

**Johnson, P.; Gerbeaux, P. 2004.** *Wetland types in New Zealand*. 184 pp. Paperback. Department of Conservation, Wellington. \$34.95. (Available through the University Bookshop.)

We all know what wetlands are, or do we? According to Dugan (1990), there are more than fifty definitions and that figure is doubtless far from all-inclusive. They can vary from ‘the kidneys of the earth’ to ‘mosquito-infested mud-holes’ depending on the outlook of the observer at the time. As I recall, most, if not all, writers on the subject begin with their definition followed by a justification based on comparison with those of other writers. *Wetlands are notoriously difficult to nail down and the RAMSAR International Convention on wetlands in 1971 laid down their definition as the starting point for all others.* Since this includes everything from coastal marine waters less than six metres deep to ephemeral puddles forming in the desert after a rain shower once in a blue moon, it serves mainly to highlight the difficulties of finding the starting point for any classification system.

Johnson and Gerbeaux have produced an excellent small book that allows the reader to grasp all the complexities of sorting through the many different types of wetlands in New Zealand. It is concisely written and accessible to the lay reader as well as providing a valuable summary to those of a more scientific bent. As others before them and no doubt those yet to come, they start off with an attempt at a definition of wetlands. For them, “Wetlands are precisely that: wet lands”. Not precisely enough, it would appear, as the rest of the introduction comprises mainly a discussion of the problems surrounding the attendant difficulties of such a task!

The bulk of the book (ninety pages) sets out a classification system for New Zealand wetlands. It starts with a breakdown into nine hydrosystems – wetlands based on the landform and water regimes. This is followed by consideration of the variety of wetland classes based on their different functions – how they work; wetland forms – the features they create; structural classes – vegetation; and aquatic habits – plant adaptation. Each section has a very handy key and there are two convenient summary tables for wetland classes. As with the other chapters, close on half is taken up with excellent photographs to illustrate the key points in the text.

The remaining three chapters concern the various patterns formed by different wetland types; the driving forces underlying their formation, structure and function; and a summary of how to explore a wetland site. I found the explanatory diagrams, especially those in chapter three, very helpful in interpreting the accompanying photographs. A list of references and glossary of terms (but excluding wetlands) concludes the book.

The authors have produced a very useful guide for the different wetland types in New Zealand and for those who regard those wet bits as an irritating barrier

necessitating a frustrating detour, this book will give every reason to slow down and work through the classification provided. You might not make the hut on time, but you will have a greater appreciation of these often ignored and sadly neglected features of our landscape. And when stuck in the hut with the rain pouring down outside you might just have a go yourself at coming up with a precise definition of wetland – good luck.

Ref: Dugan, P.J. (1990) *Wetland conservation: a review of current issues and required action*. International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Gland.

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### NZ Plant and Fungi Databases



Allison Knight

<http://nzflora.LandcareResearch.co.nz/> This increasingly useful database now covers seed plants, lichens, mosses, liverworts, freshwater algae and ferns found in the wild in New Zealand. You can search for 'preferred' current botanical names, Maori name, common name and some synonyms. For some species there are also distribution maps, recent literature lists (4 papers for *Hieracium*) and even images of some herbarium specimens (eg of toetoe but not of cabbage tree).

The database for NZ fungi (and plant pathogenic bacteria) is accessed separately: <http://nzfungi.landcareresearch.co.nz/html/> This website claims to be "...one of the most extensive electronic compilations on the national fungal biota of any country." It covers much the same taxonomic ground for fungi as the plant database does for lichens, plus sometimes field images, which can be very helpful.

Both websites are ideal for checking current names on species lists before you publish them, but you need to have a relatively fast internet connection or it could take 15 minutes or more per name!