

Fiordland Coastal Newsletter

Conservation for prosperity – *Tiakina te taiao, kia puawai*



Kia ora from the Biodiversity Team at the Department of Conservation (DOC) in Te Anau. This issue of the *Fiordland Coastal Newsletter* has updates on a number of conservation activities undertaken around the Fiordland coast over the past summer. Among the stories are reports of North Island kokako breeding on Secretary Island, the transfer of South Island robins/kakaruaui to the Cleddau River delta in Milford, a busy year for marine mammal sightings, an additional release of brown teal/pateke into the Arthur Valley, and a bumper breeding year for blue ducks/whio.

Marine Mammal Sightings In Fiordland

When heading into Fiordland, there is always the chance of seeing a marine mammal – regardless of where you travel. Sightings of New Zealand fur seals and bottlenose dolphins are common in the more popular fiords, such as Milford, Doubtful and Dusky Sounds, but there is always a chance that something slightly more unusual will be found too. A number of large whales, such as humpback and southern right, spend time on the coast and in the fiords, as do their more elusive cousins – the beaked whale. Dolphins, ranging from the largest in the form of orca, to some of the smaller species, like Dusky and common dolphins, are also possible to see.

Sightings in 2010

A number of significant sightings of marine mammals up and down the coast were reported last year. Late summer saw the return of one of the least known species of beaked whale to the Doubtful Sound area – Arnoux's beaked whale. A pod was seen almost exactly a year after spending a week in the same area in 2009. Worldwide, very little is known about these animals, so it's exciting to know they frequent the Fiordland coastline.

Another visitor that returned to the fiords was a Southern elephant seal, who spent a lot of time 'hanging out' in Preservation Inlet. It's not known if it's the same seal seen in 2009, but wardens at Kisbee Lodge reported that it was around for a number of weeks, before finally heading away. The sheer size of this species of seal is really something to behold!



Above – A pod of Arnoux's beaked whales in Doubtful Sound (*Real Journeys*)
Above right – An elephant seal in Preservation Inlet (*DOC*)

Other interesting sightings included a pod of orca that was seen in the southern fiords around Chalky Inlet, and also spotted the following day off Milford Sound. This just shows how fast these animals can travel!

The winter saw a few sightings of humpback whales and some southern right whales, which appear to be coming back to New Zealand coastal waters in ever-increasing numbers.

Martins Bay was a hotspot for creatures both dead and alive last year. A small pilot whale and a

porbeagle shark were found washed up on the beach, while a number of large pods of bottlenose dolphins were seen in Lake McKerrow.



Have you seen any marine mammals in Fiordland?

If you see any interesting species on the Fiordland coast, DOC would love to hear about it. Clear photographs of the particular mammals will be even better!

While we are keen to know of any species you may encounter, the most important, now that we are heading in to the winter months, is the southern right whale/tohora. Preferably, we would like to know of your sightings as soon as possible, so that we can take identification photos and track their movements.

If you see anything that could be of interest, please contact Richard Kinsey (rkinsey@doc.govt.nz) or Kath Blakemore (kblakemore@doc.govt.nz) at the DOC office in Te Anau (ph 03 249 0200).

Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Secretary Island Supporting Takahe Species Trials

Eight years on since work first began to restore Secretary Island to a pest-free environment, translocations of native species, thought to be suitable for release there, are well underway.

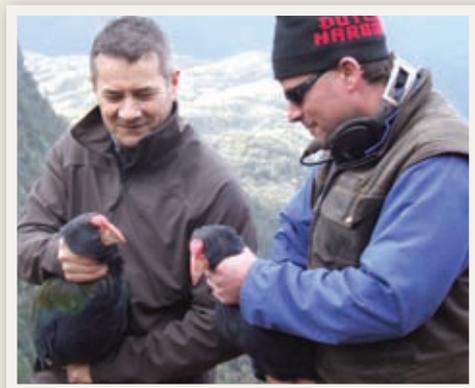
It is still unclear how suitable the island is as a home to takahe, although we do know that a specimen was found there in the 1800s. It is thought that Maori may have put a small number of birds on the island as a food source.

The release trial of three pairs onto the island since 2009, with another pair due to be released shortly, will provide valuable information on how takahe use different habitats (e.g. shore grasslands, forest, tussock/alpine tops), to determine whether the island is capable of maintaining a population of takahe.

While the primary purpose of this trial is to establish the suitability of the habitat, data collected will also help to inform us on the dispersal and suitability of territories for pairs in the future, and on their survival and breeding success.

To date, one nest containing two eggs has been discovered by a hunter, on the western coast of the island. This is very different from the tussock nests usually found in the tops of the Murchison Mountains, home to the takahe. Unfortunately, both eggs were infertile, but the fact the birds developed a territory and made a nest in this location provides a positive outlook for the island's potential.

