

## Painting Life in the Southern Beech Forest

**T**his issue's centrefold painting of nature in a southern beech forest is the work of artist Ronald Cometti who wants to save the trees from loggers.

'I was leading a tour group of Americans from the San Diego Museum of Natural History on the West Coast last year when the enormity of what New Zealand was doing to its beech forests struck me hard,' says the artist. 'I've given the talk about our Gondwana beech forests often before — about how Japan still has 67 percent of its forests while we have only 23 percent. I was speaking of its values when suddenly I got choked up and couldn't go on. It seemed such a waste, so sad really and I resolved to do something about it personally.'

As a nature artist, Ronald Cometti decided that his best form of protest would be to paint the values to be found in the forest. He and his wife returned to

the South Island, from their home at Orewa on the Hibiscus Coast north of Auckland, and spent three weeks in the forests of Maruia and Lewis Pass, absorbing the atmosphere and studying the shape and life of the red and silver beech forests. This, coupled with photographs, preliminary sketches, 'and photographs in my mind' provided the framework for the painting. Further research involved finding individual specimens and talking with experts, including Forest and Bird's field officer in Christchurch, Eugenie Sage. Altogether, the scene took three months to research and paint.

'On the way I discovered more of what we were losing and tried to incorporate these things into the painting,' says Ronald Cometti. 'The need of so many forest birds for nesting holes in old trees is an example.'

'I also tried to show a representative understorey of shrubs.



GORDON ELL, BUSH FILMS

Artist Ronald Cometti with his painting of nature in a southern beech forest featured on pages 24-25 of this journal. He painted it as a personal protest at forest destruction.

'I'd read in *Forest & Bird* once that tui had the role of opening up mistletoe flowers so the plants could be pollinated, so that went in,' he says. 'Also I'm told the beech forest is where five of our galaxids grow from "whitebait" into fish so they went into the stream along with koura (fresh-water crayfish) and a long-finned eel.'

'Blue duck were once common in these areas though not seen for many years, so I included them,' Ronald Cometti says. 'The forests now are strangely silent having also lost so many birds to introduced pests.'

Other things to find in the

painting (pages 24-25) are the sky-blue mushroom *Entoloma* and the violet pouch fungus *Thaxterogaster*; also the peripatus, an ancient creature found in similar form as a marine fossil dated 500 million years ago in British Columbia. Altogether, there are 54 species in the painting: a test for anyone interested in identification.

While Timberlands' plans to log beech forests in Westland have since been stopped by the Government, clear felling of beech continues on Maori-owned land exempted from the ban on exporting native wood chips in Southland.

## Nicky Hager Wins 'Old Blue'

**N**icky Hager, a key figure in the successful campaign to protect publicly-owned West Coast native forests from logging, has been given an 'Old Blue' award by Forest and Bird. The national president, Keith Chapple, says that Nicky Hager made an outstanding contribution to rainforest conservation over a 25-year period.

'In recent times Nicky has helped inspire a new generation of forest activists in Native Forest Action. They sat in the trees, wrote hundreds of letters and submissions, and helped develop a solution that meets conservationists' needs and those of the West Coast local communities.'

Announcing the award Keith Chapple said Nicky Hager had a

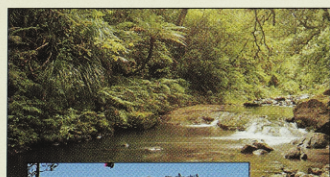
remarkable talent for ferreting out information other people wished to conceal.

'His book *Secrets and Lies* lifted the lid on a shady side of the public relations industry that sought to manipulate media and public opinion against conservation.'

Forest and Bird's annual council meeting also unanimously passed a motion welcoming the Government's decision to end the logging of the publicly owned West Coast forests.

Further Old Blue awards to branch activists are detailed in *Branching Out* on page 42. Old Blue was the female black robin whose reproductive efforts saved the species from extinction.

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