

PICTURES OF BLUE DUCK and the golden tussocks of the Lindis Pass decorate the walls of Forest and Bird's Christchurch office, an eyrie in the rambling stone buildings of the Arts Centre. The purple flowers of an orchid cascade down the bookshelves while tomes on forest ecology and alpine vegetation jostle for space with a large collection of maps. All hint at the preoccupations and passions of Forest and Bird's South Island field officer, Mike Harding.

While working at Arthur's Pass in the late 1980s for the Departments of Lands and Survey and then Conservation, Mike earned the sobriquet "Mother Duck". Almost daily he would pedal an old mountain bike up the incline to the Pass to check on the local blue duck or whio population in the Otira River valley.

"They got no private life, those poor ducks," says a friend. "Mike used to spend hours wandering up and down the riverbed observing them every evening after work and in his weeks off when he job shared." The research project which Mike began out of personal interest in 1987 has provided useful insights into the survival and distribution of high-country whio.

BORN AND RAISED in Wellington, Mike has been a Mainlander since migrating to Dunedin for university studies in 1980. Stimulated by summer holiday work at Mt Cook and a stint overseas, and having gained a basic understanding of botany, zoology and geology, he switched from science to the parks and recreation management course at Lincoln.

Most of his scientific method and expertise has therefore been self taught. It has been inspired by a deep curiosity about the natural environment and endless hours tramping and wandering in the mountain lands of the Southern Alps.

In the 1970s and 1980s natural history research was a low priority at Lands and Survey's Arthur's Pass field centre. Mike's enthusiasm and hard work during his three years there saw flora and fauna work gradually given more funding and staff time.

Friends recall Mike organising people to spend bone-chilling winter nights listening for kiwi calling near the township. "Locals knew there were kiwi in the valley but no one knew where they were,



SEAN WEAVER

Mike Harding on a vegetation survey of the Lower Kowai River. "One of the things I enjoy most is observing the natural environment, just working out the ecology of it."

Basin, the dramatic prelude to the national park. "The high country's a fantastic place to spend time in," says Mike. "It's expansive and has a wilderness character of its own because it has relatively few human structures."

IT WAS THIS INVOLVEMENT in high country issues which led to his coming to work for Forest and Bird in 1989. But exchanging mountain vistas and the damp smell of beech forest for Christchurch's cultivated landscapes and malodorous winter smog was a difficult decision.

Of slight build, quietly spoken and with a modest and unassuming manner Mike is respected by South Island conservationists and bureaucrats for his tenacity and well researched arguments.

The high country has continued as a theme in Mike's work for Forest and Bird. He has been the driving energy behind the proposed Torlesse conservation park near Porters Pass, currently being investigated by the Department of Conservation (see *Forest & Bird* November 1990). He lobbied successfully to expedite protection of one of the few remnants of Hall's totara and the woodlands which once covered the drier slopes of the Mackenzie Basin on Ruataniwha Station (*Forest & Bird* February and *Conservation News* July this year) and coordinated the society's work on DoC's tar management policies.

The meagre number of protected areas in the vastness of the high country rankles. "The few mountain tops, pocket handkerchief reserves and the odd more extensive ones which have been set aside are inadequate, not just for nature conservation but also for providing a baseline against which changes can be measured".

He points to the difficulties scientists and researchers, investigating the relationship between soils and the introduced and rapidly spreading hawkweed (*Hieracium* spp.), had in finding an area of high country soil which had not been grazed by either sheep or rabbits.

Though resident in Christchurch, Mike thinks of Arthur's Pass as home – a place of physical and mental rejuvenation and a base from which to continue his whio research. A population of *Ra-*

LIFE IN THE FIELD

As a large national conservation organisation, Forest and Bird maintains four regional offices.

EUGENIE SAGE talked to our Christchurch field officer, Mike Harding.

how many there were, and what they did," Mike says. The project was a first in providing information on population size and distribution.

Mike found himself becoming increasingly involved in the politics of the South Island high country. While living at Arthur's Pass he regularly fronted up at planning hearings in a personal capacity to object to local forestry proposals. These threatened to mar the tawny landscapes and character of the upper Waimakariri