

The West Coast is the rata capital of New Zealand. In the North, from the Heaphy Track to Greymouth, northern rata often dominates the forest landscape, mainly near the coast and on limestone faces. Huge trees festooned with climbing and perching plants billow above the forest canopy.

On higher ground southern rata is scattered on bluffs and through beech forest.

South of Hokitika in the valleys and slopes of the beech-free main divide, southern rata becomes a dominant canopy tree reaching high into the Alps.

And, in the far South, it forms emergent giants on the flood plains, or gnarled groups around the precipitous shores of the fiords.

This Crimson Trail is a journey from the north to south on the West coast of New Zealand's South Island. As you travel some 500 kilometres you will see significant glaciers, wild coastline and large tracts of primeval forest.



Rata at Otira, photo courtesy of Alyson Bone

Let's explore the West Coast Crimson Trail

1. Kohaihai Bluff

For several kilometres before you reach the Heaphy Track car park you can see young rata emerging through coastal forest along the road side. Park in the car park and walk the first part of the track across the swing-bridge to the nikau forest. Northern rata are a feature of the whole landscape.

When crossing the flood plain of the Karamea River, note the large old rata trees scattered in the farmland.

2. Karamea

From the crest of the bluff road (420 metres) to the base at Tobbins Creek, magnificent northern rata dominate the forest. Park at the sign 'Large matai tree' and walk the short track to the tree which bears a rata showing the characteristic roots around its host. Just down the road are magnificent specimens of rata festooned with climbers, epiphytes and even small trees. At Tobbins Creek, park and walk along the road to view the mature podocarp forest on the slope above, some of them with protruding rata. These trees are the future habitat for northern rata.



Northern rata

Northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) is one of New Zealand's tallest flowering trees and grows from Hokitika northwards. It usually begins life as an epiphyte (perching plant) high in the forest's canopy. As its roots descend to the ground, the rata smothers its host. Grows to 25m or more in height with a trunk up to 2.5m in diameter. Prefers warm moist areas such as north-west Nelson and Northland. Northern rata grows from sea level to a maximum of 900m above sea level.



