

Lake Cobb — January 1970

Judith Petterson, Palmerston North

Nomenclature

FOR the purposes of this account I am using the names given on the map in my article on Mt Snowden. At the time of writing there is only the 1948 Topographical Map of the Cobb Area available, but the 2nd Edition, 1968, is available for the Takaka area. Hence my map combines data from both these maps, as the area I am concerned with straddles the meeting place of the two.

The peak I am calling *Waingaro Peak* is the un-named one labelled "4700" on the 1948 map (grid reference 952592). It seems logical to give it this name since it is at the head of the Waingaro River. Long before the 1948 map was published, the name "Waingaro" had been used by local residents and by the botanist F. G. Gibbs, for the peak now named *Mt Benson*, which dominates the northern bank of the Upper Cobb Valley. Since *Mt Benson* is now established on the 1948 map, and is not likely to be altered, I am using the name "Waingaro" in a more logical position, as a parallel to Anatoki Peak (at the head of the Anatoki River) and Cobb Peak (at the head of the Cobb River).

Cobb Peak is the locally-used name for the craggy peak visible at the head of the upper Cobb Valley for most of its length. It used to be called "Mt Cobb" by F. G. Gibbs and local residents. It is not named in the 1948 map, but is indicated by contour lines (grid reference 923579). Lake Cobb is in its "arms", and the Cobb River originates from this lake. Cobb Peak lies between Lake Cobb and Island Lake.

Mt Cobb, as named on the 1948 map, is a different peak which lies between Lake Cobb and Lake Henderson, and is not visible from the valley floor until one is close to it. The makers of the 1948 map apparently did not consult F. G. Gibbs, who knew this country very well and collected many valuable specimens from it, now in national herbaria.

Lake Cobb is at the head of the Cobb Valley, and is not to be confused with the *Cobb Reservoir*, a man-made lake filling the lower part of the Upper Cobb Valley, which is a broad glaciated valley of typical shallow U-shape, the only one in Northwest Nelson.

Iron Tarn is on the ridge between Waingaro Peak and Mt Benson. This is my name and it does not appear on the published maps.

During January 1970, members of the Wellington Botanical Society walked from Trilobite Hut in the Upper Cobb Valley to

Lake Cobb, and spent six days camped near the little 4-bunk hut below the lake, from whence we made sorties in several directions.

It proved to be a profitable time for gentian enthusiasts. The Cobb Valley gentian (sp. "a") was in full flower on the grassy valley floor. *G. filipes* with its tiny dainty blooms and slender habit was found on a gravel spit beside the water. (I had seen it before in bog at Salisbury's Open (Tableland), and in limestone crevices on Mt Arthur, where it is dwarfed to tiny clumps 1-2 inches tall. There is an excellent photograph of it in Salmon's *N.Z. Flowers and Plants in Colour*, Plate 484 (both editions), unfortunately wrongly named "*G. corymbifera*", which is a much larger species with big flowers borne in large masses on tall stout scapes. Salmon's plates actually show *G. filipes* natural size, as can be seen by the *Raoulia glabra* growing alongside.)

Gentiana patula was found in swampy areas near Lake Cobb. It grows tall like *corymbifera*, but not so large and stout. The basal leaves are elliptic (not strap-shaped as in *corymbifera*) and the scape leaves are broadly ovate and sessile, which separates it from species "a", whose scape leaves are petiolate and elliptic.

Gentiana spenceri was always found in mountain beech forest, usually growing in the yellowish moss on the forest floor. Its spoon-shaped leaves form a flat rosette in the moss, and its flowers are small and delicate, white with a few purple veins, surrounded by a sort of involucre of a few large leaves.

On the higher peaks around Lake Cobb there grows a particularly fine gentian with large lemon-tinted flowers, about 3 cm. diameter, borne singly on short stems, but with many flowering stems on each plant. It often has a "mat-forming" habit, with leafy prostrate branches radiating out 6-8 inches from a central rootstock. The upright flower-stems, only 2-4 in. tall, arise from the prostrate branches near their tips. This I believe to be Petrie's "*G. bellidifolia* var. *australis*" (*Man. N.Z. Fl.* 1925), but the locality given there is too far south and west ("Karamea to Westport, and Southwest Otago"). Allan expresses doubt as to the status of this name (*Flora of N.Z.* 1961) and I would suggest that, as this large-flowered short-stemmed species is very distinct from all others in the area, and is found on the southwest faces of all the high peaks around Lake Cobb to at least as far south as Mt Peel, it deserves a new name not associated with *G. bellidifolia*, which it does not resemble. The type specimens of Petrie's var. *australis* are in the Dominion Museum, and need to be compared with specimens from the Cobb area before a new name is given.

