



# Jonathan Wilkinson

NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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## Orangutans and the quiet joys of my job

One of the quiet joys of serving as your Member of Parliament is discovering the remarkable individuals who call the North Shore home. Time and again, I am humbled by the stories of neighbours whose accomplishments are matched only by their humility.

Among them is Dr. Biruté Mary Galdikas, a resident of Deep Cove and tenured professor at Simon Fraser University, whose life's work is nothing short of extraordinary.

Biruté is one of three protégées – along with Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey - of the legendary Dr. Louis Leakey. Together, they transformed our understanding of the great apes: chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans.

Biruté has spent over five decades in the rainforests of Borneo, dedicating herself to the study and protection of orangutans—the “Buddhists” of the primate world, as she fondly calls them.

### Gazing at the stars

Her journey began in Toronto, where, as a child of Lithuanian immigrants, she would gaze at the stars and ponder humanity's place in the universe. At just twelve, a photograph of a young orangutan captured her imagination and set her on a path that would lead to the heart of the Indonesian jungle. Supported by Dr. Leakey, she embarked on her fieldwork in 1971, establishing Camp Leakey and forging a bond with the orangutans that would last a lifetime.

The patience required was immense; in one instance, it took her fifteen years to earn the trust of a single wild orangutan.

Her stories are as captivating as they are inspiring. She recalls the early days in Borneo. Supplies were scarce, and trips home to Canada meant returning laden with essentials.

Biruté was first featured on the cover of National Geographic Magazine in 1975 and then again in 1981 – the iconic photo of her son, Binti, in a bucket with an infant orangutan, one of the many orphans that she and her team rehabilitated over the 54 years she has been pursuing this research.

### Primate “kin”

Her work has been celebrated worldwide yet she speaks most warmly of the connections she's made—both with her primate “kin” and her human community here on the North Shore. She delights in the natural world that surrounds her Deep Cove home, including the bears, skunks and racoons that periodically visit.

Looking into the eyes of an orangutan, Biruté reminds us, is like looking into an ancient mirror. “They are who we once were,” she says, urging us to remember our place within nature, not apart from it.

Her wisdom is a gentle call to gratitude—for the beauty of our community, for the privilege of coexistence, and for the shared journey of all living things.

For all she has given—to science, to conservation, and to our community—I am deeply grateful to Dr. Galdikas. Her example is a reminder that greatness often lives quietly among us, inspiring us to cherish and protect the world we share.

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