

## The Kiwi way

Pig-sticking, anyone? For the adventurous outdoorsman, there's much more to remote New Zealand than the legendary trout fishing

By Bruce Masterman

My bare legs are a map of bleeding scratches and punctures, courtesy of repeated encounters with a nasty plant called spear grass. My shirt is drenched in perspiration, and my heart is doing a reasonable imitation of a dozen Maori warriors stomping their feet in unison. On the ground in front of me lies a brindle-coloured wild pig. I've just killed it with a knife, concluding an adrenalin-charged hunt that had taken me over hill and dale, up and down ridges and across shallow creeks.

My new Kiwi friend and guide, master pig hunter Steve Clark, sports a huge grin as he shakes my hand. "Good on you, mate," he says. "Your first pig. Bet you'll never do that back home in Canada."

That's a sure bet. Pig-sticking just isn't done in my home province of Alberta, or anywhere else in Canada for that matter. It has a bit too much of a *\*Lord of the Flies\** undertone to it than most Canadians are probably ready to accept. Truth be told, I never really thought I'd find myself sticking a pig, either. But as my wife, Karen, and I discovered during a wild three-week visit last November, anything's possible when it comes to hunting and fishing in New Zealand.

It all started innocently enough. Our hosts were Heather and Roy Campbell, deer farmers from Oamaru on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island. We'd met a year earlier when they came to Alberta to visit a mutual Kiwi friend, Gary Park. Gary grew up in Oamaru, but left at age 19 to begin a newspaper career that eventually took him to Calgary, where we met and became friends.

Gary had phoned me several months before the Campbells arrived. He raved about his good friends, and how the ever-irrepressible Roy planned to recover from a cancer operation by visiting Canada for a little fishing, touring and general frivolity. It would be Roy's second visit, and Heather's first. Gary asked if I might consider taking the couple fly fishing, and I readily agreed.

We first met on a June morning in Longview, a little town in the heart of cowboy country. Longview is a gateway to my favourite outdoor playground, Kananaskis Country, a provincial recreation area spanning more than 4,000 square kilometres of foothills and mountains. Gary drove Heather

and Roy down from Calgary, and we planned to spend the day hiking and fly fishing one of my secret trout hot spots. Their enthusiasm for life was immediately obvious—and highly infectious. “We can’t tell you how much we’re looking forward to this,” Roy told me.

It was a day of firsts for the Kiwi couple. They saw their first grizzly, and took full-frame photos of the bear feeding in the ditch next to the highway. They caught their first Alberta trout and ate their first Alberta shorelunch. Every experience, according to Roy, was the absolute best. (He was far too gracious to mention that the beaver pond trout they caught that day were mere minnows, I would later learn, compared to the trout back home in New Zealand.)

Roy and I fished together twice more during their stay. We waded a limb-numbing stream on a hike into a gorgeous little lake, where we caught and released dozens of scrappy west-slope cutthroats. And on our final trip, my friend Jim McLennan generously offered to row while Roy and I fished the Bow River downstream of Calgary. I caught a few good trout on streamers, but Roy was skunked until we were almost at the take-out. Then an obliging eight-inch rainbow took his dry fly. In typical good cheer, he reacted as if it were a 25-incher.

By the time they headed home, Heather and Roy had exacted a promise that Karen and I would visit them in New Zealand. Aware that Roy’s cancer might return, they urged us to come sooner rather than later.

So that’s how Karen and I found ourselves travelling halfway around the world from our home in High River, on the edge of the foothills in southern Alberta. The actual flight time between Calgary, just a half-hour north of us, and the South Island’s international airport at Christchurch was 16 hours. Flying over both the North and South Islands, we couldn’t get over the country’s small size—it covers just 266,200 square kilometres. In contrast, Canada is almost 10 million square kilometres, while Alberta alone is more than twice as big as both islands combined. And at just a touch over 32 million people, Canada’s population is eight times greater than New Zealand’s.

