

# THE RIMUTAKA FOREST PARK TRUST RAG

RIMUTAKA FOREST PARK TRUST INCORPORATED  
C/- Private Bag 43-902 • Wainuiomata

May 2003

## The Great Stoat-Killing Project of 2003!



(This is the story of how the Trust decided to join the "Coalition Forces" and effect "Regime Change" in the Rimutaka Forest Park.)

The early European explorers who visited the Orongorongo Valley and Rimutaka Mountains left vivid accounts of the abundant bird life found there. Kakapo, Kakariki, Kereru, Kiwi, Weka, Takahe, Kokako, Kaka, Korimako, Tui, Huia flourished in an environment unlike anything ever seen on Earth. Then rabbits were released but their numbers exploded so farmers felt compelled to release stoats to control the rabbits. That's when it all went

wrong. Three years after their release there was a noticeable decline in bird life.

Local extinctions followed. Firstly the kakapo, then the Kokako, the Takahe, the Kiwi, the Huia. Bush fires and land clearance didn't help either but it doesn't altogether explain the comprehensive clean-out of almost all species right up to the present day. The bitter legacy of the stoat's long-ago introduction is inherited today by every conservation group in the country including our own.

Last year, at the Trust's AGM, guest speaker, Paul Jansen (*DOC's National Kiwi Recovery Coordinator*) outlined the ongoing nationwide destruction of Kiwi young by stoats. (*He also spoke of hybrid Kiwi looking for a home.*) Appalled by the extent of the tragedy Trust members wondered what they could do to help the accelerating decline of indigenous bird life especially Kiwi. Paul gave us some ideas and we realised that only by undertaking intensive trapping of stoats, ourselves, over extensive areas of the Park could we further our conservation objectives.

We got a few supporters together, consulted with Poneke Area staff and spoke to DOC's national stoat control advisers. A decision was made to trap stoats over a thousand hectares. A budget of \$23,000.00c for the 2003 - 2004 year was set. The money had to be found somewhere and it just so happened that the indefatigable Bill Milne had a blank **N.Z. National Parks and Conservation Foundation** application form in his pocket. This newly founded organisation was sufficiently impressed to give us \$8,500.00c!

A decision to purchase timber to construct 100 stoat tunnels was rapidly made. The timber arrived and within two weeks had been cut to length, nailed and the resulting tunnels fitted by Don Millward and various of his friends with prototype DOC 108 traps (*kindly lent by Doc's national stoat-control Manager, Ian McFadden*). A further eight hundred metres of timber was immediately procured by Bill McCabe. By the end of May, four hundred of the tunnels will be ready for the new, yet to be manufactured DOC 108 traps.



Later, this year, a helicopter will be hired to lower the more than four tonnes of trap-fitted tunnels into the McKerrow and Turere watersheds. Already the forty kilometres of tracks required for trap placement are being defined, cut and tagged. Volunteers will be needed to help distribute the traps and then make the monthly checks to ascertain kill rates and refresh baits.

*(If you, your partner or a friend are interested in either of these tasks please inform Trust Secretary, Russ McStay on phone 569 2915)*

Once the initial work is completed and trapping commences in earnest threatened wildlife species like the remnant Kakariki, tiny Titipounamu, Karere, Kereru, sweet-sounding Korimako, Miromiro, Popokatea and migrant Koekoea will, hopefully, flourish again. We'll have to work on the possums and rats as well but the stoats come first. Then - who knows - Paul Jansen might let us have a few of those hybrid Kiwi to start our own colony and DOC might even approve their translocation.

One thing for sure, the authorities currently responsible for law and order in Wainuiomata are very thankful that so many of the usual suspects are being kept off the streets.

John Rush

### **Waiorongomai Valley**



An area in the eastern (or Wairarapa) side of the Park which deserves to draw greater visitor numbers is the Waiorongomai Valley. In the summer months in particular, when daylight hours are long and the sun has taken the chill off river waters, a day spent tramping to and from Waiorongomai Forks can be a most pleasant experience. It is a day trip that can be readily accomplished by any reasonably active person resident in the greater Wellington area.

For a number of years now, in late January or February, the writer has led Kaumatua

Tramping Club trips to this area. Trip participants have been mainly retired folk, the oldest being over 80 years of age. At an easy pace, and having refreshment stops, it takes around two hours to get from the car park/picnic area to Waiorongomai Forks, and much the same time to complete the return journey. My favourite place for a 60 minute lunch stop is 5-10 minutes walk up the Waiorongomai branch above the forks, where there is the option of lolling either in the shade or direct sun on a sloping gravel beach beside a deep pool where the keen ones can enjoy a refreshing swim.

