Friends of Flora Newsletter

AUTUMN EDITION No 135, March 2026

Photo Chrissy Kaneen

In this autumn edition

From the field

David Steel and Steve Waal hard at work trapping on the Cobb ridge. Photo Gerald Bruce-Smith

Megan Wilson & Robin Toy take a break. Photo Maya Mosimann

From the Chair

This newsletter brings stories of huge successes and joy but also devastating news from our alpine zone. FOF's 25th year of restoring the biodiversity of the Flora has been one of extraordinary challenges. Eight months on from the devastating storms that washed out both the Cobb and Graham Valley Roads, access to the Flora is still very limited. Despite this, our wonderful volunteers have continued to service the entire network of 1342 double-set stoat traps, often staying up the hill for multiple nights (91 nights so far). This effort has been critical due to the current irruption of mustelids and rodents.

But this is not all, we've also kept up with FOF's biodiversity monitoring although a few programmes had to be scaled back. This monitoring continues to show the benefits of the trap network. The results of the February walk-through whio survey are spectacular with 16 adults and 2 juveniles in the Flora, and 20 adults, 10 juveniles and 7 ducklings in the Grecian. Twenty-five years ago, there was one single male! Similarly, FOF's camera traps have been 'capturing' footage of roroa, great spotted kiwi, right across the project area. Many of these kiwi are Flora-bred. Twenty-five years ago there were none – just the faint memory of a call on a still night. Few would have believed a group of volunteers could achieve the change in birdlife in the Flora we now see. Thank you to all our volunteers whose huge effort has made it happen.

Whio family in the Grecian in 2026. Photo Peter Born

Continued volunteer work has only been possible due to the efforts of the FOF Committee. The organisation required to co-ordinate multi-day team events has been mind-boggling. I am hugely grateful for the Committee's commitment and mahi. As Peter Olorenshaw explains below, Committee member's innovative solutions to the access difficulties have also substantially reduced the carbon footprint associated with FOF's activities. With the consequences of the climate crisis so evident, we can be proud of this.

Despite the conservation successes, it is a tough time for our precious wildlife. The Mt Arthur giant wētā (see below) is critically threatened and FOF's monitoring shows, that after several years of high mouse numbers in the tussock, it is now teetering on the brink of extinction. Such critters may seem remote and irrelevant given the pressures of daily existence. Why should we care about a nocturnal creature that lives high in the mountains and is rarely seen? It is one of Aotearoa's most charismatic invertebrates — nowhere else in the world has similar gentle 'giants'. It is part of what makes New Zealand unique and special, a kākāpō of the invertebrate world. Personally, my life is enriched by knowing that this extraordinary creature is trundling around in the tussock while I sleep. The hours I have spent with fellow volunteers searching for these wētā and their inky footprints on tracking tunnel cards have been an emotional rollercoaster – exciting and depressing in equal measure, and sometimes just cold! Ecological reasons why we should care are many and complex but the Mt Arthur giant wētā has been at home on Wharepapa|Mt Arthur for millennia. If it goes, the functioning of its habitat will shift. The ecologist, Paul Ehrlich likened loss of species to randomly popping-out rivets from the wing of an aeroplane. Remove one or two and the plane will probably be fine. Remove 10 or 20 or 50 then at some point, that we are entirely unable to predict, there will be a catastrophic failure and the plane will fall from the sky. We do not know what impact loss of the Mt Arthur giant wētā will have but we know it's fate will likely be shared by many other mouse-sensitive species. The alarm bells are clanging loudly.

