

New Zealand
Hall of Fame
50 Remarkable Kiwis

MARIA GILL

Illustrated by BRUCE POTTER



Ingrid Visser

World Famous Orca Scientist

1966
Born

1982
World sailing
trip

1992
Begins
research on
orca

1997
Appears in
TVNZ natural
history
documentary

2000
Finishes PhD

2001
Keiko is
released onto
the wild

2002
Orca status
changed from
common to
'nationally
critical'

2009
Appears in
Jean-Michel
Cousteau
Call of the
Killer Whale
documentary

2010
Finalist in New
Zealand Herald
New Zealander
of the Year
Awards

Ingrid Visser wanted to work with whales and dolphins from the time she was six. She would practise diving with a mask and snorkel in a small swimming pool in the backyard. When she was 16, her father bought a boat and the whole family set off sailing around the world. They sailed to 50 countries and travelled 52,000 nautical miles.

Back in New Zealand after four and a half years of sailing, Ingrid enrolled in a vet course. However, her low grades meant she could not go to the next level; she had a type of dyslexia where numbers jumbled up. She enrolled in a zoology degree and studied animal behaviour. A meeting with Sir David Attenborough (a world-famous animal scientist) set her off in the right direction. He suggested she work on New Zealand orca — the world's largest dolphin, aka the 'killer whale' — as no one had studied them before.

Ingrid sent out flyers asking people to contact her if they saw orca. After receiving photographs from around the country she noticed that an orca named Corkscrew had been seen in the South Island and the North Island. She had evidence that orca were travelling from southern waters to northern waters. She bought a Naiad inflatable boat and as soon as she received a call about an orca sighting, she would set off to find them. Ingrid took photographs of the orca she saw and collated an orca photo-ID catalogue. Her observations revealed that New Zealand orca had unique behaviours. For example, they would dig their snouts into mud in shallow waters to catch stingrays. They also worked in groups to catch sharks but did not eat seals or sea lions, unlike other orca populations around the world (Argentinean orca surf onto the shore to grab sea lion pups in their mouths). Ingrid has travelled to Antarctica, Argentina and Papua New Guinea to study the orca. She

