

Ryton Station

The journey through to Ryton Station and further on to our 'shearers quarters at Glenthorne Station' added to the anticipation of 'experiencing the great views'. The nice warm temperatures, the clear skies and the warm greetings from fellow club members encountered on the way certainly enhanced the feeling.

Day 1 started at the Lake Ida Mt Olympus ski field road and a true north otago ice breaker welcome from Daphne and her fellow passengers.

While we waited for the group staying at the Ryton Lodge to join us we exchanged introductions and subsequent compliments flowed, ceasing somewhat when Daphne was handed a shovel by a fellow club member, and the timely arrival of the other group.

A quick briefing and the fleet headed off along a typical high country access track, meandering through matagouri and broom towards the hills. Moderate gradients with a mixture of clay and stones, and the occasional patch of slightly loose basalt scree. Shortly after a brief stop for a quick drink the fleet encountered the first of several great vistas of the valleys to the south, west and the north. Looking to the north west one got a glimpse of the 'pinnacles', one of the geological features enroute. For those who enjoy emulating mountain goats the opportunity to get up close to the pinnacles couldn't come soon enough. Needless to say such a desire was enough reason for those drivers who love to wash their tyres to ford the Harper River river.

The Pinnacles are made from geologically young rock, probably 3-7 million years ago, consisting of alluvial sands and gravels. Erosion, caused by rain water washing away the exposed soil, has formed the pinnacle shapes. Pebbles or small stones may be seen on the tops of the pinnacles, temporarily protecting them from erosion. Nearby, the Harper River has exposed older rocks, containing fossils of marine origin.

Thirst and appetite from the scramble up to the pinnacles in 25 degree temperatures hastened the need to find a sheltered spot for a lunch stop. An appropriate spot was identified a short distance away, coincidentally the track led to a very wet swampy patch - temptation a plenty!

Immediately after lunch the fleet headed off in a direction looping back towards the start point. This necessitated several deliberations over route instruction and map reading. The various track spotting activities provided a further stream and river crossing experience and lots of photo opportunities.

The braided river bed presented a variety of streams with varying flows of water and depth. The main 'arm' of The Harper being the most challenging with a fast flowing current and being of sufficient depth to test the lower door seals on some vehicles.

With the track spotters successfully locating the correct route back to the main access road the fleet headed to the access road to the area referred to as the Mt Olympus ski field.

Upon approaching this area one could aptly name it a 'scree' field as the sides of the valley were devoid of vegetation.

Onwards and upwards through a very soft and loose gravel surface provided a stiff test of engine torque curves and vehicle cooling systems. Approximately halfway up the surface changed to small rocks, some with rather sharp looking edges.

Upon reaching the ski tow equipment chalets near the summit at approximately 1650 metres above sea level one realized the effort was worthwhile. The magnificent vista to south east included Mount Hutt and the Canterbury plains beyond.

During the 'breather' one rather optimistic member found a set of disused skies and gestured that they may provide a more appropriate way of returning to the base hutt! The member decided to return to the base hutt with the same amount of skin on his body that he journeyed up with, the vehicle tyres being the only objects subject to gravel rash. From base hutt the fleet headed to another well known winter recreation facility located in the area - Lake Ida. In the winter the lake freezes over providing a natural ice rink which is used for ice skating and curling. A brief read of the history of ice hockey suggests that this was the base for the Mt Harper - Windwhistle Ice Hockey team which competed for the coveted 'Erewhon Cup'. After enjoying a cup of refreshment the days trip concluded with a bar b que at the Ryton Lodge chalets.

Day 2.

'Black Thunder to Red Dwarf - would you like to ride with us?'

The day started with a more relaxed approach as rendezvous time was set for 10.00 am. On my way to the Ryton Lodge I ventured down to the Ryton River camping ground to view the variety of styles of huts and older caravans. On receiving a warm greeting from Dave Armour and indicating to him that I had an empty seat, Jessica Armour decided to accompany me for the mornings trek. I was then advised our call sign was 'Black Thunder' and Dave's red Suzuki's call sign was 'Red Dwarf'.

We proceeded to the lodge and joined the convoy. A short delay ensued as the trip leaders and track spotters began using a variety of techniques ranging from 'it looks like it should be this one' to 'We'll go to this one and if we can't open it then it's got to be the wrong one' to decide where the first gate was. Once the correct gate was located the fleet moved off following an undulating track through kanuka and matagouri. In no time at all we encountered the first challenge for the day - a rather long ascent with a tight zig zag half way up with a very loose rock surface and off camber. The site of 'red dwarf' backing down out of the zig zag for a slightly different approach twice indicated that this was going to be a challenge indeed. This thought was reinforced by site if the blue toyota surf needing to have a second go without passengers.

