

Through the looking glass

Part three in a series looking at regional variations in native plantlife. Philip Smith takes a trip to the Peat Dome of the Hauraki Plains.

Words and photographs by Philip Smith



Wetlands are often magical places – teeming with birds and insect life, and divorced from the world around, by virtue of their watery nature. Their beauty is also frequently unexpected, as it only fully reveals itself when we are immersed within them. This is particularly true of places like Torehape Peat Dome (on the Hauraki ‘Plains’), which appears drab and unpromising from the outside, yet possesses an otherworldly beauty that unfolds as one penetrates its interior.

Upon visiting this remarkable place in late spring, the pure white flowers of *Epacris pauciflora* lit up its ordered stems, whilst the graceful, drooping flowerheads and long, jointed canes of *Sporadanthus ferrugineus* created a surreal atmosphere that was reminiscent of the fynbos vegetation of South Africa’s Western Cape (where *Sporadanthus*’s relatives have achieved their greatest diversity). Spiderwebs decorated the spaces between the leaves of rushes and restiads, and small moths took to the air as we brushed through the manuka – possibly including the minor entomological celebrity, Fred the Thread (a tiny moth whose caterpillars may be the thinnest in the world).

I approached this visit with a degree of ambivalence, as the site is administered by a peat mining operation. It was therefore a relief to encounter a relatively sustainable methodology to peat harvesting, that includes a rotational policy, progressive revegetation of all harvested areas, and a limit to the depth to which peat may be harvested. When one witnesses this in contrast to the surrounding grazed paddocks that betray no evidence of their ecological history (they were once peat bogs as well), it lends credence to the mining operator’s stated enthusiasm towards this special environment.

Within Hamilton City itself, efforts are afoot to rebuild lost landscapes, through the laudable Gully Restoration Programme – a scheme that has identified Hamilton’s gullies as regionally significant ecological systems. One of the most important species to be promoted for gully restoration is the swamp astelia (*Astelias grandis*), an impressive brute that is, in my opinion, a superior

alternative to *A. chathamica* for landscaping in northern parts of New Zealand.

Other important species for gully restoration include swamp maire (*Syzygium maire*), pukatea (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*), kiekie (*Freycinetia banksii*) and kahikatea (*Dacrycarpus dacrydioides*), all of which endure in a forest remnant by the Waikato River (Hammond Bush) where long-tailed bats maintain a rare presence in an urban environment.

As one travels westward to the King Country and the Waikato’s western coastline, an impressive array of limestone landscapes play host to distinctive sets of plants. Gardenworthy members of these ecologies include an attractive, white-flowered umbellifer, *Scandia rosifolia*, an underutilised, scented species of Clematis (*C. forsteri*), and an elegant weeping rata called *Metrosideros colensoi*.

To the east, the vast, flat expanse of the former Hauraki swamp (now converted into a mostly featureless sea of pasture) forms a stark contrast to the forested ranges of the Coromandel Peninsula. The undulating topography and winding coastline of the Coromandel gives rise to a wide variety of ecologies, from coastal dunes (where the orange-leaved sandbinder, pingao, is being assisted in its recovery) to the subalpine scrub of Te Moehau (where several montane species make their northernmost appearance in the country).

The Kauaeranga Valley and the high points above it contain interesting assemblages of plants that occur in few other places – including a compact species of *Dracophyllum* (*D. patens*), the Coromandel Hebe (*H. pubescens* ssp. *pubescens*) and a particularly dignified species of Coprosma, called *C. dodonaefolia*. The Coromandel Range, with its largely volcanic origins, is a suitable point at which to end this survey of the Waikato’s flora, as the next subject of this series of regional guides is the Central North Island (where volcanic activity continues to actively shape landscapes and ecologies).

Note: I would like to acknowledge Paul Duffy, who generously shared his knowledge of the Waikato’s natural history with me, and Peter Morris, who provided valuable insights into the restoration of Waikato’s fragmented habitats. ①



01: *Epacris pauciflora*. 02: *Dianella haemastica*. 03: *Astelia grandis*. 04: *Sporadanthus* flower. 05: *Torehape* peat bog.

