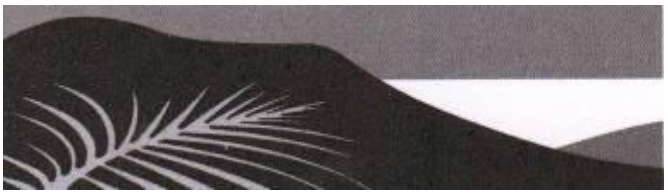

Windy Hill Sanctuary Newsletter #50 June 2026

Kia ora

The time has now come for me to step down from my role as the Windy Hill Rosalie Bay Catchment Trust and Windy Hill Sanctuary Manager - work that I have remained steadfastly committed to for a long time. This moment brings with it a mix of pride, gratitude, and reflection on what has been an extraordinary chapter of my life.

Reflections

At 19, you never imagine that buying a share in a large remote property on Aotea Great Barrier Island will lead, by your mid-forties, to you living there, beginning a pest management project, and then devoting nearly three decades of your life to that work.

Sanctuary Open Day 2003

You don't imagine that you will be an employer of up to seven people at a time, be raising up to $300k per annum, be tuned in to cat scats, have a gun licence, and that the hunter in you will come alive. You don't imagine this place will become your turangawaewae.

I purchased my share of 230 hectares in the Little Windy Hill Company in 1972. Back then conservation was about stopping the subdividing of land and the clearing of native bush. By the mid-nineties it was clear that it was invasive animal pests that were decimating our bush and native species. Through the Government NZ Biodiversity Strategy (2000) private landowners were called to work alongside DoC to halt the waning of the county's unique biodiversity. The shareholders of the Little Windy Hill Company picked up that challenge in 1998.

Aotea Great Barrier is rat heaven – with only feral cats as their main predator the numbers here are classified as 'plague'. Over the 27 years of active rat management in Windy Hill Sanctuary more than 70,000 rats have been trapped with an estimated 100,000 removed using bait. What began in 1999 with 100 rat traps and a part time worker mushroomed over time into a collective of 58 landowners, a dedicated field team of up to five people, 6000 devices to cull rats and feral cats spread over 800 HA, sustained feral pig management, a comprehensive monitoring programme, and an exciting research and development focus.

NI robin translocation Mokoia Is 2008

Together - landowners, the Trustees, the field and admin teams - we have transformed Windy Hill Sanctuary into a thriving and respected ecological and community asset. Over nearly three decades, I have had the privilege of working alongside passionate trustees, dedicated volunteers, supportive community members, and committed landowner partners who all shared a common goal: to protect, restore, and celebrate this special environment.

The engine room of the Sanctuary has been a fantastic field team, 43 individuals engaged over time, who have diligently set thousands of rat traps and bait stations, cleared tracks and weeds, monitored species, often covering 15-20 kms a day to do so. What a pleasure to watch new team members grow into conservation professionals and to have several people who cut their conservation teeth at Windy Hill now leading other community projects.

Sanctuary of NZ conference Windy Hill 2010

Other highlights that stand out include:

- Strengthening biodiversity, including the return of North Island robins, and enjoying abundant bird, lizard, and invertebrate life.
- Building an extraordinary data base – we now have a knowledge base for birds, lizards, invertebrates, and weta that is 20+ years in length. Rat monitoring extends to 25 years.
- Working alongside a range of expert researchers at Windy Hill identifying plants, fungi, moss, lichens, orchids, and freshwater species. The growing knowledge of what's here contributes significantly to the Aotea knowledge base of species.
- Incredible funding support – most noteworthy is Foundation North's ongoing commitment of over $1m. Aotea Great Barrier Local Board has been a long-time supporter and Auckland Council's more recent support has been outstanding.
- Establishing strong governance practices that ensured the Trust remained sustainable, transparent, and resilient over time.
- Building meaningful partnerships with landowners, local authorities, iwi, environmental groups, and funding supporters.

These achievements were never the work of one person—they reflect the collective effort, perseverance, and belief of many - our Trustees, landowners, and field team.

The journey has not been without its challenges. Environmental pressures—such as new invasive species like myrtle rust, weather events, and the impacts of climate change have tested our resolve. Securing funding has been a constant effort, requiring creativity, persistence, and advocacy. Governance itself evolved over the years, bringing its own complexities as expectations, regulations, and community needs changed.

At times, decisions were difficult, and progress felt slow. But those challenges also strengthened the Trust and the field team, encouraging adaptability, collaboration, and long-term thinking. As my Dad used to say, 'all character building'.

Conservation Week 2019

I will remain engaged as a Trustee with the confidence that Lou Mack, the new Trust Manager, will carry on the mahi of restoration, community engagement, and fund raising with integrity and expertise. The handover has been gradual, two and a half years has been allowed for her to gather the reigns and for me to let them go.

This role has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I have learned so much about environmental stewardship, governance, leadership, collaborating with iwi, and the power

of community. I have loved learning how our bush evolves and about the interactions between species. I have formed lasting friendships and witnessed firsthand what can be achieved when people come together with a shared purpose and passion.

There have been moments of immense satisfaction: fitting transmitters to juvenile kaka so we can track where ours go, being awarded a QSM for services to conservation, and the simple joy of finding baby Pacific geckos in my letterbox. There have also been moments of fatigue and doubt—but always outweighed by a sense of purpose because once we started on this journey, we couldn't stop, not until Aotea Great Barrier is pest free allowing our stunning range of native species to really thrive. It makes my heart sing that we now have Iwi leadership to restore the mauri of Aotea through pest eradication.

As I pass the flame, I do so with confidence in the future of the Trust and Windy Hill Sanctuary. The foundations are strong, and the commitment of those involved remains unwavering. I encourage continued support—from volunteers, landowner and funding partners, and the wider community—so that the Sanctuary can continue to flourish.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of this journey, in particular my husband Scott and my son, Guy, who have backed me all the way.

Nga mihi Mahana,
Judy Gilbert
Trustee & Nana to be!

Aotea Conservation Park Committee & Minister Sage 2020

Field team -Paul, Norman, Damian, Corey, June 2026

Aotea / Great Barrier Local Board
Auckland Council

FOUNDATION NORTH
Pūtea Hāpai Oranga
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Auckland Council
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Scott Macindoe – Funding
Phibbs & Co – Pro Bono accounts
Kelvin Floyd – Mapping
Andy Saunders - Website
Guy Macindoe – Videography

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