



## OBITUARY

**Melvyn (Mel) Peter Galbraith**

15 March 1953 – 28 September 2023

*Kāore te kūmara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka*

Dr Mel Galbraith, who passed away on 28 September 2023, left Aotearoa with an unmatched legacy in the lives of those he taught and nurtured, and in the habitats and species that he protected through his leadership and hard work. Natural history was, in his own words, his life's great passion. His career in science, teaching, and conservation spanned 46 years, and include notable achievements in significant conservation projects such as Tiritiri Matangi and Motu Kaikōura, educational leadership at Glenfield College and Unitec (Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka), as well as substantial contributions to the New Zealand Ecological Society and the New Zealand Ornithological Society. For those of us who worked alongside him, or were taught by him, the lasting impression he has left in our lives is not just a passion for the conservation of Aotearoa's special species and places, but also a model of how to move through life with humour, love, and humility. Along with the achievements and anecdotes we describe here, his memory lives on in the lives and ambitions of his students, friends, colleagues, and family, who live out the values that he shared with us.

Mel was born on the Ides of March 1953, at the Naval Hospital in Devonport, North Shore. He spent his childhood and young adult life in Takapuna, along with his older sister, Janet, and brother Stuart. His sense of wonder and careful observation of the natural world around him was evident from

his earliest toddler years. The rock pools at Takapuna Beach and the shorelines of Lake Pupuke and Rangitoto Island were his outdoor classrooms, where he first developed his scientific skills. Critical to nurturing his curiosity and fostering his passion was his uncle, John Whittle. According to his sister, John taught them in “the old-fashioned way” by making them learn the Latin names and recording the places of origin for their collections.

He attended Takapuna Primary, Belmont Intermediate, and Takapuna Grammar. Mel delighted in the holidays as it gave him many opportunities to go on caravan holidays around the North Island with his mum, Myrtle, and his dad, (Duncan) Joe Galbraith. His parents, warmly supportive of his natural history interests, allowed him to choose their destinations dependent on the potential ornithological finds. On these trips he methodically collected, and often recorded, observational data about any bird species he identified. His dad further encouraged him and created opportunities by arranging for Mel to go out with local farmers in the Albany area to observe what birds were on their farms. Over the years, as Mel's ecological awareness broadened and his understanding of biodiversity connectedness grew, his career compass was set.

Pursuing his passions, he enrolled in a Bachelor of Science at Auckland University in 1971, majoring in zoology, supported by botany, geology, and chemistry. In 1975 he completed a Diploma of Teaching, through Auckland College of Education, before continuing to a Master of Science majoring in zoology (Research topic: *Variation in the song of the chaffinch*, *Fringilla coelebs*, with particular reference to dialectical patterns), graduating with honours in 1977. At the time of his death, Mel was writing up the conclusion for his Doctorate, studying through Auckland University of Technology. His thesis, a socioecological study, explored how restoration stakeholders and practitioners measure ecological restoration success. He has since been awarded his PhD posthumously, with his daughters accepting the honour on his behalf.

Mel's career in education began in Whangārei at Kamo High School 1976–1978, before he moved back to teach in Auckland in territory that was more familiar to him, ending up at Glenfield College in 1979. Mel loved sharing his love of the natural world with his students and there is no doubt that his measured, patient, and non-judgemental nature made him a much-loved classroom teacher.

He was an early adopter; computers were just becoming a thing in the 1980s and while most were pecking their way around a keyboard with their pointer fingers, Mel was already working out how to write code. He even developed a database system that was used by Glenfield College for many years. He had a knack for that kind of thing. Mel was a problem solver and he loved getting the bit between his teeth and working his way through problems, whether it was designing a set of wooden blinds, manipulating software, or building an entire basement in his house; he was methodical, patient, and remarkably good at it.

As a teacher, the things he loved more than anything were the field trips. As a result, his students did too. There was no better forum for sharing his passion with his numerous

students than to actually be there with them in the field, in the present, and all too often in the rain. He called it teaching by osmosis, and it was probably the best teaching there is. More than once Mel would remark: “isn’t it wonderful that we’re being paid to do this.”

