



Matakohē-Limestone Island Ranger Report – March 2011

Ben has been in his element this month - lots of lovely lizards. With the assistance of our friend and fellow lizard lover Dave Craddock, we undertook our annual monitoring for the lizard species that have been released on to the island to find out how they are getting on. Much to our delight we found some really positive things are happening.

The shore skinks, the first to arrive, continue to do well and we were able to confirm that the lizard spotted at the sand wasn't a one-off. Three individuals were found, confirming that the population is indeed spreading – nearly one kilometre (as the shore skink creeps) from the original release site.

The ornate skink are still proving a bit tricky to monitor due to the natural hiding places in their habitat but the new monitoring system, set up by the Wednesday wollies, has definitely improved things; this year we found two adult female ornate skinks (as opposed to the one individual last year) and a huge number of the resident copper skinks. This, combined with the ornate skink neonate we found a few months ago, is a very positive sign indeed for the ongoing success of the translocation.

The moko skink are a more recent addition and the first year of monitoring we undertook this year relocated one very gravid (pregnant) female. While it is only the one this is still a positive result for a notoriously difficult to catch species. The fact she is gravid is even better still and suggests she has at least one male friend around. She was a real beauty – 14cm long from her nose to the tip of her very long tail.



A beautiful and very gravid (pregnant) moko skink

The geckos are harder again to monitor than the skinks. Fortunately, with two experts on the case, they located a very healthy looking male Pacific gecko and a slightly 'wrinkly' looking common gecko female, the "wrinklyness" possibly a sign that she might have recently given birth. Those eagle eyed herpetologists also managed to uncover a real treasure – an adult female and her two very young babies. These are the first confirmed island bred common gecko. Makes you just want to burst out in song. Awesome!



One of the 'uncommon' common gecko babies

In other very exciting lizard news, Ben has made some major headway with the forest gecko translocation – he has found some. These special lizards are now heading off to quarantine for the next few weeks (to check for disease) and if they pass muster we are looking to have a release some time in the next month or so. We will keep you updated.

Predator Control

On a not so bright note, invasion levels on the island are at an all time high thanks, we think, to an easy winter followed by a lush summer, compounded by beautiful still days and nights. In the last month on the island we have caught:

- three ship rats
- a stoat
- and a weasel – possibly the first weasel on the island in many years

The trap network however is doing what it should, trapping the individuals rapidly with none of the animals having obvious evidence of recent predation in their stomachs, although two of the ship rats had a stomach full of rat bait. We also didn't track any pests in the tracking tunnels which were run at the end of February - no pests were trapped that week.

As we would expect with this level of invasion, we are seeing high pest densities in the buffer, motivation for individuals to brave the swim to the island. A Norway rat was caught on Rabbit Island and two stoats and a ship rat were trapped at Onemama. This reinforces how crucial the role of the buffer is to keep the pests off the island. On Knight Island some unhelpful individual had deliberately set off all our traps – very annoying.

In response to these higher levels of invasion we have implemented a few incursion measures, deploying an additional ten rat traps in the buffer and another five on the island in the incursion hot spots.

We have also completed the N-Y baiting thanks to our volunteer James and he is currently undertaking the next round of A-M baiting, earlier than scheduled so the entire island is treated at once.

Other Fauna

Back to the positive stuff and the reason we go to so much trouble to keep those furry beasties at bay:

- Those banded rail we were talking about last month have been even more obvious this month. Ben was recently disturbed by a sad cry from the garden - a banded rail chick had gotten himself trapped and confused inside one of the wire cages we use to protect our veggies. Ben had to go down and rescue him. He left him tucked up in some shrubs calling for his parents, who eventually returned to claim him. We had been dying to capture some good banded rail shots since we moved to the island but of course, Murphy's Law prevailing, our camera was in the shop being repaired. A missed opportunity to capture these usually very elusive babies up close.
- While out hunting for geckos on the island Ben also managed to spot another very cool island resident – an enormous and fascinating stick insect. Not knowing one stick insect from another

we spoke to our local expert Olly who thinks it is a native of the *Acanthoxyla* genus. This group is very interesting in that they reproduce through parthenogenesis – for us laymen that means that they don't need a bloke. Amazing eh.

