

CAMPING LIFE WITH MARGARET BULFIN

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Life in the Bush

I first met Margaret Simpson (as she was then) at Massey College in 1946 where we were both taking horticulture. Then she joined the Botany Division in Wellington as assistant to Dr Lucy Moore; I returned to Nelson to pursue my horticultural career.

The Nelson Lakes National Park was formed in 1956, and Margaret was appointed to carry out the botanical survey of the Park. The following summer, Margaret contacted me in Nelson, where, already widowed, I was living with my small son. She wondered if I would like to join her and Juliet Burrell from Lincoln College in an exploratory trip into the Park. We would meet at St Arnaud, so I brought my 12 ft clinker-built boat and outboard along, and we started looking at the vegetation around Lake Rotoiti. Margaret was not only experienced in the bush, but also in the mountains, as she had done quite a bit of climbing in the Tararuas when in Wellington. I was very happy to accompany her.

So I was also happy when the Botany Division took me on officially as her field assistant and boatman. I think they were highly relieved that Margaret had found a female assistant, otherwise they would have had to employ a chaperone. How times have changed! These surveys were usually of two weeks duration and the only expenses I was able to claim was for petrol for the outboard motor – nothing for the car and trailer which towed the boat.

Margaret organised our trips well and would bring up as much gear as possible from the Botany Division Christchurch branch in Latimer Square. This would include a plant press, plastic bags, reference books, large boxes for specimens, a tent, dehydrated food, billies, etc. Occasionally she would ask me to bring fresh vegetables from Nelson, or book a bach at the lake.

Most times we would go in by boat to establish a base camp at the head of Rotoiti, or Rotoroa. In the early days of the Nelson Lakes Park, there were few huts and even fewer bridges. It was park policy not to allow private huts, though club huts were allowed. The Nelson Ski Club took over Kea Hut, built privately on Mt Robert in the thirties, and the Acclimatisation Society was allowed to continue ownership of the Morgan Hut.

Routine established, we would set out early for a day's collecting. We would be armed with plastic bags, all carefully labelled with the area and altitude that specimens were collected. Any other relevant information, Margaret would record in her notebook. We would try to return well before dark to get in firewood and cook a meal. Then, if we had brought the press in, we would set it up and work by lamplight well into the night. Often we would need to reorganise the press, take out the damp blotters, and dry them in front of the fire. When the specimens were safely inserted, we would strap the press up, sometimes taking all our strength to get the strap tight.

We had the press with us only when we were based at the head of the lake, and could bring it in by boat. Otherwise, it was too heavy to transport when back-packing. But we had help when we needed it – and sometimes when we didn't. Both the Park Ranger, George Lyon, and Doug Zumbach of the Acclimatisation Society were quite concerned at the thought of two women going off into the bush on their own.

Doug lived in Nelson and with his help I managed to arrange an airdrop of food to our base way up a valley. Luckily I'd packed everything in two sacks, spreading things like rice in one, and rolled oats in the other, so if one was lost, we still would have a reasonably balanced diet. Doug went up in the plane to spot drop sites, then walked up later to retrieve the sacks and put them in the hut for us. Unfortunately, one sack had landed on a dry river bed; the river rose and washed it away. So it was short commons on the next trip, and for our last meal at the end of that trip, we put all the remaining food in a billy and cooked it up. It tipped over as we served it, but we scooped the food out of the ashes, and ate it with relish.

Deer Damage

During the sixties, Forest Service had an observation hut in the Cupola Basin above the Travers Valley. This was to follow the movements of deer herds and chamois along the tops and descending into the valley in bad weather. No licences were given for shooting in the Cupola area and the devastation that deer wrought on the forest floor was terrible, with the animals ringbarking trees as high as they could reach. In 1971, it was decided to shoot as many deer as possible, and bring them out by helicopter.

Drama Along the Way

This gave Margaret and me the opportunity of being airlifted to the Angelus Basin for a day's botanising. We were landed just by the magnificent Angelus Hut at 6150 feet between Lake Angelus and a pretty little tarn. The hut was quite superb compared to the 2-and-a-half bunk shelter where we had, much earlier, spent a night in a storm. That earlier visit unfortunately sparked off a search party. On leaving St Arnaud, Margaret had jokingly said to George Lyon, "If I'm not back on Thursday, send out a search party. I want to be home for the weekend."

We had a happy few days working along the tops, from the Mt Robert ski huts along to Angelus. And then the weather packed up. It poured with rain, with virtually no visibility, so we stayed in that little two-and-a-half bunker. There was nothing to do, and I remember reading a book left there with many of the pages missing.

Next day was clear, but very windy, but we made our way down. In sight of the car park, Margaret stopped to tidy up, as there were several cars parked there. I pushed on, and could hear voices on a track down in the bush, little knowing it was a search party for us. George, being a bushman, thought we would have sheltered in the bush, not realising we were safe in the blessed little shelter.

Another excitement was when Margaret spotted an orange-fronted parakeet. This must have been in the sixties, but I can't remember the date. The wildlife people came out with their mist nets and recordings to attract these very rare birds. One actually was on a net, but they were

unable to capture it. It certainly was close enough to be able to confirm what it was. But the fellows had fun later on fooling me with recordings of kiwi, and I was searching for them everywhere.

