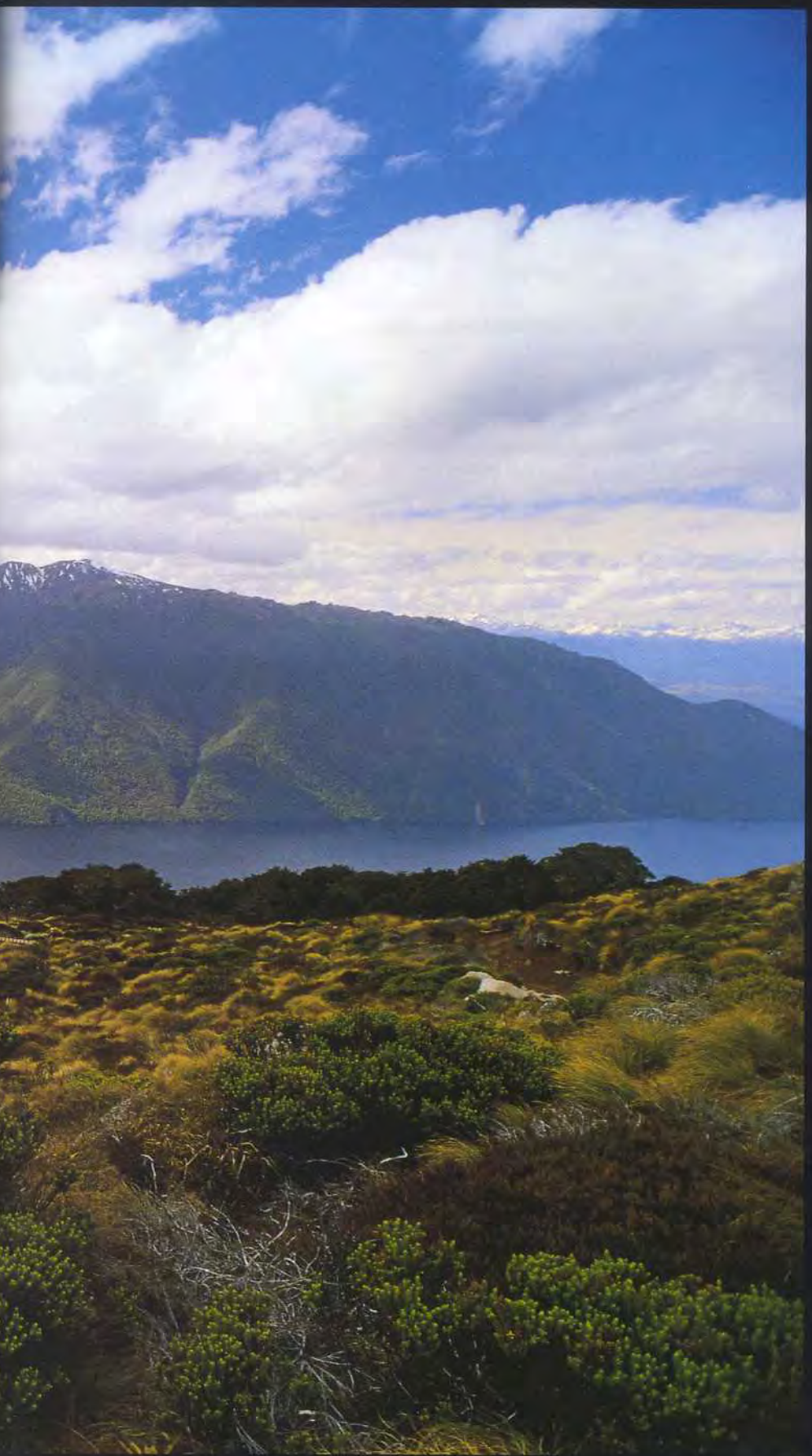
KEEPING TRACK OF THE KEPLER

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ROB GREENAWAY



It is not unusual for New Zealanders to go tramping on their honeymoon, but my wife and I gathered that it's a route less trodden in Europe.

"There's no privacy in a tramping hut, you know," advised Hans. "In Germany we go to quiet places. You can't make love in a tramping hut, you know."

He was right. The Kepler is a quiet place, sure enough, but the mattresses were far too hard.

The concept of a well-manicured track could put off a few of the traditional hairy-legged trampers, with hook-grass seeds in their beards and Mountain Mule packs cutting chasms in their shoulders. But I ask, what is wrong with being able to walk hand in hand on a tramping track?