- Also in the insect world, volunteer Dave Craddock came across a native praying mantis on the island. These are increasingly rare as they are displaced by the larger and more aggressive South African praying mantis. You can tell the difference really easily – the native one has a beautiful blue spot on the inside of its front legs – the ones they fold up when “praying”.



An absolute ripper of an insect

- We had an unexpected early morning guest inside this month, a kotare, otherwise known as a kingfisher. He had to be collected from the window sill, where he was making a dreadful racket and mess, and relocated outside. He didn't take too kindly to this manhandling, biting and squawking all the way.



Our early morning visitor (we were still in our PJ's)

- Also very close to being inside the house was a giant centipede. Turns out he was happily living under a log at the base of the stairs. He wriggled off when we exposed him while gardening - not sure where he is now... hope it's nowhere near our gumboots.
- The island now seems to have some resident California quail. They set up over here a few months ago and now have some very delightful babies. They have made the area around the manager's lawn their home and can frequently be seen on the steps down to the beach.

Kiwi

Last week our kiwi celebrity left us. He had been gaining weight steadily and, with his head still facing the right way up, was ready for the big wild world again. With only last minute warning we still had a good turn out on the Onerahi foreshore to hand him over to Meagan from DOC. He was surprisingly calm and quiet so everyone got a good look – not at all like his normal growling and wriggling self. He will be going back to the site at Riponui where he was found. Many thanks to Freddie Tito for the blessing to send him on his way.

Our island birds have refused to settle down to the business of a second clutch, despite ideal conditions. We still have hope though; Glen seemed to be hanging around the same area over the last two weeks.

Flora ... trees and weeds

- The Wednesday wollies were again dealing with weeds this month, but with a different focus. They spent the day `releasing' last year's plantings. This isn't the most glamorous of tasks but it is one of the most rewarding and important for the island. Releasing involves carefully clearing back the grass and weeds from around each plant. This will stop them being smothered and reduce competition for water and light and increase growth rates – meaning a faster track to a closed canopy and a forest. Ben will be following the releasing up with a spray to complete the job.
- A few of the wollies also headed off with Ben to some newly discovered moth plant sites. They found two adult trees, complete with pods. Great to get these down before they spread their nasty little seeds everywhere.
- Gerry Brackenbury also adopted a special project – starting to spray out an area of buffalo grass under taller canopy trees. This will make a huge difference to the natural regeneration underneath.



**Contrary to appearances,
Wednesday Wollie Barry isn't about to chop this akeake down...**

Visitors

We have had quite a few trips over this month:

- Pirates! We were invaded by a boat load of small pirates here for a birthday party.
- Jo had a great day with the kids from Tikipunga High School's special needs class.
- A big crowd of committee members and volunteers came over for the annual Walkabout.
- Elizabeth and George Kaegi, a couple from Canada, came over to explore the cement works. They are researching John Rutherford's role in cement history.
- A group of fabulous folk from Probus Club came over and had a great day on the island and enjoyed Ben's company.
- A writer for Life & Leisure magazine, doing a story on Whangarei, came over with Gerry for a tour and a cup of tea.
- Earthquake refugees! We had a full house with Ben's family who came up to stay following the Christchurch earthquake.

General

- Ben built some supports for the damaged wall sections of the Singlemen's quarters to try and halt further deterioration.
- Ben completed the spraying to prepare sites for this year's plantings.
- A bit more mowing and our familiar friend Murray from ParkCare to knock those tracks back again.
- Catch up with botanist Iain Reid about threatened plants for the island.
- Catch up with lecturer Olly Ball from Northtec to talk about invertebrate monitoring on the island.
- Community Conservation Fund progress report completed.

Upcoming

- **Volunteer Wednesday – 6th April.** Pickup at 9am at the jetty, returning after lunch approximately 2pm. See you there.
- A possible forest gecko release...here's hoping.

Hei konei ra

Jo and Ben



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