

Spring Explorations in the Upper Murray Ranges

By E. K. and T. W. Mitchell

A PART from the outbreak of hostilities, the spring of 1939 will long be remembered for the reluctance with which the winter ended. Long after the wattles and flowers in the valleys had settled down to the routine existence of long summer days, violent snow storms still broke over the alpine summits and replenished the already abundant drifts.

In all we made three main trips and two smaller ones. We skied on Mount Pinnibar (Victoria), the Grey Mare (N.S.W.), and the Dargals (N.S.W.) and made two single day trips to the western peak of the Dargals and to Mount Youngal (4,800 ft.), the first mountain across the border high enough to be snowcapped in winter. We understand that we were the first skiers to ski on Mount Pinnibar and on the Grey Mare.

Mt. Pinnibar.

On September 28th we set out on horseback from Biggara, on the Upper Murray, to go to Mount Pinnibar, which is the first really outstanding snow mountain on the Victorian side of the N.S.W. border. In the sea of forest-clad ranges which lie between the Victorian and the N.S.W. Alps there are several snow peaks breaking the green sweeps of waving tree tops, but Pinnibar is the monarch of them all and raises its star-shaped bulk head and shoulders above its lesser brothers and sisters. It is at the headwaters of the Nariel Creek and about thirty miles south of Corryong.

We left Biggara (1,050 ft.) at 9.45 and stopped for lunch at the head of Teapot Creek (1,925 ft.) at 12.30. Three-quarters of an hour later we climbed up behind Mount Unicorn into the range which runs parallel to the Murray River and for three hours our ride continued over a series of small peaks, the highest being Mount Onslow (3,450 ft.). The whole way we were treated to a series of vignettes of the N.S.W. mountains, still heavy with snow. As we drew level with Kosciusko and then drew away, these flickering scenes, seen through the tree trunks, became more and more spectacular.

Finally at 4,000 ft., on the shoulder of the Bobuck Mountain, we plunged into the aromatic tangle of wattles hiding the diverse heads of the Thowgla Creek. We rode on up the 800 foot wall, which is the watershed between the Thowgla and Nariel Creeks, until we rested on the top at 4,200 feet in a colossal forest of dead mountain ash. Large and small, they stood in great walls and avenues, the grey monotone of death bleached into whiteness by the passing of many seasons. We slowly lost height as we followed the creek and eventually reached the minute hut at ten to six as darkness finally fell on the ti-tree thickets.

Next morning we left the hut (3,850 ft.) at 8.5 and rode for an hour until the snow became too deep at 4,800 feet. All this section, and also the piece from the watershed, is under snow in full winter. We put on ski and skins in the mellow light of the mountain ash forest and climbed steadily up the side of a ridge. At 9.55 we were on the ridge-top and found ourselves at 5,150 feet about the middle of a ridge which came down easily and unhurriedly from what we rightly judged to be the summit. By this time we had largely shaken ourselves free from the trees and had begun to realise what a wonderful view would be ours when we reached the top. We set off again at 10.5 and twenty-five minutes later were dropping our rucksacks on the highest point of Mount Pinnibar—6,100 feet. (Photo p. 78.)

As mentioned before, Mount Pinnibar is a star-shaped mountain shooting out long tentacle-like ridges. One of these starts due north, swings north-east

and finally ends up to the east in a dizzy finale of crags abruptly above the waters of the Indi or Murray River. Another ridge heads off confidently to the east but loses its nerve and turning north-east finally swings north to meet its neighbour. A third great ridge runs nearly three miles in a south-westerly direction, while a fourth runs first to the south and then south-west in a wide radius sweep to provide a high level route connecting Pinnibar to the Big Gib. This last peak is 5,763 feet high and the name is derived from the aboriginal name for the white cap of clay worn by candidates at initiation ceremonies. It was still snowcapped as we gazed wistfully across the profusion of intervening ridges and gullies.

