



# MARK CARWARDINE

## WILD THOUGHTS

I was saddened recently to hear of the death of an old friend of mine. Richard Henry, who was believed to be more than 80 years old, died of natural causes. A legendary kakapo from New Zealand, he was named after a Victorian conservationist who pioneered efforts to save this Critically Endangered night parrot from extinction.

Then I started to think about how many of the last survivors of a range of endangered species I happen to have met over the years. There are loads: from Lonesome George, the last known individual of the Pinta Island giant tortoise in the Galápagos Islands, to Najin, Fatu, Sudan and Suni, four of the world's last remaining eight northern white rhinoceroses, who I accompanied on their long journey from the Czech Republic to Kenya last year.

Of course, scientists working full-time in the field know a great many more individuals by name. Partly, this is a measure of the intensity of conservation and research efforts: people get to know and recognise individuals personally because they spend so much time with them – in many cases, more time than they spend with their spouses. I have friends who study humpback whales, and they can recognise and name every individual in populations of hundreds or even thousands.

But often this is a measure of how rare many species have become. I suppose it's inevitable that we get to know the last survivors when there are so few left, but it's a shocking thought nonetheless.

Richard Henry's death brings the total number of kakapo in the wild down to 121. He is succeeded by Sirocco (who tried to mate with my head in *Last Chance to See*), Hoki (the first kakapo to be partially raised in captivity), Felix (a real hit with the females) and all the other kakapo known and cared for by the staff and volunteers of the New Zealand Department of Conservation. To them, the kakapo isn't just an endangered species, it's a population of individuals and characters they know personally.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and tv presenter.



The head-mating Sirocco, perhaps the best-known kakapo in the world.

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