

THE YEAR OF THE ROBIN

Undoubtedly the introduction of new birds has been influential but this year is certainly turning out to be the year of the robin. With 30 birds captured in northern Pureora and released this May, it could have been expected that they would

disperse as widely as did the first cohort in 2005, but perhaps the larger area of predator-controlled forest, the presence of a few anchoring birds, or some other factor has led to more of these birds staying within or near the ARK boundaries. Laurence Bechet, Heidrun Schinke, Haydn Reynolds, and Gerhard Wette, our locally based volunteers were joined by Coraline Descamps from France and sought out robins in all the previous known

territories as well as new ones discovered by these and other volunteers. With the first nests discovered in August, many more nests and territories were added over subsequent weeks. An interesting finding was the number of territories in R block, which previously had only one territory known. This block takes its name from the Robinson Ridge Track, but with five apparent territories now, it seems the track should be renamed “Robins On Ridge Track.”

Excitingly, the pair formations throughout the ARK seem to have involved almost every possible combination with original birds of 2005—Waitakere-bred birds and ex-Pureora birds—all mixing and matching. Additionally, several robins have been seen and heard in the new Aw block, which is being opened

up for predator control [see page 3]. Although late in 2005 robin calls were heard from the east side of the reservoir during the first bird survey conducted from the water, few people would have ventured subsequently into that dense untracked forest. That very density of

forest, with its tangle of kie kie, supplejack, and cutty grass, coupled with the lower rat density noted over the years at these slightly higher elevations, may make this new Aw block ideal robin territory.

Robins also have been observed a few hundred metres to the west of the ARK, closer to Lake Wainamu in the past year and again these seem to be well ensconced in their second season. Reinforcing the phrase “an oldie but a goodie”

is M/R, which has been rediscovered close to the ARK in this area. And who or what is M/R? None other than the very first bird caught and banded at Mokoia Island for our first robin transfer in 2005. Welcome back M/R! His mate incidentally is a Waitakere-bred bird banded in the first breeding season.

Behind the searchers of nests, and the banders of birds, have been our suppliers of worms who are yet another part of the ARK support system. These volunteers have kept pace with the ever-increasing need for mealworms without which finding nests and catching fledglings would be near impossible. Adnan and Raewyn Demir initially found how to ensure the propagation of mealworms and now they and Karen Colgan steadily breed mealworms year round.



Robins at the ARK—a numbers game

[photo courtesy of L. Bechet]

— The Ark in the Park —

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

KAKA BREEDING?

Some might say it's typical, but those raucous Aussie cockatoos at the Cascades, centre of the *ARK IN THE PARK*, are in strong contrast to our own endemic kaka.

Would those of you who have visited the Cascades in the past several months been aware that there have been groups of kaka about? Six often, but up to fourteen, their varied mellifluous whistling, and occasional eponymous "ka-ka" are far more pleasing to our ears than the repetitive screech of the cockatoos. Recent visitor **Andres Bosso**, the executive Director of *Aves Argentina* (Forest & Bird's Birdlife International partner) had been shown robins and hihi at the *ARK* but a kaka decided to contribute also by landing and calling only metres above his head. More often though, kaka go about their business in silence, the sound of falling husks or seeds the only sign of their presence in the canopy above. Most authorities accept that kaka seen at the *ARK* are transients, which move back to Little Barrier or Great Barrier Islands in the breeding season, so when **John Stewart** observed firstly a male feeding its partner and then mating occurring (see



Copulating kaka
[photo courtesy of J. Stewart]

photo) interest was aroused. **Suzi Phillips** who is co-ordinating sightings of kaka in the greater Auckland area (kakawatchnz@gmail.co), felt that copulation usually is performed within 100 m of a nest site. Several people have since returned to the site, but its steep slopes near cliffs above the river do not lend themselves to safe traverse so the question of whether a breeding pair has established is still unanswered.

WEIWEIA WAYFARER

With his route being the Fenceline Track that passes alongside the reservoir, the many occasions spent quietly radio-tracking our kokako has let **Paul Carter** observe the bird life. Tomtits and tui are most commonly seen, but recently he was able to observe a dabchick [weiweia], a rare endemic visitor, one that is more commonly associated in the Auckland region with the dune lakes of the Kaipara, or Whatipu but with their stronghold being the Rotorua region. Dabchicks are aquatic birds, generally preferring shallow freshwater ponds with abundant reeds and other water plants with this habitat providing their diet of small invertebrates, crayfish, fish, and molluscs. Numbering perhaps fewer than 1500 throughout the North Island, dabchicks have been noted to move into suitable habitat provided by well-vegetated farm ponds although overall numbers do not seem to be rising. With seemingly suitable habitat in its upper reaches,

will the completion of predator control around the reservoir make this wayfarer a permanent resident? The fluctuating water levels of the reservoir may make this unlikely though. With fernbird, another endemic, having recently been seen for the first time around the reservoir, what can we expect next?