Very low numbers of deer remain on the island, due to hunting. This has resulted in steep slip faces recovering quickly, thus providing abundant fresh growth for takahe. The near eradication of stoats will also increase the chances of survival for any takahe chicks in the future.



Above – Stephen Bragg (DOC) and Jonathon Larrivee (Fiordland Helicopters) with a pair of takahe ready for release. (DOC)

Right – A North Island kokako on Secretary Island, Doubtful Sound. (Kirsty MacNichol)

Kokako Return To The South

Fiordland Lobster Company's commitment and passion for Fiordland has enabled the return of one of our larger forest dwellers. With a call likened to the tones of an organ, the kokako is back on Secretary Island, in Doubtful Sound, with recent evidence that they are breeding.

Kokako were once widespread across the forests of New Zealand; one subspecies in the North Island and another in the South. Unfortunately, they are highly susceptible to predation by ship rats, possums and stoats. By the late 1980s, there were as few as 350 pairs left in the North Island, and the last known South Island bird was recorded back in 1967. Forty years later, DOC sadly conceded the South Island kokako extinct – gone forever.

Countering this sad tale in the south, the North Island kokako has made a really strong recovery over the past 20 years. Advances in pest control and translocations to secure offshore islands (such as little Barrier and Kapiti Islands) have allowed the species to return slowly from the brink of extinction.



Returning kokako to southern forests will not only mean we get to hear their enchanting calls, but also, just like the kereru and now extinct moa, they are thought to be important seed dispersers that aid the regeneration of our forests.

A recent sighting on Secretary Island in March this year has us all excited. A juvenile kokako was seen behind Blanket Bay and not far from a pair of kokako, identified as birds sourced from Kaharoa Forest near

Rotorua. Thanks to years of hard work by the Kaharoa Kokako Trust, Kaharoa Forest holds a healthy kokako population, and we have been able to transfer birds from there without threatening its population.

This exciting find indicates that Secretary Island contains suitable habitat for the North Island kokako. However, it will be a number of years before we see if the island has the potential to support a large and robust population.

This project stands out against many other similar efforts, because it's one of the first times a surrogate species has been transferred specifically to replace a recently extinct species. Fiordland Lobster's commitment to the project was a bold move. Investing in the unique values on the mainland and islands is seen as a natural extension of the Fiordland Lobster Company's reliance on the long-term sustainability of the marine environment.

Milford Sound Home Once Again To South Island Robins

Twenty four South Island robin/kakaruai have recently been transferred from the Eglinton Valley to their new home on the Cleddau River delta in Milford Sound. This transfer follows three years of pest trapping in the area, made possible with funding from Eco Tours & Cruize Milford, in association with the Fiordland Conservation Trust.

DOC and Cruize Milford staff, along with four pupils from Fiordland College, carried out the transfer. Peter Egerton, General Manager for Eco Tours & Cruize Milford said his staff felt extremely proud to have reached this day. "We have been able to give something back to the magical environment that we promote and introduce people to from all corners of the world".

DOC Te Anau Biodiversity Ranger, Gerard Hill, said that effective rat and stoat control was vital to keep species such as robin alive and well on the mainland of New Zealand. "It's great to see a community sponsored initiative like this reach the point where the reintroduction of species, such as South Island robin, can take place".

As a result of the transfer, a huge number of people will be able to enjoy these cheeky little birds while they take in the breath-taking scenery on the foreshore of Milford Sound.



Pateke (Brown Teal)

Since March 2009, transfers of pateke (brown teal) have been undertaken in the Arthur Valley (part of the Milford Track), with birds sourced from captive rearing facilities around New Zealand.

The first release of 20 pateke was a trial to test the level of predator control, as pateke are highly vulnerable to predation, especially from stoats. This release was successful, so in 2010 another 39 pateke were released, followed by a further 80 in March 2011. Transmitters have been fitted to the majority of the birds to allow staff to monitor them.

Pateke are the rarest waterfowl on the New Zealand mainland. They are mainly nocturnal birds but can sometimes be seen sunning themselves during the day.

The goal is to have a self-sustaining population of pateke in the Arthur Valley and we aim to continue to release birds into the area until 2014.

This year's release was supported by Ultimate Hikes and the Otago Community Trust, through the Fiordland Conservation Trust. Without their support, this work would not have been possible.



Sinbad Sanctuary Project Update

In 2009, Southern Discoveries, the Fiordland Conservation Trust and DOC announced plans to create a sanctuary in the Sinbad Gully. Lying in the shadow of Mitre Peak, the Sinbad Sanctuary Project has become the heart of a partnership that captures a passion for New Zealand's spectacular scenery and the urge to save a unique ecosystem.

