

A Weekend in Turangi

Joanna Wane's family goes feral at the less-travelled southern end of Lake Taupo.



JOANNA WANE IS NORTH & SOUTH'S DEPUTY EDITOR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS SKELTON.

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Billie Taylor, seven, displays her catch of the day from the children's pond at the Tongariro National Trout Centre, where junior anglers can try their hand at fly-fishing.

A vegetarian in principle (if not practice), our sweet little girl still inhabits a world where fish have souls and names like Nemo. She's also a Pisces. Fish are friends, not food!

Kneeling by the children's pond, Billie calls for a "priest" to administer the last rites. I brace myself for the tears, the anguished remorse, the loss of childhood innocence. At least it means I won't have to go shopping for dinner.

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But seven-year-olds can be ruthless, too. Grasping the priest, a carved wooden stick, she doesn't flinch. Thwack, thwack, thwack. A glistening rainbow trout quivers and quietly expires at her heartless feet.

Minutes later, she and her brother are examining its bloodied remains at the Tongariro National Trout Centre as veteran fly fisherman Graham Hamilton cheerfully rifles through its entrails – liver, kidneys and a strange, elongated sort of balloon called a swim bladder that apparently helps it balance. "This," he says, teasing out a triangular lump of pulsating red tissue from the headless corpse, "is its heart." Still beating.

Trout, trout, everywhere, a silvered flash of pink; trout, trout, everywhere but God, I need a drink.

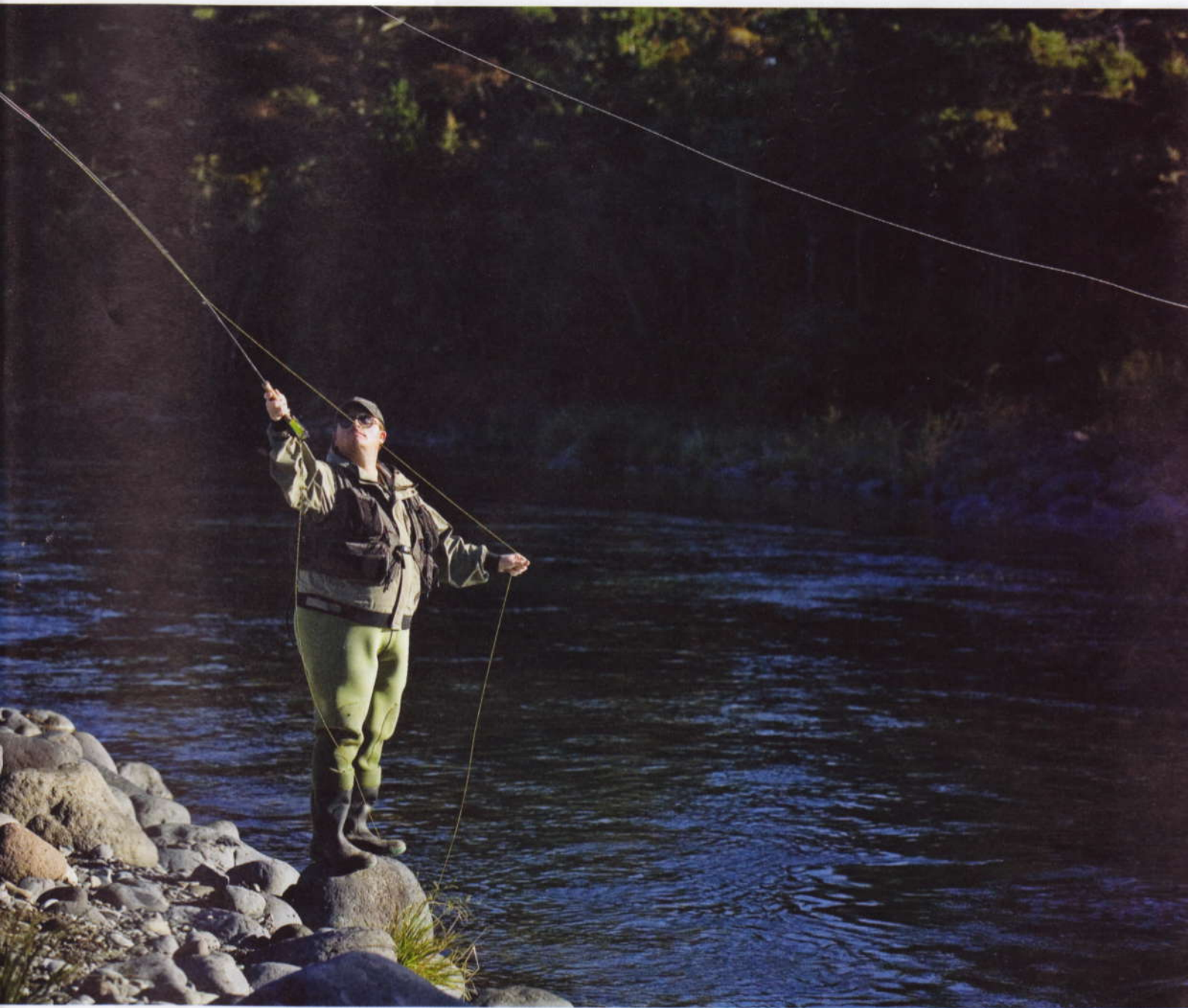
We eat it smoked with bruschetta on Daydream, a fishing boat skippered by Adam Colling with his wife, Katina, who sold their home and dairy farm 18 months ago to set up a charter business at Tokaanu, trawling Lake Taupo's less-commercial southern end. "All I used to do was talk to cows or myself," he says. "Coming straight into tourism was a bit of a shock."