Over the years, Mel took hundreds of school kids over to Tiritiri Matangi Island on tree planting expeditions and occasionally for two or three days at a time to help build tracks, plant trees or band grey-faced petrels at night. His students fondly remember the time he spent planning every part of those trips in detail, ensuring every attendee had what they needed and making sure they were included in all activities. He was so proud of that island—and these experiences were often transformative for the students, as it helped them find their place in the world and discover hidden talents.

Field trips were just another way of extending the knowledge and love of nature that made up such a huge part of Mel’s life. He was a lifelong member and regional representative of Birds NZ (NZ Ornithological Society) and was instrumental in the establishment of the Miranda Naturalist Trust.

In 1995, Mel led (along with other teachers) the first translocation of hihi (stitchbird), from Te Hauturu-a-toi (Hauturu, Little Barrier Island), to Tiritiri Matangi. Mel’s vision, which he enacted, was for a multi-disciplinary exercise at the school that harnessed the diverse talents of many students. With the oversight of the Department of Conservation, he organised for the biology students to write a management plan for the hihi, and for them to receive training in mist-netting birds. The students then spent a fortnight on Hauturu catching hihi in preparation for their transfer and release.

It didn’t stop there. Mel organised the technology department to make the nest boxes, the art department to design a logo for the project, the Māori department to write a waiata for the release of this taonga, and the English department to write it all up as a journalistic exercise that was published in an in-house magazine. There could be no better example of integrated cross-disciplinary education and, in the years that followed, those students would come to appreciate this exceptional experience. This was Mel’s way: to include others, think beyond the obvious, and, in his own measured and thorough manner, deliver a quality result. If Mel was in charge, you knew you had someone sensible on the bridge with a steady hand on the helm. Well mostly. He did manage to give everyone a turn when he was helicoptered off Tiritiri Matangi after a near-fatal fall off a cliff during some nocturnal petrel banding!

In the early 2000s, Mel was awarded a Royal Society Teacher Fellowship which allowed him a year out of the classroom to pursue his passion for restoration ecology. This held him in good stead for the next phase of his career which was tertiary teaching. And so began his time teaching in the biodiversity degree programme at Unitec where he was to remain for the next two decades.

Mel joined Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka/Unitec Institute of Technology in 2000 as a lecturer in ecology. He had a passion for a wide range of subject areas, starting with ecology and ornithology, but extending into entomology, restoration ecology, and biosecurity. Mel was a key driver developing Unitec’s courses in these areas, and was also integral to the development of three degrees at Unitec, the transdisciplinary Bachelor of Resource Management, the Bachelor of Applied Science and most recently a Masters of Applied Science, where mātauranga Māori and science were brought together.

Mel’s passion for his subjects and his genuine care for his students made a big impression on them. He gave them the confidence to believe in themselves, was particularly mindful of supporting young women, Māori, Pacific students and mentored many through to postgraduate research and beyond. He understood the need for students to learn about the environment, in the environment. He used his vast network to create opportunities in the field for real world learning, with field trips to Tiritiri Matangi, Motu Kaikōura, Mataia, CUEHaven, Pūkoro Miranda, coastal rockpools at Takapuna, Smith’s Bush and many more sites.

In 2013, Mel was awarded a prestigious Fulbright Travel Award to visit the Pacific Northwest of the United States, where he gave presentations about the ecological restoration of Tiritiri Matangi Island and took the opportunity to learn and make connections. For nearly 20 years he had a profound impact on over 600 American students, who came from Green River College in Washington State with Bruce Haulman and Megan Reiser to learn about the biology and culture of Aotearoa. He shared his love of nature and deep appreciation of mātauranga Māori with these young minds, and it was greatly appreciated by the students.

Mel’s talents extended into research. His long-term data sets collected in places like Tiritiri Matangi provide invaluable longitudinal insights, and his research linking conservation volunteers with restoration ecology has opened up new conversations and research fields. He gave conference presentations around the world and published journal papers across a diverse range of topics within ecology and ornithology, before more recently moving into social ecology and citizen science as part of his PhD research.

