

Field Trip: Rangitoto Island. 15/7/06

John Millett

Following the many preceding visits during the year of our multi-disciplined peers, we rank and file embarked at the city steps and Devonport wharf on Fuller's ferry, bound for the head of Islington Bay. Here, at 10 am, Mike lost no time in outlining his plan for the day. This was to botanise close to the shoreline all the way down the bay, then along the coastal track to Rangitoto wharf, where the 4 pm low tide dictated we should catch the boat. Lunch would be halfway along the inlet's head, where a bach still survives. Reaching the crater was not on the programme, though a couple opted to do so.

We were cautioned against losing the advantage of our 34 pair of eyes by taking the mundane for granted. Rangitoto's plant succession is full of surprises (eg. the dearth of conifers), weeds and natives plants were to be treated as of equal importance, and there was a need to rediscover the species recorded by early botanists of 100 years ago. Having lichen specialist, Rick, with us meant that even the basalt's first footing of life could be accounted for. Consequently there was plenty of noisy claim and counter claim up and down the line of our beat, which was great fun. Here is a list of the highlights as they struck me, and in order of their finding.

There were a surprising number of garden survivors flowering near the abandoned house sites. Rangitoto's mild winters but blistering summers on porous scoria favoured succulents and bulbs. White (*Narcissus tazetta*) and yellow jonquils (*N. tazetta* subsp. *aureus*); the only wild record of the red flowered *Lachenalia bulbifera*; the red crucifix orchid, *Epidendrum x o'brienianum*; red *Aloe arborescens*, among a plethora of others. Lavender (*Lavendula* sp.), rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*), the yellow flowered, no-scent jasmine, *Jasminum mesnyi*, plus the yellow *Senecio skirrhodon* (gravel groundsel) from South Africa. At the Mine Base was a truly amazing display of the mother-of-millions plant (*Bryophyllum delagoense*), growing all along the joins in the concrete, and flowering profusely. The "millions" of plantlets spread out over the concrete. We could not find a true dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) – only its "oides", *Leontodon taraxacoides*.

Abundant *Hebe stricta*, the only one found here, seems to flower twice a year. The fork fern, *Psilotum nudum*, magnificent with ripe yellow fruiting bodies, was pounced on by photographers. However, this volcano's most famous fern has to be the shy hot rock fern, *Pellaea calidrupium*, which is uncommon this far north. Maureen Young won a pot of purest-white Rangitoto honey by using her sharp eyes, forever in training, to rediscover and confirm the presence of

the fern, *Schizaea bifida*, whose fertile fronds were busy "bifiding" – our "pièce de résistance" for the day.

Rangitoto is famous for its Kirk's daisy (*Brachyglottis kirkii* var. *kirkii*), which is normally epiphytic and uncommon in the north, thriving abundantly on the ground and already starting to flower. Obliging, the two astelias, *A. banksii* and *A. solandri*, which have also adopted an earth-bound habit, were occasionally found with fresh fruit. The latter is much less abundant, with more translucent "beads" to distinguish it from *A. banksii*.

The ability of hard seeded legumes such as kowhai, wattle and gorse to wash up and set a hold was observed all together in one place, but what of the prickly hakea there too? When it comes to woody weeds, though, evergreen buckthorn (*Rhamnus alaternus*) is the dominant one here in this south eastern part of Rangitoto. It is all along the track from Islington Bay wharf to the Mine Base, but gradually thins out along the Coastal Track.

By the time the 4 pm boat deadline had been successfully met, everybody had found something to share with others, even the wartime "archaeology" of the mine store was interesting. I insisted that the subtle, sweet fragrance experienced in patches around the paths, was caused by the tiny flowers of the infamous rhamnus, which has invaded from Motutapu. This sharing, and the sunny trip back, with Auckland's yachts racing against a modern background of water-front towers, made for an expedition I believe everyone thoroughly enjoyed. The last line of an old sea-shanty sums up the weather we had:

"For a cloudy morning brings forth a shining day".

PS. Islington is still called Drunken Bay because it provided a safe anchorage for outgoing windjammers to sober up their crews!

Field trip participants:

Steve Benham, Jan Butcher, Lisa Clapperton, Brian Cumber, Christopher Davies, Neil Davies, Geoff Davidson, Jo Fillery, Allan Flynn, Sarah Flynn, Raewyn Falloon, John Gilardi, Shelley Heiss-Dunlop, Marcel Horvath, Richard Hursthouse, Peter Hutton, Joan Kember, Rick Kooperberg, Helen Lyons, Elaine Marshall, John Millett, Cara Nicholson, Brenda Osborne, Sharon Osman, Roland Payne, Colleen Pilcher, Helen Preston Jones, Juliet Richmond, Doug Shaw, Shirley Tomlinson, Heather Stone, Alison Wesley, Mike Wilcox, Maureen Young.