

SOPHISTICATED WILDERNESS

Patrick Smith takes a well-heeled hike in the wild and beautiful Seaward Kaikoura Mountains.
Photos: Nicky McArthur and Patrick Smith



It must have taken a mighty feat of engineering – not to mention bloody-minded determination – to build Shearwater Lodge 1,000 metres up in this remote alpine valley. It was something to ponder as, standing on a high saddle above the valley, we had our first tantalising glimpse of our digs. It had been an exhilarating day but now we were looking forward to putting our feet up; to drinks around a blazing fire and a promised gourmet dinner.

Shearwater Lodge, our base during this three-day Kaikoura Wilderness Walk, is named for the endangered Hutton's shearwater seabird that breeds high in the mountains, and a portion of each walker's fee goes to the Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust, of which walk owner and operator Nicky McArthur is an avid supporter.

We'd joined Nicky and a few other walkers in Kaikoura that morning and packed our bags into a 4WD for the trip into the mountains. Forty minutes north of the town, famous for its whale-watching and other wildlife adventuring, we turned off the main road and climbed up through the pretty Puhi Puhi Valley. This was once moa country; Maori hunters named the valley after the giant bird's plumes (puhi), from which they made their cloaks. The hapless moa, of course, became extinct – a future the Trust and Department of Conservation are working to avert for the Hutton's shearwater.

The private and protected Puhi Peaks Nature Reserve, through which our walk would take us, is also home to kea, bellbird, South Island robin, the New Zealand falcon, harrier hawk and rifleman, among other birds. Red deer, chamois and Arapawa sheep roam free but are culled to allow regeneration.

We came to a stop at Puhi Peaks Farm, 550m above the coast. From here we'd be footing it, but first there was a briefing in the woolshed

The three-day Kaikoura Wilderness Walk leads walkers through changing scenery that includes flower-covered meadows and rugged alpine tundra.



Above: Relaxing around the open fire at Shearwater Lodge.
 Below: The 1,000m-high lodge in its majestic setting.
 Opposite page: Beverley Falls.



with Nicky, her son Sam and our main guide, Lance Godfrey.

Our first day's walk would end at the lodge, but the trail would take us even higher than that before day's end. Happily, our luggage went ahead of us and we carried only light daypacks.

Nicky went ahead, too and our party of nine walkers fell in behind Lance, who knows these mountains intimately. Sam brought up the rear.

We climbed steadily through open hill country and then through stands of manuka and kanuka, ferns, rimu, lancewood and marble leaf. As we gained altitude the vegetation closed in and we were in a rich green landscape of ferns, regenerating totara and black beech trees that oozed sweet-tasting "honey".

By lunchtime we'd reached a spot called Totara Saddle, where an elaborate picnic lunch awaited on a long table, with superb mountain views.

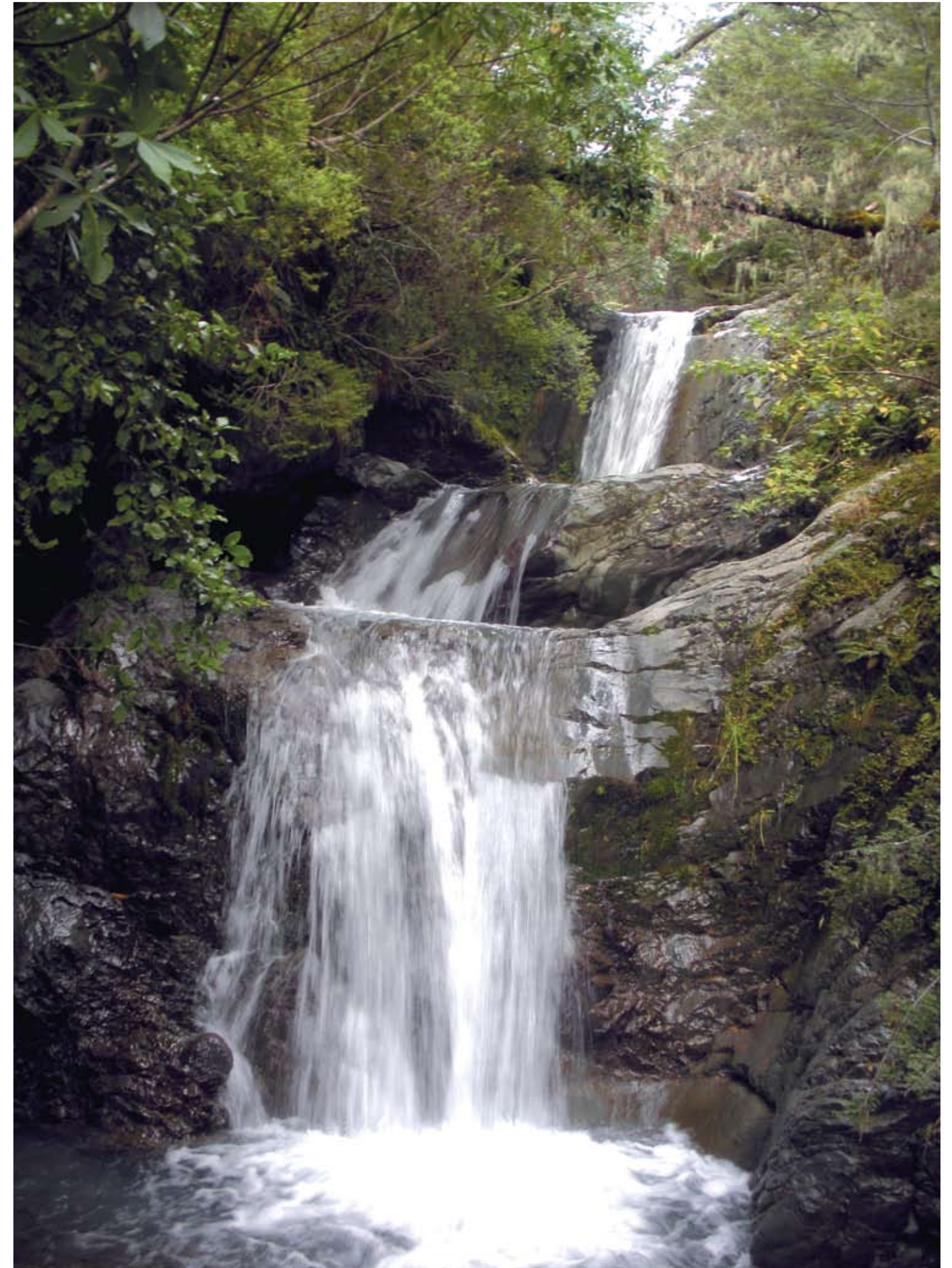
After lunch we dropped down into Happy Valley and crossed a rushing stream before climbing up into thick beech forest. We were starting to understand how wonderfully varied our days would be as we moved up and down through different ecosystems. After crossing a grassy plateau, we plunged into an ancient totara forest where thick bush lawyer vines curled up towards the canopy.

