Chapter 1

Not just a caravan

I'll bet you ten bucks you've never read a travel book like this before. A travel book written by a caravan? A lone van out in the wild? I wasn't always an inanimate object. I know a thing or two about travelling. I have been hitched to the back of many a vehicle and pulled all the way from the Pacific Isles of Northland, down to the bleak township of Invercargill in the south. But no longer. We all have to retire someplace and here I am, a simple wagon perched on a small scenic hill far from the nearest town, in a place sometimes romantically and a little cryptically referred to as the 'wop wops'.

Hang on, have I misled you already? I am not just a caravan. Let me offer you my dimensions. I am two caravans, one smaller, one larger, connected by a short umbilical corridor. As you can imagine I am not as mobile as I once was. My wheels have long since been removed and replaced with short stumps of tree trunk. I'll admit, at first it was embarrassing. Whoever heard of a caravan without wheels? But I learned to live with the ignominy. What choice did I have? At least I don't have to worry about getting a puncture and falling over.

Above me stands a slanted corrugated metal roof that valiantly attempts to protect me from the elements. It's not a thing of beauty it must be said, but it keeps me dry. The rain bounces off it with a rat-a-tat-tat like the trigger happy gunfire in a Rambo movie. My roof is held in place by several wooden beams that plunge vertically and diagonally

all around me. You might say they embrace me and hold me together.

Of my two caravans, the smaller one contains a simple kitchen, furnished with a pantry of spices and a temperamental fridge. There's no oven. Instead there's a camping stove with two electric hobs, and a microwave that might pre-date the Apollo missions. A small laminated formica table has seen better days, and is beginning to peel around the edges. Outside, sat on my tow cable sits a loud, clumsy washing machine that shakes and clatters whenever it's used. Trust me, it's an earthquake trapped in a white metal box.

My second van is a larger model, with panoramic windows from the bedroom through to the library. Whoever is staying with me can hardly complain about the view. There is an epic vista of forested hills and the grass is startlingly green. At night, the light of the Milky Way pours through my windows, our spiral galaxy as effective as a thousand 100 watt bulbs.

A small iron stove stands next to the double bed. Slapped on the chimney is a yellow post-it note that reads: 'Do not use!' The rusting chimney was blocked some time ago, and has not since been fixed. The useless stove is a constant reminder to any tenant that when winter approaches, my central heating is not so much inadequate as non-existent.

I did mention a library, but I'm no stately home, so don't get any far fetched ideas. There's little room to spare, but an entire wall is chocka with shelves and these shelves are stuffed with books. The contents make for an eclectic literary time capsule. A weathered volume of Brecht and Chomsky paperbacks stand beside the well-thumbed poems of Hafiz. The great Sufi master sits next to the collected works of Shakespeare. I absorb information when I can, reading over the shoulder of whoever is staying with me at the time. The radio is a pleasant distraction, but I have no such luxuries as a television, hot running water, internet or even a bathroom.

I do have a bath though. A bath in a caravan? Well, sort of. Let me explain. On the edge of a nearby stream, or ditch rather, stands a typical household ceramic white tub that's currently half full of dead leaves and green stains. If you're so inclined you can fill the bath from a hot water hose, or with a bucket of ominously green and cold stream water. The stream mostly consists of slimy algae, which isn't an appealing prospect I must say. I wouldn't be too impressed if someone tried to wash me with frog flavoured ditchwater…

Those of you paying attention may have noticed that I didn't mention a toilet. Well, I don't have one. But my tenant doesn't have to make like a bear and bury his business in the woods each day. Instead, there's a small building with a gas powered shower and hot water about five minutes walk away. Each call of nature requires a head long scramble down an almost vertical slope, only to meet the pine forest and trudge through the thick, pine needle strewn undergrowth. You have to traverse the hill like a, what do you call them, oh I remember, a slalom skier, a few steps left and a few steps right, cautiously sliding your way down. And yes, I have seen more than a few visitors slip and fall face first into a tree.

You have the measure of me, but I ought to introduce you to my latest resident. Jon is a young bloke, still in his twenties and standing a frustrating half inch below six feet tall. I'll tell you now for nothing that he's bound to bump his head on my door frame a few times, before he remembers to duck. He seems to have temporarily replaced Anne, who lived with me these past few years and then mysteriously packed her bags and left last week. We'd been together long enough that she'd learned to adapt and adjust to living here in the wild woods, but Jon looks more than a little lost. He's got a lot to learn, to really understand what it takes to live in the wop-wops.

This story isn't just the tale of a lonely van, but of this young man's life here. I don't try to imagine what is going through his head. I am not a psychic caravan. I leave that

to the Romany caravans and their shiny crystal balls. Jon keeps a journal and every night he scribbles away in his erratic scrawl. I am not ashamed to admit that I intrude on his privacy and read over his shoulder from time to time. After all, there's no telly so what else is a van to do for entertainment? I don't think he'd mind if I shared the occasional diary entry with you. After all, this is his story too.

Saturday 1 March

What had I done? What is this place? I'm not sure if my jaw dropped, but my stomach certainly lurched sideways as I faced these strange surroundings. I actually felt nauseous. The truth of what I'd done finally dawned on me. When I'd planned to come here it seemed like an adventure, moving to this peculiar and distant caravan in the hills of New Zealand. I'd seen photos on email from the comfort of my own home in London, but nothing could quite prepare me for how rustic it was. No, not rustic, but primitive. Like a pioneer's wood cabin, far removed from society, a place of almost absolute solitude. How on earth they'd ever managed to move the vans up this hill was a complete mystery. Looking around, I realised that I'm surrounded by forests, and not even the slightest sign of human life. I had no idea where the middle of nowhere was, but it looks like I'd not only found it, but I'd made it my home.

