

A TRIP TO THE CHATHAM ISLANDS

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While on a trip to Waiheke Island with the Auckland Botanical Society (ABS) I overheard talk of an upcoming trip to the Chatham Islands in the New Year. Enquiries were made with Maureen Young (organiser extraordinaire) who said there were vacancies and that we were welcome to come. The trip was a package tour through the Chatham Hotel who arranged everything from Auckland Airport back to Auckland Airport. All we had to pay for on the Island were refreshments and souvenirs. On the trip from Rotorua with Rosslyn and myself was Chris Ecroyd.

When we arrived at Auckland Airport ready for the direct flight to the Chatham Is, we were in for a disappointment as no-one had our contact details. The flight that day was cancelled as the plane was fog-bound at Chatham Island Airport – come back tomorrow! So now it was a six day tour.

The following day it was all go. We took off at 1230 hrs to the west over the Manukau Harbour with good views of the Awhitu Peninsula then just west of the coast down to Raglan before turning south-east.. We saw Lake Rotorua and Lake Rotokawa (NE of Taupo), then Napier at 1340 hrs before heading out to sea. Just before 1500 hrs we had our first views of the NW coast of the Chatham Islands. As we flew on the landscape appeared as a mosaic of scrub surrounding areas of grassland and in a few places patches of low forest until we approached the airport when the huge Te Whanga Lagoon (18,300 hectares) came into view. The northern part of the lagoon appeared to be a mosaic of sand bars and pond weeds but we didn't get a close look at this habitat.

At the Airport while waiting for the luggage to be unloaded botanising began, as we noting planted Chatham Is. mingimingi (*Leptecophylla robusta*), clustered clover (*Trifolium glomeratum*) with its pink woolly heads and various other weeds growing around the car park. We were picked up by bus (luggage went direct to the hotel by truck) and taken to a barbeque at a local farm where we enjoyed the feast of blue cod fingers, wild pork and salads. We walked around the extensive gardens and were introduced to the southern nettle (*Urtica australis*) with its broad-ovate leaves 10–20 cms long – it is not found on

the North or South Islands of New Zealand but it is on the southern islands including Stewart Is. – and also the Chatham Is. mahoe (*Melicytus chathamica*) on which the fruit appeared to be larger than *M. ramiflorus*.

The first full day (Monday) on the island dawned bright and clear and a leisurely walk to the wharf was rewarded by seeing some large fish (blue moki?) swimming amongst the piles. After breakfast the bus with 29 passengers (pretty cosy in the back seat) set off to the eastern south coast, along the top of a ridge SE of Owenga and above the cliffs where we saw some coxella (*Aciphylla dieffenbachii*) growing over the edge safe from browsing stock and patches of shore buttercup (*Ranunculus acaulis*) and *Leptinella potentillina*, and we admired views over Pitt Strait to Pitt Island. We took a long walk west over some pretty infertile farmland where not even the blackberry or bracken was happy (maybe it was the acid soils). However there were some botanical gems to be found e.g. shore hard fern (*Blechnum durum*), pānekeneke (*Lobelia arenaria*), Chatham Is. gentian (*Gentianella chathamica*) and *Crassula* sp. from amongst which was protruding *Centella uniflora*. Where the ground became quite boggy we found a clump of Chatham Is. forest sedge (*Carex ventosa*) and then we got ourselves into some really interesting vegetation. There was adder's tongue (*Ophioglossum coriaceum*), and tūkōrehu (*Plantago raoulii*) under a Chatham Is. matipo *Myrsine chathamica*, with nearby a large tarahinau (*Dracophyllum arboreum*) and a Chatham Is. lancewood (*Pseudopanax chathamicus*) both reaching some 5m in height. In a fenced-off coastal side of the farmland were some Dieffenbach's koromiko (*Hebe dieffenbachii*) and flowering specimens of Chatham Is. tree daisy (*Olearia chathamica*) with its serrated leaves and magnificent purple disc florets surrounded by brilliant white ray florets. Also in this area was Barker's koromiko (*H. barkeri*), Chatham Is. akeake (*Olearia traversiorum*) and the large Chatham Is. karamu (*Coprosma chathamica*). This karamu rivals *C. arborea* by growing up to 5m in height and 20cm. diameter (Allan 1961). With lunch-time overdue we found comfortable sites to relax after some all-on botanising, but there was more to come. Even while holding on to those big well-filled sammies from the hotel kitchen some were following Maureen

