

Field trip to Mercer Bay Loop Track and Comans Track, Waitakere Regional Park, 16 November 2013

Vijay G. Soma

Those attending were: Jan Butcher, Bruce Calvert, Ewen Cameron, Brian Cumber, Neil Davies, Frances Duff, Rhys Gardner, Joe Greig, Leslie Haines, Sandra Jones (leader), Margi Keys, Philip Moll, Colleen Pilcher, Juliet Richmond, Joshua Salter, Vijay Soma, Cheryl Taylor, Valerie Tomlinson, Alison Wesley, Maureen Young.

Introduction

The Auckland Botanical Society (ABS) visited the Mercer Bay Loop Walk and Comans Track in Waitakere Ranges Regional Park on 16 November 2013. The tracks are located in the lower south-west corner of the Waitakere Ecological District (Fig. 1).

Previous trip reports in the ABS journal (Hynes 1970; Anon. 1973; Shaw 2003) mention the presence of many of the species described in this Mercer Bay Track unique and interesting environment.

Often described as being 'coastal turf' habitat on these tracks there is much habitat diversity and composition differs according to exposure and altitude, resulting in a wide range of habitats, species diversity and stunning coastal views from the cliff tops.

History

Geologically the Waitakere Ranges are the eastern remnants (predominantly volcanoclastic conglomerate) of the eroded early Miocene Waitakere Volcano (Hayward 1976). The soil structure throughout this habitat is derived from weathered conglomerate with a dune sand (B.W. Hayward, pers. comm., 10 April, 2014).

Esler describes in his Summary the forest's fate: 'for nearly a century the forests of the Waitakere Range were subjected to the destructive influences of timber milling, burning and clearing for farming' (Esler 1983, p.109). He then goes on to describe the vegetation of the forest throughout last century by stating the following, including a quote from Cheeseman (Esler 1983, p.109): 'the nature of the vegetation of the Waitakere Range before milling began in earnest in the middle of last century is undocumented. The coastal fringe had been influenced by Maori occupation but elsewhere the land was "entirely covered with luxuriant forest" '.

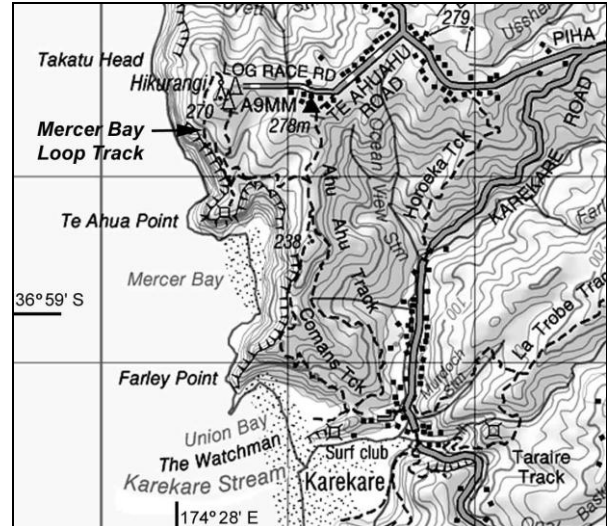


Fig. 1. Map of Mercer Bay area, Waitakere Ranges. Image adapted from NZTopo50-BB30ptBB31 – Piha by Joshua Salter. Scale: 1 km squares.

Esler (1983, p.110) later stated: 'My concept of the early vegetation is of a kauri-northern rata-rimu forest over most of the range, kauri being aggregated in some parts and in others interspersed with rimu and northern rata, these three species far outnumbering totara, Hall's totara (*P. hallii*), miro, matai and tawa. ... Local conditions may have favoured kahikatea (saddles, terraces and wet slopes), tarairi (*B. tarairi*) and kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*) (gullies) being in large numbers with pukatea (*Laurelia novae-zealandiae*), in stream margins.'

This regional park is now in its regenerative phase with no intentional disturbance, although mammalian pests are still present.

