

OF BLESSINGS AND BIRDS

Words by Claire Nelson & Photographs by Angela Terrell

Kiwi-spotting on Stewart Island.

The day I crossed the Foveaux Strait to Stewart Island, the seas were wild enough to thwart the fishermen of Bluff in their day's catch of world-famous oysters, and send fellow ferry passengers into periods of nausea-induced stillness.

Mind you, stillness is good practice for New Zealand's third-largest island. Stewart Island, or Rakiura (Māori for 'Glowing Skies'), is not the kind of place where you need to rush. Outside of the main port settlement of Oban, much of its 674 square miles of hilly, dense forest is designated as a national park. The major draw for visitors is tramping, with the two-to-three-day Rakiura Track being one of the country's official Great Walks.

This had, in fact, been my reason for coming here; a bonus hike at the end of walking New Zealand's Te Araroa, a long distance trail that wends its way from Cape Reinga to Bluff. But after five months traversing the jagged mountain ranges, cattle stations and damp backcountry of the North and South Islands, I was, well... rather tired. I had knees that popped like bubble wrap. There were holes in my shoes. I had no more gusto left for hefting a rucksack onto my back.

Rakiura instead became a place for rest and recuperation, a fine spot for doing very little; it's practically the antidote to our modern-day paradox of choice. There is one town, Oban. It has one pub, with a hotel attached. One hostel. One grocery store. A community centre. A museum. An outdoor gear shop. A (very good) fish and chip stand. But, with a population of just 408, Rakiura's locals are vastly outnumbered by the island's other key residents, some 20,000 kiwis (of the bird variety) – more than a quarter of the population in existence.

The island offers a more protected environment than the mainland, with far fewer people and less historic industry, yet even here these flightless birds have - like all of the country's natives (there is only one native mammal, and it's a bat) - been ravaged by invasive species, notably ferrets, rats and possums. As of 2025, Rakiura is approaching the end of a four-year predator eradication project, the size and complexity of which would be a world first. New Zealand is on a mission to get the whole country predator-free by 2050 – a spectacularly ambitious but crucial goal, given how embedded these pests have become. I had seen plenty of possums, rats and stoats in the New Zealand bush in my lifetime, but never a kiwi. Rakiura, then, could be my chance.

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Like a lot of good intel, mine came from a bloke in the pub: from his perch at the bar he told me I had a good chance of spotting a kiwi if I hung around the local rugby field after dark. And so that's how I found myself standing in a sports field at 10pm, quietly soaking in a drizzling rain, waiting for a bird that may or may not show. The absurdity of this (not to mention the obvious comedy punchline of looking for a kiwi on a rugby field) would've made me think he'd been pulling my leg, had there not been a few other people doing the same thing, standing scattered, still and silent in the dark. We'd all received the same guidance somewhere; those of us who clutched head-torches had them switched to a red beam so we didn't disturb the wildlife. I was determined not to make any false moves. You're only standing in a rugby field on Stewart Island in the rain once.





