

# **WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS NATURE AND FARM NOTES SUMMER 2006**

*This is a collection of the latest stories about some of the special events on our farm and nature reserve and in the surrounding Conservation Land and National Park that we visit on our guided adventure trips.*

## **1. Training Border collie sheepdogs**

We couldn't look after our 4,000 sheep on Cora Lynn Station without our incredibly hard working sheepdogs. Lodge long haired Border Collie Dogs Skip (9 years old) and Tess (1 1/2 years old) show two extremes of the complicated and time consuming task of training these super intelligent dogs to muster sheep. Skip is well trained and a very hard worker but she is getting towards her sunset years. Tess is now in full training and is incredibly exuberant. Training starts at about 14 months of age (or earlier) and continues for about another year. Perhaps half the dogs' sheep herding skills are instinctive. The other half are learned from their human master. Generally these dogs will only work for one master.

*You can see our Eye/Heading dogs (these are the ones that bring the sheep towards you) Tess, Skip and Farm Manager Neil Wood's short haired Border Collie dog Ty on our Lodge sheep trips. Neil may also show you how his NZ Huntaway dog Ted works in the opposite way to push the sheep away from you through a gateway or in the sheep yards.*

## **2. The best Mountain Beech forest flowering in at least 46 years!**

Evergreen mountain beech forests (*Nothofagus solandrii* variety *cliffortioides*) clothe the hills around Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass. These small leaved beeches are the dominant forests around the Lodge and the Rainbow Valley Nature Walk. Native mountain beech forests extend from the valley floor (altitude 600 metres-2, 000 feet) up to the timberline in most of our Waimakariri Valley apart from where early Maori and European burning removed the forest. On Mt Kai Roto, across from the Lodge, timberline is at an altitude of 1,400 metres- 4,400 feet. Throughout October and November 2005, the normally dark green beech trees turned a brown/red colour from red flowers on all the trees. This flowering started first on the warmest north facing slopes around the Wilderness Lodge. It then moved up the hillsides and west towards the colder forests of Arthur's Pass town ship. The small red wind pollinated flowers produce vast amounts of yellow pollen that has coated ponds and rivers. Beech trees synchronously flower usually every 4-5 years with the trigger thought to be a hot summer on the previous year. This simultaneous flowering across the whole population of a tree species is called "mast flowering". The 2005 beech flowering is really exceptional in its intensity. Long time Arthur's Pass' resident John Charles describes this year's flowering as the greatest he has seen in 46 years! What will follow in the autumn is the ripening of an enormous volume of beech tree nuts about a third the size of your little fingernail. These seeds are the favourite food of kakariki (green parakeet), kea parrot and mice so expect record numbers of these animals in the 2006 winter.

## **3. Saving Lake Pearson and its rare Southern Crested Grebe.**

Since opening the Lodge in 1996, we have made a big effort to protect this lovely glacial lake 18km towards Christchurch from the Wilderness Lodge. We have worked to protect the lake in partnership with the Forest and Bird Society, DOC and a small community group established in 2003 by the Conservation Department called the "Friends of Lake Pearson. Efforts so far have focused on:

- Getting powerboats and jets skis off the Lake where they were breaking all speed limits and severely harming waterbird breeding. In 2002 watercraft were restricted to 5 knots maximum across the whole lake and they were banned totally in 2004 (but this is now subject to an Appeal).

- Promoting the protection of the lake as a refuge for the endangered Southern Crested Grebe that on the lake number around 27 birds out of a total NZ population of 270. The whole lake and its margins became a Wildlife Refuge in early 2004 after support from many public submissions.
- Trapping introduced predatory stoats (weasel family) and feral cats that were killing many Grebe chicks in their floating nests. Wilderness Lodge in 2004 funded 30 stoat traps being used at the lake. We check these traps on our regular guided trips to the lake.
- Working with our Regional Council (Environment Canterbury-ECan-to provide alternative stock water systems to neighbouring Craigieburn Station so that the lakeshore can be fenced. This has excluded cows and sheep from polluting the lake waters. We helped install a stock water system in October 2005 and in early November a contractor fenced all lake's margin and the wetlands at the northern end of the lake. Wilderness Lodge offers regular dawn canoeing trips on Lake Pearson so that you can see the Southern Crested Grebes and many other water birds. We also include Lake Pearson canoe/kayak trips on our regular Limestone Castles trip. Weather permitting, we picnic across the Lake in a natural paradise.

#### **4. We find a new grasshopper species in Broad Stream**

For 5 years we have protected the riverbed of Broad Stream from grazing stock, pests and weeds within the Broad stream/McKay Moa Forest reserve. As well as the reserve containing a range of rare plants, in 2004 Gerry McSweeney discovered a new species of the ancient grasshopper genus *Bracaspis* living in a 200 metre long stretch of the riverbed. Identified by Darfield grasshopper authority Simon Morris, this new species of grasshopper is up to 1 inch (24mm) long. It has grey camouflage colouring that makes it blend almost perfectly with the grey coloured rocks of its home.

