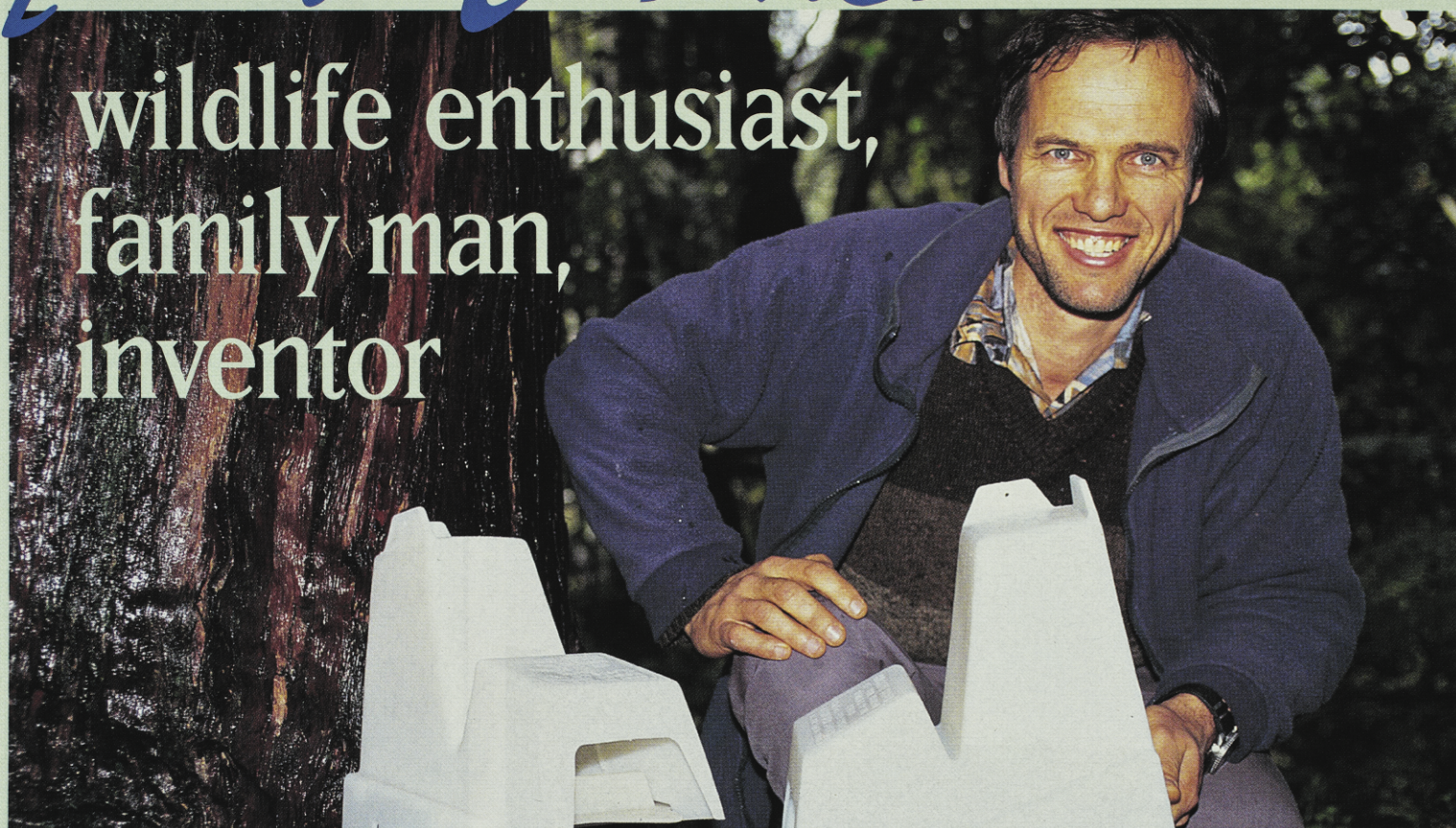


Phil Thomson

wildlife enthusiast,
family man,
inventor



SHAUN BARNETT

IT WAS THE KEA that captured his eye and his imagination during a school visit some 30 years ago by an officer from the Wildlife Service. From that moment, eight-year-old Phil Thomson became bird-crazy.

Phil still had that kea in mind when he left school at 17 to become a Wildlife Service cadet. "I spent the next four years working throughout New Zealand, at times based on Little Barrier Island, then managing takahe in the Murchison Mountains and following kakapo in Fiordland and Stewart Island," he says. "I was also involved in transferring Chatham Island parea [pigeon] from the main island to a predator-free island."

Phil rapidly discovered that protecting the native wildlife he loved meant being prepared to kill their introduced predators and competitors. Invariably he endured long hours of drudgery, cramped living quarters and unpleasant working conditions.

"I remember during a cat control project to protect kakapo on Stewart

**FIONA EDWARDS
talks to a conservation
officer who is, by his
own admission, mildly
eccentric and totally
absorbed with inventing
killer contraptions
to protect native
wildlife.**

Island, Susan (his wife), another worker and I lived in a six by eight foot, unlined garden shed, in a south-facing gully at the lower end of the island. Every day we'd be up at first light – usually woken by rain falling on our tin shed. We'd pick up a load of fish and attempt, with our faces plastered with sandflies and our hands

numb with cold, to inject the fish with 1080 solution. But the 'best' part was crawling across the island laying baits in strategic locations where we thought a cat might find them."

Before the poisoning operations began, Phil says almost half the remaining kakapo on Stewart Island had been killed by feral cats in a 12-month period.

Eleven years with the Wildlife Service eventually saw Phil move to the Waikato and initiate the new Department of Conservation's kokako management project at Mapara Wildlife Reserve, south of Te Kuiti. This highly successful project (see article page 12) controlling possums and rats to extremely low levels has allowed kokako numbers to increase – with more than 100 chicks born in the last five years. Less well known are the estimated increases in the numbers of other birds at Mapara. Tui numbers are five times greater; bellbirds, three and a half times greater; and kereru, two and a half times greater than in nearby unmanaged forests.