Getting to my new home was no simple task. On first arriving, I'd been collected from the nearest town, Paraparaumu, by my neighbour

Jean. She collected me in a beaten up white Mazda and we quickly left town, crossing the train tracks and heading for the hills. The Maungakotukutuku road is a zig zag route with hairpin bends that cling to the side of the vertigo inducing valley. To our left a steep hill rose above us. To our right, a sheer vertical drop revealed itself with the road plunging into the distant forests below. Climbing up the valley, the road reached level ground and the tarmac soon turned into gravel. The Mazda bounced along the dusty unsealed track, giving off clouds of dust as it flew across the uneven slippery surface. My first feeling was absolute shock, followed by a dash of wonder and a great deal of near terror. Where on earth were we going? I'm clumsy by nature and I was none too confident about driving to my new home everyday without calamity.

What bright idea had brought me here exactly? Well, I'd exchanged my one bed flat in suburban west London for a caravan in the New Zealand bush. I'd also swapped working for the government with working as a librarian in the small town of Paraparaumu. Living in a van might sound a bit desperate, but I'd decidedly rejected a comfortable life in favour of my solitary home in the woods. Other exchange offers had included a woman who had contacted me from Hamilton, further north towards Auckland. She'd offered me the use of her comfortable suburban four bedroom house, and was even willing to throw in her husband as part of the package. She figured that her other half could keep me company while she's away, which struck me as odd

to say the least. Unsurprisingly, a spell in surburbia complete with a househusband was not the slightest bit appealing. Other opportunities came in from the Australian outback, Canadian British Colombia - where the nearest neighbour appeared to be a bear, and a sunny spot near Bondi Beach in Sydney. I turned them all down in favour of living in the bush. Madness? Perhaps. But as soon as the photos of the rag tag lone caravan appeared in my inbox, I was hooked.

Reflecting on my primitive new home, I tried to remind myself why I was doing this. My intention at first had been simple enough. Escape. Working as a civil servant in London, I recall the feeling of restlessness in my job. I'd started to feel like a cog in the machine, staring into a PC screen all day long, tired of reminding myself that this was better than working in an asbestos factory or gutting fish for a living.

One month before I left London and chaos was all around. It was February 2003. London was preparing for a terrorist attack and the impending war with Iraq had left everyone nervous. The newspapers were filled with threats of poison gas being pumped into the London Underground or even a rocket attack over Heathrow. There was a palpable tension in the air. Only two weeks before my departure, I had returned home from work, shoes caked in snow, after another painfully slow journey battling through London's paralysed tube, train and road network. Kicking my shoes off, I'd put on the kettle, sat down, switched on the television and watched a documentary simulating a radioactive dirty

bomb at Trafalgar Square, promptly devastating central London, not a hundred yards from my office. Perhaps moving twelve thousand miles to a remote caravan in the woods wasn't such a bad idea after all?

But if I'm honest, there was always more to this than escape. After all, I hadn't met many people who'd willingly swap the comforts of their own home for what was essentially a hut in the woods. I'd always felt a connection to wild places, and as a child I had whiled away many a carefree hour swinging across rivers on rope swings. I have fond memories of my father building a shelter in the woods, using nothing but branches and vines. It was great fun enacting the Arthur Ransome and Enid Blyton stories that my mother had read to me, and far more exciting than the troubles of school. But playing in a forest for an hour or two before returning to my home comforts and loving family was quite a contrast to moving to a forest, some twelve thousand miles away.

End of diary entry

Chapter 2

Feathers and furry things

A small plump hedgehog flies overhead. A surreal sight I'll admit, but I'm more worried that Jon might crash his car straight into me. He'd certainly never seen a flying hedgehog before, and I wish he'd look where he's going when he's behind the wheel and headed straight for a helpless stationary vehicle. "Holy Christ" I heard as he skidded to a halt, blinking and rubbing his eyes. A falcon flew gracefully past. Held in its talons is a small passenger, most likely his in-flight meal. The hedgehog's little feet dangle in the air, wiggling frantically as the bird of prey swoops gracefully overhead. Rising triumphantly through the valley, I reckon it's a one way ticket for Mrs Tiggy-Winkle.

It is March 2003, and it's a cracker of a day - we're having one of the hottest summers on record in New Zealand. I'm sure I've got a barometer somewhere, but I find the radio a more reliable source of information. Tarmac is melting on the roads and the trains are struggling to run - the wrong kind of heat, I suppose. Personally, I find the extreme heat is less of an issue when some bugger has pinched your wheels and there's nowhere to hurry to. Luckily the nearby pine trees and my rickety roof offer enough shade to stop my walls bleaching in the midday sun.

Jon is settling in nicely, and seems to think that he's living in a holiday resort. For the moment at least, he's lost the worried expression that seemed like a permanent fixture ever since he arrived. I think it took him all of three minutes

to unpack and move in. There's a handful of t-shirts, some other old clothes and a few CDs, that's about it. He seems happy enough as he drags a chair outside to admire the view, wiping the sweat from his face. He's even found a length of washing line, tying one end to my roof and the other to a protruding tree root. Hanging up a sheet, he finds relief in an impromptu sun guard as he kicks off his shoes to enjoy the grass beneath his feet and admire the view. And what a view it is. I am sat on top of a hill, a clearing covered in lush green tussock grass, stretching to the vast pine woodland. Beyond lays a cool river concealed by aged mountains of dense indigenous forest. Rolling clouds scud by while the rabbits bounce about, their long ears twitching to every tweet and whistle of the local birdlife. It's sweet as.

The sun sets, eclipsed by the surrounding hills, and the rabbits vanish from view. Our only company is a New Zealand native owl, the morepork. His wide bulbous eyes that carefully track his prey are not be seen, nor his graceful and silent movement. He's a nocturnal bird that's sensitive to light so he's not the easiest of creatures to spot, but he makes his presence known through his yelping call. "More pork" he demands, like a rude customer in a restaurant. The Maori consider the high pitched, piercing yelp to be an ominous forewarning, and they aren't wrong. We would have uninvited visitors before the night was over.

BOOM! BADAMN! BOOM! Jon is rudely awoken from a deep sleep by a series of loud thumps pounding my roof. He'd fallen asleep listening to the Iraqi war coverage and I suspect the poor boy thought he was under attack from Patriot missiles. BOOM! Scratch, scratch, scratch. Then it goes quiet again. Jon steps out of bed, reaches for the torch and throws some clothes on. He gingerly peers outside and takes small, careful steps into the darkness, peering over my roof with a dim flash of torchlight. He really ought to get some new batteries.

"Argh!" he yelps, before stepping back so quickly that he almost falls and rolls down the hill. Nose to nose with

a possum, the creature peers back at him through the darkness. Jon is slack jawed at meeting this visitor. The possum is rather less impressed and clings to a wooden beam supporting my roof as if I were a branch. I interpret the possum's mousy expression as 'this is my forest, what the hell are you doing here?' The creature is illuminated by the torchlight with an eerie glow, with the sort of face that only a mother could love. You'd never describe a possum as cute - they're rather large, meaty creatures. Their bodies are almost pear shaped and they're grey and furry with a face like a rodent on steroids, complete with a big bushy tail.

They're buggers, possums. That's a bit harsh, you might think but I have my reasons. They defecate on my roof. Their claws are like razors, and this particular visitor will leave me with a permanent scar no doubt. My reasons may be personal, but possums are also responsible for eating much of New Zealand's forest and consequently decimating the indigenous wildlife. There are about 30 million possums in New Zealand, meaning that there's almost eight possums for every one person.

I hear them as they munch through around nine thousand tonnes of leaves, berries and fruit every night. They were imported from Australia where ironically, they're protected. I like Australia - it's not short of open space and the Ozzies appreciate a good home on wheels. Many of their trees have defences such as spines, prickles or poisonous leaves – plus Aussie possums have predators. But here in New Zealand possums have no natural enemy, and their numbers have swollen. Not only do they eat the homes of native birds, they will also eat their eggs and chicks too. The buggers have even been known to push kiwis out of their burrows, simply for a dry place to sleep. And if they get inside a van, you're a gonner. Years ago when I was sat in a caravan park near the Coromandel, a possum sneaked through an open window of a neighbour and shredded every single inch of carpet, curtain and furnishings within. The van was destroyed in about ten minutes flat, and the owners promptly dragged it

to the nearest scrap heap. It was a messy way to go, so I'm relieved that Jon had the sense to shut the door behind him when he stepped outside this evening.

This particular possum is transfixed by the torchlight, his ears twitching. Their call is a blood-curdling scream, said to resemble the sound of a woman being brutally murdered, chilling the bones of those who are unfamiliar with this harrowing noise. What with their murderous cry, razor sharp claws and wide array of victims the possum resembles an extra from a horror movie - the bastard child of Freddy Krueger and a fat squirrel.

New Zealanders are a resourceful bunch, with some pretty imaginative uses for the pests. I've been overtaken by motorcyclists in the South Island with live possums stuffed down their jackets to keep them warm, with furry noses peaking from between their jacket buttons. But being used as living insulation isn't the worst fate for a possum. People aren't squeamish about killing animals in New Zealand, particularly vermin that devastates the natural wildlife. Back in the day, my wheels have rolled with a bounce and a thud over a possum or three. You can even buy novelty squashed possum shaped chocolates, complete with instructions on how customers with a sweet tooth should "pursue, knock down, and flatten any possum that you have the opportunity to kill."

Friday 21 March

My close encounter with the possum was quite the awakening, and it wasn't long until I found myself in the ziggurat obsessed art deco town of Napier in Opossum World. Essentially just a shop with a startling array of possum related products, this is the closest thing that New Zealand has to a possum theme park. On offer are warm gloves and socks, shelves

of teddy bears, and even kinky handcuffs, all proudly made from the hides of possums. The macabre possum museum section, resembling a Victorian freak show, was particularly odd with shelves of stuffed moth-eaten possums leering unpleasantly from behind their glass enclosure. If Dr Frankenstein had been a taxidermist from New Zealand, this is what he'd have created.

A slot machine with an attached plastic rifle encouraged visitors to take bloodthirsty pot shots at the possums while avoiding the native birds, as they bob about among the artificial undergrowth and trees. My favourite feature is a Mini embedded in the wall, with a squashed possum flattened beneath a rear tyre. Possum road kill is a frequent sight in all but the most urban areas of New Zealand, and as an added comedy touch, standing on the roof of this vehicle was a choir of possums, each holding a little song sheet. A red button flickered invitingly in front of me. Upon pressing the button, the furry quartet squeaked a lively "On the road again…" like a macabre version of Disney's singing chipmunks, Chip an' Dale.

Returning to the caravan that night I fell asleep listening to the horrific scream of many rampant possums. I was grateful I'd had the presence of mind not to watch the recent movie sensation, The Blair Witch Project, before moving here. A film about a group of students running around an unknown dark forest, being hunted and killed by some unseen malicious force was not a memory that I wanted to be fresh in my mind. My new home is not a place I'd want to succumb to an

attack of the heebie-jeebies. My imagination is active enough, without the thought of murderous witches and terrified victims stumbling around and screaming like a pack of wild possums.

