

Field Trip to North Piha and Whites Beach, 11 November 1995

Graeme Hambly

This excursion led by Ewen Cameron to North Piha, though the location is close to Auckland and seemingly familiar to so many of us, was for me an eye opener and one of the more interesting trips we have done. I have never seen such profuse and varied coastal vegetation before - both species rarely encountered in what is now a commonly degraded part of the flora, but especially the density, rich appearance and size of the plants present. To list and describe some of these: long dangling mats of *Tetragonia trigyna*, with leaves up to 3 inches round and the green interspersed with bright red; abundant beds of *Lagenifera pumila* - very much like the lawn daisy, but again, more lush than is usually encountered, and with that habit of a native species somehow to look more appropriate and real than any superficially similar introduced species. It was pleasant to hear that what otherwise looked like a weed - *Cardamine debilis*, was native and therefore not imposing its place there. But *Oxalis exilis*, despite the unpleasant ring of the name in a gardener's ear, also illustrated the 'native looks natural' principle, since the expected invasive mats were instead pools of almost pointillist leaves with an occasional ripple of yellow flower. *Senecio lautus* had most of us fooled. Although some plants pretended to look just like the species, most did not, often growing to a foot high, and with polished purple leaves. No doubt this was in order to be mistaken for *Senecio bipinnatisectus*, a word which once having started, many of us could not finish! Other notable species included *Arthropodium cirratum*, *Hebe obtusatum* which is almost restricted to the Waitakere west coast, *Parietaria debilis*, and dripping cords of *Stellaria parviflora*.

On the crest of the hill between Piha and Whites Beach, Ewen Cameron made an interesting discovery. His insouciant inspection of a small geranium growing on a rock became quickly more voluble as he declared it to be *Geranium retrorsum*! This particular species is quite uncommon and most abundant (of all places) on Watchman Island beside the Harbour Bridge. It is characterised by very divided leaves, flowers in pairs, and hairs retrorse or bent back along the stem. Sandra Jones can claim indirect credit for this find, because she had just lowered herself to this spot in order to prove to Ewen that *Cheilanthes distans* grew there. The hill crest besides yielded *Wahlenbergia "vernicaosa"* (with a Northland / Auckland / Coromandel distribution), *Parsonsia heterophylla* with a scent that was not perhaps jasmine, but certainly (for once) scent, and *Scandia rosifolia*. The latter is a member of an endemic genus and is nowhere common, and was therefore surprising for the one species of beetle and two of weevil feeding on the pollen of its flower umbels. Willy Kuschell, an entomologist who had joined us, explained that these weevils belong to a large endemic family very unusual within the group for host non-specificity.

Whites Beach at one place offered a difficult choice between cliff climbing or rock hopping, with Ewen advising that the latter did not mitigate the unexpected wave. The best botanists also proved competent magicians, when Maureen Young and Anne Grace produced completely from nowhere handfuls of very beautiful violet shells (*Janthina* spp.). Since the violet shells we recently found at North Cape were much larger, I was intrigued to learn from Anne that New Zealand stranded up to five species. Interesting plants at Whites Beach included clumps of *Celmisia major* on spray washed rock, and alongside, a few patches of an unidentified *Asplenium*. Simply because it was exactly like and unlike *A. haurakiense*, we all fell for Ewen's suggestion of *A. terrestre*.

The farpoint was the stack, Fishermans Rock, which provided a vertiginous as well as botanical challenge that was passed up by many. But here the comparison of field trip to cross-country, botany to sport was accentuated, since Ewen's boys, presumably running for the Museum team, dashed up the narrow spire even before the rest of us arrived. I regret to report that Steve

Benham, contrariwise representing the Botanic Gardens, wobbled (not to mention *persona auctoris*) before he attained the summit. Perhaps this is the reason why I cannot now remember at all what was growing there.

It was a day of botany (as I have already related), incident (our treasurer's crouched head was narrowly missed by a dislodged rock, and a committee member broke her ankle), interest (the remains of a mollymawk on the beach, of a kauri snail - *Paryphanta* otherwise unrecorded for the area, and penguin nests and intact shell), and finally, philosophy. For Steve daringly asserted that he learnt his plants by family, not individual. Anne rejoined emphatically "Taxa are man-made things. Women don't like taxa!" Ewen (albeit an unambiguous gender) was silent.

North Piha, Whites Beach and Fishermans Rock

E. K. Cameron

On Auckland's west coast there is a very pleasant walk from the northern end of North Piha (Kohunui Bay): up the Laird Thomson Track, out to the pa at Te Waha Point, back to the Laird Thomson and down the steep track to the rocky south shore of Whites Beach, along the beach to the north end, up then down the Rose Track to Fishermans Rock, return to Whites Beach, up a different section of the Rose Track to the narrow road, down a ridge track to the Laird Thomson Track summit and then return to North Piha via the Laird Thomson (see Figure 1). The return walking time is only c. 2 hours but it is nice to take 2-3 times this. The walk is almost entirely within the Centennial Memorial Park.

On 9 November 1995 I did a reconnoitre of this route with Doug Rogan for the Auckland Bot Soc trip which I led two days later. On 16 December 1995 I repeated the trip. A species list is appended for all plants seen during these three trips (apart from the road section at the top of the Rose Track); Fishermans Rock species are also marked separately.

Laird Thomson - up

The Laird Thomson Track (often wrongly spelt Thompson, it was named after the Thomson family, see Mead 1973) begins at the back of the North Piha beach where the steep volcanic conglomerate cliffs of early Miocene age adjoin the beach. The fairly even gradient track traverses steep slopes clothed in continuous windshorn pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) 7-10 m tall (see Cranwell, 1981: 46 for a photograph). Houpara (*Pseudopanax lessonii*) and kawakawa (*Macropiper excelsa*) are the main shrubs. This is a wonderful area for native herbs. On the shaded rocky faces by the track mats of New Zealand spinach (*Tetragonia trigyna*), *Lobelia anceps* and *Parietaria debilis* are very common. New Zealand celery (*Apium prostratum*), *Cardamine debilis*, *Stellaria parviflora*, rengarenga (*Arthropodium cirratum*), *Lachnagrostis billardierei*, *Poa anceps*, *Senecio lautus*, *Hydrocotyle dissecta*, *Ranunculus reflexus* and *Lagenifera pumila* are common. *Luzula picta* appears to be local (it is a rather difficult species to see amongst sedges and grasses). Various sedges are common including *Carex dissita*, *C. spinirostris*, *C. flagellifera*; *C. lambertiana* is rather local. Near the top *Scandia rosifolia* is present. Unfortunately onion weed (*Allium triquetrum*) is also locally present and presumably has spread down from the baches far above.