



*A string of weekend cottages, known in the north as bachs, perch among the volcanic boulders around the coast of Rangitoto. Built during the 1920s and 1930s, the bachs are on Crown land and several efforts have been made since then to remove them. At one point leases were to die with their owners. In 1990, leases of land for some 34 bachs were renewed by the Department of Conservation, despite moves at the time against more than 20,000 similar arrangements on Crown reserves throughout New Zealand. Now a special trust has been set up to restore some bachs, with AMP putting up \$60,000 for the next three years. Despite the extraordinary natural values of the island, its human aspect is receiving heritage status too.*

picnicked here, in 1840, vast areas were still raw rock. Early photographs depict a rubblefield of broken basalt with only occasional trees. The more recent skin of spreading pohutukawa is still underlain with raw rock, and the closer view shows many bare areas between the trees.

The lava cone of the island is still growing its first cloak of plants. Rangitoto is so young there hasn't been time for much soil to form. Instead plants largely grow in the humus formed from leaves of the pioneer plants.

These include the most primitive: blooms

of algae which appear purply-white on the open rockfields. The natural succession of plants is quicker than that suggests, however. Pohutukawa has established widely, thus creating shade under which more tender plants can grow. Botanists have identified the most successful of these pohutukawa as a local strain, a mix of pohutukawa and its cousin the northern rata. Gradually the adjacent colonies of trees are merging to create a broader forest.

The pohutukawa have extremely long roots reaching far underground to tap into subterranean water. A fire can burn down

through these roots for weeks. There is no running water on the island but it is said to contain a miniscus of water underground — enough to provoke the suggestion at one stage that it should be tapped for a city supply.

The trees and shrubs of the island, not surprisingly, have hard, hairy leaves or tiny needles to protect them from a harsh environment. The weather is often wet, with strong salty winds, or hot and dessicating.

The common shrubs are kanuka and manuka, the pin-leaved mingimingi, and the shining-leaved robust coprosma. Plants that more usually grow in the crowns of forest trees grow here among the rocks; such as the shining broad-leaved griselinia or puka, the hairy Kirk's tree daisy, northern rata vines, and narrow-leaved astelia which can form a luxuriant silver ground cover.

Despite the rugged terrain, and daytime temperatures which may reach 50 degrees Celsius on the open rockfields, the most delicate plants can grow, but only in the shade. There are some 100 recorded species of mosses and liverworts, more usually lovers of damp places. There are more than 40 species of ferns; and some 20 different native orchids which find a niche in the shade, some on the trunks of trees, others growing from pockets of humus. A visit in late spring can provide a happy field of search for plant enthusiasts particularly in areas adjacent to the wharves.

A less pleasant sight for the purists are 'garden escapes' and other weeds, more than



*Black-backed gulls nest in colonies on the open rocks from October till December. The birds feed on the suburban mainland of Auckland but many fly back to roost on Rangitoto at night.*