

Some Main Range Huts and Their Approaches

D. Richardson

IF anyone asked me why I had the temerity to write about Main Range huts, I think I should be honest to reply; I don't know, I really don't know. For many of the pioneers of the Main Range were hutting long before I ever clamped a pair of planks to my ill-fitting ski boots. Perhaps the reason is that I really love the wild grandeur of the range; the sunny days and still, crisp moonlit nights; the vast expanse of virgin snow, unravished by a thousand skiers' tracks; the snow gums and the rocky crags; "steep frowning glory" of a western face or simple beauty of a crazy creek meandering aimlessly over the floor of a valley or tumbling down a rocky gorge. Perhaps also because I feel that even in the wanton fury of the blizzard, there are useful lessons to be learnt; that here is a challenge which I must accept or suffer the frustrations of defeat without a fight. Perhaps, too, because, living an ordered life in a crowded city, half strangled by restrictive regulations and trammelled by the canons of convention, I yearn for the freedom of the range; for the opportunity to share the thoughts of my companions; for the knowledge that here, when dangers threaten, man draws a little nearer to his fellow man, and closer to his God.

Lying between Kosciusko on the south to Jagungal on the north, and from a line drawn between the Chalet and Alpine Hut

on the east to the Grey Mares Range on the west, there is an area of snow-fields comprising about 200 square miles and containing but half a dozen habitable huts. True,

There are huts on the Hotel-Chalet traverse and some within almost a stone's throw of the Chalet; I exclude these for the purpose of this article. Nor do I include Farm Ridge Hut, O'Keefe's Hut and others situated north of Jagungal on the Kiandra traverse; nor the huts west of Big Bogong on or near The Dargals.

From the point of view of accommodation we must also exclude the Seaman Memorial hut, which can be regarded as an emergency shelter only; so, too, we might exclude Foreman's hut which is, one might say, at the Chalet's back door.

What habitable huts are there then in this 200 square miles of snowfields? Pounds Creek Hut, White's River Hut, Dicky Cooper Hut, The Tin Hut, Mawson's Hut and Grey Mare Hut.

Pounds Creek Hut is Government controlled and is reached from the Chalet via Charlotte Pass and the Snowy River, or via Spencer's Creek; or, for those who do not object to a climb, by a direct route over Mt. Guthrie. It is about four miles from the Chalet and is easily located on the right bank of the Snowy about 600 yards below the junction of Spencer's Creek. It will accommodate about six persons, but has

suffered during the war years through neglect. No doubt the Kosciusko State Park Trust will, in due course, make it comfortable, but it will probably be regarded as a transit hut and so not available for extended accommodation. I assume, also, that it will contain in the future, blankets, emergency food, and firewood. It has a Canadian stove which, with proper flue arrangements, could make the hut warm. Approaching it from the north, the skier has the choice of perhaps three routes in fine weather: (1) the western side of Tate East Ridge; (2) Consett Stephen Pass and the Guthega and eastern side of Tate East Ridge; (3) the plateau east of Mount Tate, dropping to the Snowy at the junction of the Guthega and Blue Cow and proceeding up the Snowy on the right bank. Proceeding from White's River Hut in fine weather, the first alternative necessitates climbing almost to the top of Mt. Tate and provides an exhilarating run down Tate East Ridge to Pounds Creek. It is to be recommended to those who would enjoy the magnificent view from Mt. Tate and who would revel in the long traverses which the west side of Tate East Ridge and the eastern slopes of Gills Knobs have to offer. If Consett Stephen Pass is reached in bad visibility, the wise course is to drop fairly sharply to the Guthega River, cross, and traverse the eastern slopes of Tate East Ridge, avoiding the very steep slopes near the head of the Guthega and eventually crossing Tate East Ridge close to the Snowy and locating the hut from its proximity to Pounds Creek.

Last year I was a member of a party of six who made the trip from White's River Hut to the Chalet in bad weather. We had been hibernating for six days at White's during an intense blizzard and, seizing the opportunity offered by an easing of the conditions, made a break for the Chalet. After climbing out of the valley we set a compass course which we estimated would keep us east of the Granite Peaks as offering the safest route, avoiding the possibility of bearing towards the Rolling Grounds and avoiding also the dangers of the cornices near Mt. Tate. I would hate to attempt to plot accurately our course on the map, but we ran into sunshine near the southern tip of an area marked "Very High Plateau," from where we experienced a delightful traverse to the junction of the Guthega and Snowy Rivers. The value of this route is that it

offers a degree of protection from westerly winds and the presence of any thick timber warns that the party is heading too far east; there is no doubt, too, when the Guthega is reached—there being only one other pronounced valley leading to the Snowy, its direction being about 90 degrees from that of the Guthega and its sides being heavily timbered, whereas the Guthega is almost free of timber. If the Snowy is open, it might be necessary to keep to the left (or western) bank until a crossing is reached, but the right bank is the easier going.

