

Camp at Princess Bath, looking to the southwest ridge

FIT FOR A PRINCESS

This alpine grade one is a right royal way for trampers to bag a 2000m-plus peak.

by PETER LAURENSEN





A dawn view south from Princess Bath

Mt Princess towers regally to the northwest of Lake Tennyson in the St James Conservation Area. Nestled in a cirque below the 2126m summit is a gleaming jewel of a tarn fit for royal bathing: Princess Bath.

Some names in the area, such as the Spenser Mountains, Mt Una and Lake Guyon, were inspired by the sixteenth-century epic poem *Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser. Book three in the six-book series is titled *The Warrior Princess*. It's possible Mt Princess and Princess Bath are also a nod to Spenser's work. Either way, the names spark the imagination.

Adding fuel to the spark, alpinists Paul and Shelley Hersey gave a presentation to my NZAC section about a guidebook they are compiling of the best easy mountain routes. Up for possible inclusion was Mt Princess – an alpine grade one, which means it's climbable without a rope. My friend Bruce Davies and I were inspired to check it out.

It's possible to begin from Lake Tennyson and then climb over Mt McCabe (1606m), but the easiest approach is from Maling Pass (1306m). To drive a 4WD to the pass, register with DOC for the code to unlock the gate about 6km to the east

of the pass. There's a small grassy spot at the pass to leave a vehicle or two.

The Maling Pass road is also part of the 64km St James Cycle Trail, which carries on westward into the Waiau Uwha Valley. Opened in November 2010, it was the first of the Ngā Haerenga New Zealand Cycle Trail 'Great Rides'. It starts at Maling Pass and finishes at St James homestead.

In beautiful autumn weather, we bumped up the road beside Princess Stream with her royal highness, Mt Princess, straight ahead. Near the pass the stream veers away, up a wide valley that narrows and steepens closer to its source: Princess

Bath, behind a bulging rock wall.

There is no marked track on the entire route, but the initial climb to Pt1572 is a well-trodden path that leads steadily north through shrubland, then sidles right into a tussock basin south of Pt1906. It's also possible to swing left and gain the ridge south of Pt1906 – the terrain is quite open.

We'd set off late in the morning and, being keen photographers, we paused in the basin to capture a gleaming tarn at 1580m before carrying on towards a rocky shoulder to the east of Pt1906. We had expected to continue sidling on the eastern face of the ridge towards Princess Bath, but when confronted with a bluff we opted to climb to Pt1906. Just as well, because from there we had a great view to the tarn now some 150m below. It sat majestically in its cirque, enclosed on three sides by steep rock.

Beyond Pt1906, if conditions permit, it's possible to climb a steep broken section of the southwest ridge of Mt Princess. However, we planned to camp beside Princess Bath and then complete the traverse in an anticlockwise direction the next morning.

As we descended into the cirque we could see campsites at both the western and eastern shores of the tarn. We picked



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the eastern side, where Princess Stream provided a lovely babbling brook outside our tents. Directly above, a 150m scree slope led to the southeast ridge of the royal mountain. Our plan was to follow this to the summit the next morning and descend the southwest ridge back to the tarn. We would then climb up to the southeast ridge in the afternoon and descend southwards to Mt McCabe (1606m) and Maling Pass. But until we got up there we didn't know if this was possible – a bit of uncertainty to add spice to the proceedings.

As daylight faded, advancing clouds soon engulfed us. This made the steep scree slope we intended to descend off the southwest ridge and back to the tarn look particularly menacing. The temperature plummeted, driving us into our sleeping bags by 5pm. We were camped beside a bath fit for royalty, but Mother Nature had switched off the heating so we left bathing for another day. Soon after, it rained. We crossed our fingers for the clear dawn the weather forecast had promised.

Confined to my tent for hours, I pondered the backstory of the St James Conservation Area and the Molesworth Recreation Reserve to its east, both former high-country stations. →

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Climbing the scree to access the southeast ridge at 1940m



Mt Princess summit view includes the entire route from Maling Pass. Mt McCabe and Lake Tennyson are top left

Before colonisation, Māori trading and pounamu trails ran through the Clarence and Waiau valleys, connecting the east and west coasts.

