

High Country Heartfailure

12th-17th
January 2009



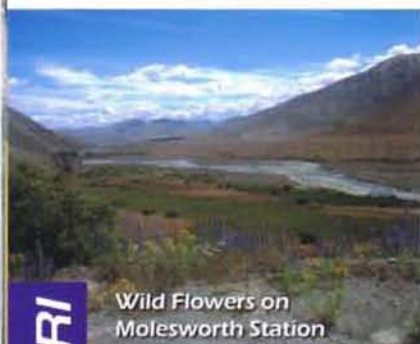
Dusty road across Molesworth Station to Isolation Flat

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Road up Blairich Pass



Start of Blairich Pass



Wild Flowers on Molesworth Station



Isolation Saddle - Molesworth Station

The booking was long made with NZ Adventures for their High Country Heritage safari and the male 4x4er in the household was making ready to cut short my lazy summer beach holiday with another round of exhilarating 4x4 driving in the South Island. Being a Geography teacher such trips do have an immense interest for me but cutting into my sacrosanct summer holiday?

An early morning start saw us make good progress to Wellington, via coffee and delicious oven fresh scones from New World Taihape. Meeting like-minded friends at Wellington, we had a smooth crossing and arrived in Blenheim for the group orientation at 8pm.

The purpose of such meetings is obviously to take in the explicit health and safety matters which are an important component of these well organised trips. A secondary component is to scope out the other participants. A total of 10 vehicles were registered representing a mixture of geographic locations, ages and occupations.

Two way radios were distributed together with the Information and Safety booklet and curiously a plastic sheet, biodegradable in which we were to deposit excrement, should we be caught short! I would have thought that at the least they could have thought about the transparency issue! Thanks DOC for the forethought!

Day One -

Blenheim to Hanmer
Monday dawned bright and fine as we lined up the range of vehicles including a Prado, Courier, Discovery, Surf, Mazda Ute, Landcruiser, Land Rover, Challenger and the trusty Jeep.

We left in convoy to head out amongst the vineyards of the Wairau Valley and the hidden Waihopai spy tracking stations to climb on well formed tracks. Through the dry Marlborough sheep country grassland and over the first high country station, our first stop was at Blairich Pass at a height of 680m. The view was spectacular down into the Wairau Valley and across to the inland Kaikouras. My expectations of dry brown countryside

Most husbands would give their wives flowers but no, my exceptional male presents me with the most vicious long-thorned ugly greenery to be found in New Zealand! - Matagouri.



Cobb mustering hut - Blairich Pass



Line up on the first day

...a 15,000ha sheep property which can be under snow for 3 months at a time...

were immediately revised as unexpected colour emerged in the masses of blue storage plants, interspersed by pink briar roses in bloom.

Being a North Islander I enquired of the bushes surrounding us. My South Island raised 4x4er kindly presented me with a branch. Most husbands would give their wives flowers but no, my exceptional male presents me with the most vicious long- thorned ugly greenery to be found in New Zealand! – Matagouri.

Winding down into the Awatere Valley, under the eyes of Mt Birch we were treated to a magnificent lunch at Middlehurst Station, a 15,000ha sheep property which can be under snow for 3 months at a time and enviably has a school with 6 pupils. I can't imagine why the teacher didn't want to swap her 6 angelic primary students for my class of 36 truculent secondary students.

Continuing on from Middlehurst we entered Molesworth Station, New Zealand's largest property, now owned by DoC. Only open for a few short weeks info@4x4action.co.nz



Arrowsmith Range

in summer, this dusty road traversed Isolation flat to climb up to Isolated Saddle. The harshness of the Station was evident in glaciated landforms and uplifted geology midst hot dry summers and harsh winters.

Here we waited for the convoy and the first casualty – a puncture requiring additional help to obtain a Disco jack. What do they say about Land Rovers and spares?

Exploring the terrain on the saddle by foot we uncovered a plaque to the road builder; a fitting memorial to a tough occupation in an extreme environment. It is hard to believe that such roads were built as late as the 1960's

for the passage of the South Island power cable. The road continued on parallel to the Acheron River to end at the 1862 Acheron Cob Accommodation House.

Moving into Jollies Pass, we descended into the Hanmer Valley for views of the upmarket tourist town. Excellent accommodation and food was enjoyed as we joined the wedding anniversary celebrations of two of our fellow travellers.

Hanmer to Methven Day Two and the vehicles were on the road south at 8.30am. A quick trip via the main roads of Hurunui, North Canterbury saw us venture into Pyramid Valley, the site of moa bone

discovery in the 1930s and on to McDonald Downs Station.