Dabchick (Weiweia)
[photo courtesy of P. Carter]

OUTWARD BOUND

Dense and dark, separated by the black water of the reservoir, the untracked forest on the far side is touched with mystery. Selectively logged up to the first decade of the 20th century, the area had then been set aside with no public access as the water catchment to the first reservoir in the Waitakere ranges.

A hundred years in Auckland's warm, wet climate, and the absence of deer or goats, ensured a vigorous increase of understorey, sub-canopy, and canopy species surrounding the remaining first-growth trees. Podocarps, kauri, and rata pierce the canopy of a forest in which we considered the same intensive predator control as elsewhere in the

ARK but it was always going to be a big task. No current tracks conveniently divided it, bait lines might have to be twice as long as our volunteers usually contended with, and the distance from our base complicated the logistics of material supply. Then three of our kokako chose to reside here!

With two females and one male, a breeding pair might well eventuate in this area that we intended to protect "in time." Crisis often means opportunity and this kokako dispersal occurred as ARK committee member **Andy Warneford** was searching for a MSc thesis topic. Posing the question of whether a lesser grid pattern of bait stations could provide a sufficiently effective rodent control as the ARK has consistently achieved with its 100 m × 50 m grid, Andy was able to gain financial support for the thesis from the Biosecurity department of our partners, the **Auckland Regional Council**. A plan for a 100 m × 100 m bait-station grid was drawn up, approvals gained from **Watercare** and the

ARC, rodent monitoring lines established, and the navigation of bait lines started in this 285-hectare trial block. Yes, a trial block bigger than Tiri Island and certainly extraordinarily more difficult to traverse. Starting points to navigation though were made from two historically used routes at either side of the



View of new block across reservoir—dense, dark, and trackless
[photo courtesy of J. Sumich]

block. The first, the Gleeson's Track long overgrown but still showing the benched and drained sides, was an old horse and coach trail and part of a route from the Henderson Valley to Bethell's Beach at the coast. This probably would have ceased functioning even before the reservoir filled in 1906 with the completion

of the Waitakere Dam. Much less defined was the second track, still with some benching and previously part of a walking route. Apparently un-named, it became Rata Track from a large, ancient rata **Maurice** and **Karen Colgan** found along the route they navigated.

The need next was for skilled bushmen able to navigate through the tangled mass of supplejack, kie kie, and Gahnia and what better "bushmen" than our herbicidal heroines, **Fiona Cameron** and **Sarah Stewart**, and bush bashers **Dave Jacobi** and **James McClaughlan**? With saws, secateurs, and primarily doggedness, they pushed through, over or under the vegetation giving us lesser mortals direction out of chaos—a chaos of fallen trunks and branches interwoven with lianes connected with trees twined with more creepers all obviously making a complex habitat that favours birds. Robins, hihi, and kokako have been seen and (or) heard even in this short period. How many might be here next year after rodent and mustelid control?

KOKAKO CAPERS

Six kokako were released to the Cascade Kauri Park between September and November this year, and with the help of many dedicated volunteers we collected data on the birds' movement patterns once they were released. In the majority of cases, the birds remained close to the release location for a period of several days, sometimes moving up the valley sides, as in the case of bird #63 (with the bands M-WG). This bird ventured further away from the release area on subsequent days, but generally returned afterwards. Other birds left the area rapidly and were not detected again for several weeks until they suddenly re-appeared. For instance, #45 disappeared for a further 6 weeks until she miraculously turned up to visit the speakers one morning. The speakers set up in the forest may have influenced the eventual dispersal rates of the birds; hopefully, these return visits will help prevent the kokako from heading to Piha Beach!

Radical movements over short periods of time were characteristic for many of the birds, no doubt a natural reaction to being kidnapped. Two of the birds (#35 and #47) did meet and form a pair to the southeast of the dam, which was great news for everyone! We first noticed that the signals were consistently coming from the same place and then heard regular song coming from the area, which is a good sign that the territory is established.

Although some birds have established a large home range area in which they can generally be found, the other birds are still roaming the Waitakeres. As the summer progresses, we hope

they will become more settled, once they have found each other and formed pairs. It was fantastic to see the enthusiasm and dedication of the volunteers, and I was very grateful for the hard work they put in.

And now from volunteer **Paul Carter's** perspective:

"I have never tracked or monitored anything before, so the experience of kokako monitoring has been one of excitement and amazement. It has been something I have always longed to do and with such a special bird makes it all the more amazing. The driving force for me to keep going is the knowledge that we are doing something that has never been done before and the wonderment of what you will find each time you go out. Where are the birds today? Can you see a pattern in their movements? The excitement of having a couple of birds pair up. Will they start breeding? If so, when and will it be obvious? Has the latest female to be released paired up with the second male in the Ark? Only time will tell."

— *David Bradley*

Supporters Corner?

We'd love you to be in our corner and if you are unable to actively work alongside our volunteers consider assisting by contributing to **Help-A-Hectare**. See our website for details (<http://www.arkinthe.org.nz>). An annual deduction from your account will be used to maintain predator control ensuring even more biodiversity gains.

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*Enjoy a Merry
Christmas
and a Happy New Year!*

Until next time . . .

John Sumich