

BUBS

We were hunkered down in the scrub hugging pampass and manuka, Ed and I. Just quietly watching the goings on out on Walker Island. We pretty much knew what was about to unfold. A slaughter most likely.

Ed and I had trundled up through Kaimaumu this fine late summer day, knowing that the tides, moon, and condition of the birds were all primed for a harvest. We were going on instinct and on knowledge gleaned from those who used to practice the craft years ago, now too old or too caring to continue.

Walker Island is a series of shell banks located inside the mouth of Awanui Harbour, a couple of kilometres east of Kaimaumu village. It had been designated as a wildlife refuge sometime in the fifties because of the wildlife values, particularly with being a nesting site for gulls, oystercatcher and so forth. The shell banks shift about marginally, growing, shrinking with subtle changes due to fickle mother nature, the ebb and flow of storms, time and tide.

Kuaka, or Eastern Bar Tailed Godwit as they are known, frequent the shell banks around February - March. Flocking together in huge mobs wading in the shallows, picking over the crabs and crustaceans building up their fat reserves ready for their big migratory flight up to the northern hemisphere. They are also sought after as nice plump food source for some local iwi, a tradition still carried over from days gone by, now outlawed and unlawful unless permitted under the Wildlife Act.

The Kaimaumu area is mostly scrubland, with some farming, contains large tracts of old gumfields picked over by gum diggers in the early 1900's, now mostly conservation area. It is also very flat and offers few high vantage points. We did find one, near the rubbish dump. Parked our wagon up in the scrub out of sight and hunkered down on the highest point we could find and glassed the area. The first thing that stood out was the makeshift campsite tucked into the scrub and pampass right near the shoreline roughly a kilometre in front of us, directly in line with the Walker Island shell banks.

Our timing was either impeccable or lucky, probably the latter, but either way as we watched we spotted a small Parker-craft type dinghy with three persons in it, slowly motoring out from the campsite heading for the shell banks. They landed on the western shore, nearest to us and climbed out, hauling the boat up onto the sand. Through my bino's I made out two firearms being carried by two men. The third person looked like a woman wearing drab brown overalls. Ed confirmed the gender a few minutes later, "Yep, that one's got tits."

We watched quietly for another thirty minutes as the two guys carrying firearms worked their way around to the eastern side of the low island, moving very slowly. We could also see a black mass of kuaka being pushed closer to their position by the rising tide. The distance for us was around two kms but we heard the shots distinctly, rapid unmistakable fire of semi-auto shotguns letting rip as fast as they could. Birds wheeled up, blackening the air, swirling away to the south and west. Like watching a flock of fruit bats, the mob of kuaka swirled away.

"Holy crap!" muttered Ed. The woman got the boat back into the water and chugged around to where the two men were bending down picking up objects in shallows, watched her get out, helping pick up birds.

"Well now what?" this was my question. It was obvious the boat would be returning back to the camp very soon. We had a conflag trying to decide whether to hit the campsite on our todd or go get assistance from the local Police from Pukenui back up the road a ways. We surveilled the partially obscured campsite once more. Quite a few vehicles and quite a few people wandering around. It was hard to get a head count but we figured at least seven or eight not counting the ones still out in the boat. The odds were not great if things went pear-shaped on us.

Right, the plan was, ring up Murray and get him to hustle over here, grab reinforcements from the boys in blue, while we kept watch. At least we were in a position to get vehicle rego's if anyone came out in the meantime while we waited for backup.

So we waited, Ed and I. The time ticked away very slowly lying in the scrub on a hot summer day, mozzies pestering, watching the odd vehicle pass below us, heading out to go fishing from the point, clouds of dust adding more gritty coatings on the already dust covered scrub around us. We watched the boat chug its way back to the campsite area, disappear from view below the scrub line. It had only one destination. Hungry mouths waiting for a cook-up of fat kuaka most likely.

Watching carefully, after a while we could make out what looked like plucking activity by several people in and around some pampass at the edge of the camp next to the beach. Don't take too long Murray!

Nearly an hour later we watched a police Landcruiser materialise out of the dust. "Good man!"

Ed and I scurried down from our perch in the scrub. Pulled up on the side of the road hidden from the campsite by head high scrub we had a quick conflag, Murray was with Archie the local cop. Ed and I headed off leading the way, turning off the road onto the sandstone track that wound its way through old mud holes and sand patches in the low scrub, headed toward the camp.

We were none too soon. Coming the other way toward us was an old beat up looking car, a station wagon. As it got close driving the same track we were on, it slowed down, seeming to almost hesitate, nowhere to go but backwards, hemmed in by scrub. As we pulled up the station wagon slowed to a crawl then stopped a few metres from us. Glaring almost. There was one person inside. A very large female person. Bubs!

