

# Mavis scaled great heights

Mavis Melville Davidson, M.Sc., OBE, 1910 - 2004

Born Mavis Gedye at Te Karaka in Poverty Bay, she was the seventh child of a Norwegian mother and a father from Cornwall. She trained in secretarial work and arrived in Wellington about 1933. The commercial work was not challenging enough for her and she 'discovered' with fascination the geological and botanical treasures of the Tararua Range. Her active mind needed answers and although times were hard she started university in 1940.

She had married Bill Davidson in 1939, and the pair often motorcycled to the hills. War came and they both joined the army, Mavis becoming Lieutenant Davidson, 2 i.c. of the gun battery at Palmer Head, guarding Wellington harbour.

After the war, Mavis returned to Victoria University, graduating M.Sc. in Zoology in 1950, and subsequently lecturing there. It became a period of great activity in the mountains, leading climbing trips in the Southern Alps, helping with hut building, holding administrative positions in the Tararua Tramping Club and the Federated Mountain Clubs. With Rod Hewitt she made many ascents in the Mount Cook area, and together they wrote a guide book about the region, and a book titled "The Mountains of New Zealand". In 1953 she made alpine history by leading the first 'all women' party up Mt. Cook. Back in Wellington she was a council member of the Wellington Botanical Society, the N.Z. Ecological Society (foundation member of these) the Wellington branch of the Royal Society of N.Z., the N.Z. Association of Scientists, and the New Zealand Alpine Club. A superb photographer, she won prizes in photographic competitions. She was later elected a life member of the Tararua Tramping Club and the N.Z. Alpine Club.

The N.Z. Forest Service appointed her as a biologist in 1958, working on red deer in the Tararua Range. About this time her husband Bill survived a very severe car accident which left him disabled. Mavis's loyalty and attention to him over the following thirty years was inspirational.

In 1962 the red deer study was shifted to the South Island. Mavis, now a scientist within the Forest Research Institute, and a member of the Institute of Forestry, was assigned to study sika deer. This became the work to which she devoted the rest of her life. She looked first to the deer cullers, and with a highly observant hunter called Don Kiddie produced an important booklet about sika deer. Concurrently Mavis obtained an old rabbit's hut at Kuripapango to use as a base, and

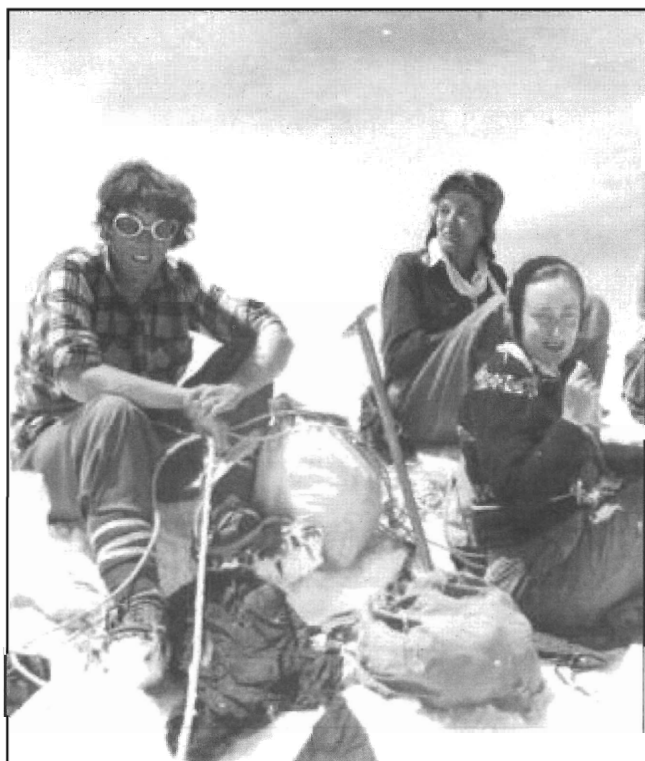


also set up a "hide" in the Oamaru Valley near where sika deer had been liberated in 1905. It was a tiny hut, overlooking the grassy flats frequented by deer, and she used powerful binoculars to observe and record their activities.

To study herd dispersal she used collar tags of plaited nylon, the different colours of which she could identify and which were later returned to her with appropriate records, by hunters, if the deer was shot. The collars (some 1800 of them) were attached by the cunning use of snares.

Mavis was supported in the field by one or two especially selected deer cullers who were trained as technicians, setting the collar snares, shooting deer far from the study area, and performing autopsies. They set up a bush camp not far from her hide, and after dark Mavis would join them for the evening meal, which always ended with a cup of coffee laced with a dash of whisky. Such was Mavis's character that a powerful bond of trust and friendship was formed between her and her co-workers - she was strong, encouraging, and fearfully knowledgeable.

For over three years, from 1963 to 1966, Mavis



*Mavis Davidson (right) on the summit of Mt. Cook after having just led the first all-women ascent in January 1953.*

spent periods of 10 to 15 days each month studying sika deer in the field, but regularly returned to Wellington to look after Bill and catch up on office work. Until retirement in 1975 she continued field work, especially studying dispersal and anatomy of sika deer, working mainly from her base at Kuripapango. For six years after retirement, Mavis was a valued member of the Kaweka Forest Park advisory committee.

At age 81 she took part in a memorial visit to Crete, followed by a visit to Mohensee, Germany, where she was an honoured guest of the International Sika Society.

Mavis continued to work long after retirement, publishing articles and papers until the age of 85. In fact, most of her 12 scientific publications on sika deer were published after retirement. She

was always generous - with money, time, hospitality, and knowledge. When the N.Z. Deerstalkers Association wanted to do their own study of sika deer, Mavis was unstinting in giving them technical and practical help.

Mavis was characterised by her industry, toughness, pioneering spirit, and the positive way she encouraged others. She influenced the lives of hundreds of people. For these qualities, and for her work, she received an O.B.E. in 1992.

Mavis's brilliant memory was intact right to the end. Each Christmas she posted her beautiful alpine cards to some 300 friends, each with a short handwritten note. The handwriting on her final card, Christmas 2003, is bold and firm.

**Ashley Cunningham**

## NZFP Researcher

**John Leonard**  
1927-2003

John, the great-grandson of the first Mayor of Auckland, grew up in that city. He was successful at school and at the age of 11 he travelled to England to attend boarding school. At the outbreak of the Second World War he had to come home quickly. Back in Auckland he attended Kings College before going onto Auckland University where he got an M.Sc. in chemistry.

During his student years he and his friends undertook many expeditions into the ice and snow of the Southern Alps. He measured and worked out the cartography of some unknown mountains. The results were published under his name.

John started work as a chemist in the Research and Development Section of NZ Forest Products (NZFP) in the late 1950s. Early on he worked on the development of an adhesive from radiata pine bark which had a potential for use in bonding particle boards and plywood; it became known as Tanaphen. Later on among other things he worked on the preservative treatment of radiata pine timber and plywood.

John also directed a project on the effect of run-off into streams of fertilisers applied to forests particularly following thinning. This study was made in Kinleith and Mahurangi forests, both part of the NZFP forest estate at that time. This work involved much detailed chemical analysis of the run-off for many chemicals which



he supervised and interpreted in association with the foresters. This resulted in his joining the Insitute of Forestry.

John retired from NZFP in the late 1980s. Throughout his life he had to cope with a severe speech impediment. Outside his work John had a long interest in Theosophy. He was also a member of the Alpine Club.

**Heidrun Leonard and Rex Mirams.**