

The JRA N. Island of NZ Rally

The JRA North Island Rally was the one that very nearly didn't happen. Several of us had allowed ourselves plenty of time – we thought – to get to Mahurangi Harbour, in the Hauraki Gulf, only to find ourselves trapped between 50 and 100 miles away.

The latter part of the summer had been very windy and a week before the rally, I was ready to leave the Bay of Islands. Then I heard the forecast and decided against it. Further south, in Whangarei, Kurt on *mehitabel* and Rob and Maren on *Pacific Spray* made the same decision. New members David and Rosemary on *Arcadian*, also in Whangarei, had a new rig that had only been tried out twice. They too lurked, waiting on the forecast. A few days later I was sitting in a bay with *Fantail* getting hammered by gusts that must have been F10 at times. This storm was followed by several days of F6+, which I didn't fancy at all. Nor it seemed did anyone else: text messages and emails were flying and we even wondered about changing the venue.

Two days before the rally was due to start, everyone was still cowering in harbour.

On the morning of 22 March, the weather finally gave us a break. *Pacific Spray*, *Arcadian* and *mehitabel* sailed out of Whangarei and *Fantail*, 50 miles further to the north, got underway at 0600, took the fair wind and ran with it. By tea time we were off Whangarei, with the others already in the Hauraki Gulf, and common sense suggested that I put in to anchor. But *Fantail* was going like a train and I decided to carry on, under reduced canvas so that I could find anchorage in daylight. However, this plan was thwarted by the wee ship who wanted to get there, and in spite of only having the top three panels of her sail, carried on at over 4 knots. At this speed I could risk catnapping (something I had never done successfully before) and we continued sailing, eventually bringing to in Christian Cove, a few miles into the Hauraki Gulf. It was Friday and we still had 12 hours before the rally was due to start. I felt quite pleased with myself and turned in for a few hours.

After a quick breakfast, I set off towards Mahurangi and had hardly got underway when I saw the unmistakable shape of *mehitabel* come out from behind a headland. Of course now it was almost calm and our progress was far from fast, but light winds had been forecast and were one of the reasons I carried on overnight. *mehitabel* and *Fantail* arrived within a few minutes of each other and we brought to near *Pacific Spray*. Footprints could be seen across the bay, the sail going up and down as David (another one!) tried to sort out his brand-new rig. Not long after I anchored, *Tystie* dropped her hook, followed soon after by *Arcadian*. David (Tyler) and I had not seen each other since New Year, so he came over to see what I'd done to *Fantail* in the interim. I popped a bottle of bubbly and we called over to the nearest boat to come and share it. The rally had begun.

The sound of an outboard advertised *Pacific Spray's* dinghy returning with the 'shore party': Simon and Caroline (*China Moon*), who had flown in rather than sail the 1000+ miles from Tasmania; new member, Jocelyn, who is exploring the idea of sailing and living aboard her own junk-rigged boat; and Paul, whose *La Chica* had not managed to meet her launching date (when do they ever?). They all piled on board *Fantail*, who was beginning to get a trifle crowded. Then another boat hove into view: a fascinating lug-rigged schooner, with a pram bow. (the general consensus was probably 'so near and yet so far'!) beautifully constructed and full of clever ideas as we found out later. This was *Le Canard Bleu*, built by Brian Owen, famous in NZ for building the 64ft gaff schooner, *Maggie*. His crew, Mike Churchhouse, was also considered acceptable company, having sailed around the world against the wind in his Lidgard 30, which has a junk mainsail, and a jib.



Canard Bleu, Pacific Spray, Arcadian, Tystie and Fantail: the fleet gathers.

As we'd run out of bubbly, and Brian offered an invitation, the party transferred itself to *Canard Bleu*, and in due course everyone was drinking and talking, and the odd person was even listening, while snacks were passed round and the boat admired.

The plan for Saturday, was to head north for Bon Accord Harbour on Kawau I, about 10 miles, as the crow flies, from Mahurangi. The day dawned fair with a good sailing breeze that would have us beating in flat seas, sheltered by offshore islands. About 1030, sails started going up masts, anchors were raised, dinghies brought aboard and the yachts sailed out into the main harbour, tacking, gybing, taking photographs and admiring one another. And all secretly wondering how we were going to compare. We had to beat out between an island and the mainland and it was a wonderful sight to behold: the seven boats – as varied a selection of craft as you are ever likely to see together – sailing in line ahead and each one tacking at the same spot. It was like something out of Patrick O'Brien., but disappointing that there were no other boats out on the water to admire the spectacle.



Canard Bleu, Fantail, Footprints and Tystie

Tystie is too well known to need description; the 33 ft *Footprints*, designed by Gary Underwood, will be familiar to website users: she has just fitted a new sail to David Tyler's design and this was its first real trial; the 49ft *Arcadian* was relishing the conditions: she and *Fantail* sailed tack for tack to Bon Accord Harbour; *Le Canard Bleu* was crashing along in fine style, her pram bow making plenty of noise; *Pacific Spray* was right behind her, making good progress but really wanting a bit more wind; then came *mehitabel*, her flat sails belying all the latest thinking as she inexorably worked her way through the fleet, finally being the second boat to sail into anchor.

mehitabel and *Pacific Spray*, enjoying a fresh breeze.



