Humpridge Running Mission April 23rd Anzac Weekend 2022 –Brendon Ojala, Jono Bell, Nolan Hill

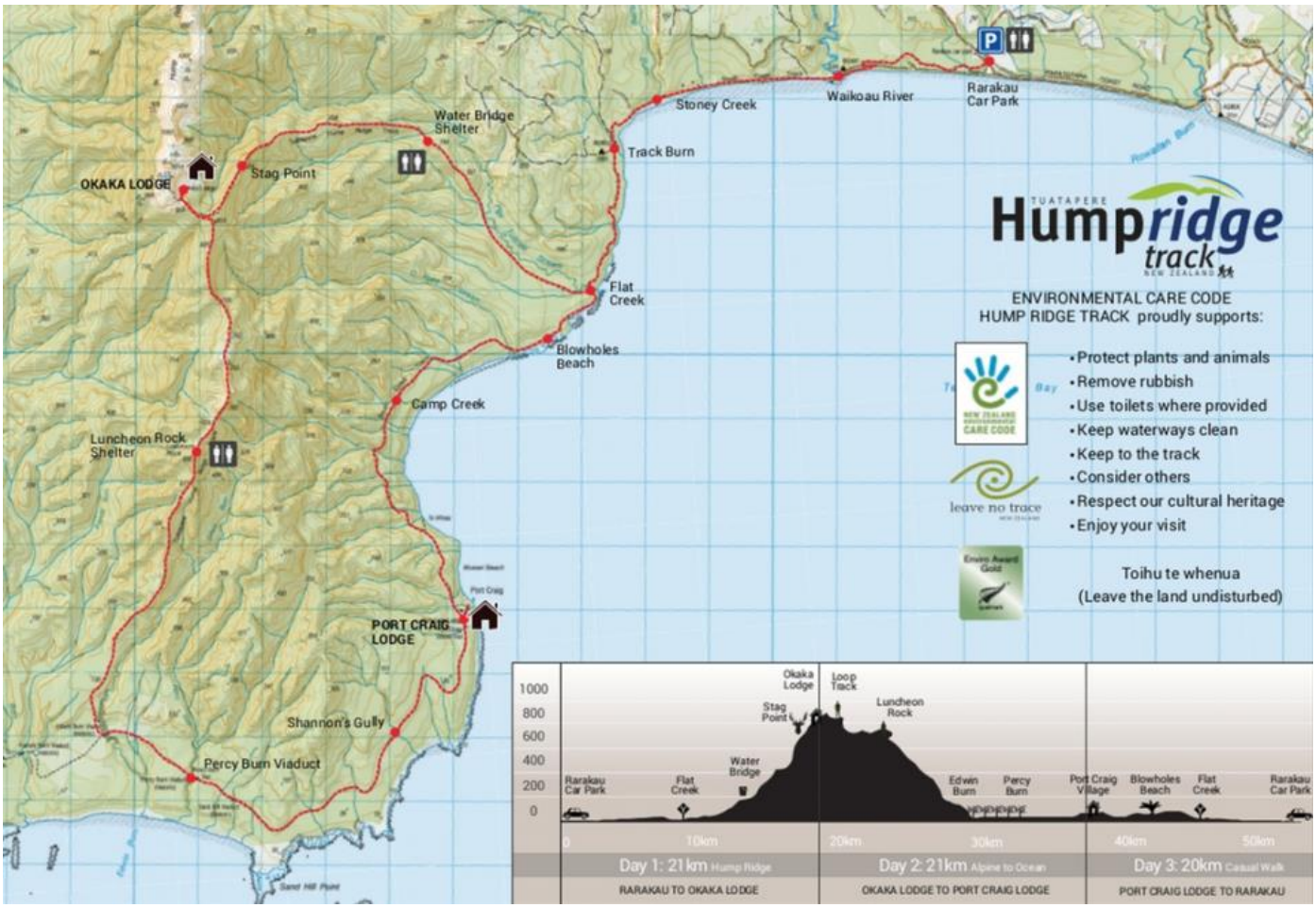
What?.. no!..Jono's running pack had unzipped itself and his jacket and spare polypro were lying somewhere back down the beginning stages of the Humpridge track. After 5km's of our Anzac weekend day mission, Jono had learnt another important lesson: *always zip both zips right over to one side/ end of your pack, otherwise they will pull open*. At 6:20am on the south coast of Fiordland, one can get cold fast! so cousin Brendon and I walked back to stay warm, while Jono ran to find his warm layers.