Gentiana vernicosa and *G. gracilifolia*, both named and described by Cheeseman in *Man. N.Z. Fl.* 1906, appear to be habitat forms of the same species, since they are closely similar in leaf form. The leaves have an extremely glossy appearance when dry, and an unusual stiff narrow-oblong shape. We found *gracilifolia*

only in boggy areas, in full flower, while plants matching the description of *vernica* were found in dry spots, and were not in flower, though some were in bud. The two forms were often found only inches apart, the one flowering and the other not, the one slender with narrow leaves and the other stocky with broader leaves, the one in wet ground and the other in dry, and it seems likely that the damp habitat causes the early flowering and the slender growth form, while the dry habitat delays flowering and causes a more stocky growth form. A hunt for intermediates revealed many plants in intermediate habitats which showed intermediate characters and could not be put clearly in one or the other category.

Plants of the bog form were dug up in generous sods (to avoid root disturbance) and carried home to plant. One of these is still alive — the others, as usual with gentians, sulked and died in civilisation. The living specimen has looked like typical *gracilifolia* all winter, but I hope for a change of form during the summer. Typical *G. vernica* occurs all over the Tasman Ranges, and I have collected it on Mt Arthur, Mt Peel, the Tableland, Gordon's Pyramid and Boulder Lake.

On January 16th a party set out from the Upper Cobb Hut to test the route which Graham had seen from the top of Kakapo Peak in January 1958. A long wearisome sidle up the steep Burgoo side of Waingaro Peak, on brittle, shattering, shaley rock, brought us to the summit of the razor ridge leading from Waingaro Peak to Kakapo Peak. Those who braved the climb up and over this ridge were rewarded by finding a small thirst-quenching tarn on a grassy "bench" on the Waingaro side. From there they found it easy travelling on the bench to the scree falling from Kakapo Peak, and a steep pull up to the scree to the summit. There were many interesting epilobiums on the scree and summit, some keying out to *E. pycnostachyum* but showing considerable variation among themselves, others keying out to *E. rubromarginatum* or *E. glabellum* but different from either. *Myosotis traversii* was found in flower.

This party returned to Lake Cobb via the Waingaro side of the ridge, on easy bench country well below the ridge top, and in half the time it took to go via the Burgoo side. A good straightforward route in clear weather, but no tracks marked.

Those who turned back at the sight of the jagged razor ridge rested on a knob near the top of Waingaro Peak, where we were investigated by a rock wren, which came very close to us so that we could see its dark eyebrows and the fluffy yellow feathers beneath its wings. It continually did its typical "knees bend" exercise, and uttered soft "chit-chit" calls, as it hopped from rock to rock in a circle round us. We must have been sitting on its territory, and we made the most of our opportunity to photograph and study this rare little bird.

The rock wren remained in charge of its knob as we climbed over Waingaro Peak and down along the range towards Mt Benson. Soon we came upon an iron-stained tarn, whose water tasted like rusty tin cans, and whose small outlet stream trickled down 200 ft to the head basin of the Waingaro River. This is a nice, smoothly curving bowl covered with tussock, whose back wall is the Razor Ridge and whose side walls are Mt Snowden on the north and the Lockett Range (on which we were standing) to the south.

The Iron Tarn (as I am calling it) was set in a curious gully-topped ridge composed of soft flaky shale between two narrow marble ridges, the shale eroding easily and forming a gully between the harder marble walls. The shale is dark in places, and is probably full of graptolite fossils. However, the strata are vertical and as the slivers of shale protruded only a few inches above the ground we could not lever out any fragments that were not weathered. The rusty water of the tarn was coated with a film of rainbowy oil, as was the wet mud around it.

Another day we made our way to Cobb Peak, where in a watercourse trickling down a smooth rock face we found *Celmisia gibbsii*, new to all of us and not found on Snowden, Iron Hill or Mt Arthur. The type locality is given by Gibbs as "Mt Cobb", which I believe to be what we now call Cobb Peak. He also found it on "Waingaro Peak" which is now Mt Benson (*Flora of N.Z.* vol. 1, 1961, p. 618).

