



NZ WALKING  
SPECIAL  
ARTHUR'S  
PASS

# A KNEES- UP IN THE MOUNTAINS

On a challenging trail in Arthur's Pass NP, *Great Walks* bumps into some age-defying trampers.

WORDS AND PHOTOS\_HUW KINGSTON

Looking back  
toward Tarn Col.



Left to right: The tarn at Tarn Col; Crossing the Bealey River; In one of the ice tunnels heading down from Tarn Col.



“COME on John, what have you got to lose?” I’d joined Laurence in a double pronged attack on his dad. An attack on his reticence to get his bung knee fixed. “You’re only 70 and it will ensure you can enjoy hiking and biking again,” chimed Laurence, doubtless not for the first time.

John was giving us a lift mid-afternoon to the start of our tramp through the Edwards and Hawdon Valleys. I’d flown into Christchurch at midnight the night before. John and Laurence had picked me up and we’d driven straight out to their new bach (holiday house in Kiwispeak) below the mountains at Castle Hill. I’d seen it under construction back in March 2020, just after walking the new Paparoa Track, but had to leave to get back to Oz with borders closing.

Now, back in NZ for the first time since, I was over there to lead a six times COVID-cancelled South Island MTB tour. But I rarely hit NZ without allowing time for a bit of an adventure with Laurence. Formerly a NZ-representative cyclist, Laurence went into anaphylactic shock after a single bee sting ten years ago. It sent him into a coma that, when he came to, left him partially paralysed and unable to speak. By dint of hard work, he overcame both and the bugger still rides faster and skis better than I do, even though he is still legally blind.

Mid-afternoon, John dropped us off near Greyneys Shelter, 5km before Arthur’s Pass, and hobbled with us to the Bealey River and our first river crossing. The Edwards-Hawdon tramp is not one for those shy of a spot of wading. There are innumerable crossings, endless opportunities for wet feet and it is not a route to follow after heavy rain or with rain in the forecast. Treat all river crossings with respect and realise they always look easier than they usually are.

### On the up

Once across the Bealey and then the Mingha rivers, we started up the Edwards Valley through a shady beech forest. After a couple of hours, we crossed the east branch of the Edwards River and started climbing steeply, at times close to the edge of the gorge below. These exposed sections gave glimpses of powerful waterfalls dropping through the gorge. With the sun now finished for the day, we emerged onto more horizontal and open tussock country in the upper valley at 1000m, in the distance spying Edwards Hut, which we reached 3.5 hours from our start.

The peaks around us, including Falling Mountain straight up the valley, still had plenty of snow, not surprising given our early November visit. We were the only ones at the hut and settled

## “SOON THE SUN WAS WARMING US AND UP AHEAD TO THE MASSIVE BOULDER FIELD BELOW FALLING MOUNTAIN”

in, mug of red in hand, as a full moon rose. It was good to be back in the Southern Alps.

I thumbed through a few old copies of NZ Wilderness magazine, finding an article on how to keep trekking into older age. Sage advice such as: stop when it hurts, ease your way in, get issues looked at early. And examples of people in their seventies and eighties still clambering through the mountains. A cold night necessitated a pulling on of the beanie in a sleeping bag perhaps too lightweight for the season.

### You’re getting warmer

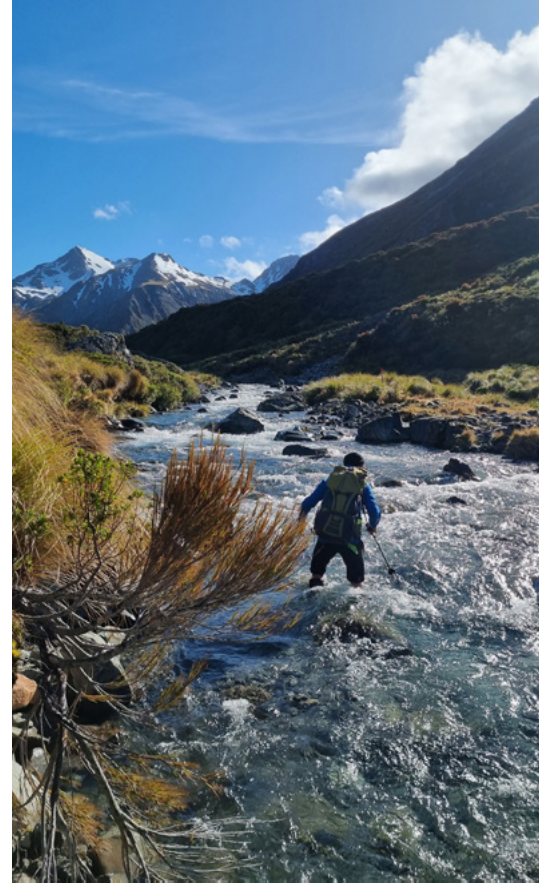
We woke to the moon slipping away and sunlight strolling down the hillside, burning off the frost as it went. It hadn’t quite reached the bottom of the valley as we negotiated the first river crossings, the cold from our feet migrating up through our veins. Occasional poles topped

by orange markers showed the way through the open country, a thin foot pad too on occasions. Soon the sun was warming us and up ahead to the massive boulder field below Falling Mountain. Eponymously named, this hill shook millions of tonnes off itself in the huge 1929 earthquake. To see how far the rock had gone, not just down into the valley but up the other side of Taruahuna Pass, was to witness the scale of the downpour.

