

THE LIGHT ABOVE THE LEATHERWOOD



A panoramic traverse of the Ruahine tops between the Marakoro and Waipawa rivers.

by PETER LAURENSEN

THERE is no point in trying to keep boots dry when heading to Colenso Spur. On the 4.5km approach, the Makaroro River is crossed numerous times, and by the time the orange triangle high above the river is spotted, your boots will be soaked through.

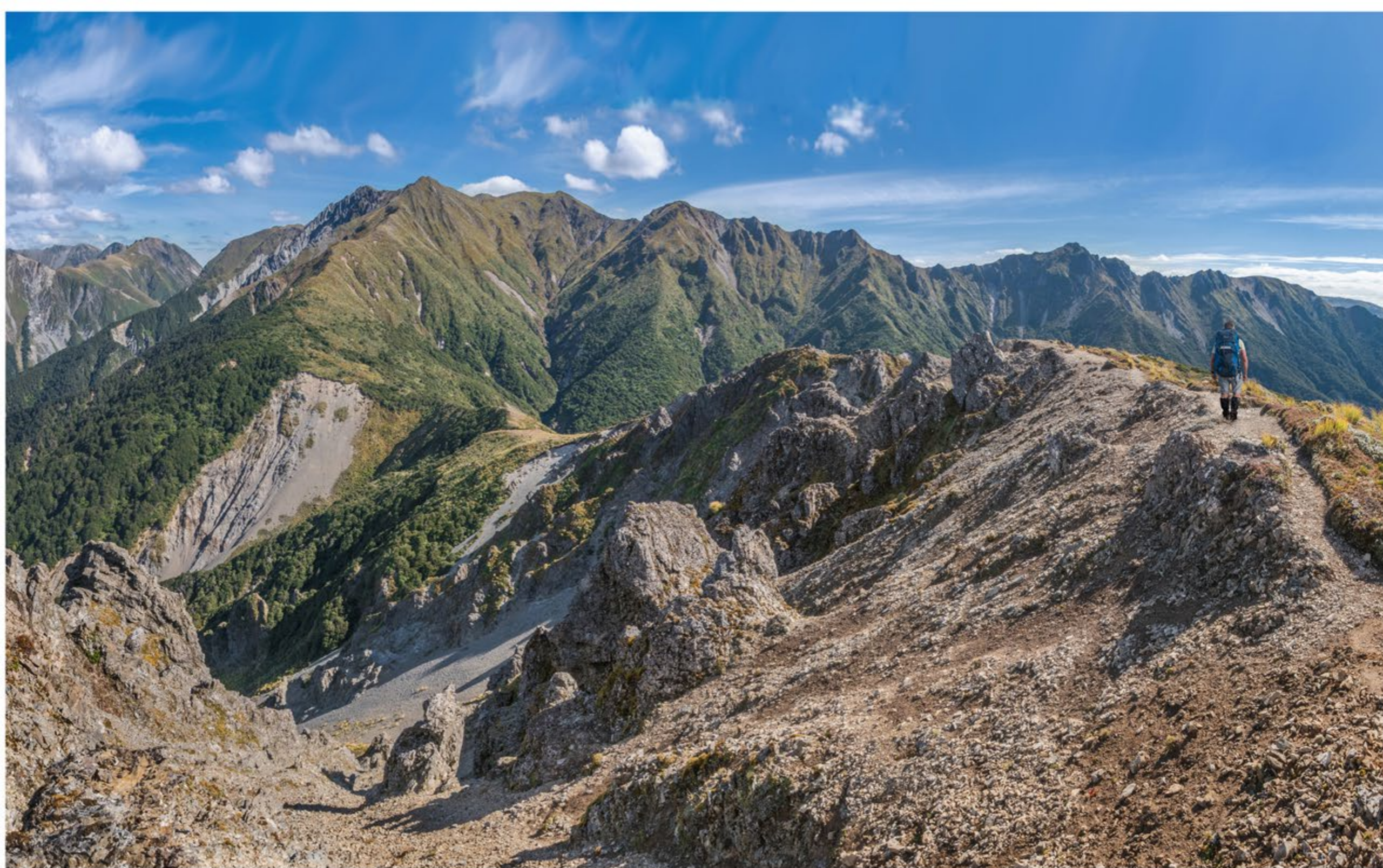
I'd been dropped 3km up the Makaroro River at the northern end of Wakarara Road, having left my car at my intended exit point further south. The plan was to travel south for 13km along some of the most impressive tops in the Ruahine Range. I am far from the first to traverse the range. Somewhere near the base of Colenso Spur is a stone memorial to William Colenso, the first Pākehā to cross the range in 1847. He made an earlier, unsuccessful attempt in 1845. There was no trail then and Colenso survived by eating cabbage tree tips and squeezing water from moss.

I have made many trips into the Tararua Range, but have visited its northern counterpart just four times. The highest peaks in the Tararua are all lower than 1600m, but the Ruahine Range boasts six points above 1700m. This slightly more alpine terrain motivated me.

I headed west past the Sparrowhawk Track junction, splashing up the Makaroro for another 2km before spying the track marker. It's normal for the eroded sections above a river to be steep, but the base of Colenso Spur was a small cliff. Beyond, the gradient relented a bit, but both hands were often needed during the first hour of climbing. For two hours, sweating profusely, it was steady progress up the spur and I couldn't help but think Colenso would have had it even tougher.

