
Obituary – Joan Wiffen*

New Zealand's best known palaeontologist, self-taught Havelock North fossil hunter Joan Wiffen, has died aged 87. Mrs Wiffen, who became known as the Dinosaur Lady, died suddenly in Hastings Hospital on Tuesday 30 June 2009.

Her dig at Maungahouanga in Hawke's Bay was the first known site where dinosaurs lived in New Zealand. Mrs Wiffen was the author and co-author of more than a dozen scientific papers and wrote of her achievements in her book *Valley of the Dragons*.

Born in 1922 and brought up in the King Country and Hawke's Bay during the 1930s Depression, Mrs Wiffen later recalled marvelling at the presence of sea shells high in the hills.

But she had only a brief secondary education - her father believed higher education was wasted on girls and she was expected to get married and have a family. She served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force during World War 2 and worked for six years as a clerk before marrying Pont Wiffen in 1953.

The couple raised their two children at Haumoana near Hastings, and the family hobby was rock collecting - they gathered minerals and fossils from throughout New Zealand and Australia. Her husband enrolled in night classes in geology, and when he was ill, she went in his place and recalled being 'green with envy' when someone found a fossil shell in mudstone.

'I knew what I wanted - to collect fossils,' she said later.

Following an old geological map indicating reptilian bones in the Te Hoe Valley, she found the tail bone of a theropod dinosaur in the Maungahouanga valley in northern Hawke's Bay in 1975. Mrs Wiffen went on to find bones from half a dozen other dinosaurs, including an armoured ankylosaur, a hypsilophodont, as well as a pterosaur flying reptile, and marine reptiles, such as mosasaurs and plesiosaurs.

In 1999, she found bone from one of the largest known dinosaurs, a titanosaurid: 'I saw a partly exposed concretion (sedimentary rock) about the size of a rugby ball in the stream bank. I dug it out and asked a colleague to break it open with a hammer,' she said afterwards.

'I immediately saw a bone structure inside that looked different from the bone of a marine reptile.'

Friends and family helped her recover heavy sandstone rock from which she extracted the fossils with painstaking cutting and grinding and use of acid baths.

In 1994, she received an honorary doctorate from Massey University and the following year a CBE. In 2004, she accepted the Morris Skinner Award from the United States-based Society of Vertebrate Palaeontology for outstanding and sustained contributions to scientific knowledge.

Her fossil finds are held in the palaeontology collection of GNS Science, with some on loan to Te Papa.

A spokesman at GNS said her scientific endeavours spanned arduous field work, painstaking fossil preparation, taxonomic description and palaeontological interpretation.

'Her contributions were extremely important nationally and give New Zealand geographic position, internationally,' the institute said.

She also promoted palaeontology through contributions to popular books and articles, public lectures and school presentations. Mrs Wiffen is survived by her son and daughter and a stepson and their families.

* From *Otago Daily Times* website. See also <http://www.natlib.govt.nz/collections/online-exhibitions/self-taught-scientists/joan-wiffen>