

A winter tramp of the Heaphy Track

MANY PEOPLE tend to associate walking the Heaphy Track with the warmth of summer. Believing that isolation is an important part of any trip into the back country, I was a member of a party that planned the 4- to 5-day walk for the middle of August last year.

THOUGH this was only 2 weeks away from the opening of the whitebait season (and the accompanying rains), we had high hopes of having the cool nights and clear days that winter on the Coast can provide.

History

The early Maoris were the first to use part of the track. Following the Aorere River south, they eventually turned westwards and headed down the Heaphy River to the coast.

Charles Heaphy, V.C., "discovered" the western coastal section in 1846, the inland route lying unused for a further 13 years. The track became more popular as the lure of gold grew; it was finally graded and surveyed in 1900.

Local hunting and fishing parties remained the most frequent visitors to the track until 1965, when the North-west Nelson Forest Park was established. Since then, the Forest Service has been constantly upgrading the track system; its 76 km now includes six huts, five shelters, and numerous swing bridges, the track's grade remaining constant throughout.

Showers and mist

The first day's walk, from Brown Hut to Goulund Downs, was long and wet in the continual showers and

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thick mist that prevailed. From the first swing bridge the track followed the river flats before climbing through bracken, fern, and gorse. Spur-winged plovers and pied oystercatchers soon gave rise to their feelings at the disturbance our party caused.

After a long, steady climb for 4 to 5 hours we arrived at Perry Saddle Hut in time for lunch.

Along the way the soft whistling song of the kaka (in sharp contrast to its predator-like appearance) was heard from high in the canopy. It was, however, left to the tuis, bellbirds, and silvereyes to provide most of the "musical accompaniment" to the morning.

After a cup of hot, sweet tea and some lunch, we disappeared into the murk and began the 2-hour tramp to Goulund Downs Hut. A steady descent through low, stunted bush lasted for 20

minutes until the mist lifted to reveal the downs — a huge expanse of rolling tussock dotted with clumps of silver beech.

Late in the afternoon the familiar whistle of the blue duck led to a cautious stalk and a chance to study a pair of these birds. In fact the birdlife on the downs seemed quite plentiful; redpolls, chaffinches, thrushes, and the yellow-breasted tit were frequently noted.

After reaching the hut we watched the antics of a friendly pipit. Eager for insects, he was not in the least worried by our presence.

A night at the Downs Hut can certainly be eventful. An hour or so after dark the old hut echoed to the cries of at least three great spotted kiwis, and the local opossum provided "on the spot" entertainment. This local identity managed to foil all our efforts to trap him. He eventually won the duel by claiming our bait four times before leading us on a wild chase through the tussock.

