Moanui Conservation Area – 4 October 2020

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Moanui Conservation Area is a moderately sized reserve of approximately 1500 ha in the headwaters of the Motu River. Access from Opotiki is via the Waioeka Gorge Road and Trafford's Hill, turning off SH2 to the right just before Matawai. The narrow, winding metal road follows through farmland for a further 15 minutes or so into an area of red and silver beech forest where the Conservation Area adjoins the road. Elevation here is approximately 700 m, rising to around 950 m towards the back of the reserve.

Nine Rotorua BotSoc members from Rotorua, Tauranga, Whakatane and Opotiki met in Opotiki at 8 am on Sunday 4th October, and managed to squash into two vehicles for the one hour drive up to this reserve.

We were armed with historical beech mistletoe records (courtesy of DOC, thanks Paul) from 2012 and 2016, mostly from sites close to the road. Some of the host trees had been banded according to the records, and some not. Our intention was to locate the most accessible of these mistletoes, if possible, and assess their presence and condition, as well as updating the species list for the Conservation Area.

Our first stop was at the far western boundary of Moanui CA where it adjoins the road, and we left our cars here and entered the bush onto a flat, beech covered ridge at around 720 m elevation. The canopy here was a mix of large red (*Fuscospora fusca*) and silver (*Lophozonia menziesii*) beech, along with tawari (*Ixerba brexioides*) and some kamahi (*Weinmannia racemosa*).

Rotorua Botanical Society looking about in the beech-dominated forest at Moanui Conservation Area. *Photo: Jacqui Bond*

Dicksonia lanata and crown fern (*Blechnum discolor*) were abundant on the ground, while the shrub tier included *Coprosma tayloriae*, *C. tenuifolium*, *Leucopogon fasciculatus*, and *Raukaua anomalus*. There were numerous good healthy specimens of *Raukaua edgerleyi*, ranging in height from about two to four metres, along with seedlings of *Alseuosmia pusilla* and miro (*Prumnopitys ferruginea*).
Although the day was fine, a cool south-westerly breeze under the shady canopy reminded us that we were definitely up in the mountains here. We searched with our binoculars but were unable to locate a previously (2016) recorded *Peraxilla colensoi* in an unbanded silver beech host.
Continuing our botanizing we slowly moved northwards. Several flowering spider orchids (*Corybas acuminatus*) were found, along with a good assortment of filmy ferns. All of the six previously recorded filmy ferns were present, including *Hymenophyllum villosum*, *H.bivalve*, and *H. rarum*, and we also added *H.revolutum*, *H.scabrum*, *H.dilatatum*, and *H.frankliniae*.

Hymenophyllum scabrum at Moanui. *Photo: Jacqui Bond*

We continued northwards to a more defined ridge at the back of this terraced area and climbed slowly to a knob at just under 800 metres elevation. We stopped here for morning tea amongst the neinei (*Dracophyllum latifolium*), before retracing our steps back down to the road, where we were able to remove a clothing layer in the warm sun.
Our next task was to search for a *Peraxilla tetrapetala* mistletoe previously recorded on an unbanded silver beech behind the Moanui Conservation Area sign on the roadside. The beech mistletoes were not yet in flower and most of us would have found this plant rather difficult to see, but it was soon located by Paul who has done numerous mistletoe surveys for DOC. This had originally been a large plant of around 2x2 metres, but now appeared mostly dead, with only about 10% foliage cover remaining due to possum browsing.
From here we got back into our cars and drove about 200 metres back down the road towards the east, with a few keen botanists walking and recording roadside species. Here at “Host 7”, a red beech beside the road, we found the narrower-leaved *Alepis flavida* which had been previously recorded. The plant displayed somewhat sparse new spring foliage, probably after winter browsing, and Paul located another, much healthier specimen of around 2x1 m in the same large host tree.

As there was a good, grassy roadside parking area here, and a nice mix of sun and shade, we ate our lunch and chatted here for about half an hour before continuing on down the road back to the east. A large banded silver beech a couple of hundred metres from our lunch site was recorded as host to four mistletoe plants (*Peraxilla colensoi*). We observed all of these, including one very large plant. All appeared to be in healthy condition. We then moved further down the road to Host 4, a large silver beech hosting a massive *Peraxilla colensoi,* once again protected and in good order thanks to the tree having been banded.

Whilst searching in this area a group of us crossed the creek, climbing the opposite bank amongst a large, beautiful patch of *Blechnum colensoi* ferns. Here we discovered three new unrecorded *Peraxilla colensoi* plants on silver beech trees adjacent to an old possum trapper's campsite. While the rest of us needed binoculars, Jo Bonner was starting to show amazing talent for spotting mistletoe plants with the naked eye. We made notes on the locations and details of these plants for DOC, and made our way back to the road where the remaining half of the group were busy recording roadside species, and collecting some herbarium specimens for Elizabeth.

Amazingly, by this time it was around 3.30 pm. The day had flown by, and for those driving back to Rotorua and Tauranga it was time to start heading home. So we called an end to the botanizing, having felt somewhat encouraged that the beech mistletoes in this area, while struggling against possums, are still mostly present. The value of protective aluminium bands on host trees was really obvious, and it was nice to be able to add a few more specimens to the list of those previously recorded.

Many thanks to those who travelled over from Rotorua and Tauranga. It was a pleasant and interesting day.

Inside Moanui Conservation Area. *Photo: Jacqui Bond*.