In early 2005, with the help of students from University of New Hampshire's EcoQuest partnership, we counted 187 of these grasshoppers in Broad Stream. This may be their total world population. What makes this new species special is that it now seems that 3 of the 4 large braided river catchments north from Mt Cook National Park each has its own isolated special riverbed *Brachaspis* grasshopper (the 3 rivers are the Tekapo , Rangitata and Waimakariri). Each grasshopper has evolved isolated from the others by an impenetrable barrier of high mountains and although similar they each have distinct physical differences. In early November 2005 a "missing link" thought to be a *Brachaspis* grasshopper was found in the Upper Rakaia riverbed at Manuka Point, the last of the big 4 rivers outlined above without one of these special grasshoppers. Further investigations are now underway.

With our guides you can discover this gentle herbivore on fine warm days on our guided McKay Moa Forest Walk.

#### **5. Arthur's Pass National Park mountain valleys filled with alpine flowers after a very warm winter.**

The winter of 2005 is one of the warmest on record. We had little snow and at lower altitudes there was also little rain. The lack of snow and rain means that river levels are very low. Little snow on the hills and warm settled weather also has raised ambient air temperatures. One result from this is that it is an early year for alpine flowers. From early October onwards there have been a sea of alpine flowers in the mountains. The warm weather has also resulted in large numbers of flowers. This year the world's largest buttercup, *Ranunculus lyalli*, is flowering particularly well. These have huge dish shaped leaves and a metre tall spray of white flowers. Right through the mountain summer there is a sequence of alpine flowers. First the giant buttercups and NZ foxgloves (*Ourisia*), next the giant carrots (*Aciphylla*, *Anisotome*), then in January come the mountain daisies (*Celmisia*) and orchids and finally NZ edelweiss and gentians in February-March.

You can discover all our alpine flowers on our guided Upper Otira Glacier and also on our Arthur's Pass Alpine Discovery trips. You can also see some of the flowers by yourself on the Dobson Nature walk across the summit of Arthur's Pass. We are also offering

occasional special trips to see strange flowering scree plants on the Torlesse and Craigieburn mountain ranges east of the Lodge.

#### **6. Wilderness Lodge, Lodge guests and Butterfield and Robinson help save Dragon's Teeth shrub lands of the Craigieburn Conservation Park.**

The Lodges " Limestone Castle and Lake Pearson Canoeing Guided Trip" that is offered every few days has a very special component; 20 minutes of practical conservation field work. On this adventure trip you have the chance to help restore one of New Zealand's rarest and strangest shrubland communities, the Dragon's tooth (*Dracophyllum* species) Flat of Craigieburn Forest Park. This shrubland, close to Highway 73 at Craigieburn Cutting in a cold valley floor/saddle, appears to have survived since the Ice Ages free of beech forest. It is covered with a mixture of sub alpine *Dracophyllum*, narrow leaved snow tussock and alpine hebes, heaths, mountain daisies and orchids. Sadly, after surviving for perhaps 11,000 years, this rare shrubland is now at risk of being smothered by North American lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*). Planted in the 1950s and 60s in a Government erosion control experiment, these introduced pines are now seeding out of control with the seeds blowing in the wind up to 50km (30 miles) from the parent trees. With the agreement of the Conservation Department, Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass has adopted a 4 square kilometre (40 hectare /100 acre) area here that we are saving from being smothered by the pine trees. For the last 5 years our guests on the limestone trip have worked with us on this project. This year regular Wilderness Lodge visitor, Canadian cycle/walking tourism company Butterfield and Robinson, also started helping to finance this project. Over the coming years B&R will be helping to finance the removal of mature pine seed trees from above the Dragon's Tooth Flat.

On our guided limestone trip you will be shown the special plants of this area and be each invited to help hand weed around 50 small pine trees. Last year we removed nearly 50,000 weed pine trees from this site and it is great to see it being restored to its original wild state.

#### **7. Record flowering of mistletoe:**

After virtually no flowering in Spring 2004, this 2005 spring there has been an outstanding flowering of red mistletoe on the Rainbow Valley Nature Walk around the Wilderness Lodge. Red mistletoe (*Peraxilla tetrapathea*) is a common native plant parasite on mountain beech trees. It is now officially listed as threatened after being ravaged by the browsing of Australian possums, first introduced to New Zealand in 1858 to provide the foundation for a fur industry. Sadly no one reckoned on just how defenceless many New Zealand plants were against possum browsing because in the absence of mammalian browsers, our native plants did not evolve browser repelling plant chemicals.

Giant tree fuchsia, rata and our "Christmas tree" pohutukawa have all fallen victims to possums. Mistletoe are perhaps the most vulnerable of all and in many parts of New Zealand have become extinct or are endangered. Here we have controlled possums now for 10 years using bait stations. As a result, there has been a stunning recovery of red and yellow mistletoe. Our giant bunches of red flowering mistletoe seen on the Rainbow Walk are now amongst the largest surviving in this country. Their flowers are very important spring nectar sources for bellbirds and kaka bush parrots. Their fruits are vital for native birds in autumn and winter. You can see a huge red mistletoe (and even kiss under it!) at the letter U on the Rainbow Nature Walk selfguided trail.

