

Getting down to work with DOC: One American's education in the ways of conservation

By Leslye Penticoff, U.S.A.

As an American, I knew little about the Department of Conservation until I arrived on New Zealand soil and began to see their green and yellow logo as often as I spotted sheep (everywhere!).

New Zealand is known worldwide for its stunning natural beauty, but the kiwis doing the conservation work are less recognized. I decided back in October that I wanted to volunteer during my January holiday—winter holiday in the U.S.—and I hoped to find an opportunity near my homestay in Palmerston North. DOC offered opportunities on their website but they often only lasted the afternoon or day. So I contacted Palmerston North's volunteer coordinator, and together we worked out a full-time volunteering schedule over the course of three weeks. I packed up my work boots and I was on my way to New Zealand!

What I found there was beyond even my wildest imagination. I spent my first exciting week learning from the experts Andy, Keith, and Mark about track maintenance in the Manawatu Gorge. Despite the fact that I was the one new girl in a group of muscular, experienced guys, they were always happy to slow down and teach me about anything from mowing to the politics of using poison bait to catch possums. The next week I moved on to the biodiversity team, helping Viv to identify pest tracks collected from tracking tunnels and going to reset possum traps at the Paengaroa reserve. The most unexpected and awe-inspiring day involved monitoring Moana Roa beach for red katipo, the only poisonous native spider, with Lorraine and Michael. We were humbled to see an adult female with a clear red lightning bolt down her back, nurturing several large egg sacs that will hopefully grow into the next generation of this endangered species.

I came away from my experience with the strong conviction that DOC is secretly employing magical powers, because no ordinary agency could possibly accomplish all that DOC manages to with their dedicated force of individuals. Whether we were watching a helicopter drop metal for track work with careful precision or we were walking the roads at night listening for long-tailed bats, the depth of knowledge and the integrity with which DOC staff approaches their work ever impressed me. I was lucky enough to share in their work, glad to shoulder some of the burden. Becoming a regular volunteer was the best part of my experience—by the end, I understood the basics about DOC's multifaceted approach to conservation and, better yet, earned a place in the Palmy family.

Headed back home to Idaho, I know I'll miss everyone on staff at the Palmerston North office and will certainly miss the wild places that they so passionately protect. I encourage everyone to reach out to their local DOC staff, whether through volunteering for a day or for a month—you'll be amazed at the kindness and expertise that greets you.



Leslye examines red katipo at Moana Roa.



Leslye takes a break from work on the Manawatu Gorge track to smile for the camera.