Rabbits were introduced by settlers in the 1830s, eroding much of the soil and destroying the vegetation. The Hurunui Rabbit Board, formed in 1887, had a 128km rabbit-proof fence built, starting a few miles out of Culverden and intersecting with the whole of the Amuri, Waiau and Hanmer districts. The section between the St James woolshed and Lake Tennyson still forms the boundary fence between Molesworth and St James stations.

Sadly, the fence wasn't enough. In the 1890s, wagon-loads of Christchurch cats, plus stoats and weasels, were introduced on Molesworth Station to cut down rabbit numbers. A range of poisons was also tried and professional, semi-nomadic rabbiters and their dogs were active. Despite all this, Molesworth Station was described as an 'abomination of desolation' in the

1930s and returned to the Crown in 1938.

In 1997 Calicivirus was illegally introduced to the South Island. While it initially decimated rabbit numbers, a developing immunity has resulted in significant increases in the area. Although the 78,000ha St James Station was one of the largest operating livestock stations in the country, the rabbit problem eventually made it commercially unviable. In 2008 the station was purchased for \$40 million by the government as public conservation land, to protect its physical and cultural values and to open it to outdoor recreation and tourism.

The rain stopped during the night, and in the freezing early hours Bruce got up for a spot of astro-photography. I joined him soon after dawn. We knew that in the cirque the sun wouldn't penetrate until late morning: ample motivation to get moving.

We left our tents and excess gear in a rocky crevice, hidden from the keen eyes of kea, and set off up the scree. Climbing

WILDFILE

Access From Maling Pass

Grade Moderate-difficult

Time Two days. Maling Pass to Princess Bath, 3-4hr; Princess Bath to summit via southeast ridge, 2-3hr; Summit to Princess Bath via southwest ridge, 2-3hr; Princess Bath to Maling Pass via Mt McCabe, 4-5hr

Topo50 map BT24

with much lighter packs in the early morning light was invigorating and we soon reached the ridge at 1900m. From here on we enjoyed ever-expanding views.

Before heading north and up, a quick southwards recce along the ridge revealed we could descend that way to McCabe in the afternoon.

The narrow southeast ridge is mostly a fine rock scramble. At about 2000m there's a more intimidating section. We sidled to the east into a scree basin with several steep chutes to the ridge near the summit and chose one leading up a little north of the summit. Now, with hindsight, our advice is to keep further south, because hand and foothold options were unsettlingly sparse in the steepest part of our chute.

Following a short, intense stint, we popped out onto the northern end of a relatively flat 100m stretch of summit ridge,

with the true summit at the southern end. To the north lay the Waiau Uwha Valley with the tiny dot of Waiau Hut appearing closer than it was in the clear autumn air. To the east loomed the Spenser Mountains with Mt Una (2300m) the standout, while the Waiau Toa Clarence Valley stretched north to Clarence Pass and Belvedere Peak.

The best view was south, over Princess Bath, down the southeast ridge to Mt McCabe and Lake Tennyson on the left, and down the southwest ridge on the right.

Our descent of the upper southwest ridge was straightforward, and the exit from the ridge down the scree – though still quite steep and somewhat arduous due to the freeze in the night – was not as daunting as we expected. About 11am, four hours after our dawn departure, we were back at our now sunny camping spot.

With full packs on it was a tough climb back up the scree to the southeast ridge, but once there we enjoyed a narrow rocky scramble on new ground with beautiful views all the way to the saddle at 1500m, beneath Mt McCabe.

On top of McCabe the views had us pausing once again before gradually dropping to the tussock flats containing Princess Stream. The flats were pleasantly dry. It made for easy progress back to the 4WD road about a kilometre east of our vehicle, which we reached by mid-afternoon.

Driving back to Hanmer Springs we reflected on how enjoyable two days in the mountains had been. Now Hanmer's springs beckoned. If you're a hot springs fan then you're in the right place. After pitching tents at the Top 10 Holiday Park, we opted to go for pizza and beers instead. [w](#)