

Eldrig Tops (4 Jan) – Les Moran

Fourteen renegade members forsook the flatlanders botanising option and headed for the tops around Eldrig Peak this sparkling day. The Eldrig Tops track was accessed from the pylon road after diverging from the main road in the South Branch of the Borland Burn. Leaving the vehicles at about 560 metres above sea level we began a steady ascent through a diverse shrubland; the aftermath of clearings under the pylon line. Here Gael highlighted for us the differences between two blue sun orchids, *Thelymitra pulchella* and *T. cyanea*, which are outwardly rather similar.

After critical appraisal, *Raukaua* (previously *Pseudopanax*) *edgerleyi* quickly became *R. simplex* in all its guises. Similarly, *Olearia lacunosa* transmogrified into a very faintly-toothed *Pseudopanax crassifolius* (lancewood) that at higher altitudes revealed itself to be unequivocally *P. linearis*! Learned botanisers, beware. The leached gley soil over coarse crystalline granite rock meant that some species took on unfamiliar growth forms.

On reaching the first saddle the bush had a quasi-‘gremlin forest’ look, a further reflection of the thin layer of peat over basement rock and a perched water table. The eight metre high canopy of *Dracophyllum longifolium*, interspersed with *Halocarpus biformis* (pink pine) and mountain beech, was pierced by emergent wannabe ‘cedars’; giant *Leptospermum scoparium* (manuka) emulating round-topped kaikawaka. Throughout this zone the flowering mistletoe *Alepis flavida* was abundant on mountain beech at all storey levels.

From the forest we broke out among granite tors nestled in their gritty sandpits. Here the common ‘smalls’ were struggling – *Pentachondra pumila*, (a dwarf heath), *Dracophyllum prunum*, *Oreobolus* sp. (alpine sedge), *Styphelia empetrifolia* et al. Views from the tors out across the saddle revealed a 3 to 4 metre canopy mosaic of open tree and shrubland dominated by pink pine and mountain beech. Of the tussocks, *Chionochloa rubra* held sway here.

The bogs in the saddle were crowded with the cushion mat, *Donatia novae-zealandiae*, the mat sedges, *Oreobolus stricta* and *O. pectinatus*, the beautiful narrow-petalled sundew, *Drosera stenopetala* and the wee pygmy pine, *Lepidothamnus laxifolius*. A streamside garden displayed bouquets of *Celmisia coriacea* and *C. petrei* nestled in a pretty setting and flanked by the red mid-ribbed *Astelia nervosa*, the robust pineapple scrub *Dracophyllum menziesii*, bright green *Hebe odora* bushes and the yellow-flowered alpine daisy *Dolichoglottis lyallii*, all underpinned by a carpet of tangle fern, *Gleichenia dicarpa*. Here and there the bog twinkled with the white flowers of *Oreostylidium subulatum*.

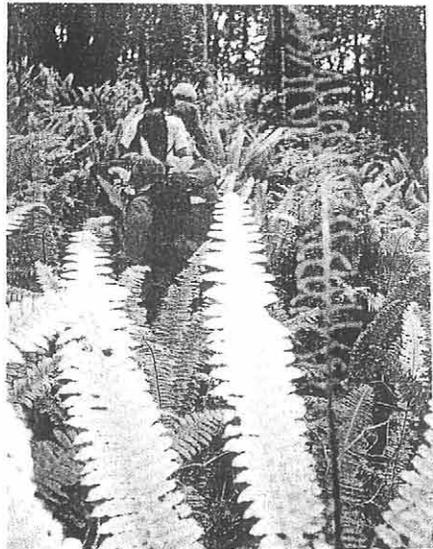
Beyond the tree line the curly-topped *Chionochloa teretifolia* dominated. *Caladenia lyallii*, (ahh that beautiful gland) was everywhere in flower. (Ian St George notes that New Zealand’s first collection of *C. lyallii* was from Otago, by Dr David Lyall, surgeon

on the *Acheron* –he must have got about *ed.*). Well ordered ‘mini pineapple plantations’ of *Celmisia lyallii* spiked the tussock land but many showed evidence of a ‘harecut’!

At about 1200m the granite tors outcropped again; huge jumbled dice sculptured into fantastic shapes, many with basins of fresh water notched into their flanks. Craig Potton, eat your heart out. And now a whole new suite of plants appeared: *Geum uniflorum* with its large buttercup-like white flowers, *Ourisia sessilifolia*, sprawling *Celmisia walkeri*, brown furry edge leaved *C. traversii*, the semi-woody branched and trailing *C. ramulosa*, whipcord *Hebe hectori* and mossy cushions of *Chionohebe thomsonii* and *C. ciliata*. The surrounding granite sand desert was studded with jewels of white-flowering *Hectorella caespitosa* and contrasting red-tinted *Luzula rufa*.

At this point some of the party headed for the grand views from the higher Eldrig Peak main ridge, while others drifted away down to the large tarn tucked under Eldrig’s eastern slopes. Highlights here were *Aciphylla pinnatifida* with its bright orange bracts and yellow leaves poking out from snow groomed tussocks and seeps. Evident, too, were the succulent-like leaved *Euphrasia integrifolia*, the clumpy *Aciphylla crosby-smithii* and one stunning *A. congesta* cascading over a bank and topped with crowded flower heads. Other gems included *Gentiana montana* displaying pink-striped white petals, *Celmisia* sp flowering in profusion and *Ranunculus lyallii* popping its white flower heads out of the tussock on all sides.

Scenically and botanically the day provided a glorious eyeful for all of us. Comprehensive species lists of vascular plants were compiled by Graeme Jane and Gael Donaghy, with the able help of Southern Botanic Man Geoff Rogers.



Alpine daisies (*Celmisia* sp) and forest ferns (*Blechnum discolor*). Photos by Robyn Bridges