

Alpine Flowers of New Zealand



An illustrated talk by Hilary Iles, local conservation educator and photographer

Hilary began her talk with a simple statement: “I like mountains because I like the view.” Although she has lived in New Zealand for 25 years she had previously climbed in the Lakes District and Europe. “My parents were keen mountaineers,” she said.

New Zealand mountains were different. Only four to five million years’ old, they were comparatively young. They also incurred high rainfall, she said. With a greater number of storm events caused by climate change there was a lot more erosion of the mountains, she added. “New Zealand alpine flora is evolving and the boundaries between the species is sometimes blurred.” There are over 700 alpine plant species in New Zealand, 95% of which are endemic.

Hilary and husband, George, stayed in DOC huts during their numerous energetic excursions into the Southern Alps, and Hilary treated us to a wonderful selection of photographs of alpine flora and fauna taken on these excursions. In the Lake Coleridge area they discovered a pair of wetas under a rock. “They can survive temperatures of minus 10 degrees,” said Hilary.

On the Winterslow Range there were speargrasses, vegetable sheep and “swathes” of celmisia. Near Lake Heron masses of gentians were

in bloom. At Mt Owen where Lord of the Rings was filmed, the couple encountered a small species of ranunculus and a larger globular species.

Seven inquisitive keas appeared in the Mt Burns area providing a brief respite from plant spotting, which included a Mt Burns version of the Mt Cook Lily.

On the West Coast, at Cedar Flats, the couple spotted matai, flowering leatherwood, celmisia, lobelia, foxglove, gentians, speargrass and orchids.

Hilary described Lathrop Saddle as a “botanist’s delight.” There were lots of plants amongst the rocks and the northern slopes were covered with celmisia. Below, on the river, there were several pairs of blue duck. Also in the vicinity the couple saw geckos, skinks and weevils.

In the Arthur’s Pass area they encountered hebe and “loose and mobile” speargrass. On the Ashburton Range they observed – albeit fleetingly - a rock wren which hopped between rocks.

Hilary ended her presentation with a slide of a shadow of a “giant” celmisia across the surface of a flat rock. It was a wonderful presentation which showcased the diversity of our alpine flora, and Hilary was thanked for her sharing her photographic expertise, knowledge and enthusiasm.

- *Allan Horwell*