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# From dunelands to goblin forest

Part six in a series that examines regional variations in native flora. In this episode, Philip Smith takes a road trip around Taranaki, Whanganui and the Manawatu.

Words and photographs by Philip Smith

**“Plants don’t grow on dunes, dunes grow on plants.”** Gillian Rapson

**F**ew places expose hubris as brutally as the coast. This extends to our efforts to manipulate our coastal plant communities, which constitute a prolonged comedy of errors (going back 150 years). In recent times, these have moved some way towards being rectified by the active restoration of our native sandbinders – although there is a long way to go.

One person who has made extensive studies of dune ecologies is Gillian Rapson, who offered the insight at the top – an expression which succinctly describes the central role that plants play in the formation of sand dunes. As we were walking through a rare (and beautiful) remnant of coastal vegetation on the Manawatu coastline, Gillian also made the frank observation that the longer one spends looking at this dynamic environment, the more mysterious it all becomes.

Dunes are of particular significance to this part of New Zealand, as the southwestern fringe of the North Island contains some of the most extensive dune systems in the country. Amidst these, a critically endangered subshrub, *Pimelea actea*, survives in perilously low numbers near Himatangi Beach. This delicate character, which bears unusual translucent fruits over much of the year, should receive greater attention in this region – as knowledge of its plight may help to avert it sliding further towards extinction. *P. actea* shares its home with a distinct species of *Selliera* (*S. rotundifolia*), a white-flowered herb that carpets the ground in various habitats between Wanganui and the Kapiti coast.

Further north, a plant that is familiar to many landscapers perches on the edge of exposed cliffs along the South Taranaki coast. Known informally as *Coprosma* ‘Hawera’, this creeping shrub may merit recognition as a distinct species. Another Taranaki resident, *Corokia cotoneaster* ‘Paritutu’, occupies an equally intimidating habitat, on the precipitous sides of a New Plymouth

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landmark, Paritutu Rock. This very attractive variant (which is found at isolated points from New Plymouth to the western Waikato coast) differs from other forms of *C. cotoneaster* by exhibiting larger leaves and flowers, and always bearing yellow-orange fruit.

No mention can be made of Taranaki’s natural history without discussing the omnipresent figure of the mountain. Mount Taranaki does not just dominate the skyline, it influences the weather profoundly. For this reason, there is a lot to be said for local knowledge when visiting natural areas within Egmont National Park. One area with specific and unusual patterns is the Ahukawakawa Swamp, on the Pouakai Range. When all other areas have cleared, Ahukawakawa can remain shrouded in cloud and rain. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the endemic shrub, *Melicytus drucei*, is restricted to the margins of this swamp, as well as the adjoining range.

In higher reaches of Mt Taranaki and the Pouakai range, the gnarled forms of kamahi dominate (in tandem with Hall’s totara) the evocatively-titled ‘goblin forest’ – an otherworldly forest type with an open understorey, dripping epiphytes and a stunted scale. Of greater relevance to landscapers are lowland forest remnants, for lessons learned in observing them are more directly transferrable to most plantings. Two species that are being restored within New Plymouth’s city limits are maire tawhaki (*Syzygium maire*) and pukatea (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*) whose revival is chiefly driven by the efforts of local plantsman, Bill Clarkson. For many years, Bill has tirelessly promoted awareness of Taranaki’s special plants – particularly through innovative schemes with schoolchildren, the future stewards of the region’s environment. ①

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01: *Corokia* 'Paritutu' fruit. 02: *Spinifex* and marram towers. 03: *Coprosma* 'Hawera'. 04: *Corokia cotoneaster* 'Paritutu'. 05: *Pimelea actea* berries. 06: *Pimelea carnososa*.

