

The LAND LADY

SHE'S THE OWNER OF A RUGGED HIGH-ALTITUDE STATION WHERE SHE RUNS AN ECO LODGE AND WILDERNESS WALKS, IS AN ARDENT CONSERVATIONIST AND CHAMPION OF THE ENDANGERED HUTTON'S SHEARWATER SEABIRD... NICKY MCARTHUR HAS TURNED ENVIRONMENTAL MULTI-TASKING INTO AN ART FORM

WORDS ANN WARNOCK PHOTOGRAPHY DANIEL ALLEN





building and on the street she asked a doctor how she could help. "I'm okay in a crisis. I've done lots of St Johns' first-aid training. I was able to sit alongside people and reassure them. My own house in Christchurch has split in two."



A 2000-HECTARE TRACT of rugged alpine terrain and dense, bush-clad valleys in the Seaward Kaikoura Ranges is an unlikely natural habitat for a lady with a cerise stripe in her hair, gold earrings and a pink lipstick in her jacket pocket. "I am not daunted by this landscape," says Nicky McArthur, plunging her Yamaha Rhino headlong into a gurgling stream and steering across a series of boulders.

"I'm far more daunted by the number of emails on my laptop."

While the contents of her inbox may cause her consternation, Nicky's feathers are far from ruffled by her ownership of Puhi Peaks Station, the country's highest piece of privately owned land situated at the head of the remote Puhi Puhi Valley, north of Kaikoura. Furthermore, her resolute spirit would give most people a run for their money.

Nicky's courageousness has been cultivated through the ending of a 20-year-old marriage and five years later the loss of her much-loved partner Andrew Fyfe, a Wanaka-based climber and photographer with whom she embraced the great outdoors both in New Zealand and Nepal. Andrew was killed at home when he fell out of a tree he was trimming. "I've become very environmentally aware since Andrew's death. When you are the person left behind you have an intense appreciation of nature and all its colours. You become super-aware of just being alive and that dovetails into taking up the opportunity to purchase Puhi Peaks Station in 2007. The gift that Andrew left me was 'this is not a trial run... this is it so don't waste it'. Carpe diem is my absolute motto."

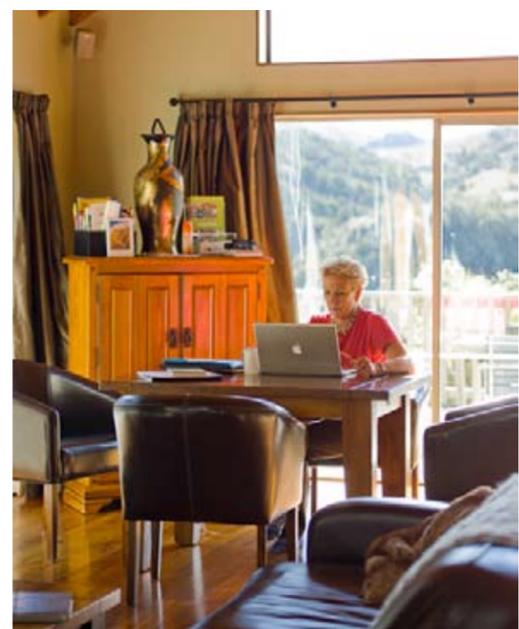
Nicky's three sons had been brought up on a farm at Oxford which was sold. She wanted them to maintain a connection with the land. "Puhi Peaks Station is an extraordinary place. It was meant to be. I'm a great believer in that." When Nicky signed the sale-and-purchase agreement, the challenge before her extended beyond the brain-rattling prospect of how to manage a vast property comprising mountainous bedrock slopes, an alpine basin, native forests, one of only two remaining breeding colonies for the endangered Kaikoura seabird, Hutton's shearwater, a range of ecosystems with diverse





“I CAN RIDE MY WIND TRAINER, DO MY MAKE-UP, TALK ON THE PHONE AND WATCH AN ART DVD ALL AT ONCE!”

building and on the street she asked a doctor how she could help. “I’m okay in a crisis. I’ve done lots of St Johns’ first-aid training. I was able to sit alongside with eirherh nfjty er-hjeo gheklgt oenerklt jnx aweofjkhv hfjhiove lnegek neilgjel neofif je fkej enkiveri gd,vnm. My own house in Christchurch has split in two.”



flora and fauna and lowland country “with not a fence standing”.