#### **8. 2005: A great lambing season for our merino sheep.**

The 2005 spring (October to December) has been marvellous for our merino mother sheep giving birth to their lambs on our high country sheep station. Called Cora Lynn (after a town in Dumfries district in Scotland) by the early Scottish shepherders who pioneered this area, our farm/reserve property covers nearly 2500ha/6,000 acres. We put the Merino rams out with the female sheep (ewes) on 15 May for 30 days. There is one ram to every 150 ewes. 5 months later, from 10 October onwards, the lambs are

born. Around 93% have a single lamb, 4 % have twins and around 3 % fail to get pregnant.

The lambs will stay with their mothers until February after which the lambs can thrive on their own and their mothers can then have a well earned rest until they "meet the boys" again on May 15.

### **9. Lizzy, Lambchop and Pansy: Wilderness Lodge orphans.**

These are our 2005/2006 farm orphans. Lizzy, a small back Angus calf, lost her mother who died giving birth. Cared for since then by Farm Manager Leonie Wood and her daughter Sarah, Lizzy drinks a whole gallon (5 litres) of special powdered milk each day and is now growing fast. Alongside Lizzy you can meet and cuddle orphan merino lambs Lambchop (male) and Pansy (female) that each drink one litre of milk twice a day. We will keep feeding them all for another 6 weeks.

Beside the driveway to the Lodge is a green plastic container. If you shake this and then open it a flock of tame sheep will come to you to be fed (use a flat open hand). These are our orphan sheep from previous years. The most famous of these is 5 year old Romney/Suffolk cross sheep Madelaine who starred in the MTV "Jackass" follow up TV series "Wildboyz" screened in NZ in 2004.

### **10. Operation Ark and rare Orange Fronted Parakeet which number only approx 100 birds in the whole world!**

6 miles/10km downriver and across from the Wilderness Lodge is the Hawdon Valley, a very special valley in Arthur's Pass National Park. Here in 1999, DOC scientists found the last stronghold of one of New Zealand's rarest native birds, the orange fronted parakeet as well as a small population of the endangered mohua or yellowhead. In 2002, Operation Ark was launched by DOC to save these precious birds. A DOC team has since put in a huge amount of effort here trapping stoats (weasels) and possums and monitoring the approx 100 parakeets that survive. 23 orange fronted parakeet chicks have been captured and are breeding in a Christchurch aviary. Sadly it looks as though the surviving mohua/yellowhead were all eaten by a rat irruption in the valley in 2004. We can take you to the Hawdon Valley on a special guided trip if you don't mind getting wet feet fording the Hawdon River. Around the Wilderness Lodge we also have our own bird and mistletoe rescue programme underway with a big effort to control possums, rats and stoats and eliminate weeds including blackberry, gorse and broom.

### **11. Wilderness Lodge signs wool supply contract with NZ fashion company "Icebreaker".**

This year Wilderness Lodge/Cora Lynn Station has signed a contract to supply our merino wool to NZ's leading producer of sports, casual and fashion merino clothing; Icebreaker. This company has been extraordinarily successful in establishing a fashion amongst New Zealanders to wear its very fine, soft knitwear. This fashion has now been exported around the world with particular success in the UK, Australia and North America. We also supply our merino wool to Italian fashion house Loro Piano, John Smedley of the UK and Smartwool of the USA.

Icebreaker products made from merino wool will be featured in our Lodge shop.

### **12. Saving our braided streams and unique riverbed birds from pests and weed lupins, gorse and broom from the Northern Hemisphere.**

The lovely purple flowers of American lupin contrast with the cheery yellow flowers of Scotch Broom and European Gorse. European settlers brought all these members of the pea family to New Zealand. Although they are very scenic for all our visitors, all these plants have become major weeds in our gravel riverbeds. The vast natural gravels of our braided rivers are home to a fascinating array of specially adapted native riverbed plants, birds, moths and other insects.

The special plants are small and cushion like and are uniquely adapted to extremes of heat, cold, wind and water. They can easily be smothered by introduced lupins, gorse

and broom. Worse still, these tall weeds hide predatory feral cats and weasels which can then stalk unobserved close to and then kill native river birds sitting on their nests. 4 native bird species are only found in the South Island's braided rivers. Black fronted tern, black billed gull, banded dotterell and wrybill plover are all in serious trouble. Recent studies show that around 95% of these bird species fail to breed successfully because of predation by the introduced animals particularly in the weed clogged braided rivers.

At Wilderness Lodge we have made a big effort to keep Broad Stream and Bruce Stream free from these weeds. You can see all the 4 threatened riverbed birds breeding in these streams and feeding in our farm paddocks between August and March. The Waimakariri River Walk is the best track to take to see riverbed birds and strange plants.

### **13. We value your observations.**

When you are out walking our tracks, on our guided walks or even around the Wilderness Lodge you may see special birds, insects or flowers. We are really interested in your observations so do feel free to share them with our staff and nature guides who will also be interested in your digital photos which may better help to identify what it is that you describe. We can also help you with nature identification books. Don't hesitate to ask questions. We are here to help you.

***Have a great time at Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass***