



### Field trip to Higgle's Bush, Woodburn, Denlair Rd

On 1 May 2010, members of the Wanganui Museum Botanical Group (MBG) and Birding Wanganui took part in a joint field trip to Clive and Nicki Higgle's farm 'Woodburn', at the end of Denlair Rd, Fordell. Six members of Birding Wanganui took part – Ian Bell, Jocelyn Bell, Colin Ogle, Robyn Ogle, Peter Frost, and Bill Greenwood, although the first five are also members of the MBG. They joined three other members of the MBG, including Clive Higgle, the owner, together with Mark Higgle, who guided us through the sometimes seemingly impenetrable forest patch, Higgle's Bush, and the adjacent Valley of Tranquillity.

Higgle's Bush is a 10 ha patch of regenerating and remnant native forest that is protected by a QE2 covenant, lying between 39° 54.813'S 175° 14.949'E and 39° 54.776'S 175° 16.073'E. The forest is situated on a relatively steep slope that averaged 20°, but in places was almost double that. The soil is clayey and, when we were there, wet, making conditions underfoot quite slippery. The forest comprises a diversity of species, including hinau (*Elaeocarpus dentatus*), tawa (*Beilschmiedia tawa*), rewarewa (*Knightia excelsa*), lemonwood (*Pittosporum eugenioides*), lancewood (*Pseudopanax crassifolius*), heketara (*Olearia rani*), pate (*Schefflera digitata*), pigeonwood (*Hedycarya arborea*), titoki (*Alectryon excelsis*), shining broadleaf (*Griselinia lucida*), northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*), and nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*, on the lower part of the forest only). Kanuka (*Leptospermum ericoides*) is also common, reflecting the secondary status of the much of the forest. Many of the plants are quite large, indicating that regeneration is well advanced. The understorey consists of a wide range of ferns, sedges (*Carex* spp.), and broadleaf herbs, including kawakawa (*Macropiper excelsum*) and parataniwha (*Elatosterna rugosum*). A woody vine, supplejack (*Ripogonum scandens*), is present throughout the undergrowth, making it difficult to move through the forest. Adjacent to the hillslope forest, but separate from it and at lower elevation, are some splendid stands of kahikatea (*Dacrycarpus dacrydioides*) and cabbage tree (*Cordyline australis*), with an impressive understorey of *Coprosma tenuicaulis* and *C. crassifolia*. This links to a narrow band of riparian forest running down the Valley of Tranquillity that contains kahikatea, lancewood and toothed lancewood (*Pseudopanax ferox*), and both black and white maire (*Nestegis cunninghamii* and *N. lanceolata*). Much of the surrounding land is covered with plantations of 15-year old pines.

Despite the floristic richness of the area, only 11 bird species were heard or seen. Fantail was the most common species seen, if only because of its habit of foraging around anything moving through the forest, including people. Silvereyes were commonly heard, along with Grey Warbler, Tui, and Bellbird. A list of species seen or heard in different habitats is given below.

|   | Hillslope forest | Forest edge | Lowland forest | Pine forest |
|---|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| New Zealand Pigeon <i>Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae</i> | ✓                |             | ✓              |             |
| Dunnoek <i>Prunella modularis</i>                   |                  | ✓           |                |             |
| Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>                      |                  | ✓           |                |             |
| Grey Warbler <i>Gerygone igata</i>                  | ✓                | ✓           | ✓              |             |
| Fantail <i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>                 | ✓                | ✓           | ✓              | ✓           |
| Tomtit <i>Petroica macrocephala</i>                 | ✓                |             | ✓              |             |
| Silvereye <i>Zosterops lateralis</i>                | ✓                |             | ✓              |             |
| Bellbird <i>Anthornis melanura</i>                  | ✓                |             | ✓              |             |
| Tui <i>Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae</i>            | ✓                |             | ✓              |             |
| Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>                |                  | ✓           |                | ✓           |
| Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>         |                  | ✓           |                | ✓           |



The most significant record was that of two Tomtit males heard calling in the down-slope section of the hillside forest, and a male was seen later in the afternoon in riparian forest along the stream running down the Valley of Tranquillity (see photo below). From data given in the *Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand 1999-2004*, the nearest other records of Tomtit are from or near Sutherland's Bush, 10 km E; pine forest adjacent to Whitiau Scientific Reserve, just north of the Whangaehu R mouth, 17 km WSW, and the forest at Atene, 25 km NNW. These other sites are themselves largely isolated from the main forest block of the Whanganui National Park and Waitotara Conservation Area, where tomtits are common. These records at Woodburn suggests that tomtit can persist in the patchwork of riparian forest strips, small blocks of native forest, and pine plantations. A more systematic search for this species in small forest blocks adjacent to or inside pine plantations might show a wider distribution than presently known.



**Figure 1.** Tomtit, *Petroica macrocephala*, photographed in the Valley of Tranquillity, 'Woodburn', Fordell (39° 55.220'S 175° 15.214'E).

Another notable piece of information was provided by Clive and Mark Higgie, who reported recently hearing kiwi (presumably North island Brown Kiwi) in the Valley of Tranquillity. This is a significant record as the nearest records are from forest in the backblocks west of Atene, 23-25 km N of Woodburn. The report needs to be followed up and, if possible, confirmed.

Many thanks to Clive and Mark Higgie for hosting this field trip and showing us around their property. Thanks also to Colin Ogle and the Museum Botanical Group for inviting Birding Wanganui to join the field trip. We look forward to future collaboration, preferably on slightly less precipitous terrain☺

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