In addition it involved a significant tourism venture: Kaikoura Wilderness Walks.

In 2003, while living in Christchurch, Nicky had bought a minority shareholding in the enterprise. A year later the shareholders, in partnership with the then-owners of Puhī Peaks Station, built an eco-friendly guest lodge at 1000 metres on the property and offered guided walks through its dramatic alpine landscape. “I’d always been interested in tourism and someone came along and asked me to come in on the ground floor. My parents from Scotland were among the first guests.”

A trained cordon bleu cook, Nicky says she knew as sole owner of Kaikoura Wilderness Walks she would never find anyone cheaper to work in the lodge kitchen. “I can do fine dining and, having been a farmer’s wife cooking for shearers for 20 years, I can also do speed and bulk!” Other aspects of Nicky’s earlier life ensured she was well equipped for her role as lady proprietor of Puhī Peaks Station, its lodge and walks.

She was born in London to a Kiwi father and a British mother but her sanctuary had always been the wilderness of Scotland. “Each summer we spent our holidays there. I was always itching to get into the hills. My grandfather wouldn’t allow me to shoot until I was 12; that’s when I shot my first stag. My parents live in the Highlands where my mother grew up; this is where I learnt about the beauty of nature.”

After leaving school in England Nicky endured finishing school in Switzerland. “It was incredibly strict but mostly it was fun – between the miserable bits. We learnt heaps, including the importance of supporting each other.” Later she and a friend set off to experience a kibbutz but they disembarked in Tel Aviv as the Yom Kippur war broke out. “My father immediately booked us flights back to London but we refused to get on them. In Israel I had some defining moments. I learnt about war and truth. Dad later told me that he’d accepted then that I was fiercely independent and on my own journey.”

Nicky’s father was in the shipping business and as a young woman she had opportunities to travel with her parents to various locations. “I was lucky to explore Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and the Amazon. Later I worked in Vancouver and Martha’s Vineyard before doing my



A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Kaikoura Wilderness Walks is located on Puhī Peaks Station, a 35-minute drive from Kaikoura or 12 minutes by helicopter. It offers two and three-day guided walks and accommodation at eco-friendly Shearwater Lodge situated high in an alpine valley. The lodge has six rooms, all with en suites. The building timber and contents of the lodge were transported to the remote site by bulldozers and helicopter. The guided walks weave through stands of manuka, kanuka, beech and totara forest. Local birdlife includes the rifleman, warbler, tomtit, falcon, pipit, New Zealand robin, white-eye, fantail, kereru and kingfisher. Deer and chamois are also seen in the vicinity. The walk is overlooked by Te Ao Whēkere (World of the Gods), one of the highest peaks in the Seaward Kaikoura Ranges. Nicky caters for guests at the lodge. Her favourite Cordon Bleu Cook School quote is “Anything is retrievable so long as it’s not black or on the floor.” Another favourite quote is “It’s not the number of breaths you take but the number of moments that take your breath away.” www.kaikourawilderness.co.nz



building and on the street she asked a doctor how she could help. "I'm okay in a crisis. I've done lots of St Johns' first-aid training. I was able to sit alongside uith euirherh nfjty erhjeo gheklgt oenerkt jnx aweofjkkvh hfjhiove lnegek neilgel neoif je fkej enkjveri gd.vnm. My own house in Christchurch has split in two."



year-long cordon bleu training in London." At the age of 24 Nicky embarked on a whistle-stop journey down under but her original six-month stop-off in New Zealand has expanded to 30 years.

Her most recent expedition has centred on sustainability and her stewardship of Puhi Peaks Station has provided an abundant platform. A QEII covenant had been placed on 1000 hectares of the station's steeper land in 2005. "I was a very keen proponent of this. I like the idea that the landowner retains ownership and management of the land but it's protected in perpetuity." Guided deer and chamois hunting on the property from March to July is also important to her sustainable management plan. "We shoot to cull – there is no trophy hunting."