End of diary entry

I worry about Jon - the forest at night can be an inhospitable place. He's not lived in the wild of the boohai before and I've seen how a man's imagination can run away with him when he is alone in the dark, night after night. I suspect it won't be long before he'll be talking to himself and mumbling like a madman, or worse, talking to me. I have plenty to say, and I'm a real chatterbox. But despite being the narrator, I'm still just a caravan and I don't possess any vocal facilities. Don't be thinking I'm a talking van - that would be foolish.

Actually, I am not the first van whose thoughts made it to print. I might be unusual, but I'm not unique. I met an old 1963 VW campervan some time ago. It had a red and white paint job, nicely restored after some lunatic had given him a thorough muralling many moons ago. You could still make out the outline of the round peace symbol though. The van's name was Urge and he'd been around the block so many times it was a wonder his axle hadn't snapped.

Truth is, Urge was a little funny. Kept muttering that he'd been responsible for one of the great American counter culture novels, Divine Right's Trip. But he was pissed because his story had been hijacked by some bloke called Gurney Norman, who'd apparently taken all the credit. Urge was alright, as VW vans go. I find them a bit up themselves personally. These days, their owners usually have deep pockets. The vans are spoilt rotten, with their new re-upholstering and every sprocket and part painstakingly restored. I used to consider myself lucky if my tire pressure was checked. No-one so much as offered me a new coat of

paint. Perhaps I should be more grateful… Caravanners can be a strange bunch of folk. I've seen more than a few fellow vehicles decked out like a psychedelic explosion in a paint factory. The vans weren't too impressed with their appearance, and neither was I.

Whump! Jon sat bolt upright. "What was that?" he said to himself. Thump! There it was again. Distracted by the noise, he turned down the radio, put down his notebook and peered outside into the darkness. I don't know what he expected. Some angry possum flinging projectiles at me? Nope. Every year near summer's end, the local insect life retreat to the warmest, brightest place they can find in the inky dark night. Fat furry-winged demons fling themselves at my panoramic windows like suicide bombers. For a few nights my artificial illuminations transform me into a botanical insect house, albeit inside out. My exterior is crowded deep with thousands of little legs, tiny wings, and all manner of bugs and creepy crawlies. The night is endlessly black, and the insects are drawn to me like moths to a flame.

One particularly mischievous bug managed to penetrate my defences, giving Jon one hell of a fright. In fairness, its vibrating wings buzz so loudly they might be mistaken for the rotor blades of an Apache helicopter. Things were about to get a little Apocalypse Now for one bug in particular. Jon rolls up a newspaper, leaps over a chair and swats the tiger moth, almost the size of a small bird, with a swift right hook. Splat! The moth smears along the inside of my window - I really wish people would take more care.

Jon tunes into the radio for a little human contact. The news is dominated by the long anticipated invasion of Iraq. "Targets of opportunity…fires rage in Baghdad…we will disarm Iraq and free its people!" a voice proclaims. This is the world's first fully televised war, or so the radio says. We wouldn't know, I haven't had a television in years. The distant violence is giving me a real sad on, and I'm relieved when Jon turns the dial from the sounds of missiles and

explosions to a local programme about New Zealand's wildlife.

"Long before the Earth's continents had taken on their current appearance, even before the extinction of the dinosaurs, the country that was to become New Zealand had already been torn loose. Isolated for millions of years, we became a great biblical ark," explained the pompous presenter. Maybe I've spent too long in this forest, but it seems like New Zealand has always been some kind of global version of the wop-wops, lost and remote in the Pacific. "There were no mammals so instead of animals two by two, birds would take their place, producing a unique and slightly bizarre set of flightless characters including kiwis, wekas and the world's only flightless parrot, the kakapo."

New Zealand didn't remain undisturbed. When people first arrived here some eight hundred years ago, the local wildlife had a mighty shock. It turns out, squashing animals has been a national past time in this country for an awful long time. First on the scene were the Polynesian explorers, who would become the Maori people. They arrived in a land of abundance. For over five hundred years, they hunted and gobbled up a vast array of unique bird life, including varieties of coot, wren, geese and swans - now all lost. The birds simply didn't know how to defend themselves and because they'd forgotten how to fly, they were unable to escape. Good grief! The poor chooks must have wondered what had hit them: "Oooh, I've not met you before. I wonder if you want to be my friend." Thump! Sizzle! Gobble! Indigenous birdlife made for several hundred years of tasty meals, and some thirty two species were dispatched before the Europeans even arrived. If the local tweeters and flappers thought that things couldn't get any worse, they were in for a very nasty surprise indeed.

Do you remember all those mammals and predators that our birds never had to worry about for millions of years? Well, the Europeans set up what they called acclimatisation societies, with the sole purpose of adapting New Zealand

to their home lands. Salmon, trout, red deer, frogs, swans, possums and rabbits were all introduced. Our local chooks simply could not cope with the new competition. Many more species died due to the loss of their habitat, along with the addition of predators and disease. Our native birds were incapable of adapting to their new environment, so they never stood a chance. One poignant example was the flightless kiore bird who, driven to the edge of extinction, was surviving on the remote outpost of Stewart Island. Then the lighthouse keeper arrived with his pet cat and that, as they say with a meow and a chomp-chomp, was the end of that.

The radio was almost morbidly apocalyptic in the story it told, but the good news is that there are survivors. The most famous of all is the country's national icon - the one and only kiwi bird. Now, this patch of wop-wops might be a remote place, but even here there's little in the way of hospitality for a kiwi. After all, possums pretty much fall from the trees like apples in an orchard. I have a certain empathy for these odd, elusive creatures. As a munted old caravan in the wild, I suppose I'm an oddity too. Since I can't provide a little shelter for a kiwi bird myself, I will have to live a little vicariously through Jon who is lucky enough to lay eyes on one.

