



To the WILD ISLANDS

exploring the Hauraki Gulf and beyond

by Gordon Ell

There is an island in the Hauraki Gulf where you climb through moss forests and the haunt of kakapo to emerge on a mountain peak which looks down on Auckland. Admittedly the glinting towers of "downtown" are 50 km away, but their existence still looks bizarre from the top of the island where time is standing still. The view from Little Barrier Island south to the petrochemical haze of Auckland encompasses all the centuries of New Zealand history, for the island is one of the few places left where the fortunate may glimpse the primeval past.

Little Barrier Island, on the outer edge of the Hauraki Gulf, is perhaps the best known to naturalists of New Zealand as the last hope of our endangered birds. Yet it is only one of at least 100 islands and islets with names which scatter the chart, from Auckland north to Whangarei and beyond the Coromandel. These are the islands which form the familiar horizon of Aucklanders, but they remain unknown to most people. They are simply too hard to get to, or remain absolutely protected places in the interest of conservation. Yet there are fortunately some, where, at a little inconvenience, the enthusiast can find a landing and see some of the rare wildlife at first hand.

Adventure and discovery

The surprising thing about the Hauraki Gulf, and the islands which spill from its mouth, is the variety. There is adventure and discovery enough for a lifetime of weekend exploration. The islands range from a volcano perhaps 800 years old (Rangitoto) to the cattle-mown pastures of adjacent Motutapu Island. There are

settled places with attendant ribbons of houses and baches, like the hillcrests of Waiheke, and there are raw rocks, jagged molars against the storms, where gannets and shags breed. There are friendly little groups of islands, not much more than hummocks scattered at the feet of the Coromandel Ranges and there is the rugged bulk of Great Barrier and Great Mercury (round in the Bay of Plenty).

One of the reasons for this plethora of islands is the reshaping of the earth after the ice age. Once the rivers of Auckland isthmus wound out towards the coromandel Ranges, in valleys like the Matakana, the Mahurangi, Tamaki and Waitemata. Now the rivers still run but into shallow bays, their olden valleys flooded by the end of the last ice age. Since then the intruding sea has cut the ends off headlands and eroded the shores of hills into island cliffs.

Spectacular forests

On the islands there are often dense forests of coastal trees. Groves of pohutukawa stain the cliffs crimson in high summer. Inland, beneath the protecting canopy of taraire, puriri and pohutukawa there are gullies of nikau, an understorey of kawakawa, large-leaved whau and coprosma. On places like Little Barrier and Lady Alice, former forestry and farm respectively, the forest is recovering under the protection of manuka and kanuka. Still mercifully safe from grazing and browsing animals, these islands have botanical riches vanished elsewhere.

On Lady Alice the large-leaved puka is spectacular, its giant leaves more than half a metre long, spreading away from a tender growing shoot that would

elsewhere be the food of possums. On Little Barrier it is the sheer density of new growth which contrasts with the browsed interior of mainland forests. It is impossible to step off the track without crushing some delicate young plant. Both these islands are rich in the epiphytic plants which are so often eaten out, even in our national parks. Yet both are distinctly different.

Lady Alice is a low island, not much more than 100 metres, a place where thousands of shearwater breed in season. Little Barrier Island, named for its function as a protection to the gulf, is a microcosm of a mainland mountain. Called Hauturu in Maori, its name translates as "the resting post of the wind". In its 800 metres of steep gully and ridge it carries the clothing of a natural transect of New Zealand's northern bush; from coastal scrub and kauri, up through the podocarps and beeches, into the windswept alpine zone about its misty cap.

Animal treasures

The sanctuary islands are famous for their birds but they have other animal treasures too. Lady Alice has tuatara. Here scientists are investigating the absence of younger animals, perhaps the result of a population of Polynesian rats or kiore, thought to eat the tuatara eggs during their vulnerable months of gestation in the ground. Little Barrier has the giant weta; at 225mm it has a body about the size of a mouse, and a fearsome exterior in no way diminished by the suggestion that it is really just a large form of grasshopper. Rare and unusual lizards inhabit the island, yet it is some years

