

New northern limit for hard beech (*Nothofagus truncata*)

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The genus *Nothofagus* (in the Fagaceae family) – beech, or tawhai - is an important reminder of our gondwanan ancestry that is the dominant component of a major proportion of New Zealand's remaining native forests. Hard beech (*Nothofagus truncata*) is an impressive tree which can grow up to 30 m tall, have a dbh of up to 2 m, and live for up to 600 years (Ogden 1988). Of all New Zealand's *Nothofagus* species it has the northernmost distribution, growing from the north of the North Island to the northern South Island. It also grows from sea level to around 1000 m altitude.

For many years the northern limit of hard beech was considered to be in the Omahuta State forest, Pukekohe Stream (NZFRI 9916, duplicates: AK 163001 & AKU 14827). Most published accounts on beech distribution in New Zealand support this (J.A. Wardle 1984; P. Wardle 1991), although Salmon (1980) states that its northern limit is Mangonui. However, it is unclear whether Salmon is referring to the township or the general area - plus there are no vouchered herbarium specimens from Mangonui in any of the major New Zealand herbaria.

Written in just readable pencil, in A. E. Wright's hand, on one of the Auckland Museum Herbarium's NZMS 260 maps was a reference to a stand of hard beech, at a location which was some 33 km north of the known limit. Thinking that this should be checked out, and happening to be going up that way I decided to add some fieldwork to the New Year's festivities. So, on the 1 January 1999, without too much of a hangover from New Year's Eve, I set off from Paihia with 3 "assistants" to check out a possible new northern limit for hard beech.

On the main road north we took the Hihi turn-off some 5 km before Mangonui. We drove through Hihi township, through the camping ground and past Waitetoki (all of which can be missed by blinking) and

started heading east, into the bush which is on private land. Near the last house the "main" road sort of petered out so we stopped and continued on foot. It was only about 200 m along the track that we came to our first beech tree. A bit further on we found a couple more and this tended to be the case for most of the rest of the track - a few scattered medium-sized trees near the bush edge. We walked along the track (which takes you to Takerau Bay if you turn left or Taemaro Bay if you turn right) a couple of kilometers before rumbling stomachs and the Mangonui Fish Shop lured us back.

All in all we found around 15 beech trees, generally beside the track, with the largest being around 12 m tall and 25 cm dbh (AK 236466) (NZMS 260 map reference O04 614949). Although we didn't come across any very large mature trees there are probably some around but you might have to venture a bit off the track. To me the trees appeared to be natural and not planted, even though they're near the track. There is no evidence of any other plantings in the vicinity. People have, however, been known to do some strange things.

The bush itself is in very good condition and has been well cared for by the locals, who are also maintaining it as a kiwi sanctuary. The forest comprises numerous large, mature kauri, taraire, rimu, karaka and towai trees with a very healthy native understorey. A very strange-looking *Coprosma* with notably obovate leaves was quite common on the edges of the bush. It was later identified as just another weirdo *C. lucida* (AK 236467). The only weeds in the area are generally found on the track; which is a disused road. The main weeds seen were mistflower and boneseed that, unfortunately, were both in copious bloom.

This area would make an ideal Bot. Soc. trip if the owners are willing as it has some wonderful bush which is relatively unexplored.

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References

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