

WORDS AND PHOTOS MARK SEDON

LOFTY

GOALS

Each year, The North Face, Australian Geographic Outdoor and the Australian Geographic Society help expedition dreams become reality with a \$10,000 grant. Last year's Adventure Grant winner was Mark Sedon from Wanaka, New Zealand. His goal: to climb and ski the 18 biggest mountains in NZ's Southern Lakes District. This is his story.

TSUN WAS SETTING far too quickly. We were near the top of O’Leary Peak (2570m) in the Forbes Mountains of the Southern Lakes region of New Zealand. We had just skied off the summit, down towards the hut, which we could see 200m below us in the fading light. I’d taken off my skis and was carefully downclimbing a steep snow couloir in crampons and using my ice axe. Not far below I could see that the couloir dropped off a cliff, beyond that I had no idea.

The fast way down: skiing Mt Pollux.



We had three options, find a route around the cliff on the loose rocks, cut a bench in the snow and camp there for the night or climb back up and find another way. Falling was not an option.

BIG-SCREEN INSPIRATION

I was on the journey of a lifetime, something I’d dreamt up several years before after watching a film at the NZ Mountain Film Festival of a guy skiing all of the peaks above 14,000ft (about 4267m) in Colorado. I’d spent hours poring over topographical maps and worked out there were 18 similar peaks above 2500m in the Southern Lakes District, where I am lucky enough to live. Then I’d won a competition, the 2012 Adventure Grant from The North Face, Australian Geographic Outdoor magazine and the Australian Geographic Society.

If successful, I could be the first person to climb and ski all 18 mountains, but it was going to be a humongous effort.

FLYING DOWN MT BREWSTER

I’d skied Mt Brewster (2515m) the year before, climbing up from the Haast Pass Highway at 500m to the Brewster Hut at 1400m. Steve Moffat and I left the hut in light rain at 4am the next day and traversed around the steep shoulder of Mt Armstrong. We almost turned back, but Steve’s enthusiasm kept me going. By the time we got on the Brewster Glacier the rain had eased and the summit of Mt Brewster had appeared out of the clouds. We climbed the steep south face in soft snow right to the summit.

It was extremely steep, so we downclimbed a little, then cut out a ledge to put on our skis and carved out smooth, easy turns down the glacier all the way back to the hut. I’d also carried up my paraglider, so tied my skis across my back, laid out the wing and waited for the breeze to blow the right way. Several minutes later I took off, flying down over the steep bush and down into the river bed. What a way to get down!

POWDER ON MT HUXLEY

I managed a day off in August, so I called Lionel Clay and Dean Staples. Two good mates, excellent climbers and great skiers. We were dropped on the glacier east of Mt Huxley and headed off on climbing skins, the way the first ascent party had back in 1939. But where they had left their skis



Skiing the East Face of Mt Edward, between ice cliffs and crevasses.

at the bluffs, we strapped ours to our packs and climbed a steep ribbon of ice for 30m. Half way up the ice, one of my lightweight aluminum crampons broke. Luckily I was able to tie the crampon on with a prusik cord and Lionel set up an anchor at the top and lowered me a rope. Just as well, because shortly after I broke the other crampon! Note to self: take better crampons.

We got to the 2505m summit and stepped into our skis. Skiing down the 40-degree summit slopes in boot-deep powder was amazing, but a little un-nerving as right below us was a 30m cliff. No room for a fall or an avalanche. Then we turned left into a steep couloir. It was 55 degrees with occasional rocks scattered down it – careful jump turn after careful jump turn, concentrating hard, don’t mess up...

After the couloir, it was a relaxing, fun ski all the way down the glacier for more than 1000 vertical metres to a small knoll where we were scooped up by the helicopter and taken home.

AMAZING MT POLLUX

The next area on my list was going to be incredibly difficult and dangerous to access in winter, so I went to the Department of Conservation (DOC) and applied for a landing permit. Landing permits are extremely hard to obtain for Mts Castor (2518m) and Pollux (2536m), so I was very excited when my application was approved.

Hours after September’s two-week storm cleared, we found ourselves on the Pickelhaube Glacier. After stashing our bivy

map

Skiing down the 40-degree summit slopes was amazing but a little un-nerving as right below us was a 30m cliff.



Kane Henderson looks on while Steve Moffat climbs a couloir on Mt Pollux.



Left to right: Adrian Lang, Lionel Clay and Mark Sedon in the bivy tent at Whitburn Snowdrift Range.

gear, we headed off to Mt Pollux, only to get stopped at the steep, unclimbed north ridge. But we found a steep couloir leading up through the 2m sastrugi and around onto the south face. Sastrugi is unstable ice that forms when water vapour freezes onto the rocks in a strong wind. The ice grows into the wind – and this was massive. Around on the south face, the angle eased back and we were able to skin again up to the south ridge. (Skinning is when you attach a material a bit like an animal skin to the base of your skis, it slides

forward, but not backwards. You have special ski bindings that release at the heel and allow you to “walk” up the snow. When you are ready to ski, you take off the skins, secure your heel and ski down.)

