

Kiwi search and rescue in Northland

THOUGH some of our native birds have adapted well to changing conditions, others have been unable to do so. The recent history of New Zealand wildlife has many examples where a decline in numbers of a species or diminution in range has been recognised late in the day. The authors of this article, Society members Michael Taylor and Kerry Walshe, who have been engaged in recent searches for kiwis in Northland, hold that there are no grounds for complacency over the future survival of the country's national bird in the wild on the New Zealand mainland.

CONTINUED farm and forestry development and re-development are an inevitable fact of life in New Zealand, and though there is general recognition that this must have a profound influence on wildlife, the absence of detailed knowledge of the effects is alarming. Attempts to regulate the extent and timing of farming operations to accommodate the interests of native birds are the exception rather than the rule.

It is against this background that kiwi searches and transfers have been taking place for several years in Northland and Auckland. First to be involved were members of the Otorohanga Zoological Society, and an initiative by Barry Rowe led to the formation of an Auckland-based group which in the past three seasons has shifted more than 50 kiwis from areas where their habitat was being reduced and released them in permanent bush reserves which should offer the birds a safer future.

Primary aim

The primary aim is a simple one — to rescue kiwis which are otherwise probably going to die, since the land development usually means the cutting or crushing of bush and scrub followed a few weeks later by burning. The individual areas being cleared are mostly small (15 or 20 ha of a private farm is the typical scale), but the

cumulative effect is liable to be considerable, especially when as in recent years there have been Government subsidies available for the clearing and conversion to pasture of unproductive land.

Northland, in particular, has experienced the effect of this policy, with the result that there are places where kiwis were formerly plentiful, but now are scarce and others where the birds appear to be in exceptionally high concentrations, probably because of their having been driven out of adjacent areas. This latter situation seems to exist at present on several properties near Dargaville and eastwards towards Whangarei, and concerned farmers in this part of the country took the initiative

of contacting the Otorohanga Zoological Society to see what could be done to minimise kiwi losses and if possible also to enable the birds to be transferred and re-established elsewhere.

If an owner is prepared to grant access to his land, first to establish that kiwis are present and secondly to enable an attempt to be made to remove birds which are judged to be at risk, what is the next move? Since native birds are to be handled, the first requirement is the necessary permit from the Wildlife Service of the Department of Internal Affairs.

The Auckland group was granted this authority to enable operations by the Ornithological Society and



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A North Island brown kiwi, the bird that has been rescued in the Northland project.