



The Catlins – Nugget Point to Waipapa Point



Otago

The wild and remote Catlins region lies at the southern tip of the New Zealand mainland. Its harsh climate continues to shape the rolling hills and windswept coastline. It contains a great diversity of natural and historical features and although it is becoming a popular tourism destination, most visitors to the area are still attracted by its tranquillity and natural beauty.

Geology

The geology of the Catlins is predominantly sandstone, mudstone and siltstone dating back 135 -190 million years to the Jurassic period. The rock was formed by the gradual deposition of sediment from the ocean and when the land was above sea level, from rivers. These rocks distinguish the Catlins from the schist rock typical of the Otago region further north.

During a period of mountain building, the sedimentary rock was folded and uplifted to form a geological feature known as the Southland or Murihiku Syncline. Subsequent erosion of the rock layers has resulted in the distinctive parallel ridges and valleys that run north-west through the Catlins and disappear into the sea at Nugget Point. Many fossils from the Jurassic era have been retained in the rocks, with shellfish being the most prevalent.

Social history

Māori, attracted by the abundance of food resources, were the first people to occupy the Catlins region, at least 650 years ago. Archaeological evidence suggests that settlement was not continuous, depending on the availability of food supplies.

Māori hunted moa and seal until about 1500, by which time moa were almost extinct and seals in short supply. Middens from moa-hunter camps are evident at Tahakopa Bay. Dense forest in the Catlins made

travelling inland difficult, with legends of hairy forest giants known as maeroero providing further discouragement. Evidence from Māori camps suggests that fishing replaced moa hunting and sealing as the principal activity.

The first Europeans to arrive on the south coast were sealers, many of whom kept their activities undisclosed to protect their interests. Whaling stations were established along the Catlins coastline at Port Molyneux, Tautuku and Waikawa during the 1830s but the industry was short-lived. The first mixed-race communities in New Zealand formed around these bases, but the Europeans also brought measles to Port Molyneux, wiping out all but seven of its Māori residents.

The early European settlements relied heavily on shipping and port access. Waikawa was a busy port town, with industries that included whaling, sawmilling, gold mining, stone quarrying, flax milling, pastoral and dairy farming. By the 1920s the entrance to Waikawa harbour had silted up, bringing an end to the boom.

Owaka further north, was settled in the 1860s. Sawmilling based there became the principal industry for the Catlins region. In 1872 more timber left the Owaka River than left any other South Island port. Since the 1860s, 180 sawmills have operated in the Catlins. The extension of the railway south in the early 1900s and the advancement of roads in the 1920s enabled the trade.

Jacks Island, Jacks Bay



As the accessible forests were milled and burned, land usage turned towards agriculture. Farming remains a primary industry in the Catlins today, along with fishing and ecotourism.

Places to visit



Nugget Point G. Loh

A 180-million-year-old fossilised forest, with tree trunks up to 20 metres long, lies embedded on coastal bedrock at Curio Bay. The trees were conifers similar to Norfolk pine and kauri. The Māori name for this internationally significant area is Tumu Toka meaning hardened wood or stump of wood.

Cathedral Caves is an impressive geological feature at the end of Waipati Beach, south of Tautuku. Named by Dr. T.M. Hocken in 1896 due to its resemblance to a European cathedral, the caves have been formed by wave action. The sea has cut deep into the rocks, resulting in two 30-metre tall caves joined in a V-formation.

Jack's blow hole, named after the Māori chief Tuhawaiki (known to European settlers as Bloody Jack), is situated in Tunnel Rocks Scenic Reserve. The 55-metre-deep blow hole was formed following the collapse of part of a large sea cavern. Although it is 100 metres from the sea, when large seas compress waves through an underground tunnel, the water explodes through the blow hole.

Nugget Point (Tokata), the best known coastal landmark in the Catlins, is named for its wave-eroded rock stacks, said to resemble gold nuggets at sunset. Vertical stratifications represent layers of sedimentary rock formed horizontally under the sea then gradually uplifted and tilted. The lighthouse was built in 1869 and is now fully automated.

Native forest

The Catlins comprises the largest area of native forest on the east coast of the South Island. The area receives an average annual rainfall of 1305 mm (compared to 800 mm for Dunedin) and on average two out of three days is rainy. Due to the high rainfall, ferns, mosses and perching plants are an abundant feature of this cool-temperate rainforest.

In many places the forest continues right down to the shoreline and overhangs the cliffs. Forest formed on old sand dunes behind the Tautuku and Tahakopa beaches are particularly impressive.

The protected forest of the Catlins and

associated conservation areas cover about 54,000 hectares. Silver beech forest predominates in higher areas and is the most southerly forest of its kind in New Zealand. Podocarp trees, an ancient form of conifer, dominate the coastal forest; including rimu, tōtara, mataī, kahikatea and miro.

Wildlife

The endemic New Zealand sea lion (rāpoka) is one of the rarest sea lions in the world, with a population estimated at around 12,000 individuals. They are making a comeback after being decimated by early hunters and sealers. Surat Bay, Cannibal Bay and Waipapa Point are popular haul-out sites for sea lions, although none breed there as yet.

Like sea lions, New Zealand fur seals were targeted by both Māori hunters and European sealers and almost wiped out. However, fur seals have been much more successful in re-establishing breeding colonies than sea lions. A breeding colony of about 500 individuals resides at Nugget Point, one of the largest breeding colonies on mainland New Zealand.

The main southern elephant seal breeding colony is Macquarie Island in the sub Antarctic region, but individuals are regularly seen at Nugget Point and a number of pups have been born here. Unlike fur seals and sea lions, elephant seals have no external ears and are unable to walk on their flippers. They move along land on their stomachs in a kind of caterpillar motion and can be seen on both sandy and rocky shores.

The endemic yellow-eyed penguin (hoiho), one of the world's rarest penguins, nests in the flax and coastal forest at Roaring Bay close to Nugget Point and at Curio Bay. They come ashore in the late afternoon/early evening after a day's fishing at sea.

Hector's dolphin (upokohue or papakanua) is one of the rarest dolphins in the world and at 1.4 metres long, also the smallest. During the summer and autumn months Hector's dolphins come into Porpoise Bay, which is well-protected from southerly swells. It is thought that Porpoise Bay is a nursery area, as mothers and calves are often seen there together. In the winter the dolphins disperse.

The Catlins estuaries at Pounaweia, Owaka, Papatowai and Tautuku provide habitats for many seabirds including wrybill, heron, stilt, spoonbill and dotterel. Bellbird (korimako), tūī, wood pigeon (kererū), parakeet (kākāriki), fantail (piwakawaka), tomtit (miromiro) and grey warbler (riroriro) are likely to be seen in the forests of the Catlins. Local beech forests in the area are one of the last strongholds for the mōhua (yellowhead), while the threatened fern bird (mātā) inhabits wetland areas.

Further information

For more information try www.doc.govt.nz, contact the Owaka Information Centre or visit the DOC Coastal Otago Area Office in Lower Stuart Street, Dunedin (Phone 03 477 0677).

Elephant seal K. Baird

