



NO HURRY AT HARIHARI

PAT BARRETT TAKES US ON A COASTAL WALK IN SOUTH WESTLAND

PICTURES : PAT BARRETT

Previous page: Sunset over Mount Oneone and the Wanganui Rivermouth. This page clockwise from left: Little green whitebaiting bach on Poerua River. Driftwood on the beach at Poerua River bluff. A view of the mountains across the Poerua River lagoon.



In the public bar of the local hotel in Harihari is a topographical map of the district. No prints of nice scenery here, just the basic necessity of needing to know the lay of the land before you venture out. Information about the landscape is paramount as Harihari is in South Westland, a mountainous tract of New Zealand cut by huge rivers and the Southern Alps. It straddles SH6 about halfway between Ross and Whataroa; if the names of those two small towns don't register, then use Franz Josef Glacier and Hokitika. However you cut it, this town is remote and has a 'lost in the wilderness' feel. Tawny mountains and dense bush hang over the town from every angle and it is great to find a place, not far from town, where the wilderness is accessible.



The Harihari Coastal Walk plunges into the forests between the Whanganui and Poerua rivers. It has a remarkably easy trail but is not without adventure and astounding scenery. The walk forms a loop from the carpark along the Whanganui River to the Tasman Sea, turns south along the beach to the Poerua River mouth and returns via an historic packtrack and parts of a bush tramway. It can be walked in either direction with ease. Careful note needs to be taken of the tides, posted on the sign in the carpark, if you hope to continue around the Poerua River bluff and complete the loop.

The first section, traversing the southern bank of the Whanganui River, passes through regenerating kahikatea forest and close to an assortment of whitebaiter's stands. It also gives good views out over the swift blue water of the river. This section is a high standard 'bush pathway' which makes light work of the trail and is ideal for families with small children.

Whitebaiting is almost a religion in these parts. Many of the stands are permanent, evident by the elaborate drawbridge-style apparatus attached so they can be withdrawn from the river at the end of the season, which here runs from September to November.

At the seaward end, a boardwalk continues over wetlands, past flax and open forest to the mudflats and lagoon at the river mouth. After the confinement of the forest, the space and sound of the sea is energising.

Rougher travel over stacks of driftwood and swampy sections is required to reach the beach and stairway climbing to the top of Mount Oneone on the south side of



Clockwise from left: Walkers at Wanganui River lagoon. Stopping to admire the Kahikatea forest boardwalk. Sunlight dapples a hiker as he walks next to the Oneone River.





This page clockwise from top left: Sand flats next to the Poerua River. Tin dinghy among the ferns. Driftwood on the beach south of the Wanganui River mouth. Opposite page: Forest track and floor near Oneone River.



the Whanganui Heads. It's only a 56m climb to the viewpoint with expansive views of rugged coast, open beach, carpets of forest and the great arm of the river. In back of it all the snowcapped Main Divide offers glimpses into the fascinating Adams Wilderness Area. There's a seat on the viewpoint platform, a fine place to sit and absorb the magnificent patterned landscape, especially at sunset.

On the rocks at the river mouth below, the scow 'Moa' was wrecked in 1935 and its skeletal remains may still sometimes be seen after a big blow on the coast. She was used to ferry timber, mostly kahikatea for butter boxes, milled from the forests through which the track passes. The constantly shifting Whanganui River sandbar sometimes allows access along the beach to the north, but do not attempt to cross the river, as it is deep and swift. Also watch out for the tides around the foot of



Mount Oneone. This estuary, and the one at the Poerua River to the south, are excellent examples of completely unmodified tidal wetlands and the reason why this is such a popular whitebaiter's retreat.

South of Mount Oneone the route passes along the beach where the Tasman Sea surges up the sand into a graveyard of bleached tree trunks scattered above the highwater mark. This horizontal forest of shattered wood extends the full length of the beach and around the rocky headland guarding the Poerua River.

It is testimony to the ferocity and magnitude of the floods in South Westland and fair warning not to risk being trapped by the tide on the headland. This section is short, about 500m, yet long enough to give some indication of what it was like for the early explorers who forged routes along this coast in the mid-1800s.

The route continues on the Poerua side of the headland where a short track climbs a low moraine wall to reach a viewpoint over the river and forest – another expanse of pristine beauty. Heading back to the carpark, past more whitebaiter's huts and a grove of pongas, the trail first cuts through a large area of mature podocarp forest and later into cutover forest where remnants of the sawmilling era lie abandoned in the forest – a wire rope, an old winch, rusting steel, and an old disused bridge crossing the dark waters of Black Creek (Oneone River). It's quiet here with only the sound of forest birds piercing the calm.

The final stretch is ruler-straight, along the line of the bush tramway, to the car park and the completion of a memorable excursion by river and coast.

FACT FILE : HARIHARI

WALKING TIME:

3 hours

GRADE:

Easy

ACCESS:

On the glaciers' side of Harihari (west end of town) take the signposted Whanganui Flat Road, 20km, to the carpark and track entrance beside the Whanganui River.