The Kepler — New Zealand's only track custom-designed for international tourism — rises from the shores of Lake Te Anau and sweeps as gentle as a contour up the slopes of the Kepler Mountains in Fiordland National Park. The route has been carefully planned to offer all the things that a track in a land of fiords can — beaches, beeches, open tussock-land with views of classic U-shaped valleys, rugged mountain tops, waterfalls, river flats, lakes, and a start and finish point near the well-developed township of Te Anau where dried pasta is readily available. This is clearly a trail that didn't grow out of some old trading or hunting route, unlike so many other tracks in New Zealand.

We began our three-day expedition in Te Anau, deciding which shaped pasta to add to our rations of wine and dried soup, and passing through the Department of Conservation field centre to check on conditions and the number of other users of the track. Although it was December, snow still lay on 'the tops' and we were warned to expect a bit of the crunchy stuff.

Many trampers catch a shuttle from the village to the start of the Kepler at Dock Bay on the edge of Lake Te Anau, but as we were going to be walking for three days we saw no reason to swap $10 to save ourselves one hour. There is a hidden benefit to such a decision.

The Murchison Mountains can be seen across Lake Te Anau from the Kepler for the first day and a half of the tramp. Bird fanatics will know the name Murchison since the takahe — a large flightless rail similar in appearance to the pukeko (or swamp hen) and once thought extinct — were rediscovered on the steep tussock slopes of the range in 1948. The birds currently number fewer than 200 and the Murchison Range is off limits to casual visitors, so it is unlikely that a casual tramper will ever find the bird in its natural environment. However, the walk from Te Anau to Dock Bay passes a set of enclosures managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) that host a range of native birds with personal histories that mean release into the wild is not an option. Included there is a pair of takahe.

As we approached the takahe enclosure, which contained a broad mess of tussock and scrub, the birds trotted towards the low fence, chattering between themselves and apparently with us. The species has the tameness and stunning appearance of all good extinct species, and yet they still have a chance of surviving in the wild if they can be protected from predation by stoats and from competition with the introduced red deer for food. We are not 'birders' of the obsessively enthusiastic variety by any stretch of the imagination, yet we spent over an hour watching the birds with their red sledge-hammer beaks, and their fiord-blue and beech-forest-green plumage as they paced the perimeter of their home. We were supposed to be out in the wilds of Fiordland, but couldn't get away from two caged birds. It might have had something to do with our recent wedding.

We hit the trail and made up time on the first section of the route to Luxmore Hut, rising from lake level at just over 200 metres above sea level to nearer the snow line at over 1,000 m. That 800 m climb, which took about four hours, was surprisingly easy — the result of good track design. The concept of a well-manicured track could put off a few of the traditional hairy-legged trampers, with hook-grass seeds in their beards and Mountain Mule packs cutting chasms in their shoulders. But I ask, what is wrong with being able to walk hand in hand on a tramping track?

The Mount Luxmore Hut — the first of three on the track — has a couple of things we hadn't seen in the mountains for a while: flush toilets and a wooden helicopter pad, all in use too. The flush toilets are there only in summer (in winter, sub-zero temperatures force the use of a long-drop), and we'd picked an interesting time to see the helicopter pad in operation. Once a year a national mountain race is staged on the Kepler, named — no surprise here — the Kepler Challenge. The 67 km event has 300 entrants running the full track in around seven or eight hours. The record is four hours, forty-one minutes. The race is over-subscribed every year and because the potential exists for the track to be injured by the event, DOC has required that the 300 entry level remain in place.

There has been some controversy over such events in National Parks in recent years, largely the result of Robin Judkins — the man who made his fortune out of the Coast to Coast multisports race that spans the South Island — proposing that he stage a race over the Milford Track. To many the idea of treating such a noble walk as the Milford as the venue for a commercial race was abhorrent. It would belittle and demean the experience of walking the track if trampers knew it was run by insensitive endorphin freaks in a few hours. It was the thin edge of the wedge. It was crass, had no place in a national park, and so the proposal to race the Milford died.

That furore led DOC to implement a social impact assessment program for the Kepler Challenge. We, along with the twenty other trampers in Luxmore Hut, were asked what we thought about the race. A day later we ran into a hut warden at the Iris Burn Hut who was compiling the results of the survey which had been held all the way along the track.

Tony Preston has had a long association with the Kepler, starting in the late 1980s when he helped build it and progressing through years of hut wardening since then. We'd met at university almost ten years previously (New Zealand is a small place). Now we kicked back in his private quarters alongside the hut, drank real coffee, and discussed the race survey.

