

BARKING mad town



Clockwise from left: The Rangitikei offers superb fishing opportunities; The statue of a Huntaway dog in Hunterville recognises the immense contribution this dog has made to the farming district of Hunterville; Richard Horrocks, member of the Huntaway Festival committee, with his Huntaway dogs

HUNTERVILLE

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Imagine tearing down a hillside wearing a piece of heavy sacking; swimming through an eel-infested trough; eating a bull's testicle and washing it down with a shot of cold cooking oil before persuading your faithful, but utterly bewildered, dog to jump into a wheelbarrow so you can hasten to the finishing line. Well, imagine no more! This delightful race already exists.

The gruelling, three kilometre obstacle course, the Shepherd's Shemozzle, could only have been born out of insanity, but nonetheless is popular among an increasing number of participants and their huntaway dogs. These hardy shepherds flock to Hunterville, the huntaway capital of the world, from all over New Zealand during the annual Hunterville Huntaway Festival, ready to pit their fitness, dog training abilities and iron stomachs against one another.

Hunterville (pop 600) is on SH1 in the Rangitikei district between Bulls and the Desert Road. Aside from the Shemozzle weekend, when the streets are festooned with thousands of festival goers, the town is a pretty sleepy place but a rich history, buzzing local community and close proximity to some wilderness gems make it well worth a closer look.

The Rangitikei River is one such gem. At 185km the Rangitikei is one of the longest rivers in New Zealand and runs from the Kaimanawa Ranges, south-east of Lake Taupo, to the Tasman Sea in the south. The iconic white 'paapa' or mudstone cliffs and deep canyons provide a majestic backdrop for rafting, kayaking and canoeing and the river also provides some great fishing. The lower reaches, which are easily accessible from Hunterville, provide good spin fishing for trout.

The Bruce Park Loop Track, 5km south of Hunterville, provides a relaxing 20-minute to one hour family walk through a remnant of podocarp and broadleaf forest. Keep an eye out for kereru, tui, bellbird, fantails, and occasionally the long-tailed bat, that live among magnificent specimens of rimu, totara and kahikatea.

The four kilometre Beehive Creek Walkway, south-east of Hunterville in the Pohangina Valley, follows the shallow sandy bed of the Beehive Creek and has numerous bird watching and paddling opportunities. The track is always popular with families in summer and, as well as being able to see tui, kereru, fantail, bellbird, kingfishers and native lizards, there are good views of the Pohangina Valley and Ruahine Ranges. The walkway is closed for lambing from August 1 to October 31.

The six to eight hour Atene Skyline Track in the Wanganui National Park, about an hour west of Hunterville, makes for a great day tramp with extensive views of the Whanganui River and its tributary valleys, Mt Ruapehu, Mt Taranaki/Egmont and the Tasman Sea. A campsite marks the mid-way point of the track.

The western side of Ruahine Forest Park, about an hour west of Hunterville, provides for a wide range of recreational activities including tramping, mountain biking, cross country skiing, kayaking, rainbow and brown trout fishing, swimming and camping. Tracks range from 20-minutes to multi-day and the park has a good hut network.

Takapari Road in the Ruahine Forest Park is a steep 11km mountain bike ride up to the A-Frame Hut and then a further five kilometre ride

along the tops with great views of the Central Plateau and the east and west coasts. Another popular mountain biking spot is Lismore Forest, 25-minutes northwest of Hunterville near Wanganui. Lismore Forest Park picnic area is the best place to start exploring the maze of gravel roads and purpose-built mountain bike tracks in the area which offer various grades and one to eight hour tracks of one to 100km.

Places to stay in Hunterville include Rothesay, the old Hunterville Post Office. Built in 1903 the heritage listed B&B is run by enthusiastic historians Robyn and Duncan McNie (and their pet ghost). Ask to see the old post office sorting room downstairs and their astonishing collection of old toys, Victorian dolls and antiques. Camping options include Vinegar Hill camping ground, five kilometres north of Hunterville on the banks of the Rangitikei River.

A strong, thriving local community always makes for a great town and there is nothing quite like a unique festival to bring the locals together. Designed as a celebration of the shepherd/huntaway relationship, the Huntaway Festival has been going strong for over 10 years and although the very thought of eating a bull's testicle is enough to make me run for the hills, one regular competitor put it simply, "I love the Shemozzle because it's so unique." You can say that again. 🐾

WILD FILE

The Huntaway Festival and Shepherd's Shemozzle is held annually on the weekend after Labour Day. **Shemozzle:** Yiddish for a confused situation or affair