White's River Hut, as many skiers know, lies in the sheltered valley of the Munyang River (or White's River) with delightful slopes on every side. To the enterprise of the Kosciusko Alpine Club we owe the comforts which this hut has to offer. It has two rooms, eight bunks, sleeping bags, blankets (placed there last year by Dr. Norman Macindoe), cooking utensils, cutlery, etc., and now possesses a small Canadian stove, insatled last year, in the rear room, by Ken Breakspear. The Kosciusko Alpine Club has expended about £250 in extending and improving this hut, and will probably stock it in future with essential foodstuffs, relying on the honour of skiers to pay for accommodation. For the 1946 season expenditure was a little less than £36 and receipts were £35.

This hut is reached from the south by one or other of the routes mentioned earlier. Care should be taken (particularly in bad weather) to avoid bearing too far west, certainly not westward of the north-south fence. In severe seasons this fence will be covered in most places, but frequently the tops of posts produce mounds in the snow surface indicating that the fence lies beneath. If in doubt when nearing the valley, it would be advisable to bear to the east, as the worst that could happen by a too-early swing would be a steep wooded drop to the river below the hut. In fine weather all one has to do is to keep east of the ridge rising towards Dickey Cooper Bogong and drop down a well-marked valley.

White's River valley is undoubtedly good skiing terrain, providing varieties of slopes and excellent wood-runs, and there is a goodly supply of dead timber (a very important factor). Here, I think, is an ideal position for a commodious club-house, if one might dream of club-houses in these days

of Trust control; and if one might also dream of the day when some tangible effort will be made by the powers-that-be to make the real snowfields accessible. And speaking of accessibility, a glance at the map suggests a direct route from the Hotel-Chalet road roughly following Piper's Creek to the Snowy, thence up the Munyang River to the hut. True there are gorges and thick timber on either side of the Snowy, but a summer track already exists as far as the Snowy and the Munyang valley provides a safe, sheltered route marred only by the lower mile or two of thickly timbered gorge. The actual crossing of the Snowy would, at times, be a problem but, while dreaming, let us dream of a small suspension foot-bridge. Thus would White's River Hut be no farther in than the Chalet, and extended accommodation would ease to no small extent the pressure on Hotel and Chalet.

From White's the skier has the choice of a few routes to the remaining huts. Up the valley, over the saddle dividing Gungarten and Dicky Cooper Bogong, skirt around Cooper Creek and, if the skier is lucky, he will find Dicky Cooper Hut cunningly concealed on a ridge dropping to a section where the creek changes direction rapidly from north to south. This is the usual stockman's hut, with few amenities. Each time I decided to make this run bad weather supervened, and so I speak not from first-hand knowledge.

Grey Mare Hut can be reached by a route via Milk Creek to a position above Valentine Falls. Here the going is rough and not to be recommended except in fine weather. One might climb the Ghost and drop down the western face through extremely thick small timber to the bottom of the falls, or cross the Valentine and by careful selection find a ski-able way down to Grey Mare Creek,—following the right bank up a couple of miles to the hut. This approach to Grey Mare Hut is not one for inclement weather or bad visibility; better to go via Mawson's Hut which is reached from White's by a fairly direct route over comparatively easy terrain. One travels almost due north between the Kerries and the Main Divide, making Valentine Creek and proceeding down the left bank to an east-west fence, a mile south of Cup and Saucer Hill, where a traverse over a knoll to westward leads to

the hut. Mawson's Hut (like the huts at White's and Pounds) is constructed of galvanized iron; it contains two rooms, each opening on to a "hall," at one end of which is the main entrance. The entrance door faces north and there is always a scour here to keep the door free of snow; this is not the case in some other huts, where a considerable amount of digging is generally necessary to obtain access. Mawson's Hut is, like most, privately owned. It is comfortable and could be equipped to accommodate six persons.