## TARANAKI, WHANGANUI AND MANAWATU'S FLORA

Name	Height (m)	Width (m)	Growth FORM	Notes
<b>Taranaki</b>				
<i>Coprosma</i> 'Hawera'	0.15	1.5	Spreading shrub	Commonly-planted groundcover; may in fact be a distinct species
<i>Corokia cotoneaster</i> 'Paritutu'	1.6	1	Shrub	Distinctive and attractive form of this species; fruit always yellow
<i>Fuchsia excorticata</i>	10	10	Tree	Extraordinary peeling bark; impressive specimens on Mt Taranaki
<i>Hebe elliptica</i>	1.3	1.5	Shrub	Often assumes a very low, sprawling habit on exposed coast
<i>Hebe stricta</i> var. <i>egmontiana</i>	2	2.5	Shrub	A distinctive and handsome variety that is endemic to the region
<i>Leptinella squalida</i> ssp. <i>squalida</i>	0.05	1	Groundcover	An attractive and useful landscape plant; found on Taranaki coast
<i>Libocedrus bidwillii</i>	15	6	Tree	Kaikawaka forms beautiful, bonsai-like specimens on Mt Taranaki
<i>Meliccytus drucei</i>	1.8	1.8	Shrub	Interesting leafless shrub restricted to Taranaki; rare in cultivation
<i>Ourisia macrophylla</i> ssp. <i>macrophylla</i>	0.7	0.6	Herb	Stunning white flower stems; common in Mt Taranaki herbfields
<i>Pennantia corymbosa</i>	8	5	Tree	Conspicuous white flowers; this small tree should be planted more
<i>Pimelea carnososa</i>	0.07	0.9	Creeping shrub	Characteristic species of South Taranaki coast; like <i>P. prostrata</i>
<i>Podocarpus cunninghamii</i>	15	12	Tree	Hall's totara is a major component of Mt Taranaki's goblin forest
<i>Senecio rufiglandulosus</i>	0.8	0.6	Herb	Riotous yellow, large flowerheads; as yet unknown in gardens
<i>Syzygium maire</i>	15	9	Tree	Was more common in damp lowland sites; endures in New Plymouth
<i>Weinmannia racemosa</i>	12	7	Tree	Kamahī's gnarled forms create goblin forest otherworldiness
<b>Whanganui/Manawatu</b>				
<i>Adiantum formosum</i>	0.8	1	Fern	Giant maidenhair's NZ presence is now restricted to the Manawatu
<i>Beilschmiedia tawa</i>	20	16	Tree	Characteristic canopy tree in much of Manawatu's extant forests
<i>Coprosma acerosa</i>	0.7	2	Sprawling shrub	Attractive orange stems, endures at various points along coastline
<i>Coprosma crassifolia</i>	2.5	1.8	Tree or shrub	Exceptional small-leaved species; reflects light in a remarkable way
<i>Ficinia</i> (syn. <i>Desmoschoenus</i> ) <i>spiralis</i>	1	2	Grass-like	Beautiful orange colour; an important sandbinder on coastal dunes
<i>Mazus novaezeelandiae</i> ssp. <i>impolitus</i> f. <i>impolitus</i>	0.03	0.6	Groundcover	Attractive flowers; potential as a groundcover for damp sites
<i>Olearia virgata</i>	2.4	1.6	Shrub	Small-leaved shrub with a tidy habit; under-utilised in horticulture
<i>Phormium tenax</i>	3	3	Flax	Manawatu was the main centre of New Zealand's flax industry
<i>Pimelea actea</i>	0.5	0.8	Spreading shrub	Critically endangered and in serious danger of extinction; pretty
<i>Pimelea villosa</i>	0.6	1.6	Spreading shrub	Sand daphne; beautiful white flowers and bluish-grey foliage
<i>Podocarpus totara</i>	16	12	Tree	Totara was an important member of lowland forest communities
<i>Rubus squarrosus</i>	3	4	Rambler	Attractive, bright yellow thorns; still found in dune forests
<i>Selliera rotundifolia</i>	0.02	0.8	Groundcover	Lower North Island species; beautiful white flowers
<i>Spinifex sericeus</i>	0.6	4	Grass	The most important sandbinder in the extensive coastal dunes