



# Molesworth — Inland Marlborough

by Les Molloy\*

East of the Spenser Mountains, the backbone of Nelson Lakes National Park, the landscape quickly changes to reflect a reduction in rainfall (7,000 mm down to 700 mm annually) and historic burning of the vegetation.

The result is a remarkable tussock grassland landscape, a series of glacial basins and ranges tucked between the Spenser and Inland Kaikoura mountains. Features of this landscape are:

- the scenic mixture of beech forest and tussock grassland mountain valleys, such as the upper Waiau, Clarence, Wairau, and Begley and Paske tributaries of the Rainbow.
- Lake Tennyson, a blue jewel set in a tawny tussock landscape, with its scientifically interesting moraine wetlands;
- the active Wairau, Awatere and Clarence faults;
- the vast, treeless, short tussock grasslands, open spaces and rare plants of the Acheron, Clarence and upper Awatere valleys (see photo).

Most of the drier tussockland lies within Molesworth Station, a huge (180,000 hectares) area of Crown land administered by the Lands and Survey Department after the Crown took over the Molesworth, Tarnedale, St Helens and Dillon pastoral runs in the 1930's and

1940's. Fires and overgrazing by sheep and rabbits had severely depleted these tussocklands.

Today, Molesworth's recovery — through control of burning, replacement of sheep by cattle, control of rabbits and aerial oversowing of grasses and clovers — is a tribute to farm managers, scientists and soil conservators within Government agencies.

People are attracted to Molesworth by its wild open spaces. There is scope for walkways, fishing, horse-trekking, canoeing, hunting and possibly even 4-wheel drive safaris compatible with pastoral farming.

A recent Lands and Survey study found that only 5–10% of the most scenic and recreationally-important land in inland Marlborough and Awatere Counties had any formal protection. There are no scenic or scientific reserves between Lake Tennyson in the west and the alpine summits of the Inland Kaikoura Range.

Public access to the area is difficult. There have been long-standing access difficulties through Rainbow Station in the mid-Wairau. The Hanmer to Tophouse "road" (installed by NZED to service its transmission line) is only suitable for 4-wheel drive.

Lands and Survey may make it easier

for the public to visit this area when the Molesworth draft management plan is released next year. Certainly there is public demand for access, as shown by the popularity of the St James Walkway opened recently through tussocklands near Lewis Pass.

Although Molesworth's vegetation is much modified, its landscape is outstanding, some of its plants and animals only occur here and the whole area is different from anything else in New Zealand's protected area system. Its recreation and conservation values urgently need better recognition.

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**Molesworth Station in the dry headwaters of the Awatere River. The Inland Kaikouras are in the distance.**

Photo: Quentin Christie, Soil Bureau

**Vegetable sheep, *Haastia pulvinaris*, has adapted to stable screes. Mt Princess, East Spencers.**

Photo: Les Molloy

