

Ruataniwha

protecting a natural remnant of the Mackenzie country



Hall's totara forest remnants flank the screes on the lower slopes of Ben Ohau. This is the largest native forest area in the Mackenzie Basin, the remainder being small pockets of beech forest.

TUCKED AWAY from the public gaze in the Mackenzie Basin are miles of rivers and their braided deltas. These areas contain rare wading birds like the black stilt, native tussock grasslands, small forest patches nestling in sheltered gullies and spectacular moraines, terraces and eroding loess cliffs – a legacy of the glaciers that scoured the basin only a few thousand years ago.

Ruataniwha is home to some of these curiosities. It is a tract of land whose future hangs in the balance. Covering the steep slopes at the southern end of the Ben Ohau Range behind Twizel it contains woodlands of Hall's totara, native shrublands and spectacular tall tussock grasslands. The sparse totara forest is one of the few remnants of the woodlands

Today the Mackenzie country evokes images of a broad and somewhat barren plain surrounded by distant mountains. But take a closer look and the real diversity of this massive intermontane basin reveals itself. Mike Harding examines one part that should be protected.

that once covered the drier slopes throughout South Canterbury and North Otago. The forest stretches across 500 hectares, in two main patches, above the shores of Lake Ohau over broad boulder slopes. It is crowned by the bluffs of the 1522-metre peak of Ben Ohau and flanked by native tall tussock grassland. All of this, including the basin of Gretas Stream to the north, lies within Ruataniwha station – a pastoral run of about 3,600 hectares presently managed by Landcorp on behalf of Electricorp.

SO SPECIAL is the Hall's totara stand, as a relic of some of the driest forest in the country, that the area was recommended for protection as a scientific reserve back in 1976. This plea, contained in a joint Lands and Survey

MIKE HARDING