

STRANGE BIRDS . . .

Having the services of a volunteer who was available on many weekdays, it was important to make sure there were sufficient tasks for him. Once he'd finished the steps up the Pukematekeo Track it seemed a good idea for him to remove exotic plants from a rough area in the middle of the golf course that lies surrounded by our sanctuary [surely unique in New Zealand!]. Wattles were the first target and after hand-pulling the small plants, he was to move on to cutting down the large specimens. By chance I was chatting with the greenskeeper who remarked that he'd recently seen four of those strange yellow-striped birds in the flowering wattle trees. Realising those "strange birds" were our precious hihi, a rapid change of plan was made! The wattles now have a stay of execution, but the **Auckland Regional Council** have agreed to deal with the other weeds in the rough, such as blackberry, gorse, tobacco weed, and ginger, with a plan for the golf course and ARK volunteers to gradually add native hihi food plants such as kowhai.



Hihi suburbanis
[photo courtesy of K. Matson]

Meanwhile another of the "strange" birds had included the Ranger's residence in its territory. Making its way across the road, lawns, and moving through bush remnants

and hedges, it was frequently heard by those at the house or adjacent workshop area. Here it seemed to be feeding mainly on Coprosma berries and insects, but for details of a hihi with more of a gourmand's taste we have to move out of the ARK.

Some 4 km away from the Cascade Kauri Park where we released hihi this year and last, are several homes along a bush-fringed dead-end road. Yvonne and Mike's home overlooks native forest extending down to Swanson, but they were aware for many months of hihi calls in the valley below them. Placing sugar-water feeders that the birds are familiar with was the right inducement. Soon, the hihi was coming close to the deck railing on which the feeder was mounted. Later the feeder was placed on a table just by the ranch slider door to the deck so that the

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— The Ark in the Park —

A Forest and Bird, Waitakere Branch "Auckland Naturally" project partnered by the Auckland Regional Council

Skink Survey

Being aware of local biodiversity and how this might change with time is a necessary component of restoration projects everywhere. Monitoring is already organised and established for our birds, terrestrial invertebrates, Hochstetter's frog, and rodents, and also some long-term vegetation plots have been set up. Monitoring is done for our translocated robins and hihi and now it's the turn of our reptiles. As many as 19 species would once have inhabited our region, but the maori kiore and later the European rats, stoats, hedgehogs, and cats made short work of many leaving perhaps only 6 species. While geckos are surveyed at night with flashlights so that gecko eye reflections can be detected, the skink species likely to be remaining in our locality are easier to detect. In autumn, a large number of corrugated iron rectangles approximately 600-mm long had been placed on north-facing sites in the rough at the edge of the golf course within the ARK sanctuary.



Copper skink

[photo courtesy of M. Leenen]

When spring arrived, Duncan Emerson guided some of us in our search for skinks that might have taken sanctuary under the iron covers. Stealthily moving to each in turn, we watched as the cover was quickly uplifted. Large hunting spiders, beetles, ant colonies, and the occasional mouse were present, but the long sinuous shapes darting for cover at many sites were Duncan's prey. With total disregard of the underlying vegetation, he expertly captured the skinks [or most of them]. A brief description of identifying features, a release of the animal under the iron, and then a de-prickling of fingers could occur! The introduced rainbow skink was present and also the native copper skink. It will be interesting to see whether the distribution noted this time of indigenous skinks near to least-disturbed forest and exotic skinks near to cut-over forest is repeated. Unfortunately, we may also see that the exotic species comes to dominate all the area in the way of many invaders. The survey will be repeated each summer and autumn.

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fortunate couple could watch the bird from their lounge. An apple nailed on the railing was initially food for white eyes, but soon the observant hihi was trying out this novel food while next a half orange titillated its taste buds even more.

No one awaited the recent Forest and Bird nationwide garden bird survey morning with more glee than Yvonne and Mike as they were looking forward to casually adding their house hihi to the list of tui, blackbird, silvereye, thrush, etc.

HIHI HAPPENINGS

With one stint of monitoring hihi over their breeding season, Andy Warneford was keen to get back to the task this year. Perusing all the information on hihi sightings gave him a flying start. These included observations recorded by volunteers and other Park users since the initial release. Further observations had come from the team adding sugar water to the feeders and Eric Wilson's fixed cameras have given invaluable information about which birds use which feeders. The rat-baiting, which began in August, was effectively a survey of the whole ARK area, so hihi sightings at potentially good nesting localities were identified then. Using last year's two nest sites as models, mature kauri on slopes near water and other mature trees of mixed species seemed the preferred nesting habitat. Two nest sites are not much to go on, yet four "hot spots" of activity in just such habitat have been located after only two and a half weeks. Initially, the calls from at least three males occurring throughout the day as the dominant bird chased off the interlopers offered a clue. Then, a possible nest-site cavity, which all males entered for considerable periods of time, looked promising. It was even more so when the dominant male was seen pursuing a female.

