

Country-Wide

Tagging along on a Molesworth adventure

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It's advertised as a 4x4 tagalong tour through Molesworth, the biggest farm in New Zealand. But judging by the three couples who've signed up for my trip it looks more like a busman's holiday.

So what do you do, Jim? "I'm a retired farmer and bulldozer contractor." How about you John? "I'm retired too - but I help my son on our farm in mid-Canterbury." I turn to Les. Farmer? "Yes, and I owned an engineering company making farming equipment."

As Geoff Swift, our guide and owner of the Molesworth Tour Company says, there's no such thing as a retired farmer. But at least these ones have got the hang of holidays. Geoff leads off from Blenheim in his truck, a Nissan Safari that's done this trip many times before, and the other three vehicles get in behind in a well-behaved convoy. We're connected by two-way radio.

In four days we'll cover 600km through the high country behind the Kaikoura Ranges, including the remote 180,476ha of Molesworth. But our adventure starts in the vineyards of the Awatere Valley. This is home territory for Geoff who used to farm and grow grapes on the river terraces. In the space of just a few hours he's told us about feuds among the pioneering families, the merits of Awatere sauvignon blanc and the politics of allocating water rights. His stories bring the place to life, as does his introductions to the local farmers.

We get our first taste of off-roading around the forestry tracks on Black Birch Station where John and Juliet Cooper have been farming for 30 years. These days they run more grape vines than sheep but John remembers doing his time as a musterer on Molesworth back in 1968.

"You'd arrive at Molesworth and Bill Chisholm [the farm manager] took the keys off you for six months. He didn't stand any nonsense from any of the men. He was a bit of a tyrant but he had to be."

Bill Chisholm is a name we will hear many times - he is legendary as the man who saved Molesworth. Back in the 1930s the station was an ecological disaster zone - the run holder walked off the land defeated by erosion, overgrazing and an infestation of rabbits. Chisholm was appointed by the Crown to turn it around. Over the next few days Geoff will explain how he managed that, but for now we head further up the Awatere for our first taste of high country.

We drive through a valley of gold - it's autumn and over the radio Geoff tells us the yellowing vine leaves are Sauvignon Blanc, the reddish ones Pinot Noir. The views narrow as the valley closes in and hills give way to rugged mountains. Frost isn't far away as we pull into the shearers' quarters at Upcot station.

Bill and Nicky Stevenson are third-generation farmers here and while Merino is still the lifeblood for the 13,500ha station, they are finding ways to diversify. As well as supplying Icebreaker clothing from their flock of 6000, they have a Merino stud and 800 Angus and Hereford-cross cattle. They've upgraded the shearers' quarters and hooked up with Geoff to give visitors a high-country experience.



Mustering on Molesworth is still done on horseback.

The family welcomes us up at the homestead for a roast wild pork dinner, which is where the questions start flying: Stock levels, rabbit control, wool and meat prices, schooling for their four girls, coping with the work and isolation - we are all curious about their life in this remote part of the world.

But the reality of the landscape and hard work doesn't hit until the next day when Bill leads our convoy on his 4WD track up the Grey River. We're heading for the musterers' hut for morning tea (all home-baked by Geoff's wife, Lee) but the going isn't easy as we dodge the matagouri and river boulders. Bill points out the rugged ridges where they will soon be mustering 1900 wethers, mostly on foot. We don't envy them.

On our second 4WD run Bill takes us through very different terrain. We climb up nearly 5000ft along the barren Schooner ridge on the western boundary of Upcot. Each time I think this must be as high as we can go Bill points ahead to a distant track, still ascending. White-knuckled, we finally get out to take photos from the top. The huge views and unfolding mountain ranges are our reward, and the winding shingle road to Molesworth, far below, looks civilised by comparison.

Day three and Geoff has been on the phone to Jim Ward, the farm manager at Molesworth, to check the progress of the autumn muster. We rumble over the Acheron River bridge on time - Geoff isn't going to risk scattering the 1000 head of cattle coming our way.

The terrain has flattened out into a plateau of golden tussock and pasture, bordered by brown rounded hills. It's hard to imagine the rabbit devastation and overgrazing that greeted Bill Chisholm back in the 1940s. Tough measures were called for: he used poisoned carrots to destroy 80,000 rabbits in the first year, stopped the tussock burn-offs and over-sowed with cocksfoot and clover. He switched from sheep to Angus and Hereford cattle, building up numbers gradually, and the station now runs up to 10,000 head.

Geoff explains that the grazing patterns set by Chisholm in the 1950s are still in place, with refinements, today. The ongoing threat is hieracium, an invasive weed that smothers the pasture and gives the hills their pinky brown tinge.

The Department of Conservation took over Molesworth in 2005, with Landcorp managing the farm. Geoff says he has a good working relationship with Jim Ward and DOC and wants to keep it that way - the balance between farming, recreation and conservation is vital to the future of the property, and his tours.

After a night in Hanmer our final day takes us back along the western boundary of Molesworth and out through the Rainbow Valley. This is the road less travelled and is restricted to 4WD.

The terrain is markedly different too - more alpine and shades of green, reflecting the higher rainfall on the western side.

First stop is to admire the "rabbit-proof fence". This, like all of the early attempts to control the pest, didn't work. Installed at great expense along the boundary, the run holders didn't foresee the snow drifts which allowed the bunnies to hop over the top. In another pest-control measure, Geoff told us thousands of pet cats were rounded up in Christchurch in the 1890s, transported north, and let loose to hunt rabbits. They failed, and the pets' owners weren't too pleased either.

Second stop is at tranquil Lake Tennyson, the source of the Clarence River. The river crossings and road are rougher on this side but the scenery is spectacular. As we approach the border between Molesworth and the Rainbow Station the landscape changes from rounded hills and shimmering tussock land to craggy mountains and beech forests.

As we follow the Wairau River down the valley back to Blenheim I look over at the blue mountains in the distance and think of the Stevenson's at Upcot. Up at the musterer's hut Bill had said he loves the hills and never tires of the land. Rather like the eternal farmers on our Molesworth tour.

Molesworth 4x4 Tagalong tours run from January to March. Drivers need to have a sturdy 4WD and know how to use low-ratio gears. The four-day tour costs \$1365 per person and includes all meals and accommodation.

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