Thanks to the couple's unbroken record of a catch on every trip, we eat trout again that evening, whole and roasted in tinfoil, with a grinding of sea salt and a flourish of lemon. And, thanks to Hamilton's priest – a fisherman's best friend – we eat it the next night by candlelight; neatly trimmed fillets floured lightly then pan-fried in butter.

"How does it taste?" I ask our son Flynn, who's 10. "Like trout!" he says, smiling triumphantly. And so it does.

For two city kids, the whole weekend is a bit like an episode of *Man vs Wild* as they navigate rapids, kayak past boiling mud pools and mountain-bike narrow bush tracks that cross swing bridges over the Tongariro River – the water not a gentle, soothing trickle but the roar of a jet engine in flight.

Famed American angler and author Zane



Grey elevated the mighty Tongariro to near-mythical status in the 1920s; Katherine Mansfield came fishing here with her dad. The fish are so big, it's said, that when you catch one the water level drops.

Taupo may rule the lake, but Turangi has the river. From dawn to dusk you'll find hearty souls out in their waders, solitary Jeremy Fishers tasting the water with their flies like a snake flicking out its tongue. The Silly Pool, the Shag Pool, the Big Bend – every curve of the river has a story. The Major Jones Pool, near the swing bridge, was named after a monocled British colonial officer from India whose handlebar moustache was always getting tangled up in his line.



I've caught something," shouts Steve de Malmanche, fishing his cap out of the freezing river and plonking it

back on his head. It's the only bite he's had all morning, not that it seems to worry him. These are the qualities of an angler: patience, stillness and acceptance of the knowledge that you might spend hours trying to tease out a trout and still go home with an empty bag.

"The fish are really spooky at the moment; the water is very low and very clear," de Malmanche says, attaching a green woolly buggler – his favourite fly – to the line. "The fish can see everything. But that makes it

Steve de Malmanche makes his line dance over the river in the early morning light.

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Top: Brian Scott at the Creel Tackle House. Above: A rainbow trout, fresh from the water.

challenging; sometimes they don't want to be caught. That's why they call it fishing. Not 'catching fish'."

De Malmanche knows how to wait. It took him more than two years to teach himself how to fly-fish; learning how to cast is as difficult as mastering the perfect golf swing. His laugh is as big and round as his belly, but when his line dances through the air, the movement is full of grace.

Downstream, the trees are flashes of gold as autumn licks its way along the riverbank and rivulets of morning sunlight race across the hills. "When the snow melts and there's a bit of a green colour to the water, that's when fishing is good, when they're running up from the lake to the rivers to spawn. Winter river fishing is very good fun."

Rainbows – beautiful but stupid – are the bimbos of the trout world. Browns, canny

and prized because of it, are more likely to outwit the hook long enough to reach trophy size (although these days, mounting fish has gone out of fashion). Just don't ask de Malmanche which tastes nicer. "I don't like trout," he laughs. "I just like fishing."

When he's not down at the river, de Malmanche works at the Creel Tackle House, which opened in 1929 on what was once the main street through town. Proprietor Brian Scott, who quit a corporate job in New Plymouth with Shell to come to Turangi, reckons it might be the oldest continuous fishing shop in the country. Sam, his chocolate labrador, is probably one of the oldest dogs.

Hundreds of flies overflow display boxes and flash their coloured tail-feathers under the glass counter: Lord's killer, Mrs Simpson (named after Wallis), fuzzy wuzzy, red setter (a New Zealand design now famous around the world), bleeding ugly olive, wiggle tails and boobies (British, of course). Salmon flies were traditionally made from up to 20 individual feathers. South Pacific bonefish flies, used in the modern sport of saltwater fly-fishing, don't have any.

The number of children's fishing licences being sold has fallen lately. But customers on this Saturday morning include a seven-year-old girl heading out on a boat to try her new rod for the first time with her dad, younger sister and the two family dogs.