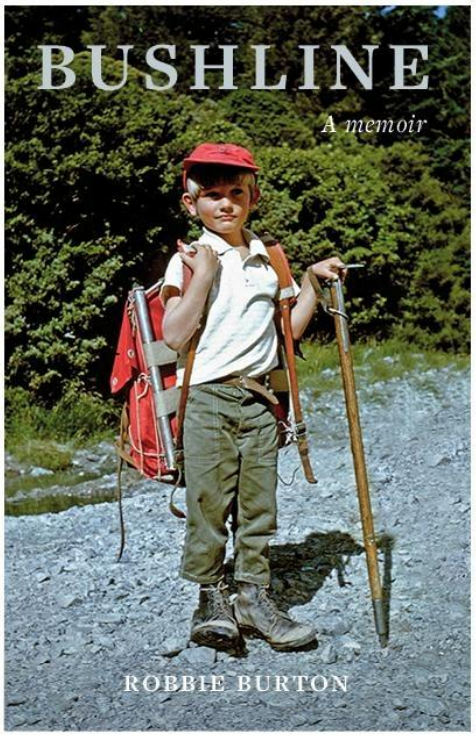
FOF volunteers are highlighting the biodiversity crisis in Wharepapa's alpine habitats. Tools for controlling mice are desperately needed. System-level change is required. Together we must learn how to achieve this. We're now consulting widely to see whether anything can be done.

My thanks to all FOF's volunteers, funders and supporters. You've been doing wonderful things for FOF for 25 years, you are incredible!

Finally, please come along and celebrate 25 years of caring for Kahurangi at FOF's 25th AGM, Upper Moutere Community Hall at 6:30pm on Wednesday 20 May.

FOF celebrates 25 years of conservation achievements

Help us celebrate quarter of a century of volunteer commitment at FOF's 25th AGM: **6:30 pm on Wednesday 20th May at Moutere Hills Community Centre**



A light supper will be served. Please put the date in your schedule. All welcome.

Author, publisher and mountain man, Robbie Burton, will be guest speaker for FOF's 2026 AGM. Robbie is Publisher and Managing Director of Potton & Burton, Aotearoa's most well-known independent publisher of books on natural history and the environment. Through him some of New Zealand's most important (and beautiful) books have been brought to life. His publishing career has given him a unique perspective on how conservation has developed over the last few decades.

Based in Nelson, Robbie's love of Kahurangi and Aotearoa's wild places shines through in his own memoir Bushline, published in 2022. Robbie is a great supporter of FOF and publisher of Caring for Kahurangi, the inspiring story of Friends of Flora.

It will be an evening to remember.

Road Closure brings chance of zero (tailpipe) emission trap servicing

Peter Olorenshaw

I have a trapline up over the back of Mount Arthur with Friends of Flora. In normal circumstances I drive up to Flora car park through the locked gate and all the way into Gridiron in our fossil fuel Daihatsu Rocky. Since June, when the Graham Valley Road to the Flora Carpark was washed out, this option hasn't been available. I biked up there three or four times, but it is a bit of a mission and then you don't have as much time and energy to do your traplines.

But recently Friends of Flora have acquired two NZ-designed UBCO off-road capable, two-wheel drive electric motorbikes for the group to use. So now I can drive our electric Nissan Leaf to the Graham Valley, jump on the e-motorbike and travel into Gridiron for zero (tailpipe) emission trapline servicing! It's great, the stream crossings are a bit more "entertaining" than they are in my Rocky, but it's all doable. And all round better for the environment we are trying to protect.

Editor: The Graham Valley Rd remains closed to the public on foot, by bike or by vehicle. FOF volunteers have a dispensation from DOC to access the Flora by this route for conservation work.

Volunteer in the spotlight

Most of our volunteers are head-down, do-the-work people, but they all deserve to be recognised. We will be introducing one of our volunteers in each newsletter so you can see the amazing people behind Friends of Flora. **Paul Ewers** has been involved with Friends of Flora for the past 25 years – Yes, he is an original. But how did he become such a big part of a group that had only just been established? Paul shares his story with us.

My sister Maryanne Ewers and Bill Rooke got me involved from the very start of FOF with the laying out of the I-trapline. Mary and Bill had the vision. I was really a guy who hunted in the Flora that also liked birds. At first, I couldn't see that what we were doing was going to make any difference. But as FOF grew and more trap lines went in and the support of DOC with 1080 drops, I could see that we could indeed make a difference. The whio are a great example of this with walking into Flora hut and being able to see and hear them and bump into them in the side streams of the Flora now.

