

2 DECEMBER – BASALT COLUMNS, PORT HUTT, WAITANGI WEST AND ADMIRAL FARM

Eleanor Bissell

A short walk from our hotel to Tikitiki Hill gave us a spectacular view of horizontally striped sea cliffs built up by layers and layers of volcanic ash laid down under the sea 5-10 million years ago. Plants would have been an intrusion here. It was a stunning ‘moonscape’ of glossy midnight blue mingled with black volcanic rock scattered over toffee shades of tuff.

The power of nature became obvious as we neared Ohira Bay where a few brave remnants of an *Olearia traversii* forest remained amid advancing windblown sand. We surveyed heavily grazed salt turf vegetation and found pratia, luzula, *Libertia peregrinans*, *Pteridium esculentum*, gentian, gunnera, *Phormium* aff *tenax*. We consumed another delicious picnic lunch (well, youngster Bill had to survey the area first!) surrounded by midden remains and endless basalt columns (79 million years old; Fig. 13). The hard basalt rock formed by rapid cooling of lava was important to Maori for shaping into tools. Above the beach and tucked into and around the rock crevices a feast of plants awaited us –



Figure 13. Basalt columns at Ohira Bay with their rich flora. *Photo: M. & B. Geerkens*

Cotula coronopifolia, *Apium prostratum* subsp. *denticulatum*, *Leptinella squalida*, lettuce green *L. dioica*, the leathery *Blechnum durum*, *Triglochin striata*, *Dichondra repens*, *D. brevifolia*, *Daucus glochidiatus*, *Luzula banksiana* var. *acra*, *Lagenifera strangulata*, *Lobelia anceps*, *Eleocharis acuta*, *Ranunculus acaulis*, *Samolus repens*, *Pimelea arenaria*, *Selliera radicans*, *Asplenium chathamense*, *Festuca coxii*, *Isolepis cernua*.

A short stop at Port Hutt enabled us to view the Seafood factory and walk along the beach. The rusting remains of the Thomas Currell dominate the harbour. First a trawler, it was used as a minesweeper in World War 2 then as extra freezer space during the crayfish boom of the 60's. Towering basalt bluffs dominated the landscape and dwarfed the stone cottage at Maunganui built in the 1860's by German Moravian missionaries. They cut local stone and burned pipi shells to use as mortar, planted an orchard, a garden, a stand of macrocarpas as a windbreak and farmed sheep. Enormous lichen-covered boulders of volcanic andesitic rock lay scattered, nature unspoiled.

The white sand and sweeping curve of Waitangi West beach had us scattering to make the most of the botanising opportunity. (Alison didn't want to let Bill off the bus!) Some of the dunes were covered with the most magnificent specimens of *Desmoschoenus spiralis* stunning against the white sand (Fig 14, p. 19). *Acaena pallida* occurred on the foredunes among the marram. We watched white fronted terns flying and swooping and oyster catchers running along the beach. The back dunes were alive with a great variety of plant treasures; *Pimelea arenaria*, geranium, leptinella, *Coprosma acerosa*, *Pratia arenaria*, *Atriplex billardierei*, with *Leucopogon parviflorus*, windblown, providing shelter.

A series of small volcanoes which erupted on the sea floor between 34 and 42 million years ago contrasted with the swamp flats that we passed through on our way to Admiral Farm. Here we had more yummy food, this time outdoors, a barbeque, with hot blue cod entrée, a cosy fire pit to sit around with a brazier burning brightly in the centre. As daylight faded Lois Croon toured us around her very extensive garden well protected from winds by large pines and macrocarpa. A pond provided water for endless numbers of plants including alstroemeria, roses, beautiful echiums, a white garden; too many plants to name. A wonderful way to finish a fabulous day.



Figure 14. Pingao (*Desmoschoenus spiralis*) on the foredunes of Waitangi West beach. *Photo: E. Bissell*



Figure 15. Ohinemama homestead and garden on Waitangi – Tuku Road. *Photo: J. Harland*