Previous field trips

The three previous published field trips to this locale are: in Mar 1970, led by Mr Mead and reported on by Mrs P. Hynes (Hynes 1970); 16 June 1973 (Anon. 1973); and on 16 Nov 2002 led by Dan Hatch and recorded by Doug Shaw (Shaw 2003). The list of vascular plants for the Nov 2013 field trip was supplied by Sandra Jones.

Our visit

We started at the Mercer Bay Loop Walk (c. 270 m a.s.l.) from the NW corner of the car park at the end of Log Race Road where the track gently winds its

way down, with spectacular views looking north beyond Piha and west out to the Tasman Sea. The Mercer Loop track culminates at the junction between Ahu Ahu and Comans Tracks, the latter offering a route down to Karekare Beach.

We also took a short side track that rises up to a ridge leading to the lookout at Te Ahua Point. Comans Track leads up to a ridge at Farley Point then gently eases downwards to Union Bay and Karekare. The return walking time is possibly a third of the time we took to walk one way (c. 6 hours).

The designated time to set off was at 10.00 am from the 'coastal end' of Log Race Road. The day was fine but overcast, clearing by mid-afternoon. Temperatures peaked at 21°C for the day and the welcome lunch stop was at the junction of the Mercer Bay Loop Walk Track and the start of Comans Track (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Our lunch stop at the intersection of Mercer Bay Loop and Comans Tracks – watching out for the runners! Photo: Vijay Soma, 16 Nov 2013. All photos by Vijay Soma (VS) unless stated otherwise.

Near the start of the walk the long-leaved pimelea (*Pimelea longifolia*) was in flower, as was the native broom (*Carmichaelia australis*) with its tiny purple/white flowers clearly visible (Pl. 2A). The delicate sterile frond of the parsley fern, patotara (*Botrychium australe*) was also seen at the start of our exploration; Sandra has seen this plant for many years in this habitat. As we wound our way along the ridge, we enjoyed the flowers of wharariki (*Phormium cookianum*) with Piha and coastal views out to the Tasman as a background.

Immediate highlights for this portion of track were the profusely flowering white sun orchids (*Thelymitra longifolia*) persisting not only at ground level but also with intermittent bursts in the clay bank, nestling with pinatoro (*Pimelea urvilleana*). The inconspicuous, epiphytic native pygmy tree orchid (*Ichthyostomum pygmaeum*) (Pl. 2B) was observed

on a rewarewa (*Knightia excelsa*) trunk. Records describe this plant as flowering in December through to January, but we appreciated the marvellous growth habit even though we were perhaps a little early (or late?) for flowers. Herbaceous 'groundcovers' (*Dichondra repens* (Pl. 2C), *Centella uniflora* (Pl. 2D) and *Hydrocotyle elongata*) (Pl. 2E) with their delicate floral displays were lining the track as we headed south along the ridge.

Dune oxalis (*Oxalis rubens*), tauhinu (*Ozothamnus leptophyllus*), *Linum monogynum* and early sightings of tutukiwi (*Pterostylis banksii*), the 'Declining' koheriki (*Scandia rosifolia*) and the little light green hihoi (*Mentha cunninghamii*) were seen along the track, most in flower, before we made our way to the lookout at Te Ahua Point. Several examples of the endemic and 'Nationally Endangered' forget-me-not (*Myosotis pansa*) (Pl. 2F) were seen flowering: One on a specimen labelled by our leader, another large plant behind a small wind-pruned manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) and a small plant spotted by Frances Duff on the steps leading out to the lookout.

Towards the start of Comans Track was a seemingly lone papataniwhaniwha (*Lagenophora pumila*), but more were seen further down the track high up on the open bank in flower forming a colony (Pl. 2G).

After lunch we ascended the Comans Track. Passing a rocky dry bank we noted shore pimpernel (*Samolus repens*) sharing a spot with the low growing, sprawling hebe (*Hebe obtusata*), native celery (*Apium prostratum*) and the native shore groundsel (*Senecio lautus*). Our ascent up the ridge culminated in a dry rocky outcrop where a morphological highlight was the 'peppered spattering' of oil glands in the ngaio (*Myoporum laetum*) leaves, seen as light passed through (Pl. 2H). The 'blue grass' with its identifiable line of hairs around the ligule, like a *Rytidosperma* species, was also noted on this dry, exposed outcrop. Rhys Gardner identified this as *Danthonia decumbens*, from the Northern Hemisphere.

