

The Piropiro Flats, west of Lake Taupo: memories from forty years ago

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Introduction

A short way south-west of Mount Pureora there is a forest clearing called the Piropiro Flats (Figs 1, 2). My first visit there was in 1981, and most of the statements in this article apply to the place as I knew it then. I have revisited the Flats a couple of times since; it is now a camping node on Pureora Forest Park's "Timber Trail" and has lost a fair bit of its misty remoteness (Notes 1 & 2).

In the winter of 1981, I had got a job with the New Zealand Forest Service, as 'headman' in charge of two good companions, Mike Ayrtton and Piet Nieuwland. We, the Hurakia Forest Survey Team, were required to set up experiments in the tawa (*Beilschmiedia tawa*) forest around the Flats, to

determine whether this tree might be able to remedy a deficiency (until new eucalypt plantations matured) in the region's supply of short-fibred pulpwood. We cored tawa to determine its past growth rates, and set up plots in which trees were fixed with a spring-loaded metal band, whose movement would register diameter growth in the months to come. (Such utilisation never took place, to the benefit of those now enjoying the Timber Trail; see also Smale, Bathgate & Guest (1986) for the "prospects" of tawa in the 1980s).

We camped for a couple of cold wet months at the Flats and the following notes were made incidentally to our daily tasks and without an eye to comprehensiveness.

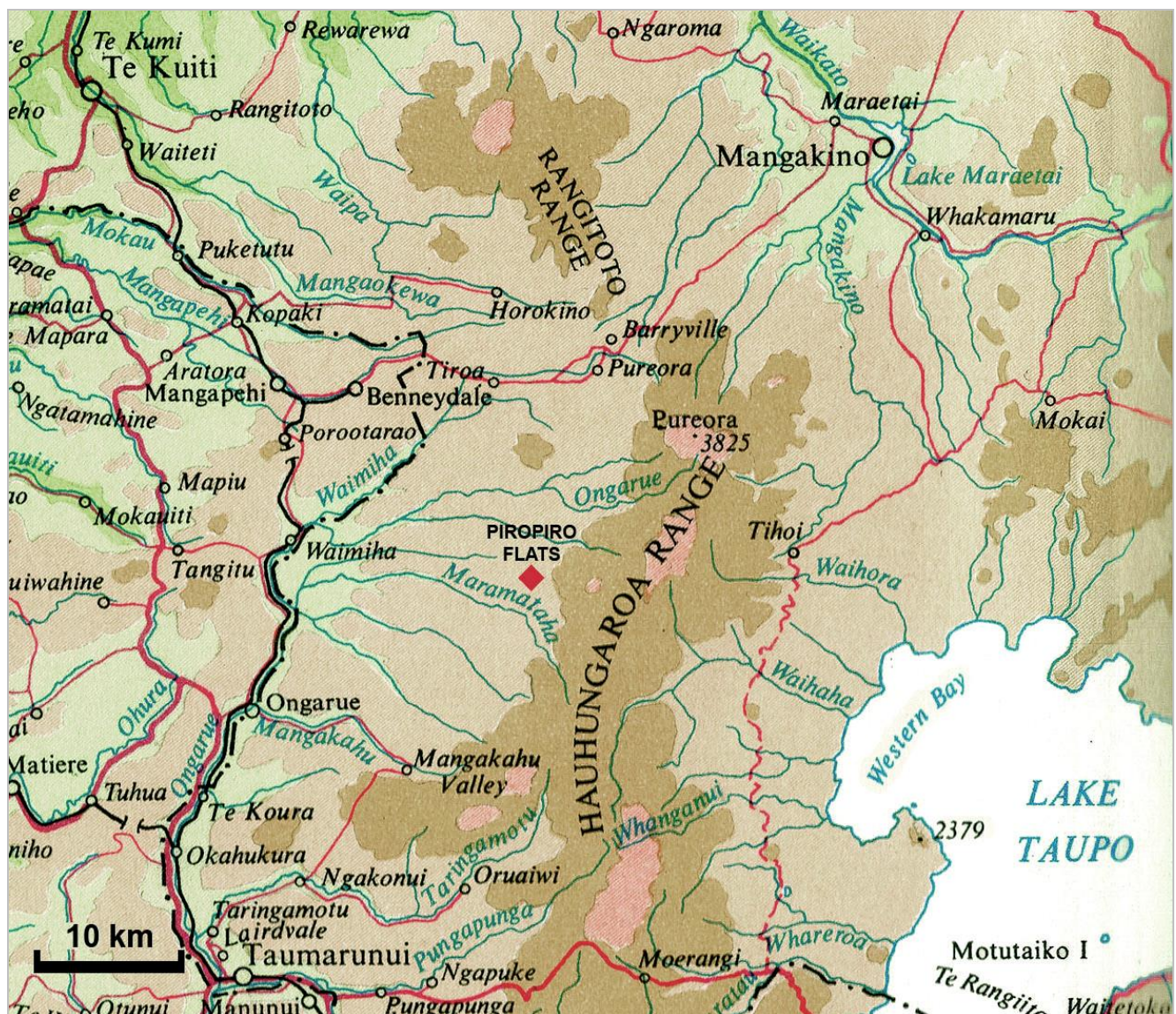


Fig. 1. Location of Piropiro Flats. From map "New Zealand 1:1,000,000 No. 3" (McLintock 1960, p.30).

