

Rangitoto ki te Tonga
D'Urville Island.
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D'URVILLE DELIGHTS

Eco-tour guides Rose and Will Parsons are passionate trappers, and their travel company is supporting community-led efforts to remove stoats from Rangitoto ki te Tonga.



Will and Rose Parsons.

Owners of Driftwood Eco Tours, Rose and Will Parsons have been running sustainable tours to some of the most rugged and remote parts of the South Island for 16 years.

One of their most popular is a five-day “trip of a lifetime” to New Zealand’s eighth-largest island – Rangitoto ki te Tonga D’Urville Island, in the Marlborough Sounds.

Rose’s family have a deep connection with the area. Her great-grandparents chose to settle in a beautiful and remote part of the Sounds near French Pass, where

Rose attended the local 20-pupil school until her teenage years.

The family farm overlooked the southern end of D’Urville Island, which was named after a French explorer and is rich in Māori and Pākehā history, as well as home to interesting wildlife.

Most of the island is covered in native bush, regenerating farmland, and coastal broadleaf and beech forest under the protection of the Department of Conservation.

On the western and northern end are steep hill country farms running high-quality sheep and cattle. DOC says the island has “exceptional ecological values” because it’s rat, possum, goat, and weasel-free, but stoats and deer are a problem.

D’Urville is surrounded by several beautiful offshore islands, some of which are under strict conservation management, including Takapourewa Stephen’s Island, home to 50,000 tuatara.

Just 800m separates D’Urville from the mainland, but once you are there it’s like stepping back in time.

“The island is just a 15-minute two-vehicle ferry ride from the village of French Pass, but once you cross that water you are in another world,” says Rose.

“It is the real New Zealand, with a population of around 50 residents spread around its coastline.”

Meeting some of the people who choose to live in this remote environment, whether farming, fishing, or saving native species, is a highlight for Driftwood’s visitors to the island.

The French Pass was once on the busy trade route from Nelson to Wellington, and you will also hear many stories of ship wrecks, explorers, whalers, and early settlers.

In earlier times, it was a leading centre for the production and trade of quality argillite tools used by Māori for vegetable cultivation, waka building, and weaponry.

The Parsons were already running a successful eco-tourism business when they decided to offer eco tours to D’Urville Island in 2017.

They wanted to give something back and support the tiny community’s 16-year effort to rid the island of stoats.

“Stoats have contributed to the local extinction of little spotted kiwi, yellow-crowned kākārīki, and South Island kākā,” explains Will.

“An important population of pekapeka South Island long-tailed bats is also at risk.”

After witnessing the benefits of trapping predators at their own property, Rose and Will jumped at the chance to support a community-led stoat eradication project on Rangitoto ki te Tonga.

Driftwood Eco Tours began donating \$300 from each of their island tours to the D’Urville Island Stoat Eradication Charitable Trust (DISECT).

Eradicating every single stoat



South Island fernbirds were discovered by Will and Rose on their Marlborough property. © Will Parsons

is a challenging project, given the rugged terrain and the 16,782ha island being about 15 times bigger than other islands previously cleared of stoats.

In some good news, the trust recently received a significant \$3.1m funding boost from Predator Free 2050 Limited and others to ramp up their efforts over the next six years.

DISECT chairman Oliver Sutherland says the trust’s relationship with Will and Rose has been beneficial for both sides.

“Having our trustees share our ambitious goal with visitors to the island not only draws attention to

the problem of predators but also demonstrates that something can be done about it,” he says.

“Given the special biodiversity we have here in New Zealand, it’s critical that people understand the nature of the threats and what we can do to help.

“The more people understand what’s going on, the more likely they are to support similar projects in their own backyards.”

The Parsons know this from their own predator-control work on their family property over the past two decades.

From 1999 until recently, the Parsons lived on a wetland property along the Ōpaoa River in the lower Wairau Valley, Marlborough.

Not long after they moved onto the property, Will, an avid birdwatcher and photographer, spotted a South Island fernbird, a small, long-tailed songbird with a declining population in New Zealand because of diminishing habitat.

Excited by the discovery, Will put a photo of it up on New Zealand Birds Online, and the Department of Conservation soon responded.

“It was big news because most people thought there were no fernbirds left in this area,” Will says.

“The Department of Conservation told us they were possibly the only ones to be found between Havelock and Oamaru.

“Needless to say, it certainly heightened our feeling of kaitiakitanga and responsibility to look after the place.”

Will and Rose began a trapping programme on their property and caught more than 100 ferrets,



Some of the wildlife found on D’Urville Island. © Driftwood Eco Tours

stoats, and hedgehogs using DOC200 predator traps.

“We quickly noticed other birds and wildlife on our property, with the appearance of some unusual wading birds, such as the glossy ibis and Australasian bittern.”

Today, thanks to the Parsons’ hard work, the birdlife on the property is significant, and the wetland and bush is protected by a QEII covenant.

Want to find out more about visiting D’Urville Island? See www.driftwoodecotours.co.nz or ring Will and Rose on 0800 708 844.



Beach at Mo Awhitu, D’Urville Island. © Tamzin Henderson

Will explains the local history of the island, with views over Port Hardy. © Tamzin Henderson