A couple of ageing anglers from Australia, both retired, are over on a six-week trip, fishing their way up from the South Island. Two young Englishwomen have been travelling for the past 18 months; the next day they're off to climb Mt Ngauruhoe. "I feel like a turtle," complains one of them, pulling on some Kermit-green waders. "Do you have them in pink?"

TROUT were introduced to the lake and rivers back in the 1880s. Turangi, once a sleepy fishing village, evolved much later when work began on the

massive Tongariro Power Project in the 1960s. Look at the hand-knitted woollen booties and home preserves on sale at a small market outside the Mustard Seed cafe every Saturday morning, rain or shine, and you may think nothing much has changed since then.

But under clear blue skies, the township sparkles. With a microclimate of intense heat and cold similar to Central Otago's, the southern end of the lake has four

boutique vineyards, specialising in pinot gris and pinot noir. From Tongariro River Estate, owner John Davidson commutes to Auckland, where he works as an insurance broker, while wife Debbie and four-year-old daughter Maddi stay home to look after Patches, Maddi's pony. Their pinot gris is lovely – French-style and heavy with fruit. In winter, they serve mulled wine by the fire. Says John: "I was a rum-and-Coke man until I met Debbie."

Last year, they strung up a projector and held a Melbourne Cup carnival; they've also hosted the Red Hat Association for "women growing old disgracefully" – the compulsory uniform is purple clothing and red hats (members include a former Mayor of Taupo). The Turangi & District Women's Club holds its annual fundraiser here, covering the grapevines with nets. Well, in a small town you've got to make your own fun.

Garth Oakden came to Turangi for six months more than two decades ago and never left. His company, Tongariro River Rafting, runs white-



Kayaking the Tokaanu Canal, where wild puha and mint can be harvested from the banks.

water rafting, raft fishing, kayak and guided mountain-bike trips. If you're lucky, you'll see blue ducks (whio) on the water – they don't quack, they whistle – and if you do, Garth and his wife, Leigh, are among the people to thank. The couple are founders of the Blue Duck Project, laying traps along the river to snare the stoats, weasels and rats which, during nesting time, see the whio as

sitting ducks.

There aren't any rapids on the Tokaanu Canal, but when we're dropped into the water by Kayak Wai Maori, we paddle straight inside a bridge. SH41 crosses the aqueduct by the Tokaanu Power Station and it's an eerie sensation to float along inside the concrete structure as cars rumble across overhead, shafts of daylight filtering through

BEST DRIVES with BMW

From exploring secret fishing spots to cruising the Central Volcanic Plateau, the agile X3 was the perfect travelling companion for our Turangi adventure, both on and off the road.

The Desert Road

Powering along the 60-odd kilometres crossing the barren plateau between Turangi and Waiouru, we opened up the X3; its intelligent xDrive made it feel more like a sports car than an SUV. Drenched in sunshine or snow, the windswept tussock plain in the shadow of Mt Ruapehu has a striking beauty. About 20km before Waiouru, we hooked right up the winding 4WD track to Tukino ski field, about 7km from the base camp carpark. The X3 handled the climb effortlessly; it was easy to see why the BMW xDrive is the world's most popular all-wheel-drive system.

Lake Otamangakau

Locals call it "The Big O" – not for the size of the lake, which is relatively small,



but for the trophy-sized trout caught there. From Turangi, we took SH47 south past Lake Rotopounamu (worth a detour for the lovely two-hour loop walking track). Rising over the saddle, we pulled over to admire the stunning view across Lake Rotoaira to Mt Tongariro. Before the turnoff to Rangipo, we swung into a side road on the right to Lake Otamangakau. Set high in moorland, this isolated lake has a spare beauty that's made it a popular site for wilderness fishing.

The Southern Bays

Take time to detour off the main highway and unexpected pleasures are to be found. For our family of four, the BMW X3 made

for a comfortable, easy ride as we cruised the picturesque settlements tucked into the southern curve of Lake Taupo. Two vineyards hug the slopes: Kuratau River Wines and Omori Estate, which both sell wine and olive oil from the cellar door. Detouring to Waihi, we dined by the water at Lakeland House below the steaming cliffs of Hipaua and a private Maori village. For views of the lake and Tongariro River delta, take SH41 past Tokaanu to the top of the Waihi hill and watch for a signposted turnoff to the lookout. Returning home after our 900km round-trip in the diesel X3, we were surprised to find we'd spent only \$65 at the pump. Not bad for a permanent 4WD.



Top: Riverside dining at Lakeland House.
Above: The old Tokaanu post office.

horizontal slats cut into the tunnel wall.