At 1300m, at the knife-edge of a bluff, I heard a rattling of stones and a sudden movement caught my eye. A magnificent stag plunged down the steep slope, dropping 500m in what seemed like a minute. He paused, looking at me apprehensively. He needn't have worried. It was the roar, but the only shooting I ever do is with a camera. There was plenty of time, and a clear view, to take several pictures before he descended into the trees.

With the stag gone, it was onwards and upwards to Te Atua-o-Mahuru (1534m), the first of eight high points along the route to Waipawa Saddle. The others, from north to south, are Maroparea (1511m), Orupu (1475m), Maropea (1481m), Pt1476, Pt1499, Te Atuaoparapara (1687m) and Pt1625.



Looking south from Armstrong Saddle to the 1300m saddle beneath Te Atuaoparapara

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Near dusk there was swirling cloud, which I hoped would soon change – for both navigational and photographic reasons.

Through a gap in the cloud a small tarn appeared to the south. It turned out to be the middle one of three nestled between Te Atua-o-Mahuru and Maroparea – an ideal spot to bivvy. The southernmost tarn is the largest, but the middle one is best placed for view-seekers who like quick and easy ridge-top access for sunrise and sunset.

That evening the setting sun played on the clearing cloud, but it wasn't until a crystal clear dawn that the route south, all the way to Te Atuaoparapara – the biggest and last of the seven high points ahead – was revealed. Though foreshortened, it was still a long way to go with the topo map indicating a day of undulations, mostly between about 1500m and 1300m. Not too onerous, but topo maps can be deceiving, as I was to discover.





Moderate-difficult	29km	Camping	2335m	BK36, BK37	From the Historic Mill car park at the end of Wakarara Road	Three day Car park to Te Atua o Mahuru, 6-7hr, to Te Atuaoparapara, 7-9hr, to North Block Road, 1-4hr



View south past Maroparea to Te Atuaoparapara – eight hours distant

The route was mostly unpoled open tops, and visibility was perfect. It was easy going to begin with, passing over Maroparea then Orupu. A 100m drop and a small eastward diversion saw me at Sparrowhawk Bivouac, where I'd hoped to top up my water supply. The tank was empty, but it was nice to visit this charming, partly dirt-floored biv. South of that and just beyond Maroparea lay a sparkling tarn where I replenished my Camelbak.

So far so good, as I dropped off Maroparea into leatherwood – hard work to puzzle and scratch through, and the topo map hadn't even indicated descent into the green zone yet.

However, it did for the next dip beyond Pt1476, which dropped to about 1250m – the lowest point of the day both physically and mentally. It was a 'fair dinkum' scratch, snag, shove and grovel leatherwood encounter. Sadly, I didn't spot the pink tape until about halfway across the dip. The tape made things easier, but close attention was needed until emerging on the south side.

Back on rock and tussock and on to Pt1499, from which there's a great view of Sunrise Hut along with a pronounced trail climbing from Armstrong Saddle towards Te Atuaoparapara, some 300m above. I'd been on the move for about six hours and it was time for lunch before taking on the final climb – along with another stretch of leatherwood bashing for good measure.



The view north from Te Atuaoparapara shows the route taken

“A DECENT WATER SUPPLY, SHELTER FROM THE STRENGTHENING NOR'WESTER AND A GRAND VIEW OVER HAWKE'S BAY – LIFE WAS GOOD.”

There were several spectacular slips along the day's route, the largest being south of Armstrong Saddle. Beyond was another dip into leatherwood before a relentless slog onto Te Atuaoparapara's summit. Here were panoramic views in the ever-improving late-afternoon light.

The south side of Te Atuaoparapara is bare ground sprinkled with treacherous gravel. As the terrain steepened, the patches of jagged rocks below accentuated my aloneness, prompting me to say aloud "do not slip" as I gingerly edged on down.

It was a relief to reach friendlier ground and find a bivvy site at a tarn nestled in a dip at about 1590m. A decent water supply, shelter from the strengthening nor'wester and a grand view over Hawke's Bay – life was good. Several steps up into the wind on the broad ridge are views looking west to nearby Mangaweka and Hikurangi and more distant Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe.

Sunset and then sunrise at this spot were reminders of how good it is to be in the digital era, and I took plenty of photos before departing at 8am. All the way along to Pt1625, above Waipawa Saddle, my shutter was in constant motion. Directly to the west, the broad top of Mangaweka glowed in the early morning light; in the distance were Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe; and immediately to the east, deep-cut streams plunged spectacularly toward Hawke's Bay.

The terrain from Pt1625 down to the saddle at 1326m was less challenging. Across the dip was a nice route back up past Three Johns, along ridge tops to one of the four named peaks over 1700m in the Ruahine – Rangiateatua (1704m). The others are Mangaweka (1731m) and Iron Peg (1703m), which I've reached, and Hikurangi (1710m), which I haven't. I vowed to return soon to carry on beyond Waipawa Saddle to tag Rangiateatua and nearby A6G4 (1715m).

Before the trip, Shaun Barnett had said to take care when entering a large band of leatherwood below Waipawa Saddle. Since he was last there, though, the trail has been improved and I had no problem finding a way down. Still, it was a long drop through 300 vertical metres of leatherwood followed by steep gravel for another 200m before the riverbed's gradient relented at about 800m.

I was ready for a rest. The tramp down Waipawa River didn't demand sodden boots, and four hours after leaving the bivvy my car came into view. The fabulous new ground I'd covered between the Makaroro and Waipawa was well worth those leatherwood battles. **w**

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