

## ***WILDERNESS LODGE LAKE MOERAKI SUMMER-AUTUMN - 2005/2006 NATURE NEWS -***

This is a collection of the latest stories about special events around the Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki and in the surrounding World Heritage protected forests, rivers and seacoast that we visit on our guided adventure trips.

### ***Elephant Seal at Arnott's Point!***

On 17 December 2005 we discovered a large male elephant seal basking on the sandy beach of Arnott's Point just south of the Lodge. We access this secluded retreat on our guided **Wilderness Seals and Seacoast Walk**. Our Nature Guides have seen "Humphrey" several times since. We only offer this Lodge moderate/ hard standard special walk to fit guests during low tide conditions in fine weather.

Southern Elephant Seals are the largest of the seal family and grow up to 5 metres (15 feet) long. In our region they breed at Antipodes, Campbell and Auckland Islands in New Zealand's Subantarctic and also on Australia's Macquarie Island. Each year, the non-breeding males go ashore usually on sandy beaches to rub off their old fur while they grow a new pelt. Since 1989, we have recorded one or two elephant seals as regular visitors to our large Arnott's Point fur seal colony. These seals are a fascinating reminder of the rich abundance of marine life in our southern oceans. Lodge Owners Anne and Gerry returned in mid January from a fascinating exploration of Campbell and Auckland Islands with Heritage Expeditions. Despite 4 days travel on the roughest ocean in the world, they delighted in seeing nesting Royal and Wandering Albatross, many elephant seal and NZ sea lion and giant coloured megaherbs.

### ***A "Normal" South Westland Summer***

South Westland is one of the wettest places in New Zealand. Prevailing warm westerly winds (created by the spin of the earth) sweep around the Southern Ocean and Tasman Sea collecting moisture. These moisture-laden winds meet the ramparts of the Southern Alps. They cool as they rise over the mountains releasing large amounts of rain; 3600mm (140 inches) a year at Lake Moeraki Lodge and 5000mm (200 inches) a year at the Franz/Fox Glaciers. In the headwaters of the Moeraki /Paringa River up to 7500 mm or 300 inches fall each year!

In an earlier career as the Westland National Park Scientist, Lodge Co-Owner Dr Gerry McSweeney in 1981 measured 6 feet (72 inches/ 1800mm) of rainfall over 3 days at a site halfway up the Franz Josef Glacier. That Glacier rain gauge in 1981 measured 16 metres (624inches) of rain for the 1981 year, a world-record high annual rainfall.

This 2005/2006 summer after a hot dry start is shaping up to be a "normal" summer. Every 3 or 4 days, a westerly front sweeps across New Zealand bringing heavy rain (about 100mm/4 inches) over around 12 hours to Lake Moeraki. A cool clear South Westerly change then sweeps away that warm moist air and usually gives us 2-3 days of clear weather until the arrival of the next westerly storm.

**We are sorry if your arrival at the Wilderness Lodge coincides with the latest rainstorm. You may have to wait just a little while, have a drink at the bar, read a book, enjoy the great food and relax. You will be surprised by just how fast the Lake Moeraki weather can change from heavy rain to bright sunshine. The**

**rain is also great to keep river water flowing through our low head 26kw Hydro-Electric turbine that powers the Lodge. It keeps the rainforest fresh and green, keeps the waterfalls tumbling and it gives South Westland some of the cleanest air in the whole world.**

## ***Moeraki Rapids Restaurant Opening December 17 2005***

Just before Christmas, Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki was honoured to host New Zealand's Minister of Conservation, Chris Carter. Since 2002, Chris has been in charge of the 33% of New Zealand protected as Department of Conservation (DOC) land. He has recently battled for whales at the International Whaling Commission and also makes sure that nature protection is high on the Government agenda.

He was joined on December 17 by local West Coast tourist operators, local farmers, Wilderness Lodge neighbours, Conservation Department staff and friends who helped the Minister to officially open our Moeraki Rapids Restaurant. This culminates a 6 year, \$2 million re-development of Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki. The Minister congratulated everyone involved with the Lodge for showing that careful nature tourism can protect rainforests and wildlife and also create jobs through a successful business.

