

Climbing: Mt Travers, fourth time lucky

By Peter Laurenson



A view from the summit of Mt Cupola to Mt Travers and other peaks. This view looks on to the Summit Creek route

Towering above Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle, one of the passes Te Araroa walkers and many other trampers swarm over each year, is the second highest point in Nelson Lakes National Park. At 2,338 metres, Mt Travers is just two metres lower than Mt Franklin to the southwest, and its summit sits directly to the north of, and 551 metres above the saddle.

Before tramping, the pass, Poukirikiri, gave Ngati Apa access to sacred Kehu Peak. The mountain, named by Julius von Haast after the explorer W.T.L. (William Thomas Locke) Travers, has three main ascent routes. The most technical and shortest route is the south ridge, accessed from Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle. This is graded 3, with a steep wall above a notch at 2,000 metres requiring use of a rope. The longest route, up Summit Creek to the north of the mountain, is graded 1. Another route, accessed from Upper Travers Hut, up the east face to the northeast ridge, is graded 2.

Of course, like any mountainous terrain, weather and snow conditions dictate how difficult any route up the mountain is on a given day. I've attempted climbs on all three routes, only reaching the summit on my fourth attempt. Mt Travers is a big mountain, where the possibility of avalanche must be considered, and where exposure to varying degrees is encountered on all routes. In fine summer conditions at least, reaching the summit is feasible for fit trampers.

My first attempt was on the grade 2 route in October. Due to unconsolidated snow and deteriorating weather we retreated after reaching the northeast ridge at 2,070 metres. My second attempt was up the grade 3 south ridge in May. At the notch, treacherous verglass ahead was enough to force our retreat. My third attempt was up Summit Creek in August, where at just 1,700 metres, clag and minimal visibility turned us around. But in August 2024, bluebird weather and firm snow conditions on the grade 2 route made all the difference.



First view of Mt Travers (2,338m) from below John Tait Hut (800m)

Following a quick water taxi zip along Lake Rotoiti soon after dawn, Jim Davidson and I set off up Lakehead Track under a clear blue sky, bearing out the start of a three day fine forecast. We made steady progress up the mostly easy and gradually ascending trail to Upper Travers Hut, reaching there in late afternoon. On our approach to the Hut, Mt Travers loomed above to the north. Its snow cover looked quite thin for mid winter. Being a winter weekday, we were sole occupants, enjoying cosy sleeps beside the wood burner that night.



Mt Travers, viewed on the approach to Upper Travers Hut (left). The grade 2 route is hidden behind the right-hand ridge

We set out before dawn at 6 a.m. next morning to take advantage of the overnight freeze and to leave plenty of daylight for our climb. We reached the snowline at 1,500 metres and soon after put on our crampons. As we approached a shoulder at 1,720 metres, the terrain steepened and the alpenglow became distracting. So up on the shoulder we paused to enjoy the moment. The view across Travers Valley was already impressive, as Kehu and other peaks were highlighted by the strengthening dawn light.



On the 1,720m shoulder with a dawn view east. Kehu is the prominent peak mid-right

Beyond the shoulder the route drops 70 metres, skirting a steep buttress, before our climb to the northeast ridge up steep, mostly open snow began. On this part of the climb there are a couple of places where small rock steps give a real sense of exposure. While the snow was very firm, on these rocks it was so thin that it sometimes fell apart just where a nice reassuring step would have been nice. We didn't use the rope, but at one point probably should have.



An open stretch at about 2,000m



Heading towards the NE ridge just north of Pt 2127

Up on the ridge I prepared for new ground, as this is where I turned right, down the ridge last time I was here. To our left the ridge reared up towards Pt 2127. The going was absorbing and spectacular – no need for a rope, but not a place to be complacent, with big drops both sides of the ridge.



The view south along the NE ridge, beyond Pt 2127. On the skyline Kehu left and Cupola right

Beyond Pt 2127 the ridge narrowed as it stretched away to a point still at 2,100 metres, where the final climb to the summit began, which still appeared further away than I'd expected. We worked our way along, sometimes dropping slightly off to the west side to get past gendarmes. The snow remained firm, allowing reassuring positive crampon placements.



At 2,100m we had lunch at the base of the west face before heading right onto the face, diagonally climbing to Mt Travers' north ridge

At the point where the final climb begins we stopped for lunch while gazing down the narrower of two gullies that lead to Summit Creek. Beyond that, directly north, Mt Hopeless stood out, with Mt Cupola much closer and to the west.



On the North ridge at 2,250m, looking back to our route along the NE ridge (right), the Travers Valley (centre), Mt Hopeless (2,278m, mid left) and Mt Cupola (2,260m, left)

We had two options to reach the summit. While I think Jim would have enjoyed pushing on directly up the steep rocky northeast ridge, we opted to traverse a steep snow face above the first gully to reach the north ridge at 2,250 metres. From there we could look into the second gully above Summit Creek and also up easy ground to the summit, which we reached at mid day.



A view south to Jim just north of the summit

I felt great to have finally reached this point. In a cloudless sky we could see mountains in every direction. The broad summit of Mt Franklin, just two metres higher than us, loomed up to our southwest. Directly east, the inland Kaikoura peaks punctuated the skyline. Just over a vertical kilometre below us, and about one horizontal kilometre to the southeast, sat the tiny dot of Upper Travers Hut. It looked so close that if I'd been told that it would take me another eight hours to reach, I wouldn't have believed it.



The summit view north



Upper Travers Hut, a tad more than 1,000m below us, viewed from the summit of Mt Travers (2,338m) - so close, yet so far. 6 hours up, 7 hours (for me) down, because the Summit Creek route requires a drop down to 1,000m before climbing back up to Upper Travers Hut

After taking many photos it was time to begin our descent. Although a longer route, we agreed to descend into Summit Creek rather than down-climb our steeper ascent route. The snow was now softening in the afternoon sunshine, demanding frequent whacking of our boots with an ice axe to avoid snowballing under our crampons.



On the lookout for a way down to Summit Creek, at left

Although the Summit Creek route is graded 1, on the ridge looking down the wider second gully giving access to Summit Creek still felt pretty steep. For 100 or more metres of descent we turned in to face the slope, until the gradient relented.



Descending to Summit Creek, with Mt Cupola (left) and Mt Hopeless (right)

At about 1,850 metres we reached snow-plod terrain. It seemed like the hard work was over, but I was forgetting how big Mt Travers is. To skirt around its base is a long way, on surprisingly rough terrain. There is no trail to follow – just a relentless descent over rutted tussock and rocky ground until we joined the creek itself at about 1,400 metres. Once in the beech forest conditions underfoot improved, but route finding wasn't easy, with tree-fall frequently disjointing the faint trail.



A view back up our descent route from about 1,850m - the snow just right of the big rock buttress (the north ridge) far left

Eventually, at about 1,100 metres, we reached a small bridge spanning Summit Creek, installed on a high trail for use in heavy rainfall and flooding. It was now only about an hour till sundown, so Jim, who is much quicker than me, shot off to reach the hut before nightfall. I plodded along behind, joining the main Upper Travers Valley Track down below 1,000 metres. As I climbed the 300 metres back up to the hut I donned my head torch. Half an hour later I trudged into the hut, 14 hours after setting off that morning. Jim couldn't tell whether it was a grimace or a grin on my face as I joined him by the wood burner. Actually, it was both. What a great day in the hills.



Dawn next morning - Upper Travers Hut and Mt Travers

More captioned images and route map at

<https://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-south-island/nelson-lakes-browse/mt-travers-east-face-summit-creek-august-2024/>