Right in our faces across the narrow gash of the river at Groggin rose the great flanks of Kosciusko. This is the real Kosciusko, the Kosciusko which so few of its thousands of visitors know. This is the Kosciusko of gorges, cliffs and crags; of majestic waterfalls and precipices and of all the wealth of detail and magnificence which goes to make a real mountain scene. The western fall of Kosciusko satisfies every craving of the true mountain-lover far beyond the powers of the insipid uplands of the Monaro side.

The best slopes of Pinnibar lie in the gullies on the south side and are steep, fairly free from timber and long. The gully heads near the summit average between 26 degrees and 35 degrees, according to our inclinometer. There is plenty of good and interesting ski-ing in them with a vertical footage of 1,200 feet or more.

While the ridges to the south-west are gentle and attenuated, those going down towards Groggin drop with an almost appalling suddenness. They discard in a series of most alluring blind edges which kept tempting us on and on for "just one more" until we found ourselves much further below the summit than we had ever intended going.

Mount Bogong, the Bogong High Plains and Mount Hotham are further away than Kosciusko, but plainly visible. The Murray can be seen as far as Towong with the blue and white Dargals standing clear cut against the northern sky as a kind of final outpost to the Alps of New South Wales.

We spent two full days exploring Mount Pinnibar and needed two more at least as we had to leave so much untouched. It is a great ski-ing mountain and one day, when the Murray Valley Highway is pushed through to join the coast roads it will pass the feet of Pinnibar. Side roads will then be built to Kosciusko and to Pinnibar, and it will be possible to ski in the morning in Victoria, lunch at Groggin and then spend a pleasant afternoon sampling the snows of New South Wales.

The Grey Mare.

On Saturday afternoon, the 15th of October, 1939, we left Geehi and rode up the Read Spur of the Grey Mare Range to the Pinnacle. The bush fires of last summer have at last made this possible; hitherto impenetrable scrub has always prevented an approach from this direction. A rough sketch of the route was drawn on the back of an envelope and given to us by a wallaby snarer. It is a most spectacular climb. Geehi is 1,340 feet and the Pinnacle, on the end of the Grey Mare, 5,100. So for nearly four thousand feet the climb has to be made up an inspiring staircase dropping off each side into dizzy declivities which end on the tree tops far below. The view from the Pinnacle itself is breathtaking. It is the only place in the Alps close to the steep western face of the Main Range. The full drop of 6,000 feet from Kosciusko and Townsend can be appreciated as it falls sheer from two thousand feet above the Pinnacle, down to the Geehi River, cascading and roaring over the boulders four thousand feet below. The great wall is so close that every single crag and ravine can be seen in minute detail. The actual distance between the Pinnacle and Mount Townsend is six miles.

We sent the horses back and pitched our alpine tent in a wilderness of dead snow gum skeletons. As darkness fell we could see the creeping pin-points of motor car lights across the border in Victoria. That night at 10 p.m. a wind loaded with heavy rain swept over the ridge. Our tent bent under the force of the gale and leaked copiously. The rain struck on the roof in staccato bursts like machine gun fire. The rubber floor kept the water in and our sleeping bags were soon soaked. We made an extra flooring of firewood, ponchos and boots. All that night, all the next day and all the following night we lay in a state of chilly saturation, living on cold sausage and sao biscuits. We could not sit up owing to the low roof and the slightest contact with the supposedly waterproof material brought fresh floods in on us.

Monday morning, the 17th, broke fine with a colourful dawn lighting up the scarred face of Mount Twynam just across the Geehi. The water in the tent was frozen and our sleeping bags were covered in ice. Cracklingly we crawled out and began a hurried search for what spare garments remained dry. At the same time we ate a quick breakfast of beef, plumcake and chocolate. At 5.45 we had left camp with our ski and were picking our way towards the Twins. The views of the Main Range were magnificent. We could look straight up the Northcote Canyon and admire the great downward sweep of fluted steepness which is the north-western face of Carruthers' Peak. Mount Twynam and the Watson's Crag area provided a series of great indentations accentuated by the deepness of the early morning shadows. Running parallel with us, seemingly only a stone's throw across the deep gash of the Geehi, were Mount Tate and the Rolling Grounds going along the eastern horizon to the rock-splattered head of the Dicky Cooper Bogong. Behind it, Gungartan trailed the Kerries in its wake. We had the advantage over Main Range skiers in that we were always looking up at greater peaks instead of looking down on lesser ones.

