

Silence

of the birds

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Pat Barrett

OUT AND ABOUT



there is hardly a bird to be seen or heard, a scenario which repeats itself throughout the day and right up the valley to the bivvy.

The valley has also been intensively poisoned by aerially broadcast 1080 drops. The last one was done in 2013, while the first was 2006.

I believe there is an increasingly strong case that valleys such as this, which should be a showcase for conservation effort and have good bird numbers of all species, are in fact silent monuments to the failure of this programme and the possible collapse of the ecosystem.

For all this, the valley is especially beautiful, being narrower than its bigger neighbour and therefore more intimate. There's also a small gorge to traverse, which is made easier by short sections of marked track that lead into the

The Hawdon Valley in Arthur's Pass National Park is one of my favourite catchments in the park. It's also popular with parties heading into the large, comfortable, and beautifully sited Hawdon Hut.

On this occasion, however, I'm not going that way, choosing instead to visit the less travelled East Hawdon Valley and its small bivvy, in the valley head beneath Mt Valiant.

With a low river and a fine day ahead, albeit with a threatening nor'west front approaching later in the day, I set off up the easy river flats, passing pockets of bush, tussock, terraces, and shingle gullies to arrive at the junction of the East Hawdon with the main branch.

I see numerous traps and tagged trap-lines here heading off into the forest where the Department of Conservation (DOC) is maintaining an intensive predator-control effort to protect the endangered orange-fronted parakeet which still inhabits the valley.

Taking my time, I explore one or two making note that

mid-valley shingle flats.

Ascending the valley, I pass through these modest obstacles and soon reach the upper valley which twists and climbs farther to reach the top forks, where the tiny two-bunk bivvy is.

It boasts both seclusion and views of the towering buttresses on Mt Valiant, which can be reached relatively easily from the western fork, and the high scree and rock slopes of the adjacent Savannah Range.

Low cloud now fills the upper valley and the odd gust of wind is sweeping the bush around the bivvy site making it cold enough to don a jacket and seek shelter. Rain is not far off.

This is a lonely, yet hauntingly beautiful place, where nature crowds in, smothering any thought of

civilisation, now so far away in time and space.

The wind and expected rain seem to heighten this ambience, echoing another dimension now experienced by so few in the cities. I rest awhile, read the hut book, take a snack and make my own entry before beginning the journey back.

The down-valley trip is easier, but only a tad faster. I

FACT FILE

Access is from Hawdon Shelter near the Mt White Bridge off SH73
Grade: Moderate
Time: 3-4 hours to bivvy
Map: Arthur's Pass National Park map

clear the gorge to enter the main valley in just 90 minutes. Along the flats beside the Hawdon River I encounter a DOC worker and friend.

We pause to exchange greetings and I mention my concerns about the bird numbers here.

They are non-committal, but pressing my point I ask if any control studies have been done here. Again, they are unsure. On my return to Christchurch, I find that none has ever been done for the greater bird population of this catchment, and most likely not for other valleys either.

It seems that the feeling of a "dead valley" I encountered in the Hawdon and elsewhere may then contain some substance. The birds have gone.