As we climbed into the interior of this station and on to The Brothers Station, the vegetation diminished in height leaving only the hardy Spaniards (with their nasty spiked flower), and tussock. Interestingly while some of the ascent had been steep, the mountain range opened up at the top to reveal smooth and glaciated roundness and tracks following the ridgelines.

A break to walk up Blue Mountain at 847m really gave a 360 degree appreciation of the huge task of fencing, roading and farming in this huge 25,000 acre property.



Ashlet Gorge



Lake Heron Station Garden



Top of Blue Mountain

Lunch again brought us down to the reality of living and working in such isolation as we enjoyed the hospitality and chat with the owners of Richon Station.

The afternoon trails appeared quite flat and unchallenging so I volunteered to drive down the remote Lees Valley and into the Ashley Gorge.

I should have known better with the word 'gorge'! Shingle roads I can handle but shingle roads, narrowed to one lane and benched into the meandering sides of a steep valley are not my cup of tea – I don't 'do' drop offs!

Somehow I managed to continue winding down as it was a situation of having no where to stop. Once at river level we crossed the bridge with a sigh of relief only to be confronted with a similar ascent up the other side. Two points remain fixed in my mind – This is a public road (ie opposing traffic can appear at any time) and the Station owners in the Lees Valley allow their children to be driven out this road every day to school at Oxford!

Out of the gorge a wonderful view appeared of the Canterbury Plains across to the Port Hills as we waited for the rest of the convoy to arrive. A truck appeared loaded with timber about to proceed in the opposite direction with the driver stating: "I believe it's a bit windy from here" – Yeah Right!

From the Rakaia crossing we climbed up to Porter's Pass and alongside Lake Lyndon and Coleridge to the restful haven of Methven where the food quality and quantities began the battle of the bulge – the 2kg gained in 6 days!

Methven to Lake Tekapo – Day Three

The day began with the largest cooked breakfast I have EVER seen. Even those with half quantities struggled. Did this indicate a stressful day to come?

The Rakaia River is a large typically braided South Island river and we set off up the Rakaia Gorge with the Mt Hutt Range to the south and the river to the north.

The scenery was incredible – a typical NZ mountain scene of ragged snow covered peaks, sprouting glaciers on the Arrowsmith Range as a backdrop to the shingle fans gravity creeping towards the river and attempting to impede our path in the foreground. Man's intransigence is forcefully brought home within such a huge and powerful natural environment.

Crossing the fans we climbed steadily above the river in tussock covered mountain sides for panoramic views into the Southern Alps and stopped en route midst the huge 2m high grass for morning tea. Across the river was a shingle bank standing at a height of perhaps 30m and



The Ridge Road from Blue Mountain



Rakaia River



Track to Lake Heron Station



Upper Rakaia



Orari Gorge Road - 1.5hrs climb



Orari Gorge Road



The road down off McDonald Downs Station-Day 2

stretching for over 600m, the product of thousands of years of erosional forces.

Crossing from Glen Falloch station to Lake Heron Station the views change from one that is fluvial dominated to one of glaciated domination. Leaving the Rakaia we turned south into the Hakatere Valley. The landforms show the

ravages of glaciation with a wide valley gouged out by ice and smoothly rounded hills rising up each side. To one side stands the impressive Mt Sugarloaf rising to 1236m, remaining alone as the only victor in the landscape's fight against the ice and sheltering Lake Heron Station on its northern flanks. Within such a stark barren

landscape, this Station homestead offers an oasis of verdant tranquillity with its beautiful garden, stream and lagoon used for fishing, boating and of course ice skating in winter. The weather was hot and the food superb.

The afternoon saw us continuing past Lake Heron into the Ashburton

Gorge and Mt Somers and southwest on the irrigated plains of South Canterbury.

Crossing the Rangitata River at Orari Bridge we entered the Tripp Settlement to cross the Orari Gorge – that 'g' word again! The Orari Gorge was a narrow valley of farm track leading along the river to Blue Mountain Station, mostly well formed but including a long steep slow ascent out of the valley into tussock hills to a height of 1083m at Mt Edith.

I must admit I felt more comfortable that the driver was on the downhill drop-off side and I used Noeline's strategy for coping by looking elsewhere at certain times. The descent was uneventful except for one tricky stream crossing followed by a sharp steep gravel ascent where one vehicle skidded to a halt and had to reverse down to gain enough momentum to gain traction over the rough terrain.

The corrugated longdrop at the bottom was a welcome sight! We met the main road near Burkes Pass and continued on to Lake Tekapo for the night – an idyllic setting looking out onto the lake.

To be continued next month 🐾



Arrowsmith Range