Taking Other Botanists Along

Margaret occasionally had other botanists out with us. One was Ruth Mason, whose special interests were wetland and aquatic flora. I do remember one day she was crawling about on the close-cropped river bank looking for the minute native mint, when some fisherman came up to enquire what she had lost. Ruth was vegetarian. I remember her bring along large supplies of cheese, and one day offering some to a native robin, who it turned out, much preferred bits of bacon rind.

Jane Taylor, a British botanist, joined us in 1963, or thereabouts, at Lake Rotoroa. She was out from the U.K. to study hepatics (liverworts). I was fascinated by her close observation of tree trunks, and had never realised that most of their green covering were liverworts, not moss or ferns.

Another visitor was Margareta Crooks (of Crooks and Dobbie Fern Book). Unfortunately on this occasion, George Lyon came up to the head of the lake with bad news for Margaret Bulfin. Her mother was very ill, so she flew home, leaving me in charge. I greatly enjoyed Margareta, as I'd always been interested in ferns. She was very patient and helpful. I hope I was able to help her also by guiding her to where the choicest specimens could be found.

Margaret had the job of escorting a noted Japanese ornithologist to the headwaters of Lake Rotoroa. This was the early sixties. My mother was very keen on birds, so Margaret kindly arranged that she take my place for a week of work. George ferried Jiro and my mother up the lake, while I stayed at the other end, with my young son Michael.

Jiro wanted the experience of catching an eel and cooking it in the embers. So one night my mother rowed him out into the lake where they caught an eel, but in the process, lost an oar. So they were circling around in the dark trying to find it. Meanwhile Margaret was panicking because she couldn't get out of the hut as they'd latched the flyscreen on the outside. All

eventually ended well: the oar was found, Margaret was released, the eel was cooked, and was a great success.

The Flower Bros. Dairy Farm

One of our regular pleasures in the Nelson Lakes area was visiting the Flower Bros. dairy farm at Lake Rotoroa. An unlikely setting for dairy cows, but the brothers took the cream over to Murchison via the Braeburn Track. (Our usual route into Lake Rotorua was via the Gowan Bridge, and once, when it was destroyed, I had to tow my boat along the Braeburn Track.)

The brothers' home was the original accommodation house which their parents had run as a fishing lodge. In those days it was a haven for a wide spectrum of fisherman and nature lovers – including the then Governor General, Lord Galway. But now it was in a terrible state of repair. They lived in the kitchen where the large table was heaped with copies of the pink-covered Auckland Weekly News. These all had to be cleared off when we joined them for a meal. The downstairs rooms were filled with farm chemicals and fertilisers. Upstairs the bedrooms still had iron bedsteads and old white cotton bedcovers. We would be told to choose our own room, and would roll out our sleeping bags on top. Today, Flowers is now up-market accommodation and I find it amazing that it was possible to renovate it so well. It now costs beyond my reach to stay there.

But with all the comfort, there is no escaping those famous Nelson Lakes sandflies. These were always particularly bad at Lake Rotoroa. Being at a higher altitude, Lake Rotoiti did not have quite the same problem, and sandflies were virtually absent on “the tops”.

It was, I think, as much because of the absence of sandflies, that both Margaret and I preferred the open tops to the bush. But then, they also had a greater range of plants than in the bush. And there were the views! From Mt Robert (4630 ft) we could see across Lake Rotoiti to the St Arnaud Range, and beyond the Wairau River to the Raglan Range and Mt Scott which Edmund Hillary had climbed when in the airforce at Woodbourne Aerodrome. Many years later, members of the Nelson Ski Club accompanied him up Mt Scott.

Memorable Expeditions

I remember one particular expedition. Margaret and I tramped up the West Sabine and spent the night at Blue Lake before there was a hut. As we were in the habit of sleeping out under the stars rather than carry a tent, when we woke that morning, our bags were saturated from a heavy dew. But they dried out in the sun. From that spot I was able to see Moss Pass which runs between the Durville and Sabine Rivers. This was named after my husband, Brian, who had made several sketches of the area, and suggested this route between the rivers.

Margaret and I climbed up to Lake Constance, which is rather barren with its jumble of huge rocks damming it up. We botanised as we went, filling the plastic bags, Margaret labelling them and taking notes. Then we returned to base, to cook a meal, and press specimens until late into the night.

Another time we climbed up steep bush-clad slopes from the Travers Valley to the tops, giving as a view down into the Arnst River, a tributary of the Travers. Margaret wanted a specimen from the middle of one of the many tarns along the ridge. It was fairly deep, so I stripped to my shirt to get it for her. That mean girl Margaret took a photo!

Margaret was always one for her cuppa before turning in. One night we collected enough dead dracophylums to make the billy boil. A little tea was left – and was frozen by morning.

When the Upper Travers hut was being built, George Lyon (our friendly Park Ranger) offered to have food airlifted in for us. We took the opportunity of putting in a few luxuries like bars of chocolate, as the elderly Harry Talbot was joining us on this trip. The airlift went well, but when we opened the box of food, we found an unsigned note “Sure you don’t mind – we have left all essential food”. Someone had pinched our little luxuries, and we did mind.

