

people windsurfing, yachting, canoeing, and fishing disturb the waterfowl during the summer. Ironically it is the introduced willow trees weeping over the water that provide some privacy and support for the floating nests of the crested grebes.

Over the years, a long-time bach owner and Forest and Bird member Neville Adams, and his family, have cared for the nesting grebes, fencing and trapping the banks around their nest sites and teaching the bach community about the rare birds in their midst. (See *Forest & Bird*, November 1988).

The outstanding landscape, geological and wildlife values of the Hakatere Basin, its lakes, and the South Branch of the Ashburton have been recognised and described since 1867 when the pioneer nature conservationist T. H. Potts took up the Hakatere lease. But progress in achieving effective protection for the area has been glacially slow.

Lake Emma and part of the Harper Range have been surrendered because of freeholding. They, and some of the Arrowsmith Range, are now conservation land. Lake Heron and the Maori Lakes are nature reserves, Lake Clearwater is a wildlife refuge and some of the higher-altitude terrain is 'retired' from grazing. That is about all of the Hakatere Basin and Ashburton lakes landscape that has any protection. The rest is pastoral lease land — leased long term from the Crown for farming.

The Department of Conservation's Canterbury Conservation Management Strategy (2000) notes that the Ashburton Lakes merit a water conservation order but, frightened by likely opposition from the farming community and the prospect of a political hot potato, the Department has done nothing to progress an application.

Erewhon and Mesopotamia stations in the upper Rangitata — their names are the stuff of legends — are just two of the larger pastoral leases in the area. They, and a handful more around the Hakatere basin, graze vast domains stretching from the valley floor to the mountain tops.

While farming has preserved the largely unbuilt and expansive nature of the basin, decades of grazing, oversowing and top dressing continue to change and degrade the indigenous vegetation.

'Improved pasture' to a farmer means grassland that, through fertilizing and over-sowing with palatable exotic grasses and clovers, will support higher numbers

of stock and provide better monetary returns. Inevitably 'improving' the pasture is at the expense of its natural character, native tussock communities and particularly, their invertebrates. Despite more than a century of grazing, however, the landscape retains a strong natural and indigenous character, partly because of the tenacity of the native species.

Grassland covers the basin. In upland areas tall snow tussock and hard tussock grow with snowberry and the spiky *Aciphylla* or Spaniard. Lower down, introduced pasture species like browntop mingle with indigenous short tussock, mountain daisies and gentians. In wetter areas, red tussock and sedges grow. Around the margins of some of the lakes and kettlehole tarns grows a special turf community with a rich diversity of tiny, and sometimes rare, plants. There is scarcely any beech or other forest, a legacy of glaciation and early Maori burning.

Wetlands are vulnerable to grazing and draining. While Lake Emma and the Maori Lakes are fenced and protected from stock, other wet places are drained or trampled and pugged by cattle so that the wetlands dry out and shrink. This encourages exotic grasses and weeds to displace the red tussocks, the icons of the natural wetlands.

To admire the red tussock wetland of the basin — and in the teeth of a nor'wester — we battled our way around the shore of Lake Clearwater. The nor'wester is yet another element in this wild landscape, and, like a living force, it was making the grasses stream and the white-capped waves pound upon the shore. We were stunned by the violence of the wind. Neville smiled, 'This isn't blowing,' he said. 'If it was really blowing, you wouldn't be standing up!'

Such a powerful landscape inspires a reciprocal powerful love by the people of the high country, be they runholders, fishers, or Forest and Bird members. Ashburton Forest and Bird Branch seeks better protection for the landscape they love and this is what they want:

1. A water conservation order over all 12 Ashburton Lakes and the streams that flow into them, and on the South Branch of the Ashburton River to well below the Ashburton Gorge. This would allow the existing water takes to continue but would prohibit any more water abstractions or any dams on the river.

2. A weed control plan involving runholders, councils and conservation



The secretive marsh crane.



New Zealand scaup at its nest.



The threatened falcon, karearea.



Australasian crested grebe.

groups that would target weeds everywhere — on pastoral lease land, on roadsides and on the river beds.

3. Better protection for vulnerable native species, communities and landscapes through the tenure review process.

ANN GRAEME is the co-ordinator of Forest and Bird's Kiwi Conservation Club.

DON GEDDES is a committee member of Ashburton Forest and Bird.

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