

Whareroa Guardians Community Trust

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Stuffed stoats, taxidermy and the Whareroa connection

The magic of Whareroa and other volunteer activities is that it can bring together people to do good and launch them down unexpected paths at the same time.

Sarah has been assisting friend and neighbour Sue, many years a veterinarian, in dissections and analysis of mustelids (stoats, ferrets etc) which have been trapped by volunteers in the Kapiti area since April 2014.

The dissection work continues, to-date they have analysed 130 specimens to understand what the pests are eating and other clues about how they live in and around Kapiti, what damage they are doing etc.

This was a pathway to Sarah learning and practising taxidermy: preserving and stuffing dead animals.

She saw this photo of 2 stoats being shown to Raumati School pupils during their trip to Whareroa in May this year. Sarah had preserved and stuffed these specimens way back when (in 2015).

In a large number of presentations about pests, these stoats have been shown to countless school kids and others, providing an invaluable bridge from the theory of pests to seeing what they look and feel like.

We took the opportunity to ask Sarah if she would write something about taxidermy for the Whareroa page.

She replied "I've been trying to think about what to write about learning taxidermy, and finding the words has been harder than I'd thought, because taxidermy is really the coming together of a dozen different skills and pieces of knowledge. There's the technical part of actually skinning the animal (which can



Alex showing stoats

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be very tricky with delicate little bits of anatomy like ears and lips, or when you're skinning around a mustelid's anal glands), the science behind preserving the skin in such a way that it will tighten up around the hair follicles so they won't fall out, and also so it won't rot, the artistic part of sculpting a form to mount it on and creating a habitat where you can place that form.

It seems like the sort of thing that would make a lot of people squeamish? There can be blood and guts and smells. And you can be hunched over the same place for hours, because you don't want to keep freezing and thawing your work, and you've only got a limited window to work in after you thaw it, so you've really just got to crack on until you're ready to stick the skin into the preservative. But it's also fascinating. And I don't quite know how to explain but I'll try: each and every animal you work on used to be a living, breathing creature, and even if it was a pest species I don't want to disrespect them? I find it all rather complicated. Good, but complicated. Unless I get myself with the scalpel while I'm skinning, or the needle while I'm mounting the pelt onto the form, and then I wonder what I'm doing.”

Earlier this year Sarah's 'Leaping stoat with 2 weasels' display was loaned for the Otaki Museum exhibition KO ŌTAKI TE AWA – ŌTAKI IS THE RIVER. The exhibition will be refreshed in September 2021, so get along and check it out <http://www.otakimuseum.co.nz/>

