

BE VIGILANT – THE ALIENS ARE AMONG US

Nicholas Head

Weeds are like some ecological consultants, they keep turning up, are troublesome blighters, and if left unchecked will cause widespread loss to natural values!

Two recent discoveries in Canterbury of *Juncus squarrosus* and *Briza media* are cases in point. Both were recently found on conservation land in the Waimakariri Basin, apparently new records for this part of Canterbury. If left unchecked these weeds are likely to become major problems.

Heath rush (*Juncus squarrosus*) was recently found in the Castle Hill Conservation Area in wetlands and stream margins draining the “leached” terrace below the Cheeseman Lodge. This record follows a sighting by Peter Johnson of *Juncus squarrosus* near the divide in Arthur’s Pass a few years ago, but it has not otherwise been recorded from the Waimakariri Basin. It is identifiable by its numerous coarse, wiry, channelled narrow leaves (~30 cm) that form very dense tufts. It also has distinctive brown flowers that occur in clusters on the ends of branches held above the leaves by a stiff culm. It is a very invasive species that forms dense thickets and is a serious threat to wetland communities.

Quaking grass (*Briza media*) is the other intruder. This was recently found in the Hawdon Valley within the Arthur’s Pass National Park and is another new record for this part of Canterbury. I won’t go into the finer details of the diagnostic features of this grass, but it is best identified by its distinctive flower head that forms purplish flattened heart shape spikes on very slender drooping pedicels. Being rhizomatous, it has formed an extensive thatch on the forest edge in the Hawdon Valley where it is spreading and smothering diverse native herbfields.

As these records highlight, weeds are remarkably opportunistic and mobile. They are super-adapted to colonise new areas, in these cases no doubt aided by human boots or back packs, and disturbance generally. It is imperative that these weeds are eradicated swiftly and DOC is investigating the feasibility of achieving this for these species.

Although it is easy to overlook the presence of exotic species when exploring our diverse natural areas, the onus is on us botanists to take note of the presence of “interesting” exotic species and pass the information on to relevant authorities responsible, such as councils or DOC. Above all, these examples highlight the importance of documenting new weed incursions as it is essential to enable effective control measures before weeds become widespread.