

» OUR OWN
BACKYARD



Cape Foulwind: The walkway takes 1½ hours to complete.

Photo: ROY SINCLAIR

Not too foul

LIZ LIGHT finds weka, seals and superb scenery at Cape Foulwind, near Westport.

Weka are fearless and cheeky and hassle us for food as soon as we arrive in the Tauranga Bay car park. These flightless birds, with reddish brown feathers, are fun to watch but, even better, is coming across a couple of their black fluffy chicks further up the track. The chicks, about as big as tennis balls, have giant feet seemingly designed for much bigger birds. It's seals that Cape Foulwind, near Westport, is famous for and seals that I initially came to see, but these few-day-old, big-foot chicks steal the show.

There are apparently about 200 fur seals in this colony, but, from the viewing platform on the hill above I can only see 20: great fat things that look like slugs stretched out on the rocks. But when I take time to look closely I notice some of the smooth brown rocks languidly wave a flipper and others roll over. Taking care with camouflage, they have chosen their home among rocks that look like them.

There's not much action. Dozing in the sun is the main activity but, periodically, a seal swims in, clambers up rocks and



Cheeky: A West Coast weka.

Photo: LIZ LIGHT

flops down in a favourite sleeping spot.

I visit a couple of weeks before the seals give birth in November. Apparently, it's mayhem in the maternity ward when there are 100 or so pups, their mothers and bull seals fighting each other as they try to round up cows for their harem.

The track meanders along a ridge above the coast to the Cape Foulwind lighthouse, a classic white tower that looks nautically picturesque. Below the track, waves surge back and forth and massive tendrils of kelp swirl and

curl to their rhythm.

It's heartening to see little paths in trackside grass, made by penguins and weka, and the characteristic scratching around nesting holes of sooty shearwaters. The Department of Conservation's predator-trapping programme has allowed an increase in numbers of little blue penguins and sooty shearwaters, almost reduced to extinction on the mainland, and they now successfully nest in this area.

I stop on a hill and look south to Tauranga Bay, a deserted semicircle of beach edged by orderly waves. The West Coast is usually much rougher than this.

Captain Cook struck particularly nasty weather when he sailed past in 1770 and was blown wildly off course. He named it Cape Foulwind. It's a cape that bothered other mariners, too, so, in 1876, a wooden lighthouse, using a kerosene lamp, was built on top of the cliff. A round concrete replacement was built in 1926 and it still shines, keeping sailors safe.

The walk finishes at the base of the lighthouse and, for those who have worked up a thirst, the Star Tavern is an amble down the



Classic white tower: Cape Foulwind lighthouse.

Photo: ROY SINCLAIR

road. It has nine beers on tap, including four Westport beers brewed by renowned West Coaster Paddy Sweeney. The local favourites are Good Bastards, a dark beer, and Green Fern, which is organic. The garden bar has views across Buller Bay, and although one can't quite see Australia there is a quirky satisfaction in having a drink here, New Zealand's closest bar to it.

□ The Cape Foulwind walkway takes 1½ hours. At the lighthouse end reward yourself with famous West Coast beer at the Star Tavern – and, at the Tauranga Bay end, the Bay House is an excellent restaurant.

□ Accommodation: Punakaiki Resort, an hour from Cape Foulwind and next to the famous Pancake Rocks; see punakaiki-resort.co.nz