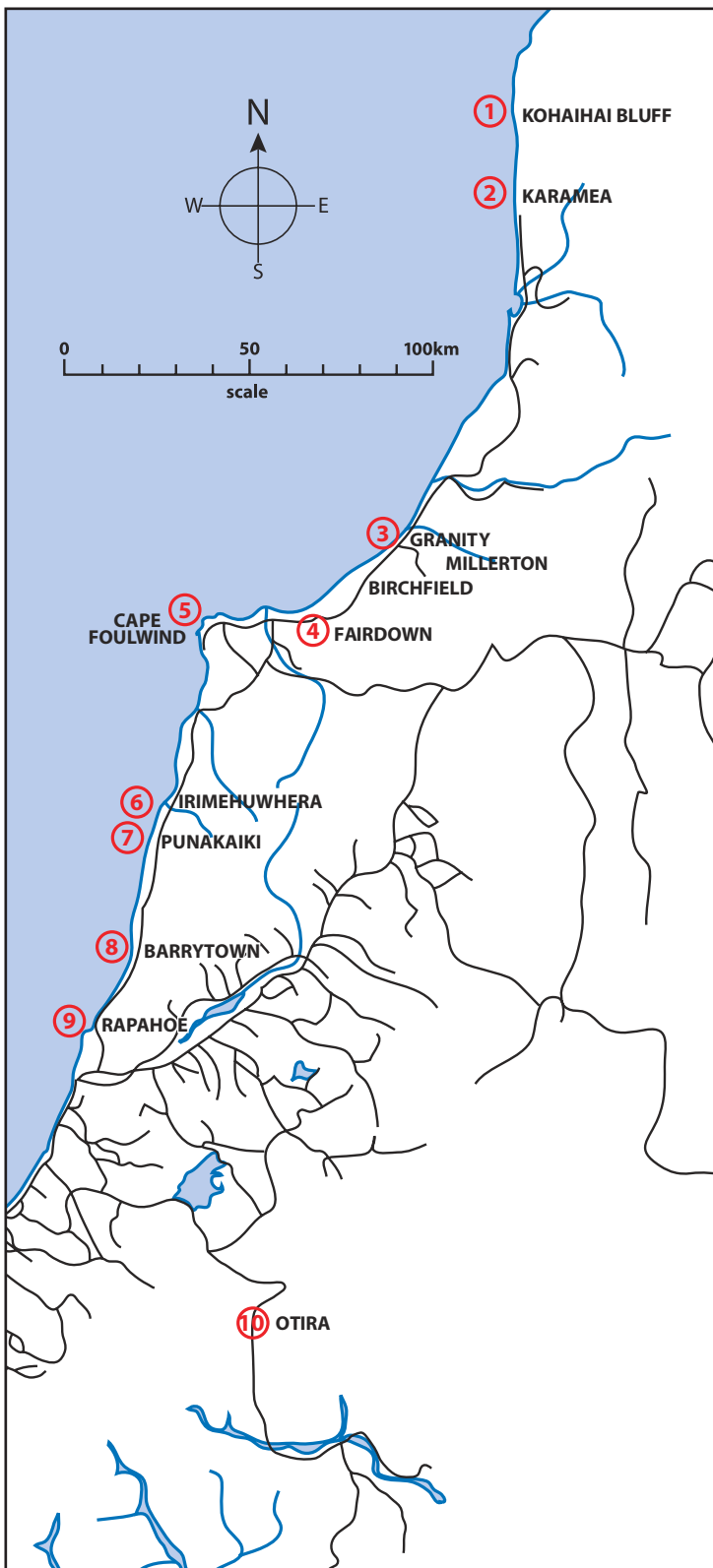
Southern rata

Southern rata (*Metrosideros umbellata*) is the most widespread rata, growing throughout New Zealand as well as in the sub-antarctic Auckland Islands. It grows particularly well along the South Island's West Coast. Grows to 15m high - sometimes more - with a trunk up to 1m in diameter. Best suited to South Island and cooler, high rainfall regions. Occurs from sea level to 760m.



Parkinson's rata

Parkinson's rata (*Metrosideros parkinsonii*) is an uncommon sprawling shrub found in the high altitude forests of northern Westland. Four other species of vine rata occur on the West Coast, including a red-flowered species (*M. fulgens*) often easily seen around the bush edge because its flowering season is from April to October. Three white-flowered species occur, two forming tall lianes (*M. colensoi*) mainly on limestone, (*M. diffusa*) in the wet lowland forests, and (*M. perforata*) that forms wind-shaped thickets on coastal slopes.



West Coast Crimson Trail (continued)

3. Millerton Incline Walkway

Take the Stockton Road from Granite, and carefully drive two kilometres to the walkway car park, noting on the way the northern rata clinging to the bluffs. At the walkway both northern rata (mostly in gullies; small rounded leaves) and southern rata (mostly on open slopes; sharply pointed leaves) occur together, as well as hybrids between these species (variably shaped; usually larger leaves). Back on the main road, you'll see the northern rata on the coastal scarps behind Granite and Birchfield.

4. Whareatea (Fairdown) Beach

Just before the rail crossing south of Waimangaroa, take Beach Road to the coast, park and, at low tide, take the one kilometre walk along the beach toward the Whareatea River mouth. The trunks of many once buried trees, including northern rata, are scattered along the beach, forming awesome wooden sculptures. Where the main road emerges from the Buller Gorge, magnificent rata line the road and are scattered in farmland.

5. Cape Foulwind

Ten kilometres west of Westport is the Tauranga Bay car park. From here you can take the walkway to the seal colony lookout. Once, northern rata forest painted this landscape red in summer, and with the local community, Project Crimson and the Department of Conservation have done a lot of work to restore this coast to its former glory.

6. Irimahuwhero

North of Punakaiki there is a car park and an interpretation platform to view Irimahuwhero, place of the 'hanging red hair'. Here the northern rata trees cling to the vertical cliffs above. Former travellers were forced to climb the cliffs using rope ladders in order to keep heading south.

7. Truman Walkway, Punakaiki

Notable among the many treasures of this walkway is just a few minutes in: a northern rata grows on a large matai and it's a young but perfect example of how the rata tree grows on its ancient host.

