

SHARED VISION



Forest & Bird members have always taken a close interest in Ōtari. This plaque in the gardens marks the spot where three puriri trees were planted by junior members to celebrate the organisation's golden jubilee in 1973. Forest & Bird has just turned 100, and the centenary of the creation of Ōtari's "open air native plant museum" will be celebrated in 2026.

Ōtari-Wilton's Bush is an exemplar of a modern landscape-based restoration project bringing people and plants together. **Kathy Ombler**

In Tāne Whakapiripiri, Ōtari's visitor centre, three carved and woven panels created by artist Matthew McIntyre Wilson (Taranaki, Ngā Māhanga, Titahi) show a thoughtful message.

Made from a fallen tōtara, and kiekie and rātā vines, the three panels represent the untouched forest before people arrived, the destruction that occurred when they did, and, lastly, the search for a new way for the future.

Ōtarikākā, the place to snare kākā, was traditionally a mahinga kai, a place for gathering food valued by iwi since the earliest settlements around Te Whanganui-a-Tara. Today, Taranaki Whānui, Te Āti Awa, and Ngāti Toa Rangatira hold Ōtari within their respective rohe boundaries.

Tim Park grew up near Ōtari and played in the stream and on the rocks in the rock garden, as all local kids do. He learned about plants from his dad, ecologist Geoff Park, before heading off on a career

focused on plant ecology, surveying forests and reserves across the country for DOC, ecological consultants, Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, and, more recently, councils.

As Ōtari Manager, he is living the dream. His passion and focus are weaving conservation science with mātauranga Māori, with due respect for the whakapapa of plants.

"I'm determined that our work in the conservation science and horticulture space is done with the support of kaitiaki, the guardians of these species – for example, Ngāti Porou (ngutu kākā) and Ngāti Kuri (rātā moehau)," he says.

"We work with kaitiaki to improve our plant collections by ensuring they are sourced from their natural habitat. My team has developed some amazing skills which can support recovery of native plants in the wild. But it's not about us assuming we know best – we work to support kaitiaki with the skills we have.



Béatrice Dèy and Frank Topia at raranga weaving workshop.

"We love bringing plants and people together. That's what it's all about."

Intensive pest control throughout Ōtari has enhanced the forest and helped the birdlife flourish. Volunteers working with the Rats and Mustelids Blitzing Ōtari (RAMBO) group have been

ridding Ōtari of its animal pests since 2007. Traplines now also extend into neighbouring reserves and across the skyline ridge, above Ōtari.

"We wouldn't have the old northern rātā or be seeing the birdlife we see or have the breeding successes that we have in Ōtari if not for the pest control and trapping," explains Tim Park.

"For me, having the kākā back here feels really significant. The name Ōtari comes from Ōtarikākā, 'the place to trap kākā'. Now we trap pests to protect the kākā who nest in the trees here."

In fact, Ōtari-Wilton's Bush is the city's "jewel in the crown" for native birds, says ornithologist Nikki McArthur, who recently completed a 12-year study that recorded a massive increase in native bird species in Wellington city reserves.

"Kererū have tripled in number across Wellington, and they are

going absolutely gangbusters in Ōtari," he said. "Kākā have increased by 260%. These birds really enjoy Ōtari's old-growth forest, with natural nesting holes in trees such as tawa and hīnau."

Many of the native species counted were re-introduced to Zealandia, in nearby Karori, and have spread from there.

"The mature forest, old-growth trees, and predator control are the key reasons why these species have dispersed to and settled in Ōtari," adds Nikki.



Kererū on kōwhai. © Andy McArthur

GROUND-BREAKING SCIENCE

A kauri seed storage project, initiated in 2020 by scientists at the Lions Ōtari Native Plant Conservation Laboratory, has garnered international attention.

"We are lucky because in Ōtari we have kauri growing onsite, planted in keeping with Cockayne's vision, so we can source the seeds easily at the right time for our work," says Conservation and Science Advisor Dr Karin van der Walt.

In February, Ōtari became the project lead for an international study looking into seed conservation of *Araucariaceae* species throughout the Asia-Pacific Region. Ōtari's kauri trees are currently unaffected by kauri dieback.

Meanwhile, painstaking research by van der Walt and research technician Jennifer Alderton-

Moss has led to the first successful germination and propagation of some of our rarest native orchids at Ōtari. Dr Carlos Lehnebach, Te Papa Botany curator and orchid guru, has described this work as groundbreaking.

Not bad, for a tiny laboratory that began life in a Portacom.



Karin van der Walt and Jennifer Alderton-Moss



Wilbur Dovey, coordinator Kaiwharawhara Revegetation Project. © Kathy Ombler

RESTORING STREAM LIFE

The Mahanga is the original name for the headwaters of the Kaiwharawhara Stream, which flows through the heart of Ōtari-Wilton's Bush.

And for a city stream, the Kaiwharawhara flows through a remarkably natural forested catchment, from Zealandia, in Karori, through Ōtari-Wilton's Bush and Trellissick Park to the harbour. The gentle walk alongside the stream is one of Ōtari's most popular.

It wasn't always like this. Twenty years ago, the Ōtari streambanks were choked with blackberry, gorse, and rubbish. Enter the Kaiwharawhara Restoration Project, a model of community forest restoration. Since 2001, project volunteers have cleared rubbish, weeded, planted more than 35,000 trees, release-weeded, and, last year, helped restore a major slip.

The forest is flourishing, and still the volunteers continue, also now collaborating with Te Māra a Tāne Zealandia's Sanctuary to Sea project (www.visitzealandia.com). This whole-of-catchment initiative, with its 100-year vision that the mauri lifeforce of the Kaiwharawhara is healed, is supported by all those involved with Ōtari-Wilton's Bush.