The Tuatapere early morning dawned clear with light cold sou-wester breeze. The forecast indicated possible showers from mid-afternoon increasing around 6pm, so it was with a small sense of urgency that we set off in the dark towards the beaches, bird rich native forest and sub alpine rocky tors of the Humpridge range.

For the last few years my cousin Brendon has had many ultra-races / events cancelled due to weather or Covid, so having supported him to complete the great walks via day trail running missions, I suggested we get in ahead of the Humpridge gaining Great Walk status and make this a replacement for Tarawera. Jono had been training to be his pacer and having a close friendship with Jono also, it was an easy choice to form a trio for this latest endeavor.

Sun rise over Te Waewae Bay looking South East toward Gemstone Beach, Riverton and Invercargill

The 61km Humpridge track was completed in 2001 after much fundraising and fighting of red tape by the charitable trust setup to revitalize the local area after a downturn in farming and the closure of various logging ventures. The idea was to have a locally owned track that would bring employment and profit to the area. Over nine months and just under 4 million dollars the track was complete and started welcoming paying walkers shortly after. Today the Humpridge track winds its way through the most beautiful bird-rich forests, sub-alpine vegetation and extra-ordinary views. Common floura includes rimu, miro, totara, large podocarp and beach. Throughout the run we had the tuneful accompaniment of fantail, bellbird, tomtit and grey warbler. On this occasion we didn't see the kaka or kea due to the wind. Throughout the run, we looked down across Te Waewae Bay, where whales and Hector's dolphin are regularly seen. This was truly an incredible vista!



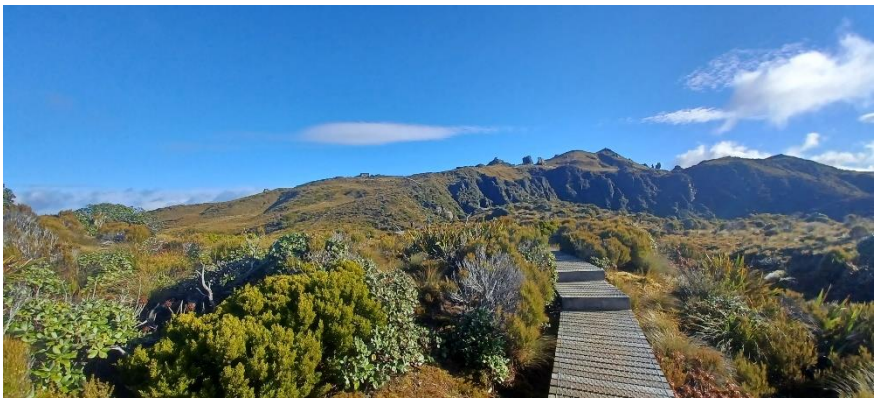
Again, reunited with Jono's full running kit, we were spoiled with the most amazing sunrise as we ran along a beach section, warm sunrays fading out the stars, which had covered the heavens of the southern ocean just 5 minutes prior. For the next hour the three of us kept good time along the well-formed 10km section of track, which was slightly muddy in places (nothing Nolan's aversion to wet/muddy feet couldn't handle). This section would be the only portion we would have to repeat, but was easy travel with the odd swing bridge for further interest.

Arriving at the Flat Creek junction where the inland/uphill section commences and the other end of the loop returns to via the south coast track, we had a quick stop and pulled out the poles. As we approached the beginning of the climb to Stag Point up a constant spur, the track continued in its flowy and well-formed state, we didn't even mind the sections of wooden board walk over the course of the day, coming to realize the track builders must have known, how muddy it would otherwise get. (11.5km's of boardwalk in total)

