

## A great cause for celebration, or kia kaha kokako.

On September 10 many of those with a love for the wonderful New Zealand environment came together to celebrate another great achievement, the successful reintroduction and breeding of kokako in the Waitakere Ranges. Those present included all ages, enthusiastic children, hardworking volunteers, contractors, scientists, ecologists, Forest & Bird members and leaders, supporters of Ark in the Park, Kokako recovery experts from DoC, WaterCare representatives, the Mayor Len Brown, Councillor Sandra Coney, Board Members and local left wing MPs. Iwi from both Ngati Rereahu and Te Kawerau a Maki brought a special mana to the day.

The cause for celebration were our kokako, the most beautiful songbird of the New Zealand forest, once at the brink of extinction due to habitat loss and predation, but now in our sights with a target for 1000 breeding pairs by 2020. The efforts of Ark in the Park are a really important contribution this target, especially with at least three birds fledged last season, improving genetic diversity and population resilience. ...Restoring our forests to the diverse and beautiful complex ecosystems of the past.

Many present at the celebration shared personal stories of what kokako mean to them, especially the pleasure in seeing a bird so rare and so beautiful, in its natural but threatened environment. To a degree, kokako reflect the damage done to the forests which once covered New Zealand, the damage done to our endemic species, but also the amazing progress and recovery that can be made by collective action and hope.

Sharing this hope, holding onto a vision of a better world, a world shared by enigmatic species is what motivates so many modern conservationists. It's a happy combination of science, faith, hard work and physical resources. It's a good reason to take stock, and to celebrate New Zealand's conservation restoration successes such as the kokako recovery project nationwide and more locally in the Waitakeres Rainforest.

Kia kaha kokako, Kia ora Ark in the Park.

*Christine Rose*



*Mayor Len Brown at Kokako Celebration (photo Christine Rose)*

## Diary of a kokako catcher

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 1.** Load vehicle. Drive to Jenny's. Load her & gear. Head out of Auckland—it's invisible due to huge downpour till we're past the Bombay Hills. Te Kuiti—last chance for a Latte. Arrive at Pureora. Meet Scratch Jansen and Tertia, renowned kokako experts.

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 2.** Alarm goes 4.45am. Quick breakfast; set off in dark. Follow the DOC ute along wet dark logging roads. Stop. Don raingear and headlamps; walk into forest 2 metres; trip over root. Soft moss and leaf litter everywhere but somehow manage to find a solitary rock to arrest my fall. Swear. Headlamps now show the way threading through large tree trunks, light reflecting from myriad raindrops. Enter a rectangle of recently cleared forest. Watch as sky lightens making net ropes just visible. One or two stars peek through thin cloud. Tuis call, then whiteheads. Recorded calls of kokako play from hidden speakers. The response is rapid; wing beats and calls. A pair approaches, moves around us, one swoops towards the net, avoids it, leaves. Silence. Return to base. Eat scones. Pass time chatting

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 3.** Alarm goes 4.45 am. Wind blows. Rain falls. Roll over and try to get more sleep. Later clear new forest sites for potential capture during fine weather interval. Eat scones. Pass time chatting. Tell of time as a locum doctor in Te Anau in 1980 when had to arrange a helicopter evacuation for two DOC staff in the Murchison Mountains, one very unwell. Went with heli crew; picked up the pair. Scratch Jansen then states he was the well DOC worker! Expresses thanks – belatedly.

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 4.** Alarm 4.45 am. No wind. No rain. Arrive at site. Wind and rain arrive also. Return to base. Gather some branches of seed bearing shrubs to place in aviary in anticipation. Eat scones. Pass time chatting.

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 5.** Alarm 4.45 am. No rain. Drive to new site. No wind, no rain, no birds. Return to base. Wind and rain come. Eat scones. Six hour walk to reduce frustration. Return to base. Pass time chatting.

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 6.** Alarm goes 4.45 am. Drive to new site. No rain. Wind shaking nets. No

birds. Return to base. No scones. Bike on magnificent new mountain bike trail, part of our esteemed leader's get-us-out-of-a-recession plan. Trail has more twists and turns than a politician. Trail goes through sensational 50m tall first growth forest of rimu, matai, miro, etc. For safe progress I concentrate on bike trail seeing only the bottom 2m of the trees [what a waste of the other 48]. And it cost \$1.4 million. And it wasn't new money, merely taken from existing DOC budget. And so will its maintenance be for all time. And the newly laid pumice surface is already floating away after 3 months—Sigh. Return to base. Still no scones. Pass time chatting.



Another Kokako for the Ark (photo: Heidrun Schinke)

**Diary of a kokako catcher Day 7.** Alarm 4.45 am. No wind! No rain! Eat breakfast. Wind & rain arrive. Pack up. Return to Auckland. Must change article heading.