I recognised Bubs from my time working the bar in the hotel at Awanui . A genial giant of a woman who lived in one of the old shops across the road from the pub. A regular drinker, dart player, related to half of the local populace at Kaimaumau no doubt.

We got out and walked up, Archie and Murray quietly pulled up behind us. The wagon was chock full of crap and paraphernalia. Bubs squeezed into the driver's seat, buckets pots , pans, and likely the kitchen sink stacked all around. Birds as well I thought, ready to head home for her cooking pot?

There wasn't a lot of choice. We would need to search the vehicle before we went any further. Anyone else would have to come through this way so we had them blocked in anyway. I quietly explained to Bubs what we intended and why we were there. She simply shrugged. She knew what I did as a sideline. It was common knowledge at the pub.

"Can you get out so we can check your vehicle out Bubs?"

She tugged and pushed at the door. It wouldn't budge. Stuck solid. I tugged at the door handle. Ed yanked at the door handle. Archie looked on. We tried the other doors. All jammed solid. "Are they unlocked Bubs?"

"Yeah yeah its been playing up though." she squeaked, a surprising high voice for one so large.

"I see the problem", muttered Archie. "The bloody thing is such a rust bucket the whole car has sagged in the middle with her weight along with the other crap and all the doors are jammed. "

"Can you wind down any other windows Bubs?" I wanted to find a way in to start our search at least. She couldn't reach them she was so large she couldn't turn around in the seat and there was so much crap piled up she wouldn't have found the handles anyway. The only open window was the one Bubs was sitting at!

It was a Murray suggestion once more.. "Looks like you will have to climb in over Bubs mate..!" He was volunteering me, the shit!

And so it was.. I squeezed in through the driver's window, crawling across over Bub's large lap, hearing Ed making a comment something like "Watch yer tackle mate." and "You got him just where you want him now Bubs."

I was sweating I tell you, and not just because of the heat. The car reeked of strange smells. I crawled my way over into the rear seats among the pots, pans, buckets, and miscellaneous camping stuff, and bric-a-brac. Looking inside stuff as I went. It was not that easy as everything was jammed in and I was crawling among it. Over to the back space I found two very large cooking pots with lids. This looked promising. I prised the top off the first and was immediately struck with a strong pungent odour right up my nose. It was a third full with some brown soupy looking liquid.

"What's in the pots Bubs ?"

"Just stuff Boyo, just stuff."

Hmm probably birds I reckon. Nothing for it but to dig around...stuck my hand in and scooped around. Turns out it was sort of a cabbage like swill and I soon realised it was very likely the camp's pig scrap bucket. Yuck! My hand smelt like swill!

Pot number two was pretty much the same. I used the same hand so at least I had one clean one until I could get out and grab Murray's shirt. I had had enough and managed to pull the catch for the hatchback door and got myself out that way.

In the meantime Archie had backed the Landcruiser up and hitched a bit of rope to the driver's door handle. It took a good tug and then she popped, springing open with a twang. You could see the car noticeably sag another inch I swear. I quietly wiped my hand on Murray's shirt tail while he was distracted watching the carry on.

We tied the door back up with a bit of baling twine we'd found and Archie sent her on her way with a warning to take the vehicle off the road for good or he would be sending her a bunch of tickets.

We headed off into the campsite, intercepting another car coming out with two women in it, turning it around and escorting it back into the camp with us. We arrived to a bunch of kids staring and half a dozen adults looking apprehensive. We recognised the three we had been watching earlier by their clothing. The woman still wearing her brown bib overalls was the one driving the car.

Junk and camping stuff everywhere. It looked like they were getting set to break camp. In the car we found both the shotguns, wrapped up in bloodied cloth, both smelt of having been recently fired. Cordite twitched the nostrils at the customary sniff test.

It took half an hour to go through the gear and no sign of birds, with just some "I don't know what you are talking about Bro," responses to our questions. It stayed like that until eagle eyed Murray had sniffed out the pampass bushes. "Over here boys!"

Scattered around and partially concealed under the sweeping pampass leaves were feathers, wings, and heads. Kuaka heads. We only found seven, but one would have been enough to clinch the deal.

The next half hour was spent gathering details and trying to get some sort of admissions without much luck so we took what we had and headed off to the Pukenui Police station to tally our day up and have a nice cuppa with Archie and his lovely wife Fran.

We never did find out what happened to the kuaka bodies, most likely quickly eaten before we arrived. I am sure my hand (and Murray's shirt) smelt for several weeks.

They had their day in Court some months later, having plead not guilty. Of course they had been using the shotguns to shoot rabbits, and they had only been netting out on the island, but alas the Judge bought not one bar of it. They were duly convicted of hunting and killing absolutely protected wildlife. Kuaka.