

New Zealand

A lion-hearted rescue mission

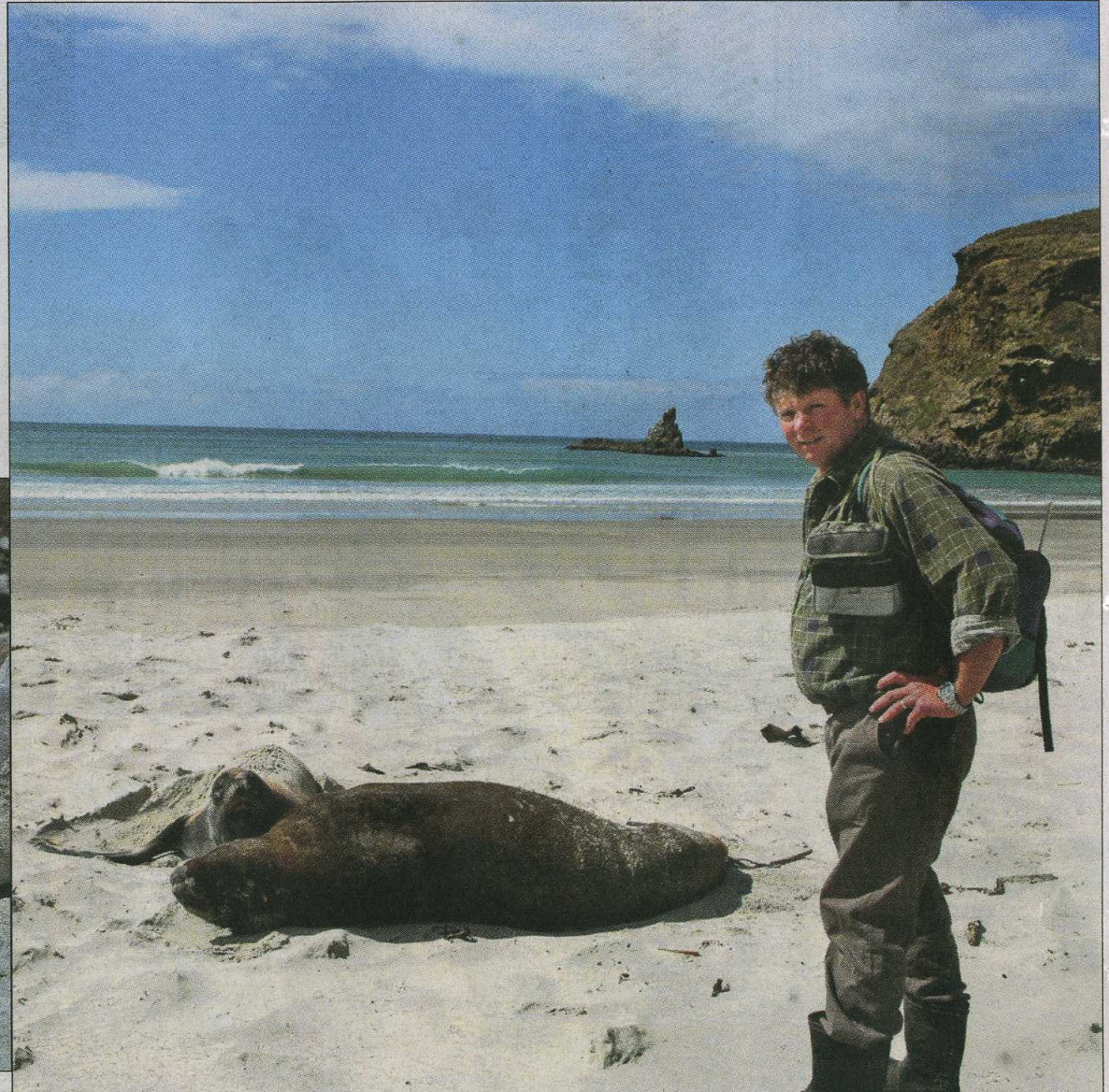
You never know what a sea lion spotting trip will throw up, **Rachael Oakes-Ash** writes.

IT'S NOT the giant knife hanging from Farmer Dave's belt that you have to watch out for; it's the plastic zip-lock bag in his rucksack. Spend a day on the Otago Peninsula in New Zealand's South Island with Farmer Dave, and pray he doesn't have to use it.

I am not so lucky. Standing knee-deep in sea lions on the remote shores of Papanui Beach, one rather hefty beast who has clearly overindulged on the special of the day begins to convulse, or so it seems.

The official word for it is regurgitation; either way it isn't attractive and Farmer Dave is thrilled.

Farmer Dave is a vomitologist. He collects fresh sea lion regurgitation, handing it over in zip-lock bags to marine biologists who study any changes in these creatures' diets. These are Hooker's sea lions, the rarest of the world's five species of sea lions, and anything that can help sustain



these New Zealand endemic colonies on the Otago Peninsula is welcome, including vomit.

