



▲ Looking into the upper reaches of Lake Roxburgh from near the top of Flat Top Hill where speargrass is at home.

◀ With the removal of grazing pressure, shrubs such as *Cassinia fulvida* are expected to spread and recolonise parts of the hilltops.



There's nothing quite like it."

In addition to the natural values, the area is of interest historically. On the eastern side, near the

shores of Lake Roxburgh, there are several rock shelters that were occupied by miners last century and as recently as the 1930s. One shelter has been converted into two rooms by the use of rock walling. The fact that many such gorge shelters have been drowned by hydro-electric development makes the examples surviving at Flat Top Hill all the more important.

In Central Otago there are precious few places like Flat Top Hill where people can freely roam and experience the dryland environment first-hand.

Central Otago has very few protected areas at relatively low altitude. Most of the reserves are on the tops of the ranges – the Bain Block on Old Man Range, for example, and the reserve on the summit of the North Dunstan Mountains.

Flat Top Hill has always been Crown land, leased for grazing. Its conservation value was recognised only in the past few

years. DoC bought the run for \$68,000, including payments of \$45,000 to the lessee and \$21,000 to Landcorp. A small amount went towards the settlement of outstanding pest rates.

For the time being the area will retain the status of stewardship land.

The site's proximity to State Highway 8 is bound to make it a popular attraction in the future and DoC has plans eventually to establish signposted walking tracks that will give visitors a look at a range of habitats. Views from the summit are spectacular, taking in the Old Man Range, Dunstan Mountains and Manuhērikia Valley.

And yet, notwithstanding the panoramas, Flat Top Hill is certain to attract, in spring at least, visitors intent on examining the ground on hands and knees, hoping for a peek at the miniature plants – a forget-me-not experience. ❖



Neville Peat is a writer based in Dunedin. His latest books are *The Falcon and the Lark* and *Stewart Island: the last refuge*.

recent visit to Flat Top Hill by a party of botanists, two of whom were from the North Island. They were delighted by their finds, which included several undescribed vascular plants.

Dr Geoff Rogers, a specialist in non-forest vegetation from Landcare Research in Rotorua, took a guess at what would happen to this landscape after 50 to 100 years of protection. He thought it would develop into a kanuka woodland with kowhai trees and shrubs such as *Cassinia*, *Olearia* and *Coprosma* mingling with the groves of kanuka.

On the higher ground, native short tussock (*Poa* and *Festuca*), together with *Cassinia* would probably dominate.

“THERE'S NO DOUBT,” says Brian Patrick, “that Flat Top Hill is nationally important in a conservation context.