"Interesting results," he said. "Virtually everyone we surveyed reckoned the race improved their tramp — made it more interesting. One thing got quite a few people though. The time-keepers and drink-stop managers were dropped off by helicopter, stayed the night in the huts and came with cooked quiches, wine, roast chicken, garlic bread and the like. All the trampers were living off freeze-drieds and dehydrated soup, which tasted twice as bad with the aroma of all that fresh cooking hanging about."

Tony went on to describe how the environmental impacts were being kept to a minimum. "The damage really occurs when runners go off the track, and they'll only do that to save time on sharp corners, like the steep zigzag off the tops on the way to this hut. We put video cameras in those locations and with a relay can pick out and disqualify any naughty runners before they finish the race."

By evening there was no sign of there ever having been 600 sneaker-clad feet on the track. We spent the afternoon fending off the blood-thirsty sandflies and shocking our circulatory systems by stripping off and falling into the pool under the Iris Burn Waterfall, a 20 minute walk from the hut. We felt cleaner than if we'd had a sauna.

Over three days we experienced the Kepler at its most busy and at its most quiet. The Californian couple arguing over how to play backgammon in the Iris Burn Hut was fascinating ("Do you think we'll ever get like that?" my wife asked). The keas that unsuccessfully begged lunch near Mount Luxmore had left a permanent reminder in the torn canvas on my pack. We'd let our eyes bathe in the view of hectares of native ladder fern and soft mosses under a canopy of red beech, and had rested by the rapidly lapping waves of Lake Manapouri.

Those scenes were almost lost in the early 1970s during New Zealand's first truly national campaign on a conservation issue. The level of Lake Manapouri was destined to be raised to supply cheap hydroelectricity for industry. A memorable song was penned that went: '"Damn the dam!" cried the fantail, as it flew into the sky.' Manapouri was the dam, the song hit the top of the charts in New Zealand, and the lake was saved. The water level is now controlled by a hydrogeneration system, but a chunk of Fiordland National Park was saved from drowning, and a drowning which would have included much of the Kepler Track.

Now the Kepler faces the challenge of surviving the growing number of conservation-minded people who wish to see what has been preserved, and currently over 5,000 people each year do so. Fortunately, the track — made to order with heavy usage in mind — is industrial strength.

Previous pages, Luxmore Hut on the Kepler Track with the Murchison Mountains across Lake Te Anau.

Page 64: Left, Waiau River from Kepler Track *[Ian Brown]*; Right, Descending to Iris Burn Valley

This page clockwise from top left: Fungi, Waiau River *[Ian Brown]*; Kepler Mts across Lake Manapouri *[Ian Brown]*; Lake Te Anau from west of Luxmore Hut; One of three hundred Kepler Challengers

Cool temperate rainforest
[Ian Brown]

Above, Elizabeth passing Mt Luxmore, the high point of the track;
Below, Rock with red lichen

info box

The Kepler Relief Valve

A Track Made For Walking

New Zealand has got plenty of two things: trampers and mountains. However, the New Zealand Tourism Board, which markets the country internationally as a tourism destination, is seeking to increase the number of visitors — many of whom tramp — to almost that of the New Zealand population. At the same time, traditional Kiwi trampers and conservationists (usually one and the same) are working out that the mountains are smaller than they once thought.

Tracks like the Milford and the Greenstone grew over a few centuries from traditional Maori trading and hunting routes into rugged tracks that interested only a few good, keen explorers. These early hairy-legged individuals lived off a little flour, fat and the flesh of native birds for weeks on end.

During the past few decades, photo albums from around the world have begun showing trampers with shaved legs and sand-shoes walking along broad avenues within the beech forest, heading from one gas-fired hut with flush toilets to another almost identical building a few hours walk away, some with their gear carried by guides and helicopters. For many traditional Kiwi trampers the romance of these tracks has been lost — although the magnificent scenery hasn't changed.

The Kepler Track was developed to relieve the pressure of numbers on internationally renowned tracks such as the Milford and the Routeburn, both of which now have booking systems to prevent the overcrowding of huts. From the word go, the Kepler was intended to be a track of international repute, and was designed to cater for large numbers of visitors. This intention was marked by shared funding of the NZ$1.4 million development costs between the Department of Conservation and the New Zealand Tourism Board, and with some labour provided by the international Operation Raleigh scheme.

Eyebrows were raised amongst the more traditional trampers when mini bulldozers were used to build much of the track. This had never previously been attempted in a national park — sweat and shovels being the norm. Not only was the Department of Conservation intending to develop a route that would require minimal maintenance — with industrial strength culverts and bridges — but they were in a hurry to have the Kepler open in time to celebrate the 1987 centenary of national parks in New Zealand. The track officially opened in February, 1988, but that was close enough.