My main goal was to check out the country’s hunting and fishing opportunities, to see how they compared with back home. Preparing for our visit, Heather and Roy, both serious anglers and hunters, enticed me with promises of fly fishing for rainbows and browns, and hunting for red deer and wild pigs. As a long-time deer hunter, I was intrigued by the prospect of hunting a different species of deer. But wild pigs?

“I’ve never shot a wild pig,” I told Roy during a long-distance phone call weeks before our departure.

“Oh, we don’t shoot them, mate.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“We stick ’em,” Roy said, matter-of-factly. “With a knife or spear.”

“Oh.”

That wasn’t the only surprise. When we left Alberta, deer-hunting season had just opened. In New Zealand, however, it was late spring, a time when most Canucks might expect big-game hunting to be closed. Wrong. Hunting season for all non-native game animals—which applies to pretty much every four-legged wild creature—never closes in New Zealand.

In fact, almost anything goes as far as regulations are concerned. There are no bag limits on game animals such as wild pigs, deer, thar, chamois, goats, sheep, possums and rabbits. You can hunt any time of the year and any time of day—or night. Too dark? No problem. Just mount a spotlight to your rifle or shotgun barrel, or get a buddy to hold one. Don’t want to walk? Just shoot from your vehicle, or from a helicopter if you have one. It’s all legal in New Zealand. Run out of venison? Just go out and shoot another deer. A hunting licence? Don’t need one to hunt on private property, unless you’re after waterfowl or upland birds—they’re regulated through \$73 season licences, bag limits and seasons running from early May to late July or August. For everything else, the only thing you need is the landowner’s permission. (For more on the regulations, see “New Zealand planner” on page TK.)

The thinking behind this, er, liberal approach dates back many centuries, when European settlers introduced pigs, deer, Australian brush-tailed possums, rabbits and many other species. Heck, even the wallabies are imported. The problem is, all these alien species are doing more harm than good, spreading disease and destroying forests and grasslands. The government’s been trying to get rid of them ever since, through shooting and poisoning. In a rationale completely opposite to the thinking in Canada, New Zealand is determined to wipe out its wild deer to stop the potential spread of disease to the country’s lucrative game-farming industry, which centres on red deer and North American elk.

As for rabbits, they’re everywhere. In a rather bizarre holiday tradition, the South Island town of Alexandra hosts an annual Great Easter Bunny Hunt on the Easter weekend, attracting hundreds of shooters who kill rabbits and hares by the thousands. “The Easter icon is, in fact, a villain,” a spokesperson for a government-backed environmental group told a local newspaper. “It is very hard to get the message across that although these look like cute, cuddly creatures, we want them dead.”

Fishing, meanwhile, is open year-round and controlled with catch limits and annual licence fees of about \$90. Resident and non-resident fees are identical. The main inland sportfish are brown and rainbow trout, and sockeye salmon. Rainbows were introduced decades ago from California, and browns came via Tasmania from stock originating in Great Britain, likely Scotland. The sockeyes have Canadian roots dating back to 1902, when Canada provided 500,000 young Pacific Ocean salmon. Their range is limited to two lakes on the South Island.

When Heather and Roy fly fished with me in Alberta, they raved about the trout fishing back home. I knew they weren't exaggerating. As a long-time fly fisher, I've seen videos about New Zealand's world-class trout fishing. For decades I've devoured magazine articles and books on the subject, and have talked to friends who have fly fished there. They used words like nirvana, mecca and paradise. So it was no surprise that I was itching to fish soon after we landed. As it turns out—thanks to a three-day cycling trip and a rather nasty stomach bug completely unrelated to enthusiastic exposure to Speights, the favourite local beer—it was almost a week before I got the chance.

The wait was worth it.

