Friends of Tawa Bush Reserves Inc.

February 2023 Newsletter

FOTBR website: https://tawabush.org.nz

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Monthly working bees: 2nd Sunday and 4th Tuesday

- **Coordinator Sunday:** Richard Herbert: herbert.r@xtra.co.nz
- **Coordinator Tuesday:** Andrew Liley: acfhliley@gmail.com

1. Yellow flowered pōhutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa)*

Gk. 'metra' = heartwood, 'sideron' = iron, while 'excelsa' = high or lofty. Many pōhutukawa trees, called the 'New Zealand Christmas tree', still adorn Tawa streets with their blazing red blooms. However, at times yellow-flowered pōhutukawas feature as a colour variant. A large tree on Main Road north of the shopping area is a good example and it flowered in December 2022.

Yellow-flowered pōhutukawa.

Yellow-flowered pōhutukawa on Main Road.

The pōhutukawa has a natural distribution in the coastal regions of the North Island, north of a line stretching from New Plymouth to Gisborne. Many of the pōhutukawa trees in the Wellington region have been cultivated.

Usual red pōhutukawa flowers.

2. Northern rātā (*Metrosideros robusta)*

robusta (L) = solid or firm. The pōhutukawa is closely related to the northern rātā, (*Metrosideros robusta)* which once dominated the Tawa lowland bush region but was virtually wiped out from defoliation due to extensive possum damage.

In January 1859, **Friedrich Krull**, an early settler, on his arrival by boat in the Wellington harbour, aptly described northern rātā trees in the then untouched native bush of the harbour: …. *the bush-clad hills have thousands of carmine-coloured blossoms that glisten between the green leaves and resemble myrtles."* ('Myrtles' is the name for the Family Myrtaceae, which includes rātās).

Northern rātā flowers.

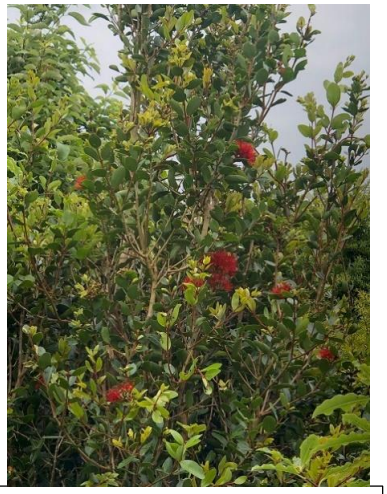
Pōhutukawa.

Northern rātā trees have glossy leaves on both surfaces, with a distinct notch at the tips. Pōhutukawa trees have larger, pointed leaves with a distinct furry underside. Leaves are also slightly rolled at the edges.

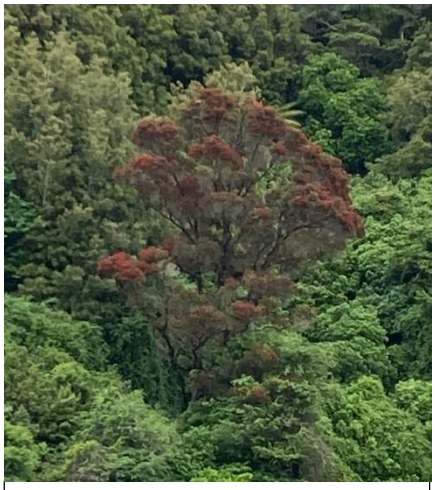
A few northern rātā trees are still present in the Tawa reserves with some seen flowering during summer. This includes trees at the edge of Brasenose Park, at the south end of Woodburn Reserve, in St Annes Reserve, and at the northern end of Wadham Grove Reserve.

Northern rātā.

Northern rātā in St Annes Reserve, viewed from the end of the cul de



Young northern rātā at the edge of Brasenose Park. (Planted by Norm Robertson about 12 years ago).



Huge northern rātā at the south end of Woodburn Reserve.

3. WCC summer guided walks in Redwood Bush

Over the summer, Redwood Bush was chosen by WCC as one of the locations for public summer walks in the Wellington area. Representing FOTBR, **John Burnet**, **Andrew Liley** and **Gil Roper** helped lead three walks that included the signed botanical walk from Achilles Close to Peterhouse Street. All participants were from beyond Tawa and it was their first time in Redwood Bush.

