

Waitawheta Hut— 17-18 February 2015

By Phillip Ashmore



After we discovered, on our tramp 19 January, that the river has been bridged all the way to the Waitawheta hut, Isabel and I decided that we would like to make the trip to the hut and overnight there. The weather looked good for Tuesday and Wednesday so we booked the hut for Tuesday night. Ken also decided to join us and so at 12:30 (after we finished our morning job) he came to our home and then we all drove up in our car to Franklin Road.

We headed off on the track at 1:35, all carrying very much heavier backpacks than we were used to on our day tramps, as we had to have sleeping bags, a change of clothes and extra food and water.

We soon encountered 2 men, a woman and a child walking out under heavy packs. They said they had camped the night at the site of the old Waitawheta hut where there is now a camping ground. As we passed through the farmland we had to thread our way through a herd of cows and watch out for their landmines.

The afternoon was overcast but still humid so after an hour or so we stopped for a break, taking off our packs and having some water. Another hour later and our bodies again demanded another break. Thereafter we stopped a little more frequently as we tired under the heavy packs. The track is also quite harsh and cobbled so regular stops were a welcome relief.

Normally when we day tramp our packs are not more than a few kgs, but now Ken had 7kg, Isabel about 6kg and I about 12kg in Roger Hey's big old pack. I had both Isabel and my sleeping bag, extra 1.5L water for Is plus our dinner, small gas stove and light. (Isabel here.. My pack had chocolates and fruit salad for dessert, also extra water and clothing to change into for the night, and oh.. I don't know what else to make it so heavy! HeHe I suppose plastic knives and forks, matches, firelighters etc.,)

It did not take me long to get more weight on the bag's hip belt and relieve my shoulders.

Our 3rd stop was by the 5th swing bridge where we had had lunch in January. The next stop was where the bypass track starts and this is as far as we had come in January. Now we were onto new territory. After a quick look at the river crossing we decided to be cautious and take the bypass track even though this would add another 800 meters to our tramp. The bypass went in a loop through mainly fern bush and went up and down a bit, coming out near where the old tramline bridge spanned the river using old tree trunks, now long gone, but still in Ken's memory banks! We heard other people talking as they negotiated the river crossing route but did not see them. By this stage we were all getting very tired so we soon called another stop for a rest. This

bypass route, although green and ferny and cool, was the longest 2kms I have ever walked!

From the start of the by-pass to the hut is 2 kms, we knew this, but it just seem to take forever. DOC website says 7.5kms from Franklin road to the hut, but I think this is to the old hut site. The new signboards by the track indicate 9.3kms from Franklin road to the hut Plus another 800meters if you take the by-pass. The altitude at the car park is 160m and at the hut 389m but it is a very gradual climb following the old tramline. Anyway, after an eternity we at last came to the bridge that takes you over the river to the hut. Where it crosses is a deep gorge and with waterfalls and rapids. From the bridge we looked down on the Toilet Bowl Waterfall and very attractive it was. A climb of 2-300 meters brought us to the welcome sight of the Waitawheta hut, with smoke coming out the chimney. What an absolute relief it was to drop our packs and get our boots off!

Inside were 2 Jafas, Ross and his son Toby, having some quality father/son time. Toby had left school and was joining the Navy so this was a short time for the Father and son to do some things together. It was them that we had heard over the river crossing earlier. What great cabin mates they turned out to be and contributed greatly to making our night a happy one. The hut has a nice covered veranda front

and back and both enter to the kitchen/ dining room, which has an iron wood fire-place in the middle. There is no cooking facility and you have to bring in you own stove. Ross had his Billy can on top of the fireplace but it was not hot enough to bring to the boil so had to put some water in a pan and open the fireplace and put it in there to boil for tea.

We on the other hand, had a small fold up gas stove and it had our billy boiling in quick time – thank goodness as Isabel was dying for a cup of coffee. There is water available in the kitchen sink, which comes from rainwater tanks at the back of the hut. There is a sign saying it is drinkable but I boiled it before Ken and I used it for our coffee. Even then it had grains of sand in the bottom of the cups when we finished our coffee.

There are two bunk-rooms, one catering for up to 16 and the other 10. We took the bigger one and Ross and Toby the other. Out back, about 15-20m are two long drop toilets and a urinal for the guys. Three big tables in the main room and a picnic table outside cater for all.

So while Toby put some food together for them we had some chicken drumsticks and pumpkin fritters which Isabel had prepared before hand at home. Fruit salad, coffee and chocolates followed this! We were happy. Ross and Toby in between were playing cards and also brought out a set of trivial quiz cards and they took turns in asking the questions. We all joined in on this game and I think that between the 3 of us we surprised them with many correct answers on some really obscure stuff. Oh well, with age comes wisdom. They were both very entertaining and pleasant.

Just as it was getting dark Ken and I went out to the toilets and on the way back I spotted, what I thought was a cat, but no, Ken said Possum. I put my bright torchlight on it and it Froze! It was a possum all right. Later when I escorted Is to the toilet I shone the torch around and picked up many furry bodies and eyes staring back. We were deep in Possum territory. We



noticed two little solar lights next to the path to the toilet, which was very handy. Later in the night they shone out quite nicely.

About 9:30 the other two and Ken all went to bed. Is and I went out onto the veranda to look at the zillions of stars that were appearing as the cloud cover broke up. A possum scampered by, not a meter in front of us as we stood on the stairs and behind us it's friend ran noisily down the veranda. Others ran through the grass in play with each other. We turned in a little later and were kept awake for quite a while by the possums using the veranda and roof as a racetrack. Noisy beggars.

Morning dawned bright and sunny. I started the fire and put Ross and Toby's billy on the top to get their water hot, and of course to heat up the cabin, which was a little cool. We had a leisurely breakfast of fruit, looked around a bit and got our bags packed. Then after tidying up in the hut we

headed back setting off at 9:20am. The going seemed much easier on the way back. We were well rested, our packs a little lighter, it was fairly cool and it was downhill all the way. We still had regular stops to rest, knowing full well now how much the heavier packs took their toll on our energy. We stopped for morning tea and then just past the swing bridges came

across a guy RUNNING to the hut!! We had a short chat and continued to the Daly's clearing hut turnoff where we went down to the river for our lunch. As we ate we heard Ross and Toby go by, chatting merrily away. After lunch we had not gone far when we came upon them swimming in the river. They were both in their shorts and

also tanning on the big rocks that are so beautiful there. As we reached the farmland area we came on 2 women walking in heading for the hut that night. As we chatted with them Ross and Toby passed us on the way to the cars. Then the runner came back. He had made it to the hut but on the way back had turned an ankle. He was still hobbling quick enough to pass us as he headed off back to Waihi and a doctors visit.

It was hot crossing the farmland and we found the cows we passed through on the way to the hut had now been put in an adjoining field. And at 1:35, exactly 24 hours after leaving the car, we were back. A very tiring walk, especially with heavy packs, and also so many cobbles to negotiate in the track. But we all thoroughly enjoyed the experience and are so pleased we have done it.