Also seen were the native coastal/lowland bushy shrub rohutu (*Lophomyrtus obcordata*) with its distinctive bark and heart-shaped notched leaves and flowering examples of two *Parsonsia* species, *P. capsularis* and New Zealand jasmine (*P. heterophylla*), in the semi-shaded environment of the canopy-covered ridge portion of Comans Track.

Running along the windswept exposed western kanuka-dominated ridge, the track itself eventually winds back down above the southern end of Mercer Bay and up towards Farley Point. Here a sheltered, cooler, forest habitat was observed, with canopy-forming trees including the hybrid *Metrosideros* (*M.*

excelsa x *M. robusta*), pohutukawa (*M. excelsa*), kanuka, mangeao (*Litsea calicaris*), nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*) and smaller shrubs. The nikau palms became more abundant creating shade for undergrowth and juvenile specimens. An array of juvenile leaf shapes displayed in the korokio (*Corokia cotoneaster*) (Pl. 2J), was observed, as too were the fruit on mature specimens. In this semi-shaded, sheltered forest toward Farley Point ridge the habitat changed from the windswept ridge track; lianes and climbers were found and here the pale green hyaline tepals of kareao, supplejack (*Ripogonum scandens*) were seen (Pl. 2K). Further highlights were *Calystegia tuguriorum* (Pl. 2L) climbing over a semi-mature nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*), kohia (*Passiflora tetrandra*) and the 'velvety-to-the-touch' fern *Lastreopsis velutina*. A tawapou (*Planchonella costata*) was also seen persisting on the exposed rocky headland; this strictly coastal species has been described as an 'At Risk' 'Relict', (de Lange, 2014) and has been recorded on a previous report (Anon. 1973).

On leaving the shaded forest and heading down towards Union Bay and Karekare, ferns, notably *Pteris saxatilis* and *Asplenium gracillimum* were observed. The herbaceous dicot, New Zealand pellitory (*Parietaria debilis*), a member of the nettle family with no stinging hairs, was also seen in this locality. The monocot *Phormium cookianum* (Pl. 2M) was also growing on the steep clay banks of Union Bay together with other coastal flax, sedges and grasses.

Exotic plants

Silene gallica was also noticed in flower, along the banks leading down to the Mercer Bay Lookout. At least three *Asparagus scandens* specimens were noticed in the sheltered parts of the track, south of the hybrid *Metrosideros*. Sprayed areas of pampas grass were observed.

Birds observed

Birds observed during the ABS trip included:– tui (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*) grey warbler (*Gerygone igata*), Californian quail, yellow hammer, welcome swallow, Indian myna, pheasant, blackbird, gold finch and NZ pigeon.

References

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A second visit

A second visit was undertaken by Sandra Jones and myself on 21 December 2013. Our goals for the day were to relocate *Blechnum blechnoides*, discovered by Ewen Cameron in 1986 above Mercer Bay (we found it by the streamlet down from the right-hand bend going up Comans Track) and *Mentha cunninghamii* (which was located in the 'flax island' before the path leading down to the look-out). The mentha appeared to be more abundant and in flower at the base of one of the dry banks than on our previous visit. We also noticed that *Myosotis pansa*, spotted too on the previous fieldtrip (behind a wind-pruned manuka) had turned brown and looked 'dead', but we concluded that salt spray and/or its natural 'dieback' were possible explanations. On our way back to the Log Race Road car-park, we noticed many specimens of *Myosotis pansa* along the side of Ahu Ahu Track. (The BotSoc field-trip did not use this track on 16th Nov).

I was most pleasantly surprised at how much difference the passing of five weeks had made. For example the *Myosotis* had stopped flowering, the *Ripogonum scandens* in the 'forest' had seeded and neither the *Parsonsia* nor the *Calystegia tuguriorum* were still in flower. In flower at this later time were *Samolus repens* and *Mentha cunninghamii*.