I was born and bred in the local area. My early years were on a tobacco farm in Motueka. I did time working in West Australia in farming and mining in my younger years. I also did two years in China establishing kiwifruit orchards. After tobacco was replaced by apples and kiwifruit, I moved into working with them.

From my high school days, I hunted in the Flora and Cobb areas and got the love of being under a beech tree.

For me, doing the kiwi programme with Sandy and Robin Toy has been my best experience with FOF. I was lucky to go into some amazing places in Kahurangi to first survey for kiwi and then go back and help to catch the kiwi for releasing in the Flora. After that the regular tracking and the once a year catching and transmitter changes became an amazing experience. My fingers were too fat to do the transmitter changes, so I did a lot of sitting holding a kiwi while someone else did the tricky stuff.

Sandy and Robin taught us all the skills in handling kiwi and how a restoration project should be run. I think we were all sad the day we took the last transmitter off and stopped our regular trips into the Flora to listen to and count beeps.

25 years on from setting out that first trap line, Paul is still heading far into the park each month and doing his traps. I'm sure he makes the time to sit under those beech trees, listens to the birds and takes in pride in what has been accomplished.

Red Mistletoe (*Peraxilla tetrapetela*) Survey

Laura Parks (DOC), Trevor Lupton, Chris Ecroyd and Henry Hart (FOF)

Background Red mistletoe (*Peraxilla tetrapetala*) grows on mountain beech (*Fuscospora cliffortiodes)* on Starvation Ridge. Anecdotal historical records describe Starvation Ridge as a blaze of red during mistletoe flowering season, but decades of possum and ungulate browse may have drastically reduced the population. Landscape-scale possum ground control in the Flora catchment aiming at *Powelliphanta* recovery commenced 1993-1994. Subsequent aerial 1080 operations commencing in 2014 have kept possum populations at low levels. With low possum browse-pressure mistletoe are slowly becoming more conspicuous.

Initial Survey December 2021 - In the summer of 2021-2022 a survey of red mistletoe was undertaken to indicate the extent and general health (broad size classes, browse /dieback) of a sample of the Starvation Ridge population. Laura Parks, Steve Deverell (DOC), and Chris Ecroyd (FOF volunteer) completed the initial survey and monitoring on 18th– 20th December 2021.

A total of 89 mistletoes were located. Noteworthy finds were 3 separate small individual red mistletoe growing on outer branches of black beech which would appear to be evidence of recruitment taking place in this population, as all other individuals were on the main stem of the host tree. It is likely that when the seed is dispersed by birds, it would land on these outer branches and over several years the plant makes its way to the main stem of the host. Steve remarked that this was the first evidence of recruitment he had observed in 25 years of monitoring.

Red mistletoe flowers and leaves showing some insect damage and leaf blisters which are characteristic of red mistletoe

Surveys December 2022 and 2023 - 45 of the 89 plants measured in 2021 were within ungulate browse height (at or below 2 m in height) and were included in the data set to measure in 2022. Deer browse in 2021 was recorded on 7 of 48 individuals within browse height. This equates to 14.5% of all plants available to ungulate browsers having some degree of browse on them. In 2022, 28% of plants were browsed. In December 2023 the number of browsed plants was again significantly higher than in the previous years' monitoring, with 58% of plants within ungulate browse height having been browsed to some degree.