We are camped at a beautiful little spot beside Lake Benmore, just off Highway 83 west of Oamaru. Roy arranges for me to fly fish the Ahuriri River with Tony Flack, an affable (heck, all Kiwis are affable) lifelong friend. Roy himself is unable to fly cast because of a severe shoulder injury—his casting shoulder, natch—caused by a rather violent collision involving deer on his farm. He, Heather and Karen are instead “forced” to fish from the Campbells' powerful motorboat on Lake Benmore.

The morning of November 9 dawns clear and warm. The lake is calm. Tony, a retired service station operator, and I grab our gear and stroll across the highway. We find his small inflatable boat where he left it the previous afternoon, tethered to a tree in a secluded bay. I like Tony immediately when he says, “You know, I'd rather catch one trout in a day's fly fishing than 20 trout while trolling with a lead line.” I can't agree more.

Tony motors across the mirror-surfaced lake to the mouth of the Ahuriri, as pretty a trout stream as I've ever seen. Since it's shaping up to be a warm day, we leave our chest waders behind. We'll fish in felt-soled wading shoes, shorts and light shirts. After stringing our six-weight rods, Tony suggests I tie on two weighted bead head nymphs: a Pheasant Tail on the

bottom and a Hare's Ear a foot above. Several feet above the top fly, he hitches in a short length of pink yarn as a strike indicator.

The Ahuriri flows low and clear. Tony tells me it was even clearer the day before, when he'd stuck 30 fish. He selflessly offers me the first cast in a deep run, but I insist on standing back and watching him show me how it's done. Two casts later, his indicator slightly hesitates and Tony sets the hook. He's fast onto a big trout. After a short but vigorous fight, he nets a three-pound rainbow, then gently unhooks and releases it.

After watching Tony release another trout, I can't wait any longer. Gingerly, I step into the cool water and start laying out line. After a few awkward, nervous casts, I finally feel as though I'm getting it right. Suddenly, a fish grabs my bottom fly. Seconds later, I reach down to hand-land it. I can't believe my eyes. After years of anticipation, of dreaming and hoping, the trout in my hand is all of three inches long.

"Now that you know how, the next one'll be bigger," Tony says as I slip the fish back into the water.

Indeed, the next one is bigger—much, much bigger. Within minutes, I land a hard-fighting rainbow of just over two pounds. Then I catch another that pushes three pounds. I can't believe the size and numbers of rainbows in this narrow, relatively shallow river—not to mention the spectacular setting. Purple lupines, cursed by locals but appreciated by visitors like me, line the banks. They provide a stunning backdrop to an already postcard-perfect scene.

We're soon joined by Tony's friend Gilbert Ellery, a retired car and boat dealer from Oamaru. For the next several hours, we three fish like old friends, catching and releasing at least 30 fat rainbows. We cast mainly to visible trout, making the game that much sweeter. There's no dry-fly action, but we don't care; the nymphing is incredible. Gilbert keeps a big rainbow for the smoker.

By Alberta standards, it's early in the day—about 4:30 p.m.—when Tony announces it's time to quit. "We must get back," he says, winking. "Almost Happy Hour." On the return trip across the lake, we stop the boat to take some last casts. We each catch a nice rainbow; Tony's is almost four pounds, mine half that.

The next morning, dawn arrives in a spectacular explosion of scarlet-tinged clouds. But the wind also blows in hard, keeping most boats on shore. After several camp-bound hours, Tony and I decide to try our luck from shore. Earlier, I wandered down to the lake to check things out (or, as the locals would say, "suss it out"). I was surprised to see many huge brown trout bolting out from under the bank to the safety of deeper water. Visions of

those trout now replay in my mind as we wade out into thigh-deep water. Over the next few hours, we blind cast big, weighted streamers, landing and releasing two trout—a brown of two pounds and a rainbow of about three. I spook several more fish by wading sloppily and failing to pay attention. Unfortunately, my home-honed foibles seem to have followed me halfway around the globe.