A bad start to the day, but the botanising was good – and the weather! While Harry went off botanising on his own, we botanised on Mt Travers (7671 ft) almost to the top, plus the red-rocked Kehu Peak which was called after a red-headed Maori. From Rainbow Pass, we could

look down on the Rainbow River and away to the Wairau. Then on to the Travers Saddle, where Harry met up with us, and we could look down on the East Sabine.

Harry told us of his early collecting days when he was a school teacher at Springfield. He and Walter Brockie were good friends, and both retired to the Richmond area. On more than one occasion, they hired a helicopter to airlift them to a hut on Gouland Downs in N.W. Nelson. I do hope their collections have been preserved.

Probably the most memorable trip for Margaret was to the Mole Tops, the most westerly of our camps in the Nelson Lakes Park. This time we had the tent, and it was pitched by a little stream with soft moss all around, and interesting plants like *Celmisia traversii*, which were not found in the drier east. It was on the open tops that Margaret collected something special that she had not come across before. She didn't let on to me just what it was, but announced she'd like to call in on "Wattie" Brockie in Richmond on the way home. When she showed him her specimen, it met with a very cool reception: "Where did you get that?" "On the Mole Tops."

You could see his relief, as, down the side of his house were similar plants, all yet to flower. Margaret's specimen was in flower. He and Harry had collected them on Mt Peel two weeks earlier – an undescribed species of *Epilobium*. (Wattie is particularly remembered in botanical circles for his studies of New Zealand species of *Epilobium* on which he carried out many interspecific crosses.) She was so close to finding a new species but as the men found it first, they were allowed to name it – but honoured her by calling it *Epilobium margaretae*. The discovery was published in 1966 with Harry describing it in Latin.

Back to Wattie's, where the joint discovery called for a celebration with Wattie's very potent home-made wine. Margaret later accused me of driving home under the influence, but we made it safely.

It wasn't until later that I realised Margaret knew Wattie was working on sorting out the New Zealand *Epilobiums*, and when he died in 1972 (aged 75) Margaret wrote his obituary. He had

taken part in many plant collecting expeditions, and added greatly to the collection of plants in the Otari Native Plant Museum in Wadestown, Wellington.

I was lucky enough to join Margaret when she escorted the well-known American botanist, Peter Raven and his equally well-known wife, Tamara, up Mt Potts, in the Rangitata Valley. They were studying *Epilobium* on a world-wide basis. We had a glorious day and could see Mt Cook from the top. Raven, in 1974, commended Wattie for his efforts in putting the New Zealand species of *Epilobium* on the map. "Thanks to Brockie's efforts, the New Zealand species of *Epilobium* are probably better known, in terms of their cross relationships, than any group of plants of comparable size anywhere in the world", he commented.

Many trips in the Nelson Lakes area over a decade or so were not the only official outings I had with Margaret. I joined her in 1965 on a survey of vegetation of Farewell Spit. We had a slow trip from Christchurch in the Botany Division's Landrover. We stayed in the old Collingwood Hotel (burnt down, alas, in 1967) and one night, from its balcony observed a remarkably bright object in the sky. It turned out to be the comet Ikey-seki. We also stored our specimens on the balcony, much to the disapproval of the management, who thought we would introduce all kinds of creepy-crawlies and especially katipo spiders, to the hotel.

Harry Talbot and Wattie Brockie were staying then at Pakawau and one day Harry met up with us at Freeman's Farm for a day on the Spit. All went well, but on the return we ran over a piece of driftwood which must have had large nails in it. We knew we had a puncture, so limped back to the farm where we found both tyres on the same side were punctured. The Landrover was abandoned, and Harry took us, plus the two tyres back to Collingwood.

Due to my work with Margaret, I got to know many of the botanists at Lincoln. When I came down to live in Christchurch, Dr Lucy Moore was instrumental in my getting a job in Plant Science at Lincoln College, and in later years on Botanical Society outings she would ask me to be her eyes. I can now sympathise, as my sight is failing.

Following her surveys in the Nelson Lakes area, Margaret's main interest turned to seeds. She was in charge of the Seed Exchange (natives) and at the time of her death was working on a Seed Atlas, which included highly magnified photographs of seeds. These showed up the wrinkled, netted, or other fascinating patterns on the surfaces of the tiniest seeds. As far as I know, this has not yet been published by Landcare. [The Atlas is well-nigh completed – Colin Webb has put a great deal of work into it in recent years – Ed.]

Unfortunately Margaret never wrote up her work on the flora of the Nelson Lakes National Park, though she did publish several short papers under her maiden name, M.J.A. Simpson. Some were about plants she had observed when working in the Park and on Farewell Spit. Margaret died in May 1996, aged 75.

REFERENCE

Raven, P.H., 1974: Evolution and endemism in New Zealand *Epilobium*. In: *Taxonomy, Phytography and Evolution*. Ed. D.H. Valentine, p 263

A Botanical Society Trip to the Top of Akaroa Basin March 2000

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