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## **Kayakers “knock off” their own Mt Cook**

Five South Island white-water kayakers have “knocked off” the kayaking equivalent of Mt Cook, completing the first ever descent of the Upper Waitaha River from the heart of the Southern Alps.

The Waitaha River, south of Hokitika, is known as one of New Zealand’s top class five rivers but until now no-one has kayaked the length of the river from the Southern Alps to sea level.

Kayakers Keith Riley and Zak Shaw who are both outdoor education tutors at Greymouth’s Tai Poutini Polytechnic, Nelson doctor Justin Venable, Christchurch doctor Paul Currant and Christchurch engineer Will Martin took three days to complete the epic journey.

The group used a helicopter to access the top of the Waitaha, starting their kayak from an elevation of 1220 metres near Ivory Lake which is the Waitaha’s source.

“It was most remote rugged wilderness I have ever kayaked, literally you can’t go any further into the Alps. We started paddling through alpine tussock with old avalanche debris scarring the hillsides, and then entered the upper gorge which was like a water-worn sculpted gutter through bedrock,” says Zak Shaw.

Known in kayaking circles as one of the hardest adventure kayak trips around, the lower part of the Waitaha was first kayaked in 2001. However it wasn’t paddled further up because at the time it was thought the river was too steep.

Two years ago Keith Riley and Paul Currant were part of a group that made the first descent of Morgan Gorge, both of them also taking part in this latest expedition.

“Most kayakers would see Morgan Gorge as a challenge, but compared with what we paddled above it when we got to Morgan Gorge on day three we felt like we were on the easy street home,” says Keith Riley.

“The Waitaha is one of the great wild rivers and I feel privileged to be one of the very few to paddle it in its entirety as a wild river,” he says.

One of the most challenging parts of the approximately 28km paddle was the Windhover Gorge where the river drops 200metres in 1km. Zak Shaw says the group arrived at the gorge after six hours of exhausting work on their second day, and were forced to portage their 30kg boats up through the bush on a steep, rough track. The portage took an additional four hours and forced the team to paddle a kilometre of hard rapids at 8.30pm when light was fading.

“The terrifying element is the unfinished business. People will go back to Windhover Gorge, perhaps when there is less water, and they have more energy and they will try to kayak the whole thing,” he says.

“It was an amazing paddle, I have come back to work rejuvenated and inspired as an outdoor educator. As tutors we need to keep having these big adventures so we can hand over the skills and values to our students.”

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