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## TRACK NOTES

# THORNTON PEAK



Steven Nowakowski explores the cloudy realms of the Daintree's highest peak

Sally Goulet, Stuart Worboys and Mark McElroy scrambling over the boulders on the eastern escarpment of Thornton Peak. Steven Nowakowski

**THE DAINTREE RAINFORESTS OF NORTH** Queensland are regarded as one of the most biologically diverse places on earth, hence their World Heritage listing in 1988. As part of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, Thornton Peak is one of those elusive mountains that often hides high among the clouds. Only on a remarkably clear winter day does the summit unveil itself to the outside world and it is a sight to behold. Thornton Peak rises sharply from the surrounding lowland rainforest to a height of 1374 metres.

For many years I dreamed of walking up Thornton Peak, though many factors have caused me to delay the climb. Information about access, terrain and water supply was difficult to obtain and finding someone who had actually done the walk was difficult. Picking fine weather to do an extended walk in the tropics also contributed to the delay.

The Queensland National Parks & Wildlife Service discourages walkers from doing the walk because of the sensitive nature of vegetation found, primarily near the summit.

Great care is needed not to disturb the highland rainforest. QNP&WS also emphasise the remoteness of the peak, while the unpredictable weather conditions can make rescue attempts very difficult. The peak has an average rainfall of about ten metres a year—it is no wonder QNP&WS would prefer people not to go. Potential walkers: treat the area with respect and caution; don't trample, cut or pick native vegetation as it is unique, with most species listed as rare or threatened. Additionally, it is a sacred place for the Kuku-Yalanji people of the area so respect for the region must prevail.

From the summit the views can be awe-some. Lush, lowland rainforest fingers its way into meandering mangrove estuaries and idyllic beaches merge with the Coral Sea. It is a place where the wet tropical rainforests meet the fringing coral reefs. Unfortunately, on our foray the weather closed in at the lookout overlooking the east coast. However, the previous day had been clear and views over the western tablelands and Mossman

were breathtaking. If the weather is on your side the walk is a must for those who love majestic peaks.

### When to go

In the tropics the humidity rises sharply when you enter the rainforest. This is especially true in the Daintree region. Walking anywhere on the coast of north Queensland between the months of December and April guarantees you will get wet. There is also a high possibility of cyclonic conditions and horrendous downpours of rain. Creeks and rivers can rise very quickly—Thornton Peak would not be a good place to be caught out. However, the months of May to August usually have good, clear weather with warm days (average temperature 25°C) and cool nights. This time of year is your best chance to see the views without being threatened by heavy downpours.

### Warnings

Water is available along most of the walk in the lowland section. A number of creeks are crossed which flow perennially. Before the

final ascent to the summit be sure to fill all water vessels because there is no water on the actual climb. This is a very exhausting section and water stops are needed frequently. At the summit camp-site there is ample water in Hilda Creek, a very large creek near the top of the mountain.

### Permits

Permits are compulsory for this walk and can be obtained from QNP&WS at Moss-

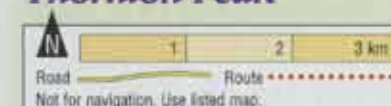
man. Phone (07) 4098 2188. Permits cost \$4.00 a person a night.

walk starts off gradually, cutting through sword grass and lowland paper-bark forest for about half an hour. A QNP&WS sign is then reached and the track turns into a marked route. This follows an old logging track up the range to about 300 metres elevation—it can be difficult because the route is not maintained. Secateurs are essential for cutting lawyer vine and other growth from the track. Overgrown lawyer vine is dreadful stuff that can cut your clothes to shreds and is quite common on this walk.

The track then follows a plateau through some beautiful forest for about three hours. I enjoyed this section thoroughly as the different vegetation types make the walk very interesting. Glimpses of Thornton Peak can be seen in the distance through the heath country. The peak looks as though it is a long way away—it is. The marked route continues for about another hour until it comes to a major creek crossing. Directly beyond this creek crossing is another; this would be an ideal place to camp if you didn't want to push on to the summit in one day. This creek is at the base of Thornton Peak and it is all uphill from here on.

Be sure to fill water containers before leaving this creek as the ascent can take up to five hours and is extremely tiring, especially in warm conditions. Arriving at the top of the western ridge is satisfying with grand views over the western and southern horizon. Thornton Peak is clearly visible to the east. Directly below the western escarpment is the summit camp-site beside Hilda

### Thornton Peak



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### The walk

The walk starts from the Forest Creek road in Daintree Village, the first street on the left after crossing the Daintree River on the ferry. For the precise location of the beginning of the track, call QNP&WS at Mossman on the number above. The ranger will send a mud map of the start location. The

## the walk AT A GLANCE

Grade	Hard
Length	Three days
Region	Wet tropics, north Queensland
Nearest town	Daintree Village
Start/finish	Forest Creek road
Map	Thornton Peak 1:50 000
Best time	May–August
Special points	Obtain permit from QNP&WS at Mossman; water available near summit from Hilda Creek

Creek—only 15-minutes walking from here. From this camp-site the summit of Thornton Peak is an additional 45 minutes walk up the eastern ridgeline. ☼

Steven Nowakowski has bushwalked extensively through most regions of north and east Australia. He has just finished his first book on Hinchinbrook Island and is currently working on his next about the Kuku-Yalanji people of the Daintree region.