Conclusion

The frequent reporting of up to date species lists and the successful pest and predator management of our Regional Parks makes the Mercer Bay Track area, and indeed the Waitakere Ranges in general, with their close proximity to the Auckland City isthmus, a special place to observe a diverse array of botany for many generations to come.

Acknowledgements

I would like extend a warm thanks to all the following people for their time and support: Josh Salter for reviewing my many drafts and Ewen Cameron and Dan Blanchon for their valuable feedback on earlier scripts; Neil Davies for photographs (Plates 2K & 2L); and to Sandra Jones for her leadership, correspondence in compiling the lists and for meeting me again at Mercer Bay for our second visit.

**Appendix: Species list for Mercer Bay and Comans Track, (Waitakere Ranges Regional Park).
Based on original list provided by Sandra before the trip.**

* = adventive taxa

+ = additions observed on field trip 16th Nov 2014

Ferns & Fern Allies		
<i>Adiantum cunninghamii</i>		
<i>Adiantum fulvum</i>		
<i>Adiantum viridescens</i>		
<i>Arthropteris tenella</i>		
<i>Asplenium appendiculatum</i> ssp. <i>maritimum</i>		
<i>Asplenium flabellifolium</i>		
<i>Asplenium gracillimum</i>		
<i>Asplenium hookerianum</i>		
<i>Asplenium oblongifolium</i>		
<i>Asplenium polyodon</i>		
<i>Blechnum blechnoides</i>		
<i>Blechnum filiforme</i>		
<i>Blechnum fluviatile</i>		
<i>Blechnum membranaceum</i>		
<i>Blechnum novae-zelandiae</i>		
<i>Botrychium australe</i>		
<i>Cheilanthes sieberi</i>		
<i>Cyathea dealbata</i>		
<i>Cyathea medullaris</i>		
<i>Doodia australis</i>		
<i>Hymenophyllum sanguinolentum</i>		
<i>Hypolepis dicksonioides</i>		
<i>Lastreopsis velutina</i>		
<i>Lindsaea linearis</i>		
<i>Microsorium pustulatum</i>		
<i>Microsorium scandens</i>		
<i>Paesia scaberula</i>		
<i>Pellaea falcata</i> - disputed!		
<i>Pellaea</i> cf. <i>falcata</i>	+	
<i>Pellaea rotundifolia</i>		
<i>Phlegmariurus varius</i>		
<i>Pneumatopteris pennigera</i>		
<i>Polystichum wawranum</i>		
<i>Pteridium esculentum</i>		
<i>Pteris comans</i> x <i>P. saxatilis</i>		
<i>Pteris saxatilis</i>		
<i>Pteris tremula</i>		
<i>Pyrrosia eleagnifolia</i>		
<i>Selaginella kraussiana</i> *	+	
<i>Tmesipteris elongata</i>		
Gymnosperms		
<i>Phyllocladus trichomanoides</i>		
Dicotyledons		
<i>Acaena anserinifolia</i>		
<i>Acaena novae-zelandiae</i>		
<i>Alectryon excelsus</i>		
<i>Alseuosmia macrophylla</i>		
<i>Anagallis arvensis</i> var. <i>arvensis</i> *	+	