(who had been here before) into the bushes to see some epiphytic Chatham Is. greenhood orchids (*Pterostylis silvicultrix*). These were growing amongst the bent over dead stipes of wheki-ponga (*Dicksonia fibrosa*), and even though the orchids were past flowering they were still an unusual sight. After a short walk along a fence line that was quite boggy in patches we came to an open area that had been churned up some time ago by cattle but now provided an ideal habitat for sun orchids (*Thelymitra* spp.) and Chatham Is. gentian with their petal tips bright pink outside. Across the nearby fence we found inaka (*Dracophyllum scoparium*), Cox's matipo (*Myrsine coxii*) and mingimingi (*Coprosma propinqua* var. *martini*). On the way back to the bus we headed towards the cliff edge where there were magnificent views of the south-facing Rangaika Cliffs to the east that rivalled any I had seen on the mainland. We motored back down the farm-track and on through Owenga to Manukau Point to visit the Tommy Solomon statue. After a quick look at the fishing boats hauled up on the beach at Owenga we went back to the hotel to well-earned refreshments before dinner.

Tuesday dawned fine and clear with a bit more breeze than the previous day so fish-watching at the wharf was off but after another hearty breakfast we set out to tour the north-east of the island. The first stop was at Blind Jim's Creek where some searched for fossilised sharks teeth while others searched for botanical gems. We found silverweed (*Potentilla anserinoides*) with its bright yellow flowers and bronze coloured leaves, the endangered Chatham Is. geranium (*Geranium traversii*), several large patches of mudwort (*Limosella lineata*) in full flower, some Chatham Is. celery (*Apium prostratum* subsp. *denticulatum*), native spinach (*Tetragonia implexicoma*) creeping up a bank away from stock and swans and in a small sheltered coastal flat a large patch of three square (*Schoenoplectus pungens*). When we reached the north-eastern region where we visited a huge, rather dry wetland, probably better called a peat-land. Dominant species here were Chatham Is. flax (*Phormium* aff. *tenax*) and bracken (*Pteridium esculentum*), interspersed with patches of Chatham Is. giant wire rush (*Sporadanthus traversii*) and oioi (*Apodasmia* aff. *similis*) with scattered Chatham Is. spear-grass (*Aciphylla traversii*), native iris (*Libertia*

peregrinans), sand daphne (*Pimelea arenaria*) and Chatham Is. gentian. DoC has started to build a boardwalk in this area to protect the plants and structure of the peat-land. All too soon we were off to visit the dendroglyphs at Hapupu. This area has been fenced off from stock and the regeneration was becoming quite prolific. After lunch we visited the Te Whakaru graveyard then the Te Whakaru settlement where German missionaries settled in the 1830s. At Point Munning we saw the seal colony and for the botanists this was where the splitters started to influence the fortitude of many botanists. However the Mercury Bay weed (*Dichondra repens*) was easily split from the three *D. aff. brevifolia* species listed by Peter de Lange in the list he so kindly supplied to the ABS for the trip. Next came the scurvy grasses / cresses - *Lepidium* spp. If the naturalised species were left out there were *L. desvauxii*, *L. oleraceum*, three *L. aff. oleraceum* (a,b & d) and *L. aff. flexicaule* which hybridises with two of the *L. aff. oleraceum* (a & b) so the botanists went off to appreciate the seals!

At the next stop, the vibrant (it has a club where some non-botanists exercised their elbows) fishing community at Kaingaroa, we took a short walk along the road and through a coastal herb-field / low shrub-land of glasswort (*Sarcocornia quinqueflora* subsp. *quinqueflora*), *Triglochin striata*, *Lepidium* sp., remuremu (*Selliera radicans*), purple shore groundsel (*Senecio elegans*), Chatham Is. koromiko (*Hebe chathamica*) and Chatham Is. forget-me-not (*Myosotidium hortensia*), to find what Maureen could hardly wait to show us – the big bold prickly Chatham Is. sowthistle (*Embergeria grandifolia*), and quite an impressive plant it is too. More botanising was to be had on a nearby rocky mound where amongst the cracks and on the ledges were Chatham Is. groundsel (*Senecio radiolatus* subsp. *radiolatus*), Chatham Is. geranium, remuremu, *Crassula* sp. and Chatham Is. button daisy (*Leptinella featherstonii*) which unlike other members of the genus in New Zealand is a smallish woody shrub. The route back to the bus was through the low scrubland but rather than down the road we went around the beach and were rewarded by finding more Chatham Is. sowthistle growing on the seaward side of some marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) in white sand. Even more exciting was finding some crystalwort (*Atriplex billardierei*) growing out on bare sand and less exciting was seeing

sea rocket (*Cakile edentula*). By now it was 1730 hrs and Ben the bus driver was keen to be on the way back to base but was told in no uncertain terms that he was to stop near Ocean Mail so that some could photograph the Chatham Is. toetoe (*Cortaderia turbaria*) and sand daphne in a sandy paddock with cattle to keep competing vegetation down. After another full-on day with great weather, the wind was strengthening and we were keen to get back to the meal of crayfish that we had been promised.

