

A TRAMPERS' GUIDE TO THE OTAKI CATCHMENT

The Otaki River drains a vast catchment of the western side of the Tararuas. Three main tributaries meet at Otaki Forks to flow down the popular lower gorge. The Waitotaru River drains the entire area bounded by Mt Kapakapanui and Mt Hector, the Waitatapaia – a sizeable chunk of "wilderness" - to the north of the Forks, and the Otaki River proper the largest single catchment in the Tararuas. It starts on the slopes of Pukematawai, is bounded on its east by the main range, a continual up/ down ridge, right down to Kime Basin, and its west, a seldom visited, heavily bushed Waitewaiwai. The Otaki is a wonderful place to tramp. Mt Kapakapanui, at 1102 m, is just in the tussock, so commands a fine view of much of the southern Tararuas. It dominates the Waitotaru catchment. Kapakapanui makes a pleasant day tramp.

The Northern (Waitewaewae) Half

The Waitewaewae River, more passionately known simply as "YTYT", is the major tributary of the Otaki River above the upper Otaki gorge. It drains the heavily forested "YTYT" Basin, a vast area that has few tracks and no huts. Similarly, the upper Otaki River has no huts or tracks above "YTYT" Hut. It is the largest part of the Tararua Ranges that can be called a wilderness area. Some would claim it is the most beautiful.

The track to the popular, near new Waitewaewae Hut dives off from the Penn Creek track on the large grassy terrace above Otaki Forks. It is benched and metalled for the first hour or so, to the bush. It drops down to probably the longest swing bridge in the Tararuas, from where you gain a good view of the valley. Then it winds up onto the edge of the large terrace in between the Otaki and Waitatapia Rivers. Rough farmland slowly blends into scrub and overgrown bush, and the ubiquitous mud begins on the old tram track. This track follows a pleasant gradient and displays the occasional railway iron and sleeper. Further testament to the pioneers early this century is seen in the old steam engine at Saddle Creek. There is one much cursed washout before the steam engine that forces trampers up for about five sweat filled minutes on a rough, slippery track, bypassing tangles of supplejack and kiekie. Forks to steam engine (Saddle Creek) one and a half hours. The "official" track fades away at the large cairn in Saddle Creek, as generations of trampers have beaten numerous good trails up the creek to "The Plateau" at the head of Plateau Stream. The creek at least washes off the mud! The gradient slowly steepens up to the last short grunt, then the track sort of pops over a knob and down to an idyllic camp site next to Plateau Stream, about an hour up from the steam engine. It's pretty flat from there, so pretty muddy most of the time. Then the track descends beside Arapito Creek, once again steeply at the top, and easing the gradient lower down. It follows the Creek for only a short stretch, then cairns and markers lead you up the north bank and above a prominent slip before descending to Waitewaewae Hut. Alternatively, and somewhat more, wisely, when the river is not in flood, one can follow Arapito Creek down to its confluence with the Otaki River, then splash on up to the hut. Much easier. And Waitewaewae Hut is very pleasant. It is a large, comfortable hut on a wide, forested river terrace. Forks to Hut 4 hours.

From the hut, the track to the tops and Mt Crawford, follows the north bank for ten minutes around to the swing bridge. Over the river, the track hits one of the most sustained uphill sections of the Tararuas, and one soon realises what one needs to combat the hill. Fitness, and a none too heavy pack! After 300 vertical steep metres, the track finds a natural "step" then a further 200 metres of steep climbing before another "step" 200 more metres, and finally the bushline, and the views! Two hours from the hut. Tall tussock can be found on the easy slopes of Shoulder Knob, followed by some pleasant tramping through the saddle and then up a little to the main range at Junction Knob, and a very worn out wooden sign, an hour from the bushline. The track is unmarked, being more of a beaten path in the tussock. No problems in the clear, but when misty, route finding can be difficult. And under snow and ice, travel up