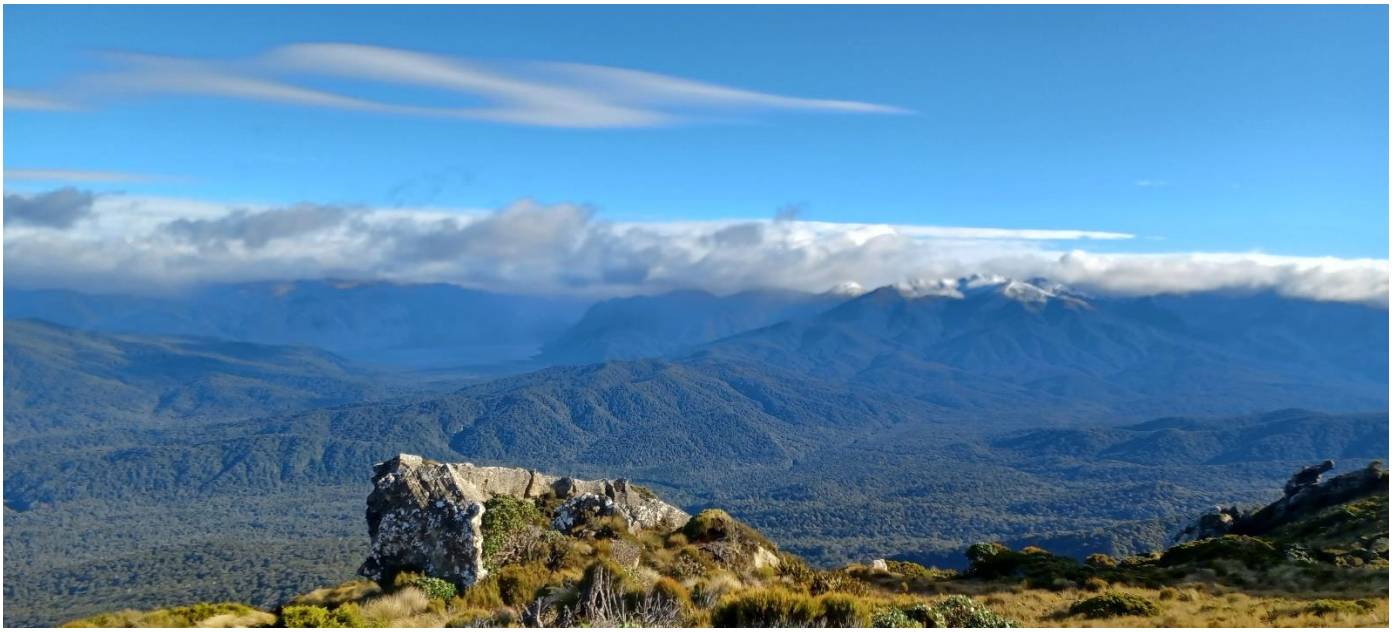
Poles out and pushing up the spur we gained the higher section near point 765 that required hands on trees to negotiate bush clad rock outcrops. Stag Point revealed the first expansive views of both Te Waewae Bay to the south-east and Okaka lodge under the Hump to the south-west.

Stag Point (point 765) reveals majestic views south-east over Te Waewae Bay

It didn't take long to sidle the last point (914) and then turn off to the right. Now running along the ridge in sub alpine terrain leading us on and up to the top we could take in the views south over the southern ocean and north towards Clifden. At the top we enjoyed fantastic 360 degree views while fighting the cold gale southerlies (the roaring 40's were out in force today!) wrapped up warm we decided to do the loop around the rock tors, tarns and tussock. As we fought the wind we were rewarded with standout views across to Lake Hauroko (NZ's deepest lake at 462m deep and entry point to the Dusky Trail –it also guards an island with the resting place of an ancient Maori woman of high rank- https://www.stuff.co.nz/travel/123389278/the-hideaways-of-hauroko)



Bush line and approach ridge –Okaka hut down slope behind boardwalk in distance.



Lake Hauroko in distance, with fresh snow on Kaherekoau Mountains centre right

This pre-lunch loop view really felt like we were looking over the edge of the bowel that is Fiordland, as all one could see was its raw ingredients that make this vast wilderness, row upon row of bush clad mountains, steep valleys, moody clagged-in lakes and wild ocean hemming it all in. This natural recipe was a fitting way to sample that section of our adventure and then to drop in at the private hut for a quick bite to eat.

Looking south-east toward Rakiura

The famous Humpridge rock strewn tarns

Looking towards distant Fiordland Mountains of the south-west corner of NZ

I see a tuatara –you?

Completing the top loop with a tail gale wind heading due south on icy boardwalks

Getting blown off boardwalk while heading back down towards Okaka Hut for lunch

Okaka hut was in the final pack up mode, hosting its last trampers that Saturday evening, before closing for winter. The two staff were so friendly they even boiled the jug for me to enjoy a cup of tea. Once Nolan's famed cold toast was consumed along with a sugary black tea, we set off, back into the cold but clear day.

