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▲ The tussock grasslands contain a wide variety of rare plant ecosystems. This highly fertile flush zone in the northern Army country is the site of two rare plants – *Carex berggrenii* and *Ranunculus recens* (var). The site has been heavily degraded by horse trampling since this picture was taken in 1989, but is part of an area from which horses will hopefully be removed under the Wild Horse Management Plan.

ON THE eastern slopes of the Tongariro volcanoes below the treeline and on the high plateau immediately to the south-east, lies the last stronghold of the North Island's tussock grasslands, a tussock estate that once stretched north as far as the lakelands of Rotorua.

Travellers on the Desert Road, about Waiouru and in the Rangipo depression, get a good feel for these grasslands that today are very much the junior relation of the 3.4 million hectares of pastoral high country in the central and eastern South Island.

However, even a casual glance from the car window along the Desert Road will suggest dramatic variations in their condition. Dense stands of tall tussock contrast with areas where introduced pasture grasses have almost entirely replaced the tussocks, and other areas where thickets of native shrubs and trees, such as monoao, manuka, and kanuka, have replaced the previous tussock communities.

The changing status of North Island tussock grasslands has spurred quite a body of recent research that has unravelled insights into their origins, land use history, natural values and threats to their condition. It is a story of changing fortunes, mostly declining, but not all the result of insensitive, exploitative land use.