Celmisia gibbsii has linear glabrous pale green leaves about 1 cm. long with a few deciduous scales beneath instead of the usual dense tomentum. The flowers are the size of a 2-cent piece. It contrasts with *C. bellidioides* whose flowers are the same size, and which also grows on wet rocks, but which has very glossy rounded dark green leaves, and often forms quite large mats.

We also found *Cheesemania gibbsii* in rock crevices on Cobb Peak. The craggy bluffs smoothly sloping on the eastern side and ragged and broken on the western side, look exactly like those of Anatoki Peak, visible in the distance across the Burgoo Valley. We have often puzzled about what kind of rock made up Anatoki Peak and the Dragon's Teeth. Here on Cobb Peak the rock was made up of thin layers of fine sandstone and shale, fantastically twisted and folded like the pages of a crumpled book. I think Anatoki Peak will prove to be the same formation.

The fast party went on to Aorere Peak at the north end of Island Lake. The rest of us made our way along the broad-topped ridge between Island Lake and Round Lake. From this ridge we could see range upon range of mountains far away to the west. We seemed to be above them all. They would be the Karamea Ranges, of which the highest is Mt Domett (5300 ft) and Mt Gari-baldi (5000 ft). Aorere Peak is 5604 ft and our ridge about

5000 ft. *Celmisia walkeri*, forming stout shrubby mats, and *Senecio adamsii*, forming stiff little bushes, were abundant on the west-sloping ridge, and as we dropped down the steep corrie wall into Round Lake, we found *Geum uniflorum* in flower, its huge solitary white flowers so delicate that they seemed to float on their long slender stems. Island Lake is about four times as large as it is drawn on the 1948 map, and oblong in shape, with a small island near the outlet.

Ivor Robbins, climbing up that steep face above Island Lake, almost vertical, with botanical specimens a few inches from his nose, found *Abrotanella pusilla*, a new record for the South Island. It is common in the Ruahines and Tararuas in boggy ground.

Postscript

While in Auckland in January, 1971, I checked up on the gentian specimens in Cheeseman's herbarium. Those from the Cobb area are as follows:

1. Corresponding to A. P. Druce's species "b" (*G. bellidifolia* var. *australis*?):

- 7297 Cobb Valley, Nelson, F. G. Gibbs
- 7280 Brunner Range, S.W. Nelson, W. Townson
- 7282 Mt. Richmond, Nelson, J. H. McMahon
- 7284 Mt. Rochfort, W. Townson
- 7285 Mt. Buckland, W. Townson
- 7287 Mt. Barron, L. Cockayne
- 7288 Griffin Range, Westland, P. G. Morgan

None of these is dated, and all are labelled *G. bellidifolia*. Petrie's name *G. bellidifolia* var. *australis* is not on any of these sheets, but I remember this name being given to similar or duplicate specimens in Petrie's herbarium at the Dominion Museum, Wellington. These are easily separated from other forms in the *bellidifolia* folder. I doubt if "Cobb Valley" is a correct locality.

2. Corresponding to A. P. Druce's species "a" (Cobb Valley floor):

Four sheets (7528.1, 7528.2, 7528.3, 7529) all from Cobb Valley, Nelson, and determined by F. G. Gibbs (who collected them) as *G. patula*. Gibbs notes: "Very plentiful on flats in Cobb Valley. As many as 30 stalks to one root, but generally 6 to 7. Flower white, striped with violet." These are distinct from all the other forms in the *patula* folder, and there are no similar specimens from areas other than the Cobb Valley.

3. *G. vernicosa* Cheeseman

The type specimen (7269, Mt. Lockett, March, 1903, F. G. Gibbs, also 7268) is a large specimen of unmistakable distinctness, typical of that described in the text as the "dry habitat" form.

4. *G. gracilifolia* Cheeseman

The type specimen (7209, Tarns on Mt. Arthur Plateau, Nelson, 4000ft, Jan., 1905, F. G. Gibbs, also 7208, 7210, 7211, 7212) is a small, slender plant with smaller flowers, like those described in the text as the "swamp" form. Some of the other specimens are very drawn up. Note that these are all flowering in January, while the *vernicosa* specimens were flowering in March. This fits in with our own observations.

I regret to say that my precious plant of *G. gracilifolia* gave up its precarious hold on life while I was away. It had only one rosette of leaves, and had not yet developed the "*vernicosa*" habit. I hope someone else will be more successful.