

SURFING

23.4

Size in metres of the biggest recorded wave ever surfed. The mass of water was ridden by Mike Parsons at Cortes Bank in California in 2008.

Storm troopers

Two international big-wave legends have targeted New Zealand as a potential haven for their adrenaline-fuelled adventures. **Finbarr Bunting** tagged along with them off the beautiful Fiordland coast.

BIG Wednesday was a 1980s Hawaiian buddy movie which captivated surf audiences worldwide with its intense depictions of the burgeoning big-wave scene.

Now in 2009, Tom Carroll and Ross Clarke-Jones have targeted New Zealand for their own personal "Big Wednesday".

The two Australian surf legends – Carroll was world champion twice in the 1980s while Clarke-Jones was a star junior who developed into a big-wave specialist – have spent this winter seeking out the biggest waves they can find for a Discovery Channel show called *Storm Surfers*.

New Zealand drew the pair's focus – along with the international camera crews from Disney-funded Discovery – and they had been eagerly awaiting the right conditions to track a huge swell generated by Antarctic storms.

Clarke-Jones, who is a fit and muscular 43, is wild-eyed and more openly passionate about seeking out the biggest waves possible.

Carroll is more famous than his friend of 20 years, but is quieter and more reflective. He was the first "millionaire pro surfer" after signing a lucrative deal with Quiksilver in 1989. But outside of big-wave adventures, he prefers the quieter life.

The pair's previous exploits were captured in *Storm Surfers 1*, which showed them tow-surfing each other into huge waves including Shipsterns Bluff and the never-surfed-before waves of Dangerous Banks off the coast of Tasmania.

Now they are helping to put New Zealand on the big-wave surfing map with their exploits deep in the South Island, off the coast of Fiordland.

A previous reconnaissance trip six weeks ago, assisted by New Zealand's top big-wave surfer Doug Young, identified a number of potential breaks.

Now the conditions looked right. A massive swell generated by Antarctic storms was due to hit the south coast.

Unfortunately, the poor wind and filming conditions on the day meant the pair were unable to catch any suitable waves.

But the search goes on.

Storm Surfers is produced, directed and was created by Chris Nelius and Justin McMillan. Nelius follows the action in a helicopter as the "air director" while McMillan is closer to the action, following on a jetski as "sea director".

They also bring along Ben Matson, Aussie weather expert and



► Doug Young is towed onto a wave at Barn Bay six weeks ago. Photos: Cory Scott



► Southern adventurers.



► Ross Clarke Jones at Barn Bay six weeks ago.



surfing enthusiast who runs the popular website, SwellNet.

After hours spent meticulously going over weather charts the night before the mission, Matson declared himself unhappy with pre-conditions but predicted there would be some surfing to be had.

The *Storm Surfers* group reconnaissance mission weeks before included taking six jetskis down a river in a remote part of Fiordland in search of the previously unsurfed Barn Bay.

They were joined by a group of Kiwis to give the all-important local knowledge, including Young, and 18-year-old grommet Sam Hawke. The group managed to hit some "12 to 15-foot waves".

New Zealand's southernmost town, Tuatapere, played host to two sporting events on "Big Wednesday". As the surfers made their way to the departure point for their adventure, the Tour of Southland cycle race was expected in the town.

To really make the day extra special for the town, there was a visit by rugby's Ranfurly Shield – to celebrate Southland's recent win against Canterbury.

A group of about 20 *Storm Surfers* crew plus media hangers-on set out.

“We had to go, this was our last chance really.”

Ross Clarke-Jones

A helicopter was used to ferry passengers across the water to Port Craig.

The fishing vessel Paragon was hired to house the non jetski crew for the day. It provided a sturdy base of operations while the six jetskis made their way out to the point the swell was supposed to hit.

There was a 30-minute trip from Port Craig out to where the big waves were supposed to be. Unfortunately the weather Clarke-Jones and Carroll sought never eventuated.

The jetskis made some darting runs to try to pick up waves but unfortunately the icy conditions were such that there was nothing for them to get stuck into. After some intense deliberations and attempts to negotiate the conditions, McMillan decided to call it a day.

Clarke-Jones was itching to get back out into the water but it was

decided the group should stay together. An unhappy bunch made their way back to the pick-up point. With only stories of previous adventures to punctuate the night.

"That swell, it was a bit of a gamble," Clarke-Jones said of the trip out to the surf spot. "Ben [Matson] wasn't convinced, we were pushing for us to go. We had to go, this was our last chance really."

"We thought it would be much bigger than that but it just wasn't."

They both said they'll be back to surf New Zealand waters again.

The search continues ...

Storm Surfers 2 will be airing in New Zealand on Discovery Channel early next year.



► Tom Carroll is towed out by Clarke-Jones, above, and Carroll samples some Kiwi cuisine, left.