

# AHURIRI VALLEY

by Bruce Mason\*

The Ahuriri River and its wetlands are of international importance. They are home for many of our endemic black stilts, the world's rarest wading bird — little wonder that the river was protected by a draft conservation order last year.

Another 54 species of birds associated with the river and its delta have been recorded by the Wildlife Service, 34 of which are indigenous or endemic to New Zealand.

To date, the Ahuriri — the southernmost tributary of the Waitaki catchment — is the only major waterway in the upper Waitaki that has not been dammed or diverted.

Man has hardly changed the Ahuriri's natural landscape. Alpine grasslands dominated by snow tussock occupy a zone above the forest and below alpine fellfields. Pockets of mountain beech cling to valley walls, reflecting the effects of fire and grazing, while towards the moister valley head silver beech

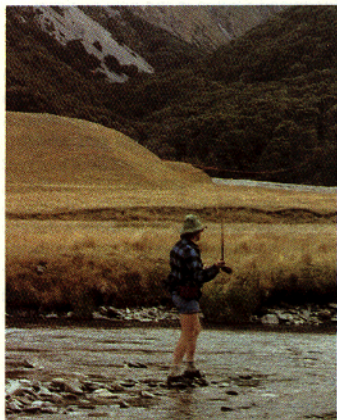
becomes more or less continuous.

Short tussock and exotic grasses now dominate the lower valley walls and floor, although isolated examples of original native vegetation remain in the swamps near the river.

The first ascents of the Ahuriri's major peaks were made in the 1930s. However, plenty of climbing challenges still remain, especially on glacier-shrouded Mt Barth and on the sheer south face of Mt Huxley.

The valley is attractive tramping, camping and deerstalking country. Spectacular Canyon Creek and its hanging upper valley is a dramatic place to visit. Range crossings north and south lead into the Dingle Burn and the Maitland via Snowy Gorge Stream.

As the only unmodified river left in the Mackenzie Basin, the Ahuriri is becoming increasingly important for canoeists and anglers. The two metre high "Ahuriri drop" and a mid-valley



**Fly fishing, Ahuriri-Canyon Ck junction. The Ahuriri is a magnificent fishing river and acclimatisation societies, along with our Society, strongly support efforts to protect the South Island high country's rivers and wetlands.**





Birchwood Station wetlands and the Upper Ahuriri River. Canyon Creek is in the centre distance, with Mt Barth (2416m) to the right.

Photo: Barney Brewster

gorge offer good white water, while the river has an international reputation for trout fishing — important for the growing tourist industry at nearby Omarama.

Up valley from the Ahuriri Plain there are nine pastoral leases over Crown lands. Farmers do not occupy all areas — much of the beech forest is State Forest and the upper valley floor is Unalienated Crown Land (UCL). There are no reserves of any consequence outside of these areas; thus the Ahuriri's scenic and recreational attractions now under threat from farming development urgently need better protection.

## Public or Private Interest — the Birchwood Case

Birchwood Station is the only pastoral lease in the Ahuriri valley head and has long been the focus of public attention. Farming interests have always dominated alternative uses of Crown pastoral land and Birchwood highlights the conflicts between public and private interests.

It is clearly an historical mistake that Mts Huxley (2484m) and Barth (2416m, Thurneyson Glacier included), and the extensive alpine barrens of the Barrier Range were included in pastoral tenure. It is incredible that they remain so.

The public is not always welcome at Birchwood Station. The first indication is a "Private Property — Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" sign on the public road leading to and beyond the homestead.

Visitors have found to their annoyance and inconvenience that access to the State Forest and ungrazed portions of the run has often been refused, sometimes even after prior consent has

been obtained. Ironically, the Forest Service has put several thousand dollars into upgrading the road access to the State Forest to encourage public use. The work has also improved farm access for the runholder.

Sections of the road formation deviate from the legal road, but rather than relocate this, as is within its power, the Crown proposes to close the legal road and issue a 33-year special lease over the road formation to the runholder — over a road that is effectively maintained by the taxpayer! While public access will be permitted, the runholder will hold discretionary rights over who drives on it. No doubt the prospect of needlessly walking along 8 km of metalled road will continue to act as a deterrent to public use.

Lands and Survey consider this arrangement an improvement on a long-standing access problem. But recreational users were not even consulted before this was done. Now we are appealing against this decision.

In return for the runholder surrendering his legal rights over a few hectares of non-legal road, he has been offered the incorporation of 730 hectares of valley floor (UCL) into the pastoral lease at no additional charge. This relatively productive land is probably the best bargaining point the Crown could have in decades to reach a full accommodation of wider community interests. This opportunity must not be lost.

A single purpose, exclusive tenure system at Birchwood has proven to be inappropriate. Instead a range of land uses should be integrated there.

Immediate priorities are:

Fencing and protection of wetlands and river margins from grazing, burning,

over-sowing and drainage.

Surrender of all alpine country from the lease (about 15,000 hectares), not just the Mt Barth-Huxley area (circa 5000 hectares) which has been agreed.

Open public access to the State Forest at Canyon Creek.

Public foot access to the Ahuriri River, the Dingle Burn State Forest and all surrendered high country.

Reservation of beech forest within the pastoral lease and exclusion of stock from this forest.

Will private interest continue to prevail in the allocation and use of public lands? A new balance of interest is necessary, but not on the historical models currently practised.

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**Birchwood Station - Ahuriri River**

