

1909.
NEW ZEALAND.

TARARUA RANGES

(REPORT BY MR. J. COWAN ON EXPEDITION TO THE SUMMIT OF THE).

Return to an Order of the House of Representatives dated the 22nd October, 1909.

Ordered, "That the report of Mr. J. Cowan, of the Tourist Department, on the expedition to the summit of the Tararua Ranges by way of the Otaki Gorge in March last, undertaken for the purpose of inspecting a route to Mount Hector, the second-highest peak of the Tararuas, be laid upon the table of the House."—(MR. FIELD.)

REPORT.

Tourist Department, 8th March, 1909.

Route from Otaki to Mount Hector, Tararua Ranges.

I BEG to report that, acting on your instructions, I went up to Otaki with Mr. W. H. Field, M.P., last Friday, and made the ascent of the Tararua Mountains from the north-western side, in order to examine the character of the proposed route from the Otaki Gorge to the summit of Mount Hector.

At Otaki Gorge we were joined by Mr. D. R. Mills and five other settlers, and on Friday evening arrived at the Forks, near the termination of the present horse-track, about fourteen miles from Otaki Township. The Forks is at the junction of the Otaki, Waitatapia, and Waiotauru Rivers, which descend rapidly from the mountains through deep and narrow gorges. Here our party pitched camp, and began the exploration of the route to the top of the range as soon as it was light enough to move on Saturday morning.

Mount Hector, 5,016 ft., is the second-highest peak in the Tararua Mountains. The Mitre, 5,154 ft., north of Mount Holdsworth, is the highest point of the range; Holdsworth is 4,835 ft. Hector can be reached from the south-eastern side (the nearest way is from the vicinity of Kaitoke Station), but only with great difficulty. The Otaki people are anxious to open up a track to the range-top from their side, and our party wished to get an idea of the character of the country for track-making not only on this side, but also on the other slope of the watershed, as far as a rapid survey would allow them.

The distance in a straight line from the Forks (which is a little under 900 ft. above sea-level) to Mount Hector is between six and seven miles; the route we traversed would be about ten miles to the dip in the range-top between Mounts Dennan and Hector. From the junction of the three streams at the Forks a long leading ridge trends up to Dennan and Hector. We followed this ridge all the way up to Dennan, passing through the bush, and emerging on the tussock slopes where snow lies in the winter; then our party went on to the high saddle between the two mountains.

The first mile or so of the route was an ascent through partly cleared and burnt bush, then we struck into the bush by a blazed track which kept to the summit of the narrow ridge. The upper Otaki River was on our left hand and the Waiotauru on our right. This ridge was in the form of a rough triangle with its apex at the Forks. The forest which covers it from the limit of the cleared land up to the alpine-vegetation line is exceedingly dense. There was no cleared path, but only a "blazed" track, in many places hard to find and difficult to follow because of the undergrowth and fallen trees. In some places there were very steep "pinches" to climb, but for the most part it was a gradual and regular ascent up to the snow-line, where the alpine grass began, and where the grade became sharper as the peaks were approached. We passed through about four miles of bush as we climbed from the junction of the rivers. First there was the usual North Island forest, with the nikau palms and very fine tree-ferns and other tropical-looking plants; then the lower mountain-forest growth of rata, rimu, miro, totara, tawai, &c.; then the trees diminished in size until we reached the dwarf totara belt and clumps of fagus trees of low wide-branched form, spreading so close to the ground that we had to stoop down to pass under their boughs (snow evidently lies on them heavily every winter); next thickets of wiry mountain-broom and koromiko and other alpine scrub growing very close and thick; then the snow-grass,

tussock, and alpine-flower belt, extending all along the summit of the range. In the lower parts of the forest the nikau palm is very plentiful, and it seems to thrive lower down in the gorge even out in the open, away from the shelter of forest-trees. This is rather remarkable, as the nikau usually requires the shade and protection of the undisturbed bush. Ferns, including the beautiful *Todea superba*, were in abundance on the ridge. It was too late in the season to see any of the ranunculoid family in bloom on the snow-country belt, but mountain daisies were numerous, and also one or two kinds of gentians, pretty white flowers with delicate blue lines or pencillings, resembling flowers I have seen on the slopes of Mount Tongariro.

Bird-life was not plentiful in the bush. There was abundance of miro and other trees, on the berries of which the pigeons feed, but the birds would probably not be seen in numbers until about May, when the berries are ripe. There were a few kakas, and we heard and saw two or three makomakos (bell-birds), tuis, and riroriros, but otherwise the forest was a very silent one.

Emerging from the alpine scrub and climbing up a steep face covered with snow-grass, mountain-flax, and dwarf koromiko, we were able to see something of the mountain country around us. It was extremely wild and broken, quite as wild as any country in the northern part of the South Island before the true Alps are reached, and, except for the snow-grass tops of the mountains, reminding me very much of the heart of the Urewera Country. From the central ridge that was still more than a thousand feet above us there stretched on either side of our ridge a series of other spurs, tussock-yellow and brown on their upper parts, then thickly forested as they sloped away to the north and north-west. They were just like great ribs; the precipitous-sided main range was the spine. Between each sharp rib there was a deep seemingly impenetrable gorge, filled with smoky blue; the sides of these gorges were mostly thickly clothed with forest, with a bare rock face here and there.

We had come all this way without crossing any stream, for we had taken the crest of the spur; but just at the edge of the snow-line two of our party, by prospecting down the side of the gully, found a small spring.

