

Sutton Salt Lake, Fieldtrip, 18 June, 2005 Toni Atkinson

It was the sunniest of days and we a scattered group of humans, overheating, thermally-dressed, surrounded by long grass, giant schist tors, blue sky. Perhaps here Tolkein turned some tardy trolls to stone. I learnt at university that NZ has only two (semi-) deciduous plants, however, here the matagouri and Muehlenbeckia had lost nearly all their leaves; a result of or a ploy to withstand the harsh winter.

Norm spent time fossicking for the private parts of grasses, and we learnt to apply certain boat terms, "keel", and "bow", to their leaves. I thought "mast" and "sail" were equally descriptive, (particularly after I got too close and a seed head went in my mouth), but these earned me only a frown. Norm found three grasses not on the species-list for the reserve: *Dichelachne crinita* (native), *Cynosurus cristatus* (crested dog's tail) and *Bromus "brevis"* (both introduced). John Barkla, our leader, added the narrow-leaved woody shrub *Olearia lineata* to the list.

The lichen-covered tors fringing the "ephemeral" Sutton Salt Lake were our lunch spot. On the rocks close to the water's edge is an orange saline-tolerant lichen, which appears similar to that found on the coast, and, like many of the lichens observed on the trip, was a mass of fruit-bodies. At this time of year the lake appears to be about 10 cm deep over a muddy bottom, and was largely covered in clear ice; despite being half as salty as sea-water which should depress the freezing temperature. The mirror-like thawed patches grew photogenically as the warm day wore on, but there was enough ice for the children to endlessly amuse themselves - walk on it, crunch through it, throw shattering pieces across the surface, and slide each other around. Certain issues arose between John's daughters which were not resolved and the party was assured will point to court action at a later date.

It is an easy place to revisit, alone, or with friends. The pleasant, well-mown track is a loop around the lake (recommended for push-chairs), and on the furthest side we were delighted to see a NZ falcon rapidly flapping its way across the sky, and calling ke-ke-ke-ke - a high note repeated in quick succession. This may be an alarm call, or a non-directional call intended to flush out and confuse prey. I was certainly confused, and for some time could not find the falcon. There were no sightings of the aquatic Dipteran larvae *Ephydrella novaezelandica*, a mud-dweller endemic to the lake. But then, we didn't look ...



Fig. *Dichelachne crinita*, plume grass. HD Wilson, 1996