

The rugged east coast of Motukawanui is in stark contrast to the more protected western shores and the island's vegetated central valleys.

Photo: John Gardiner

# Saddleback transfer Motukawanui Island

by Bay of Islands Maritime Park staff

In February 1983 a Wildlife Service and Bay of Islands Maritime and Historic Park team released 16 rare North Island saddleback on Motukawanui Island in the Cavalli Islands. The question on everyone's minds was: would the birds adapt and survive in their new environment, or would they succumb to undetected predators?

The answer to that question is not yet at hand, although recent results are not encouraging as early ones. The coming

breeding season will be critical to the hopes of everyone who has taken an interest in the release programme.

Once widespread in the North and South Islands, the saddleback declined rapidly towards the end of the last century, surviving only on Hen (Taranga) Island and a few islands off Stewart Island.

By 1962, Taranga supported the last remaining population of North Island saddleback; the species was staring possible extinction in the face. In response,

the Wildlife Service started a research programme, then gradually transferred the birds onto nine other islands over a number of years.

## Valuable national asset

Meantime, Wildlife and agencies such as the Bay of Islands Maritime and Historic Park have continued to survey islands for rodents and mustelids. It was therefore with some excitement that our park staff confirmed Motukawanui might be free of rodents, except for the relatively innocuous kiore. Newly-discovered predator-free islands are as rare as the endangered species liberated on them. Motukawanui had emerged as a valuable national asset.

The Wildlife Service proposed a trial release of saddleback on Motukawanui for February 1983. The team which went to Taranga included Wildlife Service and park staff, as well as members of the public.

## Excitement of the hunt

Mist-netting saddleback amongst the rugged, volcanic features of Taranga is quite an art. It has all the excitement and pumping adrenalin of the hunt, with none of the recriminations of carnage. Some participants, however, are known to suffer from smug satisfaction.

Sixteen birds were caught and released, four fewer than the target level. To those involved, this represented the first tangible reward, and the remainder of 1983 was tense and full of speculation.

After a bird's capture, a Wildlife Officer bands, measures and sexes it. The saddleback is then placed in a temporary aviary for a settling down period prior to being moved.

Photo: S. Anderson