The northern tip of the Kerries lies to the west of Mawson's Hut, and if one climbs this ridge one sees a long valley that leads right down to Valentine Falls,—an easy trip. To reach Grey Mare Hut from Mason's Hut an easy route is to traverse the northern tip of the Kerries, drop down to the Valentine, select a suitable crossing and in a westerly direction traverse the area contained in the creeks,—leaving timber to the north and keeping north of a rugged section of Rocky Plain Creek above its junction with Grey Mare Creek. Rocky Plain Creek is reached at a three-way fence where the route seems to lead naturally to slip-rails. The creek is crossed and McPhee's ridge is immediately climbed, from the top of which Grey Mare Hut is visible. From here there is a steep drop to Straight Creek, and in no time we see the old Grey Mare perched on rising ground, with its "annexe" at such a distance as to necessitate the donning of ski for the langlauf thereto. (Incidentally, Mawson's hut does not possess an "annexe"). Grey Mare Hut is commodious, but that is its only virtue. It is of wood, with gaping cracks in walls and floors that make it most uncomfortable. To add to its lack of comfort a chap I know tethered a horse to a wall; the horse decided to move off and brought down a whole section, portion of the roof collapsing and permitting snow to be driven into the ceilings of the remainder,—snow that melts when a fire is lit. Still, I have had some happy days (and nights) at this hut. On one occasion there were eight of us there for a night. Some around the fire were singing. Outside the night was still and the stars brilliant, the smoke could be seen curling upward from the open chimney and the flickering firelight shone through the window. It is a memory that will remain vividly with me for many a year.

From here a trip to the Grey Mare is well worth while. There are a thousand and one valleys running hither and thither that are just begging to be explored. Or, perhaps a trip to Jagungal would be preferred; or maybe a run around the north of Big Bogong to the huts near Bull's Head Creek. The map shows a hut two to three miles due north of Grey Mare Hut; this hut, I believe, was destroyed by fire some years ago.

Grey Mare Hut was once associated with a gold mining venture; there remains scattered pieces of heavy equipment, skeletons of other huts, and ghosts of yesteryear.

Let us drop in at another hut, the Tin Hut. This small galvanised structure is the highest habitable hut in Australia, 6200 ft. Its entrance door faces east, and access is gained by digging first for a shovel which usually hangs over the top of the door, and then excavating sufficient snow to allow the body to drop in. Once in, an attempt might be made to construct steps to the snow level. Or, perhaps, the chimney might be used if digging proves too irksome. This hut provides the perfect example of where not to place a door. It is a most difficult hut to find, and might easily be mistaken for one of the granite boulders scattered around. Approaching it from Alpine Hut there are three fine weather routes: (1) climb due west of Alpine Hut, turn south between Penderiffe and Big Brassy and continue to the head of Finn's River; (2) proceed up the valley due south of Alpine Hut, cross over a treeless saddle after traversing a climb, and keep to the western slopes of the ridge to the head of Finn's River; (3) continue along the valley due south of Alpine Hut (keeping high) until a double saddle is reached connecting the Porcupines, then bear westward around the end of the ridge and maintain elevation until the Tin Hut is sighted in a clump of trees. No. 3 is the best bad weather route as it offers protection almost the whole way.

The route from White's River Hut to the Tin Hut (or to Alpine Hut and the reverse journey), can be tricky in bad visibility, though fences can be very helpful. A fence runs north-south at the Tin Hut, a branch running west to a point east of the main divide, thence south to a point north-east

of Gungarten, thence west over a saddle of Gungarten down to Dicky Cooper Creek. If these fences are to be used as a guide, care must be taken to bear south over the saddle connecting Dicky Cooper and Gungarten. Perhaps the best route into White's Valley from the north is to keep Gungarten to the west until south of that peak, then to bear west over the ridge and make a timber run into the valley. The same route is to be recommended on the outward journey. I have crossed lower down Disappointment Spur, but although we found ourselves almost directly above the hut, the timber made the going difficult.

Two years ago four of us made a blizzard run from White's River to Alpine Hut and, crossing the divide near Gungarten were not agreed as to our position. We played safe by proceeding in an easterly direction until we began to lose elevation and run into timber. Reckoning we were then approaching Finn's River we turned north and, by lucky chance, passed within a few yards of Tin Hut. This has since struck me as a comparatively safe bad weather route, because one could hardly miss Finn's River and, turning north, could either make the Tin Hut or cross the saddle at the western end of the Porcupines and proceed along Dead Horse Creek.

One route more I might mention—i.e., from Alpine Hut to Mawson's Hut. This is a little north of west, with a fence and valley as a guide as far as the Valentine Creek at a point mentioned in my reference to the White's River-Mawson's Hut traverse. This is an easy run and should present little difficulty even in bad weather.

I do not regard the Alpine Hut as a "hut" for the purposes of this article. I consider it a monument to the enterprise of skiers who sought to open up the northern end of the range, and who have kept it going despite the extreme difficulties of transport. It has provided an excellent holiday at reasonable cost to many skiers, and has made accessible many delightful parts of our snow-fields which, but for its existence, would have been enjoyed by a mere handful of the more daring Main-rangers.