<i>Apium prostratum</i>		
<i>Beilschmiedia tarairi</i>		
<i>Brachyglottis repanda</i>		
<i>Calystegia soldanella</i>		
<i>Calystegia soldanella</i> x <i>C. tuguriorum</i>	+	
<i>Calystegia tuguriorum</i>		
<i>Carmichaelia australis</i>		
<i>Celmisia major</i> var. <i>major</i>		
<i>Centaurium erythraea</i> *	+	
<i>Centella uniflora</i>		
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i> *	+	
<i>Clematis forsteri</i>		
<i>Clematis paniculata</i>		
<i>Conyza sumatrensis</i> *	+	
<i>Coprosma arborea</i>		
<i>Coprosma grandifolia</i>		
<i>Coprosma lucida</i>		
<i>Coprosma macrocarpa</i> ssp. <i>minor</i>		
<i>Coprosma rhamnoides</i>		
<i>Coprosma robusta</i>		
<i>Corokia cotoneaster</i>		
<i>Corynocarpus laevigatus</i>		
<i>Cotoneaster glaucophyllus</i> *		+
<i>Crassula sieberiana</i>		
<i>Dichondra repens</i>		
<i>Disphyma australe</i>		
<i>Drosera auriculata</i>		
<i>Entelea arborescens</i>		
<i>Euchiton audax</i>		+
<i>Euchiton delicatus</i>		
<i>Euchiton involucratus</i>		+
<i>Euchiton japonicus</i>		+
<i>Galium divaricatum</i> *		+
<i>Galium propinquum</i>		
<i>Gamochaeta coarctata</i> *		+
<i>Gamochaeta simplicicaulis</i> *		+
<i>Gamochaeta subfalcata</i> *		+
<i>Geniostoma ligustrifolium</i>		
<i>Gonocarpus incanus</i>		
<i>Griselinia lucida</i>		
<i>Haloragis erecta</i>		
<i>Hebe macrocarpa</i>		
<i>Hebe obtusata</i>		
<i>Hedycarya arborea</i>		
<i>Helichrysum lanceolatum</i>		
<i>Helminthotheca echinoides</i> *		+
<i>Hoheria populnea</i>		
<i>Hydrocotyle elongata</i>		
<i>Hydrocotyle moschata</i>		
<i>Hypochoeris radicata</i> *		+
<i>Knightia excelsa</i>		
<i>Kunzea ericoides</i>		
<i>Lagenophora pumila</i>		
<i>Leionema nudum</i>		
<i>Leontodon taraxicoides</i> *		+
<i>Leptecophylla juniperina</i>		
<i>Leptospermum scoparium</i>		
<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i> *		+
<i>Leucopogon fasciculatus</i>		
<i>Leucopogon fraseri</i>		
<i>Linum bienne</i> *		+
<i>Linum monogynum</i>		
<i>Litsea calicaris</i>		
<i>Lobelia anceps</i>		
<i>Lophomyrtus obcordata</i>		
<i>Lotus pedunculatus</i> *		+
<i>Lotus suaveolens</i> *		+
<i>Lupinus arboreus</i> *		+
<i>Melicope ternata</i>		
<i>Melicytus ramiflorus</i>		
<i>Mentha cunninghamii</i>		
<i>Metrosideros excelsa</i>		
<i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> x <i>M. robusta</i>		
<i>Metrosideros perforata</i>		
<i>Muehlenbeckia australis</i>		
<i>Muehlenbeckia complexa</i>		
<i>Myoporum laetum</i>		
<i>Myosotis pansa</i> ssp. <i>pansa</i>		
<i>Myrsine australis</i>		
<i>Nertera depressa</i>		