We emerged onto a field glowing with yellow celmisia flowers and then climbed up to another saddle. Now we had our first glimpse of Shearwater Lodge across the valley. It looked so close, but it would be another hour before we could collapse gratefully into chairs on the lodge's broad deck, where afternoon tea had been set out.

Nicky showed us to our room, large, comfortable and warm, with a king-sized bed and ensuite bathroom. The purpose-built, eco-friendly lodge, named among the top 10 eco-lodges in Australasia in 2011 (the entire operation has a Qualmark Enviro Gold rating), sleeps up to 12 guests in six double rooms, each with a private veranda and breathtaking views.

Back in the lounge – polished wooded floors, high cathedral ceiling and leather couches drawn up to a blazing fire – it was time for pre-dinner drinks and canapés. Nicky, a trained Cordon Bleu cook, was already in the open-plan kitchen preparing dinner.

"The lodge is an important part of the experience," she told me across the wooden bar. "People often talk about the family





atmosphere.” And, yes, it was easy to feel at home here, pleasantly tired, drink in hand, sunk into the leather couch, feet warmed by the flaming logs in the stone fireplace.

At dinner, assigned seating at the long table brought the solo walkers into the family fold. The comfortable atmosphere grew along with talk and laughter and plenty of very fine food and wine.

The next morning, after a breakfast of croissants, cereals, yoghurt, fresh berries, pancakes and bacon, we prepared for a big day’s walk. Blue skies had given way to low cloud and it was decidedly chilly. Sam offered words of dubious comfort. “Don’t worry,” he said, “you’ll soon warm up – it’s uphill straight away.”

We struck out up Happy Valley and came to an alpine meadow sumptuously dressed in yellow mountain star lilies, daisies and hebes. We crossed the valley, rock-hopping over a small torrent, and climbed up the other side. As we got higher, tiny edelweiss and black daisies appeared. Lance pointed out groups of red deer and Arapawa sheep high on the steep mountain slopes (you can hunt here in the walk’s off-season; it helps to maintain the ecological balance). There, too, on a vertiginous rock face, we could make out one of the two shearwater breeding colonies. The birds nest in rocky burrows and make the 20km trip to the sea and back each day to feed their chicks.

We continued upwards, stopping often to examine tiny rock-clinging plants, which Lance named one by one. “You always see something in flower,” he told us. “It never gets boring, that’s for sure.”

Finally we reached our lunchtime goal: the 1,530m summit of Surveyor’s Peak. On a clear day you can see as far south as Banks Peninsula and up to the North Island. Today we could see only cloud. We hunkered down to eat our lunch.

Our route down included an exhilarating run across a wide, steep scree slope. We took off one by one, leaning into the slope, striding and sliding, to arrive at the bottom panting and laughing.

Back to the lodge the smell of fresh-baked cake greeted us and we gathered around the fire with cups of tea and coffee. Happily bushed, a nap before dinner seemed like a good idea.



Above: Day three, coast in sight.
Below: Mountain star lilies gilding an alpine meadow.
Opposite page: Dinner by candlelight and (bottom) a tasty pre-dinner snack.






Later, plates of crayfish and smoked salmon were produced to go with our drinks, then it was another sumptuous dinner and an early night.

Sunday is a relaxed walking day. After breakfast we wandered down through beech trees hung with gauzy old man's beard to pretty Beverley Falls and found our way upstream past clear pools that must be irresistible in summer.

Lunch was waiting for us back at the lodge and we gathered for the last time around the table. That afternoon we'd walk out, but via a different route to the one we came in on.

It's a pleasant walk back, across open country with magnificent views down the whole bush-clad valley to the coast. By 4.30pm we were back at Pui Peaks woolshed and 45 minutes later we were dropped off in Kaikoura.

It had been a heady three days. We'd moved up and down through several ecosystems and witnessed amazing alpine vistas. We'd seen unique flora and fauna, scrambled up waterfalls and across streams, leapt down a scree slope, enjoyed great company and been cared for at a level that would not disgrace a five-star hotel.

What a very civilised way to enjoy the wilderness. 

In this Rugby World Cup year the walking season is starting earlier than usual, on 5 September. See www.kaikourawilderness.co.nz for details.



Above: Sunshine dapples a ferny grotto.
Top right: Guide Lance Godfrey.
Right: Walkers strike out through a colourful alpine landscape.