During his 2-day visit, Minister Carter joined by the whole McSweeney family was guided along the Arnott's Point Seacoast Walk. Here he saw many fur seals and a huge elephant seal. He canoed on the Lake, fed giant eels. He inspected forests and mountain lands in the head of the Moeraki Valley where DOC are successfully controlling rats and possums to save mistletoe, rare native blue duck, kaka and yellowhead. It was a great day for the Lodge.

## ***Gold!***

Yes, there is gold at Moeraki. Back in 1885, James Monro (after whom the Monro Walk and Monro beach is named) sluiced for gold just north of Monro Beach and found gold on the uplifted beach gravels tucked amongst the coastal forest. Lodge Manager Malcolm Edwards was once a goldminer in Otago. In 1994, Malcolm was the New Zealand Gold Panning Champion. Malcolm has test panned in the hills near the Wilderness Lodge and he actually discovered a few grains of gold

Our **Historic Goldminers' Guided Walk** south of the lodge traverses a goldmining area rich in goldmining history as well as giant trees and kaka and parakeet native birds. The walk also takes you along the wild beaches of the Cole Creek to Ship Creek coastline. There are old gold diggings here, fur seals, tiny Hector's Dolphins and magnificent sea stacks and coastal scenery.

## ***2005 was a great Tawaki penguin breeding season***

Tawaki, Fiordland Crested Penguin, come ashore to breed in forest along the Lake Moeraki coastline from June to early December each year. This 70cm (nearly 3 foot) high bird is the world's rarest penguin. It is found only in the southwest corner of New Zealand with a total population of around 5,000 (the better known Yellow Eyed Penguin totals around 7,000 birds). Since opening the Wilderness Lodge in 1989, we have worked with the Conservation Department to help protect the Tawaki penguin breeding areas inside the Moeraki coastal forests.

In 1994, our coastline was declared a Wildlife Refuge to make it illegal to bring domestic dogs into the colonies. This will protect the breeding penguins from their most significant predator associated with humans. We are also working with DOC and controlling introduced stoats (weasel family) and rats that can kill penguin chicks. Human visitors to the penguin beaches are also tightly controlled to prevent disturbance to the birds. These efforts are paying off with 2005 being a great year for penguin breeding at all the colonies close to the Lodge.

**Although the penguins have now finished breeding and now spend weeks feeding on the open Tasman Sea, you may still occasionally see them on our guided coastal walks. During late Jan to March, they come ashore to moult (grow new feathers) before returning in June for the next breeding season.**

### ***The world's cleanest beaches?***

While on the Coast looking for penguins, seals, shells, gemstones or driftwood, spare a thought for the beach itself.

Is this the cleanest beach you have ever walked along? We are determined to keep our seacoast clean. The main pollution problems are fishing gear washed off boats in the Southern Ocean/Tasman Sea in stormy weather. If you want to help us keep our beaches clean, do pick up any beach debris you encounter. Feel free also to collect any small beach gemstones or driftwood that you encounter as a reward for helping clean up our beach and as a memento of our wild and beautiful coastline. Tonnes of new driftwood and stones are thrown up after every storm. **Lodge Manager Malcolm and Nature Guide Swade can help to identify your different beach pebbles.**

### ***2005 was the best whitebait season for decades***

Whitebait (*Galaxias* species) are 5 species of transparent larval fish that migrate into South Westland's rivers where they grow into small fish up to 30cm (12 inches) long. Every spring, from 1 September to 14 November, New Zealanders and Haast locals flock to the South Westland rivermouths on the incoming tide. They use large nets to catch tiny whitebait in large nets.

Elsewhere in NZ, whitebait catches have drastically declined as whitebait river and wetland habitat has been modified by farming and urban development. South Westland has the largest area of unmodified wetlands remaining in our country. The 2005 whitebait season was the best for many decades with literally tonnes of whitebait being caught on most of the rivers.

