

Skis and Brumbies

By Elyne Mitchell

SOUTH of the Ram's Head you come upon "The Cascades"—a place of which few winter travellers in the Alps have ever heard.

The Cascades is the summer home of the brumby horses, and we have often wondered if it was not very possible that some of the mob might be caught in there by the winter snows, and forced to remain. We wondered, too, how much snow would lie there, and this last winter I planned to ski over from the Chalet and find out.

The only other recorded skiing at the southern end of the Alps was in 1937 when George Day and my husband and I skied down to the Dead Horse Hut and back to the Chalet in the day (A.N.Z.Y.B. 1939). A trip to the Cascades would be at least twice as far and mean a night's camp in the slab and bark hut which I had seen when I rode through in the summer.

Early winter, when I had hoped to make the trip proved too short of snow, and it was not till August 16th, after a heavy new fall, that we decided there would be a sufficient covering on the lower ridges to the south.

We set off at ten past seven that morning, keeping high in the Stilwell Range in an unsuccessful attempt to elude the icy traversing on the way to the Ram's Head. It was not until we got into the Ram's Head Range that we got into better going. There we slid quietly up and down the lanes between the ice-frescoed granite tors till we came to the southern edge of the Alps and could look out beyond.

The first time I had stood there, looking over, the freezing wind that lashed our skins around us did not encourage pausing for long. This time sunshine streamed down on powder snow and charmed us to while away our time studying the country spread below. The long north-easterly running line of the Crackenback River, like a broad white ribbon, seemed to be the central part of the scene; above its source, the Chimney, a rough rocky peak, stood like a snow-flecked volcanic plug. East of the Crackenback, the Scrubby Range—low, rough hills that reminded me of the Laurentian country in Eastern Canada—is where many brumbies run, safe from molestation owing to the roughness of the terrain. Between us and the Indi Valley and all the country stretching out towards Davies Plain and the Pilot, were the ridges we had to traverse before dropping down into the Cascades—new land at which we looked eagerly.

This time, instead of going left-handed from the Ram's Head on to a spur that runs down towards the Crackenback, we skied diagonally across the face of the Ram's Head Range on to a spur that goes right to the Dead Horse Gap. Long, long schusses through cold snow crystals took us speeding downwards into this new ski kingdom, leaving the meaning-filled lines of our ski tracks across the southern rampart of the range.

We entered the woods, and deep powder snow foamed around our shins encouragingly while we went down a steep-sided creek. But its encouragement was false. Mist, after the snow had ceased falling, had wreaked havoc. All of a sudden we were in breakable crust, treacherously camouflaged with a covering of powder.

As we descended through an ever-thickening forest of burnt saplings, the crust became a nightmare, forcing your skis into diverging lines, holding you fast by the legs and crumbling to let you go. Colin Wyatt, doing continuous jump turns, seemed to be quite happy. George Day owned up to being frequently face downwards, but he was far sooner at the bottom than most of the others were. Sometimes we

noticed, thick on the crust, the big crystals that make the leaf snow in which we skied the first time we went down to Dead Horse. Perhaps it is not unusual on this sheltered southern fall of the Alps.

It took us three and a quarter hours to reach the hut at Dead Horse Gap, a journey of about ten miles. Given even moderately good conditions for the descent through the trees, it could be done in well under the three hours. The drop is approximately 1900 feet. An excellent 2,000 foot run can be obtained by going directly down from the Ram's Head to the floor of the Crackenback Valley by the ridge we descended on our first visit.

From the hut we went straight up the Dead Horse Ridge, going due south, and climbed about 900 feet before we reached the top. Then our course lay slightly east of south as we went for a way over the tops of the ridges till we slid into a small, open valley. Here our skis sunk into the deep snow crystals and, as we looked back, the whole of the Ram's Head Range was framed by the sparkling valley.

Not long afterwards we dropped down into the burnt out remains of Kerrie's Yards, once the best yards for catching brumbies throughout the whole Range. From there we turned to the east to get on to Bob's Ridge.

This ridge sweeps round to enclose the Cascades and it rises up to the peaks of Purgatory and Paradise, or Salt Yard Hill and Black Bullock. Bob's ridge was well covered with snow but the south-western faces, where we had expected good conditions, were very bare.

For some miles we skied along the ridge top, punting over the flat, sliding down small hills, but mostly climbing, with each knoll a watch-tower, looking over new country. We were close to the land of the brumbies and kept a sharp eye out for signs of them below. Eventually there was a deeper valley below us and dividing our ridge top from the slopes of Purgatory. Down this valley would be our last chance of sufficient snow for fair skiing.

We ran into the head of the valley through a mixture of breakable crusts, but nothing as bad as the morning's run, and in the wide valley head was a spring, so we downed our packs and sat on them for a while, drinking the cold, cold water. As we wriggled into our rucksacks again, I pulled my girth strap very tight, feeling that we might have to combat any grade of difficulty.

