

Fire! Fire! The 15th day after

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"The Charming Creek Valley is not so charming now". Gwenny Davis, Native Forests Action Council, reported in Westport News 18 February 1982.

"I know no sight more sad than to witness the destruction by
fire of forests on the hill-sides -- those mournful streaks
sweeping along the more accessible sides of the ranges, with
blackened trunks like Banquo's ghosts here and there in the
midst -- without parallel the most melancholy spectacle of
wasteful destruction" (Knight 1875: 474).

On 16 February 1982 the N.Z. Forest Service burnt about 120 ha of clearfelled native forest at Charming Creek (41°35' S, 175°58' E, altitude ca 200 m), Mokihinui State Forest 55, Buller region. The land was hilly and steep, and it was in an area zoned for the growing of exotic trees in the Draft Buller Regional Forest Management Plan (Forest Service 1981). The native beech and podocarp forest was considered by the Forest Service to be unsuitable for timber production, and the site had been clearfelled some months beforehand in readiness for conversion to Pinus radiata. The felled forest was allowed to dry out over the summer period. At burning an accelerant was used to achieve a complete hot burn. About a week before the burnoff the Wildlife Service had released a report recommending that the area should have remained in forest because it was one of the main habitats for the snail Powelliphanta lignaria johnstoni, a protected species under the Wildlife Act.

When the area was visited on 3 March 1982 by TKC, a member of a DSIR investigative group for the Buller region, the whole burnt area had no greenery present whatsoever -- the hot burn had completely removed all surface vegetation and only stumps and large bare branches remained. Litter and fine roots remained unburnt about 1-2 cm below the blackened surface layer.

On the surface there were a large number of dead Powelliphanta shells and remains of pill millipedes. A collection of surface material and litter was taken near the centre of the burnoff. The material was chosen from an area of about 10 square metres so as to embrace the diverse microhabitats generally present in forests, such as litter around the bases of trees and under fallen logs, the fermentation litter layer, humification horizon, and soil. About 2 shoeboxes of material were obtained, an amount usually obtained in Entomology Division samples. Back in Auckland 6 days later the live animals were extracted into ethanol with a Berlese funnel, and the material was then hand-sorted to collect fragments of arthropods and molluscs. This note records the fauna that was present.