8. Barrytown Flats

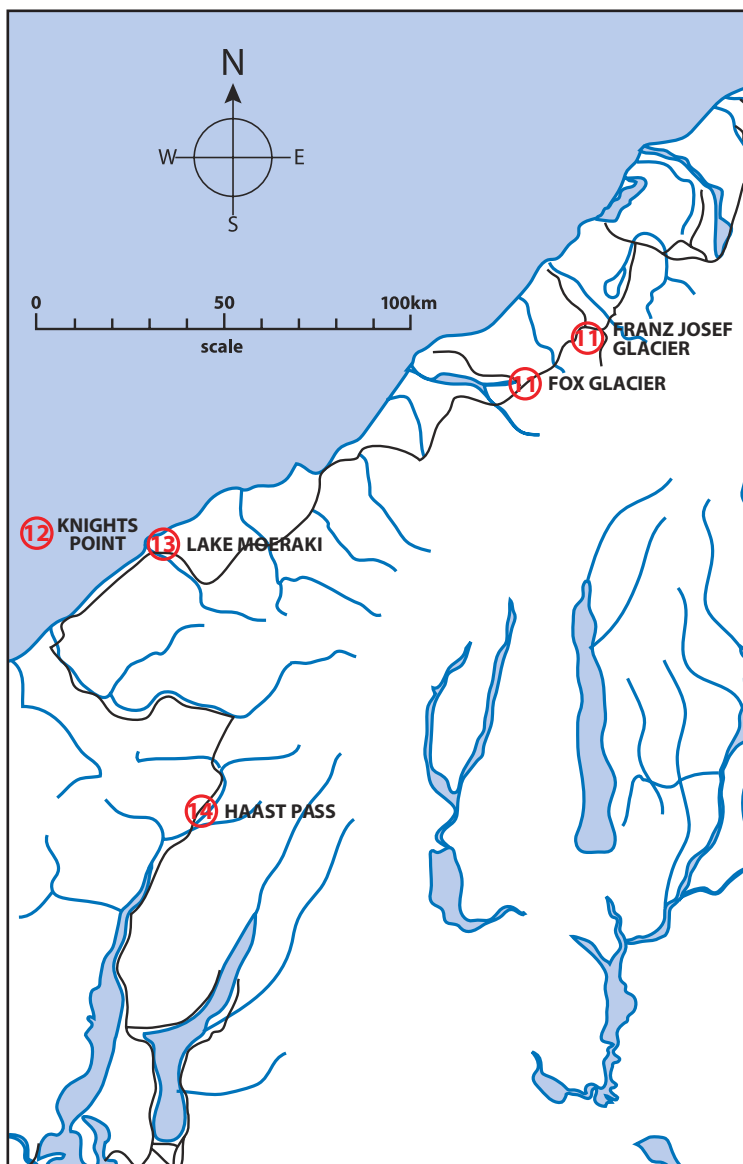
Nikau Scenic Reserve is the best visible example of original coastal sand-dune forest, dominated by kahikatea and northern rata. Northern rata growing on kahikatea is uncommon. Access to the reserve is difficult because the bush is dense and covers uneven, sometimes swampy, ground.

9. Rapahoe

At Seven Mile Creek, turn into the Point Elizabeth Walkway car park. The walkway crosses former farmland now dominated by flax, then enters the Rapahoe Scenic Reserve. The first part crosses wet soils formed by mudstone, but, 20 minutes on, the track enters limestone that forms the 'Twelve Apostles Ridge' stretching south to Greymouth. Many northern rata occur in the well-drained limestone soils, growing on rimu, miro and other trees.



West Coast Crimson Trail (continued)



10. Otira

One of the great rata landscapes of New Zealand, and an area with one of the longest running possum control programmes, the Otira Gorge forms part of the Arthur's Pass entrance into the West Coast from Canterbury. Southern rata forms a living canopy over the precipitous slopes and flowering is more prolific in some years than in others. As the summer turns to autumn, the band of flowering rata moves slowly up the Otira hillsides to higher altitudes. Beech trees are absent from the forest from here south to beyond Fox Glacier and southern rata becomes one of the dominant mountain forest species. A band of possum-killed trees is visible across the Taramakau River.

11. The Glaciers

At both Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers you can walk in some of the finest southern rata forests in the country. Pure stands of young trees, their trunks clothed in mosses and ferns, cover the moraine. Drive up the Glacier View Road at Fox Glacier and walk among the trees at Moraine Walk. While driving from Fox Glacier to Haast, one is enthralled, as you are surrounded by some of the few remaining stands of ancient forests, similar to those early travellers would have seen hundreds of years ago.

12. Knights Point

This is a Department of Conservation lookout and interpretation area. The land here is composed of volcanic 'breccia' that favours southern rata and the roadsides for 5 kilometres south are clothed in hundreds of young trees. They are noted for their early flowering (September-November).

13. Lake Moeraki

Two kilometres north of the Wilderness Lodge huge rimu and matai grow on a gravel fan leading to the lake. These trees support a population of epiphytic southern rata. The rata are perched high in the trees with roots descending to the ground, showing how southern rata may have given rise to its northern cousin.

14. Haast Pass

This is the southern entrance to the West Coast and, for a great view of rata on a formerly glaciated bluff, park 200 metres above the Roaring Billy Creek. An extensive possum control programme aims to protect rata as well as the scarlet mistletoe that grows on silver beech hosts and adds a splash of red to the forest canopy around Christmas. Southern rata continues south into Fiordland and beyond to Stewart Island and even to the sub-antarctic Auckland Islands. It is the only tree in the sub-antarctic and becomes New Zealand's most widespread tree species.



The West Coast Crimson Trail is one of a series of Project Crimson's Crimson Trails throughout New Zealand. Each Crimson Trail is unique to its region. What the Crimson Trails share is that special time of the year when glorious crimson blooms cloak the trees and the wind blown stamens carpet the ground beneath.

Crimson Trails can be explored in the following areas:

- Auckland
- Coromandel
- Mount Maunganui
- Rotorua
- Wellington
- Golden Bay
- Canterbury
- West Coast
- Otago/Southland

Brochures for each Crimson Trail can be downloaded from www.projectcrimson.org.nz

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