Saturday 22 March

If I spent too much time at home, the walls closed in on me. It's a small space that reminded me of a hobbit hole, which is well and good if you're four feet tall with hairy feet. But I found it so poky that I bashed my head on the ceiling if I moved too quickly. Sometimes, the only answer was to get out for a while.

So, I turned the ignition on the Mazda and tentatively navigated the car along the winding switchback road. I was quickly brought to an abrupt halt as ahead, stood a white fluffy roadblock of sheep. Four or five of them were nonchalantly assembled in the middle of the road. My arrival put them in a sudden panic as they turned tail and trotted down the road, and with that I followed slowly in pursuit, herding them along the road until they eventually veered right through a hole in the hedge. One after another they disappeared, until the last sheep panicked and bolted for the gate. Unfortunately for him, the gate was firmly closed and trotting at full pelt he bounced dramatically and was almost catapulted back the way he came. I'm sure, for a moment, that he looked surprised - if such an expression is possible in a sheep.

I was searching for more exotic wildlife than New Zealand's ubiquitous sheep. The closest place to see a kiwi bird is in the neighbouring town of Waikanae, at the Nga Manu Nature Reserve. This small patch of land is full of local wildlife and native trees, all fiercely protected by a powerful electric fence. Enclosed within these defences is the reclusive North Island brown kiwi - housed in a large, darkened room with an abundance of tree roots and leaves, like a Howard Hughes of the natural world.

On first inspection, the kiwi was careful and slow, concentrating on his feeding. He disappeared for long periods into his nest box. A small monitor showed grainy black and white CCTV footage from inside the nest, but

he was hard to spot and pretty well concealed. The water sprinklers were flicked on and the kiwi burst into life, rushing out from his nest into the rain, suddenly sprinting about manically. "Is he supposed to run around like that?" enquired a local family on a day out, incredulous to see their national icon with such energy and movement. Running in circles and figures of eight around the tree trunks, the kiwi was having the time of his life. The conservationist who had switched on the sprinklers explained: "He loves the rain like you wouldn't believe, but his partner, she hates it. She'll hide in her nest until we switch off the sprinkler."

He's an eccentric character, the kiwi. He's as round as a football, and furry rather than feathery with an outlandishly long beak and a pair of thick stumpy feet. He reminds me of Groucho Marx, I think they have the same lopsided waddle. Unfortunately the kiwi bird is grappling for its very survival. Maori refer to them as "te manu huna a Tane", the hidden bird of Thane, God of the Forest. The kiwis' ability to hide in the remotest corners of the country ensured its survival and almost proved its downfall. Thanks to these exemplary hiding techniques, the elusive creature was fast disappearing from its native habitat before anyone had the chance to notice.

Unlike any other bird, the kiwi has nostrils at the end of its beak which are used to forage and scent out grubs, enabling the bird to fill the gap in the food chain left by the absence of native mammals in New Zealand. This curious creature was used to foraging

about slowly, snuffling with its long beak, looking for worms. He stood a foot tall, when he wasn't leaning on his beak like an old man with a walking stick. His head bobbed up and down and his wings were noticeably atrophied through the course of evolution. Stomping about with his massive, oversize comical feet the kiwi has managed to survive quite against the odds. A recent nature documentary had shown a mother kiwi defending her young from a stoat. To the nation's amazement the mother kiwi had leapt into the air, successfully kicking the aggressor out of her nest using her size ten feet. The public had reacted with equal amounts of shock and respect - everyone knew that this was an unusual bird, but nobody ever suspected that the kiwi was a champion kick-boxer. My heart warmed to the kiwi immediately, and I couldn't help but be impressed that such an unlikely misfit of a creature could be chosen by New Zealanders as their national icon.

End of diary entry

You may not find a kiwi bird here, but you're never far from the wildlife in these woods. Again, the peace is interrupted by a loud scratchy noise coming from my kitchen ceiling. Jon is spooked and investigates me quizzically, exploring my shelves and roof with care in case something might jump out and bite his nose. He rests his hand on my ceiling as if checking a pulse - I suspect he wonders if I am alive, imagining himself sitting inside a beast like Jonah in the whale. After all, the gentle rhythmic breeze outside could easily be mistaken for inhaling and exhaling.

I do hope he doesn't give me a name. Many think they have the measure of me, indeed one lonely middle aged man I knew as Smelly Bob named me Karen. Karen - Karavan, get it? He'd spent too long with his budgies. Damn things dropped pellets of guano all over my nice formica table. I was a Christopher for a while too, after some God loving family likened me to the patron saint of travellers. And who am I now? What do you call an isolated lone caravan on a hill, am I a nervous antisocial Derek, or a scary lone woodsman like Billy Bob? Neither option appeals.

I digress. Jon discovers the source of the noise, namely the tufts of dead grass sticking through an open air vent. I know that this vegetation mound is a nest, but I'm unable to tell him. Besides, it would spoil my fun. So, Jon visits our neighbours for advice. Not the emu farm, the other neighbours. "I think the local wildlife are moving in, what do I do?" he asks Andrew and Jean. They aren't more than a few minutes walk away, but a small hill maintained our privacy. It was Andrew who had arranged for my relocation from a small caravan park to this remote spot on the hill. He looks like he's born for country life, stocky and red faced. A shoe-in for the 'Least likely to succeed as a management consultant award, 1989'. Surprisingly, he used to be a merchant banker, though you'd never know from his appearance. Like me, he is a retired traveller and in the past he'd commuted the vast distance between Auckland and Brisbane. And like me, he now lives in one hundred and sixty-five acres of solitude, filled with hard wood eucalyptus and pine trees. He earns a crust while working from home, designing security platforms for internet sites. "I rarely leave the place now," Andrew, the virtual hermit, explains with a shrug. "Jean gets the shopping, and I have everything I need here." Jon can't help but ask "When was the last time you left the wop-wops?" and Andrew isn't too sure, "A few weeks now... or is it a few months?"

