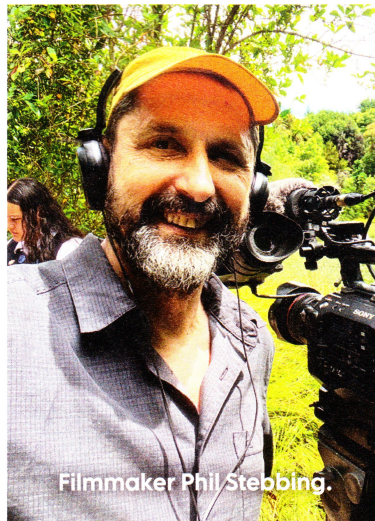




Volunteer Warwick Dean prep for a post-mounted QR code.



Filmmaker Phil Stebbing.



The QR code links to a short film about the reserve.

nature watching

Using technology to enhance and extend nature's reach.



Volunteer Christine McDonald in the nursery with students from Solway College, filmed by Phil.

Watching a film is not something you normally expect to do in a nature reserve, but visitors to the Millennium Native Forest Reserve are offered seven to watch.

They can do this simply by scanning a quick response (QR) code on their smartphone. Seven locations in the reserve have a post-mounted QR code linking to short films describing the reserve's history, special features and the people who maintain it.

A group of volunteers called the Friends of the Reserve launched the video trail in March this year. Since then, the films have been viewed hundreds of times. Feedback has been excellent from the community and funders.

The films were produced, directed and compiled by Masterton filmmaker Phil Stebbing. Phil grew up in a small village called Shenley north of London. As a youngster, he always enjoyed hanging out in the woods. "Often in a town environment we don't have a natural bush or forest place to go," he says. "I've always thought it's important for people to have trees around them."

Phil moved to Masterton with his partner and son four and a half years ago. He and his son came across the Reserve by chance during a bike ride. "I thought: 'Wow. How big is this place? How did this get here?' I was more curious than anything and really impressed."

Phil and his son later joined a working bee at the reserve, after which he resolved to become more involved. "I thought, by using my skills as a filmmaker, maybe I can help them have more of a social media presence and also document a really good example of community action."

He made a short film for the a video journalism project, before suggesting to the Friends of the Reserve that they make a documentary. A budget was prepared, funding acquired and a filming schedule drawn up. The project took several months from start to finish, including about 12 days of filming.

The seven videos range in length from two to seven minutes, and each one is introduced by a pupil from a local secondary school. "It's like you're on a journey and the kids are taking you from one place to another," Phil says.

The videos were combined into a short film that was screened at a Masterton cinema the evening before the QR trail was launched.

The Millennium Reserve's walking paths weave through dense native bush with stunning views. The reserve is home to an array of native wildlife, including birds, insects,

plants, geckos and skinks. There are several picnic spots, a lake and island, seats and scenic lookouts – an impressive development considering it was once a swampy and boggy wasteland, overrun with invasive species such as willows and brambles.

It was in 1993 that the Masterton South Rotary Club suggested to landowner Masterton Trust Lands Trust (MTLT) that a native reserve be created on the land. Since then, many hours of voluntary graft by the Rotary Club, Forest and Bird, school groups and volunteers have transformed it into a flourishing native forest. Weeds have been cleared, ponds established and thousands of native trees planted.

The reserve was opened to the public in 2008. It's criss-crossed by 2km of easy walking trails, providing access to its wetlands, woodlands, and scenic picnic stops.

Working bees are held at least once a month, and thousands of trees are still being planted each year. Funding comes from MTLT, QEII National Trust, and Forest & Bird Wairarapa.

Phil says he loves that the reserve has been restored and maintained without government help. "It's an example of how a native reserve can be created in any town from scratch without that much effort. Through collective power we can make things happen and make our lives better, and bring more joy into the world."

The videos also features some members of Friends of the Millennium Native Forest Reserve, who worked with Phil to create the videos. "Kiwis can often be a bit hesitant, but they are all so passionate about the project, they put aside any shyness and really went for it," Phil says of working with the team.

Masterton resident Graeme Pearse is a member of the Friends committee, and has been involved with the Reserve since its inception.

After seeing QR codes in use while visiting Pearl Harbour on a Hawaiian holiday, he was a convert to the idea.

"The films have made visiting the reserve more of a hands-on experience," he says of the project. "They have also brought to life some interesting aspects of its history, such as its location on a major fault line, that most visitors would be unaware of." ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.