

Return of the reserve

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Flood swamped, possum ravaged, rat scourged – and then the biggest snowfall in recent history fell on it and smashed down old patriarch trees.

Totara Reserve Regional Park had a tough year in 2004, a sad, bad and unhappy year, but today you wouldn't know it was the same place.

A tui's liquidly practising its repertoire, just there, in a rata tree. There's the ripping-silk knocking of kereru wings shearing the air. Further away, that elongated breathy whistle is a shining cuckoo proclaiming territory. And nature's drum beat is gently rumbling the bass line, the river and its rocks slip-sliding under splashing water.

From the air, the 350ha Totara Reserve Regional Park looks like a swollen letter C, with the silvery Pohangina River twisting through its back. Three walking tracks of several hours' duration loop through its swamp lowlands and the river terraces that have been lifted and tilted by long-ago earthquakes. There's short nature trails and a fern walk for the less energetic, and up to 10,000 people camp in the reserve's two camp grounds each summer.

Totara Reserve is 350ha of old, wild Manawatu, snuggled in the knees of the western Ruahine range. It's lowland podocarp forest, chock full of kaihikatea, totara and matai trees 500 to 1000 years old. Rimu and rata stand in pagan cathedral groves, hugged by swarming rata and supplejack. Nikau palms with their peculiar feather-duster foliage. There's stands of black beech near the camping areas, and kowhai and titoki and rewarewa are creeping in, accompanied by native fuchsia and clematis.

It's slowly, slowly coming back to the way Manawatu used to be, before European contact let loose a flood of pest plants and animals. It's taken time and hard work and money, and the project's by no means finished, but Horizons Regional Council biodiversity and water quality manager Alistair Beveridge says he's now starting to see what the place could be like, if the pest management work continues.

"It'll take a decade of pest management to get the core of the reserve resilient. Then we'll work on keeping the margins clear."

Totara Reserve formed through the foresight of several Pohangina Valley families, who set aside bits of bush and created some of the walking tracks. It was handed to the Manawatu District Council as a reserve, and the council's role was to look after its camp grounds. It didn't have funding or expertise to look after the bush.

The problem with New Zealand bush, however, is that it has no defences against introduced predator pests. If unchecked, they overtake bush and destroy it.

"After 2004, the place was looking really broken and sad," Mr Beveridge said. "There'd been the

February floods, then a few months later the huge snow that dumped nearly a metre overnight. That destroyed many of the big old trees that the possums had killed. And then there were a couple of windstorms up here, which took out more tree skeletons. Something had to be done."

In 2006, a trust was set up to manage the reserve. The district council was responsible for running the camp grounds, and Mr Beveridge got the job of overseeing management of the bush. Money was set aside; an initial \$500,000 for the first year, and then \$250,000 annually for the next decade. About a quarter of this budget is spent on pest control.

Mr Beveridge said the reserve then showed all the signs of seriously sick bush. It was basically a brood-nest for possums, rats and mice, with deer helping them ravage new growth on trees. Cats and stoats were rife, destroying baby native birds. Exotic bush stranglers were partying wildly – banana passionfruit, old man's beard, tradescantia, ivy and white convolvulus didn't let any new growth come up, choking light and thieving nutrients.

"The first thing we did was a weed and pest survey. We grid-searched the whole reserve, at about 30m spacings. It took two guys one whole summer, but at the end of it we knew what weeds there were, where they were, and how bad the infestations were," he said.

Small infestations of weeds were tackled first, such as the pampas grass. A programme of aerial spraying, by helicopter and abseiling humans, tackled weeds on the river terrace cliffs and larger infestations in the bush. And systematic baiting with broadleaf herbicide began, warring against possums, rats, mice, cats and stoats. That will continue for as long as the public wants to spend money protecting the reserve.

"I can't give you actual numbers of pests destroyed. But I can show you that there's lush new growth coming out on the trees, and very little sign of possum damage," Mr Beveridge said. "We've got them below the detrimental level.

"There's new native seedlings coming up underneath the understorey trees, which shows possums and rats aren't turning over the forest floor to get at the new plants.

"And there's sound anecdotal evidence from the reserve's neighbours. They're reporting that the possums aren't taking their fruit and flowers so much, and the farmers are saying there's grass growing in places they've never had it before."

Ten or 15 possums chomping pasture grass all night takes feed equivalent to that needed for one unit of stock. And they can carry tuberculosis; Pohangina is clear of that disease, but there's always the risk.

Mr Beveridge has also noticed more native birds in the reserve. Recently, when tree lucerne was flowering, he saw a flock of kereru feeding on its flowers and new shoots.

"People get excited when they see a wood pigeon, a single one. I got excited when I saw an actual flock of them, the way they should be. They're flock birds."

Tree lucerne is an exotic invader, but unlike blackberry or gorse, it's a good guy. Only living eight to 10 years, it fixes nitrogen in the soil, and it fills a food niche for kereru at the bleak end of winter.

"It's a good nursery tree, too. The natives can grow up under it. We don't remove lucerne, for all those reasons."

There have also been unconfirmed sightings of short-tailed native bats in the reserve. Nobody official has observed them yet, but Mr Beveridge is hopeful.

"We just need to get rid of the sulphur-crested cockatoos now. They're urban escapers, they live 60 to 70 years."

80 years and people get sick of looking after old uncle's cockatoo. They take a niche that our kaka should have. They nest in the same hollow logs and eat the same fruit and grubs."

The trust is improving and upgrading the walking tracks. Long flights of stairs now offer safe descents the river terraces leading into the Pettifar loop track, and work has been done on roadsides to improve car parking and information signs for visitors.

"One of our goals was to make this a better place for people to come and visit, a safe bit of old New Zealand. It's got everything, hills, river, bush, and it's nice and easy for families. Children have to have access to this so they know what it's about."

The camp grounds have also had major improvements. The Pohangina River is trying to alter its course so bush near the river periodically floods. Mr Beveridge points out totara trees whose buttress roots are buried in up to a metre of silt, dumped by the river.

"They'll eventually rot and fall over, but that's part of the cycle."

A new stopbank has been built to protect the camp ground and Camp Rangi Woods.

A new ablution block has been built for the camp ground, and there are plans to install barbecues for public use. School students have planted snake-shaped islands of native trees – shelter for campers, and to encourage more birdlife.

Camping has shifted downriver since the 2006 tragedy that saw three children killed when an undercut unstable riverbank collapsed on them, while they were swimming at the reserve. The site where Callu and Keryn Langley and Michael Liengme died is marked by a plaque on a bench, but that section of the river is now permanently closed for swimming, posted with warning signs and fenced off with hazard warnings. The cliffs in that section are shaley layers of silt and rotten rock, under constant threat of collapse.

"Down here, where we're developing this new camping area, it's different terrain. The cliffs here are very stable." Totara Reserve Regional Park is about 30km from Palmerston North, on the western slopes of the Ruahine range. Get to it by driving east on SH 3; turn off at Ashhurst and continue along Pohangi Valley Rd. Turn right at Raumai, into Pohangina Valley East Rd.

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