as we dropped down to Arete Biv for morning tea.

I'd been to the biv just once before, having come over Bannister alone a few years back. My dawn recollections are still vivid and the biv became one of my favourite shelters in the Tararua Range, along with Maungahuka Hut. On my first visit there, I carried on south to Lancaster and then down Pinnacle Spur. Being alone, the terrain on the spur had appeared foreboding and required such concentration that I didn't even register what lay further to the south.

This time, we made quick work of the spur and gained our first glimpse of Tarn Ridge and the route to Girdlestone.

Standing on top of the northernmost bit of the Waiohine Pinnacles, we couldn't help but be impressed: Tarn Ridge resembled a geographic Jekyll and Hyde with a 200m descent along a narrow and steep-sided knife-edge that required determined focus before the terrain morphed into wider and more gentle rolling tops.

Later, we climbed past the memorial and gravesite to hunter Basil Blatchford who died from exposure on the ridge in 1959.

## ON ARETE, the air was crystal clear and the southerly breeze gentle and cooling – PERFECT TARARUA TOPS CONDITIONS

We traversed a tussocky mound to find Tarn Ridge Hut below. Nestled just below the ridgeline in a little dip, with Girdlestone towering above, the hut commands a superb view north to the Twins and Bannister. The nearby loo has an even better view. It was another first-time visit for me and I made sure to enjoy the magnificent sunset from above the hut in case I never come this way again.

We knew we had plenty of work to do the next day before meeting our ride at the road end. In fact, we had a plan B to drop down Baldy Ridge and exit to the Pines if our bodies complained too much. Time would tell as we set off in the direction of Girdlestone under another completely clear morning sky.

As we neared the top of Girdlestone, we noticed a tiny yellow dot below us on Dorset Ridge making impressive progress in our direction. David, a 67-year-old just-retired doctor from Hamilton, caught up to us while we marvelled at the clarity of the view from Girdlestone. We could easily see Tapuae-o-Uenuku, Taranaki, Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe – perhaps the clearest views I've ever enjoyed from the Tararua tops. David had over-nighted at Dorset Ridge Hut, which I haven't been to and it's doubtful I ever will: it sits at the end of long ridges to nowhere. You can take this hut bagging thing too far.

Anyone who has dropped down the south side of Girdlestone will know it's a steep and craggy trail. It was no problem in the con-

ditions we enjoyed, but would be formidable in ice. I've been this way before, but was taken aback when we reached North King. Its southern aspect seemed more intimidating than Girdlestone's. We bade farewell to David at Middle King, where he headed down to Mitre Flats. Four hours after departing Tarn Ridge Hut, we reached South King and, though the tiny white dot of Jumbo Hut still looked a long way away, we felt we had enough time to reach our intended endpoint rather than shorten our route down Baldy Ridge.

The Broken Axe Pinnacles it was.

I'd been this way before, but in the opposite direction and in winter conditions. I had opted for the low trail on the southern side of the Pinnacles, and even that required use of my ice axe to stay in touch with the steep tussock slope. Viewed side-on, the pinnacles resemble a series of teeth or fins. The most pronounced and steepest, near the northern end, has a gnarly sheer section known as the crux. As we neared this, we realised it didn't look too inviting, even in perfect conditions.


Then two fit young guys appeared beyond the crux, wearing trail running shoes and coming at pace. I asked how they went over

it and discovered one had opted for a detour put in place by DOC. The other had gone over the crux OK.

Moments later, we stood at the base of the crux. I thought we could do it, but knew a fall would not end well. Simon agreed, noting the detour was there for a reason. So we went left, not up. The detour led around to the other end of the crux fin, then the rest of the trail went over the remaining pinnacles – enough fun for these two trampers.

By mid-afternoon we stood on McGregor, our seventh 1500m peak. Angle Knob, our eighth, was not far to the south. The southerly had all but died away and it was hot but the views in all directions remained beautiful. At Jumbo Hut there was plenty of cold water, but also a hoard of teenagers lying about looking at their smartphones, so we didn't pause for long.

Simon is a 60-year-old whippet and with the end in sight, he shot off ahead of me as we set off from Atiwhakatu Hut. I reached the road-end after 11 hours on the move, just as Caro drove into the car park.

It was a great trip, but true to our word we remained tight-lipped on the drive back to Wellington. 

### WILD FILE

**Access** From Poads Road car park or Mt Holdsworth Road end car park  
**Grade** Moderate-difficult

**Time** 3-4 days. Poads Road to Te Matawai Hut, 6-7hr; To Tarn Ridge Hut, 7-8hr; To Holdsworth Road end, 10-12hr

**Distance** 40.8km

**Total ascent** 3691m

**Accommodation**

Te Matawai Hut,

Tarn Ridge Hut

**Topo50 map** BN33,

BN34, BP33, BP34

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Find the map and route notes for this trip at [www.wildernessmag.co.nz](http://www.wildernessmag.co.nz)