

ON THE LOWER WAIKATO WAIPA CONTROL SCHEME

By Dennis Hynes



Lake Waikare is huge. Well worth taking a compass bearing as you go.

Recently, when gale force winds predicted for the North Island West Coast put a damper on most alternatives, Dave Beard and I from Waikato Canoe & Kayak paddled 30 kms following the Lower Waikato Waipa Control Scheme from Rangiriri through the Whangamarino Wetlands and back out to the Waikato River at Mercer.

The Lower Waikato Waipa Control Scheme is managed by Environment Waikato and utilises the natural storage capacity of Lake Waikare and the Whangamarino Wetland (up to 95 million cu m) to dampen peak flows and lessen flooding along the lower Waikato. A short paddle back up the Te Onetea Stream from the boat ramp at Rangiriri took us to the control gates which divert floodwaters from the Waikato River into the Control Scheme.

We paddled down the Te Onetea Stream and then NE across Lake Waikare to the outlet, where there is a short portage over control gates into the Lake's drainage canal. The canal is not always navigable so



Diagram courtesy of Environment Waikato

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if you think to make this trip you should contact Environment Waikato (0800 800 401) to confirm that water between Lake Waikare and the Whangamarino River is flowing.

The canal brought us into the Pungorehu and then the Whangamarino Rivers, both of which had overtopped their banks creating a maze of channels and expansive shallow lakes. With the leafless trees mirrored in still water, and with only the sound of birds and our paddles, it was surreal. Photos don't do it justice!

A section of board walk just centimetres above the water was the only 'dry' spot we could find for lunch!

At lower water levels there is a further short portage over a stone weir 500 m beyond the confluence with the Maramarua River. However on this day all we could see were some small standing waves.

We paddled on through massive control gates which prevent the Waikato River flowing back into the wetlands, under the rail and SH1 bridges into the Waikato River, and downstream to the boat ramp at Mercer.

The route is easy to follow when water is contained within the stop banks. Apart from the canal below the Lake Waikare outlet, all the other sections are navigable year round.

However the best time is following a major flood when the Pungorehu & Whangamarino Rivers have topped their banks. The extensive shallow lakes then give access far into the wetlands where it could be easy to get lost. Perhaps not best for a first trip!

For a very different experience, try it in spring when the floodwaters are retreating back within the flood banks. The water literally boils with giant carp and other pest fish.



Above & Below: Control Gates



The only 'dry' spot we could find for lunch!



It is difficult to navigate when the area is in flood.



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