Laurence and I took different routes through the rubble up to the pass. I looked down into the west branch of the Otehake River trying to pick out the route up to Tarn Col, but all I could see was a very steep gully to my right, to the east. Surely not ...

Our paths met below that gully and from our morning tea vantage point I saw that the orange markers indeed took us into the gully. It was a steep, at times exposed climb, sometimes in the rocky creek, sometimes above





## WALK NOTES | EDWARDS - HAWDON VALLEYS VIA TARN COL, ARTHUR'S PASS NP

**Distance:** 33km | **Time:** 2-3 days | **Grade:** Challenging



This interesting walk takes you through spectacular rockfalls, past mountain tarns and over two alpine passes. The picturesque hanging valley at Walker Pass is a fitting reward and worth every step over Taruahuna Pass and the steep climb up to Tarn Col. Most of the route is marked except the section between Edwards Hut and Taruahuna Pass where you follow a well-worn path up the Edwards valley marked with occasional rock cairns.



**Left:** Approaching Edwards Hut late afternoon.

**Right:** Heading up upper Edwards Valley toward Taruahuna Pass.

it on slippery snowgrass. Like the mountain above us, there was plenty of falling potential and I reckoned it would be a far from pleasant place in wet or icy conditions, even moreso if you were coming down from Tarn Col.

1368 metre Tarn Col itself is a stunning spot with its little shallow tarn and miniature island, snowy Mt Franklin framing the view behind. A knee jarring, tiring 400m descent followed that was as often in a creek as out of it. On three or four occasions we followed the creek through tunnels cut by the flow through old snow debris. Some were close to 100m long, ceilings scalloped by the melt.

### Weary legs

Once down on the Otehake River East Branch, weary legs and a substantial lunch had us both snoozing under the warm sun. Fortunately, we were not caught napping by an elderly gentleman who came upon us on the track soon after, up on Walker Pass. Sandy, in his early eighties, was out doing the same walk as us but in reverse. With a substantial pack on his back, he was the magazine story incarnate, in the perfectly named location. Even better, he told us he was out testing his new knee after a recent operation. Perfect grist for the mill of grinding down John's reticence.

I lost count of the number of stream crossings after Walker Pass, the number of animal traps too, one holding a trapped stoat. New Zealand has an immense feral animal control programme for stoats, weasels, rats, possums, and any number of introduced species; doing their best to protect to protect their often endangered native bird and animal life. A final steep descent, bypassing an impressive waterfall, brought us to Hawdons Hut, some 7.5 hours after we'd left from Edwards.



One of the best things about any trip with Laurence, whether by bike or boot, is that he makes it all so easy for me. He organises and prepares the finest food. Not for him the freeze dried, seemingly so beloved of Kiwi trampers. Trampers who seem to carry large packs but pull out few treats from them. Never for Laurence imported chocolate over homegrown Whittakers. That night, again with the hut to ourselves, we sat down for red lentil dhal with garlic, a vegetable curry on quinoa and a large piece of salmon resting on top. Helping that go down was a concoction of quince fruits soaked in vodka and sugar reduction. Fine fare that is hard to bear.

### Ancient cultures

Like so many of our brethren across the Tasman, Laurence is proud of the Maori heritage, of those who had settled in New Zealand some 500 years before Europeans arrived. He was enrolled in a Maori language course and, after dinner, practiced a speech he was to give to the class that week. A voice in the mountains.

This year we in Australia have a historic opportunity to give our First Nations people a voice. It is a small step on the long trek to reconciliation with those who have been here

for more than 60,000 years. It is a step we can take because of the generous invitation all Australians received from the Uluru Statement. I hope we can take it.

A kiwi called into the night as we slept.

From Hawdon Hut it is a 3hr walk to the pickup point on the White Station Road. We had plenty of time before John was due, so took it easy. Early on we met some conservation volunteers. They were releasing 16 of the endangered orange fronted parrots that day. Bred in captivity, they had spent one night in a specially constructed aviary before their release. The big trapping programme was in place to remove as many predators as possible to give these little birds as best chance as possible.

A few crossings of the Hawdon River kept us honest and, near one, we met Cynthia, wife of Sandy, a few years older too. She too had had a knee operation, more recently than her husband. So, whilst waiting with their campervan for him to complete his Hawdon-Edwards trek with, she was out for a shorter test run. After farewelling Cynthia, we crossed a fast-flowing streamway and wondered how she had, with recovering knee, managed it. Minutes after we arrived at Hawdon Shelter and the roadhead, our lift turned up. "John, we need a word with you..." ⚙️



This image: Reflections in Edwards Hut.

Below: Laurence at the top of the gully to Tarn Col.

### NEED TO KNOW

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