

RECENT FINDS FROM THE CANTERBURY PLAINS

Jason Butt

While it is often stated that there is less than 0.5% indigenous vegetation cover remaining on the Canterbury Plains, I find this statement can lead to a sense of complacency from the wider public. It can instil an impression that all remaining native vegetation is accounted for, measured and secured, whereas the true state of knowledge of the floristic museum pieces of the plains is seriously deficient. Recent finds of large areas of both wetland and dryland with significant values underpin this.

One site, on the north bank of the Rakaia River at Te Pirita, covers somewhere in the region of 80 hectares and contains a very small population of *Olearia adenocarpa*, some 30 km from the nearest population of the same species.

Another site much closer to Christchurch, spanning the middle reaches of the Ōtukaikino River, contains a number of wetland species typical of nutrient deficient sites or sites in early successional stages following disturbance, such as *Spiranthes novae-zelandiae*, *Mazus novaezeelandiae* subsp. *impolitus* f. *impolitus* and *Drosera binata*. Interestingly, the site also harbours an unusual incidence of oioi in a freshwater system. It lies across a number of old braid channels of the Waimakariri River. These channels either sit just above the water table so that the plants have their roots in water, or, when the water table is higher, they can be submerged.

The first plant to alert me to the treasures waiting to be unearthed was *Mazus novaezeelandiae* subsp. *impolitus* f. *impolitus*. Subsequent finds have included *Juncus caespiticius*, *Hypericum pusillum* and three species of *Schoenus*: *S. pauciflorus*, *S. apogon* and *S. maschalinus*. These are just the less common species of the Canterbury Plains – many more common species abound at these sites too. Alas, parts of this unique assemblage of wetland species have recently been cultivated, and more are likely to go under the plough in the not too distant future.

The Low Plains Ecological District is an area that continually offers up pleasant surprises for me, although I fear these surprises will diminish with time, as several of these recent finds have disappeared within a few short years of first finding them. One was a patch of four square on the edge of Carrs Road, Loburn. It was eliminated with drain cleaning. Another was an extensive patch of shrubland at Te Pirita with a very large population of *Clematis marata*. In this last year a gravel ramp was installed right in the middle of this plant community, eliminating the best of it. This all happened despite the assurances of the landowner no more than a year earlier that he had no intention of irrigating and converting to dairy.

Another site that has revealed surprise after surprise in the High Plains Ecological District is the western end of Leaches Road near Windwhistle. Here, *Heirochloe redolens*, *Aciphylla subflabellata*, *A. aurea*, *Bulbinella angustifolia*, and the occasional *Melicytus alpinus* line the road. The plant community at this site is almost certainly a product of the large rocks that were dumped on the road berm some time ago, thus making it impossible to mow.

RESTORATION PLANTING – ARE WE SAVING OR SABOTAGING OUR PRECIOUS NATIVE REMNANTS?

Miles Giller

Practically everyone enjoys planting trees. In today's carbon-aware society it almost seems like a personal contribution to saving the planet, though there are many perhaps less noble motives. Trees can provide spiritual and physical sustenance through their beauty, shade, shelter, fruit and timber. We are not the only beneficiaries. Trees provide habitat for a myriad of wildlife, from conspicuous birds to near-invisible invertebrates plus a vast array of microbial associates.

In a country where people have taken a significant toll on our formerly extensive native forests, New Zealanders are becoming more aware of the plight of our native trees and shrubs. Our flora is increasingly celebrated in our parks and gardens, enough to support a healthy native plant focus in our nursery industry. Once perceived largely as a source of cheap timber to exploit or as an impediment to agricultural production or exotic forestry, our native plants are increasingly regarded as symbols of the New Zealand identity, something to be celebrated - or at least tolerated. However, the change in perception is far from universal. Whilst increasing numbers of landowners actively protect our botanical heritage, precious fragments are still succumbing.

Only a few decades ago central and local government were providing incentives to clear residual native vegetation, yet many of those agencies are now providing incentives to protect and 'enhance' them. Most district councils have schedules of sites with residual native flora and habitats for fauna, intended to provide these sites with a level of protection. These, along with changing public perceptions, have led to numerous areas of residual native