

KAHIKATEA

The Feathers of Tawhaitari

by Kevin Smith
Society — West Coast
Conservation Officer



Kahikatea! What a suitably grand name for this noble tree, a true rangatira of Tane's forest world. It reaches heights of over 60 metres, it is New Zealand's tallest tree and lives for five or more centuries.

The sheer magnificence of kahikatea forest holds one in awe. Lofty, grey columnar trunks often heavily buttressed at the base, support sparse feathery foliage which typically forms an open canopy high above a thick low undergrowth. This sight has inspired many graphic descriptions particularly from the early explorers who knew these now sadly depleted forests much better than we do.

Pioneer botanist, Leonard Cockayne (1910) vividly portrayed kahikatea swamps as being composed of "*multitudes of long straight trunks like the masts of ships rising from the swampy grounds.*" Though perhaps the best description came from Thomas Kirk in his famous treatise 'The Forest Flora of New Zealand' (1889):

Nowhere in the world do forests as ancient as New Zealand's kahikatea forests occur. Dating back to the age of the dinosaurs, kahikatea are sometimes referred to as "floating forests" because they grow in deep peaty ooze or even over flowing water. Only 2 percent of this forest type remains, virtually all in South Westland. Photo: Craig Potton

