

# WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

## FROM KIWI EGGS TO DINOSAUR DUST

WHAT IS IT ABOUT ADVENTURE AND DISCOVERY THAT DRAWS A MAN TO THE WILD? OR IN THIS CASE, AN AUCKLAND CHAIRMAN OF HIS FAMILY-OWNED FOOD MANUFACTURING COMPANY TO BUY NATIVE FORESTS IN THE CENTRAL NORTH ISLAND?

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ACCESS IS DIFFICULT, THERE IS NO CELLPHONE COVERAGE AND THE NEAREST SHOP OR SIGN OF CIVILIZATION IS A 75-MINUTE DRIVE AWAY.

LEFT: Simon's niece Greta, daughter Corina, nephew George, and daughter Alana on a pig hunt. The pig population is kept low for the benefit of kiwi. ABOVE: Simon radio tracking a kiwi. RIGHT: The Lodge at Pohokura. Simon examining fecal evidence of kiwi. Tamsin Ward-Smith, kiwi project manager, releasing a kiwi chick at Maungataniwha. Simon and volunteer performing a kiwi egg lift.



For Simon Hall, of Tasti Products, it could have been any number of experiences that fuelled his passion. The chance to partake in night-time hunts for kiwi eggs, sniff around dinosaur dust with paleontologist Joan Wiffen, or head an expedition to find traces of the now extinct South Island kokako.

In reality, it was the chance to spend time in the great outdoors that initially captured his heart. And as many passions do, it started back in childhood, with the result being ownership of Pohokura and Maungataniwha Forests - some 12,000ha each of rugged, bush covered terrain, virgin native beech forest and chock full of flora and fauna, many of the species rare.

"As a very young child I got lost down the back of the farm and was raised by wild rabbits," Simon jokes of his early outdoor life.

It doesn't take long to realise that Simon has a very earthy sense of humour, which is perfect for an active environmentalist.

Rabbit jokes aside, he is the eldest of three brothers who, during their Auckland boyhood spent time on a family farm in the Bay of Plenty mucking about with motorbikes and rifles, farm machinery and land fenced off to preserve native bush.

So when he purchased Pohokura and Maungataniwha, this investment was initially destined to be a giant outdoor playground like that of his youth, only bigger, with walking tracks, river rafting, rally driving and a lodge at Pohokura to get away from the pressures of city life with friends and family. However, he has now come to value the land in a new way as a committed conservationist, and every hour spent in the bush is a chance to learn more about what is there.

The majority of the land came on the market nine years ago, and due to lack of interest Simon was able to purchase for a "rock-bottom six-figure price".

"They were vast tracts of largely unexplored native forest," he says. "So the adventure and discovery aspect was quite appealing. Then discovering a remnant kiwi population turned my focus towards the importance of conserving and supporting a valuable part of New Zealand."

In 2007 Simon established the Forest Life Force Restoration Trust to protect and enhance endangered species like the North Island brown kiwi and the modest, twiggy shrub *pittosporum turneri*, which is rarer than the North Island kokako. Simon and his company, who are the main funders of the Trust, have poured several million dollars of profit into the private wilderness. And private it is. Access is difficult, there is no cellphone coverage and the nearest shop or sign of civilization is a 75-minute drive away.

Luckily his property manager Pete Shaw, a former Department of Conservation employee, whom Simon credits as his main conservation influence, revels in the isolation of the property he lives on and cares for. Sharing a small cottage with partner Julie Crispin and their toddler Jemma, Pete oversees all ecological initiatives, and takes care of track cutting, hut maintenance, pest eradication and monitoring the forest inhabitants.

The Operation Nest Egg Kiwi Project in Maungataniwha Forest is now into its third season of collecting kiwi eggs from nests in the middle of the night, getting them incubator hatched, raised, and the chicks released back into the forest when big enough to fend off most predators.

So far 34 chicks have been returned to the forest with a 70 per cent chance of surviving and breeding.





This project, which is in partnership with the Cape Kidnappers and Ocean Beach Wildlife Preserve, is Simon's proudest achievement for the forest.

"It's repopulating a population which would otherwise soon become extinct to this area. And the next 30 or 40 kiwi chicks raised are becoming the foundation population of kiwis at Cape Kidnappers. There's great satisfaction in knowing I was part of that," he says.

He proudly shares these extraordinary experiences with his 220 staff who visit Pohokura and Maungataniwha for team-building weekends and to participate in the kiwi preservation programme.

"With the kiwi project they get to do something they wouldn't ordinarily get to do. We need the volunteers; they are actively hands-on helping, and they get a real buzz out of being able to contribute in such a positive way."

"It makes Tasti a more interesting place to work when there is a chance to participate in the kiwi or other projects."

In 2007 Simon purchased land additional to the Maungataniwha Forest that included the country's richest dinosaur site, the Maungahouanga Stream. Made famous by Joan Wiffen's first New Zealand's dinosaur discovery, Simon has started work on converting the 4000ha area from pine plantation back into native forest.

Last year he funded a small team of experts to hunt down any evidence of the South Island kokako's continued existence. Several leads including unusual birdcalls believed to be those of the extinct bird convinced the team it was worthwhile spending a week in remote bush to check it out.

The next project is for the whio, or native blue duck, which is currently in its infancy, he says. "They are nationally endangered and we have a significant population of about 55 birds on the property. We need to do more intensive pest control for stoats, rats and possums, which is expensive and ongoing."

The next generation of Halls will be keen to share this experience. Simon's daughters Alana, 12, Corina, 10 and Sabrina, five, have been visiting the properties since they were very small.

"They can name a lot of the plant species and have helped with some of the projects like pest and weed control," he says. "The older two have become involved in the kiwi project and are accomplished at handling young chicks and radio tracking kiwi nests and egg collection."

"They prefer going to the wilderness property than going to our beach house so that's a good sign their interest will continue."

And with any luck they will follow in their father's footsteps and preserve this wild beauty for future generations.



ABOVE: The assembled team during the first kiwi release at Maungataniwha

LEFT: Daughters Alana and Sabrina, niece Greta and daughter Corina cook dinner beside the Waiau River at Maungataniwha. Corina and Greta swim in the Waiau River at Maungataniwha. Simon releasing a kiwi chick.

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