

Department, Forest Service and DSIR report, noted that because of the vigorous regeneration of Hall's totara the area could become "an outstanding scientific and scenic attraction" and recommended that "an earnest effort should be made to secure this area". One of the key features of the proposed reserve is its diversity – lake margins, stable colluvial fans, scree, boulder slopes, outcrops and bluffs – a microcosm of the surrounding ranges. These varied habitats support an extensive range of plants and animals.

The lower slopes have an almost complete low forest cover of broadleaf, kowhai, totara and hardwood shrubs providing food for bellbirds, tuis and pigeons. Numerous common skink and the endemic Mackenzie Basin ground beetle, *Megadromus alternus*, earned the area the status of a Site of Special Wildlife Interest from the Wildlife Service in 1978. Kowhai and mountain ribbonwood are clustered higher up the slopes where, with the totara, they have escaped earlier fires. Shrubland surrounds most of the forested areas and contains a rich association of dry-climate species. At higher altitudes, the slopes are dominated by tall *Chionochloa rigida* grassland. Dwarf and large-leaved mistletoe (*Korthalsella clavata* and *Tupeia antarctica*) are unusually abundant. The slopes give a spectacular backdrop to Lake Ohau, an increasingly popular recreation and tourist area.

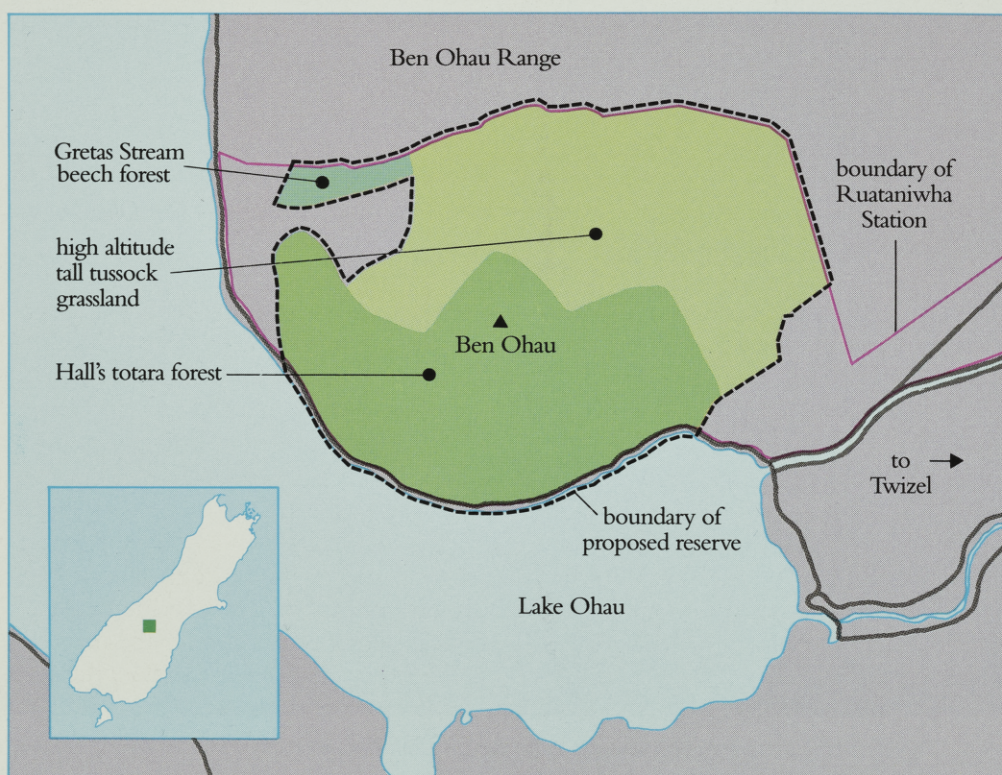
It is not surprising that the Protected Natural Areas survey team in 1984 endorsed and extended the earlier reserve proposal. In a wider survey, they also identified other important features on Ruataniwha station as priority areas for protection. The summit ridges and basins of the Ben Ohau Range contain some of the best remaining tall tussock (*Chionochloa rigida*) grasslands in the district. The PNA team identified an 800-hectare area in upper Gretas Stream, mostly on the adjoining Omahau run, as an important area for protection. In lower Gretas Stream an area of mountain beech forest, a remnant of a formerly more widespread forest, was also recommended for protection. It is an intact and reasonably well buffered forest containing abundant red-flowering mistletoe, *Peraxilla tetrapetala*.

As well as the key representative natural areas identified by the PNA team, there are other parts of the run worthy of protection. The moister south-facing slopes, above the totara remnants, have a healthy cover of tall and fescue tussock with a rich mix of intertussock herbs. In the drier parts of the Gretas Stream catchment an extensive metre-high *Chionochloa rigida* grassland occupies the stony slopes while red tussock occurs in the damp



MIKE HARDING

Hall's totara forest, with the snow-capped Barrier Range in the background.



Ruataniwha station and the vegetation communities in need of preservation.

hollows. Other features are shrublands with kowhai trees surrounding the lower bluffs, and native falcon. A major problem, however, is introduced hawkweed (*Hieracium* spp.) which grows between the tussocks and threatens the integrity of the grassland.

Land capability mapping identifies all the higher areas as unsuitable for grazing. This part of Ruataniwha station supports less than one sheep per hectare for only a few weeks in summer and it is debatable whether it can sustain grazing in the long term. In fact the most productive parts of the property for grazing are the lower slopes where oversowing and topdressing has been carried out, and the open flats between the range and Twizel where rabbit control has recently been so successful.

DESPITE RECOGNITION of the important conservation values of the area, formal protection for this scenic and scientific gem remains elusive. The proposal for the totara reserve has been lurking in government files for over 15 years, for so long in fact that its protection seemed a foregone conclusion. However, last year Forest and Bird learned that the whole of the property was to pass to Landcorp who could sell this natural gem on the open market, with covenants over conservation areas. The allocation of an important natural area with negligible production values to Landcorp instead of the Department of Conservation would be a scandal and contrary to the criteria for the disposal of surplus crown lands.

The problem has its roots in the 1960s