Many commented: *What a privilege you have in Tawa with mature native bush in such close proximity.* Also*: What well preserved and carefully maintained bush.* And: *The new botanical signage is so informative.*

4. Kākāpō numbers increase with a mast season of rimu fruit

Kākāpō live on three protected NZ islands:

- Codfish Island/Whenua Hou, a 1,396 ha nature reserve, 3km west of Stewart Island/Rakiura.
- Te Hauturu-o-Toi/Little Barrier Island, a 3,083 ha nature reserve, 80 km north-east of Auckland.
- Anchor Island, 1,140 ha in Tamatea/Dusky Sound, southwest Fiordland.

When 'Kākāpō Recovery' first began in 1995, there were 51 known kākāpō. However, with 55 chicks fledging from the 2021/22 breeding season, as at December 2022, there are now 252 known kākāpō! This bumper breeding season is attributed to the abundance of rimu fruit.

Source: Wikipedia

Kākāpō will only breed if 8% or more rimu tips bear fruit. The higher the percentage, the more likely females will be receptive to breeding. In June 2021, conditions were good, with 14% - 31% of rimu tips bearing fruit.

5. FOTBR nursery developments

Funding has been obtained to establish an additional shade-house in the FOTBR nursery. The existing space has reached capacity and the new facility will enable more native trees to be grown for eventual planting out in reserves. Further, to obtain an alternative water supply for the nursery's irrigation system, Redwood School has kindly donated their unused 25,000 litre water tank. The tank's present location behind the school hall is proving to be a challenge. Further thought and work needs to be done before it can be extracted and transferred to the new site.

6. Expansion of trapping pests

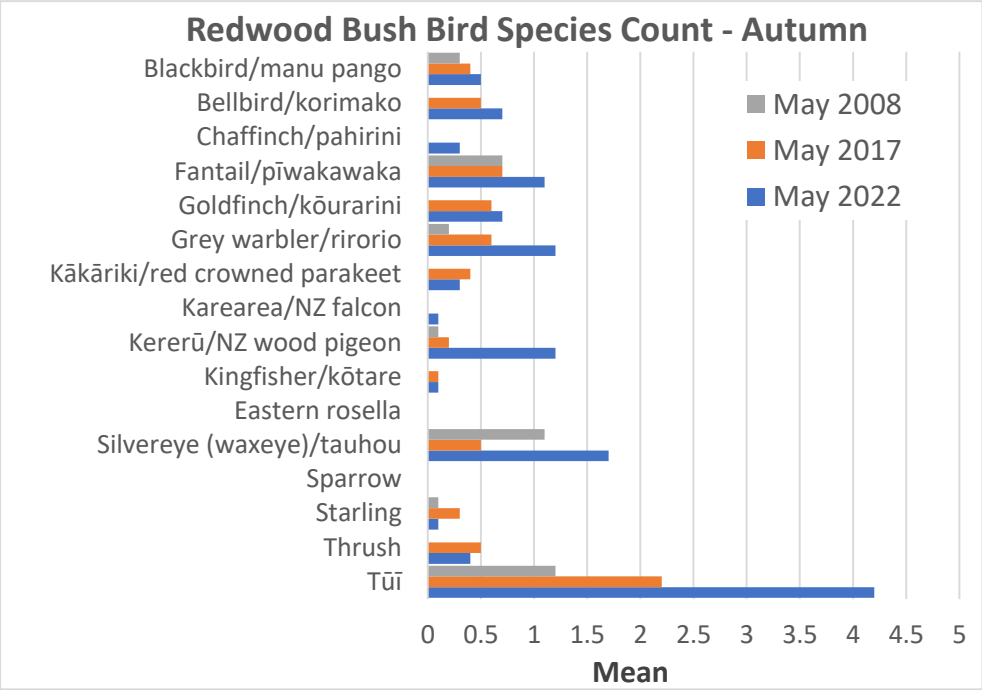
Waterways are known pathways for pests such as rats. As an expansion of the reserve trapping already done by FOTBR since the beginning of this year, 30 Victor traps have been deployed in reserves close to the vicinity of the Porirua Stream. These locations include from Willowbank Reserve to Collins Ave in Linden. In time, this trapping will expand to Taylor Park, Grasslees Reserve, Duncan Park and eventually Linden Park. FOTBR is hopeful that these new traps will make a difference in reducing the rat numbers. The next trap intensification initiative will be in the Wilf Mexted Reserve where lizards, including skinks and geckos will benefit from added protection.