**Our Lower Moeraki rainforest walk and kayak trip takes you to the heart of whitebait country down the river where in the season up to 100 people will be chasing whitebait**

### ***Saving South Westland's red mistletoe***

New Zealand has two species of *Peraxilla* red flowering mistletoe both found on beech trees. At Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass you will see big clumps of the smaller *P. tetrapathea* mistletoe which is growing on mountain beech all around the Lodge's Rainbow Nature Walk. At Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki we can show you groups of the larger flowered *P. colensoi* mistletoe growing throughout the lowland silver beech forest

down towards the Giant Rimu Lookout. **Lodge Manager Dorothy Piper painted this mistletoe and you can see her painting hanging in the Red Dog Saloon.**

New Zealand mistletoes do not kill their host beech trees. Mistletoes are actually a vital source of nectar for bellbird, tui and kaka. A 1989 study in the upper Moeraki Valley showed that kaka parrots spent 60% of their time feeding on Colenso mistletoe when it was in flower. Mistletoes healthy survival is vital for the future of this endangered large parrot. Sadly Australian possums, introduced to NZ in 1858 to start a fur industry, have eliminated these special mistletoes from most of our NZ forests. At the Wilderness Lodges we actively control possums to help save our native mistletoe and the birds that depend on it for food. We strongly support DOC's programme to control possums and rats over hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest both north and south of Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki. They are using a very effective control agent called 1080, sodium fluoracetate.

### ***Kevin Smith- a New Zealand Forest Hero***

In 1989, Forest and Bird Society West Coast Conservation Campaigner Kevin Smith mentioned to Anne Saunders and Gerry McSweeney that the old Lake Moeraki Motels were on the market. Kevin loved the forests, wildlife, rivers and seacoast of this area. He was determined they would be protected. He used the motels 1986-1989 to host groups of passionate New Zealanders on natural history trips to raise awareness that these great rainforests were under threat of destruction by logging.

Early in 1989, the Government finally protected all these forests. Anne and Gerry sold their Wellington home to finance their purchase of the Lake Moeraki Motels. In June 1989 they moved to Lake Moeraki with their 3 young children to start the Wilderness Lodge. Meanwhile Kevin Smith, using the same furniture truck, moved with his wife and 3 children to Wellington to take Gerry's job as Conservation Director of the Forest and Bird Society, NZ's largest nature group.

Tragically Kevin Smith (52) died suddenly on August 16 2005 while biking home from his Wellington based work as the Conservation Minister's Principal Advisor. In his too short life he achieved a huge amount for the protection of NZ's forests, wildlife, our seacoasts and ocean. The World Heritage protected ancient rainforests around Haast-Lake Moeraki he helped to save are a special legacy of Kevin's conservation work. Perhaps his favourite forest here was Mataketake forest, 10km south of the Lodge, where he spent many months camping, hunting deer, bird watching and exploring.

**You can experience Kevin's favourite, the Mataketake Forest on our guided "Old Goldminers Trail" walk.**

We farewell Kevin Smith, a New Zealand forest hero. He made a difference.

*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived"*

Henry David Thoreau...Walden

### ***Haast kiwi rescue***

The Haast Tokoeka Kiwi inhabits the native forest on the western slopes of the mountain ranges between the Arawhata and Haast rivers, 30km south of the Wilderness Lodge. It is ranked as Nationally Critically Endangered with a total world population of approx 300

birds. It is called the 'mountain kiwi' with its largest populations found in the high forest and alpine shrublands near the timberline. DOC has a major conservation programme underway to secure the future of this very special native bird. **"Operation Nest Egg"** involves taking freshly laid kiwi eggs from their parents, incubating and hatching the eggs in a safe environment free from predatory stoats (weasel family) and rats. When the kiwi chicks weigh 700grams and are large enough to fend for themselves in the wild against stoats and rats, they are released back into the wild.

