

## A Botanical Visit to the Chatham Islands

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### INTRODUCTION

Why am I talking to a group of plant propagators, more especially about the Chatham Islands? I thought that maybe because I too am interested in plants. Maybe also because the New Zealand Dendrology Group went over there to have their annual get-together and A.G.M. Who else goes there? Fishermen, perhaps bird lovers, and then there's that breed that want to be on Pitt Island to greet the new millennium. I will give you a very brief overview of the Chatham Islands and then talk about the plants.

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISLANDS

The Chatham Islands are 800 km east of Christchurch, or 1h by Convair aircraft from Wellington. The population is about 700, mostly involved in fishing or farming. The main island, Chatham Island, is about 90,000 ha, and Pitt Island 6000 ha. There are another eight islands in the group, some just virtually rocky outcrops. Waitangi is the main settlement with three smaller fishing villages. Main accommodation is in or near Waitangi; a hotel, motel, lodge—where we were based; there are also farm-stays. There is also a shop, garage, church, Department of Conservation (DOC) Office, policeman, a courthouse; and that's it. At Kaiangaroa, one of the fishing villages, there is a cottage brewery which produces both light and dark ales which is appropriately called Black Robin Ale. They produce about 40% of the Islands beer requirements. Topography is easy rolling, with a couple of small volcanic type cones indicating the island's past. Much of this rock has been overlaid with limestone. There is a lot of gorse. There are possums, but no rabbits.

### THE PLANTS

There are 37 plant taxa that are endemic to the Islands. That's a higher level of endemism than anywhere on mainland New Zealand. Many of these plants are under threat. We saw quite a few of these but certainly not all. There were three basic types of indigenous vegetation as we saw it: fenced forest that had survived; fenced land now allowing regeneration; steep cliffs where stock could not graze. This is where we saw *Astelia chathamica* growing which is a plant very much under threat in the wild.

### Plants That the Islands Have in Common with Mainland New Zealand but with Unique Differences.

- Chatham's ake ake, *Olearia traversii*. Huge, wonderful shaped old trees, which we saw near the coast.
- Kopi, the Chatham's karaka. Older trees, unlike their mainland cousins, having buttressed roots. These were the trees with dendroglyphs or carvings on their trunks done by the Morioris.
- Tree-like coprosmas, *Coprosma chathamica*.

- And attractive long-leaved saplings of *Pseudopanax chathamicus*. These caused a lot of comment, as did the large unmarked leaves of kawakawa.
- Whitey-wood (*Melicytus ramiflorus*), easily identified with its blue berries up the stem but with fleshy leaves.
- Ribbonwood, also slight differences to its mainland cousin, *Plagianthus regius* var. *chathamicus* (syn. *P. betulinus* var. *chathamicus*).
- Myrsine with dark green leaves, *Myrsine coxii*.
- We saw a lot of flax. It was often seen being used as a base planting along hedge rows. Not an upright *Phormium tenax*, but a flax with a wider and more flaccid leaf. David Given called it *P. tenax* Chatham Island form.

#### **Plants with Perhaps a Greater Interest to this Group.**

- *Myosotidium hortensia* growing in a coastal situation amongst marram grass in sand and with giant kelp nearby.
- The Chatham Islands sow thistle was here, *Embergeria grandifolia*. It is, like the Chatham Islands forget-me-not, *Myosotidium hortensia*, not only endemic, but both are monotypic genera. The thistle is one of the Islands more vulnerable plants.
- *Geranium traversii* was scrambling about on the nearby rocks and easily identifiable with its tiny white flowers. We also saw it growing in a sand dune community.
- *Brachyglottis semidentata* with purple/blue flowers looked beautiful. It was much photographed and I would rate this shrub as the highlight plant of the trip for me. Its cousin *Brachyglottis* (or is it *Senecio huntii*?) was in the same area but not in flower.
- Others on this walk were the white-flowered gentian, *Gentiana chathamica*. There was only a hint of whiteness left on the short flower stalks. These were growing in the company of two *Aciphylla* species, *A. dieffenbachii* and *A. traversii*.
- There were two *Dracophyllum* species, *D. arboreum* and *D. paludosum*.
- The green-stemmed form of *Euphorbia glauca* was growing outside the DOC office. I believe that it is now extinct in the wild.
- We saw many other plants such as ferns, *Dicksonia* and *Cyathea*; a *Blechnum* species of the ground fern; nikau palms, *Rhopalostylis sapida*; and kowhai, *Sophora microphylla*.
- Then there were the sand dune communities with mingimingi dominant, *Cyathodes parviflora* and also *C. robusta*.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is a very quick and brief overview of a fascinating few days. It was the off-season for crayfish although we did manage one meal of it. That, plus all the other home cooking, the Black Robin ale, and of course the good company, made for a great trip. I have to say that it was a great feeling flying back into Wellington and not having to face Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry officials with uncleaned seed, cuttings, and seedlings, which we were carrying.