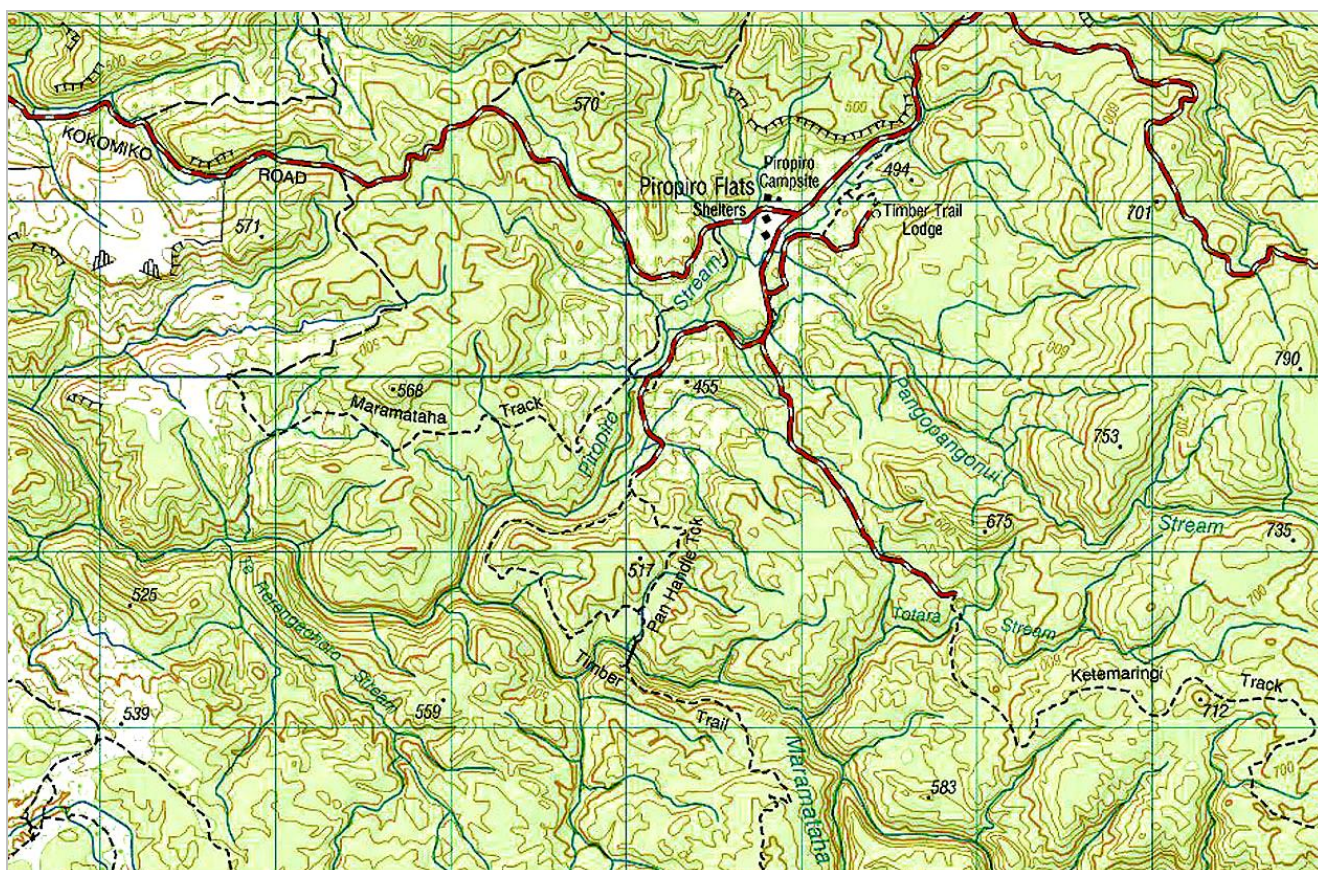


Fig. 2. Piropiro Flats. From Topo50 Map BG34, issued 2012, LINZ. Scale = 1 km squares.

Vegetation – notes from 1981

Piropiro Flats extends for c. 1.5 km around the junction of the Piropiro and Pangopango Streams, at c. 450 m a.s.l. It comprises c. 30 ha of pumice-infilled valley floor. The ridges and slopes all around, a hundred or so metres higher, are forested with tawa and rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*). The enclosed nature of the site, the altitude, and the volcanic ash soil, all make the Flats a cold place, and its position at the steep western edge of the Hauhangaroa Range makes it a wet one too.

