

THE FIRST KOKAKO NEST IN 80 YEARS!

Easing ourselves onto the rimu leaf-littered ground, we kept our eyes on the slightly darker, denser collection of branches in the canopy that Robbie had pointed out to us. To confirm the direction, sighting along two blue tapes tied to twigs assisted slightly, but the scrappy collection of sticks was greatly obscured by hanging supplejack. Having settled us down on site, Robbie departed to install another sound recorder. Gerhard and I were having our first session on nest watch near a boundary of the ARK territory where only a week before, the first kokako nest in the Waitakere Ranges in perhaps as much as 80 years had been seen. The walk initially along an easy trail was interesting with its flora being slightly different to that in lower altitudes of much of the ARK. With its upright bottlebrush-like racemes of small white flowers, specimens of tawheowheo [*Quintinia serrata*] were distinctive. Their curly edged leaves, green when new but red with age, give the trees



A historic sight
[photo courtesy of G. Capill]



Tawari
[photo courtesy of J. Sumich]

red highlights. Whether green or red, however, the leaves always have a cold, vinyl-like texture. The slight lime citrus smell of hangehange is here and throughout the Ranges at this time of year but visually spectacular was tawari [*Ixerba brexioides*]. Lime-green stamens reaching beyond ivory white petals in pentametric symmetry, the large flowers were used as adornment by Maori and the flowers were one of few they gave a specific name to, *whakou*, separate from that of the tree.

Our pair of kokako, though, had chosen another subcanopy species—a mature heketara [*Olearia ranii*] festooned with supplejack. We'd come prepared to monitor for at least 2 hours, but within 5 minutes of settling in, a soft “dook dook” alerted us to the presence of kokako.

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— *The Ark in the Park* —

ARK IN THE PARK is a project of the
Waitakere Branch,
Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society



WORLD PREMIERE OF "PREDATOR WARS"

Honouring a large group of our volunteers, the ARK committee organised a dinner held at the Golf Course. Over 8000 hours of volunteer time are recorded at the *ARK IN THE PARK* and some of our bunch just donate so much time and energy to the project. Small gifts were given, a great dinner was had, wine from supporters **Montana**, coffee from **Kokako Organic Coffee**, and the evening was already very successful when



A thank-you to volunteers
[photo courtesy of R. Woolf]

it was announced that we would be shown a small DVD presentation. Some very familiar graphics and music followed and a wonderful, lighthearted “historical” version of the ARK’s establishment and progress had us in fits.

“Predator Wars” is coming soon— but not from a far distant galaxy and not to a cinema near you. Look for it soon online on our website (<http://www.arkinthe.org.nz>).

DEEP MINERAL MYSTERY

Finding a deep man-made trench leading to a long tunnel was a surprising finding for volunteers hunting for kokako nesting activity. Mossy walls led into darker and deeper recesses that without torches the volunteers could not fathom. What could this be in such a remote area? Discussing the possibilities with local historian **Ben Copedo**, and then reading the



Gold or manganese? Mine doubt
[photo courtesy of G. Capill]

classic account of early European settlement of west Auckland, *Once . . . The Wilderness* by **John Diamond**, it was apparent that this tunnel represented a drive, an attempt to find valuable mineral ore. It seemed that in the 1880s, mineral exploration was occurring at the same time as timber extraction. “The discovery of gold was being reported from all over the Auckland province and the Waitakere Ranges came in for its share. The most numerous finds in the area were around Swanson, Waitakere and Nihotupu,” stated Diamond. This shaft then could have been an attempt to find a fortune in gold but another mineral also sought around the time was manganese and many shafts and tunnels occur throughout the Nihotupu valley. Diamond’s book states many horses perished by falling in such shafts. **Bill Beveridge**, the first City Council ranger, told me of falling into one and only was saved by jamming his elbows out. Returning later to try and barricade the hole, he was unable to find it in the tall, dense, forest. Another early ranger, **Don Stirling**, plunged into a shaft and was saved by the long-handled slasher he carried. The slasher bridged the sides of the shaft, arresting further descent and enabling his exit.

Extractive industries have long since lost favour and many generations now have realized the aesthetic, ecological, and spiritual values of the Ranges. It is one of the joys of volunteering at the ARK to know we are enhancing those values.