there can be diabolical. A few undulations on the top ridge, a short sharp uphill bit, and you are on the summit of the dominant Mt Crawford. Brilliant views from here if you are lucky. A short distance down to Nicholls Hut turnoff, takes about half an hour, seems like a long way in reverse with false summits. Nicholls Hut is actually located in a basin a couple of minutes down into the Waiohine Valley, in a sheltered but commanding location. The peak of Nicholls is not much to speak of, just a blip on the ridge just above the bushline. The track, from Nicholls northwards, is predominantly under open beech forest till Butcher Knob, approximately three hours if the going is good. It's reasonable travel to the uphill bit just before Kelleher, which is actually not on the main range, so the track bypasses the highest point there. The old track to upper Otaki Hut, now very overgrown, pops over Kelleher, and follows the prominent ridge to the Otaki River Flats far below. However, from the rocky crags and tussock knobs near Kelleher and Puketoro, good views are rewarded to the fine weather trampers. More easy open beech forest to Dracophyllum Knob, with its small tussock clearing, and ex NZFS bivvy with water tank and log book. An hour or so over a few gentle ups and downs north of Drac Biv, and the leatherwood is reached as altitude is slowly gained. You are probably used to it by then, so are mildly prepared (or utterly stuffed) for the grunt up onto Pukematawai. Nicholls to Pukematawai 4- 5 hours. The Otaki headwaters, the Park, and the Mangahoa are all laid out below you from the top of Pukematawai. The Otaki watershed boundaries the Mangahao to the north, then the Ohau as far as Waiopehu trig, and the track thankfully follows the ridge all the way. And it's a long, convoluted way too, with several direction changes and numerous hills and saddles. Firstly, from Pukematawai, the track descends steeply to the west, and to the leatherwood. The gradient slowly eases down to the turnoff to Girdlestone Saddle, then Te Hatawai Hut (one hour from Pukematawai). A rather muddy part of the world. The ridge along here is fairly flat, and from the occasional open patch, provides a view. Better views are gained from the open patches of Richards Knob and Twin Peak/ Waiopehu, one and a half hours, and two hours respectively from Te Hatawai Hut, along Dora Track. 20 minutes along the track, Yeates Track dives off to the north, down to South Ohau Hut. A steep descent to Butcher Saddle, which is difficult to determine due to several ups and downs there, then the usual grind up to Richards Knob. The track from there, down Gable End is well cleared, however it is not so over to Waiopehu, as of winter 1994. The long pampas grass tends to grow over, and makes for difficult travel when wet and cold. A short distance to Twin Peaks, with its trig, Ralph Wood memorial grave, and once again, cleared tracks (still muddy however). Tight leatherwood around the area does not bode well for off track tramping, however there are some tussock clearings, and it is not too far to the shelter of the wide open beech forest. The track sidles to the immediate north of Waiopehu peak curling around on yet another dogleg to descend the ridge to the north, into the Ohau Catchment. Waiopehu Hut is located on the ridge in the forest, approximately 30 minutes from the summit.

To follow the Otaki catchment from Waiopehu peak south, follow the ridges. Oriwa Ridge, smack bang between the Waitewaewae and Otaki valleys, curls away south from Waiopehu, and affords reasonable travel for those lucky with the weather and capable with map and compass. The small patch of tussock on Waiopehu abruptly stops at the leatherwood belt, which is mercifully short, then open montane beech forest all along the ridge to the little gem that is Oriwa clearing and Biv (one hour from Waiopehu). Strictly off track travel from there, through forest in part devastated by the storm of 1938. However, some easy open beech forest, and, if you are lucky enough to hit the main upper Otaki River, pleasant grassy flats and no route finding problems.

Access to the Upper Waitewaewae Basin is perhaps quickest from Manakau Road and Waikawa Shelter. The track is as yet untramped by the author. There is also a well-marked track south of there, off Waiotohu Road and stream, and up to "Mick" (peak, not person!), and the aircraft wreck. There is similarly a marked track untramped by the author dropping down to the Waitewaewae River near Chaney Creek, and super- delightful river flats.

SOUTH OF THE FORKS. (Excluding the Southern Crossing Route)

The Otaki River drains a vast catchment in the western side of the Tararuas. Three main tributaries meet at Otaki Forks to flow down the popular lower Otaki Gorge. The Waiotauru River drains the entire area bounded by Mt Rapakapanui and Mt Hector, the Waitatapaia, a sizeable chunk of "wilderness" to the north of the Forks, and the Otaki River proper, drains the largest single catchment in the Tararuas. It starts on the slopes of Pukematawai, is bounded on its east by the main range, a continual up / down ridge, right down to Rime Basin, and its west, a seldom visited, heavily bushed Waitewaewae (YTTY). The Otaki is a wonderful place to tramp. I recall a friend once saying that if there was a perfect tramping spot, it would be somewhere in the Otaki Catchment.

Mt Rapakapanui, at 1102 m, is just in the tussock, so commands a fine view of much of the southern Tararuas. It dominates the Waiotauru catchment. Rapakapanui trig makes a pleasant two hour day tramp from the Akatarawa Road, but you cannot drive far from Akatarawa Saddle, so need to tramp for another hour along the old logging road.