Day three (Wednesday) again dawned fine but the wind was building and there were white-caps out on Waitangi Bay. To start the day off we walked through the Frank's Big Bush Conservation Covenant. At the entrance of this property we saw some Chilean guava (*Ugni molinae*) which is one of the most insidious weeds on the Chatham Is. (de Lange et al. 2008). Plants of interest here were sticky pig fern (*Hypolepis rufobarbata*), Chatham Is. bastard grass (*Uncinia* aff. *uncinata*) and blackberry (*Rubus polyanthemus*). At the highest point in the covenant Ben grouped most of us together to discuss or guess what several arrays of pipe-work in the ground were for. Many and varied ideas were put forward, none correct. They had been set-up to detect tremors of nuclear blasts in the Pacific. From here we made our way eastwards down to the low dunes of the western shore of Te Whanga Lagoon where we found the New Zealand shore spurge (*Euphorbia glauca*) growing amongst marram grass. A short distance along the beach and up the track we had a first look at some nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*) and on entering the homestead grounds saw what looked like a giant angelica plant but the colour of the foliage wasn't quite right and later (back in Rotorua) I found out that it was the parsnip palm (*Melanoselinum decipiens*).

After lunch on the homestead lawn we visited the Henga Scenic Reserve for another bush walk with an extension over the high low-bush covered dunes down to almost sea level to look at the westerly wind-blown vegetation of Petrie Bay. Near the start of this walk we saw some pohuehue (*Muehlenbeckia australis*) with its fleshy white fruit and leaves which were much thicker than on plants seen around Rotorua. Alongside the track in open forest were clumps of Chatham Is. forest sedge and a few metres off the track the

only specimen seen of *Drymoanthus adversus* was noted by an eagle-eyed botanist. Also of interest in the bush were outcrops of much eroded limestone with a good covering of ferns. Out on the tops of the dunes vegetation didn't get above a couple of metres in height because of the wind and the salt in the sand-blasted environment .. On the way down the dunes we passed hokataka (*Corokia macrocarpa*) with its small bright orange fruit, and some more intriguingly sculptured limestone. Down on the dune flats the most obvious plants were sand coprosma (*Coprosma acerosa*), pānekeneke, sand pimelea, club rush (*Isolepis nodosa*), hares tail (*Lagurus ovatus*) and purple shore groundsel. Back up in the bush on the east side of the dunes it was a pleasant stroll back to the bus passing on the way a magnificent specimen of Chatham Is. karamu with its 5 m branchless trunk some 50 cms in diameter.

Down the road a bit we took quite a long walk eastwards towards the western shoe of Te Whanga Lagoon to see some Moriori petroglyphs (rock carvings) - but it was difficult to make out much more than masses of rounded grooves in the limestone rock face. Much more interesting to the botanist anyway was a fine specimen of the Chatham Is. nigger head (*Carex sectoides*). This plant is endemic to the Chatham and Antipodes Islands. Like *Carex secta* this swamp sedge has a "trunk" but the panicle has crowded branchlets. So another day ended on a high.

Day four (Thursday) dawned calm, cool and foggy. At 0500 hrs we could barely make out the wharf 500 metres away but thankfully the fog lifted and by 0800 hrs the day looked more promising weatherise. After breakfast and while waiting for the bus Mike Wilcox went for a stroll along the beach looking for interesting seaweeds and a short time later reappeared looking "as pleased as punch" dragging a great length of Chatham Is. bull kelp (*Durvillaea chathamensis*), the undulate-edged blade of which was almost 10 metres in length. This species of brown alga is endemic to the Chatham Is.

We set off to Port Hutt at the north reaches of Petrie Bay where the geological interest is the vertical hexagonal columns similar to those found at Halswell Quarry near Christchurch and some of the volcanoes around Auckland. Actually I did not see too

