

Trip Report: Lake Taupo & Waikato River, 3/4th October 2009

Tony Frith

After a late night road trip to Taupo on Friday, Saturday dawned sunny and rather cold. We headed down to our regular meeting point at the Coffee Plus Café and met with the rest of the team, and what a team it was Jamie, Mel, Brian, Larry, Andy, Natacha, Astrid, Chris, Ben and Myself. We then got down to business, eating breakfast and deciding what dives the day was going to bring. At last it was decided that we would split the day and dive the lake in the morning and the river in the afternoon. Now we just had to decide exactly where on the lake to go....



After breakfast we headed down the east side of the lake to Motutere Bay where we split into three groups and headed for three different locations. Andy and Natacha went further down the lake, Jamie, Mel, Brian and Larry dived one side of Motutere Bay and the rest of us Astrid, Chris, Ben and I dived the danger mark side of the bay.



After kitting up we waded into the lake and boy was that an experience in itself cold enough to freeze the gooseberries off a plaster saint. Eventually though we got up the courage and headed for the danger mark. Oh joy what was that running down my back could I mistake the feel of freezing water finding its way inside my lovely warm wetsuit....

When we reached the danger mark Ben and Chris headed off and then Astrid and I then headed for deeper waters. The first few moments underwater took my breath away as my face swiftly froze; it took quite a while to get used to that I can tell you for sure. As we dropped off the side of the reef that the danger buoy marked, we slowly headed down a reasonably steady slope to approx 12 metres where it dropped off in big blocky steps to 40 metres or thereabouts. The cliff was quite interesting but covered in fine silt that puffed up with little assistance.

Reaching 38 metres we headed slowly for the surface and investigated the multiple holes in the cliff to find numerous small fresh water crayfish or Koura inhabiting these places. As we headed further up I saw what looked like a dead trout leaning against some rocks but imagine my surprise when it turned out to be a catfish, I'd heard that there were catfish in the lake but certainly hadn't expected to see any. After a few quick photos we continued our ascent to the safety stop where Astrid deployed her SMB. We surfaced shortly thereafter to beautiful sunny skies.



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We hopped back into the cars and headed back into Taupo for lunch and then it was down to the river at Cherry Island making sure that we had plenty of time before the water release from the lake gates. On arriving at this point we decided which cars to send to the lower end of the river drift at Smales Farm and then Andy informed the bungee jump boat crew that we were going to be in the water while we geared up. From there it was short scramble down the bank and into the chilly Waikato River.

We split into buddy pairs and slipped into the river, with each pair about a minute apart and drifted down past the bungee area before we descended into the depths of the river, at this point the river varies in depth from less than a metre to 11 metres so its quite an exercise if your buoyancy is even a little off on the day. The river was not flowing quite as high as it had back in June and the current ended up being quite sluggish in some points but all went well as we drifted downriver over a multitude of sights that prove humanity can be rather lazy in dealing with their rubbish. Plenty of tires and bottles proved this point quite adequately; this time however I was on the lookout for more than the detritus of human occupation and saw numerous trout. It seemed as if they knew each time I put the camera away because there they'd be laughing at me as I struggled to get it out again before they were gone.

I found it much easier this time as I knew some of the natural landmarks to look for to navigate my way between the boulders, trapped logs and rapids. The water release from the lake gates rolled over us slightly before we hit the shallows and then it was as though we had been catapulted forwards by the water as we rushed over the stones and watching them disappear behind us it wasn't hard to see why this dive is such a fun one to do.



We initially surfaced just upriver from Chris's island and made our way round to the right and continued on downriver. We then descended again and headed down further past the hot water stream to Smales farm where we all exited safely. From here we headed back towards Taupo with one brief stop where Andy had to change his tire after getting what was almost a branch through the sidewall.

Later on in the evening we all met up at Mulligans' bar on the Taupo water front and had a chat and a laugh before dinner at the Waterfront bar and restaurant. I must say all in all it was a great day with good food, fun and great company.

Sunday dawned wet and gloomy and at breakfast we decided to head down to the southern end of the lake to see how the diving was there. After investigating several likely spots we settled on Pukawa Bay and amongst the rain we kitted up and entered the water at the boat ramp. The water wasn't as cold at the surface today, perhaps that was just because we were so cold to start with. We did a short surface swim out to the mooring buoys and then descended into the watery depths.

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The scenery didn't change a lot on this dive as it was predominantly a steady down slope into the lake so we headed down slope on the way annoying a few more koura. Having these tiny creatures put up their claws to challenge us does look quite funny seeing as we are so large and they are so small. At thirty metres we must have gone through some kind of thermocline as we started to get cold through our wetsuits etc. We continued down to thirty five metres and being near to deco we turned around and headed back to the surface in gentle stages. After getting back above the thirty metre mark the cold was not a

problem anymore and so we slowly ascended following the slope through the various short stops at 15 metres, 10 metres and finally to the safety stop at 5 metres.

And so ended our weekend away in Taupo, just in time to miss the really nasty weather that was to follow in the following days.