The Waiorongomai River crosses the Western Lake Road about 21.5 km south from Featherston. Just north of the road bridge, there is a DOC sign indicating the turn-off and conditions of entry to the Waiorongomai Valley. At this point there is a gravel road which leads to a picnic spot and car park towards the left and the Station Homestead to the right. There is a toilet in the picnic area – albeit the long drop type. Access to the river and up the valley is via a stile clearly visible from the picnic area.

Initially, the route up the valley is the wide, stony riverbed. The river needs to be forded several times, not just here but also at many other places further upstream. Sturdy footwear suitable for wet-foot tramping is therefore a necessity. Not far past a giant hillside slip on the true left side of the valley, a very large orange triangle marks the start of the first section of bush track. From then on, the standard DOC track markers guide you through each of the sections of bush track. Some bush track sections are fairly short. Only one is of considerable length. In some places, a simple crossing of the river leads to the next bush track section. In others, the route is once again the riverbed itself. DOC track markers at riverside bush track entrances are fairly obvious, but if one is missed, following the riverbed will still get you to where you want to go. As a general guide, about half the journey to Waiorongomai Forks is spent in the

riverbed and half following quite well-formed, well-marked bush tracks.

Just before the Forks (where the Waiorongomai and Oreore Rivers meet), on the true right bank of the Waiorongomai is a track leading to Waiorongomai Forks Hut. The hut is a popular base for hunters, as evidenced by several dog kennels close by. Following the bush trail beyond the hut will bring you to the Oreore River, just above Waiorongomai Forks. A short distance further upstream, the Oreore divides into two branches. I don't recommend following the left-hand branch – it is badly choked with buddleia and other rubbishy vegetation and debris. The right-hand branch of the Oreore is more like a gorge – narrow with very steep sides, and well worth exploring by fit, adventurous visitors.

For those who prefer to take it easy in pleasant bush and stream surroundings, following the Waiorongomai branch for a short distance above the junction with the Oreore is by far the best option, as described in the second paragraph of this article.

Next summer, do something different in your favourite Park. Visit the Waiorongomai Valley.

Russ McStay - Trust Secretary

### **Kiwi Project**

We have been encouraged by the support we have received from Councils (local and regional), Forest & Bird, Tramping Clubs, all outdoor interests and many more to come, for the translocation of Hybrid Brown Kiwi into the Park.

This is a proposal at this stage and we have to satisfy various DOC requirements to comply with standard operating procedures, undertake a minimum of ten years extensive stoat control and provide other field management facilities.

Obviously, this is going to be a mammoth, ongoing task and we will be requiring massive financial support. Also our needs for volunteers to do the fieldwork will be enormous.

We will keep members updated with progress, both positive and negative....

Bill Milne

### **Kiwi Project**

On Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> March four Kiwi Project members and three D.O.C. officers went to Mt Bruce National Wildlife Centre to observe their trapping systems.

Led by Tony Silbery we went over by four-wheel drive to one of the easier trap lines. About four hours were spent checking the line and noting the grid patterns of rat, possum and stoat traps.

Of particular interest were the cleared, straight, low level tracks, emphasizing the importance of easy, quick access.

Tony took us well up to a couple of very impressive Matai trees.

Possum and rat trap spacings are 100m x 150m (sidle tracks, GPS), mustelids are at 200m intervals along tracks in middle – 650 mustelid traps all up.

There is about 140 km of tracks, a big job but obviously very successful and an ongoing project to maintain this level of success. This is obviously very intensive, both in capital outlay and volunteer input.

We were back in time to be treated to the feeding of the Centre's Kaka Population, very impressive!! A worthwhile trip, we hope we can do as well as our project goes ahead. Once up and running we will be seeking many volunteers to assist in our project.

Bill Milne

### **Possum Points to Ponder**

For the first three months of this year the Wellington region has experienced a big "dry" – some may even describe it as a drought. Over the latter two months of this period there has been a marked upturn in the Trust's possum catch in the Catchpool Valley area. Is there a connection between these happenings?

At first we attributed the upturn to last year's kits having to leave their mothers and look for comparatively vacant territory with a good food supply, where they could safely take up residence without challenge. Certainly, a preponderance of immature possums in the catch during the early stages tended to support this view. But as the weeks passed, more mature possums, both male and female, were in the catch. Some of these were among the biggest encountered since the Trust began its pest management programme. Why are these leaving their established territories to join the reinfestation of the Catchpool valley area?

Issue number 13 (January-March 1992) of "*New Zealand Geographic*" features a very informative article on the ecological nightmare posed by possums in New Zealand. It contains a table showing the approximate distribution by habitat of the estimated total of 70 million possums spread throughout New Zealand. This states that by far the largest number, 54 million, live in scrubland. Native bush (other than beech) is home to an estimated 13 million, native beech forest 0.5 million, pine forest also 0.5 million, and pasture land 2 million.