From the top of the first steep snow-grass hill above the alpine scrub it was now easier going, or, at any rate, clearer, although the grade became steep. We now climbed to the top of Mount Dennan. The upper slopes of this peak had to be crossed before we could reach Hector. At the trig. station on Dennan I remained, while Mr. Field and the others went on over the flat top of the next ridge and on to the slopes of Hector. They ascended some way, but had then to return in order to reach camp again by dark. Dennan is a very sharp-topped peak; but it is several hundred feet lower than the next ridge, which is marked "Flat Top" on the survey maps, and which is the most conspicuous object in the range as one looks up the Otaki Valley.

We now had very grand views of the surrounding country: looking west there was the great round-backed mountain Kapakapanui (3,615 ft.), the traditional "Lightning Mountain" of fatal omen of the Ngatitōa Tribe; then the sea and Kapiti Island; a little southward was Cook Strait and the mountains of the South Island. Northward there was range after range of sharp blue mountains. Away some miles north of us there was the double-pointed mountain which the Maoris say is the *tino* of the range—that is, the exact place from which the mountains take their name. "Tara-rua" means "Two Peaks": it is to this part that the Maori name is said to particularly apply. In a straight line north of our viewpoint on Mount Dennan lay Mount Crawford, 4,795 ft. From the slopes of Mount Hector the Hutt Valley and Wellington Harbour were seen, and in the south-east the plains of the Wairarapa. Had it not been for the bush-fires in the valleys below—the settlers' summer burning-off fires—the view would have been much more extensive, for it is said that Egmont and Ruapehū can be easily seen from Mount Dennan on a clear day.

A remarkable and important feature about the high snow-grass saddle on the range-top between Mounts Dennan and Hector is that there is, as reported by the members of the party, a series of small lakes or tarns of excellent drinking-water. There are a score or more of these lakelets lying in the dip between "Flat Top" and Hector, about 4,500 ft. above sea-level. The tarns are quite close to each other, but are at varying levels. They evidently never dry up, and they are not stagnant; there is an outlet, and they are, no doubt, fed by springs from the upper part of Mount Hector. The presence of these little lakes and ponds adds considerably to the possible value of the place as a resort for travellers, for the saddle would make a very good summer camping-place. There is no wood just here for cooking, but enough to boil the billy could be taken from the edge of the scrub below. A camping-ground such as this, so close to the mountain-top, would be a place of magnificent possibilities for the artist, and for those who love wild mountain scenery.

The top of the watershed was reached at about noon: the journey had occupied about seven hours from the Forks camp. Leaving the slopes of Mount Dennan again at about 3 o'clock, and halting half an hour for a billy of afternoon tea where we had had lunch on the way up at the edge of the alpine bush, we returned to camp, reaching the edge of the timber just before dusk, and the Forks at 7 o'clock. The whole journey, about twenty miles of walking and climbing, took about fourteen hours, including rests.

As the result of the expedition and from what I saw of the country, I am of opinion that this is a trip that could very well be added to our tourist routes. To a large extent it is of local importance, concerning chiefly the Otaki district, but there is a good deal of interest for visitors in and about Otaki and Waikanae, and there is very good fishing in the streams; and a mountain excursion of this sort would be an additional and important attraction. The scenery is so fine that it deserves to be made more accessible. At present the ascent as we made it is too severe to be undertaken except by those used to the bush and to rough hill-climbing; and a good bushman-guide would be necessary. From my observations, I think a horse-track could be made from the Forks right up to Mount Dennan: there are no gullies to cross, and only two or three steep places

where sidelings would be necessary, until the snow-line is reached. The length of the horse-track required would be, say, eight to nine miles; the grade would be easy until the upper slopes of Mount Dennan were reached, when it would become about as steep as that of the horse-track which leads up to the Saddle on Ben Lomond, Lake Wakatipu.

A foot-track could be cleared first to the upper edge of the bush. This the settlers who were with us considered could be done at little expense; some of them considered that the expenditure of £200 would give a riding-track right up to Mount Dennan.

Mr. Mills and some of the other Otaki Gorge settlers think that by going up past the Forks along the Waiotauru Creek (the southern tributary of the Otaki) for two miles or a little less, and then striking up the next ridge to that which we traversed, an even better, or, at any rate, a shorter, route to the foot of Mount Dennan could be obtained. It would no doubt shorten the bridle-track work required, for a riding-track now goes up along the Waiotauru for some distance above the Forks to Sheridan's clearing; but it seemed to me that it would have the disadvantage of ending in a very precipitous face on the north-western side of Dennan, where the track would require to be cut out of the mountain-side, and would be liable to be carried away by the melting of the snow. The settlers intend exploring this spur up to the main ridge. What is required, however, is a proper survey of these two suggested routes from the Forks.

The total distance from Otaki Railway-station to the summit of the Tararua Range by way of the Forks and the route which we followed is approximately twenty-two miles. The vehicle-road is now being completed up the Otaki Gorge, so that it will shortly be possible to drive up to the Forks, which will then be reached in about two hours from the railway.

J. COWAN.

Mr. Robieson, Chief Clerk, Tourist Department.

Approximate Cost of Paper.—Preparation, not given; printing (1,400 copies) £2 14s.

By Authority: JOHN MACKAY, Government Printer, Wellington.—1909.

Price 3d.]