A few days later, the Campbells, Karen and I head across the South Island to a remote, rugged West Coast region the locals call the Cascades. New friends Keith Muldrew and John Collins have invited us to their sprawling, 3,000-acre ranch in the Cascade River plateau south of Jackson Bay. Thanks to frequent and heavy rainfall, the region's flowering rata bushes, mountain beech and nikau palm trees provide a lush, tropical rainforest. It's an area few Kiwis—and even fewer Canadians—ever get to visit.

On our first morning, we travel 20 kilometres by jet boat downriver to the mouth of the Cascade at the Tasman Sea. Karen and I savour our first close view of the Tasman surf crashing on the stony shoreline. Heading back up the river, the jet boat sprouts several spinning rods trolling Rapalas and big, shiny spoons. Everybody catches hefty browns, ranging from dark brown-spotted brutes to silvery sea-runs.

When we get back to the ranch, John whispers about a little spring creek that he discovered. It's too clear and shallow for spinfishing, he says, but surely my fly-fishing skills would be up to fooling some of the bruiser browns that live there. Soon, John and I are sneaking along the bushes lining the creek. Suddenly, he stops, grabs my arm and points. A brown at least 25 inches long fins peacefully in two feet of water against the far bank. My first cast is also my last. The tiny nymph drops five feet in front of the trout's nose and drifts downstream, passing just inches away. As if on cue, the trout takes off like a torpedo, leaving a wake.

That encounter sets the pattern for the next two days. I sneak. I crawl. I cut back my leader to the lightest I can possibly go. I change nymphs and try tiny dries. I fish in sun and cloud, and I fish early morning and late afternoon. And I hook exactly one trout. The monster brown takes a size 24 Blue-Wing Olive and is hooked for exactly seven mind-blowing seconds before freeing itself in one rush. Disappointed? A little. But how can one ever really regret what does or doesn't happen in the nicest piece of water you'll likely ever experience?

Later, I retreat to the Cascade, a Bow-sized river where the others are regularly catching bruiser browns on spinning tackle. I'm determined to

stick to flies. Walking along the high bank, I'm stopped by the biggest brown trout I've ever seen, a good 10 pounds, so golden brown it appears almost black. It's facing upstream in 18 inches of water beside the near bank. Very catchable, I think.

Carefully, I ease into position and deliver an astonishingly perfect cast, putting the big stonefly nymph three feet above the fish. The fly goes untouched. Eager to pinpoint the trout before casting again, I climb the bank and look down. It's gone. I wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing.

One evening, John invites me to hunt free-roaming red deer. Naturally, I say yes. He advises me that a deer of any age or either sex is legal, but suggests shooting a young male, or stag, rather than a female, which would likely be accompanied by its offspring. John and Keith like to carefully manage wild deer on their land, just as they do their cattle.

Heavy clouds envelope the valley and a light drizzle starts to fall as we ford the quads across a shallow river. After parking on a gravel bed, we begin hiking along a brush-cluttered pasture. We scan for deer, but all we see are grazing Hereford cattle. It's just like Alberta, I think. About a kilometre along, I spy a white spot in the trees 250 metres ahead. Whispering, I ask John if red deer have white bum patches. He nods yes. The deer is too far for a shot, and by the time we sneak closer, it's long gone.

About an hour later, we head back to the quads. We haven't seen another deer, the drizzle has turned to heavy rain and the light is fading quickly; in Alberta, legal shooting time would be over. Then two deer materialize in the clearing ahead. Appearing wraithlike in the mist, they stand broadside less than 100 yards away. I wipe the rain from the scope and squeeze off a shot from the .243 Winchester.

When we walk into the clearing, a yearling stag lies on the ground. Its three-inch antler nubbins are thick with velvet. "That's as good as gold," says John. And after several meals over the next week, Karen and I agree it's the tastiest venison we'd ever had.

