

# Snow dream fulfilled



The author rests at the Sealy Tarns overlooking the Whitehorse Campground (bottom left)

## Mt Ollivier, Mt Cook National Park / medium

**B**enton threw his arms wide and shouted “Hellooooo” to the world from the Sealy Tarns, half way to Mueller Hut in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park.

“Watch out for avalanches,” I said half-joking. It wasn’t the season for them but they can be a real danger on the route.

“What are avalanc...,” but before he’d finished a low rumble and gunshot sound ricocheted around the mountains as a giant block of ice fell from an opposite glacier. His eyes grew enormous and pointing to his chest he said, “Oh, so sorry! Was it me?”

Benton was a real character. I met him at Kea Point Lookout on my way to the top of Mt Ollivier and we ended up climbing together for a while. He was Taiwanese and tall and lanky with an alarmingly bad sense of balance.

“Today,” he announced when we met, “I will complete my life dream of touching snow.”

Climbing Mt Ollivier can be roughly split into three sections: Whitehorse Campground or Mt Cook Village to Sealy Tarns (two hours); Sealy Tarns to Mueller Hut (two hours); and Mueller Hut to the summit (20 to 30 minutes). The first section of the climb is well defined and straightforward. It eases you in gently but from the foot of the Mueller Range (highlighted by an orange marker) it zigzags sharply upwards to the tarns.

The day was sunny, clear and still. Mt Sefton and Aoraki looked down on us in benevolent glory as the Sealy Tarns pandered to their vanity and mirrored them perfectly. Benton was almost beside himself. This was his first mountain climbing experience and he looked like he’d

struck gold. He lingered for photos so I wished him luck for his mission and scooted on ahead.

There is no track from the tarns, only orange alpine route markers every 200m or so. Cairns also mark the way and parts of the route are rocky as you zigzag past alpine scrub, herb fields and, if you look carefully, tiny hopping rock wrens. A large rock field was a fun boulder-hop before a short scree slope landed me on the skyline ridge and even better views.

I could see the full extent of the Mueller Glacier, dark grey and covered in debris, curving down the valley. Smaller glaciers clung to opposite mountainsides with deep crevasses that looked like knife marks in hot butter. Countless waterfalls slipped from beneath them and fell in graceful arcs for hundreds of metres. I sat and watched for ages, listening out for the frequent whip-crack explosions of ice falls and occasionally seeing the cascading cataract responsible for the noise.

From the skyline ridge, the route continues to follow cairns and orange markers through large boulders for another 20 minutes before reaching the Mueller Hut. The hut must have suffered serious wind problems recently, because “I will not fart in the bunkroom” was spelled out five times on the warden’s notice-board!

I left my pack at the hut and clambered to the summit. It’s rocky and there is no track but I followed the most obvious ridge and easily found the large cairn at the top. As I ate my celebration nuts and took in more glorious views I wondered if Benton had made it.

My wonderings were answered as I descended

to the hut and saw the man himself sitting on a rock in the middle of a tiny patch of snow, happily munching a sandwich.

“Hello! Can you make a photo of me and the snow? He called over when he saw me. “I want to take my clothes off!”

“What! All of them?” I asked.

“Haha...no no. Only my top part, I will make a muscle man yes!” and he stripped off to his bare chest and started pulling strongman poses for the camera.

I said farewell to Benton and left him forging a small snowman as I started my descent. It’s by the same route and apart from being tough on the knees it was straightforward and much quicker than the ascent. After just a couple of hours, I was stomping along the home straight to my tent with my mind set firmly on a steaming cup of tea.

- Penny Jones

### WILD FILE

**Access** Start on the Kea Point track from either the Mt Cook National Park visitor centre or the the DoC White Horse Campground car park (at the end of Hooker Valley Rd). Follow the Kea Point track until the Sealy Tarns turnoff.

**Grade** Medium

**Time** One day

**Map** Track information and maps available from the Mt Cook National Park visitor centre.

**Further information** Mt Cook National Park visitor centre, ph (03) 435 1186, [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz); weather forecast, ph (03) 435 1171, [www.metvuw.com](http://www.metvuw.com)