

A TRAMPERS' GUIDE TO THE WAIOHINE CATCHMENT by Tony Gates

Totara Flats. Waiohine Gorge. Nigel Barrett Rapids. Derek Sharp Waterfall. Sayers Hut. Carkeek Ridge. Park River. High Ridge. Maungahuka. Hector River. Cone Saddle and Ridge. Neill Winchcombe Ridge.

These are all names of famous places in the Waiohine Catchment. These names, and many others, have been etched into history by the toil and sweat of trampers. The names of the Waiohine Catchment will live forever in the minds of those who have tramped there.

The mighty Waiohine River is the longest river in the Tararua Ranges, and traverses the entire guts of the ranges from the geographical centre of the Tararuas, Arete, to the Wairarapa Plains. The Waiohine Catchment boundaries most other major catchments of the Tararuas. This is therefore the largest section of the route guide. The map shows it as a long, thin blue line, winding from north to south, bushclad, and with tussock tops along both east and west boundaries for most of its length. The Waiohine Catchment has everything, from beech forest to podocarp, from tussock to leatherwood, from gorges to grassy flats. From wilderness to metalled track. Tramping in the Waiohine Catchment can cover any superlative.

There are not many tracks in the headwaters (above mid Waiohine hut), and it is as remote as you can get in the Tararuas. Tussock tops permit good travel when conditions permit, and most of the main ridges are clear of leatherwood on their tops, or have tracks cut through the (usually) short sections of scrub. The main leading ridges are tracked through the beech forest and to/ from huts, but some of these will be declassified by DOC after 1994, and not maintained. River travel in the headwaters is generally difficult, with waterfalls leading to small gorges that rapidly become large gorges, however some of the most incredibly gorgeous places on this planet are the river flats and open beech forests in the upper Park and Waiohine. Then, all the way down river to the farmland, there are numerous small but extremely pleasant river flats locked in between sections of gorge. Side ridges and side creeks often present difficult travel, though the mountain beech forest is often a real joy to tramp through. The Leatherwood belt is thankfully not consistent throughout the headwaters, or for that matter, lower down the valley, though it still must be treated with respect!

The middle Waiohine valley, with the really big gorges and Hector River as well as the surrounding tops, is similarly not often visited. It is wild and relatively remote. Hidden scenic gems are however not difficult to find.

The lower Waiohine is probably what most of the visitors relate to, with the large river, wide open valley, and the vast grassy paradise of Totara Flats. The main track traverses the valley from Holdsworth Lodge, over to Totara Creek, down Totara Flats, then over to Cone Saddle and the Tauherenikau Valley beyond. There are a few side tracks, but these are planned for limited/ no maintenance, and will no doubt just slowly fade away. Enough of that, now the route guide.

Over the Northern end of the catchment, the only official tracks follow the watershed along the tussock tops/ beech forest, and are not always well marked. Carkeek, Dorset, and McGreggor Ridges, sliced by the map boundary, each have tracks similarly variably marked, each taking approximately one hour from the tussock to the river. To follow the catchment, from Holdsworth to Cone Saddle, would take a fit person in good conditions anywhere between two and four days! (in bad conditions, you simply wouldn't do it!) The few huts found in the central Waiohine- Hector catchments are stuck either on the mist enshrouded tops, or far below, on narrow valley floors. The tracks to and from them usually follow prominent ridges. Mt Holdsworth is perhaps the most prominent Tararua landmark viewed from the Wairarapa Plains, and there are good tracks leading up to the peak. West from there the track descends into the Waiohine catchment in traditional Tararua style, steep and rough (in places at least), and unforgiving for the unprepared. Firstly, Isobell Peak is traversed, then a kink to the left (south) to the bushline, and the long descent on a prominent ridge to the river. The bushline there luckily lacks much leatherwood, and is very pleasant. It is a real relief for the knees to

reach the magnificent podocarp forest surrounding the standard NZFS Mid Waiohine Hut. Holdsworth to Isobell one hour, 15 minutes to the bush edge, then maybe one and a half hours to the river itself. The track winds down the eastern bank, over a bluff, then crosses the swing bridge before climbing steeply to the bushline on Aokaparangi. Good views of the gorge. (Avoid the gorge at all costs, unless you are correctly prepared, with a wet suit and truck tube.) Aokap. Biv is located on the bushline, on the next ridge to the south, but following the bushline can be difficult due to leatherwood. Perhaps better to climb up, then down, but beware of typically difficult route finding in poor weather.