Kiwis may take their deer hunting seriously, but it's nothing compared to pig hunting: to many, it's akin to religion. And even if you're not a pig hunter, there's a good chance you know one. When I was being treated for my stomach bug in a doctor's office in Oamaru, for example, the young physician proudly produced a framed photograph of himself, complete with a Rambo-like headband, and a very dead and very large wild boar sporting scary, scimitar-like tusks. Remembering my long-distance phone call with

Roy weeks earlier, I asked if he'd stabbed it. Turns out he shot it with a high-powered rifle. "Sticking pigs is a whole different ball game," the doctor told me, almost reverentially.

No doubt, many Canadians would debate and fret endlessly over the ethics involved in killing a game animal with a spear and knife. Not Kiwis. To them, it's part of their culture. They neither ask for nor do they want approval. As for me, hunting is hunting. Period. Does it really matter if you kill an animal with a bullet at 300 yards, an arrow at 10, or with a single knife or spear thrust into the heart? The result is the same. Besides, when in Rome...

It's just before 6 a.m. on a Saturday when Steve Clark, his son Lance and the Campbells' grandson, Sean, pick me up at Heather and Roy's house. Three dogs are kennelled in the back of the pickup. As Steve drives, the trio regales me with pig-hunting stories. Steve, 45, has been at it since he was a kid, following in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Lance, 16, stuck his first pig at age seven, while Sean, 14, just started and already has three.

Steve uses a foot-long, Kauri wood-handled knife his great-grandfather made some 150 years ago. Killing about 150 pigs together a year, Steve and Lance keep up a friendly competition (just before we were to leave New Zealand, Steve would stick a 204-pound—dressed—boar that beat Lance's largest by three pounds). "It's a great tradition that we love doing together," Steve says.

After an hour's drive, we rendezvous with their friends Jacqui Turner, 19, and Craig Gibb, 21. Both are experienced pig stickers. Craig works as a pest controller, hired by farmers to kill possums, rabbits and pigs. We head to a sheep and cattle station where Craig had spotted pigs a few days earlier.

As we mill around the vehicles, the hunters fit several dogs with wide, thick collars to protect their necks from the boars' sharp ivory tusks. Despite the precaution, dogs are regularly hurt or killed in action. Nobody wants that to happen—pig dogs are also family pets, and good ones are worth a few thousand dollars. Lance carries a short-barrelled double-barrel shotgun. He uses it only to kill a pig that's hurting a dog, or to destroy a mortally-injured hound.

The dogs vary in size, breed and function. A crossbred boxer-Australian cattle dog named Brock is trained to find, chase and hold the pig by its ears until the hunter arrives. Same goes for Rip, a Rhodesian ridgeback-Labrador cross. Then there's Kai, a 90-pound boxer-Staffordshire terrier cross, which is expected to hold the pig's throat until the hunter kills it.



It's cool and drizzling as Steve and Craig scan the surrounding hills and form a plan. They decide to traverse several ridges and circle around to a spear grass and thorn-infested hillside where they suspect the pigs live. After two hours of slogging over decidedly unfriendly terrain, we finally reach the hillside. I've tried to dodge the hundreds of clumps of sharp spear grass, but my legs and hands are punctured and scratched.

Craig and the teenaged boys work one side of the hill with Craig's dogs while Steve and I stay on the other side with his three. Several hundred metres later, the squealing of pigs breaks the silence. The dogs have found the prey. Steve starts running and yells at me to hurry. I freeze when the dense grass ahead of me starts moving, just like in the movie *\*Jurassic Park\**, when flesh-ripping velociraptors move in for the kill. In this case, I envision an angry, deadly tusked boar slicing me open. I relax as a small sow passes by a few feet away.

When I finally catch up, the dogs are holding a 100-pound beast while Steve clutches the tail and a hind leg. "Take my knife and stick it, right behind the front leg," shouts Steve.

I yank the knife from the sheath on his belt and stab the pig. The hunt is over.

When in Rome, indeed.