The last 30 vertical metres of Mt Pollux was a very steep and exposed, knife-edge, snowy ridge that led directly to the top. What an amazing summit, so rarely climbed, especially in winter, with fantastic views out over the Tasman Sea to the west, Mt Aspiring to the south, Aoraki/Mt Cook to the north and steep, ice-covered faces below us on all sides.

After carefully downclimbing the ridge, we skied way down the Donald Glacier for lunch. Then we skinned back up, abseiled down our climbing route to the Pickelhaube Glacier and headed over towards Mt Castor with tiring legs.

SASTRUGI ON MT CASTOR

After skinning up Mt Castor for a couple of hours, we found the final 30m was also sastrugi ice, so we switched to ice axes and crampons, which bit hard into the ice as we climbed to the summit. One of our team skied right off the summit and down the west face, while the rest of our group downclimbed off the top then skied all the way back to our camp site. What a day in the mountains, followed by a great night bivvying

One of our team skied right off the summit and down the west face, while the rest of the group downclimbed off the top. . .



Descending Cascade Saddle to the Matituki Valley.

You can't rush mountains – they let you up them when they're ready. I knew I'd finish the peaks but it might take another year.

under the stars. The next morning was windy and clouds were building, so we scampered back to Wanaka.

SNOWDRIFT RANGE'S BIG 5

It was already late September and the unseasonably bad weather was causing me to fall behind my schedule of peaks. I had really wanted to complete the project in one winter, but realised, with the benefit of hindsight, that I was getting a bit pushy. I should have known better than to push things when the weather wasn't perfect, but we headed into the Snowdrift Range, where five of the peaks lay, way out west in a northerly clearance.

A quick weather lesson: only go into NZ's western ranges in either an easterly or southerly clearance. Lionel, Adrian Camm and I were bivvying at the Whitbourn Saddle – after a massive day getting there, having skied Mt Maoriri (2595m) – with only two more nights' worth of food and gas, watching the cloud roll over from the west. We needed perfect visibility to navigate the route back down to the Dart Glacier, or else it would be a three-day hike out...

Despite this, we headed off across the Snowball Glacier early one morning, all of us completely blown away by the beauty and serenity of the range. We eventually made it

up Mt Lydia (2517m) and skied amazing, boot-deep powder down onto the Marion Plateau just as the cloud came in. We'd already climbed over 1500m that day, so we weren't going to let a bit of cloud stop us. But just 100m before the summit of the furthest peak, Mt Ian (2502m), we were stopped by steep sastrugi ice over loose rock.

The limited snowfall of winter hadn't filled in the route and after several tries with one ice axe and no protection, risking serious falls, we abandoned our efforts and headed back towards our bivvy site, navigating via GPS in the thick cloud.

I thought I would have felt more disappointed, I knew that with this failure we wouldn't complete our project that winter. But you can't rush mountains – they let you up them when they are ready. I knew I'd finish the peaks, but it might take another year. We got back to the bivvy on dark, having climbed more than 2500m up in one day. There were thick clouds and strong winds when we bedded down for the night – if we weren't so tired we'd have been awake all night worrying. But a late-night pee revealed clearing skies, so we were confident the next day would be OK.

DANGER ON MT EDWARD

The next day wasn't OK. The tops of the peaks were in the



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cloud and there were strong winds, but we headed off up Mt Edward (2620m) anyway. Once at the summit we did get the occasional clearance, enough to look down the steep east face, past avalanche debris, ice cliffs and crevasses. It didn't look very promising, but we had picked out a route on our way in a few days before and thought we'd get down or, more accurately, hoped we'd get down.

We skied right off the summit down the south-east ridge until the angle got too steep for us, then we traversed right onto the south face, skiing down hard, wind-packed snow, over crevasses and under ice cliffs. We regained the east face and skied down nice corn, ever closer to the big ice cliffs we knew were below us. I traversed way out left to where we'd thought the route went, but it ended in a 20m ice cliff.

I carefully turned around and came back, Lionel found a route down a steep gully below an active ice cliff, we quickly followed, trying not to rush, but fully aware a big hunk of

ice could shear off at any moment and crush us like flies. I traversed out left again, over big piles of car battery-sized ice blocks, trying to put the danger overhead out of my mind. I pushed left, around a steep corner, past gaping crevasses, around and under some rocks and I saw the route down ahead went through.

I traversed further left, away from the ice cliffs and down onto the Dart Glacier. Yeeharr! I'm not sure if the sweat on my forehead and shaky hands was from the heat and exercise, or the adrenaline. But either way, we all high fived on the glacier and slumped down for a well-deserved rest, gazing in astonishment at what we'd just skied. A big crack rang out and we all jumped a little, but we were safe and no ice came down that time.

It took a few days for the legs to recover from that trip. And even longer for the weather to come right. The spring westerlies set in for three weeks, with three to four metres

of new snow and barely a 24-hour clearance. When it did clear at the end of October, it looked like mid winter in NZ's Southern Alps.

CHOPPER IN

Of the 18 2500m-plus peaks in the Southern Lakes District, three are within local heli-ski operators' terrain. But the tops have not been skied, so we headed into the Richardson Mountains via helicopter. We shut down the helicopter in Glencairn Creek and climbed Centaur Peaks (2525m) with ice axes and crampons, some of our group skiing down from the icy summit, others downclimbing the initial 30m, then all of us skiing down lovely corn snow.