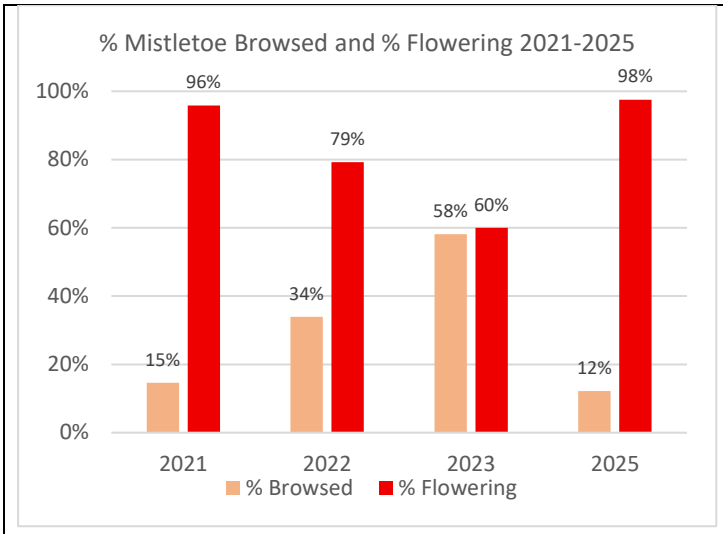
Mistletoe flowering can vary from year to year. In the 2021 survey 96% of red mistletoe was flowering. This reduced to 79% in 2022 and 60% on 2023.

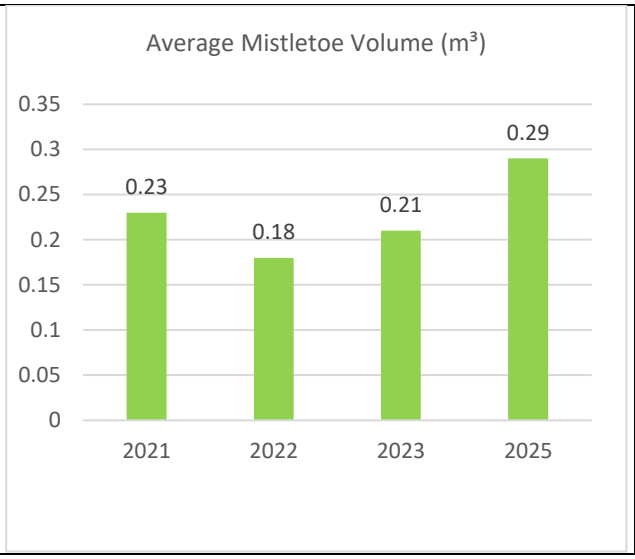
Mistletoe Survey January 2026 - This survey had been planned for December 2025 but was postponed due to unsuitable weather. The survey was conducted by FOF volunteers Trevor Lupton, Chris Ecroyd and Henry Hart. Laura Parks provided the methodology, recording sheets and previous survey data. A total of 41 mistletoes below 2 m were surveyed. The number was down from previous years due to 9 mistletoes having died since the original 2021 survey. Three new mistletoes were located. All were below 0.5 m from the ground indicating minimal browsing.

Ungulate browse had reduced since 2023 with only 5 out 41 mistletoes showing browsing damage (12%), a similar level of browse to 2021. The average volume of the mistletoes and level of flowering had also returned to 2021 levels or higher. No possum browse was observed.

Overall, our view was the mistletoes appeared healthy with generally good vigour. Since 2021, 9 mistletoes have died out of around 50 plants. Mistletoe death was related to host tree or host branch dieback. Offsetting this, 9 new mistletoes have been found and added to the survey.

Future Surveys - This is now a FOF project including data management and reporting which will be shared with DOC. Laura remains involved with technical guidance.





Note: The January 2026 data is presented as "2025" for consistency

Chris Ecroyd measuring mistletoe canopy volume and shoot length while Henry Hart estimates mistletoe and black beech canopy fill.

Old ungulate browse, probably the worst observed.

Disaster in the Alpine

Way back in 2016, Lesley Hadley, one of FOF's most committed volunteers, took on the mantle of FOF's champion of alpine fauna. Nationally, the alpine zone occupies around 8 percent of Aotearoa's land area yet supports around 40 percent of invertebrates.

We developed a project to determine how one of New Zealand's iconic invertebrates, the Mt Arthur giant wētā, was faring. The wētā occurs in tussock grasslands on just a few mountains in Kahurangi National Park, and the Flora is a known hotspot. Little else is known about these critters.