I like Andrew, he's a dag with a mischievous sense of humour and he has a little fun with Jon. "Your neighbours,

the emus, well one time, one of them escaped from the farm and fled into the bush," he grins, raising his eyebrows. "It was days before they found it, running wild." Andrew hands Jon a box of poison. "I'm not sure" Jon says, nervous of what he might end up killing. "Well, it's probably rats, and you don't want to be living with vermin."

This was how, within a few weeks of arriving in the bush, Jon made his first kill. The poison works by dehydration, so the rodents made for the nearest river and died there rather than leaving their rotten corpses festering in my roof. Jon was changing and adapting to outdoor life. He'd drawn the line - the wildlife would remain outdoors, for the moment at least.

One of the hardest things about living in the bush if you're not used to it, I'd say, is the silence. Trust me, it was a shock coming here. I'd been accustomed to the constant clatter of life on the road, or parked up amongst the chatter of a caravan park. If all you've known is the constant buzz of towns and cities, this place can take some getting used to. There's no passing traffic, no voices from any neighbours, no aircraft flying overhead and no hum from electric pylons. Nothing. The only sound is the gentle rustle of the leaves in the breeze. I could tell the isolation was getting to Jon. He'd twitch whenever a noise broke the silence. A crack of a twig or a strong gust of wind rattling my doors would set him off, pacing about my floor, restless and unsettled.

Jon found refuge in the radio. Alas, the local broadcasts can make for dismal listening. A selection of easy listening ballads introduced by a local DJ as "More hits from the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s..." Describing the songs as hits is pushing it a bit, and someone should sue the radio stations for misleading their audience. I don't recall ever hearing any Elvis Presley, Beatles, Chuck Berry, T-Rex, or Duran Duran. Instead, almost every radio station broadcasts an unrelenting and brain-rotting parade of one-hit wonders and easy listening records. The radio stations seem to have acquired their playlist by trawling charity shops, only to

discover that all the decent records were scratched and worn out, so instead they stocked up on obscure Perry Como and Connie Francis albums. New Zealand has a keen recycling policy which is to be commended, but these records ought to have been melted down long ago. The commercials provide some form of respite though, as a jolly female voice offers a range of buns, baguettes and ciabatta from her café, only to be followed by a Carry-on inspired advert for an establishment called Big Joe's garage. "Situated on the corner of Dickson Street and Cockspur Avenue, hehehe!" It was as if Carry On favourite Sid James had never died and instead retired to New Zealand, earning beer money for recording innuendo laden adverts.

I'm partial to a tune or two. I might not have ears, but the frequencies resonate rather pleasantly through my walls. My most musical visitor is of the feathered variety, and his name is Tui. He is a most unusual bird - one of those creatures that's often mentioned in wildlife documentaries. They have the rare ability to not only mimic the song of other birds, but to also produce a realistic impression of a camera. Tui often sits in the branches overhead, happily warbling his clicks, whirrs and hiccups. And when he gets in his zone he can beep, buzz and almost beatbox for long stretches of time. In some inspired moments he sounds like Star Wars' R2-D2 reading Tolstoy's War and Peace. He's a natural entertainer. His jet black plumage and tuft of white feathers around his neck gives the impression that he's dressed in a dinner jacket with a napkin tucked into his shirt. It isn't difficult to see why New Zealand's music awards are named the Tui's.

Jon typically spends the evening cross-legged on the bed, writing his thoughts down in his journal. He prepares himself a simple supper, boiling a bag of ready-made ravioli. His attempts at cooking aren't up to much, but then I don't have much of a kitchen, so who am I to criticize?

Outside, it's still insect season and I can feel some 786 little legs flitting about on my windows. I'm not sure if it

tickles or itches, but it's a curious sensation. One fat beetle scuttles across the pages of Jon's book. Snap! He is squashed instantly with a sharp slam of the covers. Ouch. Bad karma.

Another intruder. A finch flies through the kitchen door. I'm reminded of the budgies all over again, and I'm worried that the distressed bird will excavate the contents of his interior all over my interior. He swoops through my cramped confines, panicking but just about managing to avoid bouncing off my walls. Jon springs into action and in the absence of a net, lays a hand on a sieve and takes chase on a frenetic pursuit. The bird takes refuge by swooping behind the microwave, scuttling and flapping about in a frenzy before pausing to catch its breath. Jon heaves the microwave off of the fridge with a cough and a sneeze. One swift lunge later and the sieve captures the wheezing bird, who is taken outdoors and relaunched into the air. The little bird is quickly joined by his partner who'd evidently been waiting in the nearby branches. Better out than in, I say.

Saturday 12 April

The forests of New Zealand are a hostile environment for most of the country's indigenous wildlife. If you want to turn the clock back to see these creatures in their natural habitat, then you need to visit New Zealand's outlying islands.

Islands are often a fertile haven for unique wildlife; Madagascar has the lemurs, Mauritius had the dodo, Jurassic Park had dinosaurs and New Zealand's islands are no exception. They're not easy to reach and for good reason - the more people visiting these places, the greater the risk of something dangerous being introduced to these small pockets of surviving birds. I was fortunate

to find myself on a boat headed out to the savage triangle carved out of the horizon on the Tasman Sea - Kapiti Island.