We had a rest on the summit of the southernmost Twin (5,400 ft.), having reached it in time to see a giant of a dingo pause for a second and then disappear as suddenly as if he had been snatched away. From the northern Twin we hit the pace up as great rolling billows of clouds were beginning to sail in from the Murray. Passing the Grey Hill (called by local cattle men the Blue Hill) the snow was black for acres around from the tiny particles blown off the fire-blackened snowgum trunks.

We reached the decapitated trig station on the summit of the Grey Mare (6,129 ft.) at 9.6 a.m. All around the ranges glistened under the greatest covering of spring snow seen in the mountains for a decade. The Ink Bottle, Finlay's Lookout and the Dargals especially had more snow on them than in some winters. The somewhat disappointing Scammel Spur also had an unprecedented covering.

Jagungal, as usual, looked superbly aloof. The area between the Grey Mare hut and Mawson's had very few bare patches except where the terrain broke abruptly and desperately into the gorges at the head of the Geehi.

Down each side of the Grey Mare were the most tempting slopes running to the east and west which seemed to promise all kinds of delightful running.

On glorious spring snow we coasted down off the summit enjoying a number of invigorating schusses interspersed with glorious, long drawn-out sweeping turns.

On the South Twin we had an early lunch, relaxing lazily and examining in detail the great hammer-headed spur which reached out towards us from the shoulders of the Dicky Cooper Bogong. Further to the south, the aggressive cliffs of the Mann Bluff reared themselves arrogantly from the welter of vegetation clinging to their feet.

At 1.15 we were back at our half-dried out camp and that night slept soundly in Geehi.

H. Barlee, the wallaby hunter and lessee of an area on the Pinnacle, is build-

ing a hut there this summer. It is a trip which all true lovers of ski touring should make. Very few other tours fulfill so completely the idea of what mountain scenery should be at its most satisfying.

The Dargals.

The Grey Mare trip was supposed to have been our finale for the season, but the falls of new snow in early November, blanketing the hills as low down as the 2,000 ft. level, were too much for us. On the ninth of November we loaded ski and rucksacks aboard the horses and set off for Wheeler's Hut, via the Pretty Plain. Our object was to explore the eastern face of the Big Dargal (5,500 ft.). There are three Dargal peaks, the Big Dargal, the Dargals (Trig. Station—5,661 ft.) and the Dargals West Peak (5,400 ft.). The latter is not within the scope of the map. Between these peaks lies a triangular tableland broken into irregular open meadows by dense thickets of snow gum and smoothly rounded, lichen-covered monoliths of granite. The western wall is very steep and the country extremely rough and broken by tors, boulders and scrub to such an extent that, although the snow is plentiful there in winter and early spring, ski-ing is practically impossible. The east side of the Big Dargal rises 1,100 feet above the digging-scarred open lands in front of Wheeler's Hut, where once the Toolong gold rush flourished. There are four or five nice steep and interesting runs back to the hut, as well as tours towards the Ink Bottle and Round Mountain. To the north runs the long and heavily wooded ridge of the Jagumba range culminating in the flattish top of Jagumba itself. The ridge is fairly uniform in height except for the scoop-out of the Port Phillip, or Wolsley's, Gap. In comparison with Jagumba's uninspiring summit, the vertical rock channels of Manjar's (Black Jack's) precipitous sides stand out across the Tooma River in vivid contrast. The summit (5,255 ft.) is skiable (when you get there), but the sides would need a rock climber's equipment.

Jagungal stood out clear and practically due east, a lone sentinel above the recumbent forms of its sleeping companion peaks and ridges. The open country along the Tooma River was a pretty pattern of brilliant green grass half blotted out by the melting of the fresh white, unseasonable snow.

We had some glorious runs down into the mountain ash gullies until the snow got too soft, soon after midday, and next morning, Armistice Day, reluctantly packed our ski for the last time before resigning ourselves to the long and enervating days of summer.