

# RUNNING WILD

in the

## WAITAKERE RANGES

Words: Malcolm Law  
 Images: Running Wild Ltd



DAWN ON THE TE HENGA DUNES



RUNNING SOUTH DOWN KAREKARE BEACH

**This is the second in a series of articles through which I will share with readers some of my favourite spots to get off the beaten track and enjoy trail running, New Zealand style, at its very best.**

For over 20 years now the Waitakere Ranges, just a short drive west of Auckland, have been my local stomping ground. I have clocked up literally thousands of hours running its myriad trails and I still never get bored. While sub-tropical bush is the dominant backdrop there is a huge variety of running experiences to be had and so, like many Aucklanders, I am pulled back time and time again to pit myself against the winter mud or rejoice in dry summer conditions. With a network of tracks that extends over more than 250 kms this is indeed a trail runner's heaven placed on the doorstep of the nation's largest city.

The Waitakeres are the place to go for anyone who wants to get strong on hills. For while the highest point is a mere 474m above sea level, there is very little flat running to be had. The bush-clad forests of these ranges extend like a crumpled blanket inland from the wild west coast and the shores of the Manukau Harbour, presenting little in the way of cruisey running. Added to this is the technical nature of much of the terrain. Tree roots, rutted tracks and sharp gradients soon teach the aspiring trail runner great off-road technique that will come in handy when taking on rough stuff anywhere else in the world that they may wander. Then add into the mix the strength-building benefits

of running on soft sand and rock-hopping up stoney river beds and you have one of the best all-round training grounds in the country.

So where are the best places to sample a quintessential Waitakeres trail running experience? A great place to start is the Cascade Kauri area, accessed from Falls Road off Te Henga Road. This offers some of the smoothest trails in the Park, thanks to the upgrading of the Montana Heritage Circuit which for beginners is a great introduction. But branching off from this are also a wide array of steep, gnarly trails that make a more challenging outing for the experienced runner.

Another great short run on relatively well-made trail is a circuit around Fairy Falls, accessed off either Mountain Road or Scenic Drive. The Falls are just one of several great cascades that caress these hills with their graceful beauty and, after a big storm, their awesome power. More adventurous runners may even want to string together Fairy Falls with the Kitekite Falls near Piha and the Karekare Falls to make a classic point-to-point '3 Falls' run.

The Kitekite Falls are perhaps the highlight of the tight network of trails that are easily accessed from Piha. Just take a look at the map and plan a circuit of 5 – 25 kms duration starting from the end of Glen Esk Road. Whatever you decide to do you won't be disappointed, but I'd highly recommend incorporating the Maungaroa Ridge Track if possible. This is usually one of the driest trails in the area and takes you on a beautiful journey through juvenile kauri forest and offers some great views over the Piha Valley

to the west coast.

Further north, the Te Henga Walkway is a spectacular section of coastal track that starts at Te Henga (Bethells) Beach. Run out and back and incorporating a loop of the Goldies Bush area, with its enticing combo of stream-bashing and smooth trails, this is a classic three - six hour outing.

More great running can be found in the Karekare area. Head north from the beach on Comans Track and loop around Mercer Bay for some of the most spectacular coastal vistas in the country. Done during a winter storm this is a truly memorable (and invigorating) experience. Or head south along the beach to follow the line of the old logging tramway to the mouth of the incomparable Pararaha Valley, its entrance guarded by a huge sand dune that is great fun when descended at full tilt. This area always reminds me of a scene from Jurassic Park, it is so pristine and prehistoric feeling. The only thing missing is a giant brontosaurus or two and the film set would be complete. A full ascent of the Pararaha Stream is a classic that calls for good rock-hopping skills and a willingness to both scramble some tricky sections and swim a few strokes across pools, but it makes for a unique and rewarding adventure particularly on a hot summer's day.

Another must-do trail, one of my favourites in all New Zealand, is the Omanawanui Track that can be done as part of a loop from Whatipu. This has a few really meaty climbs in it but the effort affords the sweating, heaving trail runner with unparalleled views over the Manukau Harbour and down the west coast. I have even seen Mt. Taranaki

from here on a fine day!

Much of the rest of the southern Waitakeres is the preserve of the die-hard technical trail runner. In winter these trails are home of the infamous Waitakeres Mud Monster which has a voracious appetite for loosely tied running shoes and human ankles. You'll come out from classics like the Twin Peaks track wondering how it's possible to spend so long 'running' such a short distance; you'll be filthy and tired. But like any other Waitakeres experience you'll have a sense of achievement and a huge smile on your dial.

Of course no review of the Waitakeres would be complete without mention of the 75k-long Hillary Trail. This takes in many of the best tracks in the Range, starting at Arataki Visitor Centre on the scenic drive and finishing at Muriwai Beach. Opened in January 2010 on the second anniversary of Sir Ed's death this has become a rite of passage for ultra-runners who will take anywhere from 10 to 16 hours to knock it off. It's beautiful and it's brutal, and so makes an appropriate icon for all that is great about running in this precious piece of trail heaven.

Mal Law is a veteran endurance athlete who over the years has explored all corners of our beautiful country. He is the founder of Running Wild – [www.runningwildnz.com](http://www.runningwildnz.com) – and through this aims to inform and inspire trail running in NZ. He is probably best known for his 7in7 Challenges which have so far raised more than \$260,000 for charity.

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MERCER BAY SEEN FROM THE HILLARY TRAIL



CLIFF-TOP RUNNING ON THE OMANAWANUI TRACK