many six-sided columns; five-sided seemed to be the norm with occasional four- and some six-sided. Nobody really cared as they were quite impressive. The hunt was on for some botanical delights and those found were the native shore dock (*Rumex neglectus*) and crystalwort in the wind-blown sand, spleenwort (*Asplenium* sp.), Chatham Is. koromiko, *Poa* sp. and remuremu amongst the nooks in the rocks. On the way back to the bus Chris found a specimen of Colenso's mountain myrrh (*Chaerophyllum colensoi* var. *colensoi*) in fruit. Then we were off to Wharekauri near Cape Young (the northern-most point of mainland Chatham Is.). At Wharekauri we sought comfortable places to enjoy the sunshine, the breeze off the sea and our lunches. After this we had about an hour and a half to explore the beaches and nearby cliff-tops and scenery. DoC has been doing considerable vegetation enhancement in this area with good success with the Chatham Is. forget-me-not and Chatham Is. sowthistle. One of the problems with this is that these plants need nutrients from nesting birds and the Maori as distinct from the Moriori and probably the sealers and whalers pillaged the nesting sites to the extent that they no longer exist. Much admired along the coastal rock platforms were the swirling blades of the southern bull kelp (*Durvillea antarctica*) as the swells rose and fell along the rocky platforms. There are two beautiful beaches here but as there was a good sea running nobody was tempted to cool off. We went back the way we had come to near Blind Jim's Creek where there was a half kilometre walk up a gradual rise to the Nikau Bush Conservation Area. The main features of this area are the quite dense kopi (karaka, *Corynocarpus laevigatus*) forest with patches of tall nikau. We were lucky to find some native forget-me-not (*Myosotis spathulata*) with its solitary white flower in the upper leaf axils. Kopi was introduced by the Moriori as a food source and it spread very successfully to most drier parts of the island probably when kereru were plentiful. Back at the road we spent some spare time on some serious searching for sharks teeth at the nearby shore of Te Whanga Lagoon.

On Friday, our last full day on the island, the bulk of the day was spent in the south-east of the island. There was to be a late start and a group of serious botanists wanted to see

some of the recently-described species of tree daisy or shell akeake (*Olearia telematicum*). This species grows in a long wetland from the upper part of Maipito Road down to near Owenga Road and also in other wetlands on the island. After walking to the site and getting permission from the land owner we set off through some very humpy farmland towards the low-forest. This species along with that with which it was included (akeake) both have opposite leaf arrangement (not common in the genus) but the shell akeake flowers at a different time of the year. It wasn't hard to find this plant as typically it grows in wetland and is invariably hollow. Also found here was Chatham Is. forest sedge, the (introduced to the island) giant rush (*Juncus pallidus*), sharp spike rush (*Eleocharis acuta*), mingimingi, peka-a-waka (*Earina* aff. *aestivalis*), and on the ground a *Pterostylis*, possibly *P. silvicultrix*. On the way out to the road I plucked a piece of the shell akeake and almost convinced Chris that it was a new species of *Coprosma* and (with a quick bit of thinking) called it *C. astipulata* as there were no stipules. It made for good discussion and humour. Just to the west and part of the way up Maipito Road we saw the last of the grand 19th century Chatham Island houses (Nairn House) built in the 1880s. Meanwhile out in Waitangi Bay the MV *Rangitira* was approaching the Waitangi wharf.

On our trip to the south-west we passed the remains of the old wireless and telegraph station. Most communication is now via satellite. Most of the land alongside the road in this area appears reasonably fertile but the economics of farming on the Chatham Is. is marginal with the high cost of transport. Before lunch at the historic Ohinemama Historic House, the bus dropped the botanists off to walk along the road for a short distance to the road end. The highlight was undoubtedly the sighting of the Chatham Is. Christmas tree (*Brachyglottis huntii*) with its narrow-elliptic leaves forming a quite dense canopy with bright low-cone shaped inflorescences dotted over it. Along the roadside we also spotted some hells bells (*Anaphalioides bellidioides*), mountain kiokio (*Blechnum montanum*) and in an area of land fenced off from stock and regenerating amongst the bracken were upright plants of tarahinau somewhat reminiscent of rewarewa (*Knighia excelsa*) regeneration in the Bay of Plenty. After a delicious home-cooked *al fresco* lunch at

Ohinemama House (during which we briefly suffered the only shower of drizzle during our stay on the island) we were off homewards with a stop to see the most photographed tree on the island – a very wind-sculptured akeake. The rest of the day was our own and about half the group elected to walk out to Point Webb then Point Weeding both of which offered spectacular views of the vertical eroded cliffs and surging seas.

Saturday dawned fairly bleak and some hoped that the airport would be closed so that we could get our seventh day in but we had no luck there. The cloud lifted and by 0900 hrs we were mingling at the airport with some locals for the trip home, on a flight that was “smooth as”.

Would I do it again – YES but it would be better to be able do it with a bike and tent now that I know the layout of the island. But the hotel does have its comforts.

REFERENCES

Allan H.H. 1961. *Flora of New Zealand*, Vol. 1. Wellington, Government Printer.

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