To start with the valley was open enough to make long schusses, and we sped optimistically down through the trees, loudly commenting on the virtues (or difficulties) of our various lines. Had anyone been forced to turn quickly, the crust would have certainly done its best to make that turn impossible. The lower we dropped, the deeper became the valley cleft, the thicker the trees, and we ran high along the right hand side, side-slipping when a check was necessary. Then suddenly a long, openly timbered ridge swept us down to a flattening in the valley. Here the snow was firm and good and we swung down through the trees at a nice speed, schussing out across a solid snow bridge over the creek.

Then our difficulties commenced. The snow grew deep and wet, rocks and bushes became thicker and thicker as we descended, loops of grass eagerly offered a tunnel for a ski and refused to allow the foot to pass. First on one ski, then on the other, wildly lifting a foot over a triangular rock, swiftly straddling a clump of ti-tree, snowploughing down a narrow pitch till the heavy wet snow formed a wedge that forced one's ski tips apart, down we went, cursing—laughing—and crashing through the timber.

Near the bottom there were some sun-melted tracks where something had been pawing through the snow for grass. These were the first signs that the brumbies were really still in the Cascades and, in the excitement of seeing them, the twenty odd miles we had travelled seemed forgotten.

The valley floor was not so deep in snow as I had expected. Tussocks stuck up everywhere, giving a plum duff appearance to the whole valley, and here and there were completely snowless patches.

Like black trackers we crept forward, each of us instinctively going quietly and looking in all directions for our quarry. Just before we reached the hut we saw them.

It was only a small mob of brumbies and they were about half a mile further down the creek, grazing on a little knoll and camouflaged by granite boulders. Obviously the snow was too thin to ski after them, so we went up to the hut and left our skis and packs.

George Day got his lasso ready and we crept down to the creek-side, trying to keep in the one set of footsteps because the evening frost had already iced the snow over and each step made a rending sound.

The Cascades creek is a broad one and proved difficult to cross, but we sneaked over it while we were hidden from the brumbies by the shoulder of a hill, then we crept up, keeping under cover for as long as possible. The young stallion in charge of them was already scenting danger, and they broke up a side valley almost as soon as we appeared. Then the chase commenced. Twice Curly Annabel, helped by his footballers' training, headed them back towards us, but they broke a third time and got away up to the timber. We ran and ran, but there were none of our hoped for deep snow drifts into which we could run them, and, though they were poor from the sparse feed and so not very strong, we were tired from our long day's skiing.

At last some of us, having lost the chase, were crossing the creek, when the bucks suddenly appeared with George Day after them. We headed them off between the creek and the horse paddock fence and, as we held them, George—and the horses—had a much needed rest. Then off they went again with George after them, swinging his rope as he ran. Till then everyone except Colin Wyatt had kept dry-footed.

The rope whizzed through the air once and slipped off a colt's neck as it ducked its head; then a second time and it tightened round its throat as it took off over the creek. George went through the creek, like an aquaplaner, on the end of the rope and Curly after him to help hold the animal. Eventually they got him down and, as we had no way of getting him home or of branding him to show proof of ownership, George banged its tail, waving the trophy aloft in triumph.

With the excitement of the chase over, we realised we were very tired, and when we reached the hut we lit a quick fire and made some tea before starting the real work of getting a full supply of wood and water, making the hut comfortable for the night, and then cooking our meal. For a long time we sat sipping our boiling tea before we could persuade ourselves to move.

In spite of a lack of plates and cooking utensils we managed to have a pretty good meal of eggs and sausages fried in a camp oven and balanced precariously on well buttered toast. Then in the arc of firelight, we sat and yarned about brumbies, listening to George's wonderful tales of the hills, and the "buckeens" and the cattlemen who hunt them. Unlike the "man from Snowy River" we had come down on our skis in winter time, a way of living about which Banjo Paterson never wrote, but perhaps in this way we can carry the tradition of those times into the new pages of our hills under snow.

There was a hard clear frost that night but we were warm and comfortable and felt that we had a promise of fine weather to follow, but the morning was cold and grey as we left the hut to return by the shorter route up the ridge where the riding path lies.

The height of the Cascade Valley is about 4,800 feet. It is like a basin hung on the end of the Alps; over its southern rim drop the long steep mountain ash spurs straight down to the Indi River and Victoria.

Energy seemed less noticeable in our party that day, and the angry clouds and dead white snow gave no quickening to our spirits as sparkling sunshine would have done. We climbed up through tall dead forest, over snow all criss-crossed with the tracks of rabbits and occasionally scarred with the ploughed furrow of a wombat. Higher up the snow-gums were thick and grey and only afforded us glimpses at the breaking wave crest of Pinnabar's cornice against the sullen sky.

The run down to the Dead Horse was in a mixture of crust, thin snow and grass, but not unpleasantly difficult and I found it really good fun. I did see one

member of the party head downwards and in mortal combat with some timber, but he seemed to come out of it unscathed.

To get back to the Ram's Head we slid down to the Crackenback and climbed up the ridge which we had skied on our first visit. The 1939 fires had cleared it of most of its sucker forest and it would provide really good skiing. Nearing the "tops", the wind was blowing angrily, casting snow into our eyes, but as we slid down on to the Snowy Swamp, a blue light began to break up the grey and no storm came.

On the top of Charlottes' Pass we stopped to fasten little plaits of brumby's tail to our coats as positive proof of our capture and of our ski journey to the domain of the wild horses.