The next track south follows the ridge from Maungahuka, East to Concertina Knob (fifteen minutes into the bush), then steeply down to Neill Forks Hut (another standard ex NZFS affair). Last time I did that route it took less than one hour! However, I suspect two- three hours to be more reasonable. There is a swing bridge there. Another steep climb on the track, for maybe one hour, will put you on top of Cone Ridge, then a more gradual descent for a similar length of time to Totara Flats, and the longest swing bridge in the Tararuas. From the bridge, you can glimpse some of the huge grassy slips up in the gorge. There is a slightly overgrown track climbing steeply up the other (western) side of Neill Creek to Neill peak, and the Neill Winchcombe Ridge Track. The ridge north from Mt Holdsworth follows tussock tops and rocky crags to the Kings, from where it is covered by the route guide for the Waingawa Catchment. The Otaki Catchment covers the western side from Arete to Hector. The Neill Winchcombe Ridge, descending east from Hector, will consume all of five or six hours of your life if you choose to tramp there. And be prepared for dry conditions and slightly overgrown tracks. The first two or so hours of the ridge is in tussock, with a strong hint of steep, rugged terrain around the place. Winchcombe Peak is just out of the leatherwood. Then the track proper starts, with a short stint through the leatherwood to the beech forest (large, gnarly and artistic trees) at the old Winchcombe bivy site, a good spot to camp. This is two minutes stroll to the south of the ridge. Then the track winds up and down, through stunted alpine beech forest, to emerge on Neill peak (one hour). There is a small bit of scree and tussock, and good views from there of the upper Tauherenikau and Hector catchments, and the southern main Tararua Range. Five minutes east takes you to the track to Neill Forks Hut, then a short, sharp descent, and corresponding climb, up to the open areas of Cone Peak (Neill- Cone, one hour). The Cone Ridge track is very overgrown on the southern end, and, following a flat ridge, can be difficult to follow. Cone Ridge two hours. Cone Peak to Cone Saddle one hour down the hill, with a big step on the way.

The route in to Totara Flats from Holdsworth Lodge (and road end) follows the well-worn and pleasant path down Totara Creek. A friend took his six year old daughter there the other day, telling me that the track is somewhat improved from the old days. I don't really cherish my memories of deep mud puddles, log jams, and slippery boulders. It should take you two hours from the track turnoff to the swing bridge (but I once saw a party take eight hours, mind you, they looked like the sort that would take an hour to walk round the square in town!) There is a shorter alternative route, from Mangatdrere Road to Sawyers Hut (an old private hut, unlocked). Maybe two hours walk takes you to this delightful "antique" hut, on the verge of the middle of Totara Flats.

The swing bridge leads directly to the rustic, (though condemned) old Totara Flats Hut. A short half hour walk leads to the new Totara Flats Hut, with gas on tap and warden. Pleasant grassy flats, wide open spaces, and always the big river, with its swimming holes. The main track follows the river's western bank right down to the swing bridge at the road end. I always find it fascinating wandering down Totara Flats, through vast grassy river flats, then tall podocarp forests. A lovely place. DOC plan a major track upgrade for this bit, I guess with foot bridges, due to high usage, and some grotty sections of the track. At Makaka Creek, the track climbs off up to Cone saddle, steeply at first, then sidling Cone Peak, (one hour) en route to Tauherenikau Valley. Totara Flats Hut to Makaka Creek one hour, and two hours down to the swing bridge at Walls Whare (Shelter). There is another track to Cone Saddle from the swing

bridge, climbing steeply out of the valley, then following a long, flat ridge north to Cone Saddle (two hours). Note, there is another car park, with information and river access, about ten minutes' drive down valley.