Dense stands of matai (*Podocarpus spicatus* [now *Prumnopitys taxifolia*]) and totara (perhaps both *Podocarpus laetus* and *P. totara*) are said to have once grown all around the Flats, presumably wherever the pumice was not too deep. Logging began here in about 1923 and continued to the end of WW II, with two mills situated on the Flats itself (Walker & Cooke 2001; King & Richie 2015: 10). By 1981 evidence of all this activity was rather slight: sawn stumps here and there, a few irregularities of terrain, and several groups of old apple trees. There was, at one place near the stream, a 'Chinaman' (Orsman 1997), that is, a cutting into the side of a terrace, into which trucks were backed and loaded from the top and sides.

The cutover forest was burnt several times subsequently by meat-hunters to make habitat for

wild cattle, pigs and deer. The remaining dead spars, mostly of matai (whose bark is relatively fire-resistant), and the cut stumps of the original podocarp forest, are best seen among the blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) along the western side of the Flats.

Deer numbers were high until the early 1970s, then dropped sharply as hunting intensified. Consequently, after several mild winters at that time, blackberry was able to spread, around the logs and stumps of the lower slopes and out into the open area and down the streamlets—a decade later it was very unpleasant work indeed to regain the Flats from the forest around. Blackberry here seems to coexist with bracken (*Pteridium esculentum*) but resists succession to native trees and shrubs.

Much of the central and eastern parts of the Flats, where the pumice is deepest and the habitat coldest, has a cover of either adventive grasses (mainly *Agrostis capillaris*) or native scrub. Some of the latter is 'red scrub', of monoao (*Dracophyllum subulatum*), but most is a taller and more varied 'grey scrub', of *Olearia virgata*, *Coprosma propinqua*, and mountain toatoa (*Phyllocladus alpinus*). Manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) is also present but favours disturbed ground (perhaps the pumice is generally too deep and droughty for it) and usually seems to lose out in competition with monoao. I

have no record of kanuka (*Leptospermum ericoides* - see Note 3) but it is certainly not present as tree-sized individuals. Rabbits and a few hares are now the most frequent grazing animals.

I had supposed that the quasi-frost-flat cover of the Flats might be its original one, at least on the deepest pumice, but its low diversity of native plants suggests otherwise (M. Smale, pers. comm.).

Except for some relic podocarp stands in the south-east, the Flat's tallest cover consists of riparian bands of mountain toatoa. Most are only c. 10 m tall and c. 15–25 cm dbh but there are some larger specimens at the junction of Piropiro Stream and Kokomiko Road. The main species regenerating in these riparian bands is probably *Podocarpus hallii* [now *P. laetus*]. See the Appendix for a list of the plant species recorded in 1981.

Note 1: Much of the Flats' botanical and historical interest remains, but inevitably, after forty years, the magic has diminished. A Lodge complete with the sounds of revelry by night overlooks one end of the main clearing. Campervans have butted into every accessible dell and glen—the sight of one of the latter being tidied up by a leaf-blower has haunted the writing of this article.

Note 2: Walker & Cook (2000) describe the farming and logging activities that took place in the Waimiha region in the early twentieth century and give (pp. 113–115) a sketch map and illustrations of the Piropiro sawmills and settlement. In 1981 though, most of my local information was obtained from possumer-in-residence Mr Ivan "Nugget" Bonasich (1926–2017). His hospitality (fur-lined hut, matai-burning stove, sherry, pungent conversation)

cheered us through the dismal weather and helped us forget our work responsibilities.

It may be of some broader interest to mention that Nugget was a very early user of curry powder as a lure for possums. I now wonder whether he might have been the first to do so. A Bayesian would say this supposition is strengthened by knowing that Nugget had formerly run a King Country fish-and-chip shop, but I wish I had asked.

In 1981 Piropiro Flats was an isolated place, cut off especially from the western (Ongarue) side of Hurakia Forest by the deeply incised Maramataha River, an obstacle which not even the pre-war timber-getters had overcome. Warned off by the definiteness of Nugget's descriptions, we never went so far. It is now crossed by a glorious suspension bridge, on the Timber Trail (Fig. 2).

Our first night on the Flats was unusually fine and clear. I laid out my Everest Mummy in the open, away from Nugget's malodorous pile of wet matai firewood. Night fell and at the foot of the clearing a hundred metres away radiation fog began to form. It thickened and moved upslope and the stars grew dim. Comforted by the gradual muffling of the forest's sounds, and in the soothing presence of smoke, I slept like someone who thought that the Forest Service would go on forever.