<i>Nertera dichondrifolia</i>		<i>Carex breviculmis</i>	
<i>Olearia furfuracea</i>		<i>Carex dissita</i>	
<i>Olearia solandri</i>		<i>Carex flagellifera</i>	+
<i>Oxalis exilis</i>	+	<i>Carex lambertiana</i>	+
<i>Oxalis rubens</i>		<i>Carex lessoniana</i>	
<i>Ozothamnus leptophyllus</i>		<i>Carex solandri</i>	+
<i>Parietaria debilis</i>		<i>Carex spirostris</i>	+
<i>Parsonsia capsularis</i>		<i>Carex testacea</i>	+
<i>Parsonsia heterophylla</i>		<i>Collospermum hastatum</i>	
<i>Passiflora tetrandra</i>		<i>Cordyline australis</i>	
<i>Peperomia urvilleana</i>		<i>Cordyline banksii</i>	
<i>Pimelea longifolia</i>		<i>Cortaderia selloana</i> *	+
<i>Pimelea urvilleana</i>		<i>Dactylanthus glomerata</i> *	+
<i>Piper excelsum</i> [Macropiper]		<i>Dianella nigra</i>	
<i>Pittosporum crassifolium</i>		<i>Dichelachne inaequiglumis</i>	+
<i>Pittosporum eugenioides</i> (planted)		<i>Diplodium alobulum</i>	
<i>Pittosporum tenuifolium</i>		<i>Echinopogon ovatus</i>	
<i>Planchonella costata</i>		<i>Ehrharta erecta</i> *	+
<i>Plantago australis</i> *	+	<i>Ficinia nodosa</i>	
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i> *	+	<i>Freycinetia banksii</i>	
<i>Plantago major</i> *	+	<i>Gahnia lacera</i>	
<i>Pomaderris amoena</i>		<i>Gahnia setifolia</i>	
<i>Pseudognaphalium luteoalbum</i>	+	<i>Ichthyostomum pygmaeum</i>	
<i>Pseudopanax crassifolius</i>		<i>Isolepis levynsiana</i> *	+
<i>Pseudopanax lessonii</i>		<i>Isolepis reticularis</i>	
<i>Pseudopanax hybrids</i>		<i>Juncus planifolius</i>	
<i>Rhabdothamnus solandri</i>		<i>Lagurus ovatus</i> *	+
<i>Rubus cissoides</i>		<i>Lepidosperma laterale</i>	
<i>Sagina procumbens</i> *	+	<i>Libertia grandiflora</i>	
<i>Samolus repens</i>		<i>Libertia ixioides</i>	
<i>Scandia rosifolia</i>		<i>Lolium perenne</i> *	+
<i>Senecio hispidulus</i>		<i>Luzula banksiana</i>	
<i>Senecio lautus</i>		<i>Machaerina juncea</i>	
<i>Silene gallica</i> *	+	<i>Microlaena avenacea</i>	
<i>Solanum nigrum</i> *	+	<i>Microlaena polynoda</i>	
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i> *	+	<i>Microlaena stipoides</i>	
<i>Sophora fulvida</i>		<i>Microtis uniflora</i>	+
<i>Tetragonia implexicoma</i>		<i>Microtis unifolia</i>	
<i>Trifolium dubium</i> *	+	<i>Morelotia affinis</i>	
<i>Trifolium pratense</i> *	+	<i>Oplismenus hirtellus</i>	
<i>Trifolium repens</i> *	+	<i>Orthoceras novae-zeelandiae</i>	
<i>Ulex europaeus</i> *	+	<i>?Petalochilus bartlettii</i>	
<i>Vinca major</i> *	+	<i>Phormium cookianum</i>	
<i>Vitex lucens</i>		<i>Phormium tenax</i>	
<i>Wahlenbergia littoricola</i> ssp. <i>vernica</i>		<i>Poa anceps</i>	
<i>Wahlenbergia violacea</i>	+	<i>Pterostylis banksii</i>	
Monocots incl. grasses & orchids		<i>Rhopalostylis sapida</i>	
<i>Aira caryophylla</i> *	+	<i>Ripogonum scandens</i>	
<i>Allium triquetrum</i> *	+	<i>Rytidosperma biannulare</i>	
<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i> *	+	<i>Rytidosperma gracile</i>	
<i>Apodasmia similis</i>		<i>Rytidosperma unarede</i>	
<i>Aristea ecklonii</i> *	+	<i>Schedonorus arundinaceus</i> *	+
<i>Arthropodium cirratum</i>		<i>Schoenus maschalinus</i>	
<i>Asparagus scandens</i> *	+	<i>Schoenus tendo</i>	
<i>Astelia banksii</i>		<i>Sisyrinchium iridifolium</i> *	+
<i>Astelia solandri</i>		<i>Sporobolus africanus</i> *	+
<i>Austroderia splendens</i>		<i>Thelymitra</i> sp.	
<i>Briza maxima</i> *	+	<i>Thelymitra longifolia</i>	
<i>Briza minor</i> *	+	<i>Thelymitra</i> aff. <i>longifolia</i>	+
<i>Bromus hordeaceus</i> *	+	<i>Uncinia banksii</i>	
<i>Bromus lithobius</i> *	+	<i>Uncinia uncinata</i>	