

Dorothy White

It was Bot.Soc. that introduced me to 'the other side of the mountain' in what was then our annual around anniversary weekend foray out of Auckland. Those were the days of the old Blyth Hut, crossing the stream by the Ohakune Ranger Information Centre walking on a wire and clutching another, of the Lediards, the Warrens, Les Butler, Polly Young, Minnie Barr, Arthur Mead (he showed me my first Ranunculus in bloom then-at the springs at the end of the Mangetepopo track), Phyl Hynes, Peggy Sexton. We stayed in the old Regent Hotel, ministered to by the rather eccentric gentleman owner, discovering tins of beer stashed by shift railwaymen who there stocked their liquor (a dry hotel) under the mattresses for when they were changing from 'to Wellington' to 'to Auckland' shifts.

This February, I was there again, with my usual key to my favourite ambience - Salmon's 'Field Guide to the Alpine Plants of New Zealand', but pampered by an Ohakune Mountain Road bus ride, right up to the 4850' of Turoa Village (age decrees I'm a numeral dyslectic when it comes to metric conversion).

There in seemingly a grey place, we scrambled over the old lava flows and volcanic debris to our first find - mountain celery (Anisotome aromatica): some 'doubting Thomas's' tasted and confirmed its name, then as we scattered, two plants definitely dominated - mountain inaka (Dracophyllum recurvum) glowing redly at its tips and the whipcord hebe (Hebe tetragona). Among snowberries (Gaultheria colensoi), Coprosma petriei (with its varied coloured translucent drupes) and the little mountain heath (Pentachondra pumila), bloomed Celmisia incarna (with its thick white hairy leaves), C. spectabilis (with smooth shiny large leaves and the daisy flowers on long thin stalk). A special find was the sadly called 'lesser onionleaf orchid' (Prasophyllum colensoi) and then, surprisingly Chiloglottis cornuta.

Our lone insectivorous offering - tiny sundew (Drosea arcturi) which certainly couldn't cope with a large meal.

Contrasting to the dullness of the volcanic rock and the icy-topped Ruapehu looming above us were the pristine white eyebrights (Euphrasia cuneata), the everlasting daisy (Helichrysum bellidioides), Ourisia robusta and Forstera bidwillii. Then, nearer the buildings of Turoa Village (methinks planted as away from their usual site on an overhang or in trickles of water) the shiny leaved golden buttercup (Ranunculus insignis). Another yellow plant was the right tight little Senecio bidwillii and the mini fried egg North Island edelweiss (Leucogenes leontopodium) in its silvery patches.

February is a good time to see the white free-flowering Gentiana bellidifolia snugly nestling close to the stony outcrops set in its colourful reddish foliage. The red flower stalks of the willow herb (Epilobium glabellum) and the reddish-pink berries of the bog mingimingi (Cyathodes empetrifolia) and the pale mauve of the N.Z. harebell (Wahlenbergia pygmaea) gave further colour to our morning, in contrast to the tree daisy (Olearia nummularifolia) that was well represented.

A small area of rock and stone, steep and exposed on a dull day, yet it had a wealth of plants, mostly prostrate, hugging that inhospitable terrain, clustering sometimes in rosettes, sometimes with hairy leaves, sometimes with succulent, yet surviving, pollinated by insects.

A fascinating morning, recalling my introduction to this, the more interesting side of the mountain.