The old road continues down to and beyond the rather dilapidated Waiotauru Hut, near some grassy river flats. Amazingly, street cars could once reach that hut! The road ends above Waiotauru Forks, and feels like what it is, the end of the road. However, a track follows the river downstream for about an hour to the farmland, then half an hour further to the picnic area at Otaki Forks. A good mountain bike ride. There are numerous old logging trails in the Waiotauru, clogged with pampas grass, and rapidly reverting. Logging during the 1960's seems like ancient history when you see how much regeneration has occurred. The southern edge of the Waiotauru catchment is tracked, and the large Renata Hut is only 10 minutes from the road, opposite Rapakapanui track. Renata and Elder peaks are just in the open tops, as the ridge winds its way past Elder Biv (several confusing "dog legs" here) and along to Aston, on the legendary Southern Crossing. Some easy off-track travel here, notably in some side creeks, and some typically difficult as well. The Waiotauru catchment is the domain of the competent bushman. Road to Aston - allow three to four hours.

The legendary and ever popular Southern Crossing of the Tararua Range, more passionately known to generations simply as "The Southern" follows the tops on the steep eastern boundary of the Waiotauru Catchment until the end of the Renata Ridge at Aston. Then it wanders down to Alpha, overlooking the Hutt and Tauherenikau Catchments. Time to complete, approximately 16 hours (all time record a little over five hours!). But "The Southern" is a long story, deserved of its own chapter in the next newsletter.

Away from the rough pasture at the bottom of Judd Ridge, the Penn Creek track starts. It leads to a good circuit up onto the tops, not so much for the scenery, but for the proximity to Otaki Forks, and the ease with which you can get there.

The gorge sidle track to Penn Creek Hut takes about three hours to tramp. It dives off from the Southern crossing track on the first large grassy terrace above Otaki Forks, then splits once again, from the YTTY track, just before the short descent to the footbridge. Stick to the track and enjoy views of the mighty Otaki Gorge, far below. It is a bit of a goat track in places, muddy too, so definitely not for those in fancy white Roeboks. The sidle track overlooks some large grassy slips over the river, as it winds frustratingly high, then drops down again. There are three side creeks to cross, so water is never far away. The track climbs high to the prominent ridge before Penn Creek, then way down to a terrace close to pleasant river flats on Penn Creek. There is a good side trip off the track and down to pleasant campsites at Penn Creek and the Otaki River for a swim. In suitable conditions, travel up river is easy for about an hour, crossing it several times, till Plateau Stream. Back on the track to Penn Creek Hut, the track climbs high above a mini gorge in Penn Creek, then drops down through Mahoe forests to Penn Creek. There is a sign a couple of minutes downstream from the hut warning the unwary of falling rocks from a slip above. Then a few small grassy flats, and the hut, a standard ex NZFS six bunker maintained by VUWTC. Wet feet from here for those who continue the circuit. The tracks to complete the Penn Creek circuit are overgrown, muddy affairs, but important routes through the leatherwood nevertheless. Follow the bed of Penn

Creek itself up from behind the hut for ten minutes to the major fork, then there is a rather overgrown track through the leatherwood up onto the tussock of Vosseler Peak and the main divide. Two hours from the hut. Alternatively, there is a reasonable track from Penn Creek hut up onto Table Top following the flat behind the hut for five minutes or so, then crossing a small side creek just past the main creek junction and up a steep spur to the tops. Two hours. Muddy.

DOC plan to place a new hut on the main range/ Pakihore Ridge/ Yeates area for safety purposes (Tararua Peaks can be dangerous), then make tracks forming much better loop trips for trampers in this area. They also are considering a new "Mansion" for Table Top, forming more good tramping circuits.

The Southern Main Range track/ route, from Bridge Peak, north to Maungahuka (peak and hut) alternates between tussock and leatherwood, crossing numerous contour lines, kinks in the ridge, and brushing past more than a few leatherwood bushes. Perusal of the map may not mean much to the uninitiated, but all those names of peaks assume momentous importance when on them. Tramping in the Tararua Ranges is renowned for the continual ups and downs, and the Southern Main Range is no exception.

