

# The Staircase Approach to Victoria's Bogong

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**B**ECAUSE it is Victoria's highest mountain, isolated from all surrounding high country by deep valleys on every side, and without accessible roads, and because of the uncertain and severe weather conditions encountered upon it, Mt. Bogong throws out a challenge to skiers, the overcoming of which brings its own reward in mental and physical triumphs.

Among those taking up the challenge last season was a September party led by Gavan Crowl, of Beechworth. The preliminary eight miles' tramp from Tawonga into Mountain Creek has been reduced to two miles with the opening of a new forest road along which we drove appreciatively. With the invaluable assistance of Stockman Ryder and his team of pack horses we completed the climb to 4800 feet in five miles to Bivouac Hut on the Staircase Spur in just under three hours, finding the snowline extended to half a mile below this point.

Resisting the temptation of a clear, frosty night and falling barometer to make a start, we settled down to endure the company of the rats until dawn, which by way of a contrast brought a high wind and heavy rain. Our ultimate objective, Cleve Cole Hut, situated on the south-eastern flank of the mountain, still lay distant some two miles of ascent to 6500 feet, and a further two and a half miles of descent to 5800 feet. However, indirect radio contact, through Hotham Heights Chalet, to the party already in occupation led by N. Lottkowitz, established that much severer conditions existed across the main ridge, and thus immobilised us for that day. Our radio

technician, Jud Douglas, unavailingly spent considerable time trying to induce the pedal generator outfit to re-charge the radio batteries.

Improved reception in the evening put us in direct touch with the Lottkowitz party, as well as with Hotham Heights, whose instruments recorded no further deterioration in conditions. Rodent life again disturbed the peace of the weary. To our chagrin, morning revealed slight abatement in wind and rain. Five similar successive mornings had been the previous experience of some of the party in 1939; and also of the Lenne party in 1943, and doubtless of many others. The Lottkowitz party again reported steady wind and rain and poor visibility in their region. Two of our party found conditions slightly improved 500 feet higher on the Spur, and on return learned that the Lottkowitz party had invited us to make the ascent to the Summit Hut, which they appointed as our rendezvous. Mt. Hotham reported all instruments rising slowly.

Dividing into two groups, comprising some experienced skiers with novices, the lighter-burdened moved off at 11 a.m. ahead of those bearing heavier packs, planning to return from the Summit to assist with the loads. They were subsequently relieved of this obligation by the premature and welcome appearance of the Lottkowitz party.

The snow surface over the final steep pinch of 500 feet was wind-scoured and hard, but not sufficiently so to warrant the use of crampons. Once on the main ridge, we were exposed to the full force of the biting wind, and visibility was reduced to one chain, and less. But for the replacement by

the Lottkowitz party in better visibility of missing snow poles and markers, our party's retreat to Bivouac Hut would be inevitable. We were largely encouraged to continue by the moral support and physical assistance of our newly-found guides. The route, even in the immediate vicinity of the Cleve Cole Hut, was by no means obvious, and the Hut itself was completely covered with snow. Entrance was made along a trench forty feet in length by ten feet in depth at the doorway. Shafts had been sunk to the window level. On arrival at 3 p.m. our hosts ministered hot soup, biscuits and copious draughts of tea to revive our energy. The kitchen stove smoked to such order, due to a snow-damaged flue, that cooking for fifteen was concentrated on the open fire, resulting in a deal of congestion around meal times, and in the drying of clothes. This inconvenience was offset by the unaccustomed luxury in a mountain cabin of hot showers. Batches of scones baked in a biscuit-tin oven over the open fire formed an appetising substitute for bread.

Low cloud restricted ski-ing on the following day to minor slopes adjacent to the Hut, but thereafter brilliant sunshine gave uninterrupted views of the whole Alpine panorama extending over two States. Beyond the Big River Valley rose Mts. Nelse, Spion Kopje, McKay, Cope, to Fainter, Feather-top, Loch and Hotham, with Wellington, Baw-Baw, Howitt, Buller and Cobbler in the background; beyond the Mitta Valley stood Mts. Wills, Gibbo, Pinnabar, Townsend and the whole of Kosciusko's Main Range, while the green crops of the valleys themselves showed up in contrast.

The slopes of Audax Ridge, Hell Gap, Tadgells and Haunted Gully, give an infinite variety of runs, first class in length and grade, and well-sheltered by the intervening main ridge from the prevailing wind from whichever quarter.

One afternoon a photographic enthusiast appeared near the hut, having walked un-

accompanied, and inappropriately clad and shod, from Bivouac Hut without skis or equipment. Presumably he would not have tackled the climb in adverse weather, but had he been overtaken by one of the sudden changes which work up so quickly, his safe return could scarcely have been assured. He, however, appeared quite unconscious of his remarkable performance.

Our descent to Tawonga, starting at 11 a.m. on the seventh day of our trip, was considerably impeded by snow rapidly thawing at the lower levels under the influence of strong sun, where the uneven surface and appearance of obstacles precluded the use of skis, and feet sank at every step to knee or thigh depth. After lunching at Bivouac Hut, the road was eventually reached at 5 p.m.

With the long steep approach from Tawonga, the exposed crossing of the main ridge, and the uncertain weather and consequent delayed arrivals and departures fresh in our minds, we had looked frequently towards Mt. Wills and the Omeo Highway crossing it, to guess at the distance and difficulties of an approach from that direction. We now learned of the initiative taken by Mr. T. W. Mitchell, M.L.A., and prominent Australian skier, in exploring this route. He left the Highway on horseback at Bogong Saddle, 14 miles beyond the Mitta Township, travelled up the Mulhauser Spur, since traversed by the mountain cattle grazing on the eastern end of the Bogong and arrived at the Cleve Cole Hut in 3½ hours' ride for the ten miles' journey. In the opinion of Mr. Mitchell and stockmen working in the region, horses could be taken five of those ten miles in normal mid-winters, leaving a climb of 1200 feet only in the remaining five miles to be made on foot, or if the whole ten miles is covered on foot a rise of 3600 feet over all, through sheltering timber and along the gullies of Aertex Creek and the Island to the very door of the Hut, permitting a certain approach and retreat on any specified day of the year without regard for adverse weather.