

# THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS VISITED

by Audrey Eagle

It was a privilege to visit the Auckland Islands and also an adventure which was faced with some trepidation. Everything we had read implied the worst: "vile weather . . . bleak climate, strong westerly winds, rainfall spread over 300 days a year". We hadn't expected that our six days were to be sunny and calm with only one wet morning.

Alex Black's *Acheron* of Dunedin was chartered, and skippered by him with a crew of three, his wife Colleen, son Sandy and Naomi Peterson, former mate on the *Spirit of Adventure*. The *Acheron* was to become our floating hotel, as sleeping ashore is not permitted. The 23m long vessel was comfortably filled by fourteen people, so it is amazing to think that Captain Cook's *Endeavour* was only 9m longer and yet held 94 men and all their stores for a long voyage.

Pauline Mayhill of Hamilton arranged the trip. The party of ten consisted mostly of Waikato members of Forest and Bird and the Ornithological Society. Two were members of the Conchologist Society. The party was comprised of Pauline, Keith and Peter Mayhill, Peggie Jenner, Bryony Macmillan, Mercia Barnes, Jim Gaulstone, Ron Sinclair, Audrey Marriott and myself. Our purpose was to learn more about land snails, birds, plants and also to satisfy a desire to see the Auckland Islands from a conservation point of view.

The Department of Lands and Survey had issued permits for landing and also permits to Pauline Mayhill and Jim Gaulstone for collecting land snails for the National Museum; to Bryony Macmillan of Botany Division, DSIR for collecting samples of *Acaenas* (bidibidi) needed for her study of this genus; and to me for collecting a leaf and a flower from *Stilbocarpa*, gentian, *Anisotome* and two species of *Pleurophyllum*, all of which I wanted to paint.

December 2. We left Dunedin on the thirty-six hour passage which, as we neared the Auckland Islands, became quite lively and we were grateful to arrive in the calm waters of Erebus Cove where we spent the first day. Having avoided the solitary Hooker's sea-lion (*Phocarctos hookeri*) that was guarding the small beach, we visited the graveyard that once formed part of the Enderby Settlement. To see "Died of Starvation" on a gravestone as almost a first impression of the Auckland Islands which remained in my thoughts throughout our wanderings and at each place we visited I wondered how one could survive there. The sea-lion had followed us and chased us from our contemplation of the cemetery so we turned our attention to the forest.

Typical lowland Auckland Island forest is made up of southern rata, (*Metrosideros umbellata*), many of which have liverwort and moss covered, prostrate trunks from which grow a thicket of branches, inanga (*Dracophyllum longifolium*) with trunks up to 10m in height and haumakaroa (*Pseudopanax simplex*). Weeping matipo (*Myrsine divaricata*) and hipiro (*Coprosma foetidissima*) were the understorey and always present was the fern *Polystichum vestitum*, ideally suited to the conditions, growing very large and often with trunks a metre in height.

At a higher level (about 50m) the rata becomes scrubby and ends. The main species then are the matipo, inanga and cottonwood (*Cassinia vauvilliersii*) which in some places form an almost impenetrable barrier.

Above the scrub belt tussocks take over and, on wet summit ridges, mosses, liverworts, lichens and sedges grow, and in drier areas, dwarf alpine plants. But we never had time to scramble up to the higher tops and see these plants at close quarters.

December 5. Was to Enderby Island where on landing we were face to face with some of the seventy-four impressive male sea-lions that were on guard along the sandy beach. There were no females present for them to fight over so they mainly ignored each other and us.

The majestic and well-named royal albatrosses (*Diomedea epomophora*) were sitting on eggs, unperturbed by the clicking of cameras. The first plant excitement was a host of golden-flowered *Bulbinella rosii* covering several hectares. On Enderby Island most of the herbs have been eaten flat to the ground by the hungry cattle and rabbits so it is fortunate that *Bulbinella* is unpalatable to them. Other spectacular herbs have gone, or like *Anisotome latifolia* a few plants cling to cliff edges out of reach of the browsing animals. *Anisotome* belongs to the carrot family and the root was one of the survival foods of the castaways.

All the birds gave us great joy; yellow-eyed penguins (*Megadyptes antipodes*) marching inland, one being seen on a nest with a chick. Auckland Island shag

