

May Field Trip: Wainui Hills and Riteakawarau Trig

Rhys Gardner

On the warm damp morning of 15 May about thirty or so of us met near King's Quarry, off Pebblebrook Road, about halfway across the country between Silverdale and Kaukapakapa. This part of Rodney District is still a bit far north to have succumbed to lifestylitis, and the scene is a pleasantly rural one of dairy and cattle-raising farms, pine groves and plantations, streams and fencelines edged mostly with totara or kanuka, and a satisfactory number of mixed-bush remnants.

The area we were going to examine, the eastern part of the Wainui Hills, carries the largest continuous piece of what could reasonably be called 'native forest' in the immediate vicinity (particularly so if one includes the 'Swiss Block' adjoining to the southwest), and at c. 200 ha. it may in fact be the largest such area between the northern end of the Waitakeres and Mt Auckland and the Dome Valley. Long owned by the King family (Mr Austin King of Pebblebrook Road is the present scion) it has been leased in the past for various quarry operations, and is now under consideration by Winstones Aggregates Ltd as a greatly expanded source of material.

Winstones' geologist Alan Happy and their mining engineer Bernie Choate accompanied us, and, looking across to the exposure of King's Quarry, we were urged towards an understanding of their requirements. This high ground is composed of a conglomerate of beautifully rounded cobbles and pebbles, laid down in Miocene times as delta fans at the face of land to the west. The pebbles are composed of a number of different kinds of material, some of which are very hard - it may be no coincidence that the stream here is called the Waitoki, 'toki' of course being the Maori word for axe. According to Alan and Bernie it is not so much Auckland's appetite for pebblegardens which is driving the project, or the finding of cheap ways to arm our frigates, so much as a need to secure road metal to underly the major highways planned for this part of the Auckland region.

From this southern side one sees only a fraction of the area. Its bush cover is continuous but unspectacular, being of tall kanuka and young podocarps, mamaku tree-fern groves, a few kauri-rickers on the ridges, etc. Pampas grass is the worst weed on the older quarry faces and tailings; gorse and pines are present too in the scrub above. Stories were told about desperate heroism among

pampas grass, of its flammability and its lacerous nature, and how wasps make nests at its base especially on gravel. Restoration of this kind of habitat, as part of growing up in a future Green New Zealand, was mooted enthusiastically by a number of older members.

The first botanical surprise came when the usual sharp-eyed readers of species lists simultaneously saw "*Stachycarpus spicatus*" - a pity he doesn't have Taxoncheck(tm) was the general opinion. Then we had a look in the pond on the quarry floor for *Potamogeton pectinatus*, which the writer had found here a year ago - unfortunately it had nearly completed its winter dieback and all that could be extracted from the cold deep water were some unconvincing bleached shoots. The occurrence of this uncommon plant here is rather strange, since the pond is a relatively young one. The next most recent collection in AK of this plant is also a curious one (Ruawai, 1997 "causing problems in farm troughs", AK 234413).

We moved slowly uphill through what no poetic soul pointed out might be Gerard Manley Hopkins's original drizzle-decked ridge track kanuka scrub, then past some large but stunted manuka on the ridge, and so eastwards into older ridge vegetation with large trees, particularly taraire, and a good amount of young podocarps. There are scattered kauri stumps along this ridge, and, according to local landowner and forester John Groome who came with us, similar stumps (a metre in diameter or more) were also to be found on the Ian Hellyer property on lower ground just to the northwest. The only kauri remaining in the current area though are moderately large emergent rickers, and (as is the case in numerous places) there seem to be rather few young plants to be found. A story of John's about rodents eating the taproots of even quite big kauri may have let the rat out of this particular scientific bag.

After gaining Riteakawarau, which is a junction of several grassy ridges just beyond the bush edge, we were able to appreciate the partially bush-clad vista to the north, and, to a lesser extent, appreciate "Flat Top", an andesite plug-like mass now terribly quarried but still bearing on its eastern side a patch of dense totara forest also with *Libocedrus*, *Clematis cunninghamii*, *Libertia grandiflora* and *Carex spinirostris*. On a more positive note, we could agree on the suitability of

Riteakawarau and our ridge track for incorporation in a revived NZ Walkways System.

Doing as geologists must do at high places, Alan explained regional structure to us; we then regained the shelter of the taraire groves for lunch. Botanists then did as they must do and we bush-crashed down to Pebblebrook Creek on what was sufficiently wet and steep and slippery enough not to be a leading ridge, though in fact it was. The forest is a mixture of young podocarps, taraire, puriri and tawa; a pleasing feature was the thigh-high 'river' of parataniwha along the overgrown road lower down on the slope.

The long walk back along Pebblebrook Road to the

cars in watery afternoon sunshine had some fine naturalistic touches: the old ditch-and-bank hawthorn roadsides now overtaken by totara trees, the Waitoki Stream bridge with its single large kauri tree burnt-out at the base supposedly by some Maori woman long ago, Nature's rustic artwork in the shape of a huge, bleached and rotted-out macrocarpa stump adorned by karamu and a cabbage tree sapling, the ancient oak and karaka trees of the King family homestead site, and the current efforts of Winstones to restore scrub to land close to the quarry yard.

Our thanks to Winstones for giving us access to this fine and extensive area. We certainly hope we can say that we have not seen the last of it.

An *Alseuosmia* in the afterlife

M.W. (Wendy) Patterson

The parent bush of *Alseuosmia macrophylla*, presumably of Waitakere stock from the Oratia area (G. Davidson pers. comm.), was sold by Oratia Native Plant Nursery to someone unknown, who gave it to the Forest and Bird trading table, where it was bought by Frances Kelly, who planted it at Te Kaha Road, One Tree Hill, in a sheltered corner. It was quite a few years before it flowered, and when it did it chose the time when Frances was away in China, while I baby-sat the plant. I paid several visits and finally could report that the first flower was green with a touch of red; later flowers were a good pinky-red.

On 20 July 1994 at a farewell lunch for Frances she gave me a twig of the bush with one flower out, good colour, good fragrance – I had to carry it

about all day but in the evening put it into an earthenware vase 10 cm tall filled with tap water. I kept up the water supply and was rewarded with 3 more flowers. Shortly after this I lifted it up and was amazed to find that it had lots of good roots, so I left it in its vase, and gave it nothing but tap-water.

In 1995 it had 3 flowers in August. In 1996 it produced 4 flowers, and the remains of one flower, and one miniature berry (that failed to expand, seedless ?) are still on it. In 1997 and 1998 it didn't flower but grew a new shoot in three bursts, 25.6 cm long. I was looking forward to flowers on the new shoot when on 19 April 1999 after a short illness the cutting died – aged 4 years 9 months. Voucher specimen: AK 237917.

Motutapu: Healing hill sides

Alistair MacArthur

An account of the Auckland Botanical Society field trip to Motutapu Island, and a little of Rangitoto Island, on Sunday 22 August 1999.

As it happens I start to write this up with echoes in

my ears of some disquieting accounts about forest destruction. While trying to get over the latest flu.....some call it Australian, and it certainly bounces up and down like a kangaroo and whizzes back like a boomerang.....I have heard the B.B.C.