Then we flew to the north Harris Mountains and climbed Headlong Peak (2510m). The skiing was steep and falling wasn't an option as we skied the north-west face, down a steep couloir. With two possible first descents under our

belts before lunch, we then headed over to Mt Head (2313m), which wasn't so steep, but had amazing snow and great views over to the Snowdrift Range where we had skied a few weeks earlier. We skied right off the summit and down the Grant Glacier for almost 1000 vertical metres.

The helicopter then dropped us on the glacier below Sir William Peak (2610m) and headed back to Wanaka. The route above looked daunting and, without much hope of summiting, we headed off for a look. Two hours later, after some steep snow climbing, we were amazed to be standing on the summit with views over to our next objective, Leary Peak. We carefully downclimbed, collected our overnight gear and carried on skiing down the Frances Glacier. We had to climb over our fifth mountain of the day, Leary Peak (2570m), to get to the hut for the night, so we pressed on up to Shepherds Pass in the hot afternoon heat, then up the north face of Leary Peak, getting to the summit at sunset.

We skied off the summit, down the Grant Glacier for almost 1000 vertical metres.



Steve Moffat skis Mt Earnslaw

THE WAY DOWN O'LEARY

We hadn't thought much about the ski descent off O'Leary Peak. It looked fairly straightforward on the map, we'd heard of lots of people skiing it over the years. What we didn't realise was that no one went straight down to the hut. So off we went, skiing careful, steep turns down the south-west face, the snow getting steeper and steeper, the most amazing sunset in a blur of reds and oranges to the west. After a while, the skiing got too steep, and we could still not see the slopes below. So skis off, crampons and ice axes out, we downclimbed carefully on tired legs. We could see the hut 200m below us in the fading light, but there was a gap in the route I suspected was a cliff. At the bottom of the steep couloir there was, in fact, a cliff, so Steve looked left, while I looked right. Steve hooted, so I followed him in complete darkness, climbing across a narrow ledge on loose rock. It took one difficult move, my skis hit the rock above and crampons scraped, but I stretched out and stepped down onto the snow. Whew! Down. The others followed and we walked through the door of the small, four-person bivvy hut at 10pm.

The next two hours were spent melting snow, eating dinner and drinking tea. There were lots of laughs and banter about an amazing day. The snow on Mt Head, the steeps of



Adrian Lang and Lionel Clay after skiing the east face of Mt Edward (above them).

Headlong, the route up Sir William, the descent off O'Leary. Sleep came easy.

PADDLING FOR HOME

The next day we headed off to climb Mt Earnslaw / Piki-rakatahi (2830m), cramponing up the east face, then around to the south. Looking up at the steep south face worried us a little, snow was loading onto the 55-degree slopes, creating avalanche danger, and below the face was a big ice cliff. We

We could see the hut 200m below us in the fading light but there was a gap in the route I suspected was a cliff.



Looking for a route down into the Dart Valley.



Pumping up the kayaks in the Dart Valley.

First we had to ski a nasty avalanche gully full of blocks of debris, then we popped out in the picturesque valley with a meandering creek and perfect, soft corn snow. Then it was skis on the back and downclimbing the steep tussock grass, watching out for spiky spear grass, and on to a nice, big, flat rock for the night. We brewed a cup of tea and cooked dinner while enjoying the evening light.

The next morning we continued down, but eventually got into steep, thick bush where our skis would catch above our heads, and then again below our packs as we fought our way through spiky trees. Eventually we popped out on the grassy flats right next to our kayaks. After a quick rest with very enthusiastic sandflies, we pumped up the kayaks and loaded them with skis, boots, ice axes and packs, before launching into the Dart River. There were only small rapids on the Dart, so it was a nice, relaxing way to paddle back to the township of Glenorchy for hot chips and a pie.

A big thanks to The North Face, Australian Geographic Outdoor and the Australian Geographic Society for their support. The Adventure Grant gave us an amazing opportunity to explore one of the most spectacular regions on earth and I'm looking forward to finishing the adventure this coming winter.

THE ESSENTIALS

The Adventure Grant:

For more info on the annual grant sponsored by the North Face, Australian Geographic Outdoor and the Australian Geographic Society, go to www.thenorthfacegrant.com.au.

2012 Winner: Mark Sedon runs the annual New Zealand Mountain Film Festival in Wanaka and is producing a documentary on his adventures. For updates, see www.kiwiskiguide.com.

decided to leave our skis there and carefully climbed up the very edge of the face on soft winter snow. Not long after, we were elated to be on the summit, but in strong north-west winds, so we didn't hang around. We downclimbed to our skis, clipped in and skied the steep east face on perfect corn, being careful to jump over the small bergschrund (crevasse) before carrying on right to the hut door.

After a cup of tea and lunch, we skied off west down the next part of the adventure, the Bedford Valley. Most parties head east down Kea Basin, but I'd spotted a possible route through the cliffs to the west and had stashed two inflatable kayaks in the bush by the river.