Kapiti Island is a prominent local landmark. Every day, I'd spot this jagged mountainous outcrop of rock. There's a particularly good vantage point on the road home, where I'd pull over on occasion to admire the view. Once, I'd parked the car to admire the sunset, as the sky shifted from the dramatic hues of blood red into a rippled crystal blue. The sun set dramatically behind Kapiti Island, it was a spectacular view and a perfect moment. Well, almost. The experience was only slightly marred by a discarded Big Mac polystyrene box and a used condom dumped on the grass verge... remarkable what they give away with Happy Meals these days, isn't it?

On a sunny day without a cloud in the sky, our group boarded a small boat and bounced across the strait to Kapiti Island. With some surprise our bags and pockets were thoroughly searched before boarding the vessel. "Overdoing it a bit aren't you?" I asked as my day-pack was thoroughly rummaged. Kapiti Island's security arrangements are tighter than LA airport. "Sorry mate," came the reply, "but it took us years to rid the island of predators, and if anyone was to smuggle a pair of stoats back here, it would be catastrophic for the wildlife." Seems hard to imagine that anyone would deliberately attempt such a thing, yet only recently the alarm had been raised when a letter was received at the office of the local newspaper, claiming that possums had been re-introduced to Kapiti Island. The Department of Conservation (DoC)

had meticulously searched the island, before coming to the conclusion that the message had been a vicious hoax and since then, they've promptly upped security. While international customs ransack bags for explosive and illegal drugs, the DoC search for possums, stoats and rats. Don't underestimate the DoC though, they manage about 30% of the entire country. If the kindly conservationists, geologists and ornithologists that comprise the DoC's staff ever decide to overthrow the government and take over the country, as unlikely as that sounds, they'd already have a pretty decent head start.

A rum old sea dog with a white wispy beard and a passionate hatred of possums met us at the pebbled beach of Kapiti Island. "Imagine how much vegetation it takes to feed thirty million possums every day. Buggers! Everyone one of 'em. Our kiwis are now all but gone from the mainland." He continued: "Even a few years ago there were enough wekas that they were still considered a pest, rummaging through peoples garbage cans, but now they're endangered as well." A pair of wekas scampered about our attentive group, the round flightless birds nosing for food with their long beaks. We're told that wekas are scavengers by trade and not naturally aggressive, but that doesn't prevent one weka from using his beak to defend itself from my trouser leg. "Ye better watch ye bags, those wekas are devious buggers and they'll unzip a backpack and have anything edible or shiny before you know it!" The Department of Conservation might manage the island, but the birds had made it quite clear who runs the show.

To protect the habitats of endangered birds and the Maori burial grounds, much of Kapiti Island remains out-of-bounds to the public and prying sightseers. With a choice of only two paths available to the public on the island, the coastal route, and the track leading to the peak, we opted for the latter. Following the path through the bush, we paused to watch the friendly fantails as they flitted through the undergrowth, displaying their tail feathers. An unwieldy wood pigeon landed heavily on a branch that's clearly several sizes too small for him. Realising his mistake, the pigeon frantically thumped his wings, returning his vast weight to the air before the branch split under his weight. The primeval forest is filled with a humming chorus of bird songs, sounds that not so long ago would have filled every valley and plain of New Zealand. The view from the peak was spectacular. Marlborough Sounds lay hazily to the south across the Cook Strait, small islands scattered along the waters with Kapiti Coast to the east. I shuffled to the edge and look straight down the west face of the island, a sheer vertical cliff plummets dramatically five hundred metres into the turbulent sea below. Hungry from our walk, we cracked open a picnic of ham and cheese rolls, while defending our lunch from the locals. One devious weka strutted around our small circle, stalking us like some small descendent of the velociraptor. His head bobbed up and down with curiosity as he eyed us hungrily.

Walking the return journey, a kaka followed, the inquisitive green parrot swooping from branch to branch before climbing down the

tree trunks using his beak as a third claw. He stopped a few feet ahead and obligingly posed for the camera, watching us expectantly. He's no fool. The bird seemed to be deliberately putting on this little performance for an edible reward. As bird brains go, the kaka is second only to the crow. Kakas have been known to unscrew jam jars using their talons and beak. Perhaps the kaka and the weka ought to form some sort of criminal alliance. The kaka could get the visitors' attention by performing for scraps, while the weka ransacks their backpacks for snacks and valuables. I certainly wouldn't put it past them.

A group of fellow walkers stopped abruptly, staring into the forest. "What are you all looking at?" I asked. A lady with a floppy sun hat was poised with her SLR pointed into the bush. "Look, there's a takahe," as she pointed excitedly towards a rather portly bird with green and blue plumage and a bright red beak, sitting in the tussock grass. Standing in quiet awe, we observed the bird snuffling around, looking for insects.

The takahe is one of the most extraordinary creatures in New Zealand, if for no other reason than the fact that in 1930 the takahe was presumed extinct. The only place you'd find a takahe was stuffed and mounted in a museum case. But a determined amateur naturalist, Dr Geoffrey Orbell, was quietly fascinated by these birds and after many years of diligently searching in his spare time, he rediscovered the takahe in November 1948. A colony of 250 birds had somehow continued to survive, finding refuge in the wop-wops in the unexplored and remote mountains of Fiordland.

I stood there, quietly watching this phoenix from the ashes, as the takahe clambered closer and closer, my camera discreetly clicking away. A figure approached from the distance, walked down the path, shouting at the top of her voice "Mike! What you up to Mike?" I was appalled - what was she doing? Was she some inconsiderate visitor who had foolishly mislaid her hen-pecked husband? Didn't she realise that she'd scare away this elusive creature?