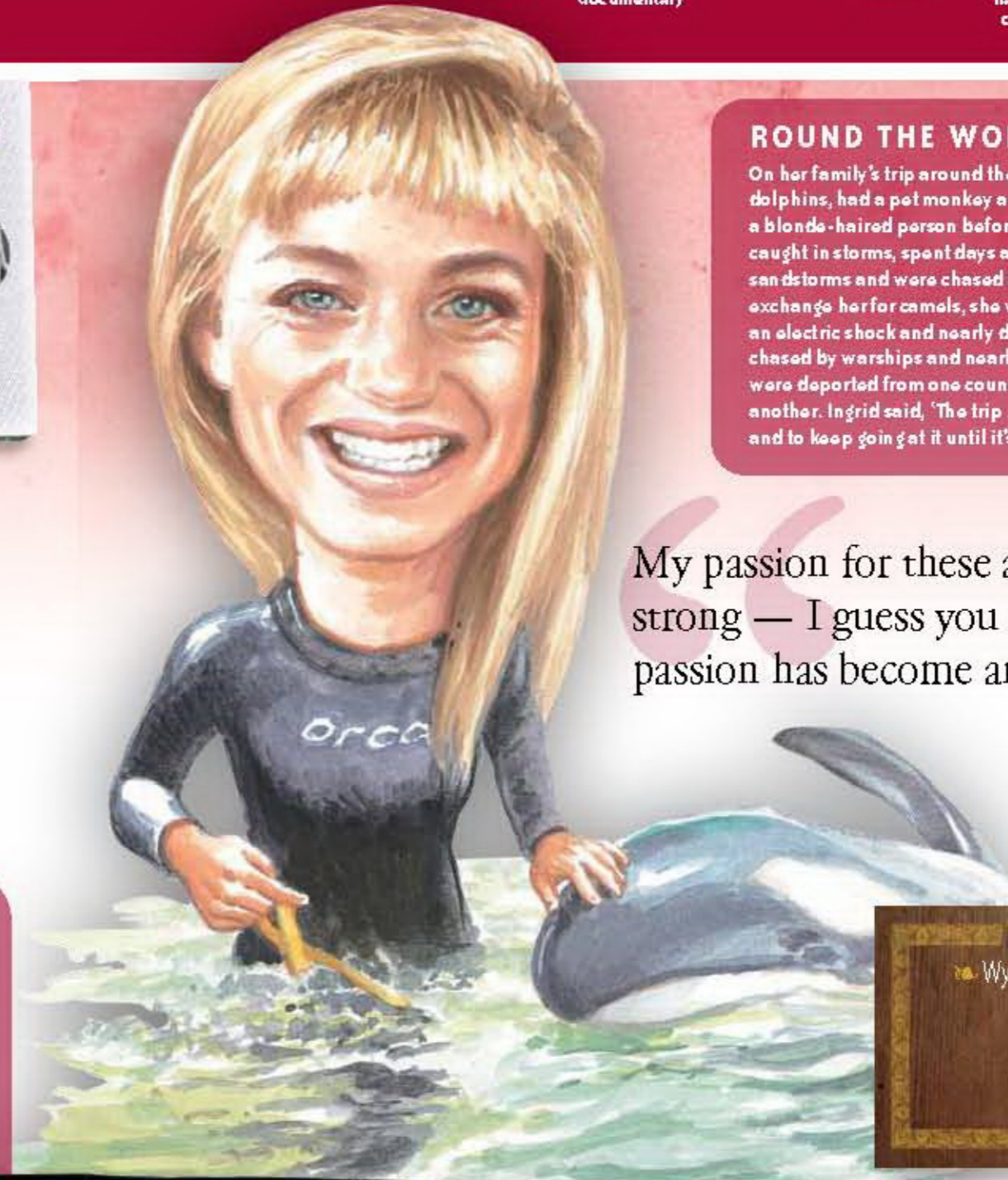


discovered that the grey orca she had seen in Antarctica were also travelling to New Zealand.

After noticing some orca had wounds from boat propellers, Ingrid wrote a pamphlet encouraging people to be careful when boating around orca. She also lobbied to have orca classified as 'nationally critical'. She educates the public by writing books, giving talks and working on documentaries. One of her messages is the importance of not putting pollutants in the sea, as orca are at the top of the food chain and they accumulate those toxins in their bodies. She also remains fully involved with saving stranded orca. Her evidence that they can survive a stranding has encouraged other countries to not kill beached orca.

ORCA ENCOUNTERS

Ingrid has had some amazing encounters with Orca. One time, Rinie, a young orca calf, pulled at Ingrid's fins to slow her down when she was swimming, like it was a game. A female orca she called Digit approached her, opening and shutting her mouth, just like Ingrid was doing when she talked. Digit touched Ingrid's hand in the water and allowed Ingrid to tickle her. Another female orca called Miracle recognises Ingrid's boat and comes alongside to greet her.



ROUND THE WORLD TRIP

On her family's trip around the world, Ingrid swam with sharks and dolphins, had a pet monkey and met people who had never seen a blonde-haired person before. They ran the yacht aground, were caught in storms, spent days adrift in calm weather, sailed through sandstorms and were chased by pirates. Offers were made to exchange her for camels, she was mugged, and her father received an electric shock and nearly died. They were boarded by military, chased by warships and nearly run down by a cargo ship. They were deported from one country and invited to live permanently in another. Ingrid said, 'The trip ... taught me to stick with something and to keep going at it until it's finished.'

My passion for these animals is incredibly strong — I guess you could even say that passion has become an obsession ...

TROPHY BOARD

- Wyland/Dive New Zealand Marine Environmental Award
- Bachelor of Science
- Master of Science
- PhD

32



Sailing around the world with her family



Rescuing Budie, the stranded orca



Onboard the Orca Research Trust Naiad boat



An orca skull with teeth



Ingrid with Keiko, the star of Free Willy



Ingrid has helped to rescue many orca like Ben