Shearwater Lodge, powered by a small hydro system in the nearby Happy Valley Stream, boasts a top-line eco-friendly sewage and grey-water system. Eighteen months ago Kaikoura Wilderness Walks was awarded Qualmark Environ-Gold in recognition of its sustainable practices.

Nicky's right-hand man at Puhi Peaks Station is her manager, Lance Godfrey, who has always worked in the mountains around the Kaikoura region. In winter months when the property is blanketed in snow Lance maintains the tracks, buildings and power supply. In the summer season he's the main guide on the walks, often assisted by Nicky's sons: Harry, 23, and Sam, 22. Her eldest son James, 26, a helicopter pilot in Australia, has also stepped into the breach when he's received an SOS. "We have up to five part-time staff over the summer. I clean the loos, make the beds and mop the floors with our wonderful helpers. I do the food, then put on my lipstick and turn into the hostess. I believe if you don't do all the jobs that make up a business it's hard to understand what it takes."

While Nicky is unwavering in her commitment to Puhi Peaks Station, she says the current economic climate makes the operation of Kaikoura Wilderness Walks no easy ride. "Exchange rates are enough to exacerbate any good tourism project at the moment and that's before we talk about the killer 15 percent GST or the Christchurch earthquake. It's really hard work. I'm so fortunate

to be surrounded with fantastic mentors and have a great support network. The Kaikoura community has been right behind me but at times I find it pretty tough on my own. That old adage 'a problem shared is a problem halved' is outstandingly true."

But capability is something on which Nicky McArthur is not short. When the February earthquake struck she was in a central-city shop. Once out of the building and on the street she asked a doctor how she could help. "I'm okay in a crisis. I've done lots of St Johns' first-aid training. I was able to sit alongside people who had been injured to try to comfort and reassure them. My own house in Christchurch has split in two."

Back in the eco-friendly township of Kaikoura, where home base is a small cottage near the sea, Nicky is immersed in a Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust project aimed at securing the survival of the unique seabird. Chicks have been carefully removed from their subalpine colony at nearby Kowhai Valley and re-established at a colony on Kaikoura Peninsula where they have the possibility of breeding away from wild pig predation.

There are other causes close to her heart. She is a zealous supporter of rural schools – "they offer the best of family values" – and she'd like to see every young Kiwi resident between the ages of 17 and 25 undertake a compulsory New Zealand year. "Everything from Outward Bound to budgeting, IT, Maori language, kaitiaki, community service, road safety, animal husbandry and care of the land." She also wishes the whole country were members of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and has her fingers crossed that Kaikoura will one day be "plastic-bottle free".

As for Nicky's personal sustainability? "I believe I came of age when I turned 50," she says. Since then there has been a solo backpacking trip to Bolivia ("I suffer big time from wanderlust"), a world age-group triathlon run in Switzerland, regular trips to the north-west hills of Scotland, biking, skiing and pursuing her love of art through the Wellington-based Learning Connexion. She uses the medium as a vehicle for spreading her message about the importance of sustainability in life and has sold a number of a



KAIKOURA'S UNIQUE BIRD

Hutton's shearwater or titi is the only New Zealand seabird that breeds in a subalpine environment. It is classified as nationally endangered because of its rapid decline in numbers. It's not a large bird and fits between your hands. Puhi Peaks Nature Reserve, which is 1000 hectares of QEII-covenanted land at Puhi Peaks Station and is classified as a Significant Natural Area of International Importance, has one of only two remaining Hutton's shearwater colonies. Over the last 1000 years it's believed hundreds of colonies existed in the Seaward Kaikouras and beyond. The arrival of Europeans and pigs, cats and stoats contributed to their decline. Eight colonies were counted in the 1960s. This number has since dropped.

In winter the birds fly to fish-rich waters off the Australian coast. They return to Kaikoura in late August to breed and often have to sit on the snow waiting for it to melt before they can access their burrows. Adult birds fly between 20 and 500 kilometres each day to eat fish and krill in the sea. On their downhill flight they travel at around 154kph, reaching the ocean in less than seven minutes. Since 2005 a third Hutton's shearwater colony has been established on the Kaikoura Peninsula as part of a large-scale community-led recovery programme. In the last two years there have been encouraging signs with the return of some birds to the manmade site. A predator fence installed last year will help. www.huttonsshearwater.org.nz