*PS: In fact 4 birds were caught this year of the 8 hoped for, two in the week before the above sad tale and 2 after. They have not moved too far from the release site at the north end of the dam and a team of volunteers using telemetry are following their movements with interest*

## Monitoring day

Whiteheads were conspicuous everywhere in the Waitakere Ranges on whitehead monitoring day although there were several younger volunteers also! The first whitehead monitoring organised by John Staniland had several senior Ornithological Society members paired up with Ark volunteers so that each team had at least one person skilled

in distinguishing birdcalls. With translocations from Tiritiri Island in 2004 and 2007, the release this year came with a proviso that a monitoring system be developed and tested. This survey would of course have to be far beyond the Ark boundaries as whitehead are not especially territorial and even after the first translocation, reports surfaced within weeks of sightings at considerable distances from the release site. Having instituted some tomtit surveys throughout the Waitakere Ranges some 20 years ago, John Staniland organised that the whitehead survey be on the very same tracks with tomtits to be counted this time to compare with that historical data. Robins were to be counted also for good measure as although these had not been present since the 1890s our translocations in 2005 and 2009 to the Ark had led to some dispersal. The whitehead monitoring technique finally approved by the Department of Conservation was that the tracks were to be surveyed at much the same time on one day. Stopping at intervals along each track the monitors were to listen for robin or tomtit calls then using playback calls of whitehead, await any response. Showing that the survey technique was workable, one group heard a single whitehead and another on a different track saw a group of three. As well, tomtits were seen on every one of the survey tracks indicating they were also more established than 20 years ago. A robin noted on one track meant that this first survey was a great success.



*Whitehead searches for whitehead (photo: Karen Staniland)*

## Those numbers again

What do 2 days; 27 people; 205 hectares; and over 570 bait stations all add up to? The answer is unqualified success! Finally having the approval to bait the most south westerly corner of the Ark, the question arose of how to do so. Taking some 2.5 hours just to walk to it from our base at the Cascades it was obviously not efficient to walk there and back and then place bait in between time. This had been anticipated though and with the support of the Alpine Sports Club, we had access to their wonderful hut near our southern boundary. With a view way down to Lion Rock and Piha beach the bush cloaked hut was an ideal base for our weekend. Saturday morning and the first of us arrived to open gates and the hut and haul up food, bait, maps and all the necessary equipment for our venture. Volunteers, 27 in total came in their tramping gear ready for another Ark baiting session but also with sleeping bags and changes of clothing that were soon dumped and stored in the hut while bait lines in this new block were assigned. The lines we were told, had all been cleared to an excellent standard, several had ropes placed at tricky steep sections but all this had been done many months ago by contractors so little was known of each line, its slopes, steep pitches, even the exact number of bait stations so it was with some trepidation I assigned lines to couples hoping that there would not be too many difficulties to overcome. Fine weather prevailed and by lunch many lines had been baited and everyone returned to the hut, some with very long journeys back along Ridge Road or Rata track. Robins heard by 2 parties and whiteheads by one boded well for this patch of bush. Planning on using the volunteer workers all Saturday and again on Sunday meant they needed pampering so our Camp Mother Yvonne assisted by partner Mike [who is not camp anything] had lunch prepared which was appreciated and demolished by all. With lizard monitoring scheduled for some weeks ahead, we had invited herpetologist Duncan Emerson to show geckoes and skinks

from his collection which represented species currently or previously in the Waitakere Ranges. These beautiful creatures entranced all especially the yellow morph of the Auckland Green gecko. Another set of bait lines was assigned to the volunteers for the afternoon session with many lines passing under great rimu, puketea, totara and even some large kaikawaka but kauri were rare having been logged around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having heard Duncan earlier state how difficult it was to find geckoes in the ranges, Sian Coleman on her first volunteer day with the Ark was surprised to find one on the ground a mere 10 minutes away from the hut. Her sharp-eyed find was a forest gecko, dead unfortunately but at least showing us there were still reptiles in our forest.

Dinner was soon ready for us on our return and after, with the fire going, & the occasional glass of wine we were shown Sue Sinclair's short PowerPoint of the monitoring surveys being undertaken by the Heritage section of Auckland Council. Lizard monitoring at Waiheke to show what we might anticipate at the Ark; Regional flora with Ark having greater diversity than even Little Barrier Island; and Regional fauna with Ark showing how our efforts have increased the native bird ratio. The weather held again and after breakfast on the following morning the remaining volunteers finished off the final baitlines. Organising such a project took several people considerable time yet to have achieved so much in such a short time was a fantastic effort by all.

Knowing the terrain now in this new block with comments from the volunteers, any subsequent weekend blitz on this remote corner will be easier.

### Ark in the Park Contacts

Laurence (volunteer work)  
natureproject@forestandbird.org.nz

Maj: phone: 3023902,  
m.depoorter@forestandbird.org.nz

John: phone: 8185267, cjk@xtra.co.nz



*Alpine Sports club hut-preparing for the baiting  
(photo: Chris Frentz)*

## Easy bird watching!

You don't always have to go into the depths of the Ark to enjoy the sight of our birds feeding – sometimes the birds come to you.

Through the window of the Ranger Station recently Ark Manager Maj de Poorter and I had a very close view of an iridescent tui taking small inky purple fruits from a tall shrub hard against the building in Ken and Colleen's garden. A few days later Grant Capill and I were thrilled at a kereru, only one metre above our heads, gorging on the same fruits.

This small tree is a common and important member of the understorey of our forest and is one of its heaviest fruiterers, often surpassing some larger tree species in output. It is **mapau** (*Myrsine australis*) bearing on attractive red stems its small alternate leaves with wavy margins. Beetles in large numbers often chew the young leaves later in the season, providing further food for birds. A good plant to get to know.

By John Staniland

## Until next time ...

*John Sumich*



With thanks to our main financial supporters: ASB Community Trust, The Trusts Community Foundation;  
Additional support received from: Birdlife International Community Fund, Auckland Zoo Conservation Fund, Zelda Roberts Charitable Trust