Farmer Dave owns 400 hectares of farming land that happens to include Papanui Beach, home to a colony of sea lions, a colony of fur seals, some little blue penguins (also known as fairy penguins) and the world's most endangered penguin, the yellow-eyed penguin.

He takes his role as guardian of nature's rarest seriously and has been known to transport an abandoned yellow-eyed penguin egg in the warmth of his hands under his sweater to an empty nest in the hope another penguin will adopt the egg. It did and the baby penguin was named Jenny after the student staying on the farm who helped him. She emails often for Penguin Jenny updates.

For a rare species it's like Pitt Street on Papanui Beach. Walk the grassy hills and dunes behind the beach and you practically wind your way around packs of yellow-eyed penguins gossiping in the sun. It would seem we have stumbled upon a wildlife breeding ground a mere 40 minutes from the city of Dunedin.

Guests at the exclusive neighbouring Kaimata Retreat have access to Farmer Dave's personalised safaris, his dry wit and his enthusiastic stories of the yellow-eyed penguin colony he calls his own.

Make the 40-minute drive from downtown Dunedin past the sheltered Otago Harbour and cross over the hills towards the Pacific Ocean where the wind blows strong and the sea water pounds the rugged coast. In the middle sits the calm waters of Papanui Inlet, a quiet, peaceful azure bay with a handful of dwellings.



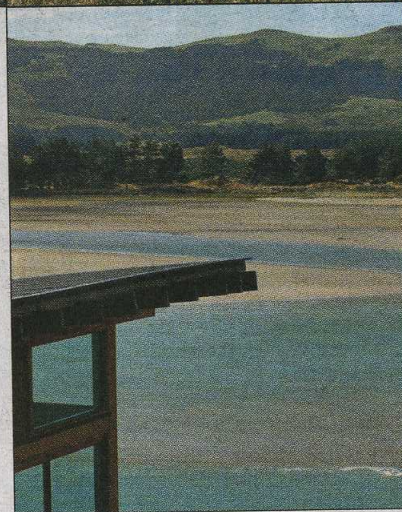
Kaimata Retreat perches hillside, clinging to the side of the inlet with wooden decks and glass walls that give those inside the distinct belief they're walking, or floating, on water.

As we sit by the property's open stone fire, the day takes on a film-like quality. The light changes from direct sunlight to a muted glow, the tides move in and out revealing sand banks and water birds, and the weather becomes temperamental.

The young owners, Kyle and Rachel, live on the property in an old cottage with their three toddlers, a rooster and a blind hen. They sneak into Kaimata Retreat and stock the fridges with locally produced gourmet delights, keeping the fire stoked and the wine chilled like hospitality fairies never seen.

It's clear they love their location. The macrocarpa timbers of Kaimata's three-bedroom dwelling were taken from the land on which it rests and the property is filled with artwork from renowned Dunedin artists. Wine is from Otago and oysters from nearby Bluff.

The beauty of the Otago Peninsula is well documented and at Kaimata Retreat it's there for the viewing.



Guests need never leave once settled in, except to hang with Farmer Dave on his private safari.

When climbing into Farmer Dave's beaten-up Land Rover to begin our wildlife adventure, we were politely given a set of binoculars. These were immediately made redundant by the sheer proximity of sea lions, penguins and fur seals.

I can't help but think of the groups of tourists who have paid their cash to



view these critters from afar. They will squint through telephoto lenses from viewing platforms in other parts of the peninsula.

Here, with Farmer Dave, we can practically groom the critters and I even begin to waddle like a penguin, though that may have more to do with the fully stocked Kaimata fridge than my affinity with the birdlife in front of me.

We wander the entire beach,

TRIP NOTES

- Kaimata Retreat, Papanui Inlet, phone + 64 3 456 3443, or see www.kaimatanz.com. The entire three-bedroom retreat is available from \$NZ550 (\$490) per night in winter to \$NZ750 per night in summer. Individual rooms are available from \$NZ140 per night.
- Farmer Dave's private wildlife safari is only available for guests of Kaimata Retreat. \$NZ75 per person.
- Freedom Air flies direct from Sydney to Dunedin twice a week, phone 1800 122 000. See www.freedomair.com.au. Air New Zealand flies to Dunedin from Sydney via Christchurch daily, phone 13 24 76. See www.airnewzealand.com.au.

RARE BIRD, INDEED: (clockwise from main picture) Farmer Dave checks his charges; a paddock with a view; a yellow-eyed penguin; the retreat's waterfront; fireside at Kaimata; sea lions soak up the sun.

Farmer Dave telling us stories along the way, pointing out the hierarchy status of sea lions, giving us safety tips to keep the wildlife and ourselves in one piece.

It's a true David Attenborough-style adventure, once reserved for rangers and zoo keepers and those licensed to carry zip-lock bags.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Dunedin.