FOF's alpine project involves 100 tracking tunnels set in three transects: one at around 1350 m asl on Wharepapa ridge, another higher up the ridge at 1500 m and the third on the Tableland at 1300 m. Four times

over the summer an inked tracking card is set in each unbaited tunnel for a fortnight. Any critter walking through a tunnel, gets ink on its feet and leaves signature footprints on the white card. FOF has set these cards in all but one summer since 2016. Recently the cards told a shocking story, particularly on the Tableland transect:

- 2023 – 50% of cards had giant wētā footprints
- 2024 - 60% cards had giant wētā footprints
- 2025 - 35% cards had giant wētā footprints
- 2026 - 1% cards had giant wētā footprints

The proportion of cards with mouse footprints has risen over the same period.

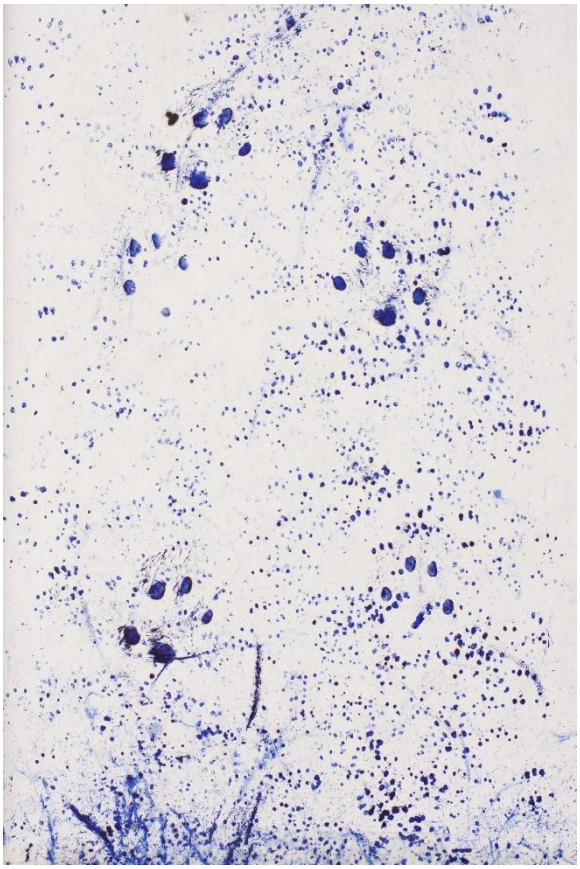
The Mt Arthur giant wētā has all but gone from this area — it is hard to avoid the conclusion we are monitoring to extinction.

Mt Arthur giant wētā nymph. Photo Ruedi Mosimann

FOF's alpine project also monitors alpine gecko's and skinks using tracking tunnels baited with tinned pear. These cards also show a horrifying decline with tracking by the Kahurangi gecko down 44% on last year.

Kahurangi gecko footprints on a tracking card. Photo Ruedi Mosimann

DOC have recently published a review of the threat status of New Zealand's reptiles. The conclusion is appalling — ***unmanaged mainland populations will continue to decline towards extinction without fundamental systemic change***. The authors note that predation by mice is a likely cause and that no mouse control tools suitable for use at landscape-scale on the mainland are available**.**



Mouse and stoat prints on an alpine tracking tunnel in the Flora. Photo Ruedi Mosimann.

Kiwi antics

The network of trailcams that we put out to record pests continue to astonish us with non-pest sightings. These two kiwi wandered past one of the cameras making a repetitive grunting noise. They disappeared stage-right with much scrunching of the leaf litter. We're not sure what that's all about, but suspect amour. You can hear them at https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1JN2Q61wnV/ Both birds were unbanded, so Flora-bred.

Later the same night, this female hurried across in front of the camera and called with the male responding immediately. Quite ear-splitting at such close range! We regularly post clips of such videos on Facebook.

A Friends of Flora Thank you.

Chrissy Kaneen, Newsletter editor

On behalf of FOF, I would like to pass on a huge thank you to all our sponsors, supporters and volunteers who enable us to work in & for the flora and fauna in an amazing part of New Zealand.

If you have ideas, tips, questions, stories, or photos to share for our next newsletter please feel free to email me @ chrissy2410@gmail.com