To my utter amazement, instead of running away scared, the takahe skipped and hopped towards the woman, as fast as his little feet could carry him. As the woman approached I realised that she works on the island for the DoC, and is calling out to the takahe. Scampering around her feet, Mike the takahe darts between her footsteps like a love-struck puppy, proving that you can find love in the most unlikely of places.

End of diary entry

There is more to New Zealand's wildlife than birds and possums, but since my wheels were replaced with tree stumps, my view of the sea and opportunity to spot dolphins is rather limited. But there was a time when I'd pass through Kaikoura, where marine life is so plentiful that you could skim a pebble from the water's edge and hit a seal, a dusky dolphin or even a humpback whale.

I was rather fond of another caravan. She sold grilled crayfish. Nin's Bin was her name. Nice curves, with a decent lick of paint on her, but it's hard to have a relationship when you're always on the move with little control over your destiny. I was a reliable van and I didn't often break down,

but I'd blow a puncture as I was approaching Nin's Bin. People took me to Kaikoura so that they could boat out to the whales and scuba with the dolphins, but I was very aware that if I was to swim with the dolphins then I'd be a one way trip to Submarine Town. Once, I did consider unhooking myself and sliding down the cliff to see what things look like from the inside of the big wet, but I don't think I'm sturdy enough to be a coral reef.

I'm more of an aviary than a fish tank, although there's one bird I'm not sorry to see the back of - parrots. There are three flavours of New Zealand bush parrot that I'm familiar with. There's the kakapo, who I have no axe to grind with, as he's like the dodo of Kiwi birdlife. As John Cleese once said, he's a dead parrot, except he isn't dead. Or rather, there are around 100 of these creatures who aren't quite dead. He's not a malicious parrot, not like the others. He's actually a charmingly incompetent creature. The kakapo makes the panda look fortunate, because their chances of mating are even lower. The kakapo mating call is of such a low frequency that prospective partners simply cannot tell where they are, since they produce a deep rumbling noise that you'd normally only get from dub reggae sound systems. That's a parrot I like. Foolish, but without a malicious bone in his body.

On the other hand, the kea and the kaka are terrors. I won't dwell on their subtle differences but the kea lives on the South Island, and the kaka in the North Island. Both are blue and green, and absolute bastards. Oh no, off he goes again, you say, moaning on like he did with the budgies. Well, how would you like it if some feathered monster with a beak like a pair of pliers sat on you, and proceeded to peck and pull the rubber lining from your windows? I've seen them strip a car of all three of its windscreen wipers in under sixty seconds. I saw one land on the shoulder of a small girl in pigtails, peck an avocado sandwich from her hand and swoop into the air with his ill-gotten gains before the unfortunate kid had taken her first bite.

I should be grateful though really. The largest predatory bird in the history of the world was a New Zealander. The Haast eagle once had a mighty wing span of three metres. Their talons were as large as a tiger's and it could dive at eighty kilometres per hour. What they'd have done to a caravan is anyone's guess but they could tear apart the giant moa, a flightless bird that stood twelve foot tall and weighed 500 pounds. I can imagine an impressive battle and if they weren't extinct, these flying tigers would have finished off the emu farm down the road in no time.

Most people accept that the last moa died almost 500 years ago, yet in remote areas of New Zealand, rumours persist that small numbers might still be alive. I was once hauled the length and breadth of the South Island on a moa hunt, looking for these oversize turkeys. My companion at the time, Richard, was convinced they had survived, as the takahe had. We never did find one. Personally, I think they were given a good dodo'ing a long time ago, but Richard kept on believing. He's not the only one either. There's one hotel near Arthur's Pass that made such good business from convincing gullible people there was a lost group of moa nearby, that the owner actually erected a life size statue of the thing.

He had a big brown beard that was thick and dense like a forest. I suspect it was no coincidence that, on meeting him, people often went straight home to mow their lawn. Richard would talk to me as we explored one lonely forest track after another. I've been conversed with more than you'd expect. People prefer people, but they'll bend the ear of their dog or talk to their transport or home, given half the chance. "Caravan," he'd say, "We'll find those giant chooks one of these days, and they'll make a movie about us." The working title was The Mystery of the Missing Moa. He wanted Jonny Depp to play him, which was a bit of a leap if you ask me. On that logic, my part would be played by a Ferrari. A real dreamer, that one. I never complained though. At least he understood how to cruise the roads and the traffic. He used

to just go with the flow, rather than constantly jamming on the brakes like some.

His moa obsession had been started by a man called Carl Bjork, who claimed to have seen three small bush moa in the 1940s deep in the lost world of Fiordland. He wasn't the only one to make such claims. In 1949, someone called Miers who worked with the Wildlife Service dug up the scorched remains of a small forest dwelling moa that had been cut with a heavy steel knife - indicating it had been eaten in the last 200 years, some three centuries after it was supposed to have been wiped out. After a great deal of futile searching, the nearest thing to a moa I've seen is a single bone. It looked like exhibit 'A' from a particularly gruesome murder trial. "You could feed an entire family with one of those," Richard pointed out. "One of these birds would have provided enough buckets of Kentucky Fried Moa for several family feasts".

For now, the only oversized wildlife I see is Jon. He seems well settled now as summer draws into autumn. He doesn't leap out of his skin every time the forest creaks or murmurs. He scribbles away at his journal and seems content with the radio for company. He's out most of the day, working at the local library. I've always appreciated a good book myself, and reading what passes through my door keeps me from becoming too restless. Jon comes and goes, but I enjoy his company when he is about, much as people do with pet cats, I suppose. I'm keeping an eye on him though. As I've said before, living in the bush can change a man, play with his mind. Jon hasn't spoken to himself for a while, but I notice he's eating jam straight out of the jar with a spoon. In my book that's an early sign that he's going feral, so I'll be watching him carefully to see how living in the bush may be changing him.