

# PROTECTING AN ICON

by Neville Peat



*Forest and Bird has recently proposed the creation of a Remarkables Conservation Park.*

*The view (from Queenstown) most people have of the national icon that is the Remarkables.*

Photo: Barney Brewster

AS FAR AS photogenic mountain ranges go, the Remarkables are tops – an upright, sky-piercing backdrop that features in every Queenstown tourist's photo collection.

Queenstown without the Remarkables is as unthinkable as New Zealand without the kiwi. Well named, the mountain range enjoys icon status. Yet within the country's parks and reserves system it currently holds the lowest status – "stewardship land".

For scenic and landscape quality alone, the Remarkables have long enjoyed rave reviews – and not only from tourists.

## Absorbing grandeur

Back in 1908, an Otago University geologist, Professor James Park, wrote of the "absorbing grandeur" of these mountains. In this respect, he said, they were unrivalled.

But their stunning form as viewed from Queenstown – an immense rock wall, evenly puckered, capped in jagged glory and rising 2,000 metres from the shores of Lake Wakatipu – is only part of the absorbing story of the Remarkables.

The range and adjacent country is built of schist and shaped, to a large extent, by ice. A glacier once filled the Wakatipu basin, and its grinding impact plus fault movement in the

bedrock have contributed to the ruggedness of the terrain.

The geological features today include schist tors, hanging valleys, armchair cirques, earth terraces and mysterious stone drains. These drains, lined at the bottom with stones, may exceed 150 metres in length. Their precise origin is unknown, but the alpine climate, past or present, particularly the action of severe frost in between periods of thaw, is said to be implicated.

## Lakes and tarns

Behind the great western wall and the big lake at its foot lies a dissected alpine landscape dotted by many little lakes and tarns left behind by the glaciation – some 60 in all. Lake Alta (1,830 metres), nestled under the range's highest peak, Double Cone (2,324 metres) in the headwaters of the Rastus Burn, is dammed by moraine in one of the best examples of an armchair cirque. To the south, Lake Hope, the source of the South Branch of Wye Creek, occupies another cirque.

Adding hugely to the scientific intrigue here is the location of the Remarkables in the transition zone between the glaciated Alps and western rainforests and the relatively dry and subdued Central Otago region, comprising

blockfaulted mountains, high tablelands and intervening basins.

The biota of the Remarkables is influenced from both east and west. Some invertebrates are thought to be unique to the area. Certainly there are combinations of plants that are unique.

Botanist Dr Alan Mark co-authored a major report on the area in the 1970s that pointed out how special it was to find several of the larger and more colourful alpine Main Divide species have their eastern limit here (including *Ranunculus buchananii*, *Parahebe birleyi*, *Anisotome capillifolia*, *Celmisia petiolata* and the snow patch tussock, *Chionochloa oreophila*), living in close proximity to cushion plants typical of the Central Otago uplands.

But perhaps the most striking feature of the plant life of the Remarkables is its diversity, with the various communities separated by altitude and topography.

The mosaic includes snow tussock, snowbanks, wetlands, cushion fields, herbfields, fellfields, boulderfields and at lower altitudes remnant mountain beech forest.

## Near-record elevations

Snow tussock is the most extensive vegetation type, ranging up to near-record elevations over 1,900 metres. Above about 1,200 metres the tall narrow-leaved snow tussock *Chionochloa rigida* is replaced by the less-lofty slim snow tussock *Chionochloa macra*, which tends to merge with blue tussock *Poa colensoi* at its upper limits or end abruptly at stony fellfield.

In upper Wye Creek, snowbanks adjoining the several large tarns carry the only known colonies of snow patch tussock on the range, here at its eastern limit.

Indeed Wye Creek holds special interest for botanists. Regenerating mountain beech covers lower reaches of the valley and a sequence of subalpine scrub, snow tussock, herbfield and fellfield vegetation follows on upwards.

DSIR botanists Ralph Allen and Bill Lee, in a report to the Department of Lands and Survey in 1986, said the vegetation sequence of Wye Creek was the most complete in the

*Ranunculus buchananii*, one of the most spectacular alpine buttercups, which reaches its eastern limits on the Remarkables and Hector Mountains. Photo: Neill Simpson

