



GILBERT VAN REENEN, CLEAN GREEN IMAGES

Beech forest and tussock grasslands are among the habitats protected.

and yellow-crowned parakeet, with kea and rock wren at higher altitudes.

Nonetheless, according to Dr McSweeney, the forest margins have been badly damaged by cattle and grazing, with a distinct absence of young beech trees and undergrowth. There is also a lack of mistletoe up to two metres above the ground, again because of cattle which, like possums, love eating the species with its brilliant red flowers and succulent leaves. But with the removal of cattle this year, sheep within five years, and with few deer or rabbits, there should be rapid regeneration of forest margins over time.

Birchwood and the Ahuriri Valley are important for other ecological reasons too. Professor Alan Mark, an expert on tussock land and alpine landscapes and also a member of the Forest and Bird national executive, extols the area as 'highly significant' because of its unbroken spectrum of high-country plant species and habitat, preserved from valley floor to mountain top. The Ahuriri is the closest thing we have to an untouched pre-European alpine ecosystem in New Zealand.

The valley floor is a mixture of short tussock, exotic grasses, mosses and lichens including the Mackenzie Basin's only low-altitude area of hard tussock *Festuca mathewsii*, with matagouri and other shrub species on shingle fans. Extensive and impressive swathes of mountain and silver beech forest meet the park-like valley floor on the western side in the lower Ahuriri, and cover both eastern and western slopes above the confluence of Watson's Stream in the upper valley. Fire has destroyed much of the beech from the eastern slopes below

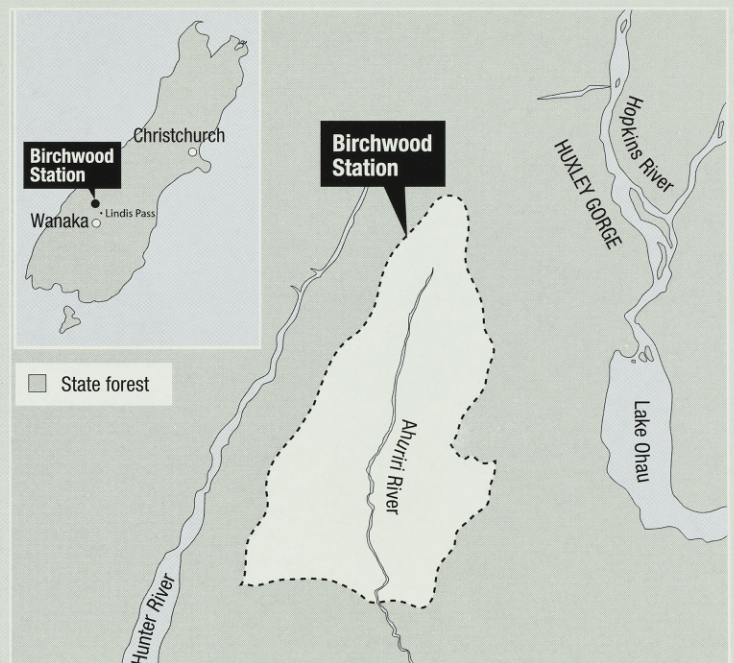
Watson's Stream. The same has happened in the adjoining upper Dingle Burn Valley, also a part of the purchase, where burnt logs can still be seen in the grassland on the eastern slopes.

In other areas there is a diverse range of natural subalpine shrublands, above the bushline, and in those places inaccessible to stock, or where forest cover has been destroyed by fire. The threatened *Pittosporum patulum* has been identified in the Dingle Burn, Canyon Creek and Hodgkinson Creek. Above the bushline tall tussock and snow tussock dominate, sometimes reaching down to the valley floor, but again interspersed with scattered shrubs such as *Dracophyllum longifolium*. Surveys have shown that slim-leaved snow tussock has all but disappeared in some areas because of grazing. In the high alpine areas cushion vegetation is found along with a range of other hardy species.

The Ahuriri also contains three species of skink (spotted, McCann's, and common) and two geckos (common and jewelled) and a range of invertebrates including eight species of butterflies. The river is a nationally important fishery for brown and rainbow trout, in a stunning high country landscape. Native fish recorded include several species of galaxias and upland bully.

The Director-General of the Department of Conservation, Hugh Logan, a mountaineer himself, says the Ahuriri area is a superb addition to public conservation land adjacent to the Ohau Conservation Area. This purchase, along with adjacent land obtained through the process of tenure review means there will be an additional 82,665 hectares of contiguous public recreational land in this area. Along with the Ohau Conservation Area, this points to the eventual formation of a new High Country Conservation Park.

'The Birchwood purchase is a wonderful conservation asset for New Zealand and one of the great recreational areas in the South Island,' enthuses Hugh Logan. 'It has a superb range of opportunities, from short walks, to demanding alpine ascents, to wonderful fishing, and it's all so accessible. On a fine day it's quite superb; you've got mountains, big glaciers, and



beech forests, with a magnificent river running through, and five accessible huts. There was definitely overseas interest in this property, but in their hearts the Williamsons wanted it to stay in New Zealand.

'We're now in a transition phase and have got to take it step by step — you can't just go from one regime to another on a property like Birchwood which has been farmed for 125 years,' he says. 'We're committed to keeping it weed free and we'll do that, but the Department of Conservation has to watch how the place changes, and adapt to those changes as they come about.'

— AINSLIE TALBOT prepared this article on behalf of the Nature Heritage Fund. See more of GILBERT VAN REENEN'S work on the website www.cleangreen.co.nz