

The natural vegetation of Orton Bradley Park

The story of indigenous vegetation in Orton Bradley Park mirrors that of Banks Peninsula as a whole.

If you could be transported 1000 years back in time, you would find almost the entire peninsula clothed in tall podocarp/hardwood forest. The arrival of humans changed all that.

Nearly all of the forest around Lyttelton harbour was repeatedly burned by Polynesian settlers. In the mid 1800s, the first European settlers at Charteris Bay encountered a landscape of tussock, bracken, flax, scrubland and second growth forest.

As elsewhere on Banks Peninsula, European settlers cleared most indigenous vegetation in this valley, and converted it to

pasture. Original forest fragments persisted only in some of the gullies.



Over the last century, indigenous forest has been making a comeback. Hardwood forest, especially kanuka, has slowly expanded its range, particularly in the gullies.

The Orton Bradley Park Board is encouraging the natural regeneration cycle in the forested areas. This may one day result in the return of tall podocarp forests in the park, and habitats for a greater range of plant and animal species.

The vegetation



Lancewood (From Wild Plants of Mount Cook National Park by Hugh Wilson)

Only a handful of the original tall podocarp trees remain in the forest remnants. These conifers have long straight trunks and their timber was sought after by European settlers. What remains are mostly totara, and the occasional matai and kahikatea.

There is however a wide range of smaller hardwood tree species. Some of the most interesting are:

- **Kanuka.** With brushes of dull green aromatic foliage and trunks with papery bark flaking off, this is the most common tree here, occurring in large groves.
- **Lancewood (horoeka).** You can instantly recognise the young plants

by their striking leaves: very narrow and up to half a metre long, angling down from the stem. The adult form of this plant is so different it was originally thought to be a different species!

- **Kowhai.** In spring, these much-beloved trees are covered in masses of drooping yellow flowers. They are a favoured source of food for nectar-feeding birds such as bellbirds.
- **Fuchsia (kotukutuku).** This native species is the largest fuchsia in the world and is recognisable by its gnarled trunk and reddish, peeling, papery bark. The small, red, distinctive fuchsia flowers hang from the branchlets in spring.

The wealth of small hardwood trees here includes mahoe, five-finger, kohuhu, coprosma, matipo, putaputaweta, broadleaf, lowland ribbonwood and lacebark. Several species reaching their southernmost limit on Banks Peninsula are found in the park. These include akeake, kawakawa, titoki and

pigeonwood. Native climbers here include clematis, passionvine and muehlenbeckia. If you are careless, you may find yourself picking barbed bush lawyer off your clothes.



Divaricating coprosma

In the indigenous forest remnants and to a lesser extent on the valley walk to Big Rock, you will see various species of shrubs with tangling, interlacing branches and small leaves. These are known as divaricating shrubs. Scientists are divided over whether this very distinctive New Zealand growth form is an adaptation to a cold windy climate during the ice ages, or to browsing by moas.

Birds of Orton Bradley Park

As with the rest of Banks Peninsula, the forests in this valley once rang with the calls of a multitude of birds. Many of these species have long since become extinct, or have disappeared from the peninsula.

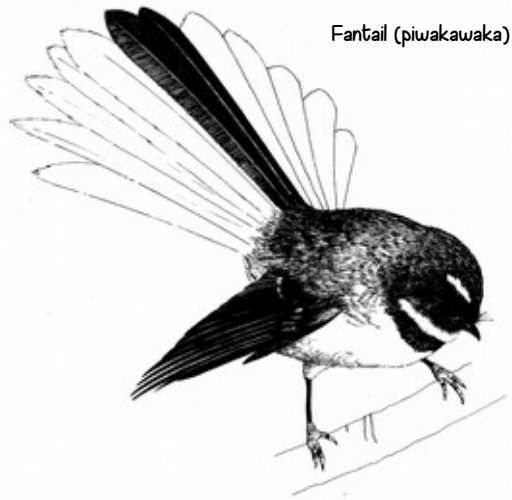
However the range of habitats in the park still supports a wide range of birds, both native and introduced. Many of New

Zealand's native birds can be seen and heard in the indigenous forest fragments and in the plantations.

Some of the most common birds are introduced species, and they are found in both open and forest habitats **here**.

Among the most common are house sparrows, dunnocks, blackbirds, thrushes, starlings, yellowhammers,

magpies and several species of **finch**.
The rare **cirl bunting** may also be seen.



Fantail (piwakawaka)

Around the homestead and in bush pockets, visitors are often startled by the sudden rush of wings as the **kereru (wood pigeon)** takes flight in the forest canopy. Kereru mostly feed on the fruits of native and introduced trees, and play a major role in the seed dispersal of many species, particularly those with large seeds. They also eat leaves and flowers of a range of species, and can often be seen on Banks Peninsula feeding on the introduced tree lucerne.

The most commonly seen of the small native forest birds are the **fantail (piwakawaka)**, which can often be seen flitting around low branches, and the **silveryeye (tauhou)**, so named for the distinctive whitish ring around their eyes. You will usually hear the melodic call of the **bellbird (korimako)** before you see the olive green bird in the canopy. The continuous trill of the **grey warbler (riroriro)** will accompany anyone walking the bush tracks. In spring, listen out for the repetitive 'coo-ee' of the **shining cuckoo (pipiwharauoa)**, back from over-wintering in Solomon Islands. These birds lay their eggs in the nests of **grey warblers**.

In open areas, welcome **swallows** fly low and fast, darting erratically to catch flying insects on the wing. In the lower paddocks of the park, you may see **white-faced herons**, **spur-winged plovers** and pairs of **paradise ducks** (the female has the white head, the male the black head). Look out too for **kingfishers (kotare)** perched on trees and poles. **California quail** can sometimes be seen near the farm buildings. **Pheasants** are uncommon but you may be lucky to see one.



Bellbird (korimako) feeding on kowhai
(by Derek Onley from *A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand*)