

## I.P.P.S. Stewart Island Field Trip<sup>©</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

This trip was organised by the New Zealand branch of the I.P.P.S., with 40 people attending from throughout New Zealand, from Friday, 20 Feb. to Monday, 23 Feb. 2004.

As people arrived in Invercargill, they assembled at midday on Friday at Diack's Nursery, from where they went to visit a garden of threatened plants managed by Brian and Chris Rance at Otatara. The Rances have for many years been collecting plants which are vulnerable in the wild, and also run a community nursery where individuals and interest groups can come along and propagate their own plants for revegetating their land. The group then visited the Invercargill City Council Nursery to look at plants collected from the sub Antarctic Islands 12 months ago on an I.P.P.S. field trip to Auckland and Campbell Islands. At this stage, the weather was sufficiently stormy for people to start wondering if they would be able to make the crossing to Stewart Island but, at the departure terminal in Bluff, it became evident that nothing short of a hurricane would stop the Foveaux Express from travelling that day. After a very interesting crossing, Stewart Island was a welcome port in a storm.

### THE ISLAND

Stewart Island, a place lost in time, now on the verge of becoming a world-renowned national park, is home to about 400 people. Rakiura National Park on Stewart Island is the 14th of New Zealand's national parks, and was officially gazetted on 28 Feb. 2002 and opened on 9 March 2002. The park covers about 157,000 ha and makes up about 85% of the island. Although the island lies only 30 km south-west of Bluff, between latitudes 46 and 47° south, it could well be in another part of the world. The highest peak is in the north, Mt. Anglem/Hananui, at 980 m. The island is about 75 km long and up to 45 km wide.

The little community of 400 or so permanent residents in the only settlement, Oban in Halfmoon Bay, has a school, a quaint hotel, two small churches overlooking the harbour, good shops for basic necessities, a well-equipped visitor centre, and a number of tourist services. Many residents are direct descendants of the whalers and early Rakiura Maori, with combined family histories reaching back almost 200 years.

Having only 25 km of roads, Stewart Island is a paradise for hikers and trampers with 254 km of walking tracks, all of which can be accessed from Oban. The tracks range from undemanding short walks around the township area to remote-experience tramping tracks that require fitness, stamina, and a large degree of self-reliance.

The northern half of the island is covered by podocarp and hardwood forest, featuring New Zealand's southernmost tall trees: rimu (*Dacrydium* sp.), kahikatea [*Dacrycarpus dacrydioides* (syn. *Podocarpus dacrydioids*)], and totara (*P. hallii*). The remaining areas of the island feature shrubland or low forest, grassland, wetland, alpine herbfield/cushionfield, and coastal or duneland communities.

Rakiura is the Maori name for Stewart Island. It is translated as "The Land of Glowing Skies" and probably refers as much to the nighttime displays of Aurora Australis (the Southern Lights) as to the sunsets.

On Saturday the group, guided by local conservation advocate and part team leader for the Department of Conservation (DOC) on Stewart Island, Ron Tindall, departed the bay on a local boat, heading for a day trip to climb Prysee Peak. We landed by dinghy and climbed to 1000 ft going from coastal scrub forest to alpine scrubland.

Despite grazing animals (white-tailed and red deer), cats, and rats introduced in the early 1900s, together with Australian brush tailed possums that have had an impact on the forest, shrublands, herbfields, and native fauna, the vegetation was varied with a good representation of species, and in places dominated by ancient southern rata (*Metrosideros umbellata*). The coolness of the day combined with the persistent rain encouraged the group to walk slightly faster than usual, despite extremely slippery conditions. After a warm-up and a cup of tea on the boat, the group then headed back to Halfmoon Bay and their accommodation to dry out prior to dinner and networking in the local hotel.

Sunday saw slightly better weather and the group went to Ulva Island just out from Halfmoon Bay, which is a pest-free open sanctuary. Ulva Island is 3.5 km long, located in Paterson Inlet off Stewart Island, and is made up of 259 ha of scenic reserve and 7.6 ha of private land. As the result of an extensive eradication programme, the island was declared rat-free in 1997, and South Island saddlebacks were released there in 2000. Walking tracks, toilets, shelters, and information signs have been put in place for the use of visitors to the island. Native birds seen during these walks include parakeet or kakariki, native wood pigeon or kereru, tui, bellbird or korimako, tomtit or miromiro, weka, robin or kakaruai, fernbird or mata, saddleback, and South Island kaka. The island's kiwi population is also special. Known now as southern tokoeka, the Stewart Island kiwi behaves rather differently from kiwi in other parts of New Zealand. They maintain family groups, for example, and some birds feed during daylight hours. Stewart Island offers perhaps the best opportunity anywhere in New Zealand for viewing kiwi in the wild. The group then overnighted back in Halfmoon Bay and left for Bluff at 8.00 AM on Monday.

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