



Photographic locations worth sweating for

Between Te Atua Mahuru and Maropea, Ruahine Range

Peter Laurenson takes us on a captivating journey through the Ruahine Range, highlighting some of the most stunning photographic locations worth the effort. Nestled between Te Atua Mahuru and Maropea, this region offers unparalleled above-the-bushline camping spots, pristine tarns, and expansive tussocky saddles. With the promise of unimpeded sunrises and sunsets, we join Peter as he delves into the breathtaking beauty and unique experiences that await in this remarkable landscape.

WORDS AND IMAGES
PETER LAURENSEN

occasionalclimber.co.nz

If you pick a fine weather window, the Ruahine Range offers some magnificent above-the-bushline camping spots where you can enjoy unimpeded sunrises and sunsets. One such spot sits between two high points, Te Atua Mahuru (1,534m) and Maropea (1,511m), near the northern end of the range. In a broad, tussocky saddle are three tarns providing a water source, with plenty of soft flat space to pitch a tent or lay out a bivvy bag.

There's a bit of sweating required to reach the tops, which sit 1,000 metres above the start point at the historic mill site at the end of Wakarara Road, lying west of Waipawa. If you're in a 4WD vehicle, it's possible to drive up the riverbed about three kilometres further, saving a good hour's gravel bashing along the Makaroro.

Where Gold Creek joins the Makaroro, you have the option of following Sparrowhawk Track up to 1,370m Sparrowhawk Bivouac, nestled in the trees just below the bushline. This

hut is small and basic but allows you to avoid camping out, with the tops still only a few minutes' stroll above the hut.

I enjoy a circuit much more than a there-and-back trip, and camping under the stars up high on a clear night is a magical experience. So I chose to carry on up Makaroro River for another two kilometres to join Colenso Spur Track. During the next hour, there was no point in trying to keep my boots dry, as I had to cross the river many times while keeping a watch for some indicator of the base of Colenso Spur. This was not as obvious as you might expect. A large DOC triangle sat quite high above the river in the trees. I only spotted it while trying to find the old stone memorial to William Colenso, the first Pākehā to cross the Ruahine Ranges in 1847. He made his first attempt, climbing up the spur named after him, in 1845. Back then, there was no trail, and Colenso survived his treacherous crossing attempt by eating cabbage tree tips and squeezing water from moss.

It's normal for the initial sections above rivers to be steep, but the base of Colenso Spur at about 500 metres is a small cliff. Above that, the gradient relents a bit, but two hands were often required during the first hour of climbing. I made steady progress as sweat poured like a river out of me. It was nice to emerge from the humid bush a couple of hours later beside an impressive bluff at 1,300 metres.

I sensed a sudden movement in my peripheral vision, then honed in on the sound of rattling stones as a large stag deftly plunged down the steep rocky slope. He dropped perhaps 500 vertical metres in what seemed like just one minute, then paused, looking directly back up at me. This was the Roar, so he was lucky the only shooting I ever do is with a camera. I had an unimpeded view and plenty of time to take several pictures before he resumed his descent into the trees.

I resumed my own upward progress to Te Atua Mahuru. From there, in slowly clearing cloud, I spotted a small tarn a little to the south. It turned out to be the middle of three

tarns nestled between Te Atua Mahuru and Maropea, and proved an ideal spot to bivvy. The tarn furthest south is by far the largest, but the middle tarn at 1,470 metres is best placed for photographers who like quick and easy ridge-top access for sunrise and sunset.

That evening was beautiful as the setting sun played on the still gradually clearing cloud. The next morning dawned crystal clear, revealing my route south to the top of the Sparrowhawk Track.

My route was mostly unpoled open tops, and visibility was perfect. To begin with, the going was easy as I passed over Maropea (1,511m) and then Orupu (1,475m). A hundred or so metre drop and a small eastward trudge saw me at Sparrowhawk Bivouac, where I'd hoped to top up my water supply. The tank was empty, but it was still nice to visit this charming little partially dirt-floored biv. South of the biv, just beyond Maropea (1,481m), lay a sparkling tarn where I was able to replenish my camelback before my descent.



THE SUN RISING OVER HAWKES BAY TO THE EAST
F8, 1/50 SEC, ISO 125, 221MM



A STAG BELOW COLENZO SPUR, RUAHINE EASTERN TOPS
F6.4, 1/80 SEC, ISO 125, 360MM



A VIEW FROM THE BUNK ROOM OF SPARROWHAWK BIV, RUAHINE EASTERN TOPS
F8, 1/50 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM



ENJOYING DUSK ABOVE MY BIVVY SITE (FAR RIGHT), WITH TE ATUA MAHURU BEHIND,
RUAHINE EASTERN TOPS
STITCH OF 2 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F8, 1/320 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM



DAWN VIEW SOUTH PAST MAROPAREA, RUAHINE EASTERN TOPS
STITCH OF 2 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F7.1, 1/50 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM



DUSK VIEW NORTH ALONG THE RUAHINE RANGE FROM MY BIVVY SPOT
JUST SOUTH OF TE ATUA MAHURU

STITCH OF 3 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F7.1, 1/80 SEC, ISO 125, 244MM