WAIKATO'S FLORA

NAME	Height (m)	WIDTH (m)	GROWTH FORM	NOTES
Waikato				
<i>Alseuosmia quercifolia</i>	1	0.7	Shrub	Amazing scent; like others of the genus, can be tricky, but worth it
<i>Astelia grandis</i>	2	2.5	Flax-like	<i>Flagship species of Hamilton's impressive gully restoration scheme</i>
<i>Clematis forsteri</i>	2.5	1.5	Climber	Attractive feature of limestone cliffs of western Waikato; great garden sp.
<i>Coprosma rigida</i>	2.5	1.7	Shrub	Features prominently in many Waikato habitats; good structural shrub
<i>Coprosma tenuicaulis</i>	2.5	2	Shrub	A distinctive feature of wetlands; lightweight appearance
<i>Dacrycarpus dacrydioides</i>	35	10	Tree	Important in Waikato's former forests; key amenity tree in Hamilton
<i>Dianella haemastica</i>	1.2	1.7	Tussock	Recently described swamp dianella; more robust than <i>D. nigra</i>
<i>Epacris pauciflora</i>	1.8	1	Shrub	An arresting site within Waikato's extant peat bogs; pure white flowers
<i>Freycinetia banksii</i>	4	1.5	Climber / Shrub	Kiekie can grow very tall if leaning on large trees; impressive & attractive
<i>Hebe scopulorum</i>	0.5	0.8	Low shrub	Solely included here as it is Waikato's sole endemic plant species
<i>Laurelia noze-zelandiae</i>	20	10	Tree	Very attractive wetland tree that can be kept reasonably compact
<i>Machaerina sinclairii</i>	1.4	2	Flax-like	Intense green, weeping tussocks with beautiful russet flowerheads
<i>Melicytus micranthus</i>	3	1.8	Shrub	Slow-growing small-leaved shrub associated with damp understorey
<i>Metrosideros colensoi</i>	3	2	Climbing shrub	Very beautiful weeping habit; climbing rata species; white-pink flowers
<i>Plagianthus regius</i> ssp. <i>regius</i>	16	8	Tree	Peter Morris informs me of ribbonwood's value in riverbank stabilisation
<i>Pomaderris apetala</i> ssp. <i>maritima</i>	4	2	Shrub	Tainui has obvious cultural importance to Waikato Maori; tough coastal sp.
<i>Ptisana</i> (syn. <i>Marattia</i>) <i>salicina</i>	3	3	Fern	The rare king fern has some of its best populations in the Waikato
<i>Scandia rosifolia</i>	0.6	1.4	Trailing shrub	Attractive white flowers on light green, glossy foliage; likes rocky ground
<i>Sporadanthus ferrugineus</i>	3	2.5	Restiad	Majestic species of Waikato's peat bogs; like a giant, improved oioi
<i>Syzygium maire</i>	15	8	Tree	Bees flock to the flowers of this wetland tree; same family as rata

Coromandel Peninsula

<i>Coprosma arborea</i>	4.5	3	Small tree	Attractive tree; deserves a greater place in gardens; also western Waikato
<i>Coprosma dodonaeifolia</i>	2	1.5	Shrub	Endemic to Coromandel & Great Barrier; attractive structural shrub
<i>Dracophyllum patens</i>	1.2	0.8	Shrub	Attractive low-growing species of <i>Dracophyllum</i> ; comparatively easy
<i>Ficinia</i> (syn. <i>Desmoschoenus</i>) <i>spiralis</i>	0.8	2	Grass-like	Sandbinder with orange colouration; planted on Coromandel beaches
<i>Hebe pubescens</i> ssp. <i>pubescens</i>	1.5	1.5	Shrub	Attractive flowering species; benefits from hard pruning after flowering
<i>Olearia townsonii</i>	2.5	1.5	Shrub	Beautiful white flowers; similar to <i>O. furfuracea</i> & occasionally available
<i>Pittosporum huttonianum</i>	4	2.5	Tree	Distinctive to Coromandel & Western Waikato; nice leaf colour & form
<i>Pittosporum kirkii</i>	1.6	1	Shrub	Epiphytic species; rare in the wild; attractive, glossy, whorled leaves
<i>Pomaderris rugosa</i>	2.4	1.4	Shrub	Distinctive tiered growth habit; cream flowers; grows in infertile habitats
<i>Pseudopanax discolor</i>	3.5	2	Small tree	Purplish-bronze foliage and dense growth habit; very useful small tree
<i>Pseudopanax laetus</i>	3	2.5	Small tree	Also in western Waikato; lush, dark green leaf on an attractive, dense tree
<i>Toronia toru</i>	4	2.5	Small tree	Vibrant, light green foliage on an upright, small tree; also western Waikato