



Matakohē-Limestone Island Ranger Report – April 2011

After that tantalising teaser in last month's report, this month the mokopirirakau are firmly in the spotlight. On a surprisingly warm and sunny Wednesday the first 15 mokopirirakau, or forest geckos, were welcomed on to Matakohē-Limestone Island. A crowd of 35 people accompanied the lizards on their boat journey and were there to be part of the blessing and release. Our kaumatua, Freddie Tito of Te Parawhau, talked about the importance of the geckos as our "elder siblings" and "treasures" and the need to conserve them.

Forest geckos are one of the hundred or so species of native lizard we have in New Zealand and the sixth lizard species we have reintroduced to Matakohē. The name mokopirirakau means 'the lizard that clings to trees' which indeed they do. Like their names suggest, forest geckos are most often found in trees in areas of remnant native bush, but are declining on the mainland. Little Barrier is the only island population of "Northern" forest geckos that is completely free from predators so the addition of Matakohē means there are now two insurance populations should their decline continue on the mainland.

A HUGE thank you must go out to the many, many people who were involved in this special project. Once again it is an achievement of which FOMLI and its supporters and sponsors can be justifiably proud. To single out a few folks for particular attention:

Providing the money to help make this project happen were the members of the Whangarei Harbour Health Improvement Fund Board. This fund normally concerns itself with things in the waters of the harbour, however, for us they made a terrestrial exception, recognising that Matakohē is indeed an integral part of the harbour and an important asset for the community. The fund has sponsored all the lizard releases to date as well as providing the funding for the composting toilet several years ago (not nearly as fascinating as the lizards but still very important). Thank you for your support of our slightly 'out of the box' projects.

Elizabeth Adams from the Whangarei Museum and Kiwi House also deserves a great big hug for lovingly caring for the geckos before quarantine and the release, including a few individuals who became longer term residents. It was great to know the lizards were in such capable and caring hands.

Finally, thanks to Raewyn and Grant Faber who very generously gave us permission to collect forest gecko from forest on their property.

It is a hard thing to do to give up such a treasure but we promise to take good care of them and provide a safe environment that will hopefully see them live long and proliferate wildly, and in turn the island should be able to restock the mainland.



**Aha, so that's where I am
I've always wanted to live on an island**



Predator Control

After last month's high catch rate we have been continuing with our incursion response activities – an increased frequency of trap baiting/checking and deployment of additional traps and poison. Fortunately things seem to be calming down a bit with no more rats or stoats caught this month. However, we cannot afford to be complacent; in a remarkable eye-witness account, volunteer James was out late night fishing at the end of last month and spotted not just one but TWO rats swimming their way to the island. They were almost there, but when they spotted James they turned around and headed back. James, very interested in finding out where they had come from, followed them all the way back to a stormwater drain on the Onerahi foreshore. Terrifying, but incredibly interesting to witness invasion happening in real time.

Although the invasion rate of stoats and rats seems to be back to more normal levels, mouse trapping continues. We have caught five mice this month – all in the mouse specific incursion traps we have put out. We also ran the tracking tunnels again and tracked two mice. This is despite the island being fully baited at the end of last month. We may need to think about repeating an island-wide baiting again shortly, although it may pay to wait till after the abundant natural food peaks of autumn are over and snail activity abates.

The buffer remains busy with three mice captures, three ship rats, a weasel and a stoat. Ben has deployed rat traps at Knight Island and extended the coverage of the stoat traps to provide better protection for Matakoho-Limestone Island. These traps have been very effective so far in capturing rats and mice which appear to be abundant in this part of the buffer.

We have also collected our annual supply of hares from the Poroti Hunt. This hunt is organised by the Poroti Outdoors Club and they kindly donate us as many hares as we want for bait for the island. Ben and the volunteers did a great job of turning these hares into nice salted baits to supply us for the whole year.

Other Fauna

Having been on the island for over a year now, the cyclical and seasonal nature of things is really becoming apparent. With Easter coming up we expected to start hearing the morepork and sure enough they have started up, although we haven't seen our regular house visitor yet. There are lots of tiny bait fish in the harbour now too, and that must be part of what triggers the team fishing efforts of the little black shags. Just like this time last year there have been 'swags' of shags (not sure what the collective noun is for little black shags?) working the shallows chasing fish – looks something like synchronised swimming minus the nose plugs. The reef heron and pied stilts are also more common again feeding around the island and the first of the spoonbills have been spotted.