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One leg viewed

[photo courtesy of E. Wilson]

A movement of leaves, a branch bent and released, a grey shape showing, feeding on the leaves of an adjacent tree. One leg viewed, luckily the right one with band combination seen, then the bird vanished only to appear from behind the tangled canopy within half a minute. Here, though, its presence was noted more by interruption to shafts of light between leafclusters, which darkened then reappeared, rather than by any definite shape. A slight rising and falling of perhaps tail feathers over the nest edge and all was quiet—or nearly so. Tui called with lots of staccato wing flapping and noisy flights; fantails flitted constantly with sharp “tweets”; occasional waxeyes, four or five at a time; grey warblers in ones or twos. Blackbirds sang, keruru passed by with their “wump wump wump,” and even a tomtit visited with its “olly olly olly”. At 25–30 minute intervals, the kokako left her nest often with the male attending and he sometimes giving full song sequences, but more commonly soft vocalisations between the pair were heard. What most impressed was the secretiveness of approach and departure. Sneaking noiselessly through the well-camouflaged canopy of the olearia with barely a twig disturbed the bird waited till at least 20 m away before vocalising with her mate. Later, we realised this frequency of nest departure and return implied that chicks were probably being fed yet never a peep was heard as commonly occurs in many other species when the parent brings food to chicks. What a thrill to see this in our own Waitakere ranges—and how easy for us, but finding this nest initially was the culmination of many, many weeks of effort.

As reported in our September issue of the *ARK IN THE PARK Newsletter*, sound recorders were set up and recorded for periods of hours several days at a time and the resulting spectrograms scanned for consistent kokako presence. Radio-trackers plotted the movements of those birds with transmitters and dedicated searchers followed up. [A hot spot of activity plotted with GPS was confirmed almost 2 months later to be within 10 m of the first nest found; that is, before nest building occurred!]

The team, though eager and fairly well attuned to kokako behaviour, took advantage of the offer to spend time at the Hunua Ranges kokako zone. Hazel Speed of the Department of Conservation has observed this remnant population and the additional translocated birds over the past 20 years. Robbie Havell, Sharon Osman, Jenny Waite, and Andy Warneford went on the hunt at the Hunua where they found new nests, learnt a lot but could reciprocate by telling of the usefulness of the recorders developed by *ARK* volunteer Eric Wilson. Hazel can see this may be a cost-effective way to trace young kokako that disperse beyond the usual search area. Another element of managing kokako breeding they were shown was the protection around each nest—the famed ring of steel—where rat and stoat traps were arranged in a 25 m radius of any nest site to hopefully intercept potential predators. Armed with this extra training, our kokako search team came back to the *ARK*. The next day, standing near the hot spot mentioned earlier, they were able to discern that the ordinary tangle of sticks in the canopy of an old heketara was much more than ordinary and seeing the kokako enter, history was made!



Furtive kokako

[photo courtesy of E. Wilson]

POST-MORTEM PARTICIPANTS

Those walking our trap lines would undoubtedly agree that the only good stoat is a dead one, but they might be surprised to learn that some of our stoats have contributed positively after death as they never did in life. Andrew Veale, a PhD student at Auckland University and one of our canopy climbers, revealed how.

Earlier this year, a stoat turned up in a trap on Rangitoto Island about a year after the campaign to eradicate all mammalian predators. That campaign had involved two phases: first, a poison drop to eradicate rodents and to kill cats and stoats by secondary poisoning, and next, a trapping program. No stoats were detected in the traps after the poisoning campaign despite numerous checks [and very little food available given the apparent success of the rodent eradication]. Because of this, it was believed that the stoats had been eradicated, so the finding of a stoat on the island was a great surprise to all. The Department of Conservation needed to know the source of the stoat—was it a survivor that had avoided all traps, or was it a migrant, and if so where was it from? Andrew collected stoats trapped from the Auckland region [ARK IN THE PARK, Kawakawa Bay, and Waiheke island]. Because of the large number of stoats

available from the ARK, these formed the bulk of the mainland sample. Luckily, Andrew had collected stoat hair samples from Rangitoto before the eradication by deploying tunnels containing rabbit meat and a rubber band at the entry to snag hairs. All the stoats were genotyped; that is, the DNA of each specimen was extracted, purified, and amplified. Using these samples, Andrew could show that there was very little differentiation of stoat populations across the Auckland region. East Auckland and West Auckland [ARK IN THE PARK] stoats were quite similar; however, Waiheke Island stoats were different and the Rangitoto stoats were largely different again.

The stoat caught on Rangitoto was a surprise. It most closely resembled mainland stoats and so it must have swum from there. The gender was determined also; it was male and surprisingly this male stoat must have swum from one of the urban areas across the harbour to Rangitoto!

The stoats caught in the ARK formed the basis of the mainland sample because you need large numbers of samples to construct a population profile. Now this data set has the potential for use in studies of stoat movement around the Auckland region and in the burgeoning number of Hauraki Gulf island sanctuaries.

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Seasons Greetings!

Until next time . . .

John Sumich