Scrubland is the dominant feature of private properties in the lower Wainuiomata Valley. Poor new vegetation growth due to current sustained bone-dry conditions may well be causing some possum migration to the native bush areas in the Catchpool Valley where highly desirable browsing is readily available, thanks to pest control measures

which the Trust has been implementing and must continue to maintain.

Russ McStay  
Trust Secretary

### **Kid's Easter Moa Hunt 2003**

The Annual Kids Easter Moa hunt was held once again for the 6<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in the Orongorongo Valley during the very wet Easter long weekend. The event organised by Simon and Cindy DeGiorgis is orientated towards teaching and promoting conservation awareness to kid's in the outdoors.

A total of 9 categories are competed for including: *the most possums, the heaviest possum, the longest eel, the longest rat, the most rats, the best effort, the most unusual, the best overall Moa theme and the big game category.* Also a colouring in competition is held for the younger kids.

The Easter Moa hunt is run through the whole of the Easter weekend and is concluded at mid-day on Easter Sunday at Big Bend on the Orongorongo River. The weigh-in involves the counting, weighing and/or measuring of the kid's returns and the assessment and judging of the contributions.

The flooded river prevented most from getting to their destinations on Good Friday and found many competitors locating spare bunks in various accessible and hospitable baches, until the river subsided and became crossable on the Saturday morning.

Despite the loss of Friday night for possum trapping and the continued rain on Saturday night, many possums, eel's, rats and mice (and one hedgehog) met their demise.

The sky turned blue for the 85 competitors and estimated 150 plus people attending the weigh in. All kids came away with

prizes, Easter eggs and certificates of participation.

Although down on last years event, owing to the inclement weather, the 2003 tally included:

87 Possums  
15 Rats  
2 Mice  
2 Eels  
1 hedgehog

The event would not have been made possible without the support of Department of Conservation and a generous Community Grant made through the local Palister Hotel.

A big thank you is extended to the Rimutaka Forest Park Trust for the loan of almost 100 possum traps for use in the competition.

### **Kaka Sighting**

On Saturday 3rd May, 2003, at around 4.00 p.m. Dave Lewis, a Department of Conservation Ranger at the Catchpool Field Station was advised by a Park visitor that a sighting of the N.Z. Kaka had been made on the Catchpool Loop Track.

The unnamed visitor reported he had first heard the bird and then actually sighted it in trees shortly after. He had been unable to locate a second bird so he presumed it must, disappointingly, have been a lone bird.

This is the first confirmed sighting of a Kaka in the Rimutaka Forest Park for many years. Interestingly, an unconfirmed Kaka sighting was made recently in the Miro or Gollans Valley area which, as the crow flies, is pretty close to the Catchpool. Both Karori Wildlife Sanctuary and Mt. Bruce have a stock of Kaka and clearly some of the birds have a preponderancy to wander - let's hope it's not only males.

The Catchpool Loop Track is on the fringe of but within the on-going, Predation Control Operational Area. So while our lone Kaka won't find a mate there just yet there is fortunately plenty of other bird life around for a bit of company.

John Rush

### **Four Men and a Woman**



In April 2002 three mainstay, Trust members undertook to manage the Catchpool trapping programme while John Rush was otherwise incapacitated. Don Millward, in his ever-trusty Lada, Russ McStay and Bill Milne traipsed "over the hill" from the Hutt and continued the rat, stoat and possum control that the Trust had implemented back in March 2000.

To maximise the efficacy of their work the Trust purchased ten, Timms kill-traps. As the Timms does not have to be visited daily it is an ideal trap for irregular visits. Eight traps were placed at strategic points along the park road from Tawa Grove to the ford and the final two were place in the Nga Taonga Track area.



The original three trappers became two when Don buggered off on one of his many overseas adventures. Susan Ellis, a Trust member from Wainuiomata then relieved Russ McStay. Bill Milne and Susan continued until Gordon Murphy, A Russ McStay protege, took over from Susan. Susan, later became a dominant figure in the rat and stoat killing activities of Rush and O'Donnell up on the Five Mile.



Meanwhile, Bill Never-Missed-a-Tuesday Milne and Gordon Every- Friday Murphy kept adding to the totals and by April 2003 the "Kill-trap Line", as it became known was responsible for killing 138 possums, 3 cats, 1 stoat, 59 rats, 5 hedgehogs, 1 rabbit, 1 mouse and a blackbird. These staggering figures (remember the Trust had already killed several hundred possums and other unwanted pests in the area) indicate just how great the risk is to our environment. Even if the Department of Conservation used 1080 throughout the entire Park and killed every single predator - reinvasion would begin the next day!

All Park-users feel mighty grateful to these people for their on-going commitment but Bill Milne reckons he can't see anyone coming when he looks over his shoulder - so if you have a bent for walking through the bush and setting and clearing traps send your name to Russ McStay (569 2915).

John Rush