Note 3: There are now two species of kanuka recognised in the central North Island (*Kunzea serotina* and *K. tenuicaulis*).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Mark Smale for encouragement and suggestions.

References

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Appendix. Indigenous Flora of the Piropiro Flats – c. 80 native species.

Names in curved brackets were current in 1981

FERNS & LYCOPODS

Blechnum membranaceum
Blechnum novae-zelandiae
Blechnum penna-marina
Blechnum deltoides (*B. vulcanicum*)
Gleichenia cunninghamii
Grammitis sp.

Hymenophyllum multifidum
Hymenophyllum sanguinolentum
Leptopteris hymenophylloides
Lycopodium deuterodensum
Lycopodium fastigiatum
Lycopodium scariosum
Lycopodium volubile

Polystichum vestitum
Pteridium esculentum

GYMNOSPERMS

Dacrydium cupressinum
Phyllocladus alpinus
Phyllocladus trichomanoides
Dacrycarpus dacrydioides

Podocarpus laetus (*P. hallii*)

Prumnopitys taxifolia
(*Podocarpus spicatus*)

Podocarpus totara

TREES & SHRUBS

Aristotelia fruticosa

Beilschmiedia tawa

Carmichaelia flagellifera

Carpodetus serratus

Coprosma dumosa (*C. "tayloriae"*)

Coprosma propinqua

Corokia cotoneaster

Elaeocarpus hookerianus

Gaultheria antipoda

Griselinia littoralis

Hebe stricta var. *stricta*

Hoheria sexstylosa

Kunzea sp. (*Leptospermum*
ericoides – see Note 3)

Leptecophylla juniperina
(*Cyathodes juniperina*)

Leptospermum scoparium

Leucopogon fasciculatus
(*Cyathodes fasciculata*)

Leucopogon fraseri (*Cyathodes*
fraseri)

Melicope simplex

Neomyrtus pedunculatus

Nestegis lanceolata
[I have no record of *N. cunninghamii*]

Olearia virgata

Pennantia corymbosa

Raukaua anomalus (*Pseudopanax*
anomalus)

Pseudopanax crassifolius

Pseudowintera colorata

LIANES

Clematis forsteri

Muehlenbeckia australis

Parsonsia capsularis

Rubus cissoides

Rubus schmidelioides

DICOT HERBS

Acaena anserinifolia

Cardamine sp.

Euchiton audax

Geranium potentilloides

Geranium brevicaule

Gonocarpus micranthus

Lagenophora pumila

Myosotis sp. (rare, *M. forsteri*?)

Pimelea prostrata

Viola filicaulis

MONOCOTS

Astelia fragrans

Astelia grandis

Carex breviculmis

Carex dissita

Carex ?erythrovaginata (*Uncinia*
?laxiflora)

Carex horizontalis (*Uncinia rupestris*)

Carex (*Uncinia*) *uncinata*

Carex sp. (*C. solandri* or *C. testacea*?)

Cordyline australis

Austroderia fulvida (*Cortaderia fulvida*)

Dianella nigra

Festuca or *Poa* sp.
[presumably, *Poa cita*]

Hierochloa redolens

Juncus edgarae

Juncus planifolius

Lemna minor

Luzula sp. [*L. picta* var. *picta*?]

Microlaena avenacea

Poa anceps

Flora of the Tapuwae Forest Blocks, Hokianga, Northland

Marley Ford

Introduction

Tapuwae was the customary land (whenua) occupied by the Ngāti Here and Ngāi Tūpoto hapu of Te Rarawa. The approximately 2,000 ha on the north side of the Hokianga Harbour, surrounding the Tapuwae River, was named after an ancestor, Tuwhakararo, who was renowned for his running ability, hence the full name Te Tapuwae o Tuwhakararo: the resounding footsteps of Tuwhakararo.

The bush-clad whenua was used to graze cattle for the benefit of the hapū. Many Ngāi Tūpoto whanau lived on the land, particularly in the summer due to a reliable water supply. In 1911 the Tāi Tokerau Maori Land Board, which had been given authority over all Maori lands in the north at that time, leased the land out for 50 years. The lease changed hands several times and was eventually abandoned in 1959. For

the next 23 years it was run by the Maori Affairs Department under their development scheme, which had poor outcomes for the land and hapu – considerable debt was accumulated despite the buoyant farming climate at the time (Henwood, W, pers. comm.). This was the catalyst for a small group of shareholders to assert rangatiratanga over the whenua and regain control; in 1979 the Tapuwae 1B & 4 Incorporation was set up to govern the block, and in 1982 the land was returned to the hapu. The returned property was in a dismal state requiring the Management Committee to start from the beginning.

Today the focus for this block is to enhance and sustain its people (approximately 1000 shareholders) and the environment, through dry-stock farming, forestry, honey, native nursery and conservation operations. It is committed to kaitiakitanga (guardianship) to protect, restore and enhance the