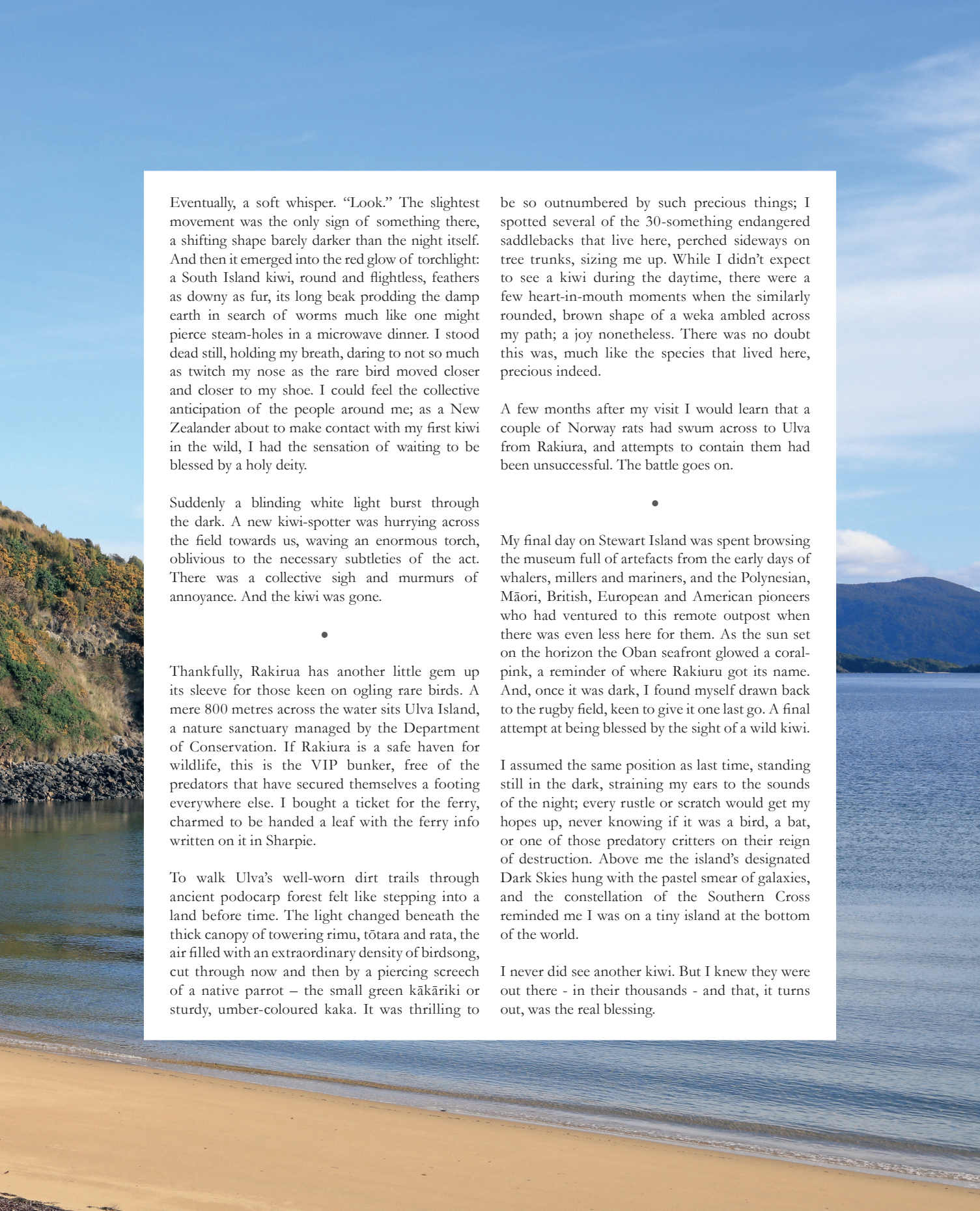


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Eventually, a soft whisper. “Look.” The slightest movement was the only sign of something there, a shifting shape barely darker than the night itself. And then it emerged into the red glow of torchlight: a South Island kiwi, round and flightless, feathers as downy as fur, its long beak prodding the damp earth in search of worms much like one might pierce steam-holes in a microwave dinner. I stood dead still, holding my breath, daring to not so much as twitch my nose as the rare bird moved closer and closer to my shoe. I could feel the collective anticipation of the people around me; as a New Zealander about to make contact with my first kiwi in the wild, I had the sensation of waiting to be blessed by a holy deity.

Suddenly a blinding white light burst through the dark. A new kiwi-spotter was hurrying across the field towards us, waving an enormous torch, oblivious to the necessary subtleties of the act. There was a collective sigh and murmurs of annoyance. And the kiwi was gone.

Thankfully, Rakirua has another little gem up its sleeve for those keen on ogling rare birds. A mere 800 metres across the water sits Ulva Island, a nature sanctuary managed by the Department of Conservation. If Rakiura is a safe haven for wildlife, this is the VIP bunker, free of the predators that have secured themselves a footing everywhere else. I bought a ticket for the ferry, charmed to be handed a leaf with the ferry info written on it in Sharpie.

To walk Ulva’s well-worn dirt trails through ancient podocarp forest felt like stepping into a land before time. The light changed beneath the thick canopy of towering rimu, tōtara and rata, the air filled with an extraordinary density of birdsong, cut through now and then by a piercing screech of a native parrot – the small green kākārīki or sturdy, umber-coloured kaka. It was thrilling to

be so outnumbered by such precious things; I spotted several of the 30-something endangered saddlebacks that live here, perched sideways on tree trunks, sizing me up. While I didn’t expect to see a kiwi during the daytime, there were a few heart-in-mouth moments when the similarly rounded, brown shape of a weka ambled across my path; a joy nonetheless. There was no doubt this was, much like the species that lived here, precious indeed.

A few months after my visit I would learn that a couple of Norway rats had swum across to Ulva from Rakiura, and attempts to contain them had been unsuccessful. The battle goes on.

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My final day on Stewart Island was spent browsing the museum full of artefacts from the early days of whalers, millers and mariners, and the Polynesian, Māori, British, European and American pioneers who had ventured to this remote outpost when there was even less here for them. As the sun set on the horizon the Oban seafront glowed a coral-pink, a reminder of where Rakiuru got its name. And, once it was dark, I found myself drawn back to the rugby field, keen to give it one last go. A final attempt at being blessed by the sight of a wild kiwi.

I assumed the same position as last time, standing still in the dark, straining my ears to the sounds of the night; every rustle or scratch would get my hopes up, never knowing if it was a bird, a bat, or one of those predatory critters on their reign of destruction. Above me the island’s designated Dark Skies hung with the pastel smear of galaxies, and the constellation of the Southern Cross reminded me I was on a tiny island at the bottom of the world.

I never did see another kiwi. But I knew they were out there - in their thousands - and that, it turns out, was the real blessing.