

## **A tramp in the Matukituki Valley**

*Undeterred by rough track, treacherous fords and car-eating birds, Graham Daniels and wife Alison headed for Mount Aspiring on New Zealand's South Island*

Some years ago Alison and I were in Wanaka in New Zealand's South Island. We wanted to see Mount Aspiring but the closest we got was to stand beneath a fingerpost pointing across Lake Wanaka to a cloudy region. This year we were luckier and the view across the lake to the mountain was clear. In an effort to get closer for a better view we did this walk.

We knew much of the approach road was unsealed so our son drove the hire car (uninsured on such roads). The road up the side of the braided river went through fenced fields that enclosed sheep, then deer, then cows and lastly a field with about a dozen assorted bulls all looking in top condition. Finally a very well appointed farmhouse complete with a couple of helicopters.

Then a sign said 'Unsealed road with deep fords for 10km'. Undeterred, Gabriel drove on with his parents' hearts in their mouths. There must have been 10 such fords across streams and each was deep and bumpy enough to worry us. Only when we reached the car park at the road end did we realise from the other 40 cars there that it was quite normal in New Zealand to drive good cars along very rough tracks.

As we put our boots and walking shoes on before our planned 9 km tramp, three keas did their best to get into the boot of the car. The kea is a green parrot-type bird with an orange breast, about the size of a large seagull, and is renowned for pecking rubber window trims off cars. Our plan was to walk to Aspiring Hut along the valley and then to return the same way. Over the fence and along a track, we saw a school party of teenagers crossing a swing bridge on our right which led over the river and steeply up into the Rob Roy Valley, which is an area of spectacular Alpine scenery, snowfields, glaciers, sheer rock cliffs and waterfalls.

The track soon became an intermittent path and on one bluff we watched a herd of cows tentatively crossing the wide shallow river from an area of boulders on one side to the greener grass on the other side. It looked cold and deep and when the mothers were off their feet swimming we felt for the calves but somehow they made it.

Our valley was very different from anything in Britain. New Zealand is very young in geological terms and the river issued from glaciers only a little further on. The river had a bed which was a mass of boulders brought down by the spring torrents. So we were to walk along a U shaped valley with a flat floor and very steep sides. In Britain the original steep mountains have all been worn down into gently rounded hills with only occasional steep crags.

Very soon we realised that the streams which had crossed on the unsealed road were by no means unusual, and as the walk progressed we had to boulder skip over at least a dozen streams of varying widths. These streams came steeply down from much higher up the valley sides and would quickly rise and become impassable in times of heavy rains. The day was dry now and the streams fordable if one was nimble. Being English we tried hard to keep our feet dry but we felt rather silly when a group of Kiwi trampers didn't even break their stride as they strode straight across the rivers. One such local lady walker, at least as old as me, cheerfully remarked that she knew her socks and boots would dry out (but then she had spares, which we did not).

The last mile to the hut was very wet and boggy so it really didn't matter if we had kept our feet dry till that point. The well appointed Aspiring Hut is run by the New Zealand Alpine Club and non-members can stay there, but of course it is necessary to book and take sleeping bags and food. Sadly, even having reached the hut we were unable to see the summit of Mount Aspiring and we then learnt we needed to press on for another two hours to the Liverpool Hut to really see it.

After our sandwiches we retraced our steps and once again performed our cowardly attempts at crossing the streams but it did not seem to matter so much that our feet kept dry as they were quite soggy already. The day's tramp had been wonderful with the dramatic scenery of towering hills and ever opening views as the valley penetrated further into the mountains. How I wished that when young I had had the opportunity to live in New Zealand and to enjoy tramping in the valleys and lower hills and climbing the snowy peaks. Go there yourself!

**Graham Daniels**

