

A HIGHER TAKE ON WYE CREEK



by PETER LAURENSEN

The view to Pīkio (left) and Double Cone (far right)

**A DIVERSION OFF
THE POPULAR WYE
CREEK TRACK WILL
GET YOU HIGH ABOVE
THE CROWDS AND
IN SIGHT OF ENDLESS
MOUNTAIN RANGES.**

Wye

Creek is a stunner. Confined to the west by The Remarkables, to the east by Tapuae-o-Uenuku/Hector Mountains and dotted with gleaming tarns, it's easy to see why it's a top day trip in the Queenstown Lakes district.

In recognition of its beauty, high tussock-land and alpine ecosystems, as well as its cultural, historic and recreational significance, in 2017 Federated Mountain Clubs launched a campaign to encompass this area within a Remarkables National Park.

Though it's not yet a national park, I was glad of the opportunity to get in there with my tramping companion Dan Clearwater. But our intended route was to be no valley wander.

We set off at dawn on the first section of popular Wye Creek Track, located on the west face of The Remarkables. Beginning below 400m, the track zigzags up beside a hydro station pipeline (Wye Creek's water has been used for power generation since the late 1920s), climbing through beech forest beside a waterfall that cascades exuberantly down to Lake Wakatipu.

At the power station water intake at about 640m, the marked, benched track turns left and climbs for an hour through beech forest to the treeline, where there's a nice view of Lake Wakatipu and the Bayonet Peaks. It emerges beside the creek in the lower Wye Creek basin and from there becomes a route that leads to the 1970m saddle separating Double Cone from Pt2050, before descending to Lake Alta at 1801m. This 13km track takes 6–8hr and requires a pick-up at The Remarkables ski area.

With rock climbs for all abilities on both sides of Wye Creek (these become ice climbs in winter), the track is popular with day walkers and climbers and can get busy, particularly in summer.

Our route was different, however. At the water intake we crossed the creek. We would climb high onto the tops above on a circuit with the same start and end points, obviating the need for car shuttling logistics. We would also enjoy both tops and valley walking and avoid crowds for most of the day.



Descending into Wye Creek with Double Cone at left



As the saying goes, however, 'there's no such thing as a free lunch'. Immediately after crossing the creek, for the first 400m or so we scrub-bashed up a steep spur on the true left of Wye Creek, climbing east towards Pt1916. Unlike Dan, who relished the challenge, I gritted my teeth, resigned to getting through the scrub as a rite of passage to the tops.

When we reached the open tussock it was immediately apparent that the effort had been worthwhile. Lake Wakatipu and the surrounding peaks were at our backs; before us, easy, rolling tussock stretched towards a craggy skyline. At about 1400m we could look north into Wye Creek, a view that opened out and became more impressive as we continued up onto scree slopes. Here we traversed to our first objective, a saddle between Pt2103 and Pt2090, where we gained the ridge.

Snow cover began at around 1700m on gently sloping scree, but crampons weren't necessary. Beyond the saddle the gradient increased as we climbed towards Pt2090. I opted to put my crampons on but Dan scrambled up the rocks, which, though lumpy going, proved less exposed.


Once on top of Pt2090 we got our first complete view of the surrounding alpine terrain. We'd hoped to trace the ridge north over several more high points, but the steep, weather-beaten Otago schist and greywacke ahead, though above 2000m, was mostly free of snow and would be difficult and slow going. Our intended route would be better under full snow cover in clear winter conditions.

What lay before us was reward enough, all the same. Immediately to our east a spur dropped then rose again to a smaller high point. We knew that the view from there of Lake Hope, 300m below in a basin to the east, would be unimpeded, so off we went.

While there are no tarns to speak of on the slopes above Wye Creek until the northern head of the valley, it's a different story on the eastern side of the Hector Mountains. Of the numerous lakes and tarns there, Lake Hope is the largest. Our view that day revealed the lake frozen over and snow-covered, but it's easy to imagine the great camping potential here in summer conditions.

Indeed, because the terrain is so rugged and demands considerable effort to get into, it would be worthwhile breaking a long day into two shorter ones by descending 150m from the saddle south of Pt2090 to Lake Hope, then retracing your steps to the saddle the next morning.

We stayed high, however, and from Pt2090 enjoyed a magnificent view north along The Remarkables to Double Cone, with Wye Creek snaking its way up-valley. From this angle it was obvious why Double Cone was so named. Our map warned of cliffs, directly west of where we stood, blocking access to the valley floor. But looking north, the western side of our range appeared to be straightforward open ground with many descent options. First, though, we had to pick our way down over blocky boulders and broken rock for several hundred metres to reach the tussock again. It was hard, but infinitely better than vertical scrub-bashing.

It was now midday and the wind had strengthened. Including a lunch stop in the lee of some boulders, it took us about three hours to reach the valley floor. To avoid any chance of getting bluffed, our route traversed downwards and north from Pt2090, crossing a tributary stream at 1550m before dropping directly through tussock to the valley floor. From there we enjoyed a much easier trudge south for about five kilometres and reached the car park at 5pm. The stroll beside the babbling creek was a nice way to finish our circuit – easier going but still with impressive vistas, this time of towering cliffs, waterfalls and huge lichen-covered boulders that had tumbled from the heights over millennia. 

Descending back to Wye Creek and easier travel

WILDFILE

Access From SH6, by the Wye Creek bridge, 20 minutes drive south of Queenstown

Grade Moderate–difficult

Time 9–12hr

Distance 13km

Total ascent 1700m (approx)

Topo50 map CC11



DOWNLOAD Find the map and route notes for this trip at www.wildernessmag.co.nz