**Lodge Manager Malcolm and Head Receptionist Rachel were lucky recently to be invited by DOC to climb high into the mountains and change the radio transmitter on a Haast Tokoeka Kiwi. They captured it, fitted the new transmitter and then released it back into the wild (see the photo on the noticeboard next to the Bar in the Lounge).**

Sadly because they are nocturnal and so rare, we cannot show you these endangered Haast kiwi in the wild. The best place to see kiwi near here is the Queenstown Kiwi and Birdlife Park Kiwi house. This family company is also active in helping DOC's kiwi conservation work.

### ***Budget Accommodation!***

It had been a lovely January 2006 night. The Lodge dinner was fantastic. After a rainy day, the sky cleared briefly. The European family of 4 staying at the Wilderness Lodge decided at 9.45pm to quickly walk (without a torch and without telling reception) down to the Tasman seacoast on the Monro Track. They reached the beach at 10.15pm just as the last light was fading. They then quickly retraced their steps but discovered that there was much less light inside the forest than on the beach. In fact there was so little light in the forest that they couldn't find the trail turn off that led from the end of the trail to the Monro Creek swing bridge close by the Lodge.

It was pitch black. The group walked into the Creek in an attempt to cross. However with all the rain, the water was over waist deep and the creek was unfordable. They re-traced their steps back down the track and diverted down the lower Moeraki Lagoon track. Here at 11pm they fortunately found an old leaky shed. All night long the rain poured down through the holes in the roofing iron. Fortunately there was a rowboat in the shed. The family crawled under this boat to shelter from the rain. They then endured the coldest, wettest night of their lives.

First light dawned at 5.15am. They walked 500 metres back to the Monro Creek swing bridge. They crossed it and walked a mere 200 metres to the Wilderness Lodge where they collapsed into their beds for a well-earned sleep. The first Lodge staff learned of their adventure was when 4 very sheepish visitors arrived very late for their breakfast.

#### **The lessons we should all learn from this?**

- **Please tell reception if you plan a late night walk so that we know where you are. Alternatively do your walks during daylight hours.**
- **Feel free to ask us for a torch/flashlight because we know just how dark our rainforest can be on a moonless night**
- **Do feel free to check in at reception anytime and tell us where you are walking/canoeing so that we can look out for you if you don't return.**

#### **Hector's dolphin in trouble.**

The world's smallest and rarest marine dolphins are found around the South Island coast

(population about 7,000) and the West Coast of the North Island (population about 100). Formerly they were all called Hector's Dolphin but recently that name has been confined to the South Island dolphins and the tiny North Island population is now called the Maui's Dolphin. They are around a metre (3 feet) in length) and prefer shallow coastal waters where they feed near the wave breaking zone.

**You can easily see Hector's Dolphins at Ship Creek, 12 km south of the Wilderness Lodge on Highway 6 and sometimes also at Monro Beach and also at Bruce Bay 50km north of the Lodge.**

Unfortunately in November 2005, 4 Hector's Dolphin were drowned in a recreational fishing set net at Neil's Beach, 60km south of the Wilderness Lodge. Any pre-mature death of these dolphins is a tragedy. They are long lived and they are very slow breeders. Accidental by-catch and death of these dolphins in mono-filament coastal fishing nets has led to a continuing decline in their numbers throughout their natural range.

West Coasters are rallying to save what is probably the largest remaining population of these tiny dolphins found down the entire length of the West Coast.

### ***Our nature guides and staff***

Staff and guides at the Wilderness Lodge work here because we love the outdoors and wild nature. We have explored most of the tracks in the Valley. Most of us are keen canoers and some of us are keen trout fishers.

Senior Nature Guide Swade lives on the seacoast at the Whakapohai River just south of the Wilderness Lodge and has a huge knowledge of South Westland. He has fished the South Westland coastline for many years and has nature guided from the lodge for the last 10 years. Nature Guide Michael McSweeney lived most of his early years with his family at the Lake Moeraki Lodge until he moved to live at the Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge. He is in his 3rd year studying ecology at Otago University.

### ***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 Lake Moeraki!***

FOR ANY COMMENTS OR QUERIES ON THIS NEWSLETTER CONTACT GERRY ON  
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