

## WHITEHEAD RELEASE No. 3

“A lot of air time” laughs Jenny Waite as she describes the rough crossing to Tiritiri matangi for our most recent translocation. Months of planning seemed destined to failure as stormy weather arrived. The expected Sunday morning start was delayed further and further, but on Monday afternoon a bumpy crossing was eventually made. Once there, some members of the team sorted out all the mist nets and other necessary equipment while others gathered leaf litter and berry-bearing branches for the three aviaries. Along with our *ARK IN THE PARK* volunteers and Tiri supporters were some volunteers from Moturoa Island restoration project [Bay of Islands] who were joining us to catch whiteheads for their first translocation. After the storm, however, Tuesday delivered calm, fine weather—ideal conditions for mist-net catching, and catch they did. A dream run ensued with 92 birds being caught and transferred safely to the processing area by 2:30 PM. Barely able to keep up with the input, Andy Warneford banded, weighed, and recorded the sex of all the birds before they were placed in the aviaries.



Jacqui Wairepo with grumpy whitehead  
[photo courtesy of A. Warneford]



Whiteheads release  
[photo courtesy of A. Warneford]

Re-capture of the birds in the aviaries was much easier with 40 taken the next day to Moturoa, and 50 to the *ARK* on the following day. An uneventful release occurred although one bird, perhaps harbouring a sense of indignation, flew immediately from its transfer box straight into the head of one of the capture party.

Previous releases of whitehead in 2004 and 2008 have been made; however, for a flocking bird with no strong territoriality, dispersal was expected and sightings since the releases have been infrequent. Significant intervals after translocation of some species to Tiritiri and other small islands often passed till the birds could be seen regularly although here in the Waitakeres

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dispersal within 30 000 hectares is possible and indeed sightings have been made at considerable distance from our release site. A family group of 10 seen at the ARK just before this recent release was a positive indication that even with dispersal, the birds could find mates within this large area. Nevertheless, a 10-year plan with the Department of Conservation will likely ensure the more rapid establishment of whitehead. The plan calls for an annual release of significant numbers of birds for up to 10 years, with an assessment at 5 years to decide on further continuation dependant on the results of monitoring. Annual surveys over a large number of sites within the ranges will be conducted and if the trend shows significant increases, then the full 10-year plan will occur.



*Whitehead in coprosma*  
[photo courtesy of J. Fitter]

## Feeding frenzy—

Saturday, first day of baiting for this year. A good turnout and the volunteers at the Ranger Station are hearing which lines are to be done, receiving reminders to place more marking tape, and how many bags to place. I'm standing away from the crowd; after baiting for 8 years I guess I know the drill. Hearing first the characteristic wump, wump, wump, I casually look south and see a group of six keruru flying towards us and then another group and another. Excitedly, I interrupt the volunteers' briefing as nearly 40 keruru come across and start wheeling to descend onto the slopes below Pukematekeo Track. It's a spectacular sight as white bellies flash against forest greens. Settling, then rising, individuals and small groups make the air live. Buoyed by this display, we all head off for our tasks but over the next weeks keruru are seen in big numbers. One estimate on one occasion was of nearly 50 birds. "Tirau" [= many Ti] supplies the answer. Those sites with lots of Ti kouka, or cabbage tree, our most common native Cordyline species also known throughout the Pacific as *Ti*, provide abundant seasonal food. Upside down more often than not, the keruru gorge on the masses of Ti kouka seeds, fattening themselves up in preparation for winter. In many parts of New Zealand, keruru are rarely seen. Predated by rats or stoats or indeed illegally hunted, numbers have plunged. Seeing as many as we have gives testament to our predator control yet historical accounts are of flocks of thousands— we are not there yet but are surely progressing!

## Kokako updated

Kokako are still in significant numbers in their favoured area at, and just beyond, our southern boundary. Andy reports that several birds are being heard and usually seen on every day he and others have

been working near these areas. Applications are under way with appropriate authorities to gain approval for long-term protection of this favoured area.

Meanwhile at the Buffer Zone where our neighbours to the north are assisting us by controlling pests on their properties across the road from the ARK, Moby, Punga, and their chick Brittany are still being seen regularly. Brittany must be quite a *chick* as she has already convinced another kokako to join the trio and we will assume for the moment it's a "he"!

September will see again a further capture expedition to try and catch the remaining eight birds our permit allows. All going well and these being caught, this would bring the total transferred to 30, a number deemed large enough for a founder population.

## Bird count

Autumn, spring, and summer bird counts have been undertaken by John Staniland for over 4 years using another forest area nearby that contains a similar mix of old-growth and secondary-growth forest as a comparative site. John's monitoring technique is the standard slow walk transect where only birds heard or seen within 20 metres of a fixed route are recorded. Although the ARK and the comparison site are closer together now with the ARK's expansion over the past 2 years and allowing that birds benefiting from the decreased predation risk and increased food source in the ARK are still free to disperse from our sanctuary, the total number of birds heard and seen and the number of species is greater at the ARK. Significantly greater numbers of fantail, tui, and especially tomtit are seen at the ARK although grey warbler are in greater numbers at the comparison site.

