

Natural Habitats of the Wellington Region

John Dawson

Most people who have a special interest in the native plants and/or animals of the Wellington Region are involved with one particular reserve. In the case of this seminar we are concerned with the bush remnants of the Wellington Botanic Garden. My own primary commitment is to Otari-Wilton's Bush, but I have quite strong secondary interests in the Nga Manu Nature Reserve at Waikanae, Kaitoke Regional Park and the Wainui Waterworks Reserve, to name a few. A special involvement with one particular reserve is probably the best way of making a useful contribution for most people, but it would be regrettable if this should lead to ill-feeling and rivalry between groups. A special effort should be made to develop links between such groups and to establish co-operative educational programmes for the general public.

The Wellington Region is ideally suited to such a joint endeavour. Alone among the New Zealand regions that include a city or cities, ours possesses a wide range of natural habitats some of which are in a nearly original state -these include forests ranging from species rich stands at warmer lower altitudes, including a swamp forest at Nga Manu, to simpler beech forests on infertile ridge crests in the lowlands and at higher, colder altitudes in the mountains. Above the forest in the Southern Taranaki there is also the best example of alpine vegetation in the North Island, but it is unfortunately not readily accessible to most people. There are also wetlands, both saline and fresh water, coastal shrublands and, along the Cook Strait coast, one of the richest marine floras and faunas in the country.

There is a feeling among those primarily interested in native plants that the reserves largely concerned with native animals, such as the Karori Sanctuary and the proposed Marine Education Centre, are seen by the public to be more glamorous than plant reserves and as a result they attract more financial and other support. This is something plant-lovers must largely learn to live with, as being animals ourselves we can relate more easily to other animals than to plants. However it should be pointed out that native animals make their homes in the plant communities. This is partly for the shelter they provide but mostly because, directly or indirectly, plants are the food for animals. This is because plants alone, with their "magic pigment" chlorophyll, are able to combine water and carbon-di-oxide to make sugar and other energy-storing compounds.

In presenting the fascinating story of the native fauna and flora of the Wellington Region, the intricate interactions of plants with plants, animals with animals and plants with animals, as well as the less conspicuous but equally important roles of fungi and bacteria, should be strongly emphasised. This broad approach is the best way of capturing the imagination of enquiring minds.