Mel contributed to the science community through his various appointments to editorial boards. Around 2006, Mel saw that there was a need to develop a peer-reviewed transdisciplinary journal for biosecurity. Through his leadership, *Perspectives in Biosecurity* was launched in 2017, and seven issues of papers have been published since then.

From 2019, Mel was the research leader for the School of Environmental and Animal Sciences. Mel ably chaired committee meetings and managed conference budgets, but most importantly he mentored and encouraged a new generation of researchers, which was greatly appreciated. In addition to his academic contributions, Mel’s kaitiakitanga of the puna at the Unitec Mt Albert campus, Te Wai Unuroa o Wairaka, and her biodiversity is remembered with aroha by staff and students. He will be forever remembered as part of that puna and the awa it feeds as it flows out to the moana. In 2024, Mel was posthumously awarded the title of Associate Professor by Unitec, a testament to his long and successful career in academia.

Mel was extremely well connected with a wide and eclectic range of individuals and organisations. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. He would never tell you what an effective operator he was or how valued his considered opinions were. Such was Mel’s humble nature that you would be forgiven for not knowing what a remarkable contribution he made as member of the many organisations he was associated with, including being a founding member of four: Pūkoro Miranda Naturalist Trust, Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi Incorporated, Chelsea Regional Park Association, and NZ Trust for Conservation Volunteers. As well as being a founding member of the Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi in the early 1980s, Mel also served as Secretary, then Chairperson and later was given the honour of a life membership. Mel, in his

well-organised manner, was fantastic at navigating through the myriad ways one could apply for funding from various sources. He designed the logo for the society too—just another of his creative talents. The Tiritiri Matangi sanctuary project went from strength to strength under Mel’s chairmanship and gained an international prominence that saw Mel host dignitaries such as David Bellamy and HRH Prince Philip on the island. He served on the Auckland Conservation Board for six years, the Motu Kaikōura Trust for 15 years as member, later as chair, the New Zealand Ecological Society as President or Vice-President from 2009–2013, as a council member of Birds NZ from 2014–2023, and convener or organising committee member for seven conferences. As a council member of the New Zealand Ecological Society and then as President, Mel contributed an enormous amount of mahi with kindness and generosity, including organising the 2008 NZES Conference at Unitec, and facilitating and editing the 2013 special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Ecology* on Tiritiri Matangi Island, showcasing 25 years of world leading ecological restoration.

Of all his achievements, and there were many, his proudest accomplishment was his family of whom he was particularly proud. Mel met his wife, Sonya, at the University of Auckland when they were both studying for their BSc; their mutual love of the natural world around them shaped their life journey. At every opportunity Mel also shared his passion for nature with their daughters—Sarah, Maria, Josie, and Tessa—growing their connections with, and care for, the world around them. As his parents did for him, Mel supported and encouraged his girls in following their passions, each reflecting a branch of Mel’s own: education, ornithology, geology, music, and Te Ao Māori. We are grateful for his wonderful family and the gracious way they shared their darling Mel with the many people in his life. He adored them and was the consummate family man alongside his teaching and conservation work; showing that devotion to a career need not be at the expense of family and other relationships.

And now, unbelievably, he is gone. Gone too soon. This gentle, kind soul who loved Gary Larson cartoons, Billy Connolly, and Drambuie in equal measure.

Mel was selfless in his endeavour to leave behind a rich legacy for Aotearoa. He has made a material difference to the conservation estate of Aotearoa and has been an inspiration to many of his students and others along the way, many of whom are now contributing to this legacy themselves through various aspects of teaching, research, policy, and conservation.

There is a whakatauki that seems to be appropriate here: “Kāore te kumara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka” (A kumara does not speak of its own sweetness).

Mel was one of the most humble men we have ever known, yet one of the most talented and accomplished. Mel, let us speak of your sweetness.

The poet Dylan Thomas puts it like this:

“And the twice told fields of infancy  
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved  
in mine  
These were the woods the river and sea  
Where a boy  
In the listening  
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.  
And the mystery  
Sang alive  
Still in the water and singing birds”

Mel, you were a dear friend and a kind and generous colleague. You will be greatly missed.

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Margaret Stanley, Shona Myers

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