'Remember the power breaking technique we learnt at driver training' suggested Keith Rowlings over the radio. A timely reminder.

By the time it was Black Thunder's turn a gallery had formed on the ridge.

Power on - let foot riding the brakes and we were at the top with minimal drama.

After letting some air out of the tyres and some 'power breaking' 'Red Dwarf' managed to negotiate the section. The thought of being on the end of tow rope in this situation was just not an option! Nor parking up and riding with 'Black Thunder'.

The convoy progressed on through more undulating bush, ultimately gaining altitude, and experiencing some close contact with the rather abrasive matagouri branches that persisted in protruding over the track. A brief stop and a call to 'man the shovels' to smooth out some loose scree gave the vehicles further back the opportunity to photograph 'Stone City' - a collection of stone cairns constructed by track users from prior trips.

With the track cleared the convoy progressed onto a north facing slope where the terrain was predominately clay and stones covered with rank grasses. Water tables had found their way into the ruts which meant a potentially tricky situation where particularly steep descents were encountered. A remark regarding 'abs pinging' was heard on the radio while descending a particularly wet section.

By this time trip leader Robbie was heading the call for a comfort stop - preferably close to a lot of bushes. The spot that was chosen was eminently suitable, not because the trucks in the rear of the convoy were entertained as the kanuka bushes below rapidly

become out numbered by moving white tops, but for the proximity to a very picturesque water fall and stream. Lunch tables and chairs also appeared and the group proceeded to settle in for a very enjoyable lunch break.

Upon completion of lunch and a 'people' rather than 'trucks' photographic opportunity being taken by Jessica, a short briefing was called.

Sherrif Laurie who had enjoyed a pleasant lunch seized the opportunity to fine a certain member who had selectively offered to trim the protruding matagouri bushes with 'cutters' so the club president would not scratch his Toyota, for failing to do so.

The calm before the storm perhaps - co leader Neville Daniels proceeded to inform the group that to enable safe negotiation of a very tight turn at the edge of a drop off, drivers would be required to reverse to the edge of a drop and then proceed forward to the right to follow the descending track. Navigators would be required to stand on the edge of the drop off and advise the driver when to stop reversing. He advised that participants would find this experience and exercise in building 'trust' very useful in the future. I'm not sure what the driver of a very new looking terracan was thinking, especially when his navigator admitted that the last time she was guiding him whilst backing, he still managed to hit the garage door! Discretion being the better part of valour I was moved to prompt Neville for some advice for those who would be concerned about a 'parallel sort of occurrence'.

'Please ask the next vehicle for assistance if you think you need it' was the reassuring advice.

It was doubling reassuring that the true spirit of this club was demonstrated as the more experienced members willingly assisted all navigators and drivers to safely negotiate this particular turn. It was also noticeable the number of cameras 'at the ready'. Was it because the vista looking right down the Ryton River across to Lake Coleridge from this corner was spectacular, or was it because they were insured with ami?

Once everyone had descended this section the search for the next part of the track took on rather humorous dimensions. A call to look for a track on the 'left' by the very visible white markers gave the impression that that's where we should be heading. No sooner was it confirmed that there was indeed a track there, the advice came over the radio 'well we don't go that way, we keep that one on the left!'

Leader Robbie proceeded to lead the convoy on the correct track where we encountered two extremely steep descents to the valley floor. All vehicles negotiated these sections without drama and the convoy proceeded through to the last section of interest before turning onto the Mt Olympus Ski field access road. This section was going to test 'Black Thunder' as the current set of tyres are totally unsuitable for negotiating a soft wet muddy slippery length of bog.

'It will be okay' remarked Jessica 'it looks dry on the bottom!'. Sure enough it was 'Ok'. I know I was 'dry' and ready for a drink.

I was also feeling very grateful to everybody who organized and assisted with this trip.

The scenery was fantastic, the weather was superb and the driving challenges were varied and sufficient. Further more I had been able to practice what I had learnt at driver training.

We proceeded to the final rendezvous point advised on the radio but not before we passed a road sign that was just so appropriate 'BACK TO REALITY'.