



Waikanae Estuary Scientific Reserve



KAPITI COAST



How to get there

The main entry points into the reserve are on Manly St North, Paraparaumu Beach.

At Waikanae Estuary, freshwater from the Tararua Ranges meets the saltwater of the Kapiti coast. This mixing of the waters and the ever shifting river mouth create an environment of rich plant and animal communities. More species of coastal and aquatic birds visit Waikanae Estuary than any other site on the Wellington coast.

Bird species that breed there include banded dotterel, variable oystercatcher, pukeko and dabchick. Other resident species include white-fronted tern, Caspian tern, pied stilt, scaup, brown teal, grey duck, shoveler and mallard. Royal spoonbills have nested on Kapiti Island since the early 1990s, and they regularly visit to feed in the shallow waters of the estuary.

River's end

From the Tararua Range, the Waikanae River once flowed through dense forest which reached almost to the sea. At a point near the present railway bridge, the river split into two channels through swamp forest and salt marsh, meeting again at the dunes and lakelets of the estuary. Here they cut through sandhills, some 10 metres high.

Middens, observation posts, pa and burial grounds are reminders of early Maori who moved through the area. Ngati Apa, Rangitane and Muaupoko were followed by Ngati Toa, Te Ati Awa and Ngati Raukawa. The estuary is the site of the 1839 Battle of Kuititanga where Te Ati Awa, who had established pa on both sides of the estuary, fought Ngati Raukawa, forcing them to flee to Otaki. The area is sacred to the people of Te Ati Awa ki Whakarongotai who are tangata whenua of this area.

In 1886 the Manawatu Railway opened the coast to more European settlement. Flaxmilling and farming settlements ripped away much of the coastal forest, exposing the rivers' flanks to erosion. Since then, housing, flood protection, gravel extraction, stormwater, farm waste and industrial discharges have further diminished the power of the river.

Creation of the reserve

Since the 1960s, the land around the estuary has been transformed from a coastal wilderness to a densely populated urban area. In the 1970s, the Waimeha Swamp was drained and blocked to create the Waimanu Lagoon and traditional whitebait spawning grounds were lost. Hundreds of residential sections were developed to the north of the river.

Conservationists helped to establish Waikanae Estuary Scientific Reserve in 1987 to protect the remaining area. In the 1990s, though, subdivision crept closer to the estuary, increasing the threats to wildlife from pets and disturbance by trail bikes.



Take care at Waikanae Estuary



Beware of soft sand near water. The changing course of the river affects the water table beneath the sand and can cause quicksand conditions.



Rare sequence of habitats

Waikanae Estuary Scientific Reserve, Kapiti Marine Reserve and Kapiti Island Nature Reserve provide a rare sequence of protection for animals which move between river, sea and land habitats.

The marine reserve is home to sponges, seaweed beds, starfish, corals, anemones and fish including butterflyfish, blue cod and red mullet. Fur seals visit Kapiti Island and feed on squid and lanternfish. Whales and dolphins also visit these clear waters as do ocean fish such as blue moki and kingfish.

Whitebait migrate between the sea and river.

The river and estuary is a tidal home and airport to a variety of waders and sea birds. Species, such as variable oystercatcher (torea-pango), occupy the sandspit where the river affords some protection from the increasing numbers of cats, ferrets, dogs and trail bikes on the other side of the reserve.



Variable oystercatchers.
Photo: Paul Schilov.

Flocks of white-fronted terns, shags, gulls and penguins roost on land but rely on the sea for small fish and shrimps. Domestic travellers, such as wrybills and black-fronted terns from Canterbury, stop over, as do the international migratory birds, such as godwits and knots from Siberia.

The birds depend upon the constant movement of the river and the tide which opens up twice a day to reveal a feast of worms, shellfish and crabs. If the river and sand is stabilised too much these intertidal flats will dry out forcing the birds to leave.

Living carpets

Carpets of remuremu, *Selliera radicans*, grow in the firm mud along the waters of the estuary. They vary according to the flow of the river and the development of the wetland.



Remuremu,
Selliera radicans.
Photo: Jeremy Rolfe.

The mosaic of tidal sandflats, sand dunes, salt marshes and lakelets provide a home for this and more vulnerable plants such as two regionally rare carex species. Many of these plants have disappeared because they are very sensitive to changes in water quality and introduction of weeds.

The ones that get away

Not all whitebait end up in fritters. If they escape the nets, native freshwater fish swim up-river to mature and breed. Five species of galaxiid fish make up the whitebait catch. The inanga, koaro and banded kokopu are the most common but the giant and short-jawed kokopu are very rare.



Whitebait. Photo: Stephen Moore.

They are secretive and like to lay their eggs near banks with lots of native bush and grass. But the removal of riverside bush has limited the areas where they can breed. The young fish are swept out to sea for several weeks before migrating back up river. Provided there are no barriers upstream, such as weirs and dams, they use the river as a highway, sometimes climbing huge waterfalls to reach their preferred habitat.

Please remember

Waikanae Estuary Scientific Reserve contains rare plants and wildlife, and fragile habitats. Dogs must be kept on a lead at all times. Activities that may cause damage, such as lighting fires, hunting, mountain biking and trail bike riding, are not permitted.



Please remove your rubbish.
Recycle paper, glass, cans and plastic.

If you think there is a safety hazard in a conservation area, call the nearest DOC office or DOC HOTline.

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468
Report any safety hazards or
conservation emergencies
For fire and search and rescue call 111

More Information

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