



GARETH EYRES

Above: Gareth Eyres and Peyton. Opposite page: Lake Wakatipu, as featured in his new book.

Leading the Blind

Photographer Gareth Eyres is giving both his time and his skills to raise money for guide-dog training.

Pop into Gareth Eyres' place at Pt Wells, near Matakana, and you'd be forgiven for thinking he has orphans or grandchildren stowed away somewhere. Childproof stairguards, bars and gates abound, and the place has the air of a well-used rumpus room. But when you spy snug rugs covered with chewed soft toys and dog hair, it's clear this is a different kind of foster home. "Welcome to Puppyland," Eyres says.

For six years, the acclaimed landscape photographer and his book-designer partner, Kate Greenaway, have been "puppy-walkers" for guide dogs in training. They've had four fulltimers and five boarders so far – one of whom, Peyton, has come back for good as a breeding-stock bitch.

"Kate does most of the walking. I just slob around on the couch with them," says Eyres,

as their new pup, 14-week-old Veda, leaps at him for a wrestle.

He doesn't deny that parting with their puppy-walking graduates is wrenching, but there are rewards knowing the dogs which pass their Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind training programme go on to perform an invaluable service.

One new owner Rebekah, a blind and partially deaf mother of two pre-schoolers who lives in Wellington, rang him recently to say her guide-dog Kiya had transformed the family's life.

"It's a huge responsibility," says Eyres. "This dog's making sight-and-hearing decisions such as crossing a busy road."

But Eyres has an even more personal story behind the publication in late March of a sumptuous collection of his New Zealand landscapes, profits from which will go to guide-dog training.



A born storyteller, he launches into an account of an archery accident in November 2007 which gave him a whole new appreciation for his own eyesight. While testing a new bow, he pushed up his dark safety glasses to take a better look at the peep-sight. At that moment, the thumbnail-sized block of plastic flew off the bowstring, hit the upright pulleys and slammed back into his wide-open left eye.

"It hit me at around 100km/h and knocked me over. I instinctively looked through the eye to see if it was okay. It was filling up with blood – going glug, glug, glug – then went from red to pink to black.

"My left eye's my strong eye – the one I take pictures through. I really thought I'd lost it."

Given it was a Friday evening and a fair way to A&E, he spent a sleepless night with painkillers and frozen peas. Next morning, his GP took a look. "The pupil had been knocked into the shape of an old TV, semi-oblong, and I had this splattered, gory view of the world. But at least I could see. A bit.

"I couldn't stand daylight because the iris was stuck wide open, so I became a vampire and prowled around at night."

A corrective lens was fitted and eventually the eye came right. But those 20 months of migraines and ophthalmologist visits left a lot of time for thinking.

"I thought about how my sight was tied into my everything. I thought, 'Crickey dick, in a milli-moment it could've gone.' I thought about how important these guide-dog puppies are."

So Eyres decided to donate not just his time but his skills. After poring over his photo

archives and heading off on a few road trips to fill the gaps, he's releasing *New Zealand from North to South* in time for the Red Puppy Appeal (March 26-28) and hopes to donate at least \$22,500 – the cost of training one guide dog – to the Blind Foundation.

Robyn Langwell, the founding editor of *North & South* magazine and a fellow dog-lover, insisted on writing the words for free.

Turning the book's pages is like taking

your own road-trip through the country, but with access to the best vantage points – from a pohutukawa-fringed Bay of Islands vista to a ship steaming over Lake Wakatipu. "These aren't out-of-the-way wildernesses," notes Eyres. "These are places that resonate with New Zealanders."

And, yes, Eyres plans to foster more future guides at Puppyland. "I know they're going on to something bigger."

SARAH LANG



Reader Treat

North & South has five copies of Gareth Eyres' *New Zealand from North to South* (The Backroads Press, valued at \$54.95) to give away. Send an envelope marked "NZ from North to South", with your name and address on the back, to *North & South*, Private Bag 92512, Wellesley St, Auckland 1141, to arrive no later than April 16, 2010. The first five envelopes drawn will each receive a copy of the book.