The waterway opens out into a narrow flax corridor that winds past raupo, swamp weed and patches of wild mint and puha. It's an active thermal area and we've been warned to keep clear of the steaming water and boiling mud pools. But most terrifying of all are the spiky blackberry brambles that claw at me from the bank whenever Billie, my co-pilot, decides to show off her rather unorthodox paddling style.

By the end of the weekend, the score is two trout for Flynn and one for Billie, who had to put an undersized catch back into the lake. ("I'm sure it's going to grow and have the rest of a happy life," she says, philosophically.)

Phil and I don't catch any – the sacrifices one makes for one's children! – but we do come away with a new roasting recipe: cognac, brown sugar and lemon zest. Even I'd sell my soul to a priest for that one.

Best To-Dos

AJ Charters

The catamaran is called Daydream but on board it's all action as skipper Adam Colling goes trout hunting down the southern end of Lake Taupo. Priced from \$120 per hour for up to six people, but the boat can carry up to 20.

Tokaanu Marina, ph (027) 345-7202,
email ajtaupocharter@gmail.com

Tongariro National Trout Centre

Kids can try fly-fishing – with a guaranteed catch that can be barbecued or smoked on the spot – on Children's Fishing Days, held once a month over winter. Beautiful bush walks, a museum and an underground viewing chamber. Turangi, SH1, ph (07) 386-8085, www.troutcentre.org.nz

Vertical Assault Indoor Climbing Wall

Don't wait for a rainy day to tackle the 14m tower and speed climbing corner (\$11 kids, \$15 adults). Or hunker down in the Red Crater internet cafe and watch the action through a glass viewing wall. 26 Ngawaka Pl, Turangi, ph (07) 386-8949, www.extremebackpackers.co.nz

Tongariro River Rafting & Mountain Bikes

Thrills and hopefully not-too-many spills in and around the river. The Family Float through tumbling Grade 2 rapids is a perfect intro for small water rats (\$65 per person), while guided bike rides range from beginner trails to the classic 42nd Traverse. Atirau Rd, Turangi, ph (0800) 101-024, www.trr.co.nz

Kayak Wai Maori

Paddle through the Tokaanu Power Station aqueduct beneath SH41, then follow the canal past steaming hot pools and boiling mud. The full circuit out to the lake takes about three hours but a shorter paddle was enough for our junior novices. From \$30 per person. 203 Puanga St, Tokaanu, ph (0800) 529-259, www.waimaori.com

Tokaanu Thermal Pools

Locals have been soaking in these natural mineral springs for the past five centuries (the large public pool is treated). The entrance to a 20-minute walkway through this active thermal area is right next door. Mangaroa St, Tokaanu, ph (07) 386-8575.

Best Eats

River Wines Vineyard & Restaurant

Mulled wine and an open fire in winter, pétanque and a sun-drenched courtyard all year round. Try the gourmet pizzas (\$20.50), with a crispy thin base from dough made fresh each morning. Tongariro River Estate, 2/134 Grace Rd, Turangi, ph (07) 386-6704, www.riverwines.co.nz

Grand Central Fry

Haven't bagged a trout yet? Head down to the riverbank with a newspaper-wrapped "catch" of steaming, golden-fried fish and crinkle-cut chips from the best little takeaway in town.

Cnr Ohuanga Rd & Ngawaka Pl, Turangi, ph (07) 386-5344.

Riverway General Store & Outfitters

A dairy and tackle shop in one, run by former Taupo fishing guide Marcel Ryda. Stock up on pies, lollies and ice cream, or swap tall tales with Ryda, whose Fine Fishing tours include raft or helicopter trips into remote back country. 123 Taupahi Rd, Turangi, ph (07) 386-0501.

Lakeland House

The only restaurant where you can wine and dine right on the edge of the lake. About 8km west of Turangi – but a world away from the cheek-by-jowl crush of Taupo. Open for lunch and dinner, Wednesday to Sunday. Mains from \$28. Waihi Rd, Waihi, ph (07) 386-6442.

Best Coffee

Rafting New Zealand

Take a hit of Ozone Espresso at this former Tokaanu-based company's new Turangi base, which includes a cafe, racks of cool Chalky Digits clothing, and hot solar-powered showers to warm up in when you come off the river. 41 Ngawaka Pl, Turangi, ph (0800) 865-226, www.raftingnewzealand.com

Best Sleeps

Creel Lodge

Set in lovely native bush with hidden herb gardens and the Tongariro River on its back doorstep. Well-behaved dogs welcomed "by appointment"; fishing gear and licences available from the historic Creel Tackle House out front. Doubles from \$110 per night.

183 Taupahi Rd, Turangi, ph (0800) 273-355, www.creel.co.nz

Tokaanu Post Office

Built in 1913, this charming former post office and postmaster's residence is now a privately owned bach, available to rent as casual, family-friendly accommodation for up to 12 people. From \$150 per night. Bookings through www.bookabach.co.nz +