OLD MAN RANGE - Again

Yvonne & Ross Elder

The Old Man Range has a fascination for us, so that, any time we are down that way, a trip to the tops is a must, to look for treasures in the tundra. Unfortunately, this time, we missed the best day by having to go to Alex for a car battery, the next day was overcast and though we made it to the top the cold wind quickly drove us off. We did, however, manage to collect a few seed of Dracophyllum muscoides, probably the dominant plant of the area, certainly the most conspicuous, the reddish- brown cushions being easily picked out from the distance both on the top and on the slopes leading up to them. During the night snow fell and in the morning there was a snow cover down to about 1200m, which put and end to any more high level trips, but meant there were to be more trips to the 600 - 1000m levels to muster sheep to lower pastures.

Fixing the altitude in this region is made easy by the presence of the Last Chance Water Race, which starting at Shingle Creek at about 700m, runs roughly parallel to the Roxburgh-Alexandra highway, crossing over Chasm, Gorge, Hut, Coal, Obelisk, and Butchers Creeks ending at what was the Last Chance Co. Gold Mine halfway between Fruitlands and Alexandra.

In the lower part of the range more and more tussock land has been ploughed and sown in pasture grasses. Above this top-dressing has encouraged the growth of grasses and herbs, but a more intensive stocking with cattle as well as sheep has tended to thin out the tussocks and keep them more trimmed so that there is not as much bare soil around the bases where water could start run-off channels. From about 1200m the smaller blue tussock takes over as the predominant species, however, it now spreads much further up, taking over the place of the almost disappeared snow tussock.

In the early years snow tussock covered the top third of the range but by about 1920 had mainly gone owing to the extensive burning and grazing by cattle and to a lesser extent sheep. There were still large patches of snow grass in the head of Shingle and Chasm Creeks which lingered on but now there are only a few isolated clumps or individual plant in places where stock and fire find difficulty reaching. The replacement of snow tussock by the blue is not of itself a bad thing for the farmer nor the alpine plant

enthusiast as the less arching mode of growth and smaller size of the latter gives more space for pasture grasses in the lower part of the range and the magnificent collection of mat and cushion plants that clothe the upper part and which are so botanically interesting.

The Sutherland Bequest Project had us looking more closely at the small-leaved shrubs with greater care and several surprises turned up. Just below the start of the Last Chance Race on an exposed rocky outcrop there were four Coprosma, C. propinqua, C. ciliata, C. rugosa, and C. sp. 't'(C. parvifolia var. dumosa in Cheeseman, 1906). C. propinqua was similar to the plants growing Canterbury and showed the same bewildering variation of leaf size and shape when growing in a sheltered site, as against rocks or partially covered by a scrambling Muehlenbeckia spp. The fairly easily seen interpetiolar stipule is quite diagnostic, though one has to look harder to find a leaf with one curved edge and one straight, a feature to be found on almost every twig in Canterbury specimens, again, a good diagnostic feature. C. ciliata here shows marginal cilia on most leaves examined, but seldom showed any hairs on leaf surfaces. The marginal cilia in a lot of cases had a reddish core usually pointed forwards to the apex of the leaf. C. rugosa is easily recognised by the upright terminal branchlets with a lighter colouring than the lower ones. The first few leaf sets are more closely appressed to the stem. C. sp. 't'(C. parviflora var dumosa in Cheeseman 1906) all had that greyish-green appearance that distinguish them when viewed from a distance.

One of the more plentiful shrubs was Hymenanthera alpina often found growing against the rocks and only when the branches were pulled back did the white, grey blotched fruit, in abundance this season, become visible.

Finally , there were three Olearia spp., O.lineata, O.odorata, O.virgata var rugosa. O.lineata used to be a common large shrub called 'tea tree', especially noticeable in horse paddocks, where it grew up to 5m tall and the long slender branches were often kept trimmed by the stock, and the 30 - 45cm diameter trunck well polished by rubbing. Its disappearance was more owing to its value as firewood than as tea.