

# THE CRUSTY COULOIR

FOR TRAMPERS WISHING TO UP THEIR WINTER GAME AND STAND ON A 2000M SUMMIT, MT CUPOLA IS AN IDEAL PEAK TO FLEX YOUR CRAMPONS ON.

BY PETER LAURENSEN

The view east at sunrise  
from about 1750m





First-time climber  
Martin Love on the  
summit of Mt Cupola

For trampers wishing to climb higher into mountaineering terrain, the peaks of Nelson Lakes National Park that exceed 2000m are a good place to start. All offer grade 1 routes that, in good conditions, provide ideal 'transition ground' from tramping to mountaineering. One of the park's two-thousanders is Mt Cupola (2260m), which can be quickly accessed and towers over stunning Cupola Basin.

The peak is best tackled from Cupola Hut, a six-hour walk from the head of Lake Rotoiti, where a water taxi can drop trampers at Coldwater Hut. As with any alpine route, weather and terrain determine how challenging things will be on any given day. What makes Mt Cupola stand out for those looking for a new challenge is that access to the start of the climb is relatively benign and the couloir route (a steep gully on the peak's northern face) is direct and straightforward to navigate in clear weather, and in 'friendly' conditions no rope is necessary. But regardless of whether you get to climb or not, the scenery from above Cupola Hut is worth the visit.

Last winter the MetService granted my wish: two days of fine weather and a low avalanche risk. Having been rebuffed twice before by Mt Cupola, I was now on a mission.

I had come alone to Cupola Hut, thinking that crampons and two axes would be ample for a grade one climb in clear conditions.

At the hut, three others had the wood burner pumping out plenty of warmth. Nelsonians Grant, Rob and Martin shared a similar plan to mine: a dash to Cupola's summit. For 56-year-old Martin, it would be his first climb with crampons and axe.

Light snow fell overnight until about 3am, when the sky began to clear. I was first away at 6am. As I climbed the shelf above the hut, the sun began to show and the powder-dry snow deepened. Plugging became hard work and it didn't take long for the others to catch me. We then shared the lead, which made things much easier for me.

In the crystal-clear air, the base of the north face couloir, about 550m higher, had looked to be about an hour away. It actually took two hours, and as we neared the narrowing neck

## THE SNOWFIELD LED TO A BROKEN ROCKY RIDGE, CULMINATING IN A LOVELY CRESCENT RIDGE: A CLASSIC SUMMIT

of the couloir it looked quite steep – perhaps 50 degrees at its steepest. The snow underfoot had firmed up, suggesting a pleasant and straightforward climb.


After climbing into the narrow neck, however, we found the frozen snow was now hard ice with a thin dusting of dry powder. Getting my axes into the hard surface demanded a good swing with each placement, and I found myself wishing I'd worn my heavier, semi-rigid boots.

As we prepared to ascend the couloir the only 'ideal' ingredient missing was softer snow.

Rob, the youngest in our combined party, took the lead and broke up the surface. Even so, there was no place to relax, and full concentration on maintaining three points of contact was essential until we reached a snowfield angling up to the left.

The section above the couloir had been hidden from below, and as we exited the couloir it unfolded before my eyes and I realised how expansive it was. The snowfield led to a broken rocky ridge, which led to a section of snow-plugging, culminating in a lovely crescent ridge: a classic summit, indisputably higher than everything nearby.

We reached the summit at 10am, and our reward was a 360-degree panorama of Nelson Lakes National Park. On the eastern skyline, Tapuae-o-Uenuku stated its claim as the highest peak outside the Main Divide.

The descent of the couloir proved slightly less hairy than expected, due to the sun softening things a bit, and we were back at the hut by midday. 

### WILD FILE

**Access** From Saint Arnaud, water taxi to Coldwater Hut at the southern end of Lake Rotoiti

**Grade** Moderate-difficult

**Time** Coldwater Hut to Cupola Hut, 5-8hr; to summit return, 5-8hr

**Accommodation** Cupola Hut (\$5, eight bunks)

**Topo50 map** BS24



On a rocky section at about 2150m, just below the summit of Mt Cupola, Mt Hopeless in the distance