The aim is to secure the Sinbad Gully from the onslaught of introduced predators, such as stoats, possums, deer and rats. It is also hoped to create an internationally recognised sanctuary for the unique species already there, as well as a new site for reintroducing threatened species.

The Sinbad Gully's steep glacial walls, extreme rainfall and cold winter climate has slowed the invasion of predators. In the 1970s, some of the last few kakapo found in Fiordland were living in the Sinbad Gully.

The initial pest control has established a stoat trap-line the full length of the valley. Since stoat control begun in 2009, weka are more commonly seen, who have bred



successfully and three kiwi have been released into the valley population, to protect them from the construction work on the Cleddau flood project at Milford.

Today, its high walls harbour insects and reptiles that have disappeared from elsewhere in New Zealand. Several species of insects and a lizard, aptly named the Sinbad skink, have only recently been discovered and are known to live only in the Sinbad Gully.

John Robson, Southern Discoveries General Manager, considers his company's involvement as a long term commitment. He believes the educational benefits of the project will be far reaching, even internationally.

Above – Southern Discoveries staff, Jo and Dave Newman, holding a Cascade gecko, left and Sinbad skink, right. (James Reardon)
Above left – Cruize Milford staff release robins at Milford Sound. (DOC)
Left – Pateke with a transmitter attached. (Barry Harcourt)



Whio (blue duck). (Graeme Dainty)

Whio (Blue Duck)

This year was a bumper season for whio in Fiordland. In the area where DOC, along with the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, undertake the majority of their predator control work, 99 ducklings are known to have hatched. This is our best breeding season by far and we should see the benefits of this in a few years time, when some of these birds pair up and start breeding.

Real Journeys has been supporting whio conservation in Fiordland since 2005 and this has enabled significantly more work to be achieved. It's great to have this relationship and for both organisations to see the fruit (well, ducklings) of their efforts.

This work has also been supported by Works Infrastructure and Gunns Camp, who check traps in the Upper Hollyford Valley, and various Milford Sound community members, particularly Trips & Tramps, who check traps in the Cleddau Valley.

The Fiordland Wapiti Foundation manages the trapping effort in the Castle River and Worsley Stream catchments. The foundation is also in the process of establishing another trapping network in the Glaisnock and Nitz catchments. This should be up and running before the start of the next breeding season.

This year we also ran a project that we call WhiONE or Whio Operation Nest Egg. This involves the collection of whio eggs from wild pairs of ducks, artificial incubation of the eggs and then rearing the resulting ducklings to release at approximately eleven week's of age.

Thirteen eggs were collected from three nests. Eggs were taken early enough in the season to allow the pairs to re-nest and produce their own ducklings. All three pairs were later seen with their own ducklings, so this is an excellent outcome.

All thirteen eggs hatched successfully and resulting ducklings reared to release age. Five were released in the Castle River and eight into the Worsley Stream.

This work was sponsored by Paradise Valley Springs, from Rotorua, through the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation. Their generous support is very much appreciated.

This newsletter is available in printed and email format. If you would like to receive a regular email copy, please contact Richard Kinsey, rkinsey@doc.govt.nz.

Kakapo

The summer started with high hopes, with last year's rimu count suggesting there would be enough fruit for the first kakapo breeding on Anchor Island since intensive management of the species began. Breeding is triggered in kakapo through heavy fruiting of rimu and other podocarps. Ripening of the fruit is then needed for the females to be able to raise their chicks.

By late December, the night was filled with the deep, soft, pulsing 'booms' and rasping 'chings' of the males calling to attract a mate. All looked set – until a recount of the rimu fruit showed a major drop in numbers since the initial count, possibly due to the spring storms. As there was not enough fruit to trigger the females to breed, preparations were made to move the majority of staff to assist on Codfish Island (Whenua Hou), where breeding was in full swing.

Then, at the last minute, ranger Nigel Stevenson discovered that Hine Taumai, a female from the 2002 cohort, was nesting. Unfortunately her two eggs proved infertile, but it was still a landmark first nest in Fiordland for decades.

It looks like next year will not be a breeding season either, but the stage is set for next time the rimu, pink pine or yellow-silver pine has a good fruiting year.

Meanwhile on Codfish Island (Whenua Hou), the drop in rimu fruit numbers was not enough to deter eight females from nesting. The season is currently going well, with 11 chicks being raised, both in the wild by their mothers and by hand by the kakapo recovery team. This brings the total population to 131 birds.



Kakapo chicks in the hand-rearing unit. (DOC)