7. Resurgence of kererū numbers in Tawa reserves

Seeds from many native trees rely on kererū for dispersal. With the extinction the huia and moa, kererū are the only native birds with a wide enough mouth to swallow large fruit. These include fruit of karaka, pūriri, taraire and tawa. The North Island kokako can also consume these fruit but their natural distribution does not reach south to the Wellington area.

In some bush areas of New Zealand where kererū have declined, scientists have found that the regeneration of some native tree species fell up to 84% in two years. This is not the case in the Tawa reserves, where kererū numbers have increased markedly. For Redwood Bush, this is evident in the following graph, but is also applicable to other bird species. The recent increase is the result of effective pest control, and the resurgence of native tree growth, with more seeds and fruit available from trees such as tawa and pigeonwood (porokaiwhiri).

Photo: Paul Bouda.



Source: Roper G, 2022. *Redwood Bush, Tawa*. Friends of Tawa Bush Reserves.

9. Knowing the native trees in the Tawa reserves

Tī kōuka, cabbage tree, *Cordyline australis*

Small stands of this tall, endemic tree lily, with its corky bark and long sword-like leaves are present at the perimeters of many Tawa native bush reserves. They are also common throughout farmland, open areas, wetlands, and scrubland in the North and South Islands.

Towards the end of 2022 in early summer, tī kōuka has been especially conspicuous because of the abundance of white, sweetly scented flowers. It is often said: *prolific flowering of tī kōuka means that a dry summer follows*. The clusters of white to bluish fruit that subsequently develop are a source of food for birds such as korimako, tūī and kererū.

i. Source of names:

Cordyline is from the Gk. kordyle, meaning 'club' and is the underground 'stem', or often called a 'taproot' while ***australis*** is from Latin, meaning 'southern'.

The name **cabbage tree** is attributed to James Cook and early European settlers in New Zealand. Young leaves were used as a substitute for cabbage. From then on, the name 'cabbage tree' continued to be used.

Tī kōuka can refer to the tender 'leaf hearts' consumed both raw and cooked. Peeling away the outer leaves at the top, exposes the tender white part, which looks like a leek and 'tastes a bit like cabbage'.

ii. Uses of tī kōuka

A very versatile tree, Māori used tī kōuka for food, where the root, stem and leaves were all a good source of sugar and starch. The strong leaf fibres were woven into kete (baskets) and used for collecting and storing food and cooking mats, as well as for kupenga (fishing lines), paraerae (sandals), kakahū (cloaks) and pake (waterproof rain capes).

The 'corky' bark on the trunk of cabbage trees is fire-resistant and early European settlers used it to line chimneys of simple houses. The dried leaves also made useful kindling and they brewed beer from the root.

Corky bark of cabbage tree trunk.

iii. Disease

In the 1980s, a disease began to kill off some cabbage trees. After research, scientists determined that it was caused by a parasitic organism called a phytoplasma, which was likely to have spread by a tiny sap-sucking insect. Although the decline affected cabbage trees in farmland and open areas, trees in natural forest areas continue to do well.

White, sweetly scented flowers of tī kōuka in early summer.

Green unripe fruit of tī kōuka in late summer.

iv. What causes the holes in the leaves?

Damage to cabbage tree

Holes in leaves are caused by endemic looper caterpillars of the cabbage tree moth: *Epiphryne verriculata.* The caterpillars chew holes at night. The moths rest on the dead leaves with their wings aligned with the veins, often making them difficult to see.

Gil Roper, Editor
FOTBR Committee