Having spent most of my life in Montana, I've come to appreciate the 'backyard wilderness'. Growing up in Butte, we had the Highlands, the Humbug Spires, and the Pintler Wilderness; at school in Bozeman the Gallatin, Madison, and Bridger Ranges loomed large, both in sight and spirit; and nowadays in Missoula both the Rattlesnake and Bitterroot Wilderness hold a place in my consciousness. And then there's all the lesser known places whose names are known by few. What I like about backyard wilderness is that it's where the locals play, and that it's easier to feel such places are your own.

We're greatly blessed in the western United States with vast tracts of public land, so that a wilderness experience is more or less easily obtained by anyone willing to do the work to get outside. New Zealand is more like the eastern United States or Europe in the sense that, excluding the national parks, most of the land is privately owned.

Nonetheless, Dunedin does have a backyard wilderness, known as the Silver Peaks. Although I'm unsure of the details, the fact that it's too rugged to be utilized by farmers must be what saved it.

Some hiking in the Silver Peaks had been on my to-do list from early in our stay, but it was only last weekend that I finally got a chance to visit. I went with Alden Wright, who is another UM professor in
Dunedin on sabbatical. Alden and I are similar in that we are both gluttons for physical punishment. So no surprise, our choice of hikes was a brutal one: into ABC caves and back again for a total of 8 hours, 17 miles, and 6000 feet of elevation gain. It was an epic hike, with great views (especially west into Central Otago), awesome trail, pristine pockets of native New Zealand bush, ..., the list goes on. And it had the feel of a backyard wilderness: 40 minute drive to the trailhead, plenty of locals out on the trail, and slightly toned down, but still beautiful, scenery.