It was fascinating to watch the different boats. *Footprints* and *Fantail* each had to reef, and *Tystie* dropped one or two panels later in the day, but the other boats were probably in their ideal conditions; apart from *Pacific Spray* who sailed at her best later in the afternoon, when the breeze hardened to about F6. *Fantail* felt a bit smug at sailing faster than *Footprints*, but as the battens from the previous sail were proving too flexible, this satisfaction was undoubtedly unwarranted.

Footprints ghosting into Bon Accord to anchor.



Late in the afternoon, we all brought to at the east end of Bon Accord Harbour and the cooks got to work: at 1800 we were to assemble for sundowners on the beautifully-fitted out *Pacific Spray*, followed by a potluck supper. Although only 38ft long, *Pacific Spray* is huge and there was plenty of room for the thirteen people who eventually sat down to dinner and enjoyed a thoroughly convivial evening.

David Webb, Jocelyn O'Neill, Marie & Kurt Ulmer, Caroline & Simon Fraser, Annie Hill, Catherine Thatcher and Maren Fischer on Pacific Spray.
Saturday evening's pot-luck supper.



Fantail's yard was made

by Paul Thompson of alloy, to a similar design as that used by Arne Kverneland. At the time he gave it to me, Paul was thinking of putting wing sails on *La Chica*, but subsequently changed his mind and wanted to use his original spars. Very kindly, he offered to make me a replacement, tailored specifically to *Fantail*, a much smaller and lighter craft than *La Chica*. I had intended to swop them on Saturday morning, but had run out of time. On Sunday morning, it was blowing a bit briskly and forecast to stay that way. The plan was to head back to Mahurangi, but I really didn't want to beat back against F6, so I contacted Kurt on *mehitabel*, who was hosting Paul, and asked him if he would be kind enough to collect the old yard from me and take it back with them. Kurt soon paddled across, not only to take the yard, but to help me remove and replace it, a much-appreciated gesture. I undid the lashings and as I started to slide the yard forward, Kurt commented that it looked a bit odd. I went back aft where I had a better view and to my horror could see it was seriously bent – deflected from straight by about 6 inches! I had noticed it bending the previous day, when beating on the starboard tack, and was a bit surprised, as I'd never seen it do so before, but had assumed it would have straightened itself out as we went about.

After some debate, Kurt and I decided to carry on and replace it with the new one, but the bad news for Paul was also bad news for me, too, because the new yard he'd made for me was significantly smaller and lighter. If *Fantail* could bend the heavy one, then the new one was obviously not going to handle much wind at all; but at least *Fantail* had a yard to sail back north with. The only consolation was that Paul has not yet launched his boat, and so has discovered that he needs heavier yards while he still has his workshop and facilities. Even so, I felt less than happy when Kurt rowed back with the banana-shaped yard. (To read more about this yard and the discussions that ensued, visit the website and go to the [Technical Forum](#). The thread to look up is "Fabricated aluminium alloy yards".)

By now there was some debate among the seven boats at anchor. The wind was increasing and the anchorage was becoming less and less comfortable. *Pacific Spray* said they were off to Mansion House Bay to visit said house and get better shelter and four of us decided to follow and leave the following day. *Footprints* had to get back to Mahurangi so that Alison could get back to work and Catherine to school; *Pacific Spray* nobly volunteered to take Jocelyn and Paul back for flight and work respectively and *Le Canard Bleu* was also heading back as Brian had fallen and hurt himself and I suspect was in need of his home comforts. David (Thatcher) said he'd sail back with *Footprints* for our final evening (but in the end didn't – he'd been having too many batten problems in the gale force gusts). The rest of us carried on partying and rowing round paying visits before going over to *Tystie* for a drinks party, followed by another potluck supper on *Arcadian*. David (Webb) kept producing bottles of wine, people kept filling their glasses, the conversation was convivial and general and the following morning everyone said that they'd got back on board and said: "Surely it can't really be twenty to two?!" But it was.



Arcadian.

It was still blowing on Monday, so we stayed put again, and although officially over, the rally continued. But although we did have a drinks party - this time on *Fantail* – we forewent the potluck supper. On Tuesday, *Arcadian* stayed at anchor and the rump of the rally, consisting of *Tystie*, *mehitabel* and *Fantail* sailed back to

Mahurangi. In the lightish airs *mehitabel* sailed like a witch making even *Tystie* sit up and take notice. Once in the harbour, the three boats anchored in different places and the rally officially came to an end.



The stern view of mehitabel: all that Tystie could see for a while.

I cannot imagine spending a more enjoyable few days than we shared. There was lots of conversation and laughter, a great deal of good-natured discussion and debate, a useful exchange of ideas and experiences and the establishment and confirmation of firm friendships. It was great to have so many different boats together to compare. None of them was 'out of a box', apart from *Fantail*, who is now quite different from a standard Raven 26; the other boats were each completely unique and their owners even more so. Those of us who will still be in NZ very much look forward to the 2013 rally.