We managed to keep upright while enjoying regaining the ridge (Okaka hut sits just under the ridge) to then head back down to the intersection. This marks the bush line and turn off south, down the ridge towards the south coast proper. What followed was a delightful mix of white gravel and rock outcrops, goblin forest and boardwalks. We started catching trampers who'd left Okaka hut earlier that morning. Now 12noon, we had a comical moment when Jono proceeded to fall on his butt in front of 5 uni student girls from Christchurch. They were great value and Brendon and I chuckled away as we headed off to leave Jono pulling himself together! (Sorry Jono)!

This next section of track was very technical, due to bogs, roots, mud all downhill. We had to keep focused on foot placement and best forward route choice, again amongst big rimu, and other native giants. Eventually we arrived at the junction of the South Coast Track where a solo tramper sat next to the first of three big wooden viaducts. 20km's down 45 to go…

Jono on Percy Burn Viaduct, feels very high and rickety!

Once over the viaducts, one of which is said to be one of the largest in the world, and kinda scary to linger on for too long! I had memories of this part of the track from an earlier mission, where one has to adjust their gait to cope with the ancient railway sleepers and rail spikes, still protruding from the sleepers. These are what remain from an early logging railway that transported logs from further along the coast to Port Craig –our next goal 20km's along this flat line.

Somewhere in this section I abandoned my attempt at dry feet, as water and mud covered the trail. Jono was now out front by 30metre with Brendon trailing and myself in the middle, each in our own headspace, pushing through the monotony of cuttings, the odd tramper and metal spikes trying to penetrate our running shoe soles.

At some point approaching the historical Port Craig settlement (including an old school –now DOC hut and ruins from the logging era) Jono noted my running pack was wide open…what? No! a rookie mistake! I silently berated myself (as I knew better), while Jono checked my wife's head torch was still inside. Thankfully it was. Lesson 2: *always double check your pack zips!*

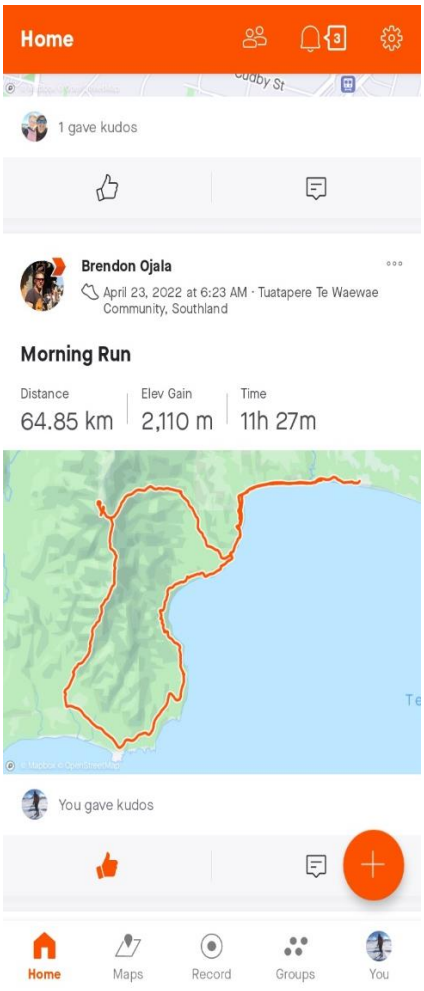
40km's in we again enjoyed the hospitably of the local hut staff who gave each of us a biscuit and a million sand flies! We were told there were 30 odd trampers in the hut that night as we headed off for the last 20km section back to the carpark (10km of which was on the first section we'd run earlier today). For this, we divided each 10km up into 5km 'park runs' to make it more doable in our minds. This along with some gentle downhill, increasing track quality and nice beach sections combined to make this a most enjoyable run. We arrived back at the turn off point at Flat Creek intersection in good time.