There is a long descent north-east from Bridge Peak, then Boyd Wilson Knob, which is fairly small as knobs come. Vosseler, a bit bigger, a leatherwood saddle over to Yeates, and then several other unnamed "sub knobs" before McIntosh. Bridge Peak to McIntosh four hours, one hour further to Maungahuka. The ridge is fairly close to the headwaters of the Hector River for a while near Boyd Wilson, and the river flats look extremely pleasant. However, the southern slopes further along, down from Vosseler and Yeates, are a different story, with imposing leatherwood choked bluffs and waterfalls. Do not get off the main ridge. The track is, in a word muddy in places. Just past McIntosh, is the top of Pakihore Ridge, then a small tarn, which may be valuable to know about, it can get pretty dry up there. Then Tuiti and Tunui, otherwise known as The Tararua Peaks rear their wonderfully rugged heads above, past a couple of little knobs that will get you in the mood. This is it, true rugged Tararua tops, real mountain goat country. The Tararua Peaks are renowned for their wire ladder, bolted to the rock, which provides access to an otherwise nearly inaccessible spot. You wonder where the track goes, as the ridge suddenly narrows, climbs, drops down to a true knife edge saddle, overhanging on the Hector River side, then bang, it disappears into thin air. That is where the ladder comes in handy, descending the first peak. Then, the track follows a slippery, wire assisted side under the second peak to a prominent knob (on the ridge mentioned below) overlooking Whatiuru Creek. A friend once took his wire haired Fox Terrier up the ladder inside his pack, head poking out! A friend once told me of a feasible route through the leatherwood and bluffs down into the Whatiuru Creek from the tops near the Tararua Peaks. Immediately east of Tinui, take the leading spur down to the north, and stick to it. Whatiuru Creek affords good travel for most of its length. Pakihore ridge is however not difficult as untracked ridges go, so can easily be gained from either McIntosh, Whatiuru Creek or Penn Creek.

Back on the main ridge, there is a small grind uphill onto Maungahuka (but you should be used to the uphill by then!), then the shelter of Maungahuka Hut. It is another standard NZFS six bunker, cosy and sheltered, and from nearby, tremendous views of the central Otaki and Waiohine catchments. Great for sunsets. It's all downhill north of there, down easy, broad tussock covered steps and to the leatherwood around Simpson. Then comes Wright, with some overgrown bits on the track, and back into the ups and downs again. Climbing the brooding bulk of Aokaparangi drags you well above the leatherwood, and offers more fine views of the surrounding catchments. The main route bypasses Equip Biv. For thirsty trampers there is a kitchen pot sitting beside the track, hopefully full of water. There is a well-marked track east from Equip descending to the swing-bridge and Mid Waiohine Hut. Maungahuka to Equip - allow three hours. A long saddle in and out of the leatherwood, then Kahiwi-roa, and its delightful "park like" side ridge descending west into the Otaki. The track may be overgrown

and difficult to find at the northern bush edge of Kahiwiroa, but it is of course well worth the effort, as a short jaunt in open ridge beech forest brings you to Anderson Memorial Hut, approximately three hours from Equip. The wilderness of the Southern Main Range is somewhat diminished from there, but it is within reasonable striking distance from YTYH Hut, and the tracks are better, hence more people. To complete this section of the eastern half of the Otaki catchment, it is an exposed one hour's tramp through the tussock and scree up onto the flat topped Junction Knob, and the turn off to Mt Crawford.

Just as an aside to this route guide, these days there are certainly more hunters flying into huts such as Anderson and Maungahuka, especially during "the roar". I know our time up there is precious, especially in good weather, but it seems to me that the area could easily become "overused" by helicopter clients.

Off-track travel in this area is, to put it simply, extremely variable. Some of the forest is simply superb, with open river flats in places. Other parts are definitely not worth mentioning, let alone visiting. Steep leatherwood gullies and waterfalls are best observed from a distance. One exception though, and I talk from a rather biased viewpoint, is the Otaki Gorge. This is definitely the domain of the dedicated trumper, the thrill seeker, and the well prepared. Do not attempt Tararua gorges such as this one without suitable tubes, helmet, and wet suit. The upper Otaki Gorge is a true Tararua Classic. Most "gorgers" tramp through to Arapito Creek (just before YTYH Hut, inflate tubes, then set off down the gorge. Easy at first, then beyond Kahiwiroa stream, about an hour down river, the gorge assumes its characteristic look - bottomless pools, "suicidal" rapids, daunting cliffs, and then the legendary five metre waterfall. Wilderness in its truest sense for the Tararuas. There are some open patches and river flats, and a grotty DOC bivvy just before Whatiu Stream, so tramping gets easier. More gorge till Plateau Stream, then a series of extremely pleasant river flats takes you to the Penn Creek confluence. A bigger river by then, so better tubing. Not far to the swing bridge, the farmland, and the car. The complete round trip makes for a good day, maybe twelve hours long.

It can be of utmost importance to know these off track routes if firstly you plan to go there, and wish to avoid the leatherwood, waterfalls, and bluffs, and secondly in the event that you are forced off the tops by foul weather.