



Ascending Mt Fyffe (1602m)

Adam Pope

Sunglasses are not just a fashion accessory in New Zealand. With an ozone hole that turns sky blue into sky white, they're an essential blindness preventing device. So put on a bowl of sunblock and your sunnies and come with me, reader, to conquer Mt Fyffe.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) say it's an eight hour return trip, but I've only been allowed six in order to pick Mary up from whale watching on time.

The drive from Kaikoura to the Mt Fyffe carpark is 10km across two straights, then a 9km wind on gravel roads beside the Kowhai River. I'd climbed a steep 400m on Monday and Tuesday, so I knew the 1602m Fyffe was no piece of cake. I started out confidently, however, jogging up the narrow gravel road. A minute later I was striding up the incline, to be reduced to pigeon stepping the incessantly acute gradient a few minutes later. My confidence had ebbed completely.

It's not long before the majestic views become apparent however. At only 500m, after 40 minutes of sweaty hiking, the entire plain is spread out below me, and I can see far out to sea. Unfortunately the atmosphere is a bit hazy, otherwise the Southern Alps would be visible in their snowy splendor.

With the blare of the bugs and the glare of the sun all around me, I continue crunching my feet up the gravel 4WD track. A puddle of sweat, I looked up at the 800m mark and there's a local. Having lost his dogs whilst hunting, the sharemilker has taken his quad bike up the mountain to co-ordinate the search with his mate below. We get to talking. Where who's from and does he know Andrew MacFarlane from Parnassus? "I know the MacFarlane's. Hey, do you wanna ride up to the Hut?"

Having taken over from horses, quad bikes are the leading cause of fatalities for New Zealand farmers. "As long as you don't sue me if you break your leg", he mutters, and proceeds to bellyache over his shoulder about the over regulation of health and safety by DOC as we carefully and bumpily pick our way up the path. I'm holding on firmly as we navigate an abundance of precipices and hairpin corners. The view can wait.

"There used to be a corking volunteer-built hut down there, a great place to stay, but DOC took it out 'coz it wasn't safe. Too bad if the roof falls on your head, it's not gonna kill yer.' We arrive at the Mt Fyffe Hut after a further 400 metre ascent. "I'm not taking you any further" were his parting words.

At 1200m, the hut is a sturdy eight bunker, featuring a stove, long-drop toilet and water tank. Many folk overnight on their way up the mountain making for a more leisurely trip. The cheap hut fees are payable



before you stay, though many also have honesty boxes in case you haven't.

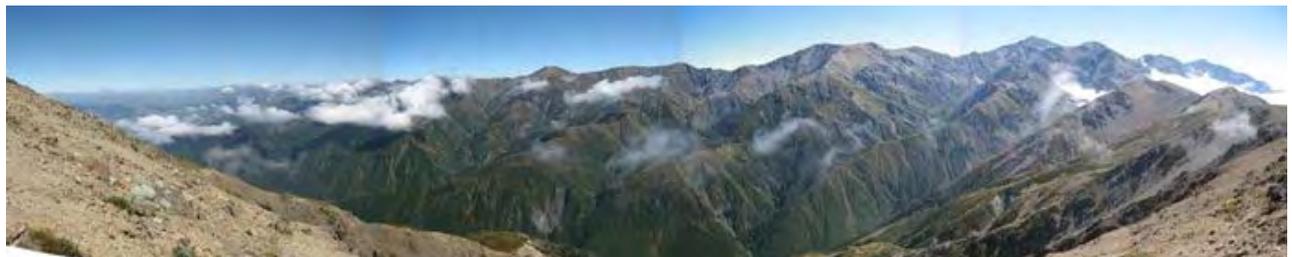
By 10.30am, cloud cover had appeared over the plain to 800m, obscuring the quilt like patchwork of fields and roads. On the other side of the ridge the rest of the Seaward Kaikoura Range was still clearly visible, their rocky peaks with shingle slides descending into narrow forested valleys and a rocky riverbed at the bottom of the cliff far below.



Clambering ever upwards, the gravel track became yet narrower, and the vegetation changed from tea tree forest to tussock, shingle, rocks, lichens and rare but stunning alpine flowers such as the pictured gentian. Stunted alpine conifers had been introduced to control the erosion caused by merino sheep grazing up until the 1950's and are so prolific that they pose a serious threat to the native plant population struggling to make a comeback.

Erosion is evident from the many large boulders on the track, indicating it's been a long time since any vehicles have driven past 1300m. I reach what I'd thought for a long time to be the peak only to see the path descend and then gradually climb the extended high ridge a further 100m to the top. The sign says '1500m' and the warm humid breeze buzzing with insects is now a cool dry mountain zephyr.

I trudge on. That last two metres feels like twenty of the initial ones. Once my head rises over the summit however, I'm greeted with a 360° view of the entire region – alpine, plain, cloud cover, rainforest, river bed, ocean, only cliché can really get across the feeling of elevated elation and clapped out exhaustion I feel as I slump into the bench at the top to take in the sumptuous view.



It might be a long way down, but now I can't wait to get to the hot springs of Hamner courtesy of Bridge and Wickers.