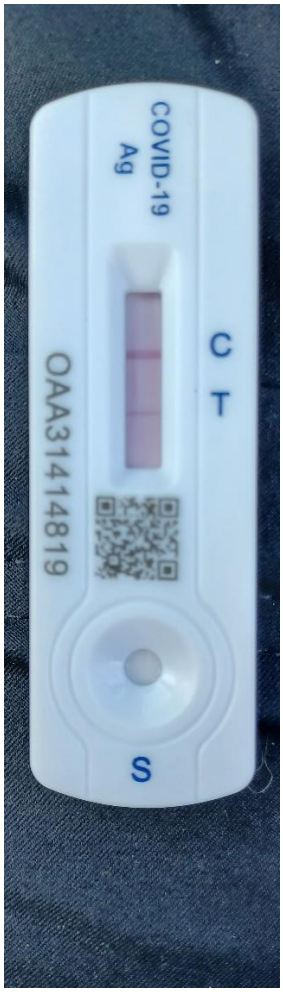
My prediction was 12hrs (having run 5 odd years ago with Jamie, Steve, Isaac, Nick and Julian in snow in 14hrs). We were on time for this and to beat any forecast rain.

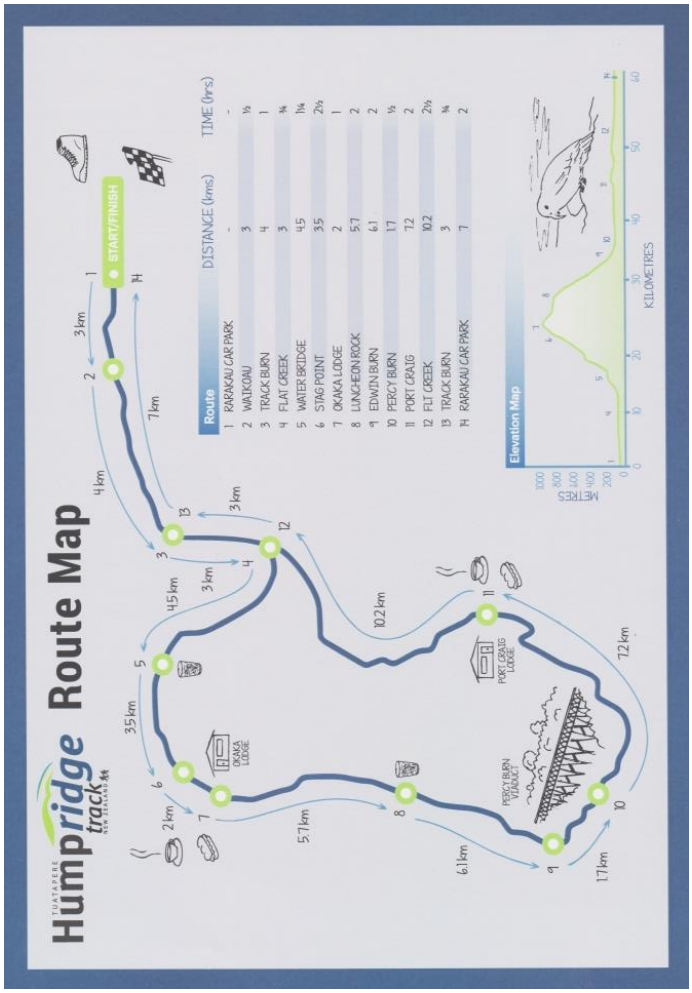
As the clouds darkened out to sea, we ran on -keeping our jacket layers on, we made our way back towards the beach 4wd track that marks the last 5k. Crossing the large Waikoau river swing bridge, this ushered us to the base of the dreaded many large steps up and out of river /coastal track and onto the snaking final 3k within tight, winding, good quality native bush track.

As we struggled to see the lush understory of bush in the fading last light of the day, I ran lost in my thoughts, again considering how fortunate and grateful I was to be able to spend time in this beautiful creation, with good friends. I was grateful for the host of nature, both reminding of what had gone before through the decaying human-made remnants, of the past and present day ancient forest as witness to all before. I was grateful for those who made this run possible, kaitiaki, guardians of the forest, track builders, administrators who fought for this track to come to fruition, hut wardens and the kind locals of Tuatapere. I hope DOC continues to build on this wonderful history and quality experience for future generations.

We were squinting due to poor light….really!







Strava Proof! 64.85 with Covid! The map

We arrived back at the carpark in 11hrs 27mins, having covered 64.85kms (65km's for Jono) and 2110m in elevation.

I am again surprised how good I felt, how cool it was to be able to run these tracks and look forward to Tuatapere's famed sausages at the Tui Based Camp accommodation and pub. Bangers and mash all the way!!!