



High up on a mountain in Mexico, Auckland photographer **Deborah Kelland** experienced one of nature's miracles

**T**he symbolic release of Deborah Kelland's monarch butterflies will mark an emotional milestone for the former boutique real estate high-flyer, whose exhibition *The Sacred Journey: A Flight for Life* opens on May 15.

The extraordinary images were taken at the Cerro Peon Sanctuary in Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains.

Millions of monarch butterflies fly south on the slipstreams from Canada each autumn, a 4800km migration that can take several months.

Roosting in fir and pine trees high up the mountain, the Cerro Peon colony swarms down to feed on a grassy plateau as it warms in the sunshine, 3000m above sea level.

Every morning for nine days, Kelland rose early to meet them. Setting out from Macheros, a tiny village in the foothills, she made the two-hour trek up the mountain on foot, carrying all her camera gear.

Flights of migrating butterflies were still arriving from Canada, forming pulsating clouds so dense they almost obscured the sky.

"When I got up there, I was on my own, so it was an incredibly spiritual experience," she says.

"You're just overwhelmed, standing in this paddock at the top of the mountain with the enormity of the butterflies coming towards you. It's like being in a snowstorm."

The monarch butterfly has a typical lifespan of only four to six weeks. However, once a year a "super generation" is produced that lives for up to nine months and can survive this epic migration.

In 2022, the species was officially listed as endangered, reflecting its devastating decline. In Mexico, the population has fallen by 70% over the past 30 years, largely due to illegal logging that threatens their roosting



spots and an increase in severe weather events caused by climate change.

Kelland, who describes her art photography as inspired by the "life force and vibrant energy of nature", was immediately fascinated when she read about the migration of the monarchs and their vulnerable existence.

Specialising in backlit photography, she wanted to photograph the butterflies against a black background — an effect she achieved by lying on the ground and shooting into the mountain.

**Deborah Kelland with her dog, Toby.**

The results are striking, setting the glowing orange butterflies against a backdrop of velvety midnight black as sunlight streaks the grass.

"It was incredibly challenging, defying all the principles of photography, really," she says. "But I didn't want blue sky, which is what everyone associates with butterflies."

The sanctuary is protected by guardians who ride up the mountain on horseback. Silhouetted in several of Kelland's images, they appear as an almost ghostly presence: the rump of a horse emerging from the shadows; a dog's bushy tail that looks for all the world as if it belongs to a wolf.

Attuned to some cosmic clock, the first wave of migrating butterflies arrives each year on the Day of the Dead (Día De Los Muertos), which is celebrated in Mexico on November 1 and 2.

"They say the butterflies are the souls of their loved ones returning," Kelland says.

"And I can believe it."

Five years after the images were taken, her collection is about to be shown publicly for the first time at the Auckland Festival of Photography.

A region-wide series of free exhibitions and events, the global programme includes work by *NZ Herald* photographers that will be displayed outdoors, along the fence at Queens Wharf.

A real-estate hotshot in the 90s, Kelland was the first agent at Bayleys Real Estate to receive the \$100 Million Award for settled sales and later founded her own boutique agency. In 2009, she walked away from the industry on the day her partner, Sue Nelson, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

The couple married in 2013, after 27 years together — one of the first same-sex weddings to be celebrated in New Zealand after a law change that year.

By then, they were living on Waiheke, where Kelland began exploring art photography alongside her charity and philanthropy work. In 2011, a T-shirt she designed in the days after the Christchurch earthquake raised thousands of dollars, with orders peaking at 700 a day.

Her first photography exhibition, the *Light of the Soul* series, was dedicated to her late mother. Shot at the Parnell Rose Garden, it featured large-scale backlit images mounted on to light boxes to mimic the rays of the sun.

Nelson kept her cancer at bay for more than a decade before her health began to deteriorate. She died in 2020