A locality close to the most walked track in the Park was another hot spot—a particular male was present over many observations and photographed on many occasions at the nearby feeder. Last year, two observers in radio contact steadily refined their search by triangulation. Using this technique, a particular kauri was identified as the likely nest tree. Both male and female hihi were present, thrilling us with their low-level, high-speed chase through the shrubs and bushes always circling and returning near the kauri. The female was next seen walking and selecting a small twig in her beak . . . we were definitely on to it now! She seemed to be entering and leaving an epiphyte on the side of the tree, but a sudden movement up higher caught my eye. A large bough, broken partway along, had a cavity and just as I was saying that it would be a likely nest site, in popped the female. Both birds continued to enter and leave with the female bringing further nest material. See our website (<http://www.arkinthePark.org.nz>) for more dramatic photos.

High-speed, low-level mating flights were the clue to another locality. Two of us were chatting on the way



First nest of the season
[photo courtesy of E. Wilson]

up the Upper Kauri Track. My companion stopped on hearing a hihi, then cheered ecstatically on seeing the handsome male, this being his first sighting of hihi on the mainland. Yet words failed him as the male pursued his mate just above our heads. Back they came at breakneck speed pruning leaf tips as they flew. Then back again in the original direction, once more over and around us and so on for an amazing fourteen times! This pair also has been detected often on another of Eric Wilson's feeder-mounted cameras with the male impatiently entering the feeder on one occasion as Eric was changing the battery unit! Within a week, Andy had spotted their nest cavity in the typical site at the end of a large, broken-off kauri bough. Two days later we found a different pair's nest that was extremely true to type—it was indeed one of last year's nest sites!

The most commonly heard bird on many occasions on these tracks near mature kauri forest is hihi—more than tui, more than fantail—yet this is not so much because of the singing ability of hihi, but more a function of testosterone. Possessing the largest testes per body weight of any bird, hihi seem to like to push their weight around. "Stitches" and alarm calls seem to be part of this macho attitude. Still their distinctive call will allow Andy and helpers to more readily monitor them.

ROVING ROBINS

Animal management is the major topic of the studies that Masha Leenen, from Germany, is taking in Leeuwarden, The Netherlands. At her institute were students who had worked on robins at Tiritiri Matangi and Masha applied also to work with robins. However, after recommendations from some of our previous students from Germany and The Netherlands, Masha was keen to join us at the ARK and will spend 5 months in New Zealand. Arriving at the tail end of our wet winter after a wet European summer didn't seem much fun, but within 2 days she had been involved in trapping and banding two robins that had previously escaped banding. After a frustrating first week when our "sure-fire" robin pairs seemed to have disappeared, the weather improved, Masha got her eye in and now four nests have been found. Our Technical Advisory Group has suggested that we should monitor robins annually until some 10–15 territories have been



Roving robin

[photo courtesy of B. Halliwell]

found and then surveys might take place less frequently. With eight having been found last year we are very close. Monitoring robins, however, gives an indication of how

good our predator control is so with ongoing volunteer support we may well continue annual surveys. Masha will be involved in intensive monitoring and banding of as many chicks or previously un-banded birds as possible.

One of the advantages of the closeness of our forest to a major population centre is that many eyes and ears are available through the Waitakere Ranges. This was borne out over several weeks recently when three separate people emailed me a photo of the same robin at the same track junction 8 km away. He

was most photogenic and allowed each photographer to capture his leg band combination. This made it easy to inform our paparazzi that he was a January 08 chick and where his natal nest was.

Raise Voices [and glasses]

Low winter temperatures and biting wind did not deter those attending our second fundraising concert. The organization by Karen Staniland, Joanne Bishop-Sime, and Sue Strom ensured an enjoyable night of varied music and song in the splendid Glen Eden Playhouse. Highlights were the piano playing of John Paul Muir and the singing of tenor Brent Read and the soprano Yuko Takahashi with folksongs from her native Japan as well as from the classical repertoire. Sponsors' products from Kokako Organic Coffee and Pernod-Ricard [Montana Wines] were enjoyed by patrons and their generosity along with that of Bush & Beach Travel enabled the evening to be a great financial success. The funds raised will go to our planned translocation of kokako in 2009.



Concertgoers

[photo courtesy of J. Staniland]

ARK IN THE PARK CONTACTS

— KAREN —

Phone: 837 0443

Email: mcolgan@netaccess.co.nz

— JOHN —

Phone: 818 5267

Email: cjnk@xtra.co.nz

Website Update

Long overdue for an overhaul, our website was tackled by Maurice Colgan and now his efforts are online. Lots of news, lots of information on what we are doing, maps of our site, monitoring results, and access to our Annual Report and also our Restoration Plan. This latter document outlines what the ARK is about and our plans for the medium to long term. Check it out at: <http://www.arkinthePark.org.nz>

Until next time . . .

John Sumich