We have also had some not so common visitors in the harbour – little blue penguins. Ben has spotted four while out boating. He stopped and gave them directions to the nest boxes on Matakoho but they just looked a bit confused. Ben also spotted 15 bar tailed godwits out on the mudflat near the sand spit – possibly juveniles that are hanging about for the approaching winter.

We are also gearing up for the petrel monitoring season. Birds could be returning anytime from now so we will be checking the nest boxes and keeping our fingers crossed for the return of Ivan plus a bunch of his mates.

Kiwi

- A new kiwi joined the Matakoho fraternity this month. This little chick came via the bird recovery centre after having a few foot problems. The lucky students of Waipu Primary got to see this tiny fluff ball up close – close enough to hear his squeaking. They were quite taken with him so we checked with DOC and the school has been given the honour of naming him.
- We also undertook a night round up to see who we could catch that was ready to return to the mainland. Once again the superior ears and catching skills of Ben and Todd Hamilton succeeded in locating three chicks. One of the smaller chicks was from Sir Ed's clutch. He was doing great, weighing 1060g only five months after hatch. The other smaller chick was Glen's; he weighed in at 1000g at only four months old. Both need just a little bit more time to get bigger and smarter before they are ready for release on the mainland. The last bird we caught was one of the chicks from Purua forest, named "Ari". He came over to the island in October 2009 and now weighs 1750g - a strapping bird definitely ready for the big wide world. He had a transmitter fitted and was monitored daily until the release; fortunately he was very easy to monitor, sticking fairly close to the house and shed. He was released on Good Friday out at Mcleod Bay, joining the growing Whangarei Heads population. Many thanks to Todd and the Whangarei Heads Landcare Forum for the work they do out there to make it a safer place for kiwi.
- Our residents have continued to take it easy, hoovering up the abundant critters and not showing any inclination to raise a second clutch. Apparently that has been the case in some of the mainland populations as well – a holiday atmosphere prevailing. We shall expect them to be 'fat as butter and sleek as satin' next time we catch up with them.



**Ralph, a friend from DOC, and Ari
who is definitely big enough to head off into the big wild world**

Visitors

- The Wednesday wollies visit this month coincided with the forest gecko release. Even after all that excitement they were still keen to get down to business and spent the rest of the afternoon sowing native seeds, weeding, cutting up hares for rabbit baits, cleaning and repairing the DOC 200s for their annual service and prepping and cleaning all the containers for stoat baits. It is because of dedicated wollies like these that the island is what it is and can provide a safe haven for new residents like the forest gecko.

- On a stink note, our regular volunteer James Brooks has badly hurt his knee so is taking it easy for a while, under strict orders from everyone. We miss you James and wish you a speedy recovery.
- We had two trips with students from Waipu Primary this month - 70 students and parents in all. They came across with Gerry Brackenbury as their guide. Another three trips are planned next month.
- Two classes from Northech (29 students) came across with lecturer Olly Ball to do monitoring on the island. The first class undertook lizard pitfall trapping and tracking tunnel monitoring. The second undertook part of the long term vegetation monitoring.
- A very important birthday party picnic group came across, including ex-island ranger Colin Bishop. We got to pick his brain for all sorts of 'historical' information.

General

- Dwane and Angela Kokich very kindly donated the island a laminator – very useful for sign making and school resources thanks guys.
- Ben and James spent quite a lot of time this month doing weed control, particularly for blackberry and pampas. The pampas are flowering so now is the time to spot and control them.
- Argentine ant survey completed for our high risk areas – none found.
- Ben gave a talk to the Onerahi Garden Club.
- Jo went along to the Landcare Forum Trappers workshop – a great day with lots of info on promising trap and poison developments.
- BNZ Save the Kiwi Trust Interim Report completed.
- Barge servicing.
- Mowing.... but it is FINALLY slowing down. Hurrah.

Upcoming

- **Volunteer Wednesday – 4th May.** Pickup at 9am at the jetty, returning after lunch approximately 2pm. See you there.
- Hundreds of grey faced petrels mobbing the island, and trees festooned with geckos.
- Planting will hopefully kick off late May thanks to the kind weather we have had. We will keep you posted.

Hei konei ra

Jo and Ben



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