

lar age. It is important that there be as little age variation as possible since older chicks become dominant and attack the younger ones.

Last season all 16 eggs hatched but one chick died minutes after hatching at the wrong end of the shell. Another chick died from unknown causes when only a few days old. A further chick died some weeks later after failing to gain any weight or strength.

Maternity annexe

The brooder room resembles a maternity annexe with hungry, noisy, cute little balls of black fluff quite unbalanced on their oversized pink feet. Feeding the chicks is a long and involved process. From 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. the chicks require food once every half-hour. The nutritious diet consists of tussock (*Chionochloa pallens* and *C. rubra*), clover, carrot, cabbage, potato, dog food and 'Farex' baby food. This is all finely chopped, mixed together and served in conjunction with a plateful of moths, all devoured in a matter of minutes. Puppets are used to feed the chicks — a blue material sleeve with red wooden beaks — while a small speaker held in the hand emits a deep guttural takahe feeding call. It can become frustrating trying to feed equal amounts to the little white-tipped beaks of squabbling baby takahe. Between feeds, many hours are spent preparing the food, including the tedious job of picking thousands of tussock tillers and stripping the base down to the juiciest inner core. During the first three weeks of feeding it is critical that the food does not contain coarse fibre as this may block the chick's digestive tract and lead to death.

Strict hygiene

Visitors to Burwood may well wonder at the people who look like butchers in their white coats and white gumboots. Well, they are actually Wildlife Service staff and it's all in the cause of strict hygiene. A foot bath before entering the building is also essential. These precautions are to prevent diseases from entering the reserve, such as erysipelas which comes from poultry and pigs, and avian tuberculosis. For this reason the reserve is closed to the general public.

The chicks are allowed to move to outside pens at about six weeks of age. At this stage they are about half-grown. The outside pens have two metre-high solid fences surrounding them and birds are watched through one-way observation windows.

They can support themselves by feeding on the tussock in the enclosures, although supplementary feeding is also necessary. The birds remain in these enclosures for four to six weeks.

During the whole period, a person is required to live in the brooder building to keep an eye on everything.

Perhaps the most interesting time was when the birds were released onto the reserve in March of this year. Ten hectares of the reserve have been fenced off with a predator-proof barrier of wire mesh with three electric wires on outriggers at the top and two on the bottom. The wires are connected to a solar power unit which can dis-

Whose rights?

A battle is being waged in Fiordland over the endangered takahe — and yet it need not be. At the time of writing the Deerstalkers Association is threatening a High Court injunction to stop the Wildlife Service re-locating takahe in the Glaisnock Valley of the Stuart Mountains. It is likely their injunction will succeed and the issue will only be resolved by court proceedings so lengthy as to prevent takahe liberation in the 1986/87 summer.

Many deerstalkers fear that, because takahe and introduced wapiti compete for the same tussock food, pressure will go on to exterminate all wapiti from the area where the takahe are re-located.

However, their fears are largely groundless, as groundless as their claim that the takahe is a dying species which is more at home in lowland podocarp-broad-leaf forest.

There is no question that wapiti numbers will have to be kept low in order to maintain the success the Wildlife Service is achieving with its takahe programme — a 20 percent annual increase in takahe numbers over the last two years has seen the population jump from 120 to 180 birds. But at the same time it would be flying in the face of reality to expect a total wapiti eradication programme to be successful. Unfortunately, wapiti and the deer they have hybridised with are here to stay because, despite intensive hunting it has simply proved impossible to eliminate the bush dwelling animals. All we can do is seek the lowest possible populations.

There is also no question that native, endangered species like the takahe take precedence over wapiti. A proper sense of priorities puts the takahe first — it requires a specific habitat (mid-ribbed snow tussock such as that found in the Glaisnock-Edith catchment) if it is to survive, whereas the wapiti is capable of living anywhere in New Zealand, and is widely farmed. The takahe is an animal in harmony with its environment, with its curious method of feeding which actually promotes new tussock growth rather than stunting tussocks as the wapiti grazing does.

At present the takahe stands the risk of extinction should avian disease attack the only wild population in the Murchison Mountains — good reason why a second, separate population should be established.

A compromise would see hunters continuing to shoot wapiti in the Glaisnock where the North American deer would be kept at low numbers in order to give the second takahe population a chance of establishing well. It would also provide a wild population of takahe for the tramping public to see. At present the Murchison Mountains special area is out of bounds to the public.

Both animals hold special attractions for New Zealanders; in Southland feelings run high on both sides of the issue, as evidenced by the large sign alongside the Te Anau highway proclaiming: "Wapiti belong in Fiordland." This attitude was reinforced on the recent *Closeup* TV programme when a Deerstalkers Association representative made the following sad remarks: "You can imagine how a stalker would feel looking for a wapiti . . . it would be bad luck for any takahe he came across. I don't think this would happen with any native birds, the ones that are in there naturally, but any that were put in there like hatchery pheasants, people may regard them the same way."

This issue must be resolved urgently. The second takahe population must be established as soon as possible. Any delay is a tragedy, risking the loss of the species forever.

Gerry McSweeney, Conservation Director

charge 10,000 volts, and to a security alarm system. The area is also being intensively trapped for stoats, cats and possums but it appears from the few catches that predators are probably in low numbers.

Behave like wild takahe

The birds released have been watched periodically from hides constructed in the area, and they appear to have adapted well. They are finding their natural foods easily and are behaving just as most wild takahe do — curious but wary of humans. They react instinctively to falcons and hawks flying overhead.

Efforts to prevent imprinting appear to have been successful. We will have to wait a further two years, when the birds will be of breeding age, before we know if the programme has been a total success.

It is hoped that by then half the total of semi-captive takahe will have been released into Fiordland's Glaisnock Valley (in the Stuart Mountains just north of the Murchison Mountains.) This will establish a new population in the wild and thus act as a safety measure should the Murchison Mountain population, for any reason, fall.

The remaining takahe reared at Burwood will form two separate semi-captive populations. It is envisaged that 800 hectares of the reserve set aside for takahe will eventually be completely predator-proof fenced. At present only small extensions take place each year due to the enormous cost.

A bright future looks certain for the regal takahe, and perhaps other species later on, with the establishment of the Burwood Bush Takahe Rearing Unit and associated reserve area.