## SENIOR CITIZENS

**M**okoia Island, Autumn 2005, and the source of our first robin translocation with 48 birds caught over 3 days for transfer to the ARK. The first two birds captured, banded, and listed are B/M and M/R. Step forward 6 years and B/M and M/R are still happy to pose for their photos! We don't know how old either bird was at capture but while a 6-year lifespan for small birds would be remarkable for northern hemisphere passerines, these two are showing another trait of New Zealand birds—that of longevity. Small passerines in the northern hemisphere might only live 3 years, but we could expect our robins to easily get to double figures. Old Blue, matriarch of the related Black Robin species, lived and bred for 14 years after her capture, enabling the species to be brought back from extinction.



B/M

[photo courtesy of G. Capill]



M/R

[photo courtesy of M. Mannington]

Longevity is a trait shared with much of our indigenous fauna. Geckoes and skinks worldwide commonly live 5–7 years, with large species such as the Australian Blue-tongued Skink living 15–20 years; however, many of our species can live to 30 years or more. A common gecko (*Hoplodactylus maculatus*) from Motunau Island marked at its first capture was recaptured after 40 years! Native frogs also display this longevity, as do our giant land snails and many of our larger insects such as the giant weta. Often associated with this trait is a later age of sexual maturation and smaller numbers of progeny per season. These traits were no longer helpful once mammalian predators were introduced and contribute to the threats against many of our native species.

## Reality shows

**R**eality TV fills our screens nightly but now Stuart Park decides that reality YouTube is our next big thing. Well not quite true, but Stuart in his work life deals with security issues and technology and also likes to use this knowledge for his interest in wildlife. Volunteering initially when he came to New Zealand from the UK with the Otago kiwi project, he arranged infrared activated cameras that took snapshots of possums visiting bait stations prior to the poisoning control measures.

Here at the ARK at the start of another season, we hiked recently along some bait lines placing bait. Untouched bags of mouldy old bait indicated the absence of rats since those baits had been laid last year. Coming upon our first bait station where bait had been taken, Stuart stopped to establish his surveillance equipment. Camouflage taping over the small snap-lock plastic box made the spyware almost invisible when strapped to a nikau trunk. The red laser beam suddenly

coming from the box onto the bait station surprised me although it was merely the hi-tech way of aligning the lens on the target. A few adjustments and all was ready. We figured that rats being always wary of new objects in their environment may not investigate the newly placed bag of bait for some time; nevertheless, Stuart had scheduled a check the following week anyway.

Finding that after only one night a rat was entering the station and taking baits away was salutary but showed the need for our ongoing rat control efforts. We can never be sure if a partly eaten bag of bait indicates that the local rats have partaken then died or if they became bait shy or indeed if new rats had moved in more recently after the bait had lost its allure. Here the infrared video showed a very active rat entering the station and taking out bait—its days though are numbered and hopefully its place is not taken till well after spring to give our wanted wildlife a successful breeding season. See Stuart's videos on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szTqNA4E4t0> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93uQZPGsAAU>

## END OF AN ERA

**B**owing out from her lengthy involvement as Volunteer Co-ordinator, Karen Colgan assured us at a function held in her honour at our base that she was now going to be just one of the volunteer team rather than being involved in the management side. In fact, a casual tally of the activities she still wanted to be involved with came to double figures so, like the best operatic heroines, her passing away from the scene will take a very long time and for that we'll be thankful.

Karen re-defined volunteer management at the ARK, integrating newcomers into the group by ensuring they were buddied with more experienced people and gaining an awareness of the volunteer's fitness to assign tasks within that person's capacity.



*Karen's penultimate farewell*  
[photo courtesy of R. Woolf]

Her weekly communication with the volunteer group not only announced forthcoming tasks but also recently observed events in the bush; a flowering of this species, a successful breeding of that. Then, there were her efforts in co-ordinating events such as our concert or the volunteer get-togethers, organising people onto the stoat trap rosters or the quarterly monitoring surveys. The list goes on and it is a testament to her abilities that we are having to deconstruct

the role and various parts are now being taken by several people. **Philip Lodge** has spent some months performing the weekend volunteer co-ordination role with initial assistance from Karen; thanks Phil!

### Concert night

**M**ulti-talented star of the screen, stage, and cabaret and also now of Glen Eden Playhouse, **Jennifer Ward-Lealand** thrilled the audience at our recent fundraising concert. A wide range of supporting artists, including Iranian pianist **Kamran Khodaverian**, entertained the house for another successful evening.

Many thanks to artistic director Karen Staniland, without whom the event could not have happened, ably

supported by Maj de Poorter. John Staniland was once again the incomparable *compère*, and Rosemary Stagg, Karen Colgan, and Louis Segedin (**Rocket Kitchen**) provided the food. Rosemary sourced wonderful raffle prizes from **Kea Jewellery Design**, **Bivouac**, and **HarperCollins**. Geoff Davidson (**Oratia Native Plant Nursery**) again donated plants and won the jewellery!

Yvonne Vaneveld was front of house and Bruce Calvert directed the traffic. An army of volunteers were there on the night to help the proceedings run smoothly, including Rosemary Stagg, Judi Simpson, Chris Bindon, Tony Morrison, Jenny Wheeler, Di and Mike Cundy, Jenny Wheeler, and Karen Colgan. Annalily and Anko collected tickets. Heidrun and Mathias Schinke, as well as Rhiannon Herrick were ushers. Jenny Jenkin and Sheryl Tapp kept the performers stocked with food and drinks. Margaret Bol and Sharon Davies sold raffle tickets at the table with Helen Holzer and Helen and Patrick very effective "raffle scouts."

Funds raised will go towards our kokako translocation and monitoring.

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Until next time . . .

*John Sumich*