

## WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD?

When Yvonne Vaneveld spotted a small broken egg amongst the undergrowth below a large kauri tree, she knew instantly that this was a significant find.

From volunteering as she does on Tiritiri matangi, she could identify these fragments as hihi eggshell and as such, they are probably the first seen in a mainland forest since the 1870s. Our nests up to now have all been in kauri trees in cavities 20–30 m above ground level and so all the eggs in those nests have

been completely unobservable. With each egg having an average weight of 3.1 g, a minimum of 25 chicks produced this season [perhaps 30], gold averaging \$940 per troy ounce, and all the contractor and equipment costs since September, each egg has been worth far more than its weight in gold. Try platinum or diamonds!

Summarising his hihi monitoring season Andy Warneford, writes that although the

rugged terrain and dense forest in the ARK was as challenging as usual, confirming that hihi can breed successfully in a predator-controlled environment and that the locality

has ample natural food sources, was pleasing. Hihi were observed on several flowering species and later on species bearing berries, observations that had been rarely reported in the past. For example, *Alseuosmia*, a low undergrowth shrub with a fragrant, heady almost tropical scent was, as expected, a nectar source

for hihi, but later this summer hihi were also observed feeding on the berries. Although a start was made on comparing *Alseuosmia* seed-set in hihi-containing areas with non-hihi areas, this wasn't continued. Hopefully, the tagged shrubs will be observed over flowering and fruiting times in future years. However, casual observation in late February in the



*Hihi gold*  
[photo courtesy of S. Sumich]

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### — The Ark in the Park —

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

## THE URBAN ARK: AUCKLAND ZOO

**A**uckland Zoo is all about conservation—playing its part in recovery and breeding programmes for a range of exotic and native species, as well as supporting habitat restoration. The 17-hectare site on which Auckland Zoo sits is a prime example of the effects of modification from early Maori to European colonisation. Some of these changes have not been positive for native flora and fauna.

It is our mission to focus the zoo's resources to benefit conservation, inspiring and empowering people to take positive action for wildlife and the environment. To achieve this, we believe leading by example is the best strategy. This has given rise to "The Urban Ark project."

Inspired by the success of the Waitakere Ranges *ARK IN THE PARK*, we have adapted that model to suit the unique environment of an urban zoo. The primary aim of the

"Urban Ark" is to reduce the number of introduced pests, both plant and animal, to improve the habitat for species that would have originally inhabited the area.

The last two monitors indicate rodent numbers have reduced to a 0% rat index from an original 35% in August 2008. Mice numbers have also greatly reduced. Being right next to Western Springs Park means that we have recurrent invasions of several pest species. Future plans to extend control into this area will not only solve our re-invasion problem, but extend safe habitat for free-ranging native species to a much wider area that includes the whole Western Springs precinct.

—Lyn Claridge/Peter Fraser  
Auckland Zoo

**Editor's Note:** The Zoo has always been a valued supporter of the *ARK*; we're pleased to have inspired and assisted in this project.

## HIHI GOLD . . .

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central hihi area seems to indicate a greater number and larger berries than observed in previous years, so it's tempting to consider that another past animal-plant association has been re-established with improved pollination of the shrub by the hihi.

Adding to the fascinating aspects of hihi behaviour is its apparent capacity of mimicry. Tui and bellbird are both well known for their mimicry, with Maori having taught pet birds complex phrases and even genealogy.

Observers here at the *ARK* have occasionally heard both robin and fantail song only to find that the bird issuing the sound is a hihi. Deceit is implicit in humans in the phrase "to speak with a honeyed tongue" so perhaps all these nectar feeders are on to something.

With evidence of 13 nest attempts found, eight known to be successful, and another one in progress, the minimum tally of 25 fledglings capped a great season and all credit to Andy and the many volunteers who assisted him.

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## Stoat Tales

**H**ave you ever considered the link between mustelid control and trout fishing? It's not obvious is it, but we have recently formed such a link and hope to gain some funds while doing so. It seems that the terminal black tuft

at the end of stoat tails can be fashioned into an alluring fly as used in fly fishing. Every stoat caught now can contribute to mustelid control at the *ARK*. As the first "law" of permaculture states, the problem is the solution!

## TOMTIT TERRITORY

One of the pleasures of navigating and placing the bait lines in the new W block, which extends from our previous boundary of the old Fenceline Track eastward to the Waitakere Reservoir, is the constant sound and sightings of tomtits. Fenceline Track was one of the sites in which tomtits had survived over the years and surveys in the late 1980s always showed a moderate presence there. Since predator control though, the numbers have increased greatly, perhaps as much as 6–8 times. With a pair every 100 m or so along both the old Fenceline Track and the new track, which skirts the reservoir before joining the old track, it may be that all possible territories are filled. Having many hectares of predator-controlled forest all around will allow for safe dispersal of these inquisitive insectivores.

Not faring as well this year has been our robin population. After the increases observed in our first seasons, we were anticipating a good increase again but early on in the season it became apparent that some of our well-established territories were devoid of any of the previous birds. Clustered along the Whatitiri Track near the stream were two empty territories and also close by were two large families of paradise duck. When all of the many ducklings vanished it was



*Tomtit [female]*  
[photo courtesy of E. Wilson]

obvious we had a problem in this area. Paul “Ditch” Keeling, a Department of Conservation staff member employed by the Auckland Regional Council to assist in rabbit control, has probably solved this problem though with the successful bagging of a 7-kg feral cat—the muscular feline showed no signs of malnutrition at all! It was a rude awakening, and with another female robin showing signs of attack in a different area where a cat was seen, a number of modified Timms traps were set out and they are soon to be supplemented by a number of Belisle traps. These are set in tower-shaped boxes that seem to appeal to cats’ instincts to explore.

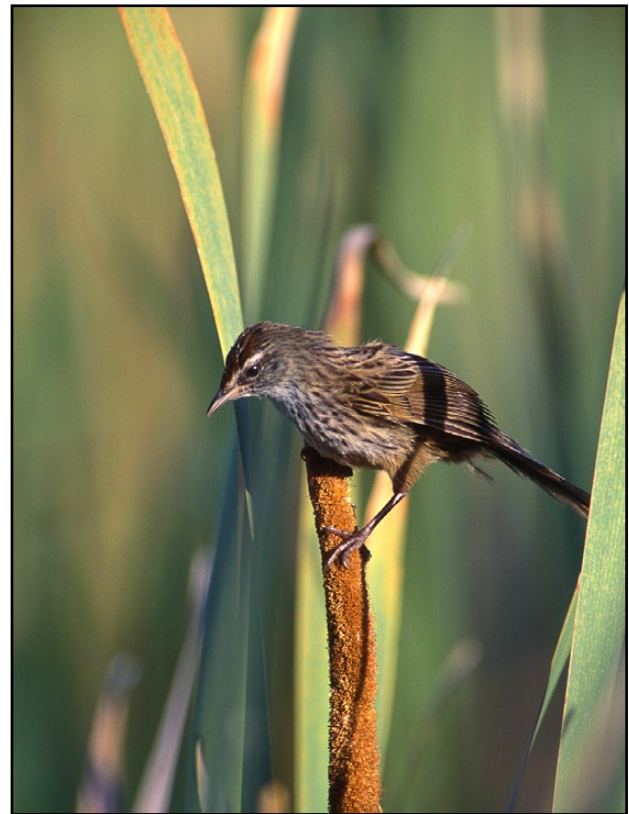
On the positive side, Masha Leenen our student studying the robin breeding this year, observed 13 nesting attempts with 15 chicks produced. Although eluding our searchers in the past two seasons, a pair suspected of being in a particularly dense thicket of supplejack was found this season by Masha and Karen Colgan. A difficult environment for humans perhaps, but the robin pair found it to their liking laying three clutches. Banding was carried out on 10 chicks, including three chicks that fledged and left the nest after Masha had departed. These have pulled through possibly with the supplementary feeding of meal worms by rostered volunteers as these chicks, the last of the season, were being brought up by the female alone.



*Defensive stance [fails with felines]*  
[photo courtesy of M. Leenen]

## FINALLY FOUND

**V**olunteers Adnan Demir and Daniel Price added another bird to the species list recently when they were placing bait stations in the new W block. Approaching the reservoir edge with its reeds, flax, and manuka scrub, they saw a scrappy, brownish, robin-sized bird, but it was the ragged, frayed tail feathers that enabled Daniel to identify this as a fernbird. Fernbirds are an endemic species found generally in dense low growth and are weak flyers. They forage under leaf litter, under bark, or on foliage for a large range of invertebrates. Duetting is a feature of fernbird contact calls—what we hear as one “utick” call is the almost instantaneous response of the female to her mate; they also have a range of “short metallic sounding calls.” Although fernbirds have previously been reported in the general area, no sightings have been confirmed within the ARK’s boundaries, including during some surveys made from the water. With predator control now extending to the reservoir, we might have more sightings of this special bird.



*The ‘scrappy’ fernbird*  
[photo courtesy of [www.jasonelsworth.co.nz](http://www.jasonelsworth.co.nz)]

### **Reinforcements for Robins?**

**E**arly March saw five ARK volunteers assisting three Puketi Restoration Trust members to conduct a survey of robins in the Mangatutu Ecological area in South Waikato. Puketi is applying for a first translocation into their magnificent kauri–broadleaf

forest sanctuary to the west of Kerikeri. With Mangatutu being one of the two sites where we plan to capture our kokako later this year, the idea was advanced that our kokako catch team also capture robins in the anticipated frequent down time. [Note: Still, dry mornings are needed for kokako capture, not at all guaranteed in the Waikato in early winter!] A pre-requisite for both robin captures is an assessment of numbers and it seems that the survey confirmed a high density—approximately four per hectare. If approval is given by the Department of Conservation, then the next step will be a disease screening that both Puketi and the ARK will conduct. If successful, it may